

My Introduction to Iran

In 1975, I decided to return to explore more of Turkey and then head further east into Asia. I remember walking across the main border crossing between Turkey and Iran, about 30 km east of Doğubeyazit, where I distinctly recall little children hurling stones at me as I walked through their town carrying my backpack. Although I had made it to the border by bus and dolmuş (re: shared taxis), I had no idea what I would use for transportation once I entered Iran. Not spotting any buses or taxis, I decided to hitchhike and, within minutes, found myself in a truck, a kind of extra large dump truck. The driver motioned for me to put my backpack in the open box-bed behind the driving compartment. Once we were on our way, something both unwanted and unexpected happened: the driver put his arm around me to draw me closer and then he began to stroke my leg. I laughed; I always laugh in such situations, at least as a first reaction. Of course I was thinking: 'my god, could this be true: this burly truck driver - the first person I encounter inside Iran - is trying to put the make on me?'. Next, in a nervous but friendly way, I pulled away from him, trying my best not to panic lest that led to more complications. I couldn't just try and open the door and get out: my backpack was in the bed-box and I would have to climb in to grab it. Fortunately, this driver didn't force himself on me and, after a few more kilometers, during which he mulled things over, he then pulled onto the shoulder of the road, stopped and let me retrieve my pack. Now, left out in the middle of nowhere, I had no choice but to put my thumb out again and hope for the best. I was still pretty ignorant of the history, politics and cultural differences of the countries I was exploring; even at age 29, it was all very much a "learn as you go" experience.

Within a few minutes, a college-aged young man on a motor scooter stopped and I climbed on behind him with my heavy pack. He took me to his apartment that was in a small town midway between the border and Tabriz. Like so many young Iranians at the time, he spoke reasonable English. (This was when American influence was at its peak, after the US and Britain had deposed the legally elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh, and replaced him with Mohammed Rez Pahlavi, who was known initially as the Shah of Iran. Later in 1979, confident in his position of power, he changed his title to Shahanshah, meaning 'Emperor' or 'King of Kings'. Starting at the border crossing and forever onwards, there were huge posters of the Shah, his wife 'Empress' Farah and their son Reza, born in 1960). So, on the day of my arrival in Iran, it seemed that I had 'lucked out' with an offer of food and a place to stay for the night. However, just after I had spread out my sleeping bag and undressed, a variation on the earlier scenario unfolded: the 'student' pounced on me and tried to fuck me. By now, I was already thinking to myself: 'well, this place is my North American world turned upside down'.

[I knew little about Islam and homosexuality and hadn't a clue about the Shia and Sunni divisions within the Muslim world. Nothing of this kind had occurred during my previous two visits to Turkey. Yes, I had been charmed by how the boys seemed to cling to each other, arms wrapped round each other's shoulders or simply holding hands (pretty much every one of them always did this!) And yes, I did wonder why so many young guys looked at me or quickly became 'glued' to me. However, in Turkey – at least in my limited experience up to that time – no one had been so aggressive as those first two Iranians I had met. So my thoughts were now quite excited by the possibility that all Iranian males were homosexual.]

Like the driver, the 'student' was aggressive but I resisted. It went on like this until it sunk in that he wasn't going to get anywhere with me, so he finally laid off and let me go to sleep. OF COURSE he wanted to fuck me: that is THE male homosexual sex act in all of Islam. But as I've said elsewhere, I was not receptive to playing bottom to a top. I hit the road early the next day, determined to make it to Tehran, still about 650 km away. Somehow, I did make it, lucking out with a trans-Europe/Asia lorry driver who, thankfully, just drove. (I've done this sort of marathon road travel a few other times: hitchhiking from Dover to Edinburgh in one day, including somehow managing to get through London, a vast city of which I had no understanding. Another time, in Egypt, I managed to play the collective taxi game well enough to make it from Aswan to Alexandria in one day. Nowadays I've come to prefer a much slower pace ... so, looking back, I can't imagine being capable of traveling such distances and meeting so many challenges in a single day on the road.)

