



November 2015

FROM SEA TO (NOT SO) SHINING SEA EURASIA STYLE: A voyage in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran

Since June my travels have been close to home – touched by seas rather than oceans. The Med, the Black, the Caspian. And then areas I always thought were the Mediterranean but merit their own “sea” title: Aegean, Marmara, Crete. Those will be part of a later story. For now we visit Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran which share borders with each other and the Black and Caspian Seas (both of which are highly polluted, hence my title).

It turns out this is an even more complex region than I realized. In addition to the four countries there are four “occupied” territories and some areas within countries with more autonomy than the rest of the country.

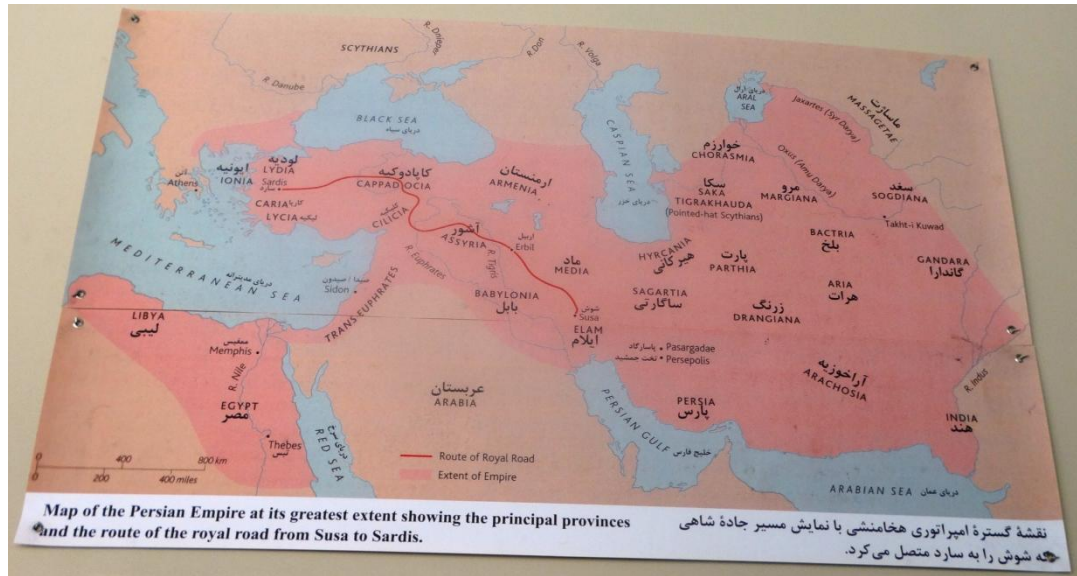
In addition to seas they share the magnificent Greater Caucasus mountain range which even in August was snow covered and glaciated in some areas.



Mount Ararat, which is now inside Turkey but is visible from Iran and Armenia, has religious significance for Christians as supposedly where Noah’s Ark came to rest, and is pictured on Armenia’s coat of arms. But I never managed an acceptable photo of it!

All the countries were overrun by the Arabs in the 7th to 10th C, then the Mongols in the 13th to 14th C. Then it was the Persians’ turn (modern day Iran) whose empire in the 17th C covered

Eastern Turkey and Iraq, the Caucasus and portions of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Previously in the 5th C BC the Persian Empire stretched from Libya on the west through Egypt, including part of modern day Greece to part of today's Pakistan on the east.



Russia controlled Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan for most of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Georgia and Armenia are both Christian but with separate Churches and customs – the Cathedral of the Armenian Church in Echmiadzin serves as the “Vatican” of Armenian Apostolic Churches worldwide. Azerbaijan and Iran are both Shia Muslim countries although in Azerbaijan it wasn’t obvious you were in a Muslim country and they have a staunchly secular government whereas Iran is a theocracy which mandates covering hair (but not faces) for women. As you see in the photos, Iranian women have a great deal of hair showing and tend to wear tight pants and stylish fitted jackets.

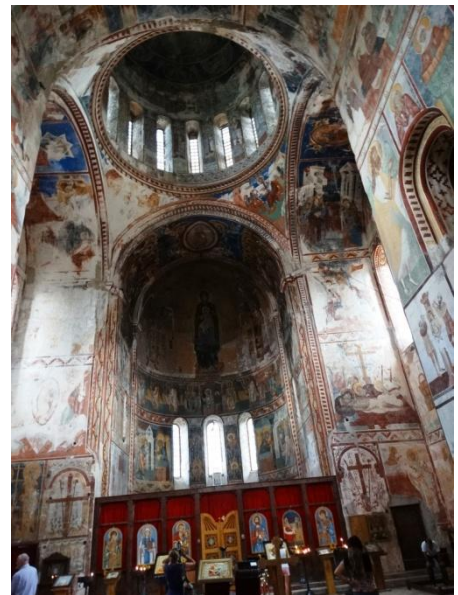


Their cuisines are quite similar with a lot of meat skewers, cucumber and tomato salad, roasted vegetables, wonderful stews and soups. They are all tea drinkers. The Georgia national dish of Katchapuri (a pizza-like pie with cheese or spicy meat filling) was a favorite and varied in style and flavor from kitchen to kitchen. Iranians eat rice with all meals except breakfast. All four countries are known for their red wine production although in Iran today this is only in private homes as it is officially a “dry” country. All four countries are known for their carpets.

