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History

As a country, Afghanistan's history is less than 300 years old but it has been playing a key role in the region for over two millennia. The map reveals the reason: Afghanistan sits at the crossroads of Asia, sitting astride the hinterland between Persia, Central Asia and India. These three centrifugal forces have interacted time and again in Afghan history, frequently dividing the country against itself. At other times, Afghanistan has united against invaders and proved a bloody testing ground for foreign empires, as well as occasionally looking beyond its borders to form empires of its own.

FROM THE PERSIANS TO THE GREEKS

The prehistory of Afghanistan has been little studied, but there is evidence of pastoralism and agriculture in the region from around 10,000 years ago. Lapis lazuli from Badakhshan was being traded with Mesopotamia and India for at least 7000 years, and around 1500 BC the country became populated by the Indo-Aryans moving in from the west. Afghanistan doesn't enter written history until around the 6th century BC, when it became part of the Achaemenid Empire of Cyrus the Great. The Persians were the world's superpower of the time, and Afghanistan was divided into satrapies – Ariana (Herat), Arachosia (Kandahar), Bactria (Balkh) and Gandhara (the Kabul Valley). The Bactrians in particular were renowned fighters. At some stage during this period Zoroaster was born in Bactria, giving rise to the Zoroastrian religion that was quickly adopted by the Achaemenids.

Nearly half the infantry and 95% of the cavalry in Alexander the Great's entire empire had to be stationed in Afghanistan to try and pacify the country.

Persia's great rival was Greece, and in 334 BC Alexander the Great launched a huge campaign against Darius III. Just 24 years old, Alexander's military genius quickly conquered the Mediterranean coast and the Achaemenid capital at Persepolis in modern Iran. His kingdom in ruins, Darius fled to Afghanistan where he was betrayed by the Bactrian satrap Bessus, who in turn proclaimed himself king. Alexander was outraged and led his army deep into Afghanistan, sweeping through the south before crossing the Hindu Kush and driving Bessus towards the Oxus (Amu Darya). He captured Bactria and Bessus, who was executed for his resistance.

Martin Ewans' highly recommended *Afghanistan – A Short History of its People and Politics* covers the breadth of Afghan history from Alexander the Great to Hamid Karzai with a sure hand and lightness of touch.

Afghanistan got deep into Alexander's blood. He took his bride Roxanne in Balkh, and founded Bagram as a base for his invasion of India. Moreover he adopted local dress, and tried to set himself up as dictator. Only an eventual troop rebellion quelled his ambition, and he eventually turned for home to die at Babylon in 323 BC, leaving no named heir but having conquered much of the known world.

Alexander left behind ten years of chaos in Bactria, with thousands of Greeks stationed far from home. From the anarchy came Seleucus who began to weld together the foundations of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom. This Hellenistic state deep in Asia sparked a centuries-long period of profound East-West cultural exchange, disseminating the aesthetics of the Classical world and absorbing the influences of both the central Asian steppe and the Indian subcontinent. Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek

TIMELINE

330 BC
Alexander the Great invades Afghanistan

AD 128
Kanishka rules Kushan empire from Kapisa (Bagram)

city in the world was a place of gymnasiums and theatres performing the Greek tragedies, temples to the old gods and groves of olive trees.

BUDDHIST AFGHANISTAN

As the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms flowered in the north, a new power rose in the east. In 302 BC north India became unified under the Mauryans, who quickly took control of southern and eastern Afghanistan. A peace treaty with the north was sealed with gifts of elephants and marriages between the Greeks and Indians. Under the great emperor Ashoka, the Mauryans converted to Buddhism, driven by his guilt at the blood spilled for the formation of his empire. Buddhist monasteries thrived across Afghanistan, together with rock-cut edicts from Ashoka exhorting readers to follow a pious life. One found in modern Kandahar was written in Greek and Aramaic.

Into the Land of Bones – Alexander the Great in Afghanistan by Frank Holt is a lively history of Alexander's Afghan campaign and the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms that sprung up in its wake.

Buddhism proved irresistible to the Graeco-Bactrians. After Seleucus the kingdom fell into a tumbling succession of warring factions and dynasties, and the Hellenistic traditions were slowly absorbed by local customs. By 150 BC, they were under pressure from other directions – the Parthians from Iran, and then nomad tribes from the north. These were the outermost ripples of a wave of people displaced by the unification of China under the Qin dynasty. Again Afghanistan's direction was influenced by events in distant imperial capitals. Of the nomads that washed up, it was the Yueh-chih in 130 BC that had the greatest impact, when they united under the name of the Kushans.

The Kushans soon settled, and took the best traditions from the Graeco-Bactrians and the Indians to fuse them with the free-spirited nature of the steppe. In doing so they created a unique culture that ruled Afghanistan for five centuries. The new kingdom was ideally placed to exploit the burgeoning trade along the Silk Road (see boxed text, opposite). From AD 128, the visionary King Kanishka built two capitals at Kapisa (modern Bagram) and Peshawar, forging an empire whose influence travelled as far as the Ganges. Kushan art, also known as Gandharan art, was a vibrant blend of Classical, Indian and Persian styles, and was hugely influential. The kingdom was the first to represent the Buddha in human form, a style it sent to Kashmir, Tibet and China. Monasteries thrived in Balkh, Kandahar, Bamiyan, Samangan, and Hadda near Jalalabad.

Life Along the Silk Road by Susan Whitfield is a great read for Silk Road enthusiasts, presenting the history of the route through an absorbing set of characters and vignettes.

Decline eventually came with the demise of the Silk Road, and the Kushans fell before the arrows of their neighbours. In the 3rd century AD the Sassanians arrived from Persia and reduced Kushan power to a rump. A century later the Hephthalites (or White Huns) swept in, and stayed long enough to build the giant Buddha statues at Bamiyan. From the east, the Hindus raised kingdoms in Kabul and Ghazni. Afghanistan was again pushed to the margins of history.

THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road was never a single highway, rather a network of routes stretching over 8000km from Xi'an in modern China across Central Asia to Damascus and Antioch on the Mediterranean. Similarly, no trader ever passed its entire length. Instead, caravans traded along set stages with goods exchanged and becoming ever more expensive at each stop.

The Silk Road really sprang into life in the 1st century BC, when China exchanged embassies with Parthia (modern Iran) and Ferghana in Central Asia. From these were born the Roman craze for silk, supplied by the Parthians. The fabric was so popular – and expensive – that the Roman Senate even tried to ban it, on moral as well as economic grounds. As the Chinese guarded the secret of its production closely, silk was supposed to literally grow on the trees of the far east.

The Parthians and Bactrians were the most avid traders, sending gold, horses, glass and ivory. In return, China sent porcelain, paper, tea, lacquer – and endless bolts of silk. Ideas became an equally important currency. The Kushans sent Buddhist ideas from Afghanistan to China, and Buddhist art to India. Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity also headed east. Bukhara, Balkh, Yarkand and Dunhuang flourished as great cities of trade and culture.

The Silk Road reached its apogee during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The collapse of the Roman and Han Chinese empires caused a collapse in trade, while the rise of Islam further changed the political and economic balance of the region. The Pax Mongolia that briefly followed Genghis Khan allowed Marco Polo to hit the old trade roads to China, but by the time the region had recovered from the depredations of Timur, the powers of Europe were looking elsewhere. The age of sea exploration had arrived, dealing the final death knell for the Silk Road.

ISLAMIC EMPIRES

In the 7th century a new power with a new religion was knocking at the door. Having swept the Sassanians aside, the Arab armies arrived in 652, marching under the banner of Islam. Herat and the south were soon subdued, but the north was a harder nut to crack. It took two centuries for Balkh to fall fully under Muslim control, where it was ruled from the Samanid Arab capital at Bukhara, and flourished as a centre of learning and culture. The rest of Afghanistan became a patchwork of squabbling Muslim city-states, far from Bukhara's influence and chafing for independence.

Out of this morass came Alptigin, a Turkish slave-soldier who overthrew his masters and captured the fortress of Ghazni in 961. He quickly died thereafter, but his successors consolidated their power and went onto capture Kabul, Bost, Balkh and Herat, dealing a deathblow to the Arabs. In their place stood the new power of the Ghaznavid dynasty.

Asia is comparable to a living body composed of soil and water/

The heart that beats inside the body is Afghanistan/

The destruction of Afghans would be the destruction of Asia/

And in their progress and prosperity lies the well-being of Asia

MOHAMMED IQBAL, 1936

Sultan Mahmoud the Great was both an empire builder and patron of the arts. Ghazni was richly endowed with mosques and palaces, becoming one of the greatest cities in Islamic world. He filled his court with poets and artists, his stables with an army of elephants, and whenever the treasury was bare, raided Delhi – introducing Islam to India in the process. Winter was spent in the warmth of Bost and Lashkar Gah, made green with an intricate series of canals. On Mahmoud's death in 1030 his rule stretched almost to Calcutta in the east, and west to the Caspian Sea.

The empire was too swollen to be stable. India and the Afghan north fell almost immediately, and while the Ghaznavid princes fought over the remains they failed to notice new tribes coming down from the mountains with envious eyes. In 1148 the Ghorids, Muslims from central Afghanistan led by Alauddin, 'the World Burner', swept into Ghazni and laid the great city to waste. It took seven days to burn to the ground. From here the Ghorids poured into India and Iran on an orgy of pillage. When they returned they endowed their capitals at Firuzkoh and Herat with fine buildings, leaving the Minaret of Jam and Herat's Friday Mosque as their greatest testaments.

6th century
The Buddhas of Bamiyan carved from cliffside

652
Arab conquest of Herat brings Islam to Afghanistan

11th century
Ghazni flourishes under Mahmoud the Great

1136
Shrine of Hazrat Ali constructed in Mazar-e Sharif

INVADERS FROM THE STEPPES

As the Ghorids settled into what they thought would be a long and prosperous rule, they had no way of knowing that the greatest storm in Afghan history was about to break over them. Thunderheads were gathering in far Mongolia, in the shape of the armies of Genghis Khan. A brilliant tactician and proponent of total war, Genghis Khan swept through central Asia in 1219 after his emmissaries were killed by unwise rulers far to the north of Afghanistan. As one historian put it, Genghis was 'the atom bomb of his day'. Having levelled Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv, the Mongols tore into Afghanistan. Balkh and Herat were dispatched without mercy, leaving little more than barking dogs as witnesses. The south, with its green gardens, orchards and canals was utterly destroyed, a disaster that it arguably has yet to recover from. In Bamiyan, the fate of Shahr-e Gholghola (the 'City of Screams') continues to burn in the folk memory of the locals.

'With one stroke a world which billowed with fertility was laid desolate, and the regions thereof became a desert.'

JUVAINI, *THE HISTORY OF CONQUERING THE WORLD*, 1259

The Mongols didn't gallop into the sunset, but incorporated the ruins into their empire. Genghis' son Chagatai ruled Afghanistan and most of central Asia. But although the Chagatai dynasty soon converted to Islam, it was never strong. Within decades of Genghis Khan's death the Turkic peoples of the northern steppe began to reassert themselves.

Their vehicle was Timur ('the Lame', or Tamerlane), an Uzbek from near Samarkand. As a tyrant and military leader, Timur was the equal of Genghis (from whom he claimed ancestry), but he was also a man of the arts and loved building cities as much as destroying them and slaughtering their inhabitants. In the 1390s he went on a rampage that landed him an empire from Syria to north India. The great Timurid cities were richly endowed by captured artisans and painters.

Timur died in 1405 and was succeeded by his son Shah Rukh, who moved the empire's capital from Samarkand to Herat, sparking one of Afghanistan's greatest cultural flowerings. Shah Rukh and his formidable wife Gowhar Shad were tremendous patrons of the arts. His court produced poetry that is still widely read in the Persian world, while the painted books from Herat would go on to form the bedrock for both the Persian and Indian style of miniatures. Scientists and philosophers were as highly regarded.

When Timur captured Andkhoi he sought omens from the local saint, who threw a sheep's breastbone at the conqueror – inspiring Timur to conquer Herat and Khorasan, the breastbone of the known world.

The Timurid Renaissance lasted just a century, until a surfeit of wine and poetry turned it flabby and decadent. Warring Uzbek tribes nibbled at its edges until they were strong enough to bite off Samarkand and (in 1507) Herat itself. To the west, the Safavid shahs of Persia were also beginning to covet Afghan territories. At the start of the 16th century, the balance of power was on a knife-edge.

THE AFGHAN KINGDOMS

The man to resurrect Afghanistan was Zahiruddin Babur, a teenage claimant to the Samarkand throne from the Ferghana Valley. Despite repeated attempts to capture and hold his birthright, the Uzbek khan Shaybani kept beating him back until he gave up and looked for a new kingdom to the south. Kabul fit the bill perfectly, and in 1504 its inhabitants welcomed him with open arms for evicting its Kandahari warlord ruler. He visited his Timurid relations in Herat months before it fell to

1194 — Ghorid sultan Ghiyassudin erects the Minaret of Jam

1220 — Genghis Khan invades and devastates Afghanistan

the hated Uzbeks, and captured Kandahar in a thrice. In that city he left a monument to his achievements – the Forty Steps (Chihil Zina) – directly above the edicts carved by Ashoka 18 centuries before.

On Shaybani's death Babur made one last failed attempt to take Samarkand, before returning to consolidate his Afghan kingdom, laying out palaces and gardens in Kabul, and always writing his memoirs, *The Baburnama*. In 1525 he followed the well-trodden path of the Ghaznavids, Ghorids and Timur and invaded India. He settled in Delhi and Agra, only returning to Kabul in death, but gave birth to the Mughal empire that held sway in India until the arrival of the British.

'Whatever countries I conquer in the world, I would never forget your beautiful gardens. When I remember the summits of your beautiful mountains, I forget the greatness of the Delhi throne.'

AHMAD SHAH DURRANI

Kabul was a favourite of Babur's son Humayun, but he held little of his father's gift for politics. Over the next 200 years, the Mughal sphere of Afghanistan was squeezed back until it comprised little more than Kabul and Kandahar. The Safavids pushed far past Herat and into the south, while the Uzbeks continued to hold sway north of the Hindu Kush.

In the early 1700s, the Safavid empire had begun its slow decline, but still managed to capture and hold Kandahar. In 1709 the Ghilzai Pashtun mayor of Kandahar, Mir Wais Khotak sparked a revolt and defeated a Persian army sent to punish him. Not only that, his son Mahmoud marched on the Safavid capital Esfahan and sacked it before the Persians could regain their senses. In retaliation, the Persian leader Nadir Shah tried to play off the Pashtun tribes against each other, supporting the Abdalis against the Ghilzais – a tactic that would be repeated in later centuries, with similar unforseen consequences. Nadir Shah appointed the Abdali Ahmad Khan as commander of his Afghan forces and the royal treasury.

The Abdalis were proven fighters, smashing Ghilzai power in Kandahar, capturing Kabul and pushing far enough into India to thump the Mughals and loot the fabled Peacock Throne and Koh-i Noor Diamond. But just as Ahmad Khan thought the status quo was restored, Nadir Shah was assassinated. Khan quickly realised the opportunity before him. Rich with the Persian treasury, he drew together the Abdalis and made his bid for power. A *jirga* (council) named him Ahmad Shah, *Dur-i Durran* ('Pearl of Pearls') and crowned him with a garland of wheat sheafs. The Abdalis were renamed the Durrani in his honour.

From his new capital at Kandahar, Ahmad Shah Durrani set about laying the borders now recognisable as modern Afghanistan. Herat, Balkh and Badakhshan all fell under his sway in just a few years, and the kingdom extended as far as Srinagar, Delhi and Mashhad. He died of cancer in 1772, and is still remembered as Ahmad Shah 'Baba', the Father of Afghanistan.

SHAH SHUJA, DOST MOHAMMED & THE BRITISH

Inevitably Ahmad Shah Durrani's empire started to contract as soon as he was laid to rest. His son Timur Shah moved the capital to Kabul in 1776, but pretty soon the kingdom descended into fights for succession and tribal revolts. Herat again resurrected itself as an independent city-state and Bukhara resumed its influence over the northern cities. Kabul became a cauldron of rivalries between the Barakzai and Sadozai Durranis, competing for the throne. Of these, history primarily remembers the cruel and

15th century — Timurid empire ruled from Herat

1504 — Babur captures Kabul, sowing the first seeds of the Mughal Empire

THE GREAT GAME

Rudyard Kipling immortalised the term 'the Great Game' in his novel *Kim*. It refers to the competition between Britain and Russia over control of Central Asia, in which Afghanistan played a central role. Britain was ever paranoid about approaches to India, the jewel of its empire, while Russia feared any approaches towards the motherland itself.

At the start of the 19th century much of Central Asia was unknown. Russia was rapidly expanding its borders towards the khanates of the old Silk Road cities, while Britain sought to explore and protect the routes through the Himalayas and Hindu Kush that led to the subcontinent. On both sides a motley bunch of explorers, emissaries and officers on 'shooting leave' risked their lives to map the region and try to win the confidence of local rulers. On the home fronts, politicians and pamphleteers kept tensions stoked up to levels of Cold War hysteria. While meddling at the Kabul court always seemed to be at the centre of things, the Great Game span off into Tibet, Chinese Turkestan and northern Pakistan, as Russian and British agents played cat-and-mouse amid the high passes. The Game reached its climax between 1880 and 1890, with war between the powers (over Afghanistan, of course) only narrowly avoided, and the settling of Afghanistan's borders for imperial convenience a few years later.

A century later, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new Central Asian states prompted a revival of the phrase. The 'New Great Game' was all about gas, oil and the rise of radical Islamism – and as if nothing had changed, Afghanistan found itself at the heart of political intrigue yet again.

feckless Shah Shuja, whose main achievement was to lose Peshawar to the expanding Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh. He was soon kicked into exile in British India by the rising star of Dost Mohammed Khan, a ruler popular for his learning, piety and sense of justice towards his people.

Dost Mohammed took to the throne at a dangerous time. Both the British and Russian empires were creeping towards his borders in a rivalry that became known as 'the Great Game' (see boxed text, above). In 1836 the British sent Alexander 'Bukhara' Burnes to woo the amir. Dost Mohammed's main preoccupation was regaining his beloved Peshawar, and he sought Burnes' help in this. But Burnes had been sent empty handed, and although sympathetic to the amir's designs, British policy favoured bolstering the Sikhs over all other considerations. While Dost Mohammed clearly saw the danger of being squeezed between imperial rivals (and at the time, Russia was aiding a Persian siege of Herat), he accepted Captain Ivan Vitkevich as an envoy from Moscow, hoping to encourage the British to engage more closely.

For a brilliant retelling of the 19th century struggle between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, pick up Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game,* told as the *Boy's Own* adventure it undoubtedly was for many of its protagonists.

The plan backfired in grand scale. The governor-general of India, Lord Auckland, decided that the amir must go, and a friendlier ruler put in his place. Shah Shuja was dusted down from retirement and placed at the head of a British and Indian army to restore him to power.

From the outset the British saw their Army of the Indus as one great victory parade. Invading from the south, resistance at Kandahar was brushed aside, and once the great fortress of Ghazni was taken Dost Mohammed took to the hills. Shah Shuja was crowned amir again in front of a population that was at best indifferent.