Once in Tehran, I tried to check into one, and then another, moderately priced hotel, always picking the smaller hotels, the ones the local citizens might choose. Their quality was at the lower end but I was learning fast and becoming pretty observant and critical of the facilities before committing myself. It was a tough game in those days: no 'Rough Guides' or 'Lonely Planets' for backpackers existed. There were only a few books intended for the wealthy class of travelers ... or the 'Let's Go' series for Americans headed to Europe and other popular destinations. I did tote around the only printed guide for Iran that existed, a Baedeker. However, once you were even slightly off the beaten track, there were no tourist bureaus or kiosks offering any assistance whatsoever. And rarely could you find a city map of any kind, so you had to be pretty flexible, tenacious, able to adapt while blundering through a maze of unforeseen challenges.

Time to talk turkey! ... about shitting and pissing ... in Iran, specifically, and in Islam, generally.

I was totally exhausted from my ordeal and I started to panic when hotel after hotel told me they were 'full'. How could I understand what this was

really all about? Finally, someone directed me to a hotel where all foreign backpack travelers eventually ended up. Indeed, it now seems unlikely that any of those other hotels I had visited had been full ... And the reason behind maneuvering young foreigners to one hotel? There are two parts to the explanation.

After shitting, Muslims clean their sphincters with their hand using water. Toilet paper is sort of 'haram' (or forbidden) since it is not the method prescribed by their religion. In Tehran, as in most Muslim cities/countries at the time - because Western flush toilets did not exist - the sewage systems were entirely gravitational. And as my certified plumber housemate has repeated ad nauseam, shit flows downhill! (no doubt, this the most basic fact for any aspiring plumber.) Toilet paper impedes the gravitational flow of turds down the pipes, likely causing disturbing and offensive scenarios for hotel managers taking in toilet roll 'carriers'. Myself? Well I had already given up this toilet paper roll nonsense simply because of space problems in my backpack and, very slowly, I had come to understand Muslim toilet habits and, frankly, I was now washing up in the Muslim way after a dump: it seemed, ultimately, so much cleaner. This may even partially account for why Muslim males have such a preference for the ass. (Males in Iran also have, for example, greater freedom to piss outdoors than do females, but they must do it in the same way females do in the West; in other words, stooping down as if sitting on a toilet seat. This must be a Shia thing since the Sunni in Morocco can pull their cocks out at any perceived semi-private space and let it flow standing up!)

My strongest memory of Tehran remains how males on the streets whistled and catcalled me in the same way guys in the US whistled at girls when I was growing up. I finally deduced that it had to do with the fact that I always wore shorts and the sight of my bare legs produced this reaction. So I decided to see if I could get all this seemingly widespread, if not universal, overt homosexuality to work to my advantage and not just spend all my energy warding off unwanted advances. After a few days exploring Tehran, visiting the bazaars and the National Museum, I decided to see what the Caspian Sea coast had to offer. I only knew that along with the Elburz Mountains (which separated Tehran from the sea), this was a popular national summer vacation spot. Somehow I found myself in a town called Babolsar. Fortunately my concerns about hotels had relaxed ... because I was unable to find a single one. So I sat on the curb of some street corner and, within a couple of minutes, I was surrounded by all sorts of boys curious to find a strange traveler in their midst. Somehow I made them understand that I needed to find a place to stay and, suddenly, I had several invitations to go with them to their homes. I chose the cutest one and followed him.

Iranian homes incorporate their own unique concept of privacy. There is the

street, then the open sewer, then a sidewalk, abutted by a wall some three meters high. You see nothing of their world unless, of course, you are invited inside. It didn't take me long to realize that, by going with this boy to his home, I would suddenly gain entry into a private sphere that I might otherwise never experience. When the door opened, I entered a compound that resembled a Roman house: a four sided building with one-story rooms around a garden. In this case, it was pretty basic, belonging to a middle class family, not poor but not particularly prosperous.

The boy spoke no English but his three older sisters were quite conversant in my native language. So, during the next two days, there were a surprising number of rather naïve discussions about our two cultures. It seemed to me that I was being 'examined' somewhat by the young women. I must say that, to a degree, I was taken aback by their intelligent inquisitiveness. I was also astounded the first time I saw one of them come through the door from the outside: her floor length chador - with its mesh piece covering the eyes - was immediately cast off, revealing a woman in a miniskirt with plenty of makeup and jewelry! This was at a time when the impact of Women's Liberation had women, back in North America, doing the opposite: ceasing to look like Barbie doll 'sex objects'. I found it ironic that, for these Muslim women, wearing a miniskirt was likely a symbol of a woman's freedom although there was no one to see them dressed as 'sex objects' unless that person had already been invited into the house by their father!

