

First Impressions

There seemed to be a kind of sameness in Asiatic Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan that I have trouble putting into words. Part of that sameness is, of course, the uniformity of religion—all three are nearly 100% Muslim, even though the people represent many different ethnic backgrounds. Another part of the sameness was the starkness of the landscape, at least in the parts of the countries that I traversed. Entering India, it was my impression that I had stepped out of a black and white movie into a world rendered in full Technicolor. I will share some of my first impressions, which I wrote back to friends in the US.

“India is such a strange place. In New Delhi, the gamut of everything is to be seen. The wealthy Indian’s contempt of the poor is obvious. One man told me I should stay in the center of town—all the Western restaurants and fancy shops—and avoid back streets because there was nothing of interest there. The saints and charlatans are in great profusion, and in most cases telling the difference requires greater discernment than I presently have. One Indian I spoke with had returned recently from a religious festival where [he claimed] the ceremonial fire had been kindled with a prayer. A street corner astrologer [one of literally hundreds] told me incredible things about my past with details that would have been impossible to guess.



“The Sikhs seem to be the most genuinely religious people here and can be trusted to give honest service. I had a long talk with a member of the Sikh family on the train from the border to New Delhi. He has invited me to his home in Baglali [sp?], so I will probably see him again. The Sikhs are generally well-dressed. Their hair is not cut, but is worn on top in a bun, over which the turban is worn. Sikh men were often drivers of the auto rickshaws that weave in and out of traffic in New Delhi. Sikhs formed some of the most elite regiments of the Indian Army.

“The second day I was in New Delhi was the first day of Diwali, the Festival of Lights. On this day every household lights candles and has a great variety of sweets on hand. Most people also buy fireworks. At times it sounded like the city was the scene of a great battle. I went to a sitar concert, and it was like New York, everyone well-dressed and most speaking in English.”

In another letter to friends about my inner mental processing, I wrote, “Before I left [the US on my journey], I felt that

too often I set myself up as your friendly neighborhood prophet and general mystic. The journey has somewhat changed this. Every day is a bewildering flow of new experiences, which have to be fitted into some larger scheme. So often I am caught doing the right things for the wrong reason (the greatest temptation in *Murder in the Cathedral* [by T. S. Elliot]). There is no good or evil; everything is capable of perversion. Every good act is capable of being used to ill advantage of the self. Even alms, the confession of faults one to another, the whole gamut of religious observance, when used wrongly, can destroy the self more than greed, concealment, or even total irreligion."