The British settled in, the officers sending for their wives while the enlisted men scandalised Kabul by dallying with the Afghan women. With horse racing and amateur dramatics, garrison life seemed good. The whole country was 'quiet from Dan to Beersheba,' wrote the British envoy at the close of 1840, wilfully blind to signs that a tribal revolt under Dost Mohammed's son Akbar Khan was brewing in the mountains. Afghan resentments spilled into bloodshed in November 1841 when a mob attacked Burnes' house and hacked him to death. As events span out of control, the British eventually found themselves hounded from the country, in the disastrous retreat from Kabul (see boxed text, p32).

The British Army invading Afghanistan in 1839 didn't travel lightly – amid the 30,000-strong herd of pack animals were two camels dedicated to carrying regimental cigars, and a pack of hounds for fox-hunting.

A year later, the British sent an army of vengeance to level Kabul, but despite the costs in blood and treasure, they realised the folly of interfering in Afghanistan too closely and restored Dost Mohammed to the throne, with a fat subsidy to boot. The amir was never so popular or powerful. He began to build the first national army, and brought Afghan Turkestan back into the nation. In the 1860s Herat was restored too, where Dost Mohammed died, to be buried at the shrine of Gazar Gah.

SHER ALI & THE IRON AMIR

After the usual confusion following an amir's death, Sher Ali ascended the Kabul throne in 1869. As with Dost Mohammed, he came to power to a background of heightened imperial tensions. Russia had recently annexed Bukhara and Samarkand, steeping Britain in Great Game paranoia. When Sher Ali received an envoy from Moscow in 1878, London insisted that they be allowed to establish a permanent mission in Kabul – and having set themselves an impossibly short time for the amir to reply, sleepwalked into the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

Apparently, no lessons had been learned from the 1840s disaster. No sooner was the British envoy Cavagnari installed by arms in Kabul, he was shot by Afghan soldiers rioting over pay. An army was sent from India to quell the trouble, which they did by imposing a reign of terror on Kabul with mass arrests and summary executions. Soon the whole countryside was ablaze with rebellion. Another British army was trounced, this time at Maiwand near Kandahar. Although the Afghan regular forces were eventually beaten, the British decided that they'd had enough. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan was allowed to take the throne from exile in Bukhara. Foreswearing any contacts with the Russians, he also insisted that no power interfere with internal Afghan affairs, and refused any envoys at his court. The British were only too happy to be shot of Afghanistan, signed a treaty with the amir and marched back to India.

For an alternative account of the disastrous British campaigns, consult George MacDonald Fraser's essential *Flashman,* memoirs of the Empire's greatest (fictional) cad, coward and hero.

Abdur Rahman unified Afghanistan with ruthless determination, gaining him the moniker of the 'Iron Amir'. He used his British subsidy to build up a strong army, which he then used to pacify the regions and break the old tribal monopolies on power. Over 10,000 Ghilzai families were relocated to the north following an uprising in the east. For the first time, Abdur Rahman claimed divine right to rule. The influence of the mullahs was restrained by bringing them under government control and establishing a unified sharia court system. When the mullahs protested he won them back through campaigns against the Shiite Hazaras and, most spectacularly, capturing and converting the pagan tribes of Kafiristan in 1893 – thence renamed Nuristan, the 'Land of Light'. An effective state administration was created for the first time and taxes were

1747
Ahmad Shah Durrani crowned, begins creation of modern Afghan state

1834
Peshawar lost to the expanding Sikh kingdom

1839–42
British occupation of Afghanistan ends in disastrous retreat from Kabul

1878–80
Second British invasion ends ignominiously; Abdur Rahman Khan takes the throne

THE RETREAT FROM KABUL

The First Anglo-Afghan War is remembered for the calamitous retreat of the British army from Kabul, a withdrawal that turned into a frozen death march that has passed into Afghan folk history.

The army was led by the incompetent William Elphinstone, a feeble and perpetually sick general on the verge of retirement, who was bullied by both his subordinates and Macnaghten, the British representative to Shah Shuja. As Kabul rioted after the murder of Burnes, Elphinstone dithered. His camp was far from the city and immediately fell under siege, a position made far worse by the decision to keep the camp supplies outside the perimeter wall.

Attempts to break free were half-hearted and quickly squashed. As more tribes joined the revolt, Afghan sharpshooters with their superior *jezails* (long-barrelled muskets) steadily picked off the British. Macnaghten tried to broker a double-dealing plan with Dost Mohammed's son, Akbar Khan, which only led to his murder at a parley and his body being strung up in the bazaar.

Elphinstone eventually agreed to abandon Kabul, and left the families of the married officers as hostages in return for safe passage to the Indian border. On 5th January 1842, 4500 soldiers and their families and 12,000 camp followers headed into the harsh winter. Almost immediately they were set upon and discipline collapsed. As the Ghilzai tribes snatched at the train of the column, the march turned into a rout. Akbar claimed it was impossible to restrain the wild Ghilzai, and demanded more hostages for protection. Elphinstone acquiesced. The hostages were the lucky ones – in the first five days of the march over 12,000 lives were lost to raids and the freezing winter. As British numbers dwindled, the raids became bolder. The tattered army made its last doomed stand at Gandamack. On January 13, army surgeon Dr William Brydon limped into the garrison at Jalalabad on a half-dead pony, the only officer to carry the British shame and disaster back to the empire.

collected. The Iron Amir forged modern Afghanistan through blood and determination.

There was a price to pay for this state-building. Feeling Afghanistan had tasted enough foreign interference, Abdur Rahman promoted an isolationism bordering on xenophobia. Modern developments like the telegraph and railways were firmly rejected, and foreign traders rebuffed. The country went from being at the heart of Asia to an inward-looking backwater.

Nonetheless, the amir held to his commitments to the British. When the Russian army advanced to the Afghan border near Herat in 1885, provoking the 'Panjdeh Crisis', he stuck firm to London's line, even to the point of allowing Herat's renowned Musalla Complex to be levelled to give defenders a clear line of fire at any advancing Russians. When war was averted, he allowed the British to settle his northern border with Russia two years later. In 1893 he further allowed the drawing of the Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and British India that sliced through the Pashtun region – a border so contentious no subsequent Afghan government has yet to formally accept and demarcate it.

> 'How can a small power like Afghanistan which is like a goat between two lions, or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust?'
> AMIR ABDUR RAHMAN KHAN, 1900

EXPERIMENTS IN MODERNISATION

Abdur Rahman was succeeded by his son Habibullah in 1901 – a rare peaceful passing of the crown. Habibullah saw the need to modernise Afghanistan. He set up schools teaching modern curricula and built roads and factories. A major influence was Mahmud Beg Tarzi, the founder of the country's first newspaper and a key reformist and nationalist thinker. Anti-imperial and pan-Islamist ideologies were beginning to gain momentum in the British empire and seep into Afghanistan. Habibullah rejected the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention that designated his country as a formal buffer zone between the empires, without even consulting him. After the outbreak of WWI, Habibullah flirted with a German-Turkish delegation aiming to take the war into India, and sought relations with newly Soviet Russia. An assassin's bullet found him in early 1919.

Habibullah's brother Amanullah took the throne, and drove even harder along the modernisation road. Almost his first act after becoming king (the title of amir wasn't suitably 20th century for Amanullah) was to provoke the British into the Third Anglo-Afghan War. It lasted barely the month of May 1919, and brought Afghanistan's first experience of air war, with the bombing of Kabul and Jalalabad by the RAF. But the British were weary from the exertions of WWI and sued for peace. A treaty granted Afghanistan full control over its diplomatic relations. After a century of the Great Game, Amanullah had won Afghanistan back its independence.

> The dispute over their common British-drawn border meant that Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's accession to the UN in 1947.

He set about the country with a modernist's zeal, and wowed Europe with an eight-month grand tour. But at home resentments bubbled away with each story of his top hats and motor cars. More scandalous still, Amanullah had allowed Queen Soraya to appear in public unveiled and wearing a sleeveless dress. Rumours abounded that he was allowing the Europeans to import machines that made soap from human corpses. The country rose in revolt, and Amanullah's army had been fatally weakened by the loss of his British subsidy. In early 1929 he fled into exile and the throne was snatched by Bacha Saqao, the first Tajik to rule Afghanistan. Not that he lasted long. General Nadir Khan toppled him in less than a year and made himself him king. He wasn't related to Amanullah, but at least he was a Durrani Pashtun, and he immediately put the brakes on the more overt forms of modernisation.

Nadir Khan barely lasted four years before his murder in 1933, to be succeeded by his teenage son Zahir Shah. Under his rule Afghanistan cautiously made progress with stepwise introduction of education reform, the wearing of the veil made voluntary, and the 1964 constitution that made the country a constitutional democracy. The most imaginative reforms were overseen by prime minister Mohammed Daoud, the king's cousin. Like his forbears, Daoud played the Afghan game of courting several imperial powers, inviting both the USA and USSR to bring trade and aid to the county, as well as rattling sabres at Pakistan over the Durand Line. Briefly dismissed by the king, in 1973 he sidestepped his cousin and declared himself president, backed by a loya jirga and a rewritten constitution.

> American aid to Afghanistan up to the 1970s focussed on the Helmand Valley scheme, aimed in large part at repairing the damage done to south Afghanistan's irrigation system by Genghis Khan and Timur.

THE AFGHAN COMMUNISTS

Although Daoud had close relations with the Soviets, he sought to deepen Afghanistan's neutrality and made approaches to the USA and Iran. The Soviets bit back. They had invested heavily in training the Afghan army, as well as encouraging the embryonic Afghan communists, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Even at this stage the PDPA had split into two bickering factions, Khalq ('The People') and the mainly Pashtun Parcham ('The Banner'). In April 1978 soldiers stormed the Presidential Palace and killed Daoud and his family. The Khalq leader Mohammed Taraki proclaimed himself president of a revolutionary Marxist regime.

1895–6
Kafiristan forcibly converted to Islam and renamed Nuristan

1893
Durand Line between Afghanistan and British India plotted

1919
Third Anglo-Afghan War results in independence

1919–29
King Amanullah attempts modernist reform programme, resulting in tribal rebellion

The countryside rose almost immediately against plans for land reform, women's rights and secular education. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor pushed for American military support for the rebellion. By the end of 1978 the country was ablaze. An army mutiny in Herat was only quelled by inviting Soviet pilots to carpet bomb the city. The communists had no answers but more force and more radical reform, and fell into infighting and party purges. In September 1979 Moscow replaced Taraki with Hafizullah Amin and drew up plans for military support. But by Christmas Eve their patience finally ran out. KGB troops landed in Kabul and killed Amin. The Parchami Babrak Karmal was installed as president, and the next day the Red Army started to pour across the border, 'invited' in to safeguard the revolution. The Great Game was back on – the Russians were finally in Afghanistan.

Amin Saikal's *Modern Afghanistan – A History of Struggle and Survival* is a key work for understanding the trajectory of Afghanistan in the 20th century.

THE ANTI-SOVIET JIHAD

The Soviets initially expected to be in Afghanistan for just a few months but events soon spiralled out of their control. The invasion not only attracted worldwide condemnation, but as the resistance called a jihad against the godless Russians Afghanistan became a beacon for the worldwide Islamist movement. The Americans feared the Cold War expanding towards the warm waters of the Arabian Sea and pledged covert military aid to fight the Soviets 'to the last Afghan'.

The resistance was known as the mujaheddin. Several key leaders were already in exile in Pakistan, having fled Afghanistan in the mid-1970s after Daoud's crackdown on Islamists at Kabul University. These included the Tajiks Burhanuddin Rabbani, founder of Jamiat-e Islami (Society of Islam), and his supporter Ahmad Shah Massoud, and the fundamentalist Ghilzai Pashtun Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, founder of Hezb-e Islami (Party of Islam). Reflecting the disparate nature of Afghan society, the resistance itself was divided. Seven main parties emerged, split between the Islamists, hoping to establish an Islamic state, and the traditionalists, who saw the Jihad as a national liberation struggle.

Funding soon poured in from the USA and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan was the epicentre of resistance, home not only to the mujaheddin parties but also to over three million Afghan refugees. The Pakistani dictator General Zia insisted that all funding and support be funnelled to his secret service,

AFGHANISTAN IN THE HIPPY ERA… AND 35 YEARS LATER *Tony Wheeler*

In 1973 Kabul was in danger of becoming a 'fly in, fly out' tourist trap. At least that's what I wrote in the very first Lonely Planet guidebook. I'd passed through Afghanistan the previous year, part of the great Asia Overland exodus, following the 'hippy trail' from London to Kathmandu and on through South-East Asia to Australia.

Looking back it was a magical era and one that still hasn't been adequately recorded, although Rory Maclean's *Magic Bus* and David Tomory's oral history of the trail, *A Season in Heaven,* capture the feel of Afghanistan perfectly. Of course the memories have faded (and if you can remember it clearly, you clearly weren't there) but Sigi's in Kabul felt like the epicentre of the Afghan section of the trail. We lounged on carpets, sipping free mint tea, listening to the music (the rumour was that if Pink Floyd released it in London on Monday the tapes were in Kabul by Friday), occasionally repairing to the courtyard to shift the giant chess pieces around the giant chessboard. Cool.

The Afghans were cool too, 'they were an example to us all, proving that you could be smart, tough, proud, broke, stoned and magnificently dressed, all at once' according to *A Season in Heaven*. Our attempts to look magnificently dressed inevitably failed. I'd no sooner arrived in Herat than I wandered off to a tailor to be fitted out with a Europeanised version of an Afghan suit. A German traveller returning from the tailor at the same time reduced the assembled Afghans hanging around the hotel to gibbering wrecks, laughing so hard they had to lie on the floor.

'No man would wear red,' one of them confided.

It was the travellers' responsibility to entertain as well as be entertained and we did our best. You arrived in Afghanistan slightly spooked; you'd heard so many stories about wild men and craziness and there was no question that crossing borders seemed like something measured on the Richter scale, the number goes up by one but the earthquake factor jumps by 10. Leaving Europe for Turkey was the first big culture shock, then it was x10 when you hit Iran and x100 when you crossed into Afghanistan. And then you relaxed, because it simply wasn't as scary as you'd expected.

Bruce Chatwin may have rejoiced that he visited Afghanistan 'before the Hippies wrecked it', which they did, he claimed, 'by driving educated Afghans into the arms of the Marxists', but Chatwin was a snob and never very happy about anybody who hadn't been to Oxford and didn't do their shopping at Sotheby's.

In fact the Afghans look back to the hippy period as a golden age, everything was peaceful and there was lots of money to be made: somebody was buying the carpets even if we weren't. In 2006 I finally returned to Afghanistan and despite the intervening chaos quickly discovered one thing had not changed: the Mustafa Hotel, where Maureen and I stayed in 1972, was still there at the end of Chicken St and still a travellers' favourite. In fact the young trio, 'two guys and a chick' in hippie-era-speak, who tumbled out of the Mustafa as I strolled by, adjusting their backpacks as they emerged, could easily have been time-warped straight from the 1970s.

My recent two-week return trip was a mystifying blend of old and new. In Kabul I couldn't remember Sigi's exact Chicken St location and the shops in the city centre, near the market and river, all seemed to be devoted to mobile phones. The flight across the snow-clad central mountains to Herat – I had zero enthusiasm about risking the road via Kandahar – was spectacularly beautiful and Herat was still a delight. Until very recently the Citadel that dominates the centre of the town had been just as closed as it was on our 1970s visit, but today it's open to visitors (it's a shame there aren't more of them) and the views are dazzling.

From Herat I forayed into central Afghanistan to visit the reclusive Minaret of Jam. I still remember seeing the minaret on a tourist poster on a Herat hotel wall and instantly thinking 'where is that?' followed, of course, by 'I'd like to go there.' It had taken 34 years, but finally I did. From Kabul another central Afghanistan trek to Bamiyan and Band-e Amir followed, where I encountered a couple of intrepid French motorcyclists. A final trip north took me into the Panjshir Valley and up to Mazar-e Sharif.

On my way back south to Kabul I made the short detour to the rock-cut Buddhist stupa at Takht-e Rostam and experienced, once again, that amazing sensation of seeing something that I knew nothing about. I'd read about the millennium-old rock dome in Nancy Hatch Dupree's classic *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan,* but I'd never seen a photograph and had little idea what to expect. Clearly it had similarities to the temples of Ajanta and Ellora in India, also cut out of solid rock, or even the cave temples of Petra in Jordan, but the place it really reminded me of was Lalibela in Ethiopia, where you could also stand at surface level and look down at the marvel at your feet. Here was something too solid for even the Taliban to damage.

1920s
Central Asia refugees flood into Afghanistan following the Soviet upheavals

1973
Daoud overthrows King Zahir Shah, declares Afghanistan a republic

April 1978
Saur Revolution brings Afghan communist Khalq party to power

December 1978
Soviet army invades Afghanistan and installs new regime

the ISI, and went about moulding the resistance to his own interests. Moderate mujaheddin groups were sidelined in favour of the most radical Islamists like Hekmatyar. Pakistani policy was aimed at installing a pliable Pashtun government in Kabul to quell disputes over the historically unstable Durand Line, and through Hekmatyar the ISI quashed attempts to unify the resistance. Touted by Islamabad and Washington as the most effective mujaheddin leader, Hezb-e Islami spent more time terrorising the refugee camps and killing Afghan rivals than Russians.

Pakistan also encouraged foreign fighters to join the struggle. Around 30,000 radicals from across the Muslim world were trained at arms, with financial support and Islamic guidance from Saudi Arabia. Known as the 'Arab-Afghans' they were deeply xenophobic and saw Afghanistan as a key staging post in a worldwide Islamic revolution. Osama Bin Laden came to Afghanistan at this time, and his co-militants would go on to take their experience to Algeria, Chechnya, Kashmir and beyond.

'What's most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?'

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI LOOKS BACK ON US COVERT ASSISTANCE, 1998

In the field, the regular mujaheddin fought on heroically. The countryside was ideal for hit-and-run ambushes, and the Red Army gradually found that it had little influence beyond the range of its guns. Scorched earth policies merely drove the resistance on. The Afghan army deserted in droves, and in 1986 the arrival of Stinger missiles from the USA put them further on the back foot, as helicopters and planes were shot from the skies. The new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, started looking for a way out. He encouraged reconciliation through Kabul's new headman, Mohammed Najibullah, and when that failed announced a unilateral withdrawal. Gambling on the survival of the PDPA government, troops were pulled out until the last tank crossed the Amu Darya in February 1989. The decade-long war had cost the Soviets over 15,000 men and proved a significant catalyst to the collapse of the USSR. Over 1.5 million Afghans had died, and four times that many had fled the country.

CIVIL WAR

The Geneva Accords negotiated between the USSR and USA were meant to end the fighting, but they were barely worth the paper they were written on. The mujaheddin rejected forming an interim coalition government with Najibullah, and all sides continued to arm their proxies.

Ghost Wars by Steve Coll is a gripping and intricately researched history of the CIA's covert funding of the mujaheddin, and the spawning of the Arab-Afghans and Al-Qaeda.

Kabul was expected to fall the moment the Russians left, but Najibullah held on for three more years. The ISI bribed the mujaheddin into forming an interim government, but it was incapable of capturing and holding territory. A huge assault on Jalalabad in 1989 turned into a bloodbath, and an internal coup against Najibullah was easily quashed. But gradually the mujaheddin gained ground. By early 1992 the mujaheddin were camped outside Kabul, with Hekmatyar to the south and Massoud to the north. At a crucial moment, an army mutiny in the north led by the Uzbek general Rashid Dostum provided the push that was needed to topple the regime. Massoud raced into Kabul to claim the prize, leaving Hekmatyar and his Pakistani handlers spitting with fury.