I spent a total of 26 days in the four countries. The experiences of my Iran week were happily supplemented by conversations and the blog of one of our Caucasus tour group members who had just spent three weeks in Iran on a tour of her own design - she is a professor of Comparative Cultural Studies. (<http://journals.worldnomads.com/krodin>). I took tours as opposed to traveling independently as there were four languages and four alphabets. There were a total of 5 of us in the Caucasus tour group with a different guide in each country and 7 of us in the Iran group. Most days we were actively sightseeing for 12 hours. The weather was uniformly hot as this was August in the desert with temperatures above 100F. Essentially I traveled north to south: Georgia to Armenia to Azerbaijan to Iran always with the Greater Caucasus mountain range on the east, which is the border with the Russian Federation. There is also the Lesser Caucasus range about 100 km west of and roughly parallel to the Greater.

Georgia is about mountains and monasteries and had its peak in the 11th C from which an amazing number of frescos and icons still remain. We visited at least five monasteries plus ten churches not associated with monasteries. Some were tiny one room affairs, others gigantic basilicas. The Monasteries were almost always campuses with many functions: study, manuscript preparation, eating and sleeping, library and of course churches and chapels.

Perhaps the most unusual monastery was David Gareja carved out of rock in the 6th C when this Syrian priest returned from Jerusalem to preach Christianity. It is on the Azerbaijan border and some of its associated cave frescos may technically be in Azerbaijan. Like most religious sites these were all closed or used for other



purposes during the period of USSR from 1921 to 1991 and, of course, were sacked and partially destroyed during periods of Arab, Mongol and Persian conquests.

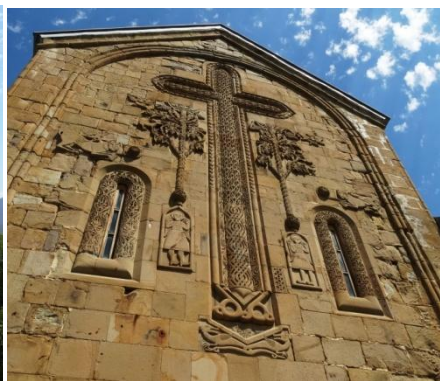
David Gareja is located in a vast stony desert area about a three hour drive from Tbilisi. Fortunately a



local family now opens their home and prepares a fabulous lunch of local dishes (photo is first course only!) if you order ahead. Since most of our group are coffee drinkers we were also thrilled to find a young entrepreneur with his “café” in the parking lot!



The beautiful Ananuri fortress with two churches is set on a promontory above the Aragvi River/Jinvali water reservoir and in addition to interior frescos there are stonework crosses on all four external sides of the Church dating from the 13th C.



In most of the Georgian churches the bell tower was a separate structure. There was a group of pilgrims from Moscow following our same monastery itinerary for a portion of the time.



Another unique region is Svaneti with defensive towers dating from the 9th to 11th C, 175 of which still exist and are in use (and beautifully lighted at night). The government has invested in the region by paving the twisting access road along river canyons (3 hour drive from Zugdidi) and also building a small airport and ski lift. The fine museum has a fabulous collection of icons

and during the various invasions and occupations many religious treasures were hidden here.



The valley where Mestia sits is overlooked by glacier peaks.



Svaneti is nestled between two conflict areas with Russia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia – which officially belong to Georgia but are controlled by Russia, ostensibly to protect the ethnic population, and Georgians can't go there.

En route to this region we passed the Gudari "friendship" monument, built in 1983 and located about 15 km from the Russian border. This mural contains lots of symbolism and a poem about friendship and the "obligations"/expectations of friendship, ironic given that what happened was anything but friendship with Russia. Also en route was the village of Latal where there were

three tiny 10th C churches. I found the cemeteries sadly interesting with all the young men lost in the 2008 war with Russia over the two occupied territories.



Georgia was Stalin's birthplace and the museum (built in 1950 while he was still alive) in his birth town of Gori now gives a more balanced picture of the true man. Even though Georgians retained their own culture and language during almost 200 years of Russian control, Russian is still the first second language learned and the primary country of emigration for work.

Along with the mountains were many rivers, most of which had rapid currents. Most days we were able to lunch en route riverside at local restaurants where we dined on excellent food and



lingered over our food and wine for a couple of hours. Fruit leather around nuts is a very popular snack. When I first saw them for sale I thought they were candles.

After a night in Akhaltsikhe which from 1688 to 1828 was the center of a Pasha of the Ottoman Empire and today has a sizable Armenian population, we drove through one of the most beautiful river valleys in Georgia to reach the cave town of Vardzia built by King Tamara (a female) in the 12th-13th C. This was a huge monastery complex which was partially destroyed by the 1283 earthquake, and sacked by Mongols and Persians. Restoration began in the mid 1850's. During Soviet times it was a tourist center and then in 1989 was re-consecrated.

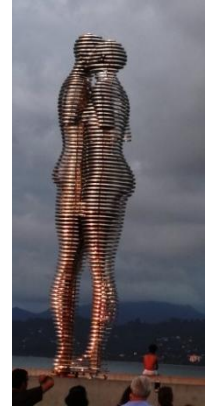


A completely different feel is the Black Sea beach resort town of Batumi which retains some lovely fin-de-siecle architecture supplemented by some ambitious modern towers one of which is to be home to a new technology university. There are also an active synagogue and mosque and mosques



in most of the small villages in this semi-autonomous region of Adjara.

