

Greece-Turkey-Iran-UAE-Oman Tour 2002/2003

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In the morning of this first of June we have breakfast in the tent of the 'boys', although its not cold it is still very windy. We decide to return to ShareKord. We do some shopping again and in the evening Behram and his friend Heidar come to our place to say good-bye. We have decided to carry on with our journey, and for the last time we show the pictures we made during our trip to the mountains. We will never forget these nice guys and hope to meet them again somewhere, someday.... Late that evening we also say good-bye to Parvim and Amir, they have been so kind to us all the time. How can we ever reward this? We still keep in touch with them through e-mails. For the last time we went to our 'oasis' to stay for the night, foxes howling in the distance....

Next morning is clear and sunny, we take the road to Esfahan again. It feels good to be on the road again, after driving through busy Esfahan we take the road northwards in the direction of the cities of Natanz and Kashan. There is only heavy traffic on these roads, we cross the Kuh-e-Karkas mountains. On the east side the vast Dasht e Kavir desert begins, the road skirts along the edge of this barren land. Temp. rise to 32°C., the air is hot and dusty. We take a turn-off back to the Karkas mountains again, we come in a valley with a river flowing. This valley full of trees and lush green leads to the village of Abyaneh . The houses in this pretty village were built from mud-brick and clay. Some of the laneways and the front yards of some homes were built on top of the roofs of homes below. Although many houses are deserted, there is some renovation going on the last years. Also the women of Abyaneh still wear traditional dress. Just before the village we found a nice place along the river between some plane trees to stay for the night.

Next morning we visit Abyaneh, the sky is very clear again and we see some beautiful cushion shaped plants along the road. The village is still quiet and we have a walk around, people are used to visitors for this is a popular destination for Iranian tourists. After our visit we went to a spring near the village to wash some clothes. In the afternoon a taxi stopped, the driver and his client came to us. The client turned out to be a young German, named Christian. The driver thought we were Germans too, the reason for introducing his client. After a short chat, Christian went to Abyaneh and promised to come back after his visit. The rest of the afternoon he stayed with us, a taxi brings him back to his hotel in Kashan in the evening. The weather had changed during the afternoon, the wind became stronger and it had rained a bit. I did not feel well that afternoon, the situation becoming worse every minute. I suffered from diarrhoea and fever and went to sleep early hoping to recover.

During the night I had to go out several times, I took some medicine and a rehydration mixture. The 4th of June is a National Holiday in Iran, commemorating the death of Emam Khomeini in 1989. So, already early in the morning the first picnickers arrived at this spot and soon we were surrounded by yelling children and men and women busy 'installing' a fire or a carpet to sit on. I still did feel horrible; we decided to drive a bit further up a gorge in order to get some rest. The rest of that day I spent sleeping, as soon as I took something to drink or eat I had to vomit. I also kept suffering from the diarrhoea. Again we went to sleep early, hoping I would recover.

Also the 5th of June is a National Holiday in Iran , being the anniversary of the arrest of Emam Khomeini in 1963, following his speech urging the Muslims of the world to rise up against the super

powers. This day I still did not feel very well, but we decided to go on anyway.

We went further in northerly direction, trying to get to the enormous salt lake of Namak . With the help of the GPS we found the right tracks, leading us into what now had become a real desert. With temp. rising over 37°C., we hoped to find some shade. At some parts we saw thousands of locusts eating our shade away!! After a while we saw the vast shimmering salt plane in the distance, probably this lake is only filled with water after long rainy periods. At one point we could drive over a causeway constructed to get the salt 'on shore'.

We followed the south shore in easterly direction; soon we saw the old caravan sarail of Marengab once part of the Silk Road, from a distance looking like a prison. When we came close to the building, we saw a nice garden outside the walls. There was a spring and even a pond with ducks and geese! The entire place was paved, just an ideal spot to stay in this barren landscape. As soon as we stopped some 5 dogs welcomed us, also for Lex this was paradise! In the first instance it looked like there was nobody around here, but after a while 2 men came out of the building and welcomed us. The rest of the day we spent at the side of the pond in the shade of trees, having tea and a chat with the 2 guys. We asked if we could stay here for the night, of course this was no problem at all.

During the night we left the doors of the car open because of the heat, all dogs lying around the car!

In the morning of the 6 th of June we got up very early, this day we wanted to try to get along the shore of the Namak lake in easterly direction. Once at the east side it maybe would be possible to head northwards again. As soon as we left Marengab, I saw the dogs following us. After a while we did not see them anymore and assumed they had gone back to the sarail.

