

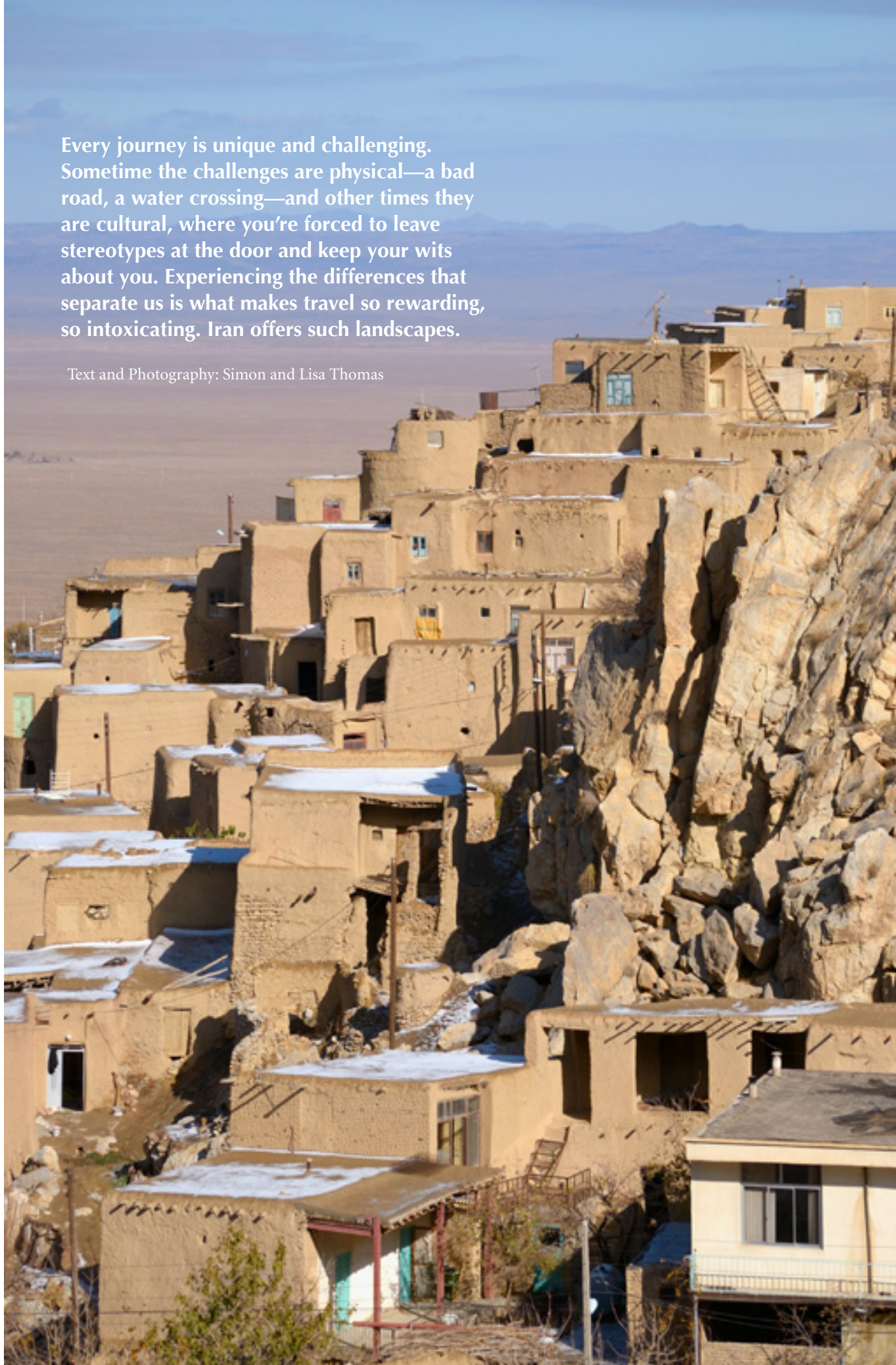
Iran

# The Different Faces of *IRAN*



Every journey is unique and challenging. Sometime the challenges are physical—a bad road, a water crossing—and other times they are cultural, where you're forced to leave stereotypes at the door and keep your wits about you. Experiencing the differences that separate us is what makes travel so rewarding, so intoxicating. Iran offers such landscapes.

Text and Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas



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“**W**hat? This is no good! You must send this one home!” exclaims the thickset, unshaven café owner sitting opposite me, pointing directly to Lisa. “I get you two well-behaved Iranian girls at 24 each and they make the same age of your wife. You marry them both, this is better. Yes?” He punctuates his words with a resounding thump of his chubby fist on the tin table, sending cutlery flying.