A significant beachfront sculpture of the fabled Ali and Nino love story has the couple moving together and apart over a ten minute cycle. (Nino is a female name in Georgia and this is the Georgian Romeo and Juliet love story.) The beach is stony like Nice and was full of vacationers at 7pm on an August night. But you know you're not in Nice by the older ladies dressed in black circulating selling Katchapuri cheese pies. New high end hotels are under construction. I enjoyed the mix of new and old (even very run down) but I expect in 5 years all of the old will be gone and it will be like Disneyland. In the 19th C this was the western terminus of the railroad that carried 1/5th of the world's oil production, from Baku, Azerbaijan.



Just outside Batumi is a huge botanical garden with plant environments from many parts of the world. We met some young women travelers from Izmir, Turkey, some of whom spoke English. They asked to take our photo and so we reciprocated.



Tblisi is a very lively capital on the Marjvena river (the one that tragically flooded the zoo with many human and animal deaths earlier this year). There is some very interesting contemporary architecture (cultural center, administrative center, police headquarters, pedestrian bridge) plus a cable car to Narikala fort that towers over the city.

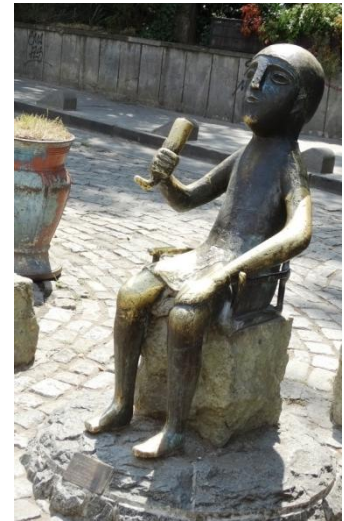


This is a culturally diverse city with synagogues, mosques, Armenian as well as Eastern Orthodox churches.

The statue of Mother Georgia symbolizes that throughout history women did all jobs (while the men were off fighting), including defending the home (sword) and offering hospitality (bowl). It was great fun that our traditional folklore dinner turned out to be more discotheque than folklore. We were the only foreigners, the food was excellent, we were treated to a couple of very intricate traditional dance performances, but mostly the evening was young Georgians dancing to their favorite tunes.



Every party traditionally has the welcoming Tamada (the master of ceremonies, so to speak) whose horn is filled with wine. Sometimes extremely large horns are used for drinking contests. As we were in Tbilisi on a Saturday we also saw many weddings.



As we exited Georgia via the border crossing to Armenia at Bavra we passed huge agricultural areas and towns of stone buildings with turf roofs, as well as storks. I am guessing this was an area of Doukhobers, known as spirit wrestlers, a Christian sect who emigrated from Russia in the mid 1800's to avoid the rituals of the Orthodox church.



After crossing the border we were in an area of hay fields and we spent our first night in Armenia in Gyumi, in the mid 1800's the third largest city in the Caucasus after Tbilisi and Baku.



Many buildings are built of black and red stones called Tuff. Armenia suffered genocide by the Turks, 1.5 million killed and another half million emigrated (western Armenia is now part of Turkey) of which this year is the centennial and being marked by the Armenian Diaspora worldwide. Every town we visited has its memorial to this genocide as well as to the men (~ 10% of the total country population) lost fighting



alongside the Russians (i.e. U.S. allies) during WWII. Armenia is also surrounded by "occupied" territories and today less than one third of the world's Armenian population of 11 million lives in Armenia. Their pre-World War I population area was six times larger than that of present-day

Armenia, including the eastern regions of Turkey, northern part of Iran, southern part of Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh and regions of Azerbaijan. Today's Armenia is landlocked and slightly smaller than the state of Maryland.

Armenia has very friendly relations with Iran with many tourists traveling in both directions, but has strained relations with Azerbaijan, as Azerbaijan accuses Armenia of genocide of Azeri's, both following WWI and just before and after independence from the USSR.

The border between Turkey and Armenia, which is closed, is guarded by Russia. Ironically the fish farm/restaurant where we dined our first night was right alongside an active Russian military base and en route we could see the Russian watchtowers on the Turkish border as well as minarets of the closest Turkish towns.



The Holy See of Echmiadzin is the Vatican of the Armenian Apostolic Church with a large campus of seminaries, printing press, residence of the Catholicos (Armenian Pope), libraries, Treasury, a vineyard and a museum building donated by a wealthy American/Armenian couple. In the Treasury attached to the Church are a number of relics including a spear used to pierce Jesus on the cross to see if he was dead as well as several slivers of the cross and a tooth of St



Steven. An interesting event here was that Shah Abbas I of Iran (1604) was having stones removed from the "cathedral" in order to build Isfahan. So the Armenians had a likeness of the Shah carved onto the top of the church which effectively stopped the



process.

The Kingdom of Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as the national religion, in 301, replacing Zoroastrianism and paganism. In 2001 there were great celebrations of 1700 years with even Roman Catholic Pope Jean Paul II attending. The current entrance portal was erected on that occasion. Every seven years they produce the myrrh used in baptisms and distribute it to Armenian churches worldwide, which occurred this September.



We were told that most churches in Armenia are built on foundations of former pagan temples. Khachkars, carved stones like stele or gravestones, first made in the 9th C, are prevalent in Armenia and are often placed at holy sites or church locations. Many are as tall as a person and some are several meters high. The side facing west can feature a variety of symbols such as a Christian cross, a tree of life, a sun or a pomegranate. There were many located at the

Cathedral in Echmiadzin and also at the Geghard Monastery where there is a project to create replicas of those from the 16th C that were destroyed by the Azeri's.