We had to stop regularly anyway; I still suffered from diarrhoea and still felt weak. After some time we approached huge sand dunes on the right side, reaching the shore. There was no way to get through these dunes, the only possibility was to get on the salt and circumnavigate the dunes. We did not know if this was possible, but saw tracks running over the salt plane. We decided to follow one of these tracks, but first took a closer look in case the salt crust would be too weak to carry the weight of our car. The salt crust looked strong enough and what followed was one of the most exciting and strange experiences we had during this trip. On the right side we saw the sand dunes rolling as far as the eye could see, on the left there was the white salt plane as far as the horizon. In some places the salt was still wet, giving the impression like driving through snow and ice!! It gave the feeling of doing something very dangerous, but on the other hand also was very exciting because of the beautiful and strange landscapes we ever did see. After a while the tracks went back to the shore again, from this point the dunes had turned into a barren volcanic landscape. We still followed the track, but then it branched off in several directions. We took a branch leading us more inland, following valleys like the wadis in Oman . Here we also saw dug out ditches, probably constructed to stop drug smugglers using this desert on their way from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the west. This way it is easier to control this area, because its only possible to cross these ditches with vehicles at only a few points.

After we reached the shore again, we followed a track to the eastern end of the lake. From here we hoped to head north. But unfortunately this track ended up in a marsh, totally impassable! We found another more promising track leading inland again, after some km. we saw a strange circular building on top of a hill surrounded by lush green... When we approached the building a young man came out. We stopped to ask for directions, but this guy said that we were not allowed to go on! He first had to contact his superiors by means of a CB radio... After he had talked to someone, he said we had to turn back. If we just had passed this building without stopping! To avoid further problems, we

decided to turn back to the Marengab sarail. After a while we saw a group of animals approaching, coming closer it turned out to be the dogs of the Marengab!!! They had followed us all the way, we could not believe our eyes!! This was the most unbelievable thing we ever had experienced. Of course we stopped, the dogs were totally exhausted. They just dropped down on the floor in the shade of the car, giving the impression of: we knew we would find you.... Watching this scene almost brought water to my eyes. After a while we gave them water, they just kept on drinking. We had to carry them inside the car one by one, for they were too exhausted to jump in themselves. So, here we were: a car full of dogs lying all over the place. Luckily Lex accepted those passengers, and back we went to the Marengab. We had to stop several times, because what seemed to be the youngest dog did not feel well and started to throw up all the water. After almost 50km. we arrived back at the Marengab sarail. One of the guys from the sarail said: you could have left those dogs in the desert.... We often wondered what would have happened to those dogs if we had been able to continue our trip along the Namak lake without turning back to the Marengab. There was no food or water for miles, only salt and sand...

This day there were some more people in the sarail, one of them spoke some English and turned out to be an architect. He showed us around inside the building, they were restoring it for several years now. He also showed us drawings of what the results should be: a luxurious hotel with all facilities!! Really a very ambitious project, but the results so far looked very promising. We stayed at the Marengab for another night; next morning before we left we asked to keep the dogs inside the building for a while. We rushed away as fast as we could and hoped that they would keep the dogs in....

We first went to the city of Kashan to do some shopping; here José could go to the shops alone again without curious men following her around! From Kashan we followed the boring main road to the city of Qom and from here further north in the direction of Tehran. Before we would enter the chaos of Tehran, we took a road to the east and back into the Alborz mountains. We could see the snow capped summit of Mt Demawend towering from a far distance. We wanted to try to find some minor roads and tracks leading into the mountains. After a while we found a nice road leading through fertile valleys, winding its way into the mountains. After we had stopped to take some pictures, a police car approached from the other direction. In the first instance they just drove by, and we went off again. After some km. I saw that they had turned and came after us.... Oh no, please not again!! But this was just wishful thinking, for they passed us and of course we had to stop. One of them asked for passports and everything started all over again. We had to follow them to a nearby police station. We had to wait, because this zealous police man wanted to phone in order to find a translator.... I tried to explain that he was wasting his and our time, but Mr Zealous just kept on phoning. After we had waited for the translator, who could not speak any English also, we had enough of this 'play'. We said we wanted to phone with the colonel in ShareKord and hoped the translator could explain this to Mr Zealous. After some minutes he seemed to understand and we were 'free' again..... Luckily we could find a track following the Havar river through a fertile valley, here we found a place to stay for the night.