The birth of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan merely delivered a slide into fratricidal war. Having liberated the country the mujaheddin set about destroying it. Rabbani ascended to the presidency and Hekmatyar was offered the job of prime minister, a job he accepted while remaining

1979–89
Mujaheddin fight jihad against Soviet-backed regime; over 6 million flee country as refugees

1989
Soviet army withdraws from Afghanistan

THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Barring clichés that the mujaheddin effectively toppled the Soviet Union, the effect of Afghanistan on those who fought for the Red Army has been little written about. During the early stages of the invasion, Turkmen and Uzbek Soviet soldiers were in the vanguard, to win hearts and minds of the locals. However, their ranks were swiftly infiltrated by the resistance, so they were withdrawn and replaced by Russian and Ukrainian conscripts.

The soldiers quickly nicknamed the mujaheddin *dukhi* (ghosts), as they were so hard to find and fight. For their part, Afghans called the Red Army the 'Army of Bastards', as it was popularly believed that Soviet soldiers were orphans raised by the military.

The war was hard, with troops frequently confined to base not comprehending why their great socialist mission was being so deeply rejected, and unable to trust the Afghan army they fought with. Stinger missiles made helicopter evacuation of the wounded difficult, causing a further drop in morale. Drug abuse and corruption were rife. Some soldiers even deserted, converting to Islam and joining the mujaheddin.

In *The Hidden War*, the Russian journalist Artyom Borovik wrote: 'We thought that we were civilizing a backwards country by exposing it to TV, to modern bombers, to schools… but we rarely stopped to think how Afghanistan would influence us.' As Moscow lost the political will to continue the fight, disillusioned soldiers questioned the reason for their sacrifices. Forgotten on their return home, many of the veterans, dubbed *Afghantsi*, see themselves today as much victims of the Soviet regime as the Afghans.

outside Kabul and shelling the city. Dostum joined Massoud's forces, then switched to Hekmatyar, then went back north to set up his own quasi-state. The newly powerful Hazara militias backed by Iran were in turn fought and favoured. Herat effectively became an independent city-state once more, under Ismail Khan. A council of mujaheddin ruled Jalalabad and the south became an anarchic patchwork of warlord's fiefdoms.

It's estimated that over US$42 billion was spent on arms by all sides in Afghanistan between 1978 and 1992.

From being the epicentre of the Cold War, Afghanistan simply dropped off the map, awash with arms, manipulated by its neighbours and with no peace in sight. Attempts by the UN to engage in talks repeatedly stalled and the Americans lost all interest the moment Kabul fell, preferring to forget the sacrifices the country had made, and the billions of dollars they'd spent arming the different factions.

THE TALIBAN

In July 1994 a group of mullahs led by Mohammed Omar were so outraged by the rape and murder of several women by a warlord near Kandahar that they grouped together students from the local madrassas to enact justice. The warlord was strung up from a tank, and flush with the purity of their cause the students went on to clear the road to the Pakistan border, drawing people to their cause and in no time liberating Kandahar itself. So goes the Taliban creation myth.

The 2005 report *Blood-Stained Hands* by Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) is a chilling indictment of civil war atrocities perpetrated by the mujaheddin in 1990s Kabul.

The truth is a little more complex. Having invested so heavily in Hekmatyar, Pakistan eventually decided he was a dead letter and looked for another Pashtun horse to back. The Taliban looked like a good prospect to help clear the roadblocks between Kandahar and Quetta, where bribes were cutting into the profits of the Pakistani transport mafia. The

April 1992
Mujaheddin capture Kabul, triggering the start of civil war

1994–5
Kandahar and Herat fall under Taliban control

AHMAD SHAH MASSOUD – 'LION OF THE PANJSHIR'

Arriving in Kabul for the first time, you could be forgiven for confusing the identity of Afghanistan's president. Pictures of Ahmad Shah Massoud vastly outnumber those of Hamid Karzai.

Hailing from the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul. Massoud was the most formidable mujaheddin leader to fight against the Soviets. Largely ignored by the Pakistanis and Americans, he built a tough guerrilla army that repulsed 10 Russian offensives against the Panjshir, often by evacuating its entire civilian population. His natural charm, fluent French and moderate Islamic beliefs made him a hugely popular figure with Western journalists.

Following the capture of Kabul in 1992, Massoud became the real power behind the throne. While militarily brilliant, Massoud was no politician, and his inability to form alliances with other factions did much to prolong the civil war.

The Taliban reduced Massoud to a rump of power in the northeast. His assassination two days before 11 September 2001 has since cast him permanently in the role of martyr and saviour, his image reproduced everywhere in the style of an Afghan Che Guevara. Politically he has become more influential dead than when he was alive.

Not everyone idolises Massoud. Many Pashtuns resent him as a symbol of Tajik rule, Hazaras for his massacres of their kin, and others for the part he played in reducing Kabul to rubble in the 1990s. While Massoud will surely remain Afghanistan's number one poster boy for the foreseeable future, he's also a reminder that in civil wars few people emerge without any blood on their hands.

Taliban were allowed to capture a major arms dump on the border, and the Pakistani army provided training and logistical support for the nascent militia. Many of the opposing warlords were simply bought off with huge bribes facilitated by the ISI and the Saudis. When Kandahar fell the Taliban were welcomed for returning security to the region.

The mujaheddin government couldn't decide how to handle the situation. Talks sparked on and off, but collapsed when the Taliban raced to capture Herat in 1995, and started looking enviously towards the capital. In a final bid for power Hekmatyar threw his lot in with the hated Massoud, but his troops left the back door open. Rushing in from Jalalabad, the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996. Massoud fled to his Panjshir stronghold.

Other things forbidden by the Taliban included nail polish, lipstick, playing cards, chess, neckties, the internet and paper bags (lest they accidentally carry verses of the Quran).

The fall of Kabul briefly jolted the international community out of their indifference. The Taliban wasted no time setting up the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Najibullah was hauled from his UN-protected compound and publicly lynched. Women were banned from work and education and wearing the burqa was made compulsory. Men had to grow beards, music was banned and shops closed at prayer time.

Over the next two years the Taliban consolidated their control of Afghanistan. Mazar-e Sharif fell, driving Dostum into exile. Uprisings in the Hazarajat were brutally suppressed. Half the population relied on food aid but there was little sign of active Taliban governance, just ever more esoteric Islamic rulings on the minutiae of life. Rabbani clung on the presidency (and Afghanistan's seat at the UN), despite eventually being pinned back to a fiefdom in Badakhshan. In addition, the Taliban became ever more reliant on the Arab-Afghans who had stayed in Afghanistan – most notably Osama Bin Laden, who had reorganised his movement into Al-Qaeda ('The Base') and set up training camps for further jihad. As Bin Laden's influence grew, the Taliban became ever more radical and unbending. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recognised the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. In the words of the head UN representative, the country was 'a failed state which looks like an infected wound. You don't even know where to start cleaning it.'

1996
Taliban capture Kabul, and lynch Najibullah

1998
USA fires missiles at training camps in east Afghanistan in retaliation for bombing of US embassies in East Africa

WAR, AGAIN

On 9 September 2001, two suicide bombers posing as journalists assassinated Massoud, an act heavily suspected to be the work of Al-Qaeda. Two days later, hijackers flew planes into the Word Trade Centre and the Pentagon, killing over 3000 people. From that moment the Taliban were doomed. Citing the rules of Afghan hospitality, they refused to give up Osama Bin Laden to the USA. Two months later the Americans launched Operation Enduring Freedom to oust the regime. Still mourning their leader, Massoud's Northern Alliance was reconstituted. The CIA returned with suitcases full of money to buy off any waverers, and the American B-52 bombers did the rest from high altitude. Pakistan objected but nevertheless distanced itself from the Taliban, who after a brief fight simply melted away, with Mullah Omar fleeing to the hills. A major offensive against Al-Qaeda at Tora Bora similarly failed to capture Bin Laden. On 13 November 2001 a resurgent Northern Alliance entered Kabul.

Taliban by Ahmed Rashid is the definitive history of the movement by a long-time observer of the Afghan scene, lifting the lid on regional power games, oil company manoeuvrings and radical Islamism.

A post-war conference in Bonn elected Hamid Karzai as interim leader. An International Assistance Force (ISAF) was mandated to provide security in Kabul, while the Americans continued the hunt on the ground for Al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants. A loya jirga the following summer confirmed Karzai as president and King Zahir Shah returned from a 28-year exile with the new title of 'Father of the Nation'. As floods of refugees and exiles followed, optimism was in the air.

THE ROAD TO RECONSTRUCTION

Although huge gains have been made since the Taliban's ouster, peace was only barely less rocky than the fighting that preceded it. Afghanistan in 2002 was effectively at 'Year Zero', its people traumatised and the infrastructure of the state destroyed. Huge attention was paid to getting the country back on its feet and assistance pledged by international donors. Yet for every gain made, a step back was taken elsewhere.

Remembering the dark days of the civil war, Afghans craved security more than anything, but requests to expand international peacekeepers outside the capital were repeatedly blocked by the Americans. Instead, many of the warlords and mujaheddin were allowed to creep back into power through either direct support or the turning of blind eyes. While there were intermittent factional fights across the north, the failure to properly control the south left the back door open for the return of the Taliban and the opium mafias. As the security situation there deteriorated reconstruction efforts ground to a halt, further alienating a Pashtun population wondering where their peace dividend had gone.

Despite the promises it soon became clear that Afghanistan was going to be an experiment in state-building on the cheap. America quickly became bored with Afghanistan and diverted its efforts and money towards

October–November 2001
Operation Enduring Freedom defeats Taliban; Northern Alliance regains power

2004
New constitution signed; Hamid Karzai elected president

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a new adventure in Iraq. The country received less than a third of the aid per head ploughed into reconstruction efforts in Bosnia, East Timor or Rwanda, and of that less than half went on long-term development programmes. A huge and expensive aid bureaucracy sprang up in parallel to the new Afghan government. Hamid Karzai's limited writ led him to be dubbed 'the Mayor of Kabul'. Unable to tackle the resurgent warlords, many of them were simply co-opted into government.

Afghanistan – The Mirage of Peace by Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie is the best book on the shelves to give a detailed analysis of the successes and failures of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

It wasn't all bad news. UN-led disarmament programmes had some impact on reducing the number of small and heavy weapons in the country. School enrolment numbers surged. Attempts to increase the international military footprint resulted in the formation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), with small military units combining security and reconstruction projects, albeit with extremely mixed success. In 2004 a new constitution was agreed upon, and presidential elections returned Karzai as leader. A year later, parliamentary elections took place, with reserved seats for women, although many were not only dismayed that known human rights abusers were not disbarred from standing, but that several even found their way into Karzai's cabinet – where they lobbied for immunity from prosecution for war crimes.

A fitful peace returned to most of the country, but international neglect of the south has been the worm in the bud. Pakistan has continued to play its own double-game, publicly signing up to the War on Terror while allowing safe haven to the Taliban leadership and fighters launching cross-border raids. In 2006 the growing insurgency resulted in widespread battles in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces and the bloodiest year since 2001. Suicide bombs, previously unknown in Afghanistan, have been imported from Iraq. Stuck in the death-grip of drugs and insurgency, south Afghanistan looks increasingly like a separate country. With the rest of the nation continuing along its unsteady path, Afghanistan's immediate future is hard to predict.

2005
Parliamentary elections held

2006
NATO takes responsibility for Afghan security; widespread violence across the south

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The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Foreign writers have frequently turned to romantic clichés when writing about Afghans. They are portrayed as fiercely proud, lavishly hospitable to guests yet always ready to pick up their rifles to defend what is theirs, and with a streak of defiant independence that renders the country ungovernable. Like all clichés, these have some basis in fact, but the truth is more complex.

'Here at last is Asia without an inferiority complex.'
ROBERT BYRON, *THE ROAD TO OXIANA*

Afghans are a naturally conservative people, and deeply religious. Their independence comes from the harshness of the country, where arable land is at a premium and the difficulties of the terrain has promoted self-reliance and inhibited the formation of strong central governments. As a result, power has devolved down to the tribe, village and – central to Afghan life – the family. The household and the mosque are the cornerstones of community.

Travellers have always remarked on Afghan hospitality, derived from the tenets of Islam and tribal codes such as Pashtunwali (p44). Even today, showing hospitality to a guest is a point of honour, down to the poorest Afghan who will offer tea even if they can ill afford it. This is a manifestation of Islam that gets to the heart of traditional Afghan tolerance, and a world away from the insular and zealous strains of Islam imported into Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion.

An Historical Guide to Afghanistan (1977) by Nancy Hatch Dupree remains a classic tourist guide to pre-war Afghanistan. It's still a great read, and can be picked up in Kabul.

The experience of war has greatly damaged Afghan society. Nearly a quarter of the population fled the country, where years in refugee camps in Pakistan, or in exile in other countries, has fractured traditions and ties to the land. Many recent returnees have headed for the cities in search of work, rather than return to their home villages. Civil war helped further split the country along ethnic lines, and post-conflict reconciliation continues to be a painfully slow process. Many warlords retain political power and sit in parliament, despite an official prohibition

'THE BOOKSELLER OF KABUL'

The most successful of the flood of books on Afghanistan that followed the Taliban's ouster was *The Bookseller of Kabul* by Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad. It recounted her meeting with a Kabuli bookseller, Sultan Khan, who invited her to live with his family for several months. A pacy account of Afghan family life, in particular the drudge and horrors regularly inflicted on the women of the family, it became Norway's top-selling non-fiction book and was subsequently published in over 20 countries. It was here that the controversy began.

'Sultan Khan' was the thinly-disguised Shah Mohammed Rais, owner of the renowned Shah M bookshop (p84) in Kabul, who had had his books burned by the communists, the mujaheddin and the Taliban in turn. When given a copy of the book he was outraged, and claimed that Seierstad had abused his hospitality by revealing family secrets and writing slander, including allegations that female relatives had had boyfriends – a grave matter of honour once the book was translated into Dari and Pashto. Many Western critics also weighed in, questioning Seierstad's fictionalising of the thoughts of the characters when she had not met many of them, and spoke no Dari of her own. Seierstad herself appears nowhere in the book. Rais has repeatedly threatened a lawsuit for compensation, while in July 2006 his wife applied for asylum in Sweden claiming that the book had put her family's life in danger. On her part, Seierstad has openly regretted not consulting with Rais on the way his story should have been told. As the story rumbles on, this best-selling book has also become the most controversial.

during elections. Despite donning democratic clothes, many Afghans see this is as a sham: *'jangsalaran jangsalar hastand'* – warlords are and remain warlords.

Need to orient yourself? Afghan graves usually lie in a north-south direction, with the body laid on its right side so it faces Mecca in the west.

LIFESTYLE

Afghan society is strictly segregated between the public and private domains. Women have always been seen as the symbols of family honour, and have traditionally been very restricted in their access to education and work. Since the 1970s, women's rights issues have made progress or been reversed according to the political and religious powers of the day (see p50).

The family is the bedrock of Afghan life, and family members only ever leave the home when they are married. Marriages are usually arranged between families by negotiation. The bride's mother and aunts usually hold the key to such discussions, although a matchmaker is sometimes used. The bride brings a dowry of jewellery and goods to set up her new house, while the groom's family pay a *mahr* (bride price) for the marriage. In some cases, poverty can force parents to 'sell' their daughters in marriage against their or her wishes. Marriage and family are so important to Afghans that they often cannot understand why Westerners travel unaccompanied by their family – particularly Western women.

A *kozda* (engagement ceremony) marks the public announcement by both families of a betrothal, celebrated with gifts of flowers and sweets. In some cases, this party may be the first time the bride and groom have met.

An instantly recognisable manifestation of Afghan conservatism is dress. According to the Quran, modest dress is incumbent on men as well as women, although it is in women that this has taken its most extreme form (see boxed text, p46). Clothing must hide the shape of the body for both sexes, while for women the *hijab* (veil) is essential for covering the hair. Afghan men most commonly wear the *pirhan tonban* (traditional male clothes) of baggy pyjama trousers and long shirt, also called a *shalwar kameez*. Only in Kabul can you sometimes see men be so daring as to wear short-sleeved shirts.

EXILE AND RETURN *Tamim Ansary*

Before 1978, Afghan exiles and émigrés numbered in the mere hundreds. Then, within four years, some six million fled the country. Most just dragged themselves to camps in Pakistan and Iran, but several hundred thousand went on to the West, accumulating mostly in Germany and the USA, and then in Australia, Denmark, Holland and Britain. Twenty years later, a whole generation of Afghans were coming of age in exile, longing volubly for a homeland they had never seen, a longing often expressed rhetorically as nostalgia for their own *khawk*.

What is *khawk*? English has no exact synonym. Soil, dust, land…all come close but none has the full resonance, for *khawk* connotes not just soil, but home, nation, ancestry, life, death, rooted permanence, the evanescence of all things, and purity. Yes, purity: Muslims must cleanse themselves for prayer but if water is unavailable, they may perform their ritual ablutions with *khawk*.

When I first returned to Afghanistan after the Taliban fled, my cousins took me to the places they assumed I most craved to see: my own *khawk*. In Kabul, this turned out to be my father's property, a concrete house squatting in a weed-choked yard, its roof all blown away, its crumbled walls scarred by grooves where guerrilla armies had ripped out the wiring to sell for cash.

In our ancestral village north of Kabul, my *khawk* was a patch of stony, featureless desert floor hemmed in by ditches running from a bombed-out, communal irrigation system that once provided this land 18 hours of water per week.

Finally they took me to my other *khawk:* the village graveyard where my father, uncles, grandparents and ancestors lay buried. A few graves had headstones, but most were unmarked mounds with no inscriptions – none were needed. In this village, everyone knew who was buried where.

While keen to preserve their traditions, Afghans are more than happy to engage with modernity and the West. Education is increasingly seen as essential for the country's development, while natural business acumen and links from years in exile makes Afghan businessmen well-placed to help their country, given enough political stability. And yet, modern business suits and mobile phones only go so far: tradition still rules, and anyone wanting to get on is still going to have to drink a lot of tea, the one unchanging facet of all Afghan society.

Afghans are traditionally pragmatic and wary of ideology, and often quick to switch political allegiances when the wind changes direction, hence the saying, 'You can't buy an Afghan, you can only rent him.'

ECONOMY

The Afghan economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture. The main crops are wheat and soft fruit, with a similar importance placed on raising livestock. At the end of 2001, the economy was at a standstill, wracked by several years of drought, and an international embargo against the Taliban. In the intervening years, a flood of aid money and investment has entered the country, prompting economic growth rates in double figures – a boom that was only just starting to slow as we went to press. Pakistan, Iran, India and the UAE are all important trading partners.

For all this, growth in the formal economy has been massively overshadowed by Afghanistan's production and export of opium. The country produces over 90% of heroin sold in the UK. Helmand and Badakhshan are the major poppy growing areas: if Helmand was a separate country, it would still be the biggest exporter of opium in the world (see boxed text, p196). Tackling opium production, which funds the resurgent Taliban and contributes to systematic corruption at all levels of government, remains a key issue in Afghan reconstruction.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan has been touted as a transit route for oil and natural gas pipelines from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. Governments and oil companies have signed memoranda of understanding with a succession of regimes in Kabul (at one point

When the war burst out, my father stayed in Afghanistan because he didn't want to be buried in strange soil. When the Afghan exile community first burgeoned in the San Francisco Bay Area, they could get together on only one project: buying a bit of land to consecrate as an Afghan graveyard, a poor substitute for their native *khawk*. Now, with the Taliban gone, some of the exiles making the pilgrimage home are the dead. Yes, some Afghan families in America are now going to the extraordinary trouble and expense of flying their dead home for burial in their native *khawk*.

