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Tales of adventure in Afghanistan

This is the second instalment of Brad Meslin's travelogue. When we last left Brad he was heading through Turkey into Iran.

Setting out from Meshad, Iran for the twelve hour, one hundred mile bus ride to Herat, Afganistan early one morning in late August, we were met at the border with a very interesting sight.

Sitting beside the passport counters, was a huge glass display case filled with about fifty different items, ranging from a Delmonte pineapple juice can, to a motorcycle

Passport

by Brad Meslin



gas tank, to a box of chocolate. All had been - you guessed it - places of concealment for quantities of dope.

Little cards beside each item noted the details. Michael....., American - 10 Kilos of Hashish hidden in a carton of Hershey bars, now serving ten years. Pierre....., French, 150 kilos of Marijuana hidden in a 750 BMW motorcycle gas tank, now serving 32 years, etc., etc. It's almost enough to make you turn around and go home, wondering if the guy sitting on top of the bus with your luggage might have planted something in order to collect his percentage.

Luckily though, it was an uneventful crossing with not so much as a cursory glance at our packs, of course, travelling with a woman always seems to create an impression of respectability for some reason. Afghanistan conjured up enigmatic visions for me. Reading James Mitchener's *Caravans*, hearing incredible stories about superb dope, listening to excited travelers, heading West, talking about the modern - day freak Mecca to the East.

It all combined to prepare me for

something not altogether different from what I would find. Inhabiting one of the most primitive and underdeveloped countries between Europe and Australia, Afghans are a very proud people who, unlike most other Asians, will not beg from tourists, and are always prepared to help in whatever way they can. Once you get just slightly off the beaten track Afganistan can show you both mystic intrigue and frightening adventure, as our most recent experience shows.

From Herat, the first city in Western Afganistan, 90% of all



travelers continue to the capital, Kabul, 650 miles away; by the southern, paved route via a city called Kandahar. This route is served by several large bus companies and provides the quickest, safest (and most boring) way to cross the country cheaply.

Only those crazy enough to risk their health, and from time to time their lives, will travel by the treacherous, alternate "Northern Route": an ancient Persian caravan trail to India. The Northern route can be negotiated only by very sturdy four-wheel-drive vehicles, or by camel. In order to travel this route - through the so-called "Desert of the Dead" - your insanity must be first endorsed by the Herat chief of police, in the form of a notarized letter of permission. The reasons for this are first, that the journey takes travellers through a highly restricted area of the country, at some points within view of the Soviet Union; and second, that if the chief of police decides you are not strong or healthy enough to complete the journey, permission will not be granted.

So, amid a group of Afghans shaking their heads in disbelief, or just staring at the "crazy tourist", I made my request: "I, Brad Meslin, Passport number....., Canadian, respectfully request permission to travel to Mazar - I - Sharif via the Northern Route, and agree to abide by any restrictions which may be imposed on me during the course of this journey".

Permission was granted, (I'm not sure whether I was pleased or not) and we were advised to bring our own food and water for the four day trip to Mazar the northern most town of Afghanistan. Our enthusiasm tempered by the looks of concern, (possibly pity?) from other travellers, we nevertheless woke at 4:30 am the next morning, to find a place on the decrepit old Russian truck with 25 other Afghans, leaving at 5:00 am for the North.

Much of the time the route consisted of the barely discernible remnant of a tire track over a sand dune. I felt certain we were driving in circles as we crept along at 5 mph through the desert, surrounded by clouds of blowing dust, the temperature well over 120 F.

Forced to wear sunglasses and scarves over our faces in order to breathe, we spent hours bouncing over dried river beds, negotiating four foot deep potholes and 30 foot high sand dunes as we made our way slowly northward. I spent over half the trip on top of the truck; even sunstroke was preferable to the claustrophobia inside it. By night fall, exhausted and covered with a

thick layer of fine dust, we stopped to sleep; only to be awakened at 3:30 am in order to make some time before the heat caught up with us again.

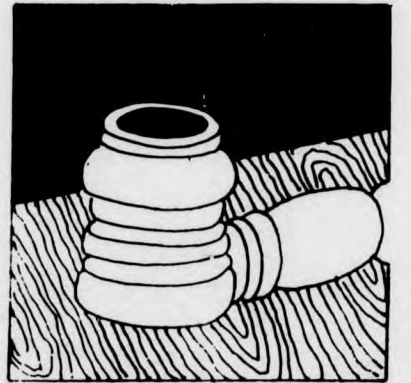
When the dust momentarily cleared, we were met with scenes of incomparable beauty, in stark contrast to the surrounding desolation. Herds of wild horses and camels wandered aimlessly through the desert; while silhouetted against sunrise of the second morning came our first glance of the oddly intimidating Hindy Kush mountains, foothills of the vast Himalayan range. They were with us constantly for the next two months, all the way to Nepal, 2,000 miles away.

Stopping periodically to enjoy a delicious watermelon sized canteloupe for 20 cents, we watched as our driver went through an elaborate ritual to buy gas for the truck. There are perhaps six gas stations along the 450 mile route each jealously guarded by a soldier carrying a bayoneted Russian AK-47 rifle.

To buy gas, our driver first gave the guard a four or five ounce piece from the two pound chunk he kept in the truck. The guard sampled the dope, munching away for a few minutes before motioning that it was alright to fill up. Laboriously cranking the hand pump to get a few gallons, the driver then paid the guard an additional \$5 in "backsheesh" (bribe money) and we were on our way.

Hash is an acceptable commodity in the less civilized parts of the country. Although the government is officially beginning a crackdown, one which has already put 15 North Americans and Europeans in notorious Kabul prison.

After a second day, much like the first, only hotter and accompanied by perhaps 200 camels for most of the day, we stopped at 8:30 pm in a town called Maimana, half way to Mazar-I-Sharif. Maimana is described in *The Student Guide to Asia*, as being virtually inaccessible



receiving only about four tourists a week.

When we asked if we could camp out, we were cheerfully told by police, this time carrying machine guns, that we must sleep in the only hotel in town for the exorbitant rate of two dollars a night each.

If we camped out they said we could be shot. We found out later that the police owned the hotel and spent a very restless night as they patrolled outside our door, cleaning and reloading their weapons continually.

Two more days of incredible, blistering heat and huge expanses of desert, finally brought us to Mazar - I - Sharif, the truck half full of sick Afghans. Fortunately, we remained in perfect health, although we picked up minor cases of the unavoidable dysentery in Kabul. Ultimately, it was a very tedious journey, but one which served as a preparation for what is still to come. From here, we head for Northern Pakistan and then to the beautiful Indian provinces of Kashmir and Himchal Pradesh. I'm checking into an expedition to K2, the second highest mountain in the world, still rather untouched by the Hordes who have literally destroyed the Everest base camp.

The only hitch is that the 200 mile trek goes directly through an area of Tibet (highly restricted) where there is reported to be a new nuclear power station and where the Chinese are using secret techniques to build a new highway. So if the articles should stop.....

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