Meals in Iranian homes take place on the floor. No chairs, just a low table upon which the various food plates and bread are placed. The so-called "National Dish" of Iran, chelo kebab, appeared far too often and often tasted too much the same for me to say that I grew fond of it. Years later, in Paris, I was invited to dinner at the home of a wealthy Iranian gay immigrant and was completely blown away by the elaborate and creative dishes he served. It made me think that what people ate in Iran was much more class based than I had realized. Chelo kebab is simply a helping of rice accompanied by beef kebabs that have been barbequed. This is somewhat analogous to Egypt where the population's diet is largely dominated by 'ful' (fava beans mixed with various spices and herbs) and bread. No utensils are used: one eats with the right hand ... and reserves the left hand to clean the ass. Myself, being strongly left-handed (favored for everything from writing to washing to digging in the garden), ate of course with the same hand. What Muslim parents do with their own left-handed children is unclear.

Males and females do not eat together but because I was both their guest and their entertainment (there was no TV or radio that I saw), the women were present while the father, the son and I ate. The father asked me how I liked his daughters. This gave me an unprecedented opportunity to test his reaction to a subject dear to my heart. One daughter served as translator. I told him how fine his daughters were and how much I had enjoyed speaking

with them. And then I added something like 'but I really like your son'. The daughter translated her father's reaction. "My father says that he understands your feelings". And then added "the boy will sleep with you this night." Her words are forever burned into my memory. When it came time to sleep, the mother escorted a giggling young man on her arm to the door of my room. There was no bed, just a mat on the floor. After spreading out my sleeping bag over the mat, I turned off the light. We undressed and lay down next to each other. Our feet met and rubbed up against each other. Then we nestled together as close as possible. I draped one leg over his and gently placed my arm around his shoulders. Slowly, nature took its course. There is nothing on this earth quite so wonderful as sleeping next to a beautiful youth.

I do have another memory of a gay sort worth sharing about this town. I recall spotting a very modern looking liquor store on the main shopping street, so I went in to take a closer look. It very much resembled an American liquor store: well lit and full of displays. As I was standing there checking out the impressive selection of liquors, two extremely effeminate men came into view, affecting a high camp act of a sort that was better suited to New York or Los Angeles. I tried speaking with them but, alas, their generation (they were about 40ish) had missed out on the more recent push to learn English. I left finding it hard to believe that this couple could survive in the Muslim world, let alone run such a high profile liquor store. Maybe this was a sort of necessary special place since it would have been overrun in the summer months with people escaping the heat of Tehran for this beach town. After the Islamic Revolution, I read about the closing of all liquor outlets in Iran and I thought to myself that these poor fellows would very likely have been executed – for being responsible for a double 'haram' in the eyes of the fundamentalists.

From the Caspian Sea, I traveled back to Tehran where I boarded a bus for Isfahan and then further south to Shiraz, the two famously beautiful cities of ancient Islamic Persia. At the time, they were quite capable of casting a spell over any visitor because of the combination of their timeworn earthy souks and their splendid masterpieces of Islamic architecture. Fortunately, in both of these classic cities, I found reasonable small hotels that had no problem in allowing into my room the occasional young man I might have met.

Like most other Westerners (to a degree), I superimposed a distorted and romanticized gloss over much of what I experienced. After all, the impact of 'orientalism' pervaded the way we were conditioned to see the Islamic world. Back then, the way most people I encountered seemed to interpret Islam was much more relaxed, gentle and hospitable ... and certainly benign. This was especially true around expressing your homosexual feelings. It is still largely this way even now but the rise of fundamentalist interpretations has

had an impact on many believers. Indeed, some of the countries I visited - even 20 years ago - are potentially dangerous today.

One day, while deep within the souks of Isfahan, I remember coming upon a crowd gathered around a boy of about 16 who lay on the ground, eyes shut, either seemingly asleep or near death. He looked so helpless and gentle, dressed in traditional clothes including a headband or 'sarband'. His face was that of an angel and I felt overwhelmed by the scene. Not knowing what was happening or what I should do, I was frozen – as were the onlookers – as I gazed at his beautiful form. I then realized that he was in the middle of an epileptic seizure and that, hopefully, he would likely come out of it after several more minutes had passed. It seemed, for me, like some sort of defining moment: staring at the form of a beautiful boy lying in the dirt, surrounded by men and boys who likely had no idea what was going on. Knowing no Farsi or Arabic - and after overcoming my instincts to hold him in my arms - I walked away.