When I came home from Afghanistan – mine being the rootless soul of modern Western civilisation – I told my relatives I was thinking of giving my land away to the poor squatters living on it. Ripples of alarm ran through my clan. One cousin called me from Portland to plead, 'Don't do it, Tamim. That land is not just equity like your house here, that's the *khawk* your forefathers' wells have watered. Our ancestor Sheikh Sa'duddin is buried there. That *khawk* is your blood, your history, it's who you are. You can't give it away.'

Visitors to Afghanistan may see barren landscapes dotted with simple graves, but Afghan exiles returning here see something indefinably more. The Afghan poet Khalili once wrote:

The fountainhead of satisfaction is the company of those we love.
It's the distance from our friends that makes death difficult.
But all the friends gather in the khawk's heart in the end,
So in death as in life we are always in the company of friends.

Tamim Ansary is the author of West of Kabul, East of New York.

Love & War in Afghanistan is a deeply moving series of life stories told first-hand from ordinary Afghan men and women, collected by authors Alex Klaits and Gulchin Gulmamadova-Klaits.

Taliban representatives were even flown to Texas for talks) but continued instability keeps plans firmly on the drawing board. Afghanistan itself has small natural gas deposits in the north, which are yet to be fully exploited.

POPULATION

Afghanistan's rich mix of over 20 ethnic groups reflects its geographical and historical position as the crossroads of Asia. Successive waves of people have invaded and settled in the country, while others left to conquer or settle neighbouring countries. The result is a patchwork of nationalities that spills over Afghanistan's borders at every point, into Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia – relatively few ethnic groups are contained entirely inside Afghanistan.

While the concept of an Afghan nationality is a very real one, decades of war has enflamed ethnic divisions. Population flight in the form of the refugee crisis has further fractured traditional ethnic and power balances in the country. Reliable population data are hard to come by in Afghanistan, although a limited census was carried out in 2003 to aid planning reconstruction.

For an insight into the role that complex Pashtun tribal relations (and warlordism) have played in post-Taliban Afghanistan, read Sarah Chayes' *The Punishment of Virtue*.

Pashtuns

The Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. The oldest continuous inhabitants of the area, they are mentioned in ancient Aryan texts as the Paktua, and by the Greek historian Herodotus as the Paktues. The British called them Pathans, while Pashtuns have often simply referred to themselves historically as 'Afghans'. They claim descent from Qais, a companion of the Prophet Mohammed.

Pashtuns live mainly in east and southern Afghanistan, spreading into North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan in Pakistan. This whole area, straddling the contentious Durand Line, is often known as Pashtunistan. There are slight dialectical differences between the two populations – those speaking the 'softer' western dialect (Pashto) and the 'harder' eastern one (Pakhtu). Yet these differences are nothing compared to the stark clan lines that have traditionally divided Pashtun society. The two main clans are the southern Durranis and the eastern Ghilzais, each further divided into subclans, known as *khel*. The Durranis have provided Afghanistan's rulers since Ahmad Shah Durrani founded the Afghan kingdom in 1747 – Hamid Karzai is from the Popolzai subclan. The Ghilzais have always played second fiddle politically – a resentment exploited by Pakistan in the 1980s and '90s through its sponsorship of Ghilzai *jihadis,* including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban leadership.

THE PASHTUN CODE

Pashtunwali, the Pashtun moral code, has traditionally taken precedence over any external laws, acting as a constitution for Pashtun society. It has frequently been interpreted by the West as shorthand for tribal extremism, but it also provides a surprisingly open and democratic code for managing tribal affairs within the conservative and feudal nature of Pashtun society. Its key concepts are *siali* (individual equality), *nang* (honour) and *melmastia* (hospitality). Group decisions are made by a council of elders, or *jirga*.

Nang is central to a Pashtun's identity, most importantly that of the family (and women in particular). *Melmastia* is the showing of hospitality to all visitors without expectation of reward. This can even go as far as offering sanctuary to a criminal, and laying down one's life for a guest. From these two pillars flows the concept of *badal* – the obligation to avenge an insult of injustice to the individual, family or clan. Injustices can be those committed on the day or a century ago – a practice which readily leads to blood feuds, and is a major reason why many Pashtun villages look like collections of small forts. The vanquished in a fight may go to the victor in absolute submission for forgiveness. The winner is expected to show magnanimity to restore the balance of honour, a practice called *nanawatai*.

Like many tribal structures, Pashtunwali has been threatened and reinterpreted as a result of war, with tribal power in many cases shifting from the elders to the young men with guns. The rise of Islamism among Pashtuns, in great part due to the post-Taliban radicalisation of the Afghan–Pakistan border regions, continues to further undermine this ancient code.

Pashtun hospitality – and revenge – is legendary. One proverb says 'Help a Pashtun, and not only will he never forget it, he will repay you double. Hurt a Pashtun, and not only will he never forget it, he will repay you double.'

Tajiks

Tajiks represent almost a quarter of the Afghan population. They are an Indo-European people, and blue eyes and sandy hair aren't uncommon. Until the 20th century, *taj* was shorthand for a Persian speaker, and the modern term Tajik encompasses a diverse group of settled peoples living in northern, western and northeastern Afghanistan, united by their language and adherence to Sunni Islam.

Tajiks are not as tribal as Pashtuns, with loyalties revolving around the family and village. Since Dari has remained the language of government for several hundred years, they have traditionally served as administrators, but with the reigns of power kept firmly from them by the Pashtuns. Only in the 20th century has this balance been undone, with the Bacha Saqao rebellion of 1929, the Tajik-dominated mujaheddin government in the 1990s and the Northern Alliance in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The continued strength of the Tajiks, exemplified by the near canonisation of Ahmad Shah Massoud, against the marginalisation of the Pashtuns remains a key political issue for the country.

Hazaras

The Hazaras occupy the mountain vastness of central Afghanistan known as the Hazarajat, and are the country's largest Shiite minority. This fact of religion has led to them being persecuted throughout history, largely viewed as a servant class by the ruling Pashtuns. Hazaras have distinct Mongoloid features, and they ascribe their ancestry to Genghis Khan's warriors – *hazar* being Dari for thousand, representing the Mongol hordes. It's more likely that the original Hazaras were Mongol farmers whose arrival in Afghanistan followed sometime after the great Khan. Modern Hazaras are also farmers, practising *lalmi* (rain-fed agriculture) in the marginal mountain environment. Aside from the Bamiyan region, there are large numbers of Hazaras in Kabul, Ghazni and Mazar-e Sharif. Hazara society is based on the power of the *mir* (local chief), with great stock placed on descent from the line of the Prophet Mohammed. Hazaras speak Hazaragi as well as Dari.

Naswar is Pashtun snuff, a chewing tobacco mixed with flavourings such as lime or juniper that gives users a mild buzz. But take care not to swallow the noxious green juice!

While traditionally marginalised, the Soviet invasion and civil war ironically gave an opportunity for the Hazaras to organise politically. Heavily supported by co-religionist Iran, the Hezb-e Wahdat party proved one of the most resilient of the mujaheddin groupings. The Hazaras fought and suffered bitterly in Kabul against Ahmad Shah Massoud's Tajiks, while the Taliban brought an ethnic fury to the Hazarajat in an attempt to bomb and starve the population into submission.

Uzbeks

The Uzbeks originally descended from Siberian nomads who settled in central Asia following the tumult of Genghis Khan. They became settled

THE BURQA

Few symbols have been so closely and negatively tied to a country as Afghanistan and the burqa (*chaderi* in Dari). Afghan women are often seen as downtrodden creatures beneath the billowing folds of powder-blue burqas, faceless and voiceless. But the burqa isn't synonymous with women's rights, and shouldn't be seen as the only barometer of social change.

The burqa was once a symbol of urbanised Afghan women. Its impracticality was a sign that the wearer was free from the toil of the fields. Village women would only don burqas to visit towns, where they would be free from the gaze of unrelated men. In the 1920s, Queen Soraya famously scandalised much of Afghan society by being photographed in a sleeveless dress, and although Kabul of the 1970 and '80s was the fulcrum of women's rights, mini-skirted Afghan women were always a rarity.

War marked the big change. In the refugee camps, burqas were adopted as tented life increased the difficulties of keeping the private (female-dominated) and public spheres separate, and was enforced by the rise of the fundamentalist mujaheddin groups. When civil war broke out, the burqa became essential as a guarantee of anonymity and protection against harassment and rape. The Taliban merely formalised its wearing as the most visible symbol of their anti-women policies.

Many women in Afghanistan continue to wear the burqa for cultural reasons. Some women have always worn it and assert that they will continue to do so. The burqa can be seen as a tool to increase mobility and security, a nuance often missed in the outside world's image of the garment. Assuming that a burqa-clad woman is not empowered and in need of liberation is a naïve construct. The majority of Afghan women are more concerned with access to education and economic opportunities.

ETHNIC BREAKDOWN (2006 ESTIMATE)

Pashtun: 42%

Tajik: 27%

Hazara: 9%

Uzbek: 9%

Turkmen: 3%

Baluchi: 2%

Other: 8%

in the 15th century, when the Shaybanid khanates of modern Uzbekistan emerged to overthrow the decadent Timurid empire. Northern Afghanistan became a semi-independent network of Uzbek khanates, such as Balkh, Kunduz and Maimana, with the Uzbek population boosted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries following the Tsarist and Soviet upheavals in Central Asia. Primarily farmers, they are also known for their horses and skill at *buzkashi*. Most original Uzbek tribal affiliations have now been lost.

Uzbek men traditionally wear the *chapan*, a quilted silk coat tied with a sash, although this tends to be restricted to older generations and for celebrations. Modern Uzbeks are more recognised by their affiliation to their strongman leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostum (see p145). In the civil war, Dostum's Uzbek militias were greatly feared, particularly in Kabul where they were notorious for their looting and pillaging, and dubbed by others as *qilimjan* (carpet thieves).

Other Peoples

Nomadism still plays an important part in Afghan life. The largest group of nomads are the Kuchi, a Pashtun tribe. Many Kuchi have suffered greatly in recent years, losing much of their livestock to droughts, coupled with the effects of land mines on traditional grazing grounds. The exact number of Kuchi is unknown, but they possibly number up to three million, spread across the whole of the country. They are the only ethnic group to have reserved seats in parliament. Among the Dari speakers, the main nomads are the Aimaq in central and west Afghanistan who are of Turkic-Mongoloid stock. In the far northeast of the Pamirs and Wakhan, the Kyrgyz continue a nomadic lifestyle with their yaks, sheep and camels (see p171).

Of the settled nationalities, the next largest populations are the Turkmen and Baluchi. The Turkmen are found mainly in the northwest

along the border with Turkmenistan, where they are mostly herders and farmers noted for their carpets and *karakol* (sheep) skin production. Like the Uzbeks, many Turkmen came to Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Politically they maintain close ties with the Uzbeks. The Baluchi span the southern border region with both Pakistan and Iran, where they are mainly herders and traders. In the eastern provinces of Nuristan and Kunar are the fair-skinned and blue-eyed Nuristanis. Afghanistan's last pagans, they were only converted to Islam in the late 19th century. Their oral history ascribes their European features to descent from the troops of Alexander the Great (see p186).

In the northwest, the farming Ismaili Wakhis share land and trade with the Kyrgyz. The other Shiite ethnic groups are the Farsiwan (often mistakenly labelled Tajiks) of Herat and the northwest, and the Turkic Qizilbash living in Kabul.

RELIGION

Islam

HISTORY

Islam has shared roots with the other great monotheistic faiths of the Middle East but is considerably younger, springing into being in AD 612, when the Prophet Mohammed received his revelations from God (Allah) in Mecca. The revelations incorporated elements of Judaism and Christianity, including a reverence for the same prophets such as Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa). While Jews and Christians have traditionally been respected as People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*), Islam regards itself as the summation of these faiths, with Mohammed being the prophet who received Allah's final revelations to mankind. (Muslims reject the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus as a misreading of the Bible – a mistake many Afghans will be happy to point out to you.) Mohammed's revelations were complied into the Quran, Islam's holiest book, while his collected sayings (the Hadith) are another important reference for Muslim scholars.

In 622, the Prophet Mohammed and his followers were forced to flee Mecca to Medina due to religious persecution (the Islamic calendar begins with this flight, known as Hejira). He returned in triumph eight years later at the head of an army, capturing the whole of Arabia, and starting one of the greatest political and religious revolutions in history. Within a century, Islam had spread as far west as Spain and east towards central Asia.

The word Islam translates loosely from Arabic as 'the peace that comes from total surrender to God'.

The Prophet died soon after retaking Mecca. Disputes over his succession boiled into violence between those who believed the new caliph should be chosen from Mohammed's most trusted followers and those who supported his heirs. In 661 the Prophet's son-in-law Ali was assassinated, prompting the split between the Shiite and Sunni sects. The Shiites were Ali's supporters, beaten by the Sunnis who supported the Prophet's brother-in-law, the governor of Syria, as caliph. The schism became irreconcilable in 680 when Ali's son Hussain and most of his male relatives were killed at Kerbala in Iraq by Sunni partisans.

Sunni Islam emphasises the traditions of the Prophet, while Shiite Islam places greater emphasis on the authorities of imams as a spiritually perfect elite chosen by Allah. Today, almost 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni, divided into four schools according to their interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law. Around 85% of Afghans are Sunni, with Hazaras comprising most of the Shiite, along with the Farsiwans and Ismaili Wakhi community. Afghanistan follows the non-hierarchical Hanafi

school of Sunni jurisprudence, although Shiite law was given equal status in the 2004 constitution.

ISLAM IN AFGHANISTAN

The village mosque is the centre of Afghan Islam, where the local mullah is the prime interpreter of the Quran for his traditionally non-literate flock. Many village mullahs cannot read either, so their knowledge of the holy book is often based on oral tradition, mixed with other Afghan codes, such as Pashtunwali, that remove them by some degrees from the Islam recognised by scholars. Afghans place much stock in their non-hierarchical society, and the same goes for religion. Tradition is vitally important, and while this has led to some insular practices (including common village strictures against women's education and being allowed to work), in many other areas it has led to the broadly tolerant nature of Afghan society. Belief in magic and *djinns* (invisible creatures made from fire mentioned in the Quran) is widespread.

Mohammed decreed all Muslims should pray facing the Kaaba in Mecca, the Black Stone supposedly given to Ibrahim by the archangel Gabriel.

Holy men have always been important in Afghan culture. *Pirs* (local saints) are revered while *sayids* (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) are especially respected. In addition, wandering holy men called *malangs* are thought to be touched directly by Allah; these are rare individuals who leave the security of the family and village structures to follow the path of Sufism, Islam's mystical tradition. Many Sufi orders (*tariqa*) exist in Afghanistan, mostly of the Naqshbandi and Qadirriyah traditions, each following a charismatic leader. Sufism seek knowledge of Allah through direct personal contact, often through rituals of music or poetry aimed at inducing a trance-like state of rapture – a heresy to orthodox Muslims (although Sufis also pray in the traditional Muslim manner). Sufi *tariqa* have produced several Afghan leaders, and played a key early role in the Jihad against the Soviets.

Radical Islam played little part in Afghan culture until society started to fracture during the war. Fundamentalist groups like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami weren't popular with the majority of Afghans, while the foreign fighters who followed the ultra-orthodox Wahhabist sect from Saudi Arabia frequently despised the Afghans they were fighting for their supposedly lax attitude to religion. The strain of Islam followed by the Taliban similarly ran counter to much of traditional Afghan belief.

The Taliban were the children of Pakistan's madrassas (Islamic colleges), which often offered the best chance of any education for those raised in the refugee camps. Here they were influenced by the austere Deoband creed, at once sympathetic to and influenced by the Pakistani Islamist parties, and Saudi Wahhabist who provided much of their funding. The madrassa-raised Taliban were free of the tribal strictures of Pashtunwali and had an exile's lack of knowledge of Afghan and general Islamic history. Instead they preferred to deal with absolutes, shunning debate, moderation and the West. The radical laws they enacted once in power were far removed from most Afghans' concepts of Islam. In particular, their virulent anti-Shiism led to persecution of the Hazaras, and the banning of festivals like Nauroz that were perceived to be anti-Islamic.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Muslims express their faith through five core beliefs, named here in Dari:

- Kalimeh – the creed that 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of God'
- Namaz – praying five times a day at fixed times, prostrated towards the holy city of Mecca
- Zakat – the giving of alms, generally interpreted as 2.5% of a person's income
- Rouza – dawn-to-dusk fasting during the month of Ramazan
- Haj – performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime, if able

ZIARATS

Ziarats (shrines) are of great importance in Afghan Islam. Although Islam does not traditionally recognise saints, the graves of *pirs,* or anyone thought to have achieved closeness to Allah, often attract local cults. People visit their *ziarats,* typically festooned with brightly coloured flags, to pray for the intercession of the *pir* for a particular favour. Women visit some for help conceiving, or to get a love-match in marriage. Other *ziarats* are renowned for their curative abilities. Caretakers often sell amulets containing earth from the grave or verses from the Quran to aid the fortunes of visitors.

The graves of *shahid* (martyrs who have died in battle) are regarded as particularly potent. In Khost, the graves of 38 Arab and Pakistani fighters killed by a US bomb in 2001 have become a famous *ziarat*. Their political beliefs are totally irrelevant – as *shahid* their graves are holy ground. Ironically, the ultra-orthodox foreign fighters who supported the Taliban would have scorned and punished such behaviour as idolatrous. Presumably as more visitors come to pray to them, they spin in their graves a little faster.

Other Religions

Afghanistan has long hosted populations of Jews, Sikhs and Hindus, all of which have now dwindled. At the start of the 20th century, Afghan Jews numbered around 40,000, a number that has plummeted since the founding of Israel to just one man in Kabul, Zablon Simintov, who keeps an unobtrusive synagogue on Flower St.

Before the arrival of Islam, Kabul was a Hindu city, but most Afghan Hindus and Sikhs arrived in the country following the mid-19th century influx of Indian court musicians to Kabul. Around 1200 Hindu and Sikh families remain in Afghanistan, mostly merchants in Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Jalalabad. Muslim occupation of Hindu and Sikh properties after years of war (particularly Hindu cremation grounds) has caused some tensions.

Christianity is a more controversial subject. Afghanistan's large Christian Armenian population was expelled in the 19th century after being accused of assisting the British, and it wasn't until 1933 that a church – a chapel inside the Italian embassy – was allowed to open, still Afghanistan's only officially sanctioned church. Afghans remain highly sensitive to Christianity taking a foothold in the country. In 2001 the Taliban arrested several international aid workers on charges of proselytising, and in 2006 there was an international furore when an Afghan Christian convert was tried and threatened with the death penalty for apostasy – he was later granted refugee status in Italy.

ARTS

Poetry

Both Dari and Pashto poetry plays an enormous role in Afghan culture, and a good Afghan education places as much emphasis on the writings of the great poets as on the Quran.