Geghard Monastery is largely carved out of the adjacent rock mountain and was founded in the 4th C at a cave, originally a pagan worship site, containing a spring whose waters are believed to prolong life. The monastery dated to the 7th C but was burned by invading Arabs in 923 then destroyed again by earthquakes in the 12th C. Many of the current structures date to the early 13th C. Geghard is notable for the numerous carvings throughout its many structures.



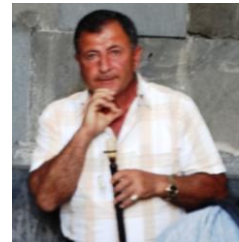
En route to Yerevan was the interesting ruins of Zvartnots Cathedral built in 641 to 661 which was round with a hood-shaped dome 45 meters high that unfortunately collapsed in an earthquake in 930. The symbol of a cross (similar to the “Maltese” cross) with two spirals seen on column cornices is similar to that on many Syrian church ruins and is known as Armenian Ionic. During our visit we were treated to a quartet singing beautiful (mostly sad sounding)



Armenian songs, which seemed to capture the mood of the country.

The next day we visited Garni, a ruin since the 1679 earthquake, originally dedicated to the sun god Mitra. 70% of the stones were found and used in the rebuilding. This site was the summer home for royalty in the 1st C. The bathhouse still features a mosaic with fifteen colors of natural stones. We were fortunate here that a very famous flutist (dudu) from the village was playing the traditional flute made of apricot wood. This temple stands adjacent to a river gorge with

cliff walls of basalt columns known as the “Symphony of Stones”.



En route to the Sanahin and Haghpat monasteries the extent of the economic impact of the collapse of the USSR was clearly evident. Vast former factories sit deserted and the copper smelter that used to employ 5000 Armenians and produce 13% of the USSR's copper now employs 500. I have encountered the same opinion traveling in many former "states" of the USSR that people were happier as part of the USSR because everyone had employment.

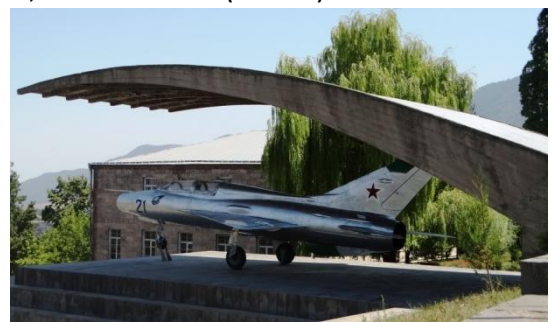


The Haghpat monastery had an interesting connection with the 1969 Armenian movie Sayat Nova which I had seen just before starting on this trip. The film follows the poet/songwriter/singer's path from his childhood wool-dyeing days to his role as a courtier and finally his life as a monk. It was released in the United States under the title *The Color of Pomegranates*. It is not a biography of Sayat Nova, but a series of tableaux vivants of Armenian costume, embroidery and religious rituals depicting scenes and verses from the poet's life. He was executed in 1795 at Haghpat monastery by the invading army of the Shah of Iran for refusing to convert to Islam. However, the monastery is most famous for the Haghpat Gospel in 1211, its illuminated miniatures in which for the first time ordinary people blend into religious scenes. It had a turbulent history but now resides in the Manuscript Museum in Yerevan.



Nearby the Sanahin Monastery gives a good example of the frequent practice of

burying people under the floors of monasteries at their request so that they could continue to atone for their sins by being walked upon. Also the Mikoyan museum, dedicated to the Sanahin born brothers Mikoyan, one of whom (Artem) was the co-designer of the Russian



fighter plane MiG, named for the surnames of the two designers (Mikoyan + Gurevich).



Yerevan, Armenia's capital is a lively town of about 1 million people (more than a third of the country's population). Since it was hot summer, everyone was out and about in the evenings, walking, sitting in cafes, or watching the wonderful sound and light show of the fountains at Republic Square. This was particularly exciting for me as one of the songs played was the Vangelis theme song from the film *1492 – Christoph Colomb*, which is the theme song played every night on the Club Med 2 cruise ship

when departing the day's port: and I would be



embarking

on her in two weeks' time. Yerevan dates from 782 BC and served as a regional capital of Muslim khanates and Persian governors until Russian annexation in 1828. During the Soviet period most of the mosques and many churches were removed. The current grid plan was developed in the 1920's.

There is a Mother Armenia statue in Victory Park (originally commemorating WWII) which replaced one of Stalin in 1962. With her sword she towers over the capital and symbolizes peace through strength. Decoration on the memorial still includes that of the Soviet period.

The urban stairway park known as Cascades with its fountains and gardens was recently refurbished by Diaspora philanthropist and art collector Gerard L. Cafesjian's Family Foundation

whose collections are now on exhibit in the galleries and include a wonderful sculpture park at the base of the Cascade with sculptures from many countries often with a decided whimsical or



ironic theme. By the way, Armenia will have a float in the 2016 Rose Parade in Pasadena.

