

Afghanistan

Much to our amazement the ride to Kabul in a mini-bus was much more spectacular than the Kyber pass; the sheer variety of landscape from rocky arid desert to huge mountains, then opening out onto green irrigated fields of rice. The Kabul gorge was a feast to the eyes. We passed through at sunset. The huge walls of sheer rock so utterly rugged and now set with gold stared down at us from far above, all silhouetted against shadowed peaks behind. Through the gorge ran a river which in places dropped in spray hundreds of feet, only to do so again further down the valley.

We sped around the curves at breakneck speed more than once noticing vehicles similar to ours smashed and rolled, off the road side. This driver was a complete nut.

At the time when people begin to switch on lights we entered Kabul, capital of Afghanistan.

We took a taxi from the bus station and asked for the Atlantic hotel. The hotel looked expensive from the outside, but after bargaining we managed to get a room for four for one dollar A. Twenty five cents each! We found the hot showers weren't so hot but at this price we couldn't complain.

Whether it was due to the dramatic difference in daytime temperature, roadside food or some other reason, we both felt ill for a couple of days. Heather lay in bed while I went out in search of nourishing food. Meanwhile we ate vitamin capsules to keep up our strength.

We were now in the middle of the belt of Islamic countries which occupy this part of the globe. At first we felt quite

strange amongst the tall turbaned men and totally covered women. The garment used for by women was a long many pleated gown together with hood and 'window' of fine mesh. Nothing at all can be seen of the woman's identity and it is even difficult to judge just how large, small or fat the wearer is. In a matter of days we became accustomed to their presence and took as little heed of Afghani woman as did the men. They were just ghosts which moved silently and anonymously amongst the 'living' men.

Kabul is situated at 6000ft and all around the city are peaks which stretch up to immense heights and are snow covered, hence the pleasant summer climate.

The little shops of Kabul are choked to overflowing with all sorts of eye catching objects, jewellery, handmade embroidered costumes to ancient inlaid weapons. It was easy to spend days slowly looking and discovering the countless variety of goods for sale. The problem was not the price but how to carry all the beauties. Pure leather coats, boots, bags, rugs, Persian carpets, weavings, the line up is endless.

Compared to Indian attempts at cooking, food here was just great. One little restaurant sold steak and chips for \$1. Naturally we became regular customers. We also found a couple of little 'cake' shops where we could buy apple and apricot pies. Yum. We also ate Afghani style one night and found the chief diet was lamb (usually barbecued) bread (flat Arabic) and spinach boiled to mush. At breakfast we often went to roadside café which served a kind of pancake fried with either potato or spinach filling. These tasted ok but after our spell from western food we kept returning to our favourite restaurant.

We decide to limit our purchasing to boots for both of us and made to measure and sandals. We agreed on a price, had our feet measured and were to return next day to receive the finished items. We told the shop keeper they had to be finished quickly because next day we had to leave. We paid our deposit.

Returning next day at the agreed time we found the shop shut. We had obviously been tricked. We had to leave at 5am next morning and he had our deposit. I went to the police station but they took us on a wild goose chase and made us pay a taxi fare to a station. They laughed at us. I went back to the hotel and hoped I could change tickets in the morning. At 4.30am I arrived at the bust station and argued for a good hour. Finally I was given my money back and so was able to get back to the shop and give the shoe maker a piece of my mind! We arrived with two large Canadians and after bawling him out the bootmaker decided it best to lower the price. We finally came away with a pair of knee-length handmade boots for Heather and ankle boots for me plus sandals for a total of less than \$17A. We also bought an embroidered dress for heather and shirts for me plus a leather shoulder bag. *(All these items were sent home and were never seen by us again)*

Next day we left with our hoard. It was Wednesday 16th May and we wanted to be in Greece on the 24th. There was a long way to go.

No sooner had we settled into a bus seat than the hotel owner arrived accusing us of breaking a window! (the window was cracked well prior to our arrival) however he began to get angry when we stated it was not our concern. He began to punch at us. Heather began to get nasty when he grabbed our money bag and bit his outstretched arm.

This made him extra mad. Soon everyone was on his side and it seemed we could get ourselves hurt, so finally with the help of a fellow Afghani traveler we paid him a dollar. At this everyone was relieved and we were on our way. For the rest of this bus ride the entire bus would sometimes turn, laugh and hold arms in their mouths while looking at Heather. Big joke!

We arrived in Herat late at night in a big Mercedes bus. Next day after looking around the town (which didn't impress us much) we looked for a Kebab. The eating places were dirt floored as was the street and the local turbaned men had obviously not seen many westerners