Afghanistan's greatest poets are Abdul Rahman Baba and Khushal Khan Khattak, who both wrote Pashto poetry in the 17th century, a time

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN *Lina Abirafeh*

Progress and social change in Afghanistan have long rested on the 'women question'. It is said that *zan, zar wa zameen* ('women, gold and land') have been the cause of conflict for centuries in Afghanistan. Afghan women's rights have always been highly politicised and gender politics, as much as geo-politics, has provided the impetus for conflicts. Throughout modern Afghan history, Afghan women have been used as the barometer to measure social change. Afghan women have repeatedly been caught between waves of enforced modernisation and conservative undercurrents. Today – several years after the Taliban – the 'women question' remains on shaky ground.

In the early 1970s, Afghan women's rights were included in the national constitution. Women – working as doctors and engineers – were seen on the streets of Kabul wearing skirts. By the end of that decade, Soviet occupation coupled with a conservative backlash would strip women of these hard-won rights. For the next 20 years, a variety of regimes exercised their influences on women's rights. The 'women question' continued to deteriorate.

Both Afghanistan and its women suffered in anonymity until the Taliban – and the activists who opposed them – gained international attention. Organisations such as the **Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan** (RAWA; www.rawa.org) brought Afghan women's rights to the forefront of the international women's agenda. RAWA's story is both romanticised and immortalised through their murdered leader Meena, who founded the organisation in 1977. RAWA's membership is large, and yet members often do not know each other due to the organisation's secret status.

Organisations like RAWA, operating clandestinely in Afghanistan and Pakistan, revealed the horrors inflicted by the Taliban upon women – including rapes, stonings and confinement. They bravely resisted oppression and persevered through home schools for girls, women's clinics and a network of underground operations providing support services for women and children.

Post-Conflict Progress?

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban, Afghan women were hopeful and demonstrated their strength and determination by assuming professional roles, public positions and accessing education opportunities. Afghan women's rights are safeguarded in the new constitution that was approved by the Afghan constitutional loya jirga, or grand assembly, in January 2004. Afghanistan is also a party to CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. While these rights exist on paper, the battle to bring them into practice is just beginning.

The parliament, formed in 2005, is 27% female. One outspoken member, Malalai Joya, gained international attention – and put her own life at risk – when she publicly denounced warlords in the 2003 constitutional loya jirga. She continues to fight for women's rights despite myriad death threats.

Despite select public accomplishments, conditions for women remain challenging. Post-Taliban Afghanistan remains a place where the lives of women's rights activists are increasingly threatened, where girls, schools are being burned, and where social indicators – for men and women – remain staggering. Afghanistan faces one of the highest illiteracy and maternal mortality rates in the world. Widows and female-headed households continue to live in dire poverty. Violence against women – particularly domestic violence – is increasing. Self-immolation is becoming a popular exit strategy for women whose lives show no alternative to living in despair. Women's rights activists are being brutally assassinated. The September 2006 assassination of women's rights activist Safia Amajan is a case in point. The head of the provincial women's affairs department in Kandahar, Amajan was murdered to send a message to women's rights advocates.

Today's Afghanistan might allow more opportunity for women – marginally, in urban areas – but fewer women appear to be accessing those opportunities. Both men and women are waiting to see how the relatively new parliament – and the proposed revival of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice – will fare and what changes this will bring. Recent increases in insecurity in Afghanistan are taking a variety of forms and affecting all aspects of Afghans' lives. Afghan women and girls are particularly affected by the current climate of elevated lawlessness and violence.

Girls' Education

Once a highly touted accomplishment of the international community's reconstruction efforts, girls in school are now increasingly threatened. Schools continue to be burned, and teachers' lives put at risk. *Shabnameh* (Night Letters) are threatening letters left in public places or on the doors of individual homes at night, frequently claiming that those Afghans who are 'associating with infidels' are thereby 'betraying' Islam and Afghan culture and will be punished. This tactic was frequently employed during the parliamentary elections to intimidate female candidates and is now directed toward teachers who attempt to educate girls. Fear of violence has a profound effect on women both because they are targeted for violence and because of the stigma they face if they are victims. Groups opposed to girls' education have used threats of violence as a deterrent, keeping an increasing number of girls out of school every year. The forces against girls' education are stronger than the communities' will to resist them.

What Next for Afghan Women?

To better understand the situation of Afghan women, it is important to understand the socio-cultural context and the fluctuating history of women's rights in the country. Throughout modern Afghan history, women have repeatedly found themselves at the centre of conflicts between Western concepts of modernisation and Afghan codes of culture. The two are not incompatible. It is a question of approach, not content. Importing an agenda of 'liberation' is not the answer, particularly when indigenous roots for human rights and other so-called Western concepts already exist. Afghan women continue to make changes and act on their own behalf as they have always done. There is such a thing as Afghan feminism – it did not need to be imported.

Many Afghan women's groups are working to support women through programs such as rights training, vocational training, job placement, health care, literacy, etc. The **Afghan Women's Network** (AWN; www.afghanwomensnetwork.org) is one such example. AWN was created in 1996 and comprises 72 NGOs and 3000 individuals who work to 'empower women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society'. Their efforts include advocacy, networking, and capacity building in issues such as gender-based violence, women's legal rights, civic education, leadership and communication. AWN and many other groups strive to offer women the tools with which they can achieve self-sufficiency, a choice, and a voice.

In the words of one Afghan woman: 'Tell [the world] that Afghan women are very strong and they will do anything for the future of their country and their children'.

For more information on women in Afghanistan, try the following books and websites:

- *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes to Weep* by Siba Shakib
- *Kabul in Winter* by Ann Jones
- *Women's Resistance* by Cheryl Bernard
- *Veiled Threat: The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan* by Sally Armstrong
- *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* by Anne E Brodsky
- *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance* by Cheryl Bernard
- *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future* edited by Sunita Mehta
- *Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan… Learned?* by Lina Abirafeh (www.fes.org.af/AFGHANISTAN0905ABIRAFEHGENDER.pdf)
- *Burqa Politics: The Plights of Women in Afghanistan* by Lina Abirafeh (www.chronogram.com/issue/2004/10/news/burqa.php)
- *Afghanistan: Women Still under Attack – a Systematic Failure to Protect* (http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110072005?open&of=ENG-AFG)
- Afghan Gender Café (www.afghangendercafé.org)
- Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities (run by Malalai Joya; www.geocities.com/opawc)
- Afghan Women's Mission (www.afghanwomensmission.org)

LANDAYS

Pashtun women are typically thought of as being the most voiceless of all Afghan communities, but they are also composers of one the most vibrant forms of poetry in the country – the *landay*. *Landay* is the Pashto word for a small venomous snake, and these poems follow suit: short, but with a lot of bite.

Like haiku, *landay* is a stylised poetry with a set number of syllables. The authors are usually unknown, but in almost all examples the woman addresses the man. Touching on the universal themes of love and war, the *landays* reveal a strong thread of pride, passion, longing and anger from beneath the burqa. Unrequited love and illicit love affairs are used by the women to taunt the weakness and virility of their men, for it is the women alone who carry the risks and consequences of their love. Some *landays* have even reached into history, such as Malalai's taunt to her menfolk credited with inspiring a famous Afghan victory over the British army in 1880: 'My love! If you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand/Someone is saving you as a symbol of shame!' Here are some of our other favourites:

> 'My beloved returned unsuccessful from battle
> I repent the kiss I gave him last night'
>
> 'May you turn into a riverside flower
> So that I may come on the excuse of taking water and smell you'
>
> 'O passing traveller!
> Are you satiated with my sight or should I turn my face again?'
>
> 'You started loving, not I
> Now the scandal has come into the open you blame me'
>
> 'Call it romance, call it love, you did it
> I am tired now, pull up the blanket for I want to sleep'

when Afghans were struggling against Mughal and Safavid rule. Abdul Rahman Baba was a mystic, whose poems meditated on the divine and the yearning of the soul to be reunited with its creator. Such longing is a classic feature of Sufi poetry, and Abdul Rahman Baba's work sits neatly alongside much of the Persian poetry written in Afghanistan and Iran at the time. His contemporary, Khushal Khan Khattak, also wrote on the divine, but his poems were more visceral, dealing with love and war in a more epic style. Khattak led tribal rebellions against the Mughals, and for many he continues to be the model of the Pashtun, at once a poet and warrior. His best poems shoot barbs at dictators and mullahs and sing paeans to the beauty of Pashtun women and (no false modesty here) his own glory as defender of his people. He wrote over 45,000 poems and in his own words 'gave the Pashto language much of beauty that it lacked before'. Pashtun poetry stills exists largely in his shadow.

> The Pashtun name spells honour and glory
>
> Without that what is the Afghan story?
>
> KHUSHAL KHAN KHATTAK

Writers in Dari (in this context usually referred to as classical Persian) have touched on many of the same themes as Abdul Rahman Baba, and form part of the same canon of Sufi poets from Iran. The classic poetic form is the *ghazal* (rhyming couplet) used almost exclusively on the subject of unattainable spiritual love, a subject rich in both secular and spiritual allegory. Best known to Western audiences is Rumi, born in Balkh in 1207. In Herat, the Sufi saint Ansari was a prolific composer of *ghazals* in the 11th century, while 400 years later Jami was a famed poet at the Timurid court. At this time Herat was so richly endowed with poets that Babur joked in his autobiography that you couldn't stick out your

leg in the city without kicking one. The tombs of both still attract many visitors in modern Herat (see p138 and p139).

Afghanistan stakes a claim for the first woman to write classical Persian poetry, Rabi'a Balki, who met a tragic end in 9th century Balkh (p157). Afghans also lay claim to the Iranian national poet Firdausi, who composed his epic *Shah Nama* while court poet for the Ghaznavids in the 11th century. Iranian poets like Jami's contemporary Hafez are equally loved.

Afghanistan's most celebrated 20th century poet is Khalilullah Khalili. He died in 1987 and is buried in Peshawar, next to Abdul Rahman Baba. *An Assembly of Moths* is the best known of his collections translated into English.

Poetry hasn't been able to stand outside the currents of recent history. Khalili was forced into exile after the Soviet invasion, and wrote poems about the resistance. Poets were also targeted themselves – the critic Professor Bahauddin Majrooh was assassinated by Hekmatyar's men in Peshawar in 1988, while as recently as 2005 the popular female poet Nadia Anjuman was murdered in Herat.

Carpets

Afghan carpets are the country's most famous folk art. An important trade item, carpets also have a strong social meaning, and often comprise part of a bride's dowry. The number of carpets a family owns is a significant indicator of wealth, even if they are a poor rural family who can only afford a machine-made carpet from Pakistan.

> Rugs of War (http://sts-dev.anu.edu.au/rugsofwar/) is a great blog about Afghan war rugs run by art historians Nigel Lendon and Tim Bonyhandy.

Northwest Afghanistan and its Turkmen population has always been the centre of carpet production. Carpets are hand-knotted, although modern Belgian wool is preferred these days to that from local sheep. Production is a home industry, mainly run by women who make them when not working in the fields. The most common design is the Tekke, with the rug divided into quarters containing stylised *gul* (flowers). Deep reds and ochres are the primary palette. These carpets are also known under the generic name Bukhara, the main place where they were historically sold for export. The *filpai* (elephant's foot) is another

AFGHAN WAR RUGS

Carpet weaving isn't a folk art stuck in aspic, never veering from centuries-old patterns and traditions. Designs are regularly updated according the needs of the export market – in the 1960s and '70s many designs were aimed specifically at the hippie and Peace Corps market. These variants reached their apogee in the 1980s with the appearance of the Afghan war rug. Adapting the Baluchi convention of depicting plants and animals on their carpets, refugees in Pakistan started to weave in images of war – weapons, tanks and planes. These were sold in Peshawar, then awash with aid workers, spies, arms dealers and lots of money. The rugs caused ripples in the international carpet market, with some dealers decrying the corruption of a famous art form, others applauding the Afghans' innovative adaptation to circumstance. Either way, the carpets were snapped up in a flurry of dollars.

When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, carpets depicted the retreating military columns crossing the border, but as the world lost interest in Afghanistan, so did the carpet dealers. No one wanted to celebrate Mullah Omar in warp and weft. A resurgence only took place after the US routed the Taliban. Shoppers on Chicken St were surprised to find this quickly commemorated in rugs, with American flags and cruise missiles and – some were horrified to discover – depictions of the planes flying into the World Trade Centre on 9/11. They're not to everyone's taste, but the Afghan war rug continues to evolve.

instantly recognisable Afghan design, with its huge medallions that dominate the carpet.

Baluchi carpets frequently have stylised animals as well as flowers, and designs such as the tree of life. Baluchis also produce intricate *gilims*, woven rather than knotted.

The Foundation for Culture & Civil Society (www.afghanfccs.org) holds regular Afghan music concerts in Kabul – see p102.

Afghan carpet production moved wholesale to Pakistan during the war, instantly creating an industry for a country that had never before had one. Even now, a Pakistani carpet is very likely to have an Afghan origin. Now that carpet producers have returned, the success of the Pakistani brand has hampered the rebuilding of Afghan carpet exports.

Music

Afghan music is divided into two main strands – classical (also known as art music) and folk. In the 19th century court musicians were brought to Kabul from north India, bringing a tradition that still heavily influences Afghan music. The instruments used are similar to those found throughout the region and in the Arab and Turkish worlds. Foremost among these is the *rebab* (short-necked lute with waist), the national instrument and particularly associated with Pashtun music. The *dutar* (long-necked lute) from Herat is also prominent. Both instruments are played in the main classical music genre, the Kabuli *ghazal*, accompanying sung mystical poetry with harmonium and *tabla* (Indian tuned drums). Classical musicians train for years under *ustads* (masters), the most famed of whom was Ustad Mohammed Qasim Afghan in the 1920s – who was popularly called the father of Afghan music.

Three Women of Herat by Veronica Doubleday is an intimate portrait of the lives of female musicians in 1970s Afghanistan, a world now largely lost.

Folk music is divided into ethnic genres, but the one thing that unites them all is the *atan*, the so-called national dance performed by both sexes at any celebration. Rhythm is very important in folk music, and there are a number of drums such as the barrel-shaped *dohol*, the goblet-shaped *zirbaghali* and the flat-framed *daff* (or *daireh*). The latter is the only instrument women are meant to play, and is also used in many Sufi rituals.

AHMAD ZAHIR, THE AFGHAN ELVIS

Ask any Afghan to name a popular singer, and it's likely they'll say Ahmad Zahir. A strikingly handsome man with huge sideburns, he revolutionised Afghan popular song but died a tragically young death – characteristics that have led many to claim him as the Afghan Elvis Presley. And like the King, Ahmad Zahir continues to cast a long shadow from his grave.

Zahir was born in 1946, the son of a diplomat. A natural musical talent, he studied classical Afghan and Indian music, but was unusual in writing his own compositions. He was also influenced by Western styles, and was unafraid to mix electric guitars and saxophones with traditional instruments. Zahir's star rose at the right time, when national radio was increasing opportunities for musicians. His golden voice and new musical style touched a chord with Afghans, and as a Pashtun who sang in Dari he became a symbol for the whole country. His dynamic stage performances helped create Afghanistan's first modern celebrity. But he also used a poet's right to criticise power – having praised Daoud in 1973, he later raised his voice at the republic's empty promises, leading to a ban of some of his music. After the Saur Revolution, many of his songs had to be recorded in secret.

In July 1979 Zahir was killed in a traffic accident near the Salang Pass, aged 33. Many Afghans believe that he was actually assassinated by the communist regime. But his music has stood the test of time, and is one thing that a frequently divided country can happily agree on.

Music has suffered greatly in recent decades. Severe restrictions were placed on musicians in the refugee camps and later under the mujaheddin government, and they were often forbidden to play to respect the martyrs in a time of national calamity. The musician's quarter of Kharabat in Kabul was levelled. This anticipated the total ban imposed by the Taliban, when unspooled cassettes fluttered at checkpoints, confiscated from taxi drivers, and musicians had their instruments smashed. Only chants celebrating *jihad* were allowed.

Modern Afghan pop is a genre that flourished in exile, with singers like Farhad Darya and Marwash, while many Afghans returned from exile sporting a love for Hindi pop.

Architecture

Afghan building has harnessed the vitality of the Central Asian steppe to the refinement of Persian culture to produce in its mosques and minarets some of the masterpieces of world architecture.

Much Islamic vernacular architecture tends to be flat and functional, with time and money dedicated instead to religious buildings. Exceptions where form and function blend successfully can be found in the Pashtun *qala* (fortified houses) of the east and south, where each building resembles a mini castle, as well as in the desert houses of the west, with their cooling domes and wind towers. Mud-brick is the building material of choice. The buildings are hard to date, and the viewer can sometimes be forgiven for wondering if a crumbling building was recently abandoned by its owner, or levelled by the Soviets or even Genghis Khan.

The abandoned metal shipping container is the war's legacy to Afghan architecture: pressed into service everywhere as shops, workshops and temporary accommodation, often covered with mud-brick to insulate against the heat and cold.

The mosque is the centre-point of Afghan architecture. The typical mosque consists of a courtyard, portico and prayer hall, facing Mecca. A minaret is usually attached for the call to prayer.

Afghan Islamic architecture really began to take off in the 10th and 11th centuries, with the rule of the Ghaznavids, who built in fired brick. Their successors, the Ghorids, took this to an artistic high with their construction of the Minaret of Jam (pp126-7) and Herat's Friday Mosque (pp136-7). Decoration was plain, and it wasn't until the rise of the Timurids, who drew in influences from across the whole Muslim world, that buildings started to sing with colour. The almost-totally-destroyed Musalla Complex (pp137-8) in Herat was the apogee of Timurid architecture, but even the citadel there was brightly decorated. The Timurids also loved high entrance portals and fat ribbed domes, such as that found at the Shrine of Khoja Abu Nasr Parsa (pp156-7) in Balkh.

Afghan architecture went into a general decline following the Timurid period, as the region's cultural centre shifted east with the Mughals. Until the modern period, most buildings were rather poor copies of Mughal originals. In the 20th century, the westernised King Amanullah tried to import central European classic design to the country with commissions such as Darulaman Palace – not an entirely successful enterprise.

Monuments of Central Asia by Edgar Knobloch puts Afghan architecture firmly in its regional context.

Since then, the story of Afghan buildings has sadly been largely one of neglect and destruction through war. Afghanistan is currently undergoing a building boom, with new buildings hastily thrown up every day. Ugly and modern confections with lots of plate glass and fake columns, they bear little resemblance to any indigenous tradition, and seem more to do with the pretensions of the Afghan nouveau riche. They're often dubbed 'poppy palaces' for the basis of much of the wealth funding the boom.

AFGHANISTAN'S ARCHITECTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

The following is our pick of the architectural highlights of Afghanistan. Of these, the Minaret of Jam has been made a World Heritage site by **Unesco** (www.unesco.org/afghanistan), while the Minarets of Ghazni and the No Gombad Mosque have all been listed as endangered by the **World Monuments Fund** (www.wmf.org).