I had, moments earlier, naively mentioned that Lisa is eight years my senior.

A metal furnace belts out heat as we slowly thaw. It took us three hours of bitter-cold riding to descend from the mountainous Howden border of Turkmenistan along the Kopet Dag pass and down to the lowlands of northern Iran. We are southeast-bound en route to Mashhad, a major oasis on the ancient Silk Road and a destination for pilgrims for centuries. With thanks for the

food and the conversation, we soon kick up the sidestands, although Lisa struggles to put on her helmet and riding gear over the Muslim-style head covering and long black dress she must wear while here.

The pitted tar we'd ridden from the border is now silky-smooth asphalt. The coffee-colored mountains of earlier have gone, replaced with a flat, dry, dusty vista. Dusk is setting quickly as we approach the outskirts of Mashhad, one of the holiest cities in the Shia Muslim world. In the dim light, we battle swarms of mopeds and fast-moving traffic and struggle to see through the dust-filled air. Past glittering mosques and tightly packed urban streets, our GPS guides us into a small, dead-end alley. A painted sign reads, “Vali's Non-smoking Guesthouse.” Vali swings open old metal doors and flashes us a wicked smile as we drive both bikes into the tiny guesthouse's basement. The basement serves as a small dormitory, and Lisa and I smile at the idea of parking

the bikes next to our beds. Realization hits home as we wearily wash the day's dust from our faces: We're really here . . . we're in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### **Lisa writes:**

Since the 1979 revolution, all women are required by law to cover their hair and wear loose-fitting clothing to disguise their figures; punishment for disobedience can be severe. This morning I feel uneasy, claustrophobic; I'd asked if it is necessary to wear the hijab (the veil and modest dress required to cover your hair and neck) when inside the guesthouse, i.e., not in public. The emphatic answer was “Yes!” Over the hijab, I'm draped head to toe in the chador, a black cloak that must cover a woman's entire body except the hands and feet. Difficult as this is for me to understand, and awkward to adhere to, it's the law.

On the streets we walk east toward the Holy Temple; locals pass us warily, each



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emitting an air of caution followed pleasantly by a smile and a shy note of recognition. Simon's height and blond hair easily mark him as a foreigner.

Inside the main temple, we join the worshipping throng and cross the vast Razavi Grand courtyard. Above, stunning turquoise and gold domes dwarf us, and above them, reaching for the sky, are richly decorated minarets. Suddenly I am pulled from Simon's side, swept up in a wave of women, and in moments I am trapped in a sea of worshipers deep inside the Imam Reza's tomb. Non-Muslims must not enter this holy shrine; I had not intended to, but upon reaching the threshold I could not turn,

let alone stop. I am in a wave of human bodies swaying back and forth and now rushing toward the zarih, the gold-latticed cage that covers the tomb. My anxiety at the thought of being found out here surely matches their fervor for prayer. I push my way back toward the entrance, desperate to extricate myself but all the while mindful of the women sitting on the floor, praying and reading the Koran. Hundreds seem to be in a trance. I've not seen anything like this before.

#### Simon writes:

We set off the next morning, stopping at the first fuel station. The fuel supply situation is bizarre, and we willingly accept the help of locals to negotiate a fee system we don't understand. Fuel in Iran is subsidized, requiring everyone who buys gas to use a fuel card. Rumors abound concerning fuel restrictions on foreign vehicles. We order the fuel, and the pump attendant uses his fuel card to allocate us his government-provided ration (these guys get paid next to nothing and certainly don't have the cash to buy a car). We pay a little over the going rate for his service, but the fuel is so cheap it's inconsequential.

#### Encounter with the Secret Service

Back on the road, our bikes feel heavy as we ride the A83, a thread of dry tar that splits a bare desert landscape. We have 600 miles ahead before we arrive in Tehran, the Iranian capital, where we must apply for and hopefully collect our Pakistan visas.

The day passes, the miles roll by. This morning's warm air is all but a memory as the temperature drops. We need our wits about us, as well-meaning but dangerous drivers buzz too close while their passengers take photos and video of us on their mobile phones. On the outskirts of Shahrud, we are



pulled over at the first police checkpoint. An excited, young, frozen officer beams a huge smile and shakes my hand excitedly. Over his shoulder, I watch trouble unfold as his colleague keenly offers the same greeting to Lisa, who is wearing her helmet and unisex riding suit; the officer is unaware she is female and recoils upon discovering her gender. We are dismissed shortly after.

