

# DESERT TRIP

**Firouzkuh Semnan Damghan Moaleman Jandagh Khor  
Mesr Chupanan Anarak Nain Ardestan Natanz**



Again my faithful and now even older friend and touring partner Fred G was traveling to Iran and I would have the pleasure of being his host. It would be, as usual, a good opportunity for an outing. We had the choice between yet another ski tour, a diving jaunt to Kish or a desert trip which we had been thinking of for some time.

For some reason Kish was promptly discarded. We chose the desert trip over the skiing tour also because our friend Mauro T, who having skied almost daily during four months training our national skiing and snowboarding teams, rightly had it “up to here” of skiing, snow and probably anything white, except skin!

The mysterious desert always exerts an attraction anyway and of course with the “Patrol” doing most of the “hiking”, it is much less “work” than a skiing tour. So the desert option easily won!

I mainly wanted to photograph sand dunes which are quite rare in Iran even though most of the land in Iran is desert or semi-desert. I thought it would be interesting to also visit some landmarks on the way.

During both nights of the tour we stayed “chez l’habitant”: at our guide’s in **Mesr**<sup>1</sup> and at the Imamzadeh<sup>2</sup> in **Chupanan**<sup>3</sup>.

I thought the four of us<sup>4</sup> relaxing together would be more convivial and in a way even more comfortable than staying at the so called five star Iranian hotels which were not available on this route anyway. More than anything we would be closer to the people and it would be less of a hassle for packing, unpacking, etc...

I had taken my small portable speakers for the iPod; Fred had some Swiss biscuits, chocolates, etc... and of course we all took sleeping bags; so we roughed it up with some degree of luxury!

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<sup>1</sup> **Mesr** is a small village about 30 km, from **Khor**. Its main attractions are the sand dunes around it, the fact that you can stay at the local guide’s place and that if you wish he can organize camel rides which he regularly does for his associate Maziar in Garmeh (see <http://www.amanieh.com/pdfs/desert.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> Place of worship, doubles as simple lodgings. Literally it’s a shrine for an Imam’s descendent

<sup>3</sup> Nice Imamzadeh to spend the night, great dunes field, poor restaurant!

<sup>4</sup> AliMo N, Mauro T, Fred A and yours truly

### **Day 1 Firouzkuh Semnan Damghan Moaleman Jandagh Khor Mesr**

Our first “actual” stop was **Semnan**.

I chose to drive via **Firouzkuh**, which is a slightly longer way but more scenic and has very little traffic. The panorama is especially beautiful after a snowfall in winter. Each of the cities we passed through, including of course **Firouzkuh**, would deserve at least a day’s stay but we were pressed to make it to the desert so we passed **Firouzkuh**<sup>5</sup>.

*Tower of Jam*



#### **Semnan**

is one of the oldest Iranian cities dating back to the days of the Avesta, thus at least 1000 BC!

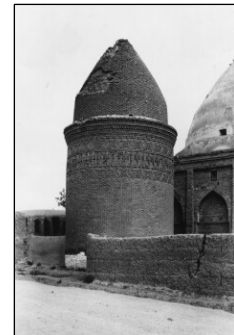
Apart from the 470 sites<sup>6</sup> listed by the “*Cultural Historical Heritage Organization of Iran*”, enough I guess for a week’s stay, **Semnan** has kept a very nice peaceful provincial atmosphere seldom found in other Iranian cities. You actually feel the continuation of the long Iranian history in this city and province that remained far from Arab Invasions but was at the crossroads of many other civilizations forming or having a major role in the building of the Persian Empire. Ironically, it is simultaneously off the beaten track. You really have to want to go to **Semnan**; case in point it is not listed in the “*Lonely Planet*” guide – yet another quality!

We quickly visited Masjed Jameh, Masjed Imam and Darvazeh Arg and off we were; **Damghan** in the same province was awaiting us.