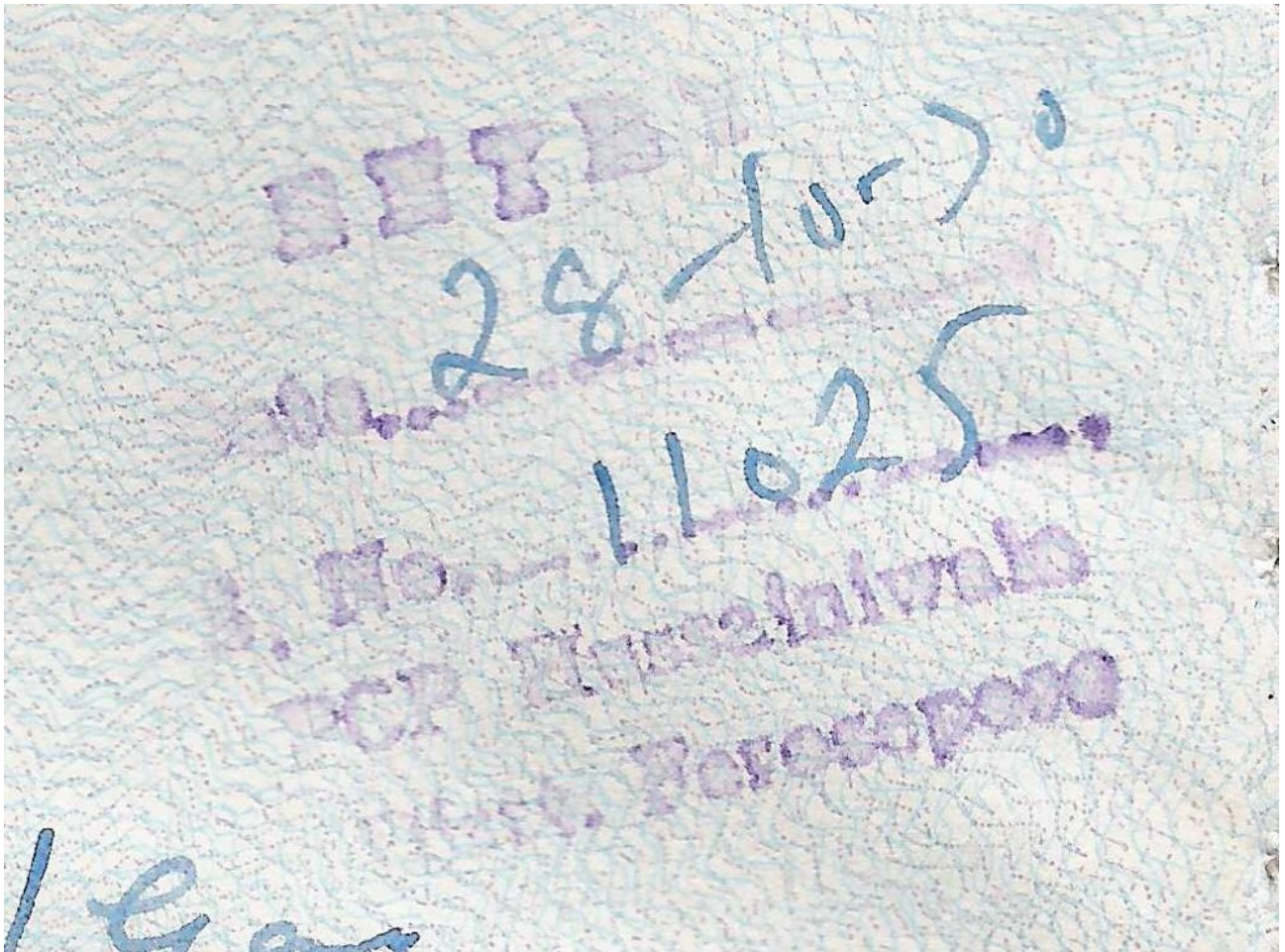
You can hear in this that always, in the background of my mind, issues of significance were constantly percolating. I was wrestling with some of the deepest issues of life and hungering for the Truth.

India!!

My traveling companions and I left Kabul and drove to the border with Pakistan another 150 miles east. The ride from Kabul down to the plains of Pakistan and India was harrowing as the road twisted through the Kabul Gorge, sheer cliffs on one side and a sharp drop on the other side to the river below. The border crossing into Pakistan was fairly smooth. Following the path of the ancient Silk Road, we drove through the Khyber Pass and on east toward India.



In Peshewar, we were able to book spots on a train heading for Lahore. It was the first of my many experiences with the vast railway system that the British built on the Indian subcontinent. Even though the railway system clearly showed signs of wear and tear, it certainly seemed luxurious after weeks on the road through Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. We reached Lahore and the border with India after spending only a single day in Pakistan.



What a relief it was to cross the border into India on October 28. One chapter of my adventure was over; the next chapter was just about to begin. I had been on the road by now for nearly a month and a half. I had traveled about 5,000 overland from Luxembourg. Traveling and experiencing a spectrum of different cultures had helped in part to prepare me for the dizzying diversity of humanity that I was about to encounter in India. This is not to say that anything can truly prepare a Westerner for India.

In Firozpur, my companions and I boarded the train for New Delhi, a rail line established in the late 1800s. Once in New Delhi, we found wonderful lodging at a youth hostel housed in a 14th century hunting lodge, which was used by the kings of India when the area was all forest. The cost for pitching my tent in the courtyard was 1 rupee (less than 25 cents) a day.