- Friday Mosque (1200; in Herat) – an astounding Ghorid monument, with four huge portals covered in a blaze of modern mosaic
- Gazar Gah (1425; in Herat) – a Chinese-influenced Timurid decoration, with 30m-high entrance portal
- Musalla Complex (1417; in Herat) – the forlorn remains of a showcase of Timurid art and architecture
- Herat Citadel (1415; in Herat) – an imposing castle with impressive crenellations, huge views and decorative tilework
- Shrine of Khoja Abu Nasr Parsa (1460s; in Balkh) – a stunning blue Timurid ribbed dome and massive portal
- No Gombad Mosque (800–900; in Balkh) – Afghanistan's oldest surviving mosque, with delicate stucco decorations
- Shrine of Hazrat Ali (1480; in Mazar-e Sharif) – every square inch covered in dizzying blue tiles.
- Minaret of Jam (1194; in central Afghanistan) – as remote as you can get, this 65m spire stands as a lonely sentinel in the mountains
- Shah-e Doh Shamshira Mosque (1920; in Kabul) – a bizarre two-storey interpretation of Italian baroque, in lemon yellow
- Shah Jahan Mosque (1647; in Kabul) – an understated white marble mosque from the builder of the Taj Mahal
- Minarets of Ghazni (1099–1151; in Ghazni) – a pair of monumental octagonal-shafted victory towers
- Mausoleum of Ahmad Shah Durrani (1770s; in Kandahar) – a brightly decorated Mughal-style remembrance of modern Afghanistan's founder

Cinema

Afghans love the movies, in particular Hindi and Bollywood films. Afghan cinema itself began in 1951 with the film *Eshq wa Dosti* (Love and Friendship), but it wasn't until the late 1960s and '70s that filmmakers started producing films in any quantity. Although well regarded for such a young industry, local filmmaking was quickly stifled under the dead hand of Soviet censorship following the 1979 invasion, and didn't begin to recover until the turn of the century. The Taliban took to the national film archives with their usual zealous attentions, and only the bricking up of many films behind false walls prevented the country's entire film stock going up in flames.

Phil Grabsky's feature documentary, *The Boy Who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan* (2004), is a touching account of a Hazara refugee family living in the shadow of the destroyed monuments.

The Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* (2001) about an Afghan exile returning to the country to save her friend from suicide met such international acclaim that even George W Bush apparently saw it. Makhmalbaf and other Iranian filmmakers have been instrumental in assisting the revival of Afghan cinema, efforts that helped produce Afghanistan's first post-Taliban movie *Osama* (2003) by Siddiq Barmak – a heart-breaking story of a young girl who has to disguise herself as a boy to work in Taliban-era Kabul – that collected a sweep of prizes at international film festivals. The Afghan diaspora have similarly picked up the camera, with Jawed Wassel's *Firedancer* (2004) about Afghan-Americans, and Farid Faiz's *Ehsaas* (Emotion; 2006) about refugees in the UK.

Afghanistan has also recently found itself as the stage for several international films, including Samira Makhmalbaf's 2003 *At Five in the Afternoon* about a Kabuli girl dreaming of becoming president, and the Bollywood feature *Kabul Express* (2006) by Kabir Khan.

Afghanistan's unlikeliest cinematic outing is 1988's *Rambo III*. Sly Stallone goes *jihad*, joining the mujaheddin to sock it to the Russians, take in a game of *buzkashi* and generally save the day to a constant backdrop of explosions.

SPORT

Afghanistan's turbulent history hasn't bred a nation in love with the quiet pursuits of lawn bowls. Sport is as you might expect it – martial and unruly. If things can be fought, Afghans will fight with them, from dogs and birds to the more esoteric – kites (see boxed text, p58) and even eggs (where dyed and boiled eggs are smashed against each other in a test of strength). But no sport more closely captures the Afghan spirit than *buzkashi*, which is often cited as a metaphor for Afghan society and politics as a whole. The chance to see a match should never be passed up.

Buzkashi literally means 'goat grabbing', and is wild beyond belief. It's something akin to rugby on horseback, where the 'ball' is the headless carcass of a goat or calf, often soaked in water to toughen it up. The *boz* (carcass) is placed in a circle and surrounded by members of the two teams – any number of riders can participate. At the signal, a melée erupts as all try to grab the *boz* and lift it to their saddle, so they can carry it to the winning spot. Only *chapandazan* (master players) ever get the chance to manoeuvre the *boz* free, masterfully controlling their horses amid a thrashing of bodies, hooves and whips. The carefully trained horses are highly prized – 'better a bad rider on a good horse than a good rider on a bad horse'.

For the definitive guide to the Afghan national sport, read *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan* by Whitney Azoy.

Traditional *buzkashi* is played on the north Afghan plains between the autumn ploughing and the spring planting seasons. A more formalised version was adopted by the Afghan Olympic Committee in the 1960s to bring it to Kabul, formalising the rules (banning knives among other things) and team sizes – this was sponsored by successive regimes as a form of patronage. *Tooi* (ceremonial matches) bring great prestige to the host who offer prizes to the most successful *chapandazan*. Mazar-e Sharif hosts the grandest *buzkashi* in Afghanistan, every Nauroz.

Wrestling and boxing are popular, and there is something of an obsession with bodybuilding studios. Many refugees brought a love of cricket back from their time in Pakistan. Football is naturally popular and was one of the few team sports tolerated by the Taliban, who weren't averse to the occasional public execution on the penalty spot as pre-match entertainment. One Pakistani team who played in Kandahar at the time were arrested for wearing shorts, had their heads shaved and were finally deported. Afghanistan has since rejoined FIFA, and played in the first qualifying match for the 2006 World Cup (where they were soundly thrashed by Turkmenistan).

MEDIA

Radio is the most important media in Afghanistan, where it plays an essential role in spreading news as well as entertainment. The national station, Radio TV Afghanistan, started broadcasting in the 1920s and has spent its life under pressure from the establishment of the day, pressure that continues from religious and political interests. The station faces strong competition from new broadcasters such as Arman FM, who mix

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KITE FIGHTING

Of the Taliban's many prohibitions, the ban on kite flying seemed one of the most needlessly cruel. Any visitor to Afghanistan will soon become accustomed to seeing kites flapping above the streets. Kite flying is a favourite obsession of Afghan boys, one recently revealed to the outside world through Khaled Hosseini's haunting novel *The Kite Runner*.

The smallest kites are tiny affairs homemade from plastic or paper scraps and a wire frame. There's no tail to increase manoeuvrability, and fliers can get their kites aloft in the barest waft of air, with patient tugs of the line. Being Afghanistan of course, there's a martial element to the pursuit and kites are fought against each other for supremacy of the skies. In kite fighting (*gudiparan bazi*) the kites' strings are covered with a mix of paste and ground glass. As the kites fly together, the flier attempts to position his kite to rub against the string of his opponent, to cut the kite loose. As the vanquished kite flutters to earth, a mad race breaks out to claim the prize. Trees and power lines take their share of the winnings too. Winter, with its strong winds, is the most popular time for kite fighting, while Kabul hosts a kite-fighting festival around Nauroz (see p95).

Afghan Wire (www.afghanwire.com) provides a daily translation into English of top stories in the Afghan press.

chat with popular Afghan and Hindi pop music. For all this, the most listened-to broadcaster in Afghanistan consistently remains the BBC. Its long-running Dari and Pashto soap opera *New Home, New Life* has been used to tackle issues from health education and land mine safety, to domestic violence and explaining the new constitution. The programme is so popular that some warring factions would call local ceasefires so as to not to miss an episode.

Newspapers have mushroomed in recent years, and there are thought to be over 300 papers and magazines in circulation. Daily newspapers published in both Dari and Pashto include *Anis, Erada* and the popular weekly *Kilid*. Many newspapers are open in the support for one political faction or another, and truly independent journalism is still taking baby steps and is under pressure from many sides.

TV is popular wherever a generator can be found to power a satellite dish. The private station Tolo TV has been a big hit, with shows like *The 6.30 Report* carrying critical reportage, while *Hop* steals from MTV with a mix of chat and music videos. Religious and political conservatives aren't fans, however – criticism of women presenters led to the murder of Shaima Rezayee in 2005, and other reporters are regularly harassed.

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Food & Drink

It's unsurprising that given Afghanistan's location its cuisine has been influenced by – and had an influence on – its neighbours. Dishes are simple but delicately flavoured with spices and dried fruit. When allowed, Afghan appetites are prodigious and meals are served with mountains of rice and bread, to be washed down with copious amounts of tea. Reliance on just a few standard dishes means that travellers aren't likely to remember Afghanistan for the food, but there are some brilliant exceptions worth hunting out.

If you want to recreate your culinary Afghan adventure at home, look no further than the comprehensive *Noshe Djan: Afghan Food & Cookery* by Helen Saberi.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Bread

Fresh Afghan bread (nan) is rather delicious. Made from great sheets of lightly leavened wheat flour, it is baked quickly on the side of a *tandoor* (clay oven). A sprinkling of sesame seeds may also be added. Watching a bakery in full swing, with a finely honed team of bakers rolling dough, slapping it on the inside of the *tandoor* and fishing out the fresh loaves with a hook is a thing of real joy. Shoppers leave with sheaves of bread folded underarm, or draped over the handlebars of their bicycles.

As well as the major Afghan staple, bread is also used as a plate for serving dishes on, as well as cutlery for manoeuvring food to the mouth. The juice-soaked nan left at the end of a meal is called *sabuz,* often served to the poor at the end of the day.

In northern Afghanistan, bread comes in rounder loaves rather than the flat sheets found elsewhere, and shows the Central Asian influence of the Afghan Uzbeks. It's slightly heavier than traditional nan.

Main Dishes

While bread is the backbone of Afghan cuisine, it's closely followed by rice. Any visitor to Afghanistan will eat their fair share of *pulao* – long-grained rice cooked in a huge vat, piled high over a serving of meat and often with a bowl of *qorma* (vegetables) on the side. *Qabli pulao* (often mistakenly called *Kabuli*) is the national dish, flavoured with grated carrot, raisins and almonds. The simplest version is *chilau,* with nothing more than plain rice and meat. *Norinj pulao* has orange peel to add a slight tang. The side vegetables are usually *kachaloo* (potato), often cooked with more meat. If you're lucky you'll be offered *borani* – fried vegetables such as *banjan* (aubergine) served slathered in a yogurt sauce. Yogurt is an important feature of Afghan cooking, and is dried into balls of *krut,* which can be stored for long periods and later reconstituted into sauces. Yogurt sauce is also an accompaniment to *mantu,* a type of ravioli originating from north Afghanistan, which is stuffed with meat. A vegetarian version is *ashak,* filled with leek.

In 2006 the World Food Programme estimated that over six million Afghans did not meet their minimum food requirements, and provided food aid to over 1.7 million Afghans every month.

Soups are popular. *Shorwa* is a thin and often oily broth. You tear pieces of bread into the *shorwa* to soak, and then eat with your fingers. *Ash* is more substantial, with noodles, beans and vegetables added to the mix. Both *ash* and *shorwa* usually have small pieces of meat floating in them for flavour.

Lamb and mutton are the most widely eaten meats. The fat-bottomed sheep is possibly Afghanistan's most iconic animal, carrying a huge wobbling mass of fat on its buttocks that's highly prized and costs more

DOS & DON'TS

- Afghan meals are usually eaten from a communal dish. Always eat, offer and accept food with your right hand – never your left.
- Don't hesitate to ask for cutlery if you're having trouble getting rice from hand to mouth.
- Always remove your shoes before entering the dining area in a private home, or sitting on the floor in a chaikhana (teahouse).
- Don't point the soles of your feet at diners when seated on the floor.
- Beware of accepting food from Afghans who may not be able to afford it – they may only be offering out of hospitality. If the offer is meaningful you'll be asked three times, at which point it's fine to accept, but try not to eat the choicest morsels on the dish.
- Don't eat too quickly – as soon as you finish, your host will stop eating too. Putting your right hand on your heart indicates you've had your fill.
- Never blow your nose during a meal (or in public if at all possible) as it's very rude.

than the animal's meat. You'll most commonly encounter it diced and squeezed between cubes of lean meat in a kebab. These *sikh kabab* are eaten alongside a *kofteh*, a kebab of ground meat. Both come served with bread and raw onion, and a sprinkling of spice. *Chapli kabab* is eaten in the east and south, and is something akin to a Pashtun hamburger.

Snacks

Street snacks are plentiful in Afghanistan, and if you're eating mostly local food they're a good way of breaking out of the standard routine of *pulao* and kebabs. They're sold from mobile stands run by sellers called *tabang wallah*. Tastiest and most filling of all is *boloni,* a fried pancake stuffed with finely chopped vegetables. The commonest filling is potato with onion or greens *(sabzi),* although you can often find *kadu* (squash). Another popular dish is *shor nakhod,* stewed chickpeas with a mint sauce, samosas and falafel stuffed in nan with some salad. *Mantu* is also often sold by *tabang wallahs* as well as *mahi* (fish) deep-fried and sold in sheets of paper.

Desserts & Sweets

Afghans delight in their sweet tooth. Milk-based puddings like *firni* are popular, along with syrupy *jalebi* and a multitude of sticky pastries like *baklawa*.

Local handmade *bastani* (ice cream), flavoured with rosewater or pistachio is delicious, but can be a source of stomach problems (a factory making pasteurised ice cream recently opened in Herat).

Fruit

Fresh fruit is one of the delights of any visit to Afghanistan. Marco Polo was one of the first Westerners to rhapsodise about the joys of sweet and juicy Afghan *tarbuza* (melons) that are grown in vast quantities across the north. The *kharbuza* (watermelons) are just as good. Kandahar is famous for its fat *anaar* (pomegranates), Bamiyan for its *sib* (apples) and the Shomali Plain for its many varieties of *angur* (grape). *Tut* (Mulberries) are grown everywhere, and are often sold dried as an instant energy food. Nuts are also very popular. Fruit is seasonal and arrives in waves as summer and autumn progresses.

DRINKS

There are few things more Afghan than drinking tea, or chai. The national drink is *chai sabz* (green tea), followed closely by *chai siaa* (black tea), both served scaldingly hot in small glasses. Chai is sweetened with heaps of sugar, or is served with a small dish of sweets. In Herat and some other places, chai is sucked through a *ghand* (sugar cube) in a manner similar to that in Iran. Green tea may sometimes be flavoured with cardamom.

Bottled water is widely available, including locally bottled brands such as Zalal and Cristal. Although water from springs and pump boreholes is generally good, you should never otherwise assume that water is safe to drink unless treated. As a rule, Afghans drink very little water, believing that tea is better for them – in winter many shun it altogether, convinced that it's bad for their health. Fizzy drinks can also be found everywhere; Coca Cola opened a bottling plant in Kabul in 2006, a marker on Afghanistan's path to the globalised economy.

The Mughal emperor Babur loved Afghan melons so much that he regularly had them shipped to India packed in crates of ice.

Fruit juices are very popular, including *kela* (banana) and *aam* (mango) when in season. These are often topped with cream and honey, and a few almonds. Alternatively, look for fresh lemonade, freshly pressed from tiny *limu* (lemons), and a sweetened spoonful of sugar.

The availability of alcohol is a contentious subject. In the 1960s and '70s there was small-scale local wine production using grapes from the Shomali Plain, but alcohol consumption has always been frowned upon. The Taliban crushed the contents of the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel's wine cellar under their tank tracks, and it remains illegal for Afghans to drink. However, alcohol has been widely available in Kabul for the international community since the fall of the Taliban. A clampdown was announced in 2006 and supplies dried up, but seemed to be flowing fairly freely again as we went to press. In the north, alcohol smuggling from Uzbekistan – vodka and Russian Baltica beer – is a big business.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The chaikhana (teahouse) is the most common eatery in Afghanistan, in many cases doubling as a cheap sleeping house for travellers. There are usually only one or two dishes on offer; if you just stick to these places you'll quickly become tired of answering the '*pulao* or *kabab*?' question. In larger towns, more formal restaurants broaden the range of Afghan dishes, and there are fast food joints selling local versions of burgers, chips and pizza.

Kabul has a surprisingly broad range of international restaurants, offering everything from Thai and Italian to Croatian. Take care if asking directions to a Chinese restaurant, however – these have become synonymous with brothels.

The Russians introduced tea to Afghanistan in the 19th century – previously only curds were drunk. They also left the word *samovar* (hot water urn), still boiling away in the corner of every chaikhana.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Afghanistan isn't a country designed for vegetarian travellers. Anyone who can afford to eat meat does, so the concept of voluntary vegetarianism is incomprehensible. Be prepared for a lot of self-catering, and enjoy the variety of Kabul's eating scene between trips further afield.

Dished served in chaikhanas will almost always include meat, whether it's buried under a *pulao* or hidden in a bowl of *qorma*. If you ask to skip the meat, you'll just get the same dish with the meat fished out. Eating street food brings a lot more variety, and you can usually find stalls selling *boloni,* vegetable-filled samosas and the like. Few Afghans eat meat every day, even those who can afford to, so eating at someone's house may bring up dishes like *borani* that are rarely served in restaurants. As an honoured guest however, you'll still usually be offered meat.

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EAT YOUR WORDS

Speaking some of the local lingo always helps and never more than when it's time for a meal. Afghans will appreciate your efforts, even if your pronunciation is off the mark, and it might help you get beyond the default *kabab/pulao* (rice with meat or vegetables) dining options. For more information about pronunciation and other language phrases, see the Language chapter, p227.

Useful Phrases

DARI

I'd like ...	*... mikham*
I'd like what he's eating.	*man az ghazayi ke un mikhore mikham.*
I don't eat meat.	*gohst nemikhoram.*
The bill please.	*lotfan surat hesab biyarin.*

PASHTO

I'd like ...	*ghuarum che okherum ...*
I'd like what he's eating.	*da hagha khuakha zema khuakhada.*
I don't eat meat.	*ze ghuakha ne khurem.*
The bill, please.	*bill rawra.*

Food Glossary

Important food terms are presented below in Dari and Pashto, but be aware that most Afghan dishes, from *kababs* to *mantu*, are the same in both languages.

DARI

aam	mango
ab	water
ab-e mive	fruit juice
anaar	pomegranate
angabin	honey
anjir	fig
ash	soup
badam	almond
banjan	aubergine
banjan-e rumi	tomato
bastani	ice cream
berenj	rice
chai sabz	green tea
chai siaa	black tea
gerdu	walnut
ghawa	coffee
gosht	meat
gosht-e barre	lamb
gosht-e gau	beef
gosht-e gusfand	mutton
gosht-e shotor	camel meat
holu	peach
kachaloo	potato
kharbuza	watermelon
khorma	cherry
limu	lemon
lubiyaa	beans
mast	yogurt
moraba	jam
morgh	chicken
moz	banana
namak	salt
nan	bread
norinj	orange
panir	cheese
peste	pistachio
piyaz	onion
tarbuza	melon
tokhm	egg
sabz	vegetable
shukar	sugar
sib	apple
zaradalu	apricot

PASHTO

ashak	noodle soup
bolani	stuffed pancake
chai	tea
da sahar chai	breakfast
da gharmy dodai	lunch
da makham dodai	dinner
dal aw sabzi	lentils and vegetables
dodai	bread
dodai aw kabab	bread and kebab
dodai awe kecha ghuakh	bread with mutton
doreh/roti	food
ghata ghuakha	beef
ghuakha	meat
hagay	eggs
kecha ghuakha	mutton
khuraka feroshi	food stall
kouch	butter
maicha	noodles
manto	steamed meat ravioli
market	market
mashrubat	beverages
masta	yogurt
muraba	jam
polave	steamed rice
polave awe sabzi	rice pilaf and vegetables
qabilie	rice with dried fruits
qahwa khana	tea house
rasturan	restaurant
sabzi	vegetable
samosa	triangular shaped stuffed meat pie
shidy	milk
shorwa	soup
ubuh	water
wrigy	rice

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Environment

THE LAND

Afghanistan's geography has played a key role in its history. It is divided into three main zones – the northern steppe, the southern desert plateau, and between them the massive spine of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The flat north and west open out to the grass plains of Central Asia and the Iranian plateau – well-trodden invasion routes throughout the centuries, this area was also part of the highway for goods and ideas that formed the Silk Road. The dry south has been a hinterland between empires from Persia and the Indian subcontinent, while the great craggy peaks that dominate the country have given refuge to its people, and made it hard for any power to conquer them completely.