From Shiraz, one can easily visit Persepolis only 60 km to the north. The great palace of the Persian Achaemenid Empire (sacked and burned by Alexander the Great) was even more famous at the time since, in 1971, the Shah had held the most fabulous party at the site to celebrate what was dubbed the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. Personally, I was impressed by the reliefs depicting males holding hands and 'throwing kisses' at each other. I'm sure I read too much into such images ... but then who knows what went on before the rules changed.

Iran also allowed non-believers into its mosques and religious compounds. The privacy issues around the residential architecture of Iran (as well as those of many Muslim countries) are such that it's easy to travel through a country without ever getting a glimpse into how people actually live their lives inside their houses. So it was great when one could get close-up views of the architecture and the elaborate decorative work found in all their ancient mosques. It did strike me as odd that non-believers could access these 'holy' public precincts, considering how such privacy issues had had an impact on the architecture and rules involving in personal residences. No doubt, these are related to Islamic principals regarding women as property, to be controlled entirely by men.

Outside the home, almost all the women wore full-length black chadors, except in Tehran where, at least at the time, many women could freely assert their independence. Otherwise, chador clad women always appeared to be scurrying from Point A to Point B ... whereas the men and the boys were always either carrying out their work duties or just hanging out, often promenading with other men, usually in close physical contact with each other, most often holding hands. And the boys, well ... just read Walt Whitman's poem "We Two Boys Together Clinging" and you'll get the idea.

In fact, it was never easier for me to meet other males ... rather it was always a matter of figuring out what their game was while they tried to figure out mine. Usually, they were looking for entertainment and foreigners, appearing as somewhat exotic creatures (a reverse form of 'orientalism'?), fit the bill. Being alone, I appreciated the easy interest.

Then, of course, there was the sex thing...

Islamic societies are worlds where males and females go about VERY separate lives. Boys hang out with other boys and men, girls with other girls and women. The contact points when and where the two genders interact are few and are usually quite controlled within a strict protocol. In addition, in this world, the Generation Gap often seemed non-existent (an aspect of Western alienation that, now at the age 70, overwhelmingly defines my own presence in the Western world) This struck me as a kind of variation on a longstanding homosexual theme and I always felt right at home ... at least back then, until the rise of fundamentalism.

However, I really hadn't yet grasped that homosex was as taboo in this world as it was in the Christian and Jewish worlds - the wonderful legacy of the Ibrihimic forefathers who had written the so-called 'Holy' texts, the authorship of the Koran attributed to Allah himself. One can assume that there was substantial homosexual bonding in old Ibrihim's time, otherwise why would 'he' - or the committee of social control freaks behind him - have bothered with such prohibitions! I doubt that such activity truly affected negatively their capacity to breed, contrary to the popularly held view. Thus, given the context, my 'appreciation' of the extent of the hypocrisy around human sexuality soared to new heights. It was so incredibly imbedded, almost all consuming- and riddled with so many contradictions that only a genius of Freud's caliber could have found his way through it ... could have dared to untangle the web of warfare between biology and these powerful systems of control that rob us of our rightful role in nature. This 'warfare' operates on every level but its roots are psychological: self-conflicting mindsets are formed early on, during the so-called 'socialization' process when - to put it bluntly - 'brainwashing techniques' are applied. Every concept and every rule, rooted within a vocabulary of sexuality, evolved within a religiously-based ideology reflective of their time and place. All resonate no matter the culture where they took hold - with the fear, the guilt and moral judgment of dogmas lurking behind their social façade. The question becomes: can any of our Ibrihimic-based cultures transcend or ever shed the absurdity of such conceptualizations? ... especially when the negativity, the backwardness and the cruelty is 'locked' within language. (In contrast to the standard Islamic contradictions around sexuality, the American sexual mentality takes somewhat different - and slightly more transparent - twists and turns within this game of hypocrisy ... but that's not today's subject.)

