

Tehran → Fuman → Masuleh → Shah Moalem (3102 Meter) → Ramsar → Rudbarak → Dizin → Tehran

July 10 - 12, 2003

Since we had three free days with my friend Fred. G. who was coming to Tehran for a week-long visit, we could go on a fairly extended tour.

I wanted the tour not to be too demanding and especially not in a very hot region. I had heard of “**Shah Moalem**” and **Masuleh** of course is one of the most famous picturesque villages of Iran. The **Gilan**¹ province in the North of Iran where **Masuleh** and **Shah Moalem** are located is, during the summer, especially in its mountainous regions, one of the cooler regions of the country.

A combination hiking / sightseeing tour in the region seemed appropriate for the occasion.

Just to make sure, I went a week before our scheduled trip to “scout” the area with my friend Hamid. N. The region was indeed beautiful and the **Shah Moalem** peak seemed a reasonable climbing challenge. So the decision was made.

Thursday morning, Fred and I were packed and ready to go at exactly 6 a.m. We took it easy, enjoying the scenery and stopping a few times on the way to have tea and even a nap! We reached **Fuman** early in the afternoon. It is a lovely small town full of trees and greenery. It is famous for its special cookies called **Kolouche** which are baked in small shops on the side of the main street. There are a few varieties of which delicious especially when hot and the town is very relaxed as is the



The Kolouche looks good too

From here we went straight to Rohani's whom I had met during

(much better than the hotel: Clean big rooms, kitchen with stove and refrigerator, shower with hot water and especially a very friendly landlady and family.) A little later we drove towards **Shah Moalem** just to see which way we would take to the summit the next morning.

Masuleh. We settled in our “suite” at Mrs. my reconnaissance trip the week before



Masuleh street scene

Shah Moalem is a massive mountain. It can be climbed from the **Masuleh** side or the **Khalkhal**² side. It is so massive in fact that it almost divides with surgical precision two very different climates:

- Extremely humid and misty on the Masuleh / Gilan side.
- Dry on the Khalhal / Ardebil side.

Right now the **Masuleh-Khalkhal** road that you have to take to go from **Masuleh** to **Sebleh**³ is really barely practicable even with a 4 x 4 vehicle even in clear weather!

¹ North Iranian province bordering the Caspian Sea, Ardebil, Mazandaran and Zanjan provinces. Capital City: Rasht. Main rice and tea growing region of Iran.

² City on the other side of Shah Moalem in Ardebil province. Made infamous by Ayatollah Khalkhali who was known as the butcher of the revolution.

In fact it was so misty and the visibility was so poor on the way up that we decided not to take any chances and returned to **Masuleh**.

The next morning there was fortunately slightly better visibility; so we managed just to get to **Sebleh** by car and started climbing at about 8:30.
The way up is straight forward with a little rock climbing and waterways thrown in to brake the monotony of the climb.

At abt. 11:40 we reached the summit at 3102 meters.

Here we met two young hikers that had come from **Rasht** from the **Masuleh** side. We took a few pictures together and started the descent back to **Sebleh** which took less than 2 hours.
We were lucky to have been able to make it to **Sebleh** because the climb from the **Masuleh** side would have been most probably impossible for us due to the very heavy fog limiting the visibility to only a few meters. - Our friends from **Rasht** must have known the way by heart!

We rested for some time at the **Sebleh** tea house and then drove back to **Masuleh** where we stayed a little to pack and chat with our landlady and her family.
In the late afternoon, we took off to **Ramsar** via **Fuman** and of course another **Koluche** pit-stop.



View of hotel's gardens

Ramsar, which is in **Mazandaran**⁴ province used to be the pearl of the Caspian. We stayed at the Old Hotel Ramsar which somehow reminds me of "Last year in Marianbad"⁵. It is in a poor state but one can still feel the charm and the old world beauty that it once had.

There are natural hot water springs right on the hotel grounds and the sea is also close by. Unfortunately if you want to use the hot water springs you had better ask the attendant to clean the pool first and if you want to swim in the Caspian it is best to rent a small boat to take you away from the dirty beach to where the water is clean.

Almost every Iranian of my generation has fond memories of **Ramsar** and its beautiful hotel with its dépendances⁶ and stone lions that are still there and on which we all had our pictures taken when we were boys.
We had a good night's rest here and on to **Rudbarak**!

Rubarak is the base camp of the **Alam Kuh**⁷. It is in the main mountaineering area of Iran and because of its green and rocky mountainous terrain is known locally as Iran's Switzerland.

