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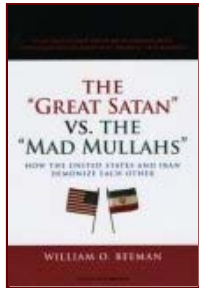
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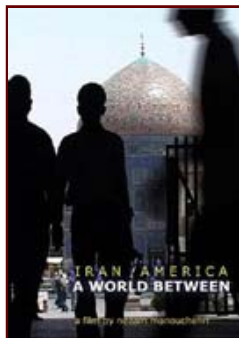
07/02/08

Cheers to Shiraz

By Shabnam Janani



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Sitting on the patio at an Irish pub on King Street in downtown Toronto with half-empty glasses of red wine, waiting for nachos, we talk wine. Sauvignon, Merlot, or Shiraz. Sweet or dry. Mature or young. On colour we can agree, but everything else led to controversy.

A ceasefire begins only when I started talking about my favourite type of wine. I prefer Shiraz -- not because of its taste, but because of the name.

Shiraz takes me to a city of that name. Shiraz is more than 4,000 years old. Once the centre of the Persian empire, now it's Iran's third-largest city. It has a reputation for its poetry, history, orange blossoms – and once for its wine.

Late May and early June is the best time to visit Shiraz. At sunset, in spring, in a field outside the city, the jingle of sheep's haw bells can be heard from far away. Their source is the Qashqai tribe whose history of migration dates back to the late 11th century makes them one of the world's oldest nomadic tribes.

Shiraz's bazaars are the primary marketing centers for the Qashqai's colourful products. Their famous silky wool weavings, as well as their carpets with traditional Persian red geometric designs, are among the most recognized handmade art in the Middle East.



Achaemenid Palace, Shiraz

I remember Narges, a young Qashqai woman with dark braided hair worn long over each shoulder and a gold silk scarf on her head. One day, as she served me warm milk, she explained the significant role of women in the economy of the tribe. "They make the carpets by hand but more than 90 per cent of the profits go directly into a third party's pocket,"

Sitting in front of her large horizontal loom, sometimes 10 hours per day, weaving deeply-coloured wools, soon became a lifetime addiction for her. In fact, her next 2*3 wool carpet would be her dowry.

She is from the Amalah division, considered the tribe's most populated and dominant clan. Narges introduced me to the chief of the Amaleh. An elderly man probably in his late 70s or early 80s with a wide moustache and deep lines around his eyes and forehead.

According to Khan, more than 5,000 families in the Amalah clan are nomadic and fewer than 400 have settled in a permanent location. Besides from the Amalah group, there are four other major divisions within the Qashqai tribe: Darrah Shuri, Kashkuli, Shish Baluki, and Farsimadan.

Their migration occurs twice a year. Usually 10 to 15 families from the same clan start moving together along with horses, donkeys, and sometimes camels as well as goats, sheep, and chickens. Sometimes small trucks for loading heavy stuff are used too, but they are driven directly to the destination and do not travel with the group.

"The tribe travels twice a year," explained the chief. "For summer and winter quarters we go between the highlands north of Shiraz and the lowland north of the Persian Gulf. The nomadic route on the skirt of Zagros Mountain is about 500 km long. Sometimes it takes months to get there."

"Although we insist on keeping the traditions of our ancestors, our daily life as a pastoral nomadic has been influenced by the political, social, cultural and economic of the urban area."

The edge of the chief's felt hat quickly became damp from the sizzling heat as he showed me around. The bright colours in the Qashqai daily garb and the inside decorations of their tents were mesmerizing.

The long, multilayered plaited skirts of the Qashqai women in a field of corn-poppay reminded me of Hafez poetry.



Hafez tomb

On my first night in Shiraz, I visited Hafez tomb in the city's core. Young people crowded around his tomb, surrounded by dozens of orange trees, the scent of orange blossoms in the air. Reciting couplets of the divine poetry and a youthful audience's contemplation of their unclear future, are permanent souvenirs of my that evening.

Jean Dixon, a visitor who came all the way from Swaziland to see Shiraz, saw an unbelievable connection between young people and literature in the city. "Literature and in particular poetry has a direct influence in people's daily lives," she told me.

Shiraz, UNESCO's world's second city of literature, produced numbers of the world's great poets such as Hafez (14th century), Saadi (12th and 13th century), and Khwajou Kermani (14th century). Their temples bounded with gardens of flowers and fruit trees are among the most tourist attraction of Middle East.

The city's distinctive scent of orange blossoms comes from its many gardens, especially five classic Persian ones. Typically, a courtyard structure of a garden with a pool or fountain in front of traditional buildings describes a few pages of history. Plants are irrigated by streams that flow from the pool. Other common characteristics of these gardens are above-ground buildings, often a bulky canopy surrounded by stone pillars.



Eram Garden in Shiraz

Afif Abad, Delgosha, Ghavam and Eram gardens were the ones I visited. According to local legend, Eram was built in the 11th or 12th century, in a competition with the glory of heaven.

The idea of creating an earthly paradise for pleasure was first practised by kings from the ancient Achaemenid empire, the largest ancient empire in the world. The empire was first formed in 550 BC, but travelling to Shiraz walking around the remains of the ancient capital empire, I could feel the atmosphere of those old ages.

A few hours' drive from the city are Persepolis and Pasargadae, a pair of UNESCO world heritage sites that are must-see destinations for history lovers.

Back on the patio in Toronto, as I talk about historic sites of Shiraz, I notice our wine carafe is empty. The taste of Shiraz is fading – a signal that it's nearly time to leave. Not so the city where some of the oldest wine in the world used to be poured into pottery cups.

About the author: [Shabnam Janani](#) is the Editor of [Salam Toronto Publications](#) in Canada. She visited Shiraz in Spring 2008.

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