I had opted to take the overnight train from Tbilisi across Azerbaijan to Baku, figuring I would get to see more of the country than by flying. Unfortunately I didn't count on an hour at the Georgia departure border crossing plus another 1 ½ hours at the Azerbaijan entry, so it was dark by the time we were en route. The border official in Azerbaijan seemed to care mostly about whether we had been in Armenia, which of course we had. The terrible part was that the air conditioning was off during these stops and our compartment was well over 40 degrees C (104 F). At least they kept the toilet compartments open during the stops.

I woke at first light in the morning and could see we were traveling along the Caspian Sea with the Greater Caucasus mountains to our left and oil pumping units to our right along the coast (also on rigs in the Sea but I couldn't see those due to haze). As we approach Baku we pass



Soviet bloc apartments, single family houses and shantytowns along the tracks (cinder blocks with corrugated metal roofs). Oil was first used in the 1800's as

mud baths to cure aches and pains, then transported as ships replaced the Silk Road. In 1905 Baku produced 50% of the world's petroleum. Today a pipeline runs from Baku through Georgia to Turkey, although natural gas production now exceeds oil.



The



Azerbaijan

population is 9 million of whom 2 million work abroad and 3 million live in Baku. Baku is a study in contrasts.



All the high rises have been built in the last ten years. They have torn down much of the city, re-clad some Soviet blocs very tastefully in a yellowish stone and built lovely plazas and parks. Some roads are 8 lanes wide, this is a town for cars not pedestrians. I loved the taxis – London cabs but purple! Some of the old oil baron mansions are now the major museums. Not a headscarf in sight except on a few tourists.

There are some very distinctive new buildings including the carpet museum adjacent to the harbor, which is shaped like a partially unrolled carpet, and the Cultural Center designed by Dame Zaha Hadid Architects, the Iraqi-British architect who also did the Design Center in Seoul which I saw last fall. Unfortunately



many of the new buildings are mostly empty as people can't afford them and instead have to commute long



distances into the city.

There is a walled old town of about 50 acres which is being restored including some caravanseries now being used as restaurants and art



galleries, the 8th C BC Maiden mosque



ruins by C and converted



tower, minaret, and the 15th C Shirvanshah palace which fell to when the Sufi's were driven out Persia's Safavid dynasty in the 16th Sunni Muslims were forcibly to Shia Islam.



In the palace museum there are mustache keepers, something I had never seen before, like an eye mask for night time sleeping, but for the mustache. Interestingly there is a classic Parisian-design news kiosk which I also saw in a small

town in Georgia!



The government obviously plans big and then executes fast including creating an entire Olympic venue in two years on former oil fields adjacent to downtown where Baku hosted the first European Olympic Games last June with 6000 athletes competing in 20 sports representing 50



National

Olympic Committees. They are also in the process of constructing Khazar islands, a new city of 41 artificial islands to house 1 million residents, including Azerbaijan Tower (expected to be the tallest in the world). The new city will be equipped with 150 bridges and a large municipal airport to connect the islands to the mainland. The project is scheduled to be completed between 2020 and 2025.

Since my visit was only in the southern perimeter of Azerbaijan I did not see the rich agricultural areas which also exist of corn, wheat, nuts, fruit including pomegranates, wine, sheep and cattle. But we did visit the Gobustan-Apscheron peninsula which juts into the Caspian Sea where petroglyph drawings and other remains of human habitation remain from 10,000 BC.



The final stop was Atashgah, a natural fire temple used as a Hindu, Sikh and Zoroastrian place of fire worship. "Atash" (آتش) is the Persian word for fire. The temple was built in the 17th and 18th centuries but was abandoned in 1883 when oil and gas plants were established in the vicinity extinguishing the holy fire. Today's

restored temple fire is fed by a natural gas pipeline from Baku. The word Azerbaijan means place of fire, and the ancient tribe were known as Azeri's, fire worshippers. And we, of course, had a final night of traditional dinner and folklore music.



Tehran is a chaotic metropolis of 15 million people with pedestrians jaywalking, motorbikes driving the wrong way on the streets and no one using any signals. We spent two days there.



The visit to the National Museum of Iran (archeological) with its excellent collections helped us visualize the region and timelines of the former Persian Empires. This was needed as during the week we would be visiting sites from 5th C BC Necropolis and Persepolis to the 1930's summer estate (141 hectares with 18 palaces) of the family of Mohammed Reza Shah, (the last

King of Iran before the Islamic Revolution of 1979), located in the hills above Tehran.

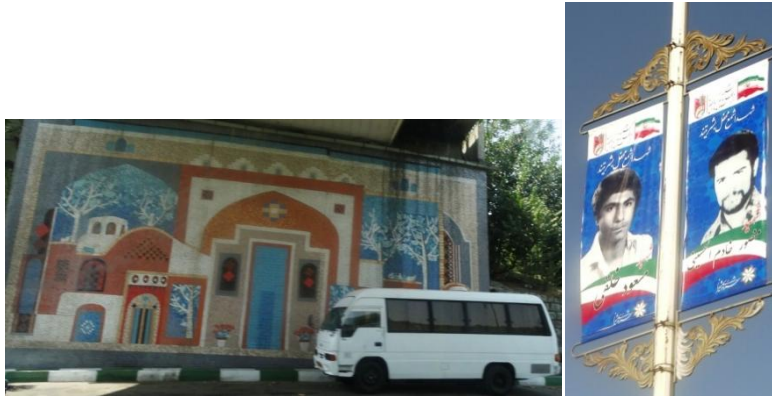
Fortunately, the current government, headed by clerics, values Iran's history and is investing in preserving and restoring Persia's cultural heritage, even when the art, poetry and customs are at odds with today's imposed lifestyles. I came away with the feeling that even in olden times (pre- and post-Islam) there was always the life lived behind closed doors that differed from the life in public view, which is apparently the situation today.