For that sum I got the use of the toilet, running water for part of the day and security for my belongings.

After being able to trust almost no food for the last three weeks except for flatbread and kebabs, the vast array of Indian food was a marvelous treat. Some restaurants offered full vegetarian meals for 2 rupee. I quickly became addicted to finger foods such as cheese pakoras and various kinds of samosas. I also began to experiment with paan. Paan is a digestive aid and stimulant. It's a betel leaf stuffed with various ingredients—nearly always chopped betel nuts and slaked lime—then folded into a triangle or rolled. Paanwalas have tiny shops and can make any combination of ingredients to suit each customer. After chewing, you can either spit out the red juice or swallow it. As I newbie, I spat.



In my next post, I will share some of my first impressions of

the seemingly endless variety of humanity on this vast subcontinent.

Ramblings

As I traveled, I was trying to process the flood of sights, sounds, smells and particularly my experiences with both Westerners and the nationals of the countries in which I traveled. I wish that I had the presence of mind at the time to keep a daily journal. It would help to trace my thoughts as they evolved as a result of my experiences. I have the next best thing in letters back to friends. Here's what I wrote in one letter:

"I want to try to give you my impressions of the entire 'scene' here. Of course I'm involved on a lot of levels, so it may not be objective. There are Afghans living in almost any imaginable condition. There are rich, young Afghans in good suits and children and beggars in rags asking "bakshish" [a few coins given to a beggar]. Some are clearly in awe of Westerners, and some are very proud and despise us. It's hard to know who to trust. It's hard to communicate with someone you can't trust (real or imagined). The West is destroying them by forcing them into this stance.



'The hippies I meet here are a strange form of humanity [this coming from one of them]. They have overcome the world physically—i.e. not desiring economic or domestic security—but are resting after the great effort. Now, instead, they are free to do unwitting damage at deeper levels. People pay 12afg for Coke instead of 3afg for tea, wear 1000afg coats, smoke 40afg cigarettes, and refuse 1 or 2afg for a beggar. They are arrogant and haggle over things with Afghans as if they were children. Moral: take what you learned at the last level and apply it to this one.

“Existence is the same wherever or at what level. There are rich exploiters and poor exploiters, straight exploiters and hip exploiters. Your level determines what is good for you in relations with the world and in what ways you act to exploit the world. People must learn that economic and social enlightenment are very minor tasks compared to what is needed to transform the entire man. If I could only learn my level

and what my special way of exploiting the world is.”