And so it was in Iran that I had my first homosexual experiences within the Islamic world. Yes, I had picked up endless vibes back in Turkey but I had been a mite too shy to know what to do about it. Turkish males were generally less aggressive than the truck driver, the student and the hordes of catcalling men in Tehran. In retrospect, I guess their aggression helped me to grow up: not to be so afraid, to be less shy and to be more direct about letting guys know that I was interested ... and equally important, I learned how to deal with unwanted advances. In the decades that followed, I was able to enjoy countless encounters in several Muslim countries including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan and Morocco. I even managed to find a boyfriend (of sorts) in Tunisia. (This was a relationship that lasted about 3 years until he went to Japan to work as a laborer. I heard through the grapevine that he married one woman ... and then another, in the Islamic fashion.

So whatever the mullahs, ayatollahs and Presidents, like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, say about homosex in Iran, I would counter by saying that these men are serious oppressors of their own people (and likely of their own needs and desires as well). Indeed, former President Ahmadinejad once declared rather famously during a visit to New York City – while speaking at Columbia University no less – that there were no homosexuals in Iran. What can one say to that sort of stupidity and denial? Rather, perhaps he should have said that his country was busy either driving us out or exterminating us. From my personal experience – having traveled extensively in nearly 60 countries – I can say that, comparatively, homosexuality (among males) is nothing short of rampant in the Islamic world (at least it was before the resurgence of ultra conservative movements including (1) the 1978-79 revolution in Iran; (2) the spread of Wahabism; (3) the rise of at least 16 fundamentalist groups and (4) the emergence of "Daesh" in the embattled regions of Iraq and Syria). In all Islamic countries, there is an enormous amount of homosexual sex going on ... usually intergenerational, often within the family itself. Perhaps many readers will reject these conjectures but my experience of some 40 years of travel in the Muslim world has done nothing but reinforce these perceptions. (But, of course, there will never be any scientific studies about anything to do with sexuality in the Islamic world. Such research would expose the contradictions and hypocrisy, making it even more difficult to manipulate people's beliefs and behaviour. Even in the Western world, any serious funding dedicated to finding out what people actually do sexually – let alone feel and want to do – dried up over the decades following Kinsey's monumental research.)

Gay identity is another thing altogether. For sure, a minority of those Muslim men who try to enjoy their homosexual attractions have assumed a gay identity similar to those in the Western world. I think the main difference is that, in Islam, you simply do things but never, never ever!, talk

about it... as if, by avoiding calling acts and feelings by name or by sharing stories, you can deny a dimension of reality. After all, the far greater 'haram' is sex between an unmarried man and woman, so before all this fundamentalist shit, there surely must have been a whole lot of 'rockin' going on! (And – I'll bet anything – there still is: it's just been driven deeper underground.) Male biology makes us horny every day. When we're young and the juices are flowing at top speed ...well, many of us males need to enjoy two or three orgasms a day, just to stay true to our evolutionary/biological mandate. Get it?

During the last four decades, we in the West have achieved considerable changes in laws and attitudes in all matters 'gay' and yet we still have a long way to go in the area of social behaviour and genuine acceptance (rather than just tolerance). Western culture now even grudgingly accepts the fact that gay people have often played major roles, historically, in culture and science, the two forces that have moved society forward and into the future. I have often wondered if Islam's persecution of its gay population has not been an important factor in stifling its social evolution and progress, contributing to its current backwardness.

Historical research often points to the Golden Age of Islam (8th-13th centuries) when sexual activities – at least among males – seemed more relaxed and accepting. This was at the same time when Islam was at its own creative zenith. The great literary compilation "Arabian Nights" contains stories told for hundreds of years in the oral tradition. The historical process of writing down the stories is an extremely complicated affair with the stories having their origins in one culture while the first written manuscripts were often found in a different culture. Many of the oldest stories are, in fact, considered Persian in origin. The main manuscripts were found in Egypt and Syria.

In the late 19th century, the great British explorer and translator Sir Richard Burton published his own 16 volume edition of the "Nights". Volume 10 reproduces Burton's essay "Pederasty" (14,000 words) in which he offers his insights on a subject found in many of the stories and something that he personally observed during his years of exploration. Indeed, the final six volumes, the "Supplemental Nights", include stories that, because of their sexual content, would have been censored in Victorian England. Even though the "Arabian Nights" constitutes a sort of cornerstone of Arabic literature, even educated BUT conservative-minded Muslims I have spoken with - about the homosexual content in some of these stories - find them revolting and cringe at their very idea (if you can imagine such a mindset!). Besides his accounts of his travels to Mecca and his explorations of equatorial Africa, Burton kept a more personal account through his journals. Tragically however, after his death in 1890, his wife Isabel (a staunch Catholic whom he married when he was 40) apparently burned them all,

thereby destroying what scholars speculate might well have been the greatest anthropological documents of the age.