'Together we started forward into those bitter cold mountainous parts, and never a road broader than the back of your hand.'

RUDYARD KIPLING, *THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING*

The Hindu Kush mark the westernmost outpost of the Great Himalaya Range, caused by the ancient collision of the Indian and Asian tectonic plates. Two fault lines – the Chaman and Hari Rud – pass through Afghanistan, making it prone to earthquakes. In the northeast, the Hindu Kush rises in a massive knot where it meets the Pamirs, which are still slowly rising. Water from here drains into the Amu Darya to be ultimately lost in the dry reaches of Central Asia; most of the rivers in the Hindu Kush are on the Indian side of the continental watershed, destined to join the Indus in Pakistan and eventually the Arabian Sea. Mountain areas are very prone to flooding in winter and spring. Only the eastern provinces of Kunar and Laghman catch the dying breaths of the Indian monsoon, allowing rich forest to develop.

A key feature of the northern plains are the rounded hills of loess, a fine glacial dust blown in from China. This dust makes the plains extremely fertile, as shown by the annual explosion of plant life during the spring rains.

The south is a land of deserts *(dasht)*. Lack of water here is a perennial problem. Afghans have developed a sophisticated system of *kareez,* or underground irrigation canals, to carry water from the foothills, often over hundred of kilometres. Many *kareez* are several hundred years old. These were once far more extensive, allowing the Ghaznavid empire to flourish in the region in the 11th to 12th centuries. Genghis Khan did huge damage to this intricate irrigation system, and taken with the resulting depopulation, left an environmental scar that the south has arguably yet to recover from.

The name Hindu Kush is supposed to mean 'killer of Indians', a definition first cited by the great traveller Ibn Battuta in 1334.

WILDLIFE

Afghanistan is home to a wide variety of wildlife. Its location means that it straddles both northern temperate and southern tropical zones, as well as being a key staging point for many migratory bird species. Unfortunately, war, habitat destruction and the easy availability of firearms have all conspired to wreak havoc on Afghan species.

Mammals

The most famous of Afghan animals is perhaps the Marco Polo sheep, named for the traveller who first described them to the west. Standing over a metre at the shoulder with a pale grey coat, the rams have tremendous spiral horns that curve up to 150cm in length. It is a mountain species, found in the Wakhan Corridor, but also in Tajikistan, Xinjiang in China, and northern Pakistan. Marco Polo noted that local herders made

SNOW LEOPARDS

The snow leopard (Dari: *palang-e barfi*) is at once the loveliest and most elusive of Afghanistan's large mammals. It is restricted to the Pamir Knot and the high slopes of Badakhshan, possibly extending into Nuristan. It is a much bulkier animal than the common leopard, with large paws, thick grey spotted fur and a long tail that makes it supremely adapted to its mountain environment. Its preys ranges in size from marmots to ibex, although it is also fond of domestic livestock.

This fact is a key problem for the snow leopard's continued survival. Attacks on livestock enclosures often follow the 'fox in a chicken coop' template, with the animal killing more than it could eat. Hunting as a result of predation is the main cause of snow leopard death in the Wakhan. Pelts are generally sold to itinerant merchants, eventually finding their way to Kabuli fur traders. The trade is illegal, and although a hunting ban in the Wakhan appear to be respected by locals, enforcement of antipoaching laws for all species hunted for pelts (also including lynx, wolves and common leopard) remains a problem.

cairns of the horns and bones as landmarks along trails, something the Wakhi and Kyrgyz still do today. There are several other fine mountain sheep and goat species, now mostly confined to Badakhshan and other provinces bordering Pakistan. These include the markhor, with its corkscrew twisted horns, the urial sheep and the magnificent Siberian ibex. Until the war, these were all more widespread throughout the country. The desert-dwelling goitered gazelle – a favoured hunting quarry of the Mughal emperors – is close to extinction in the country.

'There are great quantities of wild sheep of huge size. Their horns grow to as much as six palms in length and are never less than three or four'.

MARCO POLO, IN THE AFGHAN PAMIR

Where there is prey, there are predators. The snow leopard (see above) is only the most renowned. The common leopard remains thinly spread across the country, in hill country, mountains and plains. Similar habitats also support the grey wolf, which exists in pairs or family groups rather than the more commonly imagined large packs, as well as jackals. The brown bear persists in Badakhshan and Nuristan, but its status is unknown. The related but smaller black bear stills hangs on in tiny numbers in Nuristan. Afghanistan once also supported populations of the Caspian tiger (now completely extinct) in the marshlands and forests along the Amu Darya, and Asiatic cheetah, used for hunting gazelle. Small numbers of striped hyena can still be found in the scrub and deserts of the south.

The rhesus macaque is the only primate in Afghanistan and is found in the forests of Nuristan.

Birds

There are over 460 species of bird recorded in Afghanistan, with nearly 200 of those breeding in the country. Species are mostly Palearctic, (from Europe, the Mediterranean and North Asia), with a significant number from the Indian subcontinent.

Commonly seen species include the mynah, rock dove, bulbul and buzzard. In the mountains, ravens and choughs are regularly seen. Large raptors include the black vulture and the huge lammergeier, both of which can be spotted in remote mountain areas. Birds of prey have commonly been seen as an important trade item for some groups, and are captured for hunting or selling on to Arabs.

Afghanistan forms an important corridor for migrating waterbirds, with the south traditionally serving as an over-wintering ground, and species flying north over the Salang Pass in spring and summer. These range in size from small ducks and waders up to storks, although the Siberian crane has not been seen for several years.

Plants

Much of Afghanistan is sparsely vegetated. The mountain slopes of the east are the greenest parts of the country, with a mix of oak, juniper, pistachio and pine forest. All of Afghanistan's forests are threatened; it's thought that in the last 25 years the amount of wooded area has tumbled six-fold to around 0.5% of the country's landmass.

The northern plains are dry and at first glance fairly lifeless, but they hide a fertility that springs into life every April and May with the rains, turning the swathes of land a deep green sprinkled with colourful blooms of wild tulips and gentians. The deserts of the south on the other side of the mountains receive little of this water. Vegetation here seldom stretches beyond camel thorn, mimosa and sagebrush.

NATIONAL PARKS

On paper, Afghanistan initially appears to have a number of national parks and wildlife reserves. Facts on the ground are a little murkier. While several parks and reserves were listed in the late 1970s, no legal protection was ever granted, while any hope of control was gradually eroded by the years of war. These include the Band-e Amir National Park near Bamiyan; the waterfowl sanctuaries of Ab-i-Estada at Ghazni and Kol-e Hashmat Khan in Kabul; and the wildlife reserves of Ajar Valley (also near Bamiyan), the Big Pamir in the Wakhan Corridor, and Registan Desert Reserve in the south.

Band-e Amir, known for the unique geological features that make up its six mineral lakes, became Afghanistan's first national park in 1973. The influx of domestic tourists and their waste pose a particular problem for management of the area, as well as landmines along some approaches to the lakes, although when we visited both a national park office and gatehouse appeared to be under construction and the uncontrolled fishing on Band-e Haibat had largely disappeared.

Afghanistan contains some important wetlands, although these have been severely depleted by the persistent drought of the 1990s. Ab-i-Estada was a major stopping-off point for migratory waterfowl and Siberian cranes, as well as a nesting site for flamingo. On the edge of Kabul, Kol-e Hashmat Khan was a large reed-covered lake that was a favourite waterfowl hunting spot for Afghan royalty and Kabulis alike, but it is now almost completely dry. In Nimroz, Hamoun-i-Pouzak Sanctuary sits on the border with Iran, where the Helmand river disappears into a number of shallow lakes – another major centre for waterfowl. At the time of going to press, Afghanistan was due to become a signatory of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

The New-York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (www.wcs.org) has been leading the way in the Afghan Pamirs, surveying wildlife, working with local communities on conservation issues and lobbying for protected status for the region.

In north Afghanistan, reserves have been proposed at Imam Sahib along the Amu Darya, and the areas of Herat and Badghis provinces bordering Turkmenistan. The latter area used to be home to a population of wild ass (almost certainly now locally extinct), and still harbours small numbers of urial sheep, goitered gazelle and leopard among its remnant juniper forests. Imam Sahib is home to wild boar, otter, jackal, porcupine and possibly Bukhara deer.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

War has taken its toll on the Afghan environment, both through direct pressure on land, such as degradation and direct war damage, and through the complete breakdown of systems of resource management, from the village level up to the government. The environmental problems facing the country are myriad.

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Perhaps the biggest problem has been the large scale clearing of Afghanistan's forests, most notably in the heavily wooded provinces of Nuristan, Kunar, Khost, Paktika and Paktia. While much damage has been done by local populations and passing refugees in need of firewood, clear-cutting by mujaheddin to smuggle timber into Pakistan has caused widespread deforestation, while the huge profits have entrenched criminality. This has made large swathes of these areas prone to soil erosion and flooding. In the northwest, the once productive pistachio forests have also been largely cleared, causing more long-term economic damage. Aid agencies have started reforestation programmes in many areas, but the scale of the problem is enormous, and government control in some of the most heavily logged areas along the eastern border remains sketchy.

The 2003 *Afghanistan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment Report* by the UN Environment Programme (http://postconflict.unep.ch/) is a key starting point for the investigating the current state of the Afghan environment.

Poaching and hunting remains an issue. Birds of prey in particular are caught and sold in the Gulf. The Taliban went as far as building an airstrip in the Registan to facilitate Arab sponsors who came to hunt houbara bustards – a popular pursuit of Osama Bin Laden.

Landmines continue to plague agricultural and urban environments. Pollution is an increasing problem, particularly in cities like Kabul with their growing populations and creaking infrastructure. Access to potable water and sewage systems are both hugely inadequate. The Afghan government, together with UN Environment Programme (UNEP), is attempting to address some of these issues, and has become a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, but there's a long way to go before real progress can be marked on the ground as well as on paper.

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Safety in Afghanistan

No visit to, or time spent in, Afghanistan occurs without risk. The risks are varied and omnipresent: from kidnapping to improvised explosive devices (IEDs), from suicide bombings to land mines, from diseases to highway robbery. The time of the Taliban saw brutal policies in the country that ensured excellent security and very little crime based on a culture of fear and absolute control. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 the prevailing security environment has worsened and remains extremely volatile and unpredictable: a complex mix of insurgency, narcotics, lack of governance, absence of the rule of law and cross-border influence. Large-scale clashes and terrorist attacks continue unabated in parts of the country; even after half a decade of the presence of tens of thousands of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Coalition soldiers.

Despite on occasions being directly targeted and even killed, thousands of internationals have been working for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), international organisations (IOs) and for contractors since that time. Of those, 80% are located in Kabul and less than 5% reside outside of the main regional centres. Few independent travellers make the trip to Afghanistan, most only taking in Kabul, Bamiyan and some of the northern areas.

It also needs to be recognised that even in the halcyon days of the Hippy Trail in the 1960s and '70s, work and travel in Afghanistan was not without risk due to the absence of a strong government, lack of rule of law and the challenges of moving in extremely remote areas lacking communications and medical services. The same can be said for the NGOs and IOs working for the Afghan people during the Jihad against the Russians and later on during the Civil War and the Taliban regime. The fact is, internationals have been working and travelling to Afghanistan throughout its turbulent past and continue to do so: it is how you prepare, present and conduct yourself that will keep you out of harm's way.

Those working for NGOs, IOs or contractors will be afforded some level of security support to them – support which differs greatly between organisations. This is in stark contrast to the independent traveller, who does not have ready access to these support mechanisms. You need to be acutely aware of this in your planning.

A simple equation that encapsulates this chapter is **risk = threat x vulnerability**. A threat is something that can harm you and a risk is the chance of being harmed by that threat and the greater or lesser your exposure to the threat is your vulnerability. There is little you will be able to do to change the threat environment around you. However, there is a great deal you can do to reduce your vulnerability, which can be as simple as not moving on foot at night.

WARNING!

You are the only one responsible for your security, and this should never be delegated to anyone else. This chapter is in no way a substitute for professional, relevant and current security advice, training and information. Moreover this should be a continual process that starts during your planning and is ongoing throughout your visit.

BEFORE TRAVELLING TO AFGHANISTAN

Preparation for working in or travelling to Afghanistan is critical. It is essential to take the time to learn about the country, culture and customs, which will help you ready yourself, not only with your packing, but mentally. For even the most seasoned, risk-savvy, independent traveller Afghanistan can be an assault on your norms. Your preparation will help to keep you out of trouble and allow you to hit the ground at least walking, without wandering around looking lost and vulnerable upon arrival. For example, the value of understanding cultural sensitivities (a matter of security if you get it wrong and end up insulting an Afghan) or learning some key Dari and Pashto words and phrases cannot be underestimated.

Turning to what you pack, assembling a quick run (or grab) bag is an extremely valuable addition to your luggage. This is to be kept with you should you have to leave in a hurry or lose everything else. The important thing is to think through what your essential items are in an emergency.

Suggested things to put in your grab bag are: passport, personal documents, medications, water, small amount of food, Leatherman type multi-tool, warm covering, medical kit, mobile phone charger and toiletries.

Anyone travelling to Afghanistan, regardless of the length of the visit, needs to arrange for comprehensive insurance for both medical and personal property. Not all insurers will insure for travel to Afghanistan and those that do may exclude or limit many essential items due to war/terrorism risks. For those working in Afghanistan ensure you check with your employer as to the extent of your coverage and take out additional insurance if required. Finally, make sure you read the fine print!

Training Courses

For those planning to spend extended periods in Afghanistan and its remote areas a generic security training course is highly recommended. There are a wide range of courses available:

AKE Group (☎ +44 (0)1432 267111; www.akegroup.com) Their 'Surviving Hostile Regions' five-day course is broken down into four areas; Awareness, Medical, Self Sufficiency and Planning and are conducted in the UK, US, Australia and Sweden. The course fees are pricey at UK£1790, but can be offset by discount offered on insurance premiums following the completion of the course. AKE also offers a weekly comprehensive security information update on all provinces of Afghanistan on a subscription basis of UK£1200 annually.

Centurion Safety (☎ 44-1637 852 910; www.centuriansafety.net) Popular with journalists working in high-risk areas; conducts a three-day 'Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid Training for Aid Agencies' in the UK and US. The course is a little pricey at UK£750, but that's an all-inclusive fee. The former UK Royal Marine instructors take students through topics including first aid, vehicle safety and convoy routines, radio procedures and mines, and booby traps.

RedR Australia (☎ 613-9329 1387; www.redr.org) Conducts a four-day 'Personal Security and Communications' course for AUD$800 for organisations and AUD$1000 for individuals. Topics covered include evacuation, hostage and arrest, culture and personal responsibility, and trauma and stress. Course fees are inclusive of food and accommodation. RedR International runs similar courses in the UK, US and areas where NGOs are operating, including Sudan and Sri Lanka – unfortunately not Afghanistan.

The highly useful ECHO Generic Security Guide for Humanitarian Organisations can be downloaded from http://ec.europa.eu/echo/pdf_files/security/echo_generic_security_guide_en.pdf.

INFORMATION RESOURCES

Up-to-date, accurate information and analysis of the prevailing political and security environment is going to be your greatest asset for travelling or working within Afghanistan in order to remain situationally aware. Things on the ground are fluid and can change extremely quickly, so you always need to know, to the greatest possible extent, what could happen and what you are going to do if it does. It is good to augment your latest news with general, historical, humanitarian and reconstruction information, which will help you put things into perspective.

A list of good news sources can be found on p19. A shortwave radio is also recommended, and some stations such as the BBC World Service broadcast on FM in Kabul (see p84).

Most NGO and IO workers will receive daily security updates from their organisations' security advisors or from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO). To further enhance this it behoves you to establish a network of local security information wherever you are planning to work or travel, whether that be local staff or international colleagues.

Security briefings

Currently there are no organisations offering regular security briefings to independent travellers. For registered NGOs, there is a weekly security briefing in Kabul held by **ANSO** (coordinator@afgnso.org; briefing at Maple Leaf Inn; 3pm Thu). The **UN Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan** (UNMACA; ☎ 070 450027; Wazir Akbar Khan, Kabul) provides land mine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) safety briefings when requested to NGOs and contractors, where they also provide participants with extremely useful handouts.

THE AUTHORITIES

The Afghan National Security Forces are developing slowly, with the assistance of the international community. The Afghan National Police (ANP) are the most visible force; you will see them at check points, border crossings and airports. Corruption is a major issue within the ANP, with many supplementing their meagre income of less than US$50 per month with criminal activities. Internationals have been targeted for *baksheesh* (bribes) after dark at check posts in the provincial centres; however, they back down with a threat of a call to the Police HQ or an Embassy. Little should be expected in terms of assistance from the ANP. Their capability to investigate or prosecute crimes is extremely limited, and they are preoccupied with fighting the insurgency.

SECURITY ACRONYMS

ANP – Afghan National Police

ANA – Afghan National Army

NDS – National Directorate of Security (the Afghan spies)

Those working or travelling within Afghanistan may have an encounter with the Afghan National Army (ANA), often seen with the ISAF forces, being mentored by them. As with the ANP, corruption and involvement in the drugs trade is an issue. It must also be noted that both criminals and insurgents have been known to steal and wear ANA and ANP uniforms to conduct their operations; therefore, it is unwise to automatically assume that everyone in uniform is a legitimate member of the security forces.

In the past ISAF has supported both Afghan and international civilians with *in extremis* and medical support, including vehicle accidents and protection during riots. As an independent traveller you are unlikely to be able to contact them for assistance. Should they be mobilised they would not ignore a request for assistance but their own operational commitments and political caveats may preclude them from intervening.

COMMUNICATIONS

Communications underpin personal security management. As a minimum, anyone planning on working or travelling in Afghanistan should purchase a SIM card from a local provider or if possible set their international SIM to roam. This is a necessity not a luxury. Although the Afghan networks can be unreliable, with frequent call drop outs or inability to get a line out, they are the primary source of communication and as good as it gets. Coverage is improving continually with most provincial centres and main routes having access. It should also be noted that following a significant security incident such as a bombing, the network is swamped with people trying to locate others.

To make the best use of your communications ensure you develop a 'check in' schedule with your colleagues or fellow travellers. Also ensure you have the relevant emergency numbers for the areas you will be travelling in programmed into your phone.

Many NGOs will also operate a VHF and HF radio network; make sure you get training on how to use it. They also may operate Thuraya or Iridium satellite phones.

TYPES OF RISK

The types of risk in Afghanistan are complex and overlap heavily. Many security incidents are also 'dressed up' to make them look like insurgent acts; however, many are perpetrated by criminals, warlords or narcolords to avoid the attention of the international military forces.

Insurgency

Despite the attempts of the government and international forces to break the back of the insurgency, some analysts conclude that capability and sophistication of the insurgents is at its highest point since 2001. The insurgency is by no means homogenous, with two main groups: indigenous Afghan insurgent traditionalist groups including the Taliban and Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG); and global fundamentalist, Al Qaeda–inspired terrorist organisations with their roots outside Afghanistan. Their objectives are more or less aligned: to overthrow the elected government and return Afghanistan to an Islamic Emirate according to strict Sharia law, without foreign influence. There are clear links between them and the criminal and narco elements, as a means of supporting themselves and their operations.