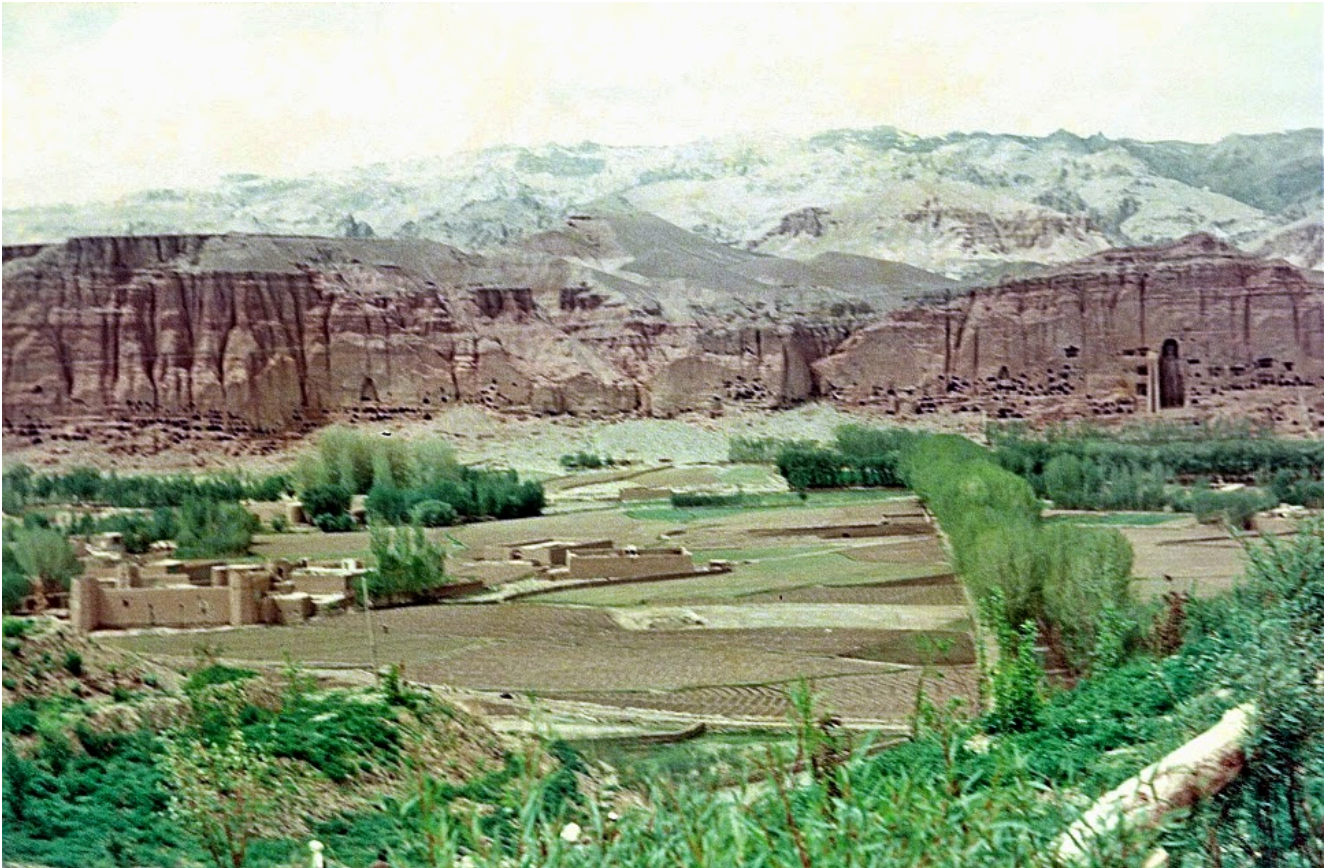
That is just a sample of the ramblings in my brain at this point in my journey. What you can hear in the midst of those disjointed thoughts is the recognition that true transformation cannot be imposed from without but must flow from a fundamental reorientation at the heart level. What was vague to me at the time was how best to accomplish that radical inner reorientation.

Bamiyan and Band-E-Amir

My traveling companions and I decided to take a side trip from Kabul before heading over the Kyber Pass to Pakistan and India. We arose early one morning and staggered to the bus to Bamiyan, which was supposed to leave at 3am. The bus was already packed full with Afghans, so we decided to ride with the luggage on the roof. We finally left at 4:30am for the 100 mile ride over a rugged mountain range.



The ride was incredibly beautiful as the road followed small, green river valleys past high, craggy cliffs on either side. The road steadily climbed from Kabul (a little over a mile above sea level) to Bamiyan at over 8,000 feet above sea level. We arrived at 3:30pm after several stops for tea, etc. Bamiyan, with a population of only 200 at the time, sits in a green valley with mountains rising all around, some to 18,000 feet.



In the valley there were two spectacular images of Buddha carved into two niches in a cliff face—one 100 feet tall, the other 175 feet tall—built in AD 507 and AD 554. There were still remains of the frescos that once covered the niches of the Buddhas and some of the meditation cells. We walked out on top of the head of the larger Buddha; the view of the valley was spectacular. All that is left today of the two statues of Buddha are the niches that once housed them. Both statues were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 in a fit of religious fervor. In the same valley we also saw the ruins of an entire city in which Genghis Khan killed every living thing to avenge the death of his brother-in-law.