#### **Damghan,**

although the second city in **Semnan** Province it is actually at least as famous if not more than **Semnan** itself, probably because the oldest mosque (Tarikhaneh) still in existence in Iran is there. It dates back to the first century after the arrival of Islam in Iran. It is believed by some to be much older having been a fire temple prior to the advent of Islam in Iran. I personally subscribe to this theory for three reasons:

- It is often the case with old monuments
- The material used and the grandeur or lets say the substance of the columns, volumes and especially the materials used are reminiscent of the pre-Islamic era
- Not logical at all but the place gives you a pre-Islamic feeling



*Left to right: Tarikhane, Pir Alamdar detail, Chehel Dokhtar*

Some guides state **Damghan** as being 7000 years old. Is it important?

I did not bother to double check although my feeling is that anything older than three or maximum four thousand years in Iran is difficult to document.

We visited the Tarikhaneh Mosque, Borj Pir Alamadar famous for its Kuffic inscriptions; it dates back to the Seljuk period (11<sup>th</sup> century AD). Imamzadeh Jafar and Borj Chehel Dokhtar.

From here we drove directly into the desert, first stop “**Moaleman**”. I understand people come around here for bird watching. We were just looking for sand dunes but we didn’t find any; so we moved on further South to **Jandagh**.

<sup>5</sup> **Firouzkuh** was the capital of the Ghurid’s empire. The “Tower of Jam” from the Great Mosque (AD 1194) is reputed to be the most striking among the seventy or so erected during the empire in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. With its harsh winters, it is one of the coldest towns of the country

<sup>6</sup> I imagine the figure to be for the whole province but still...

Here we visited the Sassanid fort which has somehow become part of the village. The fort is in ruins but parts of it are inhabited and in some places it is difficult to tell which wall or entire room is part of the old fort or has been subsequently added on to accommodate some of the locals. So much so that the outside structure is difficult to separate from the add-ons. Not a very good example in upkeep of an old architectural site. It saddened me to see the place in such a desolate shape.

In the evening we finally made it to **Khor**. We rested at Mr. Rafei's<sup>7</sup> who was very hospitable and after dinner late at night drove to **Mesr** where we would spend the first night. We arrived late, woke up the local guide and went to sleep in a fairly clean room that he let us. I couldn't wait for the morning to go to the promised dunes.

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## **Day 2 Mesr Khor Chupanan**



*Our host in Mesr with chefieh*

Traveling late at night and tired we only guessed that dunes were there. And indeed here they were right next to us, practically across the street. Only a few hundred meters separated us from them. So, early in the morning before breakfast we went straight on a photography spree which lasted a few hours. When we came back the empty place we had left was full of girls! A school group coming from Isfahan had come to see the place and have lunch there.

Desert tours in particular and excursions off the beaten track by chartered buses in general are popular with the younger generation. The girls and the accompanying staff from the school were very pleasant in all respects. I couldn't help thinking what tremendous progress especially in the provinces our young generation had made. The young ladies also were delighted to find two foreigners in our group: Mauro with his extravagant look and Fred always ready to strike a conversation. AliMo also tried his luck with the girls but with two foreigners on hand, he didn't stand much of a chance!

We packed and drove back to **Khor** to have a very late brunch at our host's Mr. Rafei.

Rush, rush, rush to our next dune site in **Chupanan** where we would also spend the night.

Having "booked" our room in the Imamzadeh upon arrival we headed to the dunes up the hill. It was still a good hour till dusk. We took off our shoes and just went wandering and taking pictures. The thin air and the feel of the sand on the soles of our feet put us in a contemplative mood, the out-of-the-ordinary scenery did the rest: We were now really on a "trip"!



*From left: AliMo sandbathing, Mauro and Fred*

<sup>7</sup> Unofficial host to various wanderers passing through Khor. He offers food and lodging

There was a roadside restaurant not too far from our “Imamzadeh hotel”. We went there before dinner time to reserve a table pretending it was a first class European restaurant. The lady<sup>8</sup> running the place probably thought we were crazy but I insisted on making a proper reservation in due form just for the fun of it. The food, as it turned was a far cry from “European style” or any style!