In the morning of the 8th of June we had breakfast in the morning sun, with singing birds amidst fields full of orchids and other spring flowers at an altitude of approx.2500m. We followed the track further along the river and saw many beautiful flowering plants, like a small Iris, a very small Allium species and spectacular purple flowering cushions of Astragalus. After a while we came on a 3000m.

high pass, here we saw a mountain lake a few hundred meters in the deep. Unfortunately there was still snow on the track, it was impossible to carry on. So, back we went the same way, we decided to stay for another night in this nice valley.

Next morning I still don't feel very well, but we head back to the main road anyway. We took the road to the city of Firuz Kuh and the Caspian Sea. Just before Firuz Kuh we spotted large cushions of *Gypsophila aretioides*, growing everywhere on the rocks together with *Acantholimon*. Some of them were really enormous, but not yet in flower.

The more we come to the Caspian Sea the landscape changes into green, forested mountains and valleys with rice fields. Just outside the town of Pol e Safid, we found another track leading in a easterly direction. This track followed a valley through thick forested mountains, we found a small open space in this 'jungle' where we stayed for the rest of that day and the night. It was a special experience to be in such a forest again, after a long time being in rather barren and treeless landscapes. In the evening we made a fire to keep warm in the cool and humid atmosphere. The following days we spent driving through this part of the Alborz mountains, again see many flowering plants. Sometimes we find the right tracks, other times it's difficult to find the right direction.

The 14th of June we descend from the mountains to the coastal plain near the city of Gorgan, through thickly forested mountainsides. From Gorgan we took the road along the shores of the Caspian Sea in westerly direction, to take a road inland again in the direction of Tehran. These roads are very busy and full of traffic, after some km. we took a turn-off to the town of Bajadeh to get back in the mountains again. The weather had become cool and rainy, luckily this road was not busy and just before dark we found a place to stay. Next day we followed the valley of the Heraz river further to the west, we tried some tracks leading into the mountains but they all ended in a village. The road ascended to a pass of 3100m., fortunately the road was cleared of snow. Again we found *Gypsophila aretioides*, this time in flower!

When we had stopped for a lunch break, we found *Dionysia aretioides* on vertical cliffs along the road. Of course, all past flowering at this time of the year. Also when we followed the main road from Karaj to Chalus back to the Caspian Sea, we saw many plants of *D. aretioides* growing on the vertical rocks in the gorge. But because it's very busy on this narrow winding road it's almost impossible to stop and have a closer look, unless you are in a suicidal mood...

Just before we reached the coast, we found a turn-off where we found a spot to stay for the night.

Next day we continued along the Caspian Sea in the direction of the city of Bandar e Anzali. Here we visited Sedi and Ali again, family of our Iranian friends in the Netherlands. We had visited them during our journey in 2000, at that time we had a very warm welcome. Also this time they were very happy again to see us, although we came totally unexpected. This time we could stay in a holiday home of their daughters' husband. Of course we met several members of their family again, like in 2000.

In the morning of the 20th of June, we said good-bye to this kind family and promised to visit them again someday... We followed the road along the Caspian Sea again towards the city of Astara, near the Azerbaijan border and from here through the mountains towards the city of Ardabil. From here we tried to get up to Mt Sabalan, an extinct volcano with a summit at 4811m. After some searching we found a track leading up the mountain, at 2465m. we found a place to stay for the night. Temp.

had dropped to a 'cold' 14°C., and we stayed inside the car for dinner. Next morning is sunny after some rain during the night; we followed the track again, but unfortunately could not get higher up the mountain. We decided to turn back; we also saw the nomads living up here in their typical dome shaped tents.

From Mt Sabalan we went on to the city of Tabriz, and from here further northwest towards Khoy and Maku near the Turkish border. Before Maku we took a turn-off to the Ghara Kelisa (Black Church), the most well-known Christian monument in Iran. Its an Armenian church, officially named the church of St Thaddaeus and was rebuilt in the 13th century after an earthquake. According to our Lonely Planet, the church has one service a year; on the feast day of St Thaddaeus around the 19th of June. This day being the 21st of June, we hoped that there still would be Armenian pilgrims here to attend the ceremonies which last for 3 days. But already on the road towards the church it was obvious that there were no pilgrims here. We parked next to the church to stay for the night, I asked the guards if they knew if the ceremonies still had to take place, but they did not understand.

After a visit to the church, we headed back to the main road to Maku. We came through a gorge where we found some nice flowering plants on the vertical cliffs. Close to Maku we found a quiet spot to stay for the night, we already could see Mt Ararat in Turkey in the distance.

In the morning of the 23rd of June, we do our last shopping in Iran and fill up with very cheap fuel for the last time to. After the usual bureaucratic hassle at the border in Bazargan, we are back in Turkey!!