The city makes great attempts to beautify itself. Along sidewalks and roadsides there are plantings and no concrete wall is without decoration.





Here as elsewhere in the country the gardens are famous. Also in every town are banners with the faces of “Hero’s” of the Iran/Iraq war of 1980-1988 when more than 1 million Iranian and



Iraqi civilians lost their lives.



Tehran is very cosmopolitan with 26 synagogues, 38 churches of various

denominations, six fire temples and even a Sikh Gurdwara. The constitution recognizes four religions: Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism. The 270-seat parliament has 2 seats reserved for Armenians, and one for each other minority: Assyrians, Jews and Zoroastrians. Only about 52 mosques serve the city, and interestingly there are 70,000 country-wide for a population of 80 million people whereas Morocco has 50,000 mosques for a population of 32 million. In Tehran I found it difficult to find a mosque, although elsewhere in the country some of our most beautiful and architecturally interesting sites were the mosques. Throughout the country are collection boxes for charity. Giving alms is one of the five pillars of Islam.



Despite some interpretations of Islam that forbid representational art we saw plenty of painting, weaving, ceramics etc. with flowers, animals, places and people (even including The Prophet Mohammed), including in mosques. One fascinating carpet in the carpet museum depicted the founding of the U.S. with Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabell at the bottom of a sort of tree of life that included George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and other historical figures and events. Because I love glass, the Glassware and Ceramics Museum of Iran was also a

highlight for me, including the building, a former prime minister's private residence and Egyptian Embassy, built in traditional Iranian and 19th C European architecture styles.



The priceless jewelry collection is stored in the Treasury of the National Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Safavid monarchs, over two centuries, about 1502 to 1735 AD, started to collect rare and beautiful gems from the markets of India, the Ottoman Empire, and European countries such as France and Italy. The collection varied with time as wars were won and lost, but has been in tact since the 1930's. Some of the highlight pieces include the Crown of Pahlavi, Nadir Aigrette, Kiani Crown, Peacock Sun Throne and , Globe of Jewels. When I later visited Topkapi Palace in Istanbul I was thoroughly disappointed by its collection!



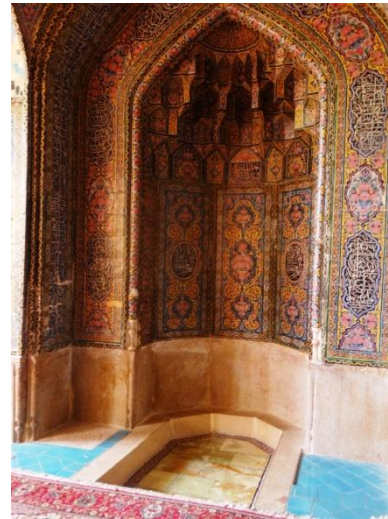
While waiting for our flight to Shiraz we saw large numbers of women wearing black chadors waiting for flights to Mashhad, where the tomb of Imam Reza is visited by 20 million Shia Muslim pilgrims per year.

The Niayesh boutique hotel in Shiraz was the first taste of a traditional Iranian house, actually quite similar to a Moroccan Riad with a large open courtyard surrounded by rooms on two

levels. In this case one courtyard was covered over to provide for the dining area including traditional bed-like eating spaces. This particular site has a history of holding the first literature association and first publishing house of Shiraz which compiled and preserved Sa'di's masterful prose work and Hafez's Divan, the spiritual Persian poet, both of whose tombs we would visit.



The highlight of Shiraz for me was the Nasir Ol Molk mosque (Pink Mosque), with its pink tiles, stained glass, carpets, muqarnas (honeycomb-shaped arches) and flexible construction that withstood the 19th C earthquakes that destroyed much of the city. I began to learn some differences in the daily customs of Shia versus Sunni Muslims, such as the depression in front of the Mihrab symbolizing man always below God, small stones that are used during prayer, three daily calls to prayer versus five, and the existence of icons.



The Jahan Nama garden, originally established in the 11th C is lovely with its ancient cypress



trees as well as the 19th C residence therein. We are seeing people and hearing languages from many parts of Iran (it is still summer vacation here): Baluchi's from near the Pakistan border, 3 different Kurd dialects from the west, and women in Melhof's (like the traditional flowing covering of southern Morocco) from southeast near the Sea of Oman. There were also Afghan refugee boys (clean and well dressed) in all the souks selling scarves and children's plastic toys.



Other beautiful sites in Shiraz included the Vakil mosque with its 48 pillars carved from solid stone and many domes which allow sound to carry throughout the vast space. It reminded me



some what of the feeling I have at the Saadian tombs in Marrakech.

The mirrored shrine Shah e Charagh was the only place we had to add a chador over our clothes – it was simply like a patterned bed sheet, a little difficult to hold onto over my slippery scarf and sarwel kameez and still use a camera! But the intricate mirror interior was worth it.



The Karim Khan fortress which was the shah's residence in the mid-18th C illustrates the use of summer porch in shade, winter in sun, plus the royal bath. I have been in (and happily used) many hammams (bath houses). The former public bath house in the fort was made more interesting by life size wax models in each room showing the activities that occurred there, from merchants in the first, disrobing room, to barbers, phlebotomists, grommage, and, perhaps, acupuncture. In the women's section there was a group preparing a bride with henna



decoration and body hair removal.

