

Małgorzata SKONECZNA* (Siedlce University, Poland)

My first trip to Iran



Two lines above I have just written ‘Iran 2018 ’it’s because I am subconsciously thinking of going there again. Why there? There are a few reasons. First of all, to make things clear, I have definitely fallen in love with Iran. How did it start? When? I do not remember quite well but a few years ago while travelling in Armenia I found out that there was a direct coach connection between Yerevan and Tehran. The journey takes about 30 hours, depending probably on the weather and line at the border but it costs a little.

Then, in Mumbai I heard about the Towers of Silence which are situated in the very heart of the city, dating back to the times when Persians were forced to move eastwards as Islam was spreading all over and they were welcomed in India.

The third reason is my next holiday which I spend in Central Asia, wishing to go along the Pamir Highway, what is absolutely impossible to do alone, unless you

* Instytut Historii i Stosunków Międzynarodowych, m.skoneczna@malgos.com.pl

have money to burn! I want to find some people to share the cost with me. In Osh (Kyrgistan) I am lucky! I meet some people who are looking for one more person to go in a jeep for 10-day journey along the Wahan valley. Two of them are Iranian siblings, great capable people with Canadian passports. We take to each other straight away.

The last but not least reason is 'our uni', namely Professor Kasia Maksymiuk. During one of the lectures she shows some photos of a little digger, penknife or something which makes her eyes glitter. I do not realize exactly why but it's none of my business. The idea of visiting Iran sticks to my mind and I cannot rest until I find way.

Well, tickets are not very expensive if you buy them in advance, but you need planning to do so and I am the last one to do it. I decide at a very last moment, get the tickets and wait patiently for winter holidays to start. I am a teacher that is why I haven't got many options to choose from, it must be either during winter holidays or summer. In the summer it's too hot on the desert and my short-term plan is to visit Yazd, the ancient Zoroastrian city, right in the middle of a desert. In summer the temperatures there reach over 50 degrees Centigrade. The remaining option is winter. The last day at school is Friday and off we go.

Unfortunately, three days before I come down with a terrible flu. Everybody knows the feeling of broken bones, headache, runny nose and constant terrible cough. Never give up! I take a plane via Amsterdam (later, when in Poland again, I read on my credit card account that I do some shopping there, which could not remember). At Tehran airport I have to wait for my visa, the procedure is not complicated but time-consuming, with my cough all arrival hall, including border control, pity me.

Finally, it's about 3 am, I reclaim my luggage (an old filthy backpack), get my Iranian SIM card (10 dollars is enough for two weeks) and head for the currency exchange. While there a group of taxi drivers surrounds me offering their service. Knowing the price (20 dollars) I bargain as, naturally they want to cheat middle-aged blond European (with her hair covered with a scarf but without any prior practice the scarf slides down all the time). The airport is over 50 km away from the city, so a ride takes quite a while. It's night but I can see some lit up mosques, among them a huge structure built to commemorate Ajatollah Khomeini. The driver talks about it without much respect.

The hotel is in the city centre, looks quite clean, the boy at the reception insists on full payment at once, the boss says so. No choice, you have to pay even without looking around the room. It's too late to be fussy. The room, as most of the places in Iran, is heated by a diesel-powered heater. The engine is just behind my window which cannot be opened, the smoke gets inside, finally I do not know whether my headache is due to a flu or because of the smoke.

The next day I am not well at all but try to go out and sightsee. I ask at the reception how to get to The Treasure of National Jewels, housed in The Central Bank of The Islamic Republic of Iran, just in front of the German Embassy. One bus, simple direction. I put myself together, cover my head and head for the bus stop. The bus is waiting, I get in through the front door, buy the ticket and wait. After a few minutes I find out that actually I am sitting in front part of the bus which is usually for men, but nobody says a word, they are so friendly, offer to show me where to get off the bus. The man who gets off at the same stop calls me saying it is my stop and pays for my ticket the second time. You pay when you leave the bus not when you

get on. The same story happens to me a few times, on that day I do not pay for the ticket neither in metro not on the bus back to the hotel. There is always somebody doing it for me, a lady with a child, a young girl and so on. Do I look like someone who needs financial support?

I get to the museum which is literally inside the bank. The jewels are stunning, to my mind look like fake, but they are real. Probably one of the most precious is a flat diamond (abt. 182 carats), pinkish, according to some Persian rulers (Nasser-ed-din) it was placed in Cirus crown. Quite a similar and far more famous diamond, Koh-e-Nur, which once used to belong to Persians, encountered some British sticky fingers and now is exhibited in The Tower of London, as was 'presented' to Queen Victoria some time ago. Taking photos is strictly forbidden so if you want to see go online to see, there are 26.733 pieces of precious gems there. Another piece worth seeing is The Jeweled Globe made of 34 kilos of gold and 51.366 pieces of stones. It's not easy to find all the countries as probably the gold smiths were better at their profession than in geography. The oceans are made from emeralds and Iran is in diamonds. Nice!

A well-known Peacock Throne (known also under the name of Sun Throne) looks like a huge uncomfortable bed. It was ordered by Fath-Ali Shah for one of his beloved wives.

That is the end of day 1 in Tehran, on the way to the hotel I grab a glass of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice which is incredibly good. Not paying any transport fares I get to the hotel.

Day no 2 must be divided in two. Early afternoon I go to Golestan Complex, the former residence of Kadjar Dynasty, in the evening I am taking a train to Shiraz.

This time I do not ask anybody where to buy the tickets to avoid their generosity, get the tickets and go to the centre, close to Grand Bazar and Golestan. I am a little disappointed, the skyline of the complex is disturbed by gray, reminding me of Polish 60s and 70s buildings, higher than the pavilions themselves. At this time of the year the gardens are not stunning either. But the souvenir shop is great, promise myself to get there again on my way back, as the money you have are limited to the cash you have on you, credit cards are useless! On the way back, I get tea from a street stall, it's great and the sugar around the wooden stick adds to the taste of it.

Getting back to the hotel is easy, I feel much better, know the way like a local. The next step will be Shiraz, known as a place of the laziest people in Iran! I will get there by a luxurious FEDAK train.