Our stay in Bamiyan was surreal. We found accommodations in the back room of a chai (tea) house. In the evenings, we drank chai and smoked hashish with the people of the village. The owner of the shop played a dambura (a two-stringed fretless instrument) very proficiently while someone else played tabla (a drum) and sang. One evening, all the Westerners in turn

were summoned to get up and dance with a lieutenant in the local police force.

Before heading back to Kabul, we hired a vehicle to drive us out to the lakes of Band-E-Amir. We climbed further into the mountains to an altitude of about 10,000 feet. The lakes range from smaller to quite large with the bluest of water and rugged mountains soaring still higher in the background.



We reluctantly left this spectacular part of Afghanistan for the long bus ride back to Kabul and the journey further east to India.

Exploring Afghanistan

Afghanistan 50 years ago was a much different country than it is today, Then it was a fairly stable monarchy under King Zahir Shah, who had reigned since 1933. He would be toppled in a coup in 1973. The scenery in Afghanistan was wild and mostly desolate. Afghanistan was at the crossroads of the ancient world. In the past, the land had been conquered by the likes of Darius I of Babylonia, Alexander the Great, and Ghengis Khan. More on that later.



The town of Herat was quite lovely, almost all bazaar and shops for clothing, carpets, and brass. There were several ruins of old castles, one of which is supposedly built on the site of a fort constructed by Alexander the Great in about BC

330. It was a complete ruin 50 years ago; since then a great deal of restoration has taken place. I also visited the Great Blue Mosque; construction on the mosque began in AD 1200. The pace of life in Herat was slow. Many men went to the tea shops, drank tea and smoked hashish all day, maybe play some music; when tired there were large carpeted platforms where they could crash.



We stayed in Herat for three days and then headed east to Kandahar. I honestly don't remember much about the two days we spent in Kandahar, and I didn't say anything about it in the letters that my parents and friends saved. From Kandahar we headed east again to the capital, Kabul, where we stayed for a couple days.

I visited the National Museum, which housed treasures that I saw then but which no one today will ever see because most of

the collection was either looted or destroyed by the Taliban (because of Hindu or Buddhist imagery). The astounding diversity of the collection resulted from Afghanistan's position on the ancient Silk Road between Europe and Asia. The museum had a collection of Greek and Roman coins, one of the finest in the world. After 50 years, I recall few of the details but remember being blown away by the breadth and beauty of the collection.

My traveling companions and I took an amazing side trip from Kabul before heading across the Khyber Pass into Pakistan and then on to India, but that deserves an entire post of its own.

