



The statistics:

One day, 24 hours, 1300 km!

I wanted to go to Garmeh for two reasons:

- First because my friend and occasional¹ hiking partner Fred G suggested organizing a desert trip for the next time we would go hiking together.
- Second to find out about this mysterious inn, run by a strange Iranian gentleman married to a French lady, lost somewhere in the desert...

My friends Hamid N and Massoud G, my wife Nini and my dog Tommy came on this tour. Tommy has a great time just riding in the back of the ole Patrol, so we take him along on these outings whenever possible.

We missed my habitual hiking, skiing and sports partner Marco D. I felt a little guilty for not taking him along and each person scolded me for being so selfish when we started off but after a few hundred kilometers under our belts, everybody agreed that five persons would have been just one too many on such a long journey. No big deal for Marco since we did the reconnaissance work for him and he can join us on the next voyage sometimes this spring inshallah!

I took the long way:

- From Tehran to Semnan², we took the way via Firouzkuh³ just to enjoy the winter scenery on this scarcely traveled road.
- From Semnan, we took the old, partially unpaved desert road around an air force base whose surroundings are off limits. Everybody is suspicious of you around there. Whenever we crossed with some kind of official authority⁴ we had to put them at ease and consciously reduce the tension that our mere presence aroused. It is difficult for locals, officials or not, to imagine why somebody would want to go through the desert unless it's for hunting – yes, there is wildlife – or on some kind of fishy spying mission.

The search for uranium story seems to be the going rumor these days.



In blue the way to, in red the way back

After a couple of hours driving in the desert, we had our first out of modern times encounter. It was with a herd of about a hundred camels crossing the road!

The old caravan days being over, they were just grazing in the area and would be used for their milk and meat just like vulgar sheep.

Still with just a little imagination we were anywhere from 50 to 5000 years back!

¹ We try to go on a hike or tour about twice a year when he travels to Iran

² Old Iranian City on the northern edge of the Dasht-Kavir

³ Old Iranian city on the Tehran – Caspian road. Famous for its cold climate

⁴ Here it was military personnel and game wardens

I like camels for their nonchalant and noble composure. With their stoic behavior they have a lot to teach us.

The Dasht-Kavir⁵ is not a desert with endless dunes as one would imagine. As a matter of fact there are very few sand dunes in the whole of the desert.



I remember looking especially for them in 1972 when I wanted to photograph a “real desert”. After much effort, I only found a few dunes between Yazd and Tabas⁶. I had trouble framing the photographs so that one could only see the dunes and the sky.

In the Dasht-Kavir, one hardly ever has the feeling of being totally lost. It is quite unlike the Sahara where, I imagine, all you can see is sand and sky. Here mountains are always near or far - so one doesn't lose one's bearings. The desert is just striking because of the feeling of immensity it gives, the subdued, mostly ochre

and green delicate hues which contrast with the incredibly deep blue sky.

In some places the landscape is lunar: vast stretches of cracked hilly terrain covered with sand like, fine earth. Small shiny stones, that seem not to belong there and that appear to have fallen from space, are scattered here and there.

We finally arrived in Garmeh at about 5 pm. It is a beautiful oasis type hilly old village full of palm trees.

Maziar's⁷ inn is out of this world. The feeling is of a Persian Indiana Jones movie!

Thanks to “Lonely Planets”⁸ the place is already known among foreign tourists for whom it must be literally “out of this world”. As a matter of fact there was already a group of Australian tourists who had reached the place by car via India! A young French couple who seemed totally entranced by the place were the other guests! No Iranians apart from us.

The place is charming, clean and comfortable enough.



Nini at the center of the Inn

Maziar himself adds to the atmosphere with his looks that are timeless Iranian. He is good looking and has long hair and a beard. He wears traditional Iranian clothes. What makes it work is that he is very hospitable, genuine and dedicated to “the cause” of his hotel.

⁵ Salt desert in north central Iran. It consists of one large and several small basins situated within a mountainous area. The desert's Persian name, kavir, signifies a saline swamp or a muddy expanse of land topped by a hard crust of crystallized salt. The weight of a human or a large animal traversing the crust, which is about 10 to 100 mm thick, can cause it to break, causing those who fall through to become trapped in the briny quagmire below the surface. Because of this dangerous feature, people rarely attempt to cross the Dasht-e Kavir, and existing rail and road routes pass no closer than its northern rim. Much of the desert remains unexplored. (Microsoft Encyclopedia reference Library)

⁶ Beautiful old and unspoiled Iranian city which, unfortunately was partially destroyed in an earthquake about 30 years ago

⁷ The gentleman that owns and runs the famous inn

⁸ New wave travel guide books

Apart from running the inn, he organizes archeological visits, tours in the desert⁹, camel and mountain bike rides (you provide your own bike but fortunately you don't have to bring your own camel!) or anything else fairly reasonable that the guests may ask of him. I even saw paragliding among the activities offered on his website (see address in under "Links" below)!

We saw little but enough to know we want to go back. We didn't even get around to visit the fortress for which the place is known. I hope I'll find the time to go back there soon.

We left Garmeh only 2 hours after arriving and drove straight back to Tehran, this time via Nain¹⁰! We were back home almost exactly 24 hours after we had left.

J-M Houtcieff

PS.

I had almost finished the report but Massoud G went back there this weekend. He brings back a few photos and some comments:



- Maziar and his brother, who was also there, are both musicians and play old traditional Iranian instruments, mainly the daf¹¹.
- The food is very good and you feel as though you are invited in a local home and not like a hotel guest.
- The price for Iranians is 15000¹² Tomans per day, per person including meals. For foreigners it is 30 Euros.
- There are some dunes less than an hour's drive from Maziar's.



Maziar with daf

Links:

<http://www.ateshoni.com>
<http://nasehpour.tripod.com/peyman/id41.html>
http://www.ecotour-iran.com/glance_central.html
<http://tehran.stanford.edu/imagemap/semnan.html>

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Friends greeting!

⁹ Its always better to enter the desert proper with a guide because of the treacherous terrain

¹⁰ Another old Iranian city south of the desert, famous for its carpets

¹¹ The daf which is a very big frame drum goes to pre-Islamic. It is the main instrument of Sufi music.

¹² About 15 Euros