We left our motel at 6 this morning and instantly confronted open, frozen plains dusted with fresh snow. That was two hours ago and a relative delight compared to the tight, icy, twisting curves that now lead us up and over the Alborz mountain range deep in the Parvar Protected Area. We push on hard until finally, at 7,000 feet, we have to pull over and desperately try to heat our frozen bodies from the cylinder heads of the 1150 GS.

In Semnan we melt into the city's hectic traffic and once again play dodge 'em with gawking road users. Thirty minutes later, a police officer's arm waving from a new-looking sedan pulls us over to the roadside. Documents are asked for and quickly handed over, and the atmosphere instantly

relaxes. But the loud screech of tires behind us has me spinning around as an unmarked car pulls up hard and fast. A new stranger, tall and stern, emerges and demands our passports. "New country, new rules, new lessons," I tell myself silently. We had just spoken with our friend Masoud and knew he would be here in five minutes.

Again, the stranger demands our documents. With one of the police translating, I politely decline while wearing my most disarming, cheesy smile. All this obviously frustrates the new stranger. Both the other officers bend to his authority, which alerts Lisa and I that he is some kind of official. I politely explain via the police officer that this stranger is in an unmarked car, has no uniform, and had offered us neither identification nor reason for his request.

Bizarrely, this logical explanation of our insubordination deflates what is quickly becoming a tense situation. Masoud's arrival is perfectly timed, and with a few warm hugs exchanged (not appropriate for Lisa), we are again knee-deep in questions. Who was he? Who were we? Why were we here? Were we with the press? Did we have au-

thorization to ride the motorcycles here? Had we been anywhere near the restricted area to the south of town? Etc, etc.

Twenty minutes later, we are cleared to proceed. Our angry little X-Files encounter had been explained.

"It's OK now. He was Iranian Secret Service," Masoud explains. "They know you are coming from Turkmenistan and then Mashhad."

"They knew?" I blurted, surprised that we'd been tracked. Masoud explains that the secret service is everywhere, with what he calls "spies" in every town. We'd gone from thinking that meeting the secret service was cool to being more than a little intimidated. (Even the most innocent mistake can have serious consequences. We were very careful during our entire tour in Iran due to international developments. Just weeks before our visit, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the presidential election amidst allegations of vote rigging. Vicious rioting erupted in the streets, leaving 30 dead and more than 1,000 arrested in the subsequent wave of protests. Iranian authorities



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claimed foreign interference stoked the unrest, singling out Britain for criticism. As U.K. citizens, we were lucky to have been allowed in; as westerners, we were vulnerable. During our tour, a young French student, Clotilde Reiss, was in Iranian jail. The secret service alleged Reiss had taken photographs of the recent Iranian election protests in Isfahan and emailed them to a friend, an act of potential espionage against the Islamic Republic in the eyes of Iranian prosecutors. It was almost a year before Reiss was free to return home to France. We didn't take many photographs. We couldn't risk it!

### High Plains Drifting

Our encounter with the secret service was over a week ago. Now we are in Tehran, \$250 lighter in the pocket after the fees for our Pakistan visas and U.K. letter of no objection. (I promise I didn't make that last one up.)

With a few wrong turns made and finally bored of our taste, Tehran finally spits us out around 9 a.m. After filling up with some very suspect gas, we slide onto Highway 9.

Out of the capital, we can again appreciate the Iranian countryside: dry, rugged, and vast. Sixty miles later we pass the small village of Ahmadabad and skirt the edge of Lake Houz-e Soltan. At the town of Qom, we join the A80 and begin our southeasterly leg toward Pakistan. We've maintained a good speed, but if we are to reach Yazd by nightfall we must maintain it.

The morning heat takes its toll on our concentration. Soon, all the zips and vents on our BMW riding suits are completely open. The parched, dry air whips over us and sucks away perspiration. Our mouths are parched, and the mineral-laden air leaves an unpleasant, metallic taste.

In stark contrast to this morning's blistering heat, the air is freezing in the high plain to the northwest of Yazd, snow blanketing the ground on both sides of the road. The air smells cold but pristine. Every 30 or so kilometers we pass green road signs marked with beautiful Farsi script. We've no clue what they say.