³ Tea house on the Khalkhal side at 2185 meter. One of the standard starting points of the climb.

⁴ For our purpose this adjacent province, also bordering the Caspian Sea, is similar to Gilan. Some historians believe that human civilization has emerged from the southern coast of the Caspian Sea = Gilan and Mazandaran.

⁵ Classic French film by Alain Resnais.

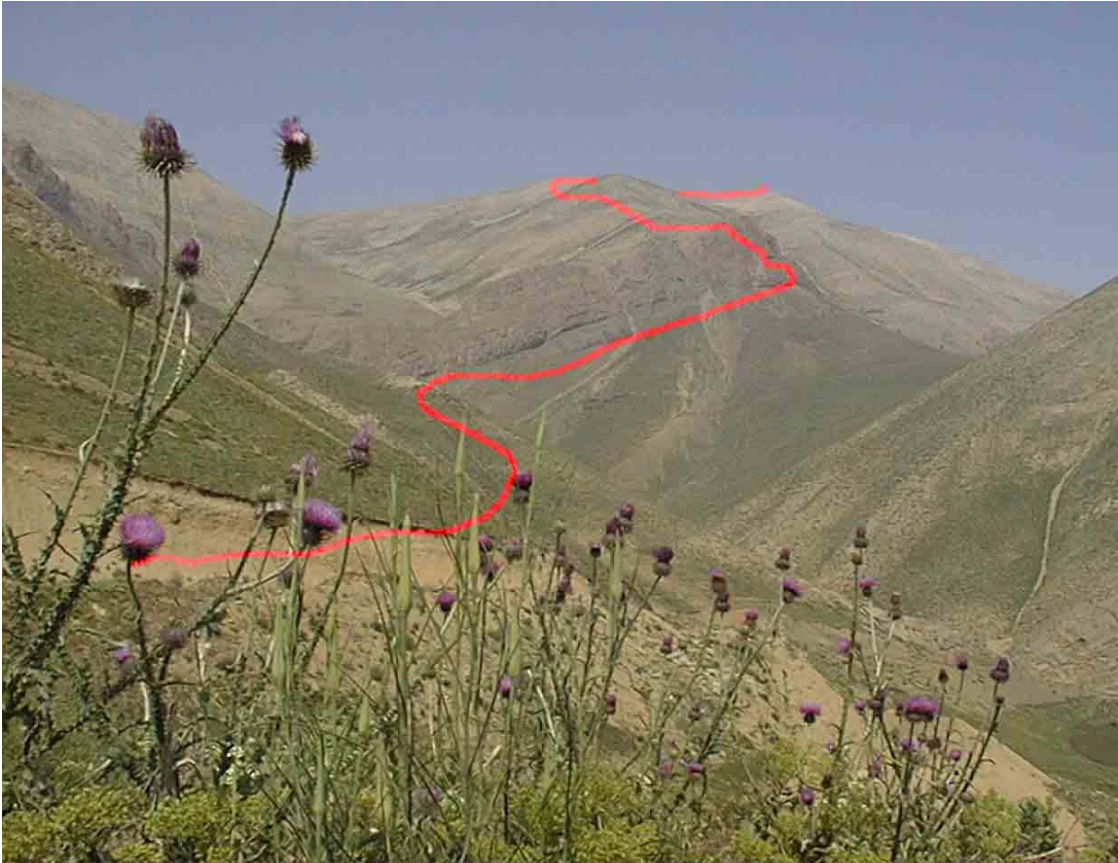
⁶ Sounds better than "outbuildings".

⁷ At 4850 meter it is the highest non-volcanic peak in Iran. There are about 14 peaks above 4000 meters in the area!

We went to visit Masht Safar who used to be the mountaineering's federation rep in the old days (before and during the revolution 25 years ago). It was a pleasure to see him, to learn that his son Rassul who was our climbing partner in the old days with my cousin Feri A. was part of the Iranian team that had made it to the Everest summit and to find Fred's and my notes in Masht Safar's souvenir book.

With all these memories of **Ramsar**, **Rudbarak** and **Alam Kuh**, I couldn't stop feeling old but strangely enough it was not an unpleasant feeling.

We drove back to Tehran via the ski area of **Dizin** where we stopped to pay a visit to our friends and have a "cass-croute"⁸ of bread, yoghurt and onions – excellent!



Shah Moalem from Khalkhal side (redline showing our approximate route up)

Sincerely,
J-M Houtcieff

⁸ Sounds better than "snack".