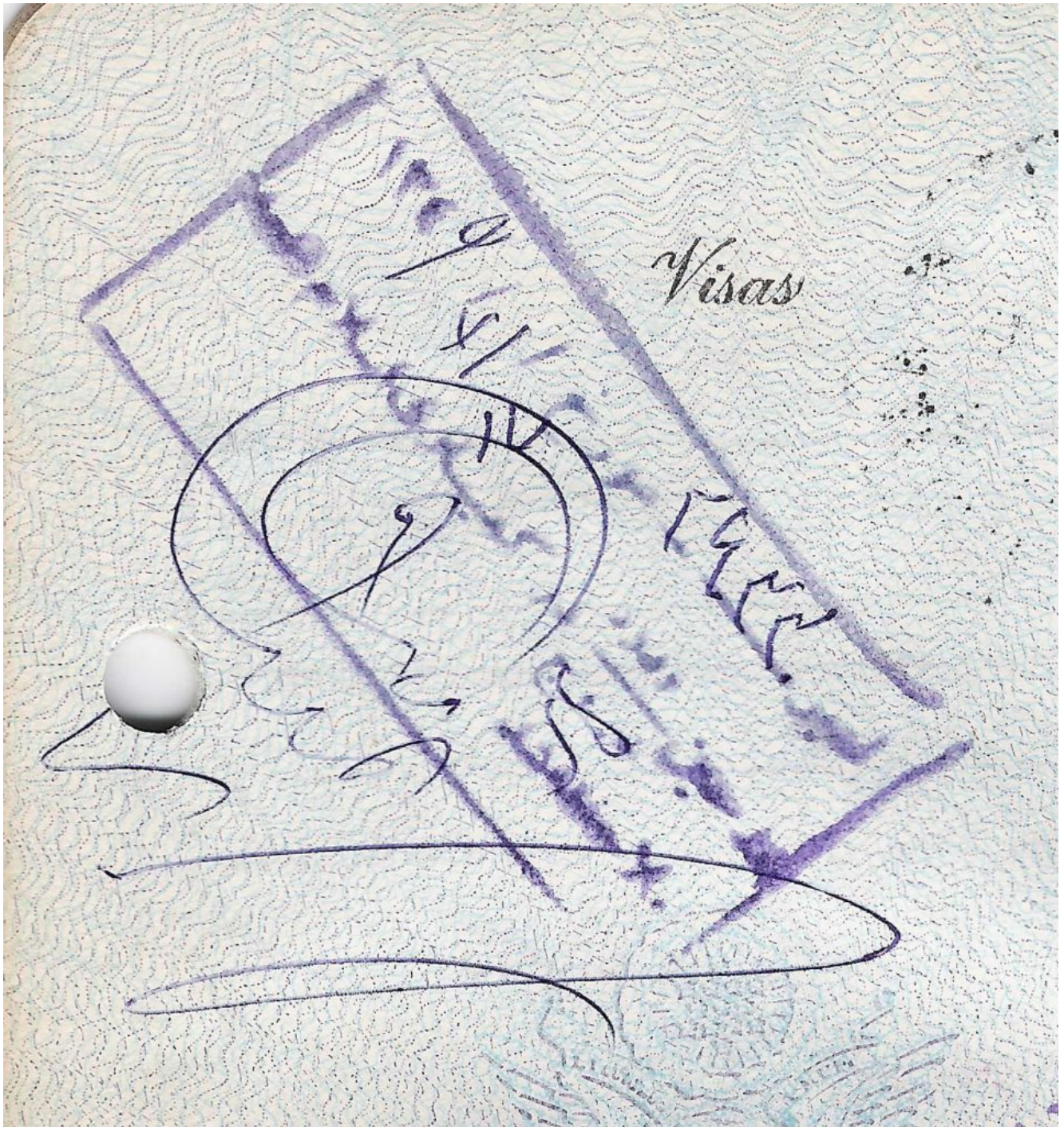
Afghanistan!!

After spending a night under the stars, we were ready for crossing the border into Afghanistan. Actually, we weren't at all ready for what was to follow. Fortunately, my mom and dad kept all my letters home as did some close friends of mine; these helped jog my memory.

The "system" at the Afghan border was unbelievable. We submitted our passports in a room with two desks. A man at the first desk checked in the passports and then placed them on the second desk—*anywhere* on the other desk. A customs officer from an inner office came, took a handful of random passports into the inner office and then called the passport owners in to interview them before stamping their passports. I think you can see the weakness of this "system". People who handed in

passports at the same time could wait as short as five minutes or as long as hours to be called into the inner office.

Since we were all traveling together, our drivers didn't want to leave anyone behind. The driver of the vehicle I was riding in (a German doctor) finally reached the limit of his patience. He strode up to the second desk, rifled through the passports, and pulled out all the passports of those traveling in his vehicle. He then barged into the inner office and shoved the passports at the border official. I was watching in horror, imagining all kinds of horrific scenarios, one of which included all of us in an Afghan jail. To my great surprise, the doctor emerged alive with all our passports stamped. I never asked if money exchanged hands.



Once we were all across the border into Afghanistan, we drove to Herat, the closest city of any size, about 90 miles from the border. Once in Herat, our breakneck pace of travel came to an abrupt halt. We found a reasonably priced clean hotel (less than \$1 per night). I was beginning to learn what was fairly safe to eat – basically anything cooked to death, such as delicious, fresh flatbread and kebabs. It was delightful to look forward to several days of rest rather than constant travel. Recalling that I was a hippie and an unbeliever, it

won't surprise you to learn that those days were spent in a haze of Afghan hashish, which was cheap, potent, and legal.