MORE ACRONYMS

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

BBIED – Body Borne IED (suicide vest)

VBIED – Vehicle Borne IED

SVBIED – Suicide VBIED

DBIED – Donkey Borne IED

The insurgency is extremely active in the Pashtun Belt; however, at times this spills over into Kabul. IEDs, BBIEDs, VBIEDs, rocketing, assassination, ambushes and propaganda are some of the tactics they are employing in their jihad – with a great deal of knowledge-sharing going on between groups in Iraq and Afghanistan. The challenge that is faced by both the government and the international community is that without reconstruction it is almost impossible to bring about enduring security and vice versa – currently both are eluding them.

Although independent travellers and NGO workers have been targeted by these groups on an extremely limited scale, it is clear that their primary target for the time being remains the Afghan Government, ISAF and Coalition forces. Some NGOs believe that there has been a blurring of lines between their humanitarian activities and the operations of the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). They feel that with the invasion of the 'humanitarian space' by gunned-up army types building schools and digging wells their vulnerability has increased through the perception of NGOs in turn being involved with the military.

Mines and UXOs

With its war-torn past Afghanistan remains one of the countries in the world most highly contaminated with land mines; 32 of the 34 Afghan provinces are affected by mines. They are not the only explosive remnant of war that account for, on average, three Afghans a day being killed or injured: UXOs include any munition that has been fired or dropped and has failed to detonate, from a hand grenade to a missile. UXOs can be found anywhere from rooftops to backyards or the desert and are equally as lethal as land mines.

The economic and social cost of the mine and UXO problem in Afghanistan is massive. Large tracts of farming and grazing land are

unproductive due to the threat that lies beneath the topsoil, and provides a barrier to the land's reconstruction. Moreover, the direct cost of demining and associated activities runs at about US$100 million per annum. The sheer number of amputees in Afghanistan is a morbid reminder of the social cost of the problem, not forgetting the widows and orphans they create.

To learn more about land mines in Afghanistan, visit the OMAR Land Mine Museum in Kabul (p93).

The Afghan NGO Organisation for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) produces a series of guidelines for land-mine awareness and safety:

- Stay away from areas such as military bases, battlefields, destroyed houses, unused roads and paths, wells, the banks of irrigation canals and culverts.
- When travelling by road, stay on the road even when taking a toilet break. If in doubt, turn back – land mines are laid to be invisible.
- Red and white marks indicate an area marked by a mine-action programme. Red marks show mined areas; white marks show that the area has been cleared and is safe.
- Talk to locals and observe local behaviour to find out about safe areas. Locals often develop their own signs for marking mined areas. These include rocks laid across a path, piles of stone or bundles of sticks.
- If you face a mine or UXO, stay calm. Turn back and slowly follow your footsteps to return to a safe area, shouting a warning to those with you. Mark the mined area with a line of rocks and inform the local authorities and/or demining agency.

Crime

When out and about don't dress extravagantly, keep your cash stashed, your jewellery covered and your mobile phones in your pocket.

With the majority of Afghans living in extreme poverty the security situation further impedes their ability to earn a basic living. The security forces are preoccupied with the insurgency and crime has flourished, aided by lack of capability and corruption within the ANP. The criminal threat is amplified by the questionable success of the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration) programme, whose goal was to remove warlord power structures and weapons. Hundreds of what are now called 'illegally armed groups' operate freely across the country, with arsenals of light and heavy weapons, therefore highway banditry, car jacking and protection rackets are rife.

By comparison to the local population, any international in Afghanistan is extremely affluent and is a potential target of at the very least petty crime.

KIDNAPPING

Kidnapping remains a threat for internationals in Afghanistan and is perpetrated by two groups: by criminals for ransom and by insurgents as part of their operations. Criminal groups have been known to sell hostages to the highest bidder, usually the insurgents.

Although numerous Turkish and Indian road construction and telecommunications engineers have been kidnapped, some later being beheaded by insurgents in the south, most other cases have been criminally inspired. An Italian NGO worker and three UN elections workers were kidnapped in Kabul and later released in 2005 – it was never confirmed if a ransom was paid.

Any kidnapping will be preceded by reconnaissance and planning. It is essential that you do not set patterns of movement and timings. This is particularly important for those working in Afghanistan, going to the office at 8am and returning to your guesthouse at 5pm on the same route everyday could indeed make you a target. Vary your movement and remain situationally aware.

Opium

The 2006 opium crop reinforced Afghanistan's infamous accolade of being the world's largest producer of opium; in fact, the country produced 92% of the global crop or a staggering 6100 metric tons. Some of it will be processed into heroin in Afghanistan, but most of the processing is done in neighbouring countries, and then trafficked all the way to the streets of Europe and Russia. It is Afghanistan's largest export and unfortunately, due to a lack of natural resources, the country's economy is reliant on its production. Expensive attempts at eradicating the crop have been made – in terms of financial resources expended and the deaths of Afghan security forces clashing with farmers – all with little impact. However, it is clear that on the opium issue, the insurgency, warlords and some government officials are happy to cooperate in the name of mutual gain.

Afghan prisons have a growing foreigner population, almost exclusively of drug traffickers. Many are lured by the easy cash; however, increasingly, more are being intercepted by the authorities.

Although the opium poppies look beautiful and many internationals would like to have their picture taken in a field, 'opium tourism' is a dangerous activity. Most fields are guarded by armed men to protect the crop when it is growing and being harvested. It may be a lethal case of mistaken identity if you are confused as potential poppy eradication surveyor earmarking annual earnings for destruction. Moreover anti-personnel mines are known to have been planted in fields to also disrupt eradicators. To learn more about opium in Afghanistan see the boxed text, p196.

MOVING AROUND

There is no doubt that you are most vulnerable in Afghanistan when you are moving around, with the majority of security incidents occurring when travelling by road. Therefore, your movement in Afghanistan should be planned, methodical and necessary.

Driving in Afghanistan requires nerves of steel in order to dodge the donkey carts, overloaded trucks and total absence of road rules. Accordingly it is advisable not to drive yourself; most NGOs employ drivers to not only drive but also maintain the vehicles. They have a distinct advantage when it comes to the language and local knowledge for navigation. However, like you, it is important your driver knows what to do in the event of an emergency.

The ANP will usually arrest the drivers involved in a motor vehicle accident at the scene, regardless of how minor the damage is – it's the closest thing the not-at-fault driver gets to insurance.

Some NGOs prefer to use low profile, local-looking vehicles rather than large 4WDs plastered with their symbols – while others not only display their logos, but also fly their flag. The threat of the environment you are working in will often dictate which option to take, and what works in one province won't necessarily give you the same amount of protection in others.

Likewise your ability to use local transport, whether that is taxis, Millie buses or rickshaws will be influenced by the prevailing security situation. Ensure you travel in at least a pair and keep in regular contact with your colleagues or fellow travellers. The decision to transit through high-risk areas should not be taken lightly, like the Kabul–Herat run by bus, where insurgent and bandit check points are commonplace, and this reinforces the need for the latest information.

Even if you never leave Kabul, you will certainly encounter checkpoints, mostly manned by the ANP; however, ISAF and the ANA may also be present. Comply with their instructions, listen to what they

want, don't argue or insult them and if possible stay in the vehicle. Using some Dari or Pashto usually works well to break the ice if there is a problem. If you are approaching a checkpoint at night make sure you dim your headlights and switch on the interior light so the security forces can see who is in the vehicle. Note also the money being palmed by officers from every other passing vehicle – the sort of corruption that dismays ordinary Afghans and helped pave the way for the Taliban in the 1990s.

It is extremely important that your vehicle does not come too close to any ISAF, ANP or ANA convoys. These conveys are often the targets of suicide car bombs using the modus operandi of ramming into their vehicles and detonating themselves. Therefore, after several verbal and visual warnings they will shoot into any vehicle moving too close to them with their large mounted machine guns. Do not attempt to overtake these convoys – regardless of how slow they are moving.

When you check into your accommodation orientate yourself with the exits, bunker and fire fighting-equipment. Don't be afraid to move the bed away from the window either.

EMERGENCIES

Having a plan for what you will do in the event of an emergency is critical, whether that be a vehicle accident or being in an area when the security forces are attacked by a suicide bomber. Although you can never plan for every eventuality, you need to remember a few guiding principles. If you are involved in an incident, do what you can at the scene in the immediate aftermath to save loss of life and prevent injury. After the situation has stabilised and the security forces have taken charge pull back to a safe area and call your emergency contacts.

If you are not involved in the incident, do not rush to the area with your camera as a 'war tourist'. You are exposing yourself to extreme risk, not only with nervous security force personnel potentially shooting you, but also secondary attacks from insurgents such as bombs that are detonated to inflict casualties upon the responding forces. Stay away from these areas: ISAF and the Afghan Security Forces will handle the situation. The same applies if there is shooting, rocketing or armed clashes, which are more common at night; stay inside your accommodation and away from the windows. If you are working for an organisation, this is where you will have to comply with the security procedures – for example moving to the bunker. As outlined earlier, independent travellers do not have such support.

Medical Emergencies

The health services in Afghanistan are continually improving with the assistance of organisations such as the ICRC and Emergency. However as an independent traveller or worker, your aim should be to get stabilised and evacuated as soon as possible, whether to home, Islamabad, Delhi or Dubai, should something happen to you. Cleanliness, lack of medical supplies, intermittent power, out-of-date medication, over-prescribing and medicating for additional profit and the questionable credentials of some medical staff are all reasons why immediate evacuation is your best option. Those Afghans who can afford it also seek treatment in neighbouring countries. For more information see p221.

HOW TO UNDO ALL YOUR GOOD WORK IN A NIGHT

Good reputation and behaviour are serious considerations in a 'shame and honour' culture like Afghanistan. It continues to be one of the most conservative Islamic countries in the world, underpinned by an ancient tribal structure, with most of its population living in poverty. Although you will see Westernised Afghans in Kabul, they represent a tiny fraction of the population. The economic divide between expats and such Afghans and the majority of the population who live below the US$1-a-day poverty line consolidates the opinion of Afghans that expatriates earn excessively large amounts of money only to spend it on immoral pursuits that serve to corrupt their nation. Since the fall of the Taliban, Kabul has been flooded with influences from the West that are abhorrent to Afghan culture such as alcohol and prostitution. No one really knows how much was here before the influx of internationals – however the perception among Afghans is that they brought it with them. Afghans are not allowed to enter the expatriate restaurants in Kabul or purchase alcohol, and internationals are openly asked by Afghans 'Do you go there for whiskey and sex?' Although this is clearly not the case, it serves to reinforce the negative perceptions. The Kabul scene grows by the month fuelled by well-paid contractors, diplomats and UN workers. Behaviour such as drunkenness in public, insulting Afghan guards and continued support of Chinese restaurants, most of which are fronts for brothels, make it hard to insist that Western culture is not having a negative effect on the country. Most work in Afghanistan to do good, but as one Afghan commented, 'We know that you come a long way from your family and put yourself in danger to help us but why do you have to insult our culture while you are doing it?'

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Working in Afghanistan

The fall of the Taliban saw a flood of international aid workers, contractors and business people come to Afghanistan. Most are based in Kabul, where there is a thriving expat scene. Numbers are more thinly spread elsewhere, with the international presence in the south and east continuing to shrink.

Particularly if you're working in the humanitarian sector, working in Afghanistan can be stressful. Hours are long (six-day weeks are usually the norm), and security concerns can restrict your movement. Each organisation has its own arrangements – UN agencies tend to have the tightest security, with blanket restrictions and regular 'lockdowns'; other agencies have a more flexible and nuanced response to local conditions. While it's important to take their security advice extremely seriously, don't let it make you paranoid. Either way, bring plenty of reading material, as nights can be long if you're not allowed out. See the Safety in Afghanistan chapter (p68) for more information relevant to those working in the country.

ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int) and DevNet (www.devnetjobs.org) are good places to look for jobs in the development sector in Afghanistan.

If you're working with an international organisation, check the training and orientation you'll receive prior to posting. The **Aid Workers Network** (www.aidworkers.net) is a useful resource, with a good forum and advice on everything from careers to training courses. The **British Agencies Afghanistan Group** (www.baag.org.uk) has an excellent downloadable briefing pack for those working in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately the influx of foreign workers has had some negative consequences. For more on the attitudes of some Afghans to expats, see the boxes 'How To Undo All Your Good Work In A Night' (p74) and 'The Kabul Bubble' (p82).

It's thought that there are currently around 7000 foreigners working in Afghanistan, plus 16,000 US Army personnel and 18,000 NATO forces.

TOP TIPS FOR WORKING IN AFGHANISTAN

The experience of living and working in Afghanistan can be a very personal one, so we asked a variety of expats to give us some hard-earned gems of advice:

- 'Learn about Afghan culture and society before you arrive. There is no substitute for respecting and understanding the context you work in. Do some homework to understand what will and won't work in Afghanistan. Listen to Afghans about what they want: this shouldn't be about us.'
  LA, Kabul
- 'Don't fall in the trap of getting stuck in Kabul, make sure you use some of your downtime to explore this amazing country.'
  Anonymous, Kandahar
- 'If you value your clothes, always self launder (plus it gives you something to do on the weekend!). But never use the local washing powder, although it makes a good toilet cleaner. Never blow your nose in public – it's considered very rude. Finally, always pack your iPod.'
  SC, Lashkar Gah

REPORTING FROM AFGHANISTAN *Christina Lamb*

'Going inside' was what we called it in the old days. When the Russians were occupying Afghanistan back in the 1980s, most of us covering the war were based in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, divided from where we wanted to be by the jagged mountains of the Khyber Pass.

By foot, donkey or motorbike, we would travel back and forth across those mountains with the mujaheddin, dodging landmines and Soviet helicopter gun-ships. Sometimes we would darken our faces with dirt and a potassium mixture to blend in with the fighters; sometimes we would be disguised in burqas. We lived on stale *nan* (bread), occasionally supplemented by rice from some villagers or okra fried in diesel oil. When you were inside you longed to be out, but when you were out, you spent all your time trying to get back in.

There were no satellite phones then so it was impossible to file copy while inside Afghanistan and crossing the border meant being out of contact for weeks. Even when back in Pakistan, it was so hard to get an international phone line that most of the time the only way to file was through the telex operator in the Public Call Office who required regular *baksheesh* (tips) to keep him punching out all the holes in the ticker tape.

Once I got a visa from the communist regime to cover the war from the other side. That was little better. Copy had to be sent through the one-armed telex operator at Hotel Kabul who doubled, somewhat alarmingly, as the taxi driver, his one black-gloved hand swinging back and forth from the gear-stick to the steering wheel.

These days it's much easier. The major cities of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad all have mobile phones and internet, and some guest houses such as the Gandamack Lodge even boast wi-fi.

But other aspects of reporting Afghanistan have got harder. For a start, journalists have become targets. Afghanistan has not reached anywhere near Iraq levels but there have been a number of kidnaps and murders of correspondents.

The new highways between Kabul and Kandahar and Kabul and Jalalabad have slashed journey times but roadblocks have once more become a feature. Some are Taliban looking for government sympathisers; others are bandits or even police demanding bribes. Some of us have started wearing burqas again on the road.

Reporting Afghanistan has also become more depressing. Back in the 1980s Afghanistan was a romantic story – the Spanish Civil War of my generation – a David and Goliath struggle by these men from the mountains with their plastic sandals and old Lee Enfields turning back the most powerful army on earth. That first soured in the early 1990s when the Russians had left and the mujaheddin all started fighting each other. The moment the last Soviet soldier stepped back across the Amu Darya, Afghanistan dropped off the news agenda anyway.

That all changed of course with 9/11. In the ensuing fight to oust the Taliban, it was once again easy to identify who were the good guys and who were the bad. The Taliban after all were one of the world's most repressive regimes and most of the world was on the other side. But five years on from BBC reporter John Simpson's infamous liberation of Kabul, much of the goodwill towards Westerners had already dissipated. In large swathes of southern Afghanistan, propaganda from the resurgent and newly media-savvy Taliban combined with some overenthusiastic NATO bombing, had convinced many to see peacekeeping forces from the US, Britain, Canada and elsewhere as the occupiers.

One thing that has not changed in 20 years of reporting Afghanistan is the difficulty in finding the truth. Afghans are a captivating people, with their noble stance, generous hospitality and proud history, and a love of beauty that has even the most brutal warlord tying plastic flowers to his Kalashnikov. But to say Afghans are prone to exaggeration is like saying the French quite like wine.

The number of times I would arrive at a mujaheddin camp in the late 1980s to be told that I'd just missed them winning a major battle or shooting down seven Soviet Migs. Strangely the wreckage was never anywhere to be found. Similarly in June 2006 I went with some British soldiers into a village in Helmand where they assured us there were no Taliban then directed us straight into an ambush.

People often ask if it's a problem being a female correspondent in Afghanistan. Strangely, it's not at all. Warlords and commanders generally seem to regard Western women journalists as some kind of asexual species. We also have a distinct advantage of being able to go and sit in the women's quarters, giving us access to half the population our male colleagues often miss.

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- 'Things to bring: a very warm duvet or sleeping bag for the winter, carbon monoxide detectors for heaters in the winter so you don't die in your sleep. Bring lots of intensive moisturiser, but not lightweight stuff – something like Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour Cream. In the summer, a pumice or equivalent for feet and especially heels which can get dry and cracked.'
JN, Kabul
- 'Nothing is never what it seems in Afghanistan and if we (the visitor) can understand 20% of what is really going on in any one scene (politically, culturally and so on) we are doing pretty well. Instead, chill out and spend your first couple of months just listening and observing.'
Anonymous, Kabul
- 'Try to learn enough language to do the basic greetings at the very least. It takes down barriers quickly and serves to humanise you to Afghans. They love to hear you try and are very forgiving with their language. Lots of people bring great big clunky hiking boots as their main shoes. Try to remember to bring a lightweight pair of shoes that slip on and off easily. It makes it easier getting in and out of houses and offices.'
JK, Faizabad
- 'The key tip is to approach Afghanistan mentally prepared for a truly surreal experience and adventure. You'll certainly get sensory overload here and it's normal to get depressed occasionally and ask the proverbial 'what the hell am I doing here?' question. It's vital to have a set of friends outside of the work field that you are involved in. Try to break out of the UN, USAID/American, NGO, security firm or French/Euro speaking cliques. Otherwise, you end up talking shop all the time and find it hard to let go.'
Anonymous, Kabul
- 'Get out on the street to walk, see, feel, experience. The bazaars and streets have so much to offer, but many expats will never take the risk for fear of what might happen and never for a moment thinking what they might have missed.'
JV, Bamiyan
- 'Try to make local friends and visit as many local restaurants and places as possible. Ask plenty of pertinent questions with your Afghan friends, but realise there is a huge cultural and economic gap. Just because someone speaks English well and dresses in Western clothes does not mean they share all of your values and beliefs.'
JR, Kabul
- 'Don't bring too many things – pretty much any Western products are available. Shop locally instead of just going to the PX supermarkets. The only advantage they have is the alcohol they sell, and that's now restricted to International Security Assistance Force people.'
SKL, Kabul

Essential Field Guide: Afghanistan by Edward Girardet and Jonathan Walter is an excellent primer for those staying long-term in Afghanistan.

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