

The Osher Traveler

My Visit to Iran

By Martha Raak

Martha Raak toured Iran from November 6-21, 2010. The following are excerpts from her journal.

Travel Concepts International: The Serious Traveler provided my visa, a reading list, and thorough instructions: Be flexible, ladies wear a headscarf and a tunic below the hips, and practice knee bends for those special toilets. Always carry tissue, hand wipes, and water, and be ready for a wonderful surprise—a very wonderful welcome for all Americans!

There were 17 in our group, including our tour leader from California, Gwen Erwood. Gwen has visited Iran 10 times and loves it. Our Iranian tour guide, Bahman Zenhari, is like a son to her, and he refers to her as his “American Mother”.

Half of us were stuck for an extra day at the airport with poor communications by the airline [Turkish Airlines]. They belatedly put us up in a hotel in **Istanbul**. I visited some of the cherished sites such as the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia and the amazing seventh-century underground cistern. Now I know I can keep awake for 48 hours if necessary.

Some of the information I picked up from the guide on our bus trips: Iranians call Los Angeles “Tehran-geles” and Toronto “Tehronto.” There are so many expats there from the Shah’s time. The three Iranian Cs: carpets, cats, and cashews. The roads are excellent. A system of divided roads was begun about 10 years ago.

There are 28 provinces, and the country is twice as large as France.

The election is called “selection.”

I was impressed by a reality TV show called “Stars of Science” produced in Qatar. I wonder where “Dancing with the Stars” will get the U.S. in another 20 years.

Many crops are grown with an ancient underground watering system using water from the mountains. A typical meal included basmati rice, vegetables such as eggplant, grilled tomatoes, kebobs of beef, chicken, and fish, and smashed lamb. We usually had a delicious soup, flatbread, sparkling cider, non-alcoholic beer (no alcohol is allowed in public), and sweets or lovely ice cream of saffron and rosewater. Sometimes there were some delicious vegetarian casseroles.

A 236-mile drive to **Hamadan** to visit the tombs of Esther and Mordecai—this city is one of the oldest continually inhabited towns of the world. We also visited the tomb of Abu Ali Sina, eleventh-century physician who systematized herbal medicine.

Drive to **Shiraz** (348 miles), present day capital of Fars Province, which gave its name to the Iranian language. Oil pipelines are everywhere. There are 30 refineries here. Expats are returning with technology to help.



Martha Raak at the Chehel Sotun Palace in Isfahan (otherwise known as the Palace of 40 columns)



Sassanian Reliefs in Kermanshaw

This land of Fars is the cradle of Persian civilization. **Shiraz** is a city of historic monuments, poets and philosophers, warriors, kings, and orchards. There are wheat, barley, maize, citrus, date palms, and persimmon trees. We pass through a huge natural rock formation called “the gate” in the Algorz mountain range. It reminds me of Utah and the Grand Canyon. It is about 5 p.m., and the sun is most attractive on the lime and sandstone formations.

Had a lovely visit to the tomb of Hafez, one of the most revered poets of Iran. Our guide read a piece in Farsi, and I read it in English. He exalts the connection between God and humanity. I bought an anthology of Persian poems here. The whole site is beautiful and surrounded by gardens.

Visited the Vakil Bazaar, one of the loveliest in the world. Here true craftsmen work on polished inlaid boxes; there are copper workers, weavers, and silversmiths. Gold is very popular in Iran as it is considered a hedge against currency devaluation.

Our attractive 23-year-old local guide filled us in on women’s issues. She said that the next generation will not tolerate the headgear and other infringements on women. Women do drive here, even those in the full black chador. I even saw one on the back of the omnipresent motor scooter.

Continued on page 15



Persepolis

My Visit to Iran

Continued from page 5

Persepolis is located 62 miles from **Shiraz**. It is one of my two favorite places, the other being **Isfahan**. This is the ruined capital of ancient Iran and a spectacular archaeological site. It was reserved only for ritual celebrations on the first day of spring when the subjects from the nations ruled by Darius I came to pay homage with gifts.

Walking up the steps of the Gate of Nations gave me goosebumps as the ancients walked these very steps in the sixth century b.c. They were led to the Hundred Column Palace and the presence of the King. Xerxes and other Achaemenid Kings had palaces here until Alexander the Great destroyed much of the site in 330 b.c. as revenge for the sacking of Athens during the Persian Wars. This place has the feel of the contemporaneous Greek Acropolis. I would put **Persepolis** in the category of Petra in Jordan.

In the evening, our guide took those who wished to go to a modern indoor mall to see how the younger set comports itself. We saw women with giant bouffant hairdos, lots of makeup, and a slim scarf around their heads. The tunics or sweaters were tight fitting and covered tight jeans and high heels. In the shop windows were

extravagant gowns, etc., which apparently are worn at home and at private weddings and parties. This is a paradoxical society.

We drive 280 miles to **Yazd**, a third-century city and home to 60,000 Zoroastrians. This is a fascinating religion considered by many to be the root of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This religion faded after the Muslim invasion but also persists in India where the followers are known as Parsees. We visited a Zoroastrian shrine and saw the fire that has been burning for 1,500 years. We visited a Qanat museum that explained the amazing underground water system that still provides 75% of Iran's water supply. This ancient city also perfected a cooling wind-tower system which one sees throughout the city. We stop for a short dusk visit to the charming and ancient desert city of **Na'in**, a Friday mosque, and roam the ancient alleys.

I fell in love with **Isfahan**, the garden city and cultural heart of Iran, and can understand why over half of Iranian honeymoons happen here. This city dates back 2,500 years and was the capital during three historical periods. There is a famous bridge/dam surrounded by gardens and public paths and covering a river where people were boating. Totally charming and attractive. We visited one of the grandest and largest squares in the world, where people were picnicking, taking horse-and-buggy rides, visiting one of the two grand mosques, and strolling and buying in the huge bazaar.

We stop at the village of **Natanz** enroute to Tehran. Visit a potter and still another beautiful mosque. I will never keep these mosques separated in my mind. We arrive in **Tehran** (having stopped at a very popular fast food emporium for sandwiches to save time) and visit the archaeological museum, which to my delight had a

marvelous collection of objects from **Persepolis**.

Preparing to leave for the U.S., some of us needed to stay an extra day in **Istanbul** as airflights were unavailable. Gwen and I enjoyed strolling in the neighborhood of our wonderful small hotel. The rooftop garden looked right over the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia! We enjoyed a hot and steamy bath in a 1,000 year old bath house and a seafood dinner. We left the next morning.



Martha Raak in Iran

Martha Raak to Speak on Iran at March 22 Evening Lecture

Martha Raak will speak on Iran at 7:30 p.m. on March 22 in McConomy Hall in the Carnegie Mellon University Center.

Her talk will provide an overview of her recent trip from the perspective of a participant-observer, not a professor, she says. She will comment on Iran's history, educational system, government, religion, culture, and the role of women, illustrated with some personal photos.