On to Afghanistan

I realize that I've said very little so far about my spiritual quest. The reason is fairly straightforward. The breakneck pace of the trip thus far and the barrage of new sights and sounds (and smells) left me totally distracted. I haven't mentioned my initial plan once I arrived in India. I had become fascinated with an Indian guru (spiritual teacher) – Sathya Sai Baba. Sai Baba was noted for his apparently genuine ability to materialize holy ash and small pieces of jewelry out of thin air. His ashram (spiritual center) in southern India had attracted many Westerners as well as Asians. It was my plan to head to Sai Baba's ashram. Looking back, I'm glad that God had other, far better plans for me.

By the time we got to the Iranian border, I was feeling pretty marginal. Having abdominal cramps while traveling by bus and having to use filthy squatty potties when the bus stopped was extremely unpleasant. The border crossing into Iran was fairly smooth; this was back in the day when the Shah was still in power and the US had a good relationship with Iran.



In Bazargan, just across the border, my English friend Peter and I got a motor coach headed for Tehran by way of Tabriz. I think it would have been a fairly enjoyable trip if I hadn't been feeling so marginal. Once in Tehran, I found a reputable clinic and was able to get some meds to help me get back to health, including a shot of gamma globulin to boost my immune system and anti-malarial drugs for India. Peter and I only stayed a day in Tehran. I was feeling marginally better, so we decided to push on to Mashad in eastern Iran, not far from the border with Afghanistan. If anything, the scenery in Iran was even more wild and desolate than in eastern Turkey.

In Mashad, Peter and I met up with three German couples in three VW minibuses traveling in caravan, and we were able to get a ride with them. We drove all day from Mashad to the Afghan border. We enjoyed the relative comfort of riding in

private vehicles with agreeable companions. We arrived too late in the day to cross the border, so we slept under the stars. I'm glad we were able to get some sleep before tackling the border crossing into Afghanistan. But, that's a story for another post.

Pushing On East

At last the day had come to push on. This next week was definitely the least pleasant on my overland journey to the East. In Turkey today, there are a number of bridges over the Bosphorus Strait. There are modern motorways linking Istanbul with Ankara, the capital. None of that existed in 1970. It was a long and tiring trip across Turkey.

I boarded my overnight bus to Ankara in Istanbul, the only Westerner on the bus as far as I could tell. My conveyance was a fairly modern Mercedes motor coach with reclining seats, except for the back row of seats where I was sent. We had scarcely left the bus station before the bus came to a halt in the line waiting for a ferry across the Bosphorus Strait to the Asian side of Turkey.

Fortunately, I remember almost nothing of the long overnight ride to Ankara. My next vivid memory is of the bus depot in Ankara. I had time to wait for my next bus heading to Erzurum, near the Eastern border of Turkey. As I squatted on the floor of the station with my huge, red backpack next to me, I was soon surrounded by a circle of Turkish men on their haunches

eyeing me. I didn't sense any hostility, just a curiosity about this bit of flotsam that had washed up in the bus station.

I boarded the bus headed for Erzurum. It seemed that the further we headed east the more rugged and forbidding the landscape became. In Ankara, we had already climbed 3,000 above the sea level of Istanbul. We continued to climb, often threading along river beds between cliffs on either side. In the distance, even higher peaks grew. I was exhausted by the time we reached Erzurum, the largest easternmost city in Turkey and over a mile in elevation.

I had to change buses and arrange transport to the Iranian border, which was another 100 miles to the east. Up until this point, I was the lone Westerner traveling east. Much to my relief, I met up with another hippie headed east – Peter from England; he and I traveled east together. The scenery on the road was spectacular, if somewhat terrifying on the narrow, winding mountain road. The road continued to rise to about 6,000 feet elevation. At one point, we were only about ten miles from Mount Ararat, 16,854 feet above sea level.