We spent the night very comfortably at the Imamzadeh. The next day would be our return to Tehran. No more dunes but still some great sights were awaiting us!

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### **Day 3 Chupanan Anarak Nain Ardestan Natanz – Tehran**

**Anarak** is a pretty small town on the way to **Nain**. Slightly off the main road which helps preserving it. The people were very friendly but couldn’t help us find a restaurant / teahouse because there weren’t any.

The few remaining Asian Cheetahs live in the area.

### **Nain**

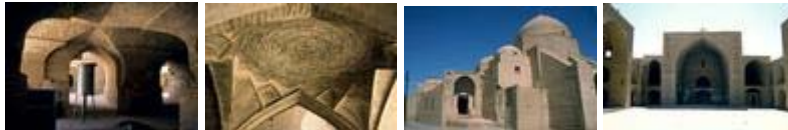
is of course one of the famous towns surrounding the great Iranian desert<sup>9</sup>. It is very famous for, among other things, its very delicate carpets. I read in one of the online encyclopedias that one of the oldest mosques in Iran is here! But by the looks of it the one in Damghan is older.

A Sassanid castle, two mosques and a husseniye<sup>10</sup> are other places of interest to visit.

**Nain rug**



### **In Ardestan**



we visited the Friday Mosque, above.

*“The current form of the mosque, consisting of a four-iwan courtyard surrounded by arcades, represents the successive work of several building periods. The earliest elements suggest an original pre-Seljuk hypostyle mosque, into which early Seljuks inserted a dome chamber and adjacent iwan (dated 1158 and 1160 respectively). However, the arcades as they stand cannot be dated to the pre-Seljuk original, as they include domed and barrel vaults that display wide variety in brickwork, height, and shape, the supporting piers also ranging in size and shape.*

*The iwans other than that of the sanctuary appear to be either Safavid construction or reconstruction; an inscription in the northwest iwan cites restoration in 1539.*

*The earliest stucco fragments, found in the western corner of the courtyard, have been dated to the end of the tenth century. The interior of the dome chamber and iwan are extensively covered in plaster. The dome and zone of transition are articulated with simulated brickwork; the iwan vault is uniquely faced with a complex stucco design of interlacing arabesques. The mihrab exemplifies skilled stucco carving, and may represent Mongol restoration” Arch Net Digital Library.*

### **Natanz,**

our last stop before Tehran is now famous internationally even among people not interested in Iran’s history because our very much in the news Atomic Research Facility<sup>11</sup> is there. I would have liked to visit it but unfortunately its off limits!

AliMo was driving when we passed by the facility and I almost had a heart attack when he stopped the car to get a better look. I shouted and we moved on. With two foreigners, my strange name, two laptop computers plus cameras and a GPS on top to crown the whole thing, had we been stopped we would still be under interrogation!

Instead we contented ourselves with the visit of “Masjed Jameh” and Masjed Mir” and the tomb of Abdul Samad.

<sup>8</sup> Exceptional in Iran to see ladies running such restaurants patronized mainly by truckers

<sup>9</sup> Dasht Kavir

<sup>10</sup> Mosque type of place reserved for the mourning of Imam Hussein ceremonies

<sup>11</sup> Our “friends” call it **Irans Special Weapon’s Facility**. May god help us with so many friends!

We drove back to Tehran with over 2000 km added to the aging Patrol's odometer.

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### **Links**

<http://www.answers.com/topic/firuzkuh>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firuzkuh>

<http://www.islamicarchitecture.org/architecture/minaret-types.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semn%C4%81n\\_Province](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semn%C4%81n_Province)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avesta>

<http://www.anarak.com/index.asp>

[http://www.geocities.com/ms\\_anaraki/](http://www.geocities.com/ms_anaraki/)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naeen>

[http://archnet.org/library/places/one-place.tcl?place\\_id=1473](http://archnet.org/library/places/one-place.tcl?place_id=1473)