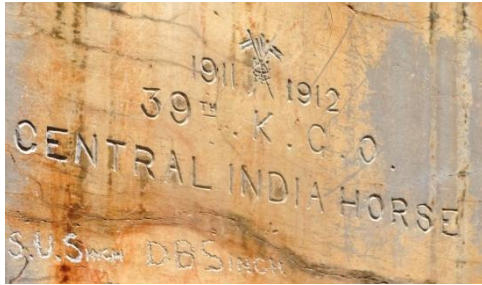
En route to Isfahan we spent a day in Necropolis,



burial site, and

Persepolis, founded by Darius I ~518 BC, built by paid male and female artisans, not slaves, at

the height of the first Kingdom of Persia. Graffiti carved on the entrance gate included The New York Herald (predecessor to the Herald Tribune), the owner of the Titanic, and a Sikh Indian rifle



group. What most impressed me at this site was evidence that the Emperor's philosophy was to allow each conquered territory (23 in total from Libya to modern day Pakistan) to retain their customs and culture, so long as they rendered him his tribute. Reliefs on an enormous wall depict the annual New Year's Nowruz (spring equinox) gift giving procession of his subject nations and it is easy to recognize the facial features, jewelry, weapons and clothing of each delegation. In addition to silver and gold vessels and vases, weapons, woven fabrics and jewelry, some of the gifts were particularly interesting: a lion with two cubs from the Cissians, a chariot from Libya, a giraffe and elephant tusk from Ethiopia, a donkey and elephant from India. Each delegation's carving is separated by stylized cedar trees which were a symbol of peace.



This symbol was a Zoroastrian emblem known as fravahr. Persepolis was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 331-330 BC and archeological excavation began in 1874. This was also the site of an elaborate celebration of 2500 years of Iran's monarchy in October of 1971. The expense and lavishness of the affair probably helped fuel the shah's overthrow 8 years later.



Driving onwards to Isfahan was mostly through stony desert with some areas of agriculture and mountains to the west. Occasional rest stops contained a café and small supply store, similar to what you would find in any developing country. Our driver prepared tea and provided cookies



at one such stop. We arrived in Isfahan about 9 pm to find the streets full of families strolling and picnicking, similar to life in other hot countries where people hibernate in the cool of houses



until the sun sets.

The center of Isfahan is Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square, second largest in the world after Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and built from 1598 to 1629 AD. The major buildings on the square are the Ali Qapu Palace (west side) which appears to be 3 stories high with the porch overlooking the square but is really 6 stories in the rear, and two mosques, the Friday Imam (south side with dome offset at an angle from the symmetrical portal) and the Sheikh Lotfollah (King's mosque which could be reached by underground tunnel from the palace) on the east.



The north side contains the Keiseric gate opening to the massive Imperial Bazaar which was a major stop on the silk road. Due to its importance as a trading center Isfahan attracted people from all over Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe who continue to contribute to the

vibrant diversity of this city. In addition to the famous carpets many other artisans creat here including metal work, wood inlay, glass and pottery and hand block printed calico/paisley design on cotton. The souk typically has everything from butchers to spice sellers to wedding dresses.



My favorite room in the Palace was the “music room” on the 6th level which is painted plaster over stucco.



In the Friday mosque the open area that was being prepared with rugs, plus under the dome can probably hold 10,000 people. The latticed windows below the dome create a beam of light which when it is time for the midday prayer fans out into a full peacock’s tail.



The Chehel Sutoon Palace is an example of the beautiful combination of gardens with Palace. Built in the mid 1500’s this palace with its pavilion of 40 columns was specifically for entertaining foreign guests. In addition to beautiful tile work with honeycombed (muqarna) entry, there are scenes of famous battles, scenes of entertainments (note the wine), small paintings from the so-called Mongol School and on the rear porches of the harem Dutch school paintings. The women of the harem overlooked the entertainment below through discreet

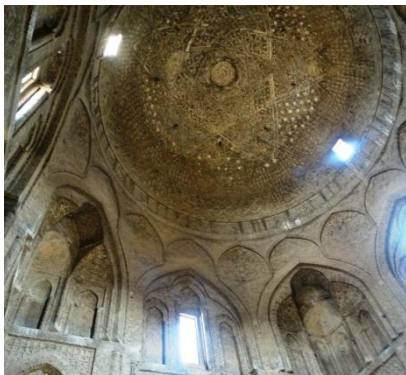


second floor windows.

The Jama mosque was a fire temple from the 8th C BC and after Islam was gradually enlarged by each successive wave of rulers. The four-iwan format typically took the form of a square central courtyard with large entrances at each side, giving the impression of being gateways to the spiritual world. This became a standard of Islamic Persian architecture. Another feature is the muqarna's (honeycombs) used in entrances and corners which were initially developed to conceal the transition from the square base to the circular dome. I first fell in love with this



architectural feature in Uzbekistan. I found the variety and complexity of the use of bricks in



this mosque astonishing. There is also a prayer room with tent-shaped vaults which is carpeted and lighted only from skylights, a very peaceful space.