The sky glows with a million little lights as we negotiate the small streets of ancient Yazd. We turn down an alley of old, mud-brick buildings and pull up outside the famously named Silk Road Hotel. A stone's throw from this legendary oasis, the tall minarets of the 800-year-old Masjed-i Jamé mosque stand like sentinels. Through the tight corridor, two dim lights barely illuminate the dark hallway. Pushing back a heavy cloth curtain reveals a sanctuary; a dozen smiling faces look up from tables dotted around the roofed courtyard. Delicious foods being delivered to the tables

perfume the air, and we realize we're starving. In our push to get here, we'd forgotten to eat today. By midnight, Nicco, a German lad riding solo on his Honda Africa Twin, joins us. There's safety in numbers, so we decide we'll ride together to Pakistan.

In the morning, we all negotiate the congested streets of Yazd. By early afternoon the A02 has taken us from Yazd, at 4,000 feet, down through the low valleys to the east and all the way back up to 8,500 feet south of Kerman. It feels great to open up the bikes on wide, clear roads. As we approach Bam, the sky finally clears and the low sun paints the mountains to our north gold and orange. The lingering clouds turn mauve and dark blue.

At Akbar's Tourist Guest House in Bam, Akbar shakes our hands firmly, followed by Alex, a Greek traveler transiting Asia on his Suzuki V-Strom. That the guesthouse is

here at all is a miracle. Akbar's life, home, and business were crushed in 2003's massive earthquake, which leveled the ancient Persian city and killed 27,000 inhabitants. Akbar lost most of his family on that tragic day. UNESCO lost a World Heritage site of B.C. Iranian architecture called the Arg-e-Bam, which was totally destroyed.

### Unwelcome Security

"I don't know if I feel safer or worse off surrounded by these guys," Lisa whispers to me as we walk to the bikes. It's 7 a.m. and we are surrounded by machine-gun-toting police and military. Akbar had hinted we might get an escort to the Pakistan border; it looks like he was right.

A gruff, khaki-dressed soldier speaking Farsi and then broken English demands our passports and receives them with a faint sneer. He tucks them into his inside jacket pocket and turns and walks away. The four



# Facts & Information

Iran

Total Mileage  
Approximately 1,678 miles



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Always consult more-detailed maps for touring purposes.

## In General

The Islamic Republic of Iran offers plains, deserts, forests, hills, and plateaus. It is one of the world's most mountainous countries. Iranians speak Persian (Farsi). As a Muslim country, everyone should dress modestly at all times with shoulders and legs covered. A woman's head and body must be covered at all times.

The official currency is the rial, but Iranians talk in terms of tomans, a unit equal to 10 rials. Iran is a purely cash economy: no credit cards or traveler's checks, just cash, preferably in high-denomination euros or U.S. dollars. ATMs require locally issued bank cards.

Visas are required and must be obtained in advance from the Iranian Interests Section in Washington, D.C. A valid visa does not guarantee entry into the country. A Carnet de Passage is required for your vehicle.

The best times to visit are April to June and September to November. Take special note of the customs during the fasting month of Ramadan.

## Food & Lodging

Meals are mainly rice with meat, chicken, or fish and some onion, vegetables, and nuts. Fruit and plain yogurt is added to most meals. Consumption of alcohol and pork is illegal.

All major towns have hotels; Tehran has several 5-star hotels. Prices range from \$15–\$25 per night. Not all hotels will allow foreigners to stay. When making a reservation you will be quoted and charged the official price, but you may get a serious discount by just showing up and negotiating. Camping is relatively new, and police registration is required. Avoid pitching your tent in the middle of nowhere.

## Roads & Biking

City roads are mainly good, but in rural areas watch out for very poor conditions. Dangerous drivers are everywhere. In winter, high passes are often closed by snow. Iranian authorities sometimes mount informal roadblocks and may be suspicious of foreigners. Always carry identification.

## Contact Information

- Visa requirements and travel advice [www.travel.state.gov/travel/](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/)
- Ramadan [www.when-is.com/ramadan.asp](http://www.when-is.com/ramadan.asp)
- Iran Tourism & Touring Online [www.itto.org](http://www.itto.org)

## Books & Maps

- *Lonely Planet Iran* by Andrew Burke and Mark Elliott, ISBN 978-1741042931, \$25.99
- Iran International Travel map, ISBN 978-1553412502, available new and used online
- *The Silk Roads* by Paul Wilson, Trailblazer Publications, ISBN 978-1905864324, \$24.95

## Motorcycle & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GS Adventure and 2002 BMW F 650 GS  
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega  
Jacket and Pants: BMW Trailguard  
Helmets: BMW System 5  
Boots: MX boots, Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10