For certain, many of the homo-receptive western travelers in the Islamic world experienced things far beyond what my tales can share. In addition to Burton's 19th century achievements, there are those of the 20th century explorer, Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003). He lived most of his life among various tribes of the Middle East before spending his final years in northern Kenya. Biographers and book reviewers have expressed their own frustration that he remained a very private man even though his writings and photographs often strongly suggested a homosexual life.

There have also been a few 'gay' writers whose lives and works reflect their experiences in the Islamic world. Like Thesiger, Paul Bowles preferred a life far from his culture of origin. However, fears fostered by a closet mentality negatively impacted Bowles' willingness to discuss his observations and experiences of homosexuality. In his final years, he seemed to have 'let his hair down' to a degree. Some of his close friends said that Paul's autobiography "Without Stopping" would have been better titled "Without Telling". It seems that both Wilfred and Paul had the most fascinating lives possible, but the pressures of self-censorship force the reader to both dig deeper, to read between the lines, in order to even begin to discover the truth. Only the brilliant British international journalist Michael Davidson has my admiration for attempting a more open and honest account of his homosexual experiences in many countries, not just Muslim lands. Perhaps this factors into why his books ("The World, the Flesh and Myself" and, particularly, "Some Boys") remain out of print.

Because I had brought the Baedeker with me, I learned about another archeological site of tremendous importance – Tchogha Zanbil*, an Elamite complex built around 1250 B.C. It included an amazing ziggurat (the only one I am aware of outside of Iraq), complete with huge numbers of mud bricks still with their cuneiform inscriptions. Since it was (and no doubt still is) off the beaten path (it not being a Persian monument), it proved difficult to find. I hired a taxi driver in Susa who claimed to know where it was. After endless errors of judgment, we finally spotted the 'hill' or ziggurat. There was no guardian, no fencing, no ticket collector. One could just walk away with whatever one could carry! (Actually, such thoughts were not in my mind at the time although, to be sure, it must have happened.) After visiting Zanbil, I hitched down to the Persian Gulf for a look. All I can recall is being in an air conditioned car traveling at over 100 km an hour while the tape deck played a Koran recitation at top volume. When we arrived at the port, it was all oil fields and oil industry related buildings and paraphernalia. I immediately turned course, back to Tehran and caught a bus heading east to Mashhad from where I planned to depart for Herat, Afghanistan.

In the complex around the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, I experienced something close to a life threatening physical attack, one that I would have avoided if I had known what was expected of me. I had entered the so-called 'holy' precinct wearing shorts with a medium format camera dangling around my neck. This was likely the same appearance I had had while visiting the mosques in Isfahan and Shiraz. In the hierarchy of 'holy' places for the Shia, this enormous complex of mosques, mausoleums, madressas, including a library and a museum, would no doubt attract the most devout as well as the most fanatic. Fortunately, I had had about half an hour to walk around peacefully, admiring the art and architecture before a crazed-looking older man with fairly long, disheveled green hair approached, shrieking, then pounding me with his fists. I hadn't a clue what it was all about; I hadn't even taken a single photo. I did seem to be the only non-Muslim foreigner in the place. Fortunately, a few Iranian visitors pulled him off me and I quickly fled back to my hotel. It only occurred to me later that I had likely transgressed both the dress code and some photo taking prohibitions.

I'll end this narrative here since, from Mashhad, I headed south to the one road connecting Iran and Afghanistan. Of course, since I was traveling over land, I did return to Iran entering further south from the Makhran desert of Pakistan to Zahedan. I recall staying over in Zahedan, Kerman (I recall appreciating its ancient architecture and general layout), and Yazd. I was determined to avoid Tehran as it had not left a very positive impression on me: it was mostly an ugly mass of uninteresting multistoried buildings, endless traffic, noise and pollution. Only its souks seemed to be made for human beings. Where I went after Yazd has left my memory; I only recall re-entering Turkey from the southern road connection west of Orumiyeh. My map made no significant distinction between the northern crossover point that was used by all cross-Asian truck transport and the road I had chosen for my return, which was little more than a piste.

* For photos of Zanbil, see the Gallery Tchogha Zanbil under 'Archeological Subjects'