In 1606 thousands of Armenians were forcibly relocated from the border city of Julfa which had been successively fought over by the Romans and Turks and was then part of Iran. Then the Iranians burned the city. There is still a large Armenian community in Isfahan and the beautiful St Gregory Armenian Church was built for them between 1606 and 1664 by the Shah. From the outside the architecture appears like a mosque, and in the interior the lowest level is traditional Iranian tile work of the time. But the entire rest of the surfaces are frescoes depicting the life of Christ, and the tortures undergone by St Gregory and the Armenian people at the hands of the Turks. Amazingly this church is exactly as it was built and has never been destroyed or rebuilt. There is an Armenian school and 16 churches in this neighborhood and while they must observe Iranian dress code they otherwise retain their Armenian language and culture.

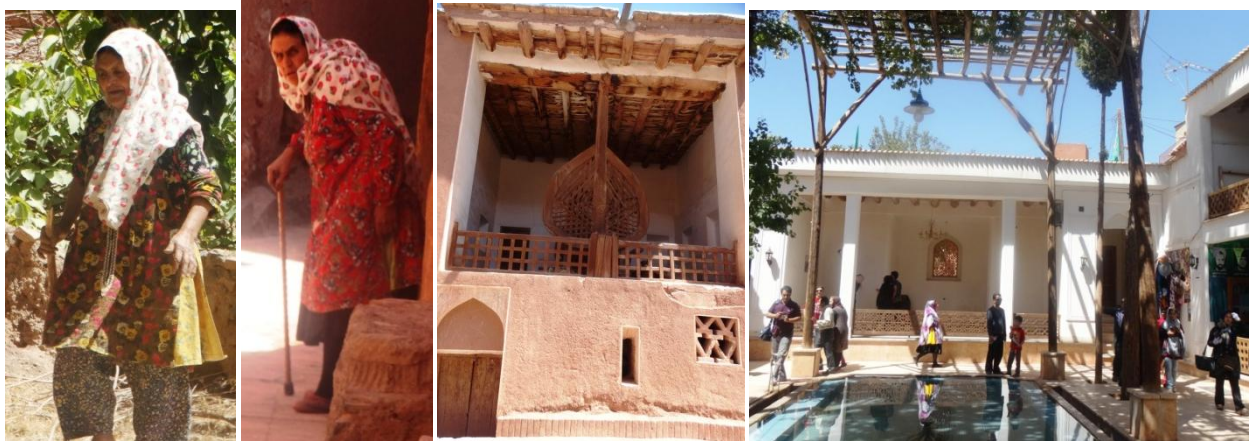


Another major feature of Isfahan is the Zayandeh river with its beautiful bridges and parks along the banks. The river is diverted upstream for agriculture and industry but during Nowuz (Iranian New Year at the spring equinox) water is allowed to flow so that people can enjoy boating activities during the holiday.



En route to Kashan, a historically wealthy center of carpet weaving, we visited the UNESCO recognized village of Abyaneh where the residents (mostly elderly women in their 80's) still speak Amharic language and dress in their traditional clothes. The town has an upper, middle and lower

town, typical of mountain villages and house designs that could handle the climate variations from extremely hot summers to cold winters. But at 2300 meter elevation the air was clear and



fresh compared to the dusty haze elsewhere in the desert. This village, like others in Iran, also has its shrine to those lost in the Iran/Iraq war. Since it was Friday, and therefore weekend, the



village was full of Iranian tourists. En route we passed caves excavated in the rocky hills to house the sheep during the winter.



Archeological discoveries in the Sialk Hillocks burial ground, including pottery and skeletons dating to 5500 BC, 4 km west of Kashan, reveal that this region was one of the primary centers of civilization in pre-historic ages.



By some accounts, although not all, Kashan was the origin of the three wise men who followed the star that guided them to Bethlehem to witness the nativity of Jesus. In early times the area was famous for pottery and tiles and later for silk and other textiles and carpets. The city was leveled by an earthquake in 1778, so the palatial homes of the carpet merchants that we visited post-date that event.



This 40 room house of carpet merchant Tabatabaei has three levels. The animals were housed at street level and then you descend to the house. There are winter rooms where the sun shines, and cooling rooms below grade for summer where a system of chimneys brings cool air into the room. There are salons for visitors and three courtyards which separate the family quarters and servants' quarters from public areas. The quality of the artisanal work probably represents the best money could buy at that time (1859).



Fin garden, fed by bountiful springs, with its hammam and beautiful décor was a popular place of visit for royalty and the wealthy, as well as for Iranians today.



The souk in Kashan, a former caravanserie, was perhaps the most beautiful of all the souks that



we visited.

And of course lunch at a local restaurant was outstanding.



Our final stop was Qom which is considered holy by Shi`a Islam, as it is the site of the shrine of Fatema Mæ'sume, sister of Imam `Ali ibn Musa Rida (Persian *Imam Reza*, 789–816 AD). The city is the largest center for Shi'a scholarship in the world, and is a significant destination of pilgrimage. Since none of our group was Muslim we had no place we could visit, only take a few



quick photos.

Did I mention that in addition to the heros, everywhere there were photos of the Ayatollahs – former Khomeini and current Supreme Leader Khomeini?

We were in Iran at a somewhat historic time: the British Embassy reopened following closure after it was stormed and ransacked in 2011; the U.S. Congress was preparing to vote on the nuclear agreement; and the Iranian film, Muhammad Messenger of God covering the Islamic Prophet's childhood years opened in Tehran and at the Montreal World Film Festival.



The Iranians were very friendly and welcoming and are hopeful and excited to be having more tourists.

The next chapter of this trip will focus on my first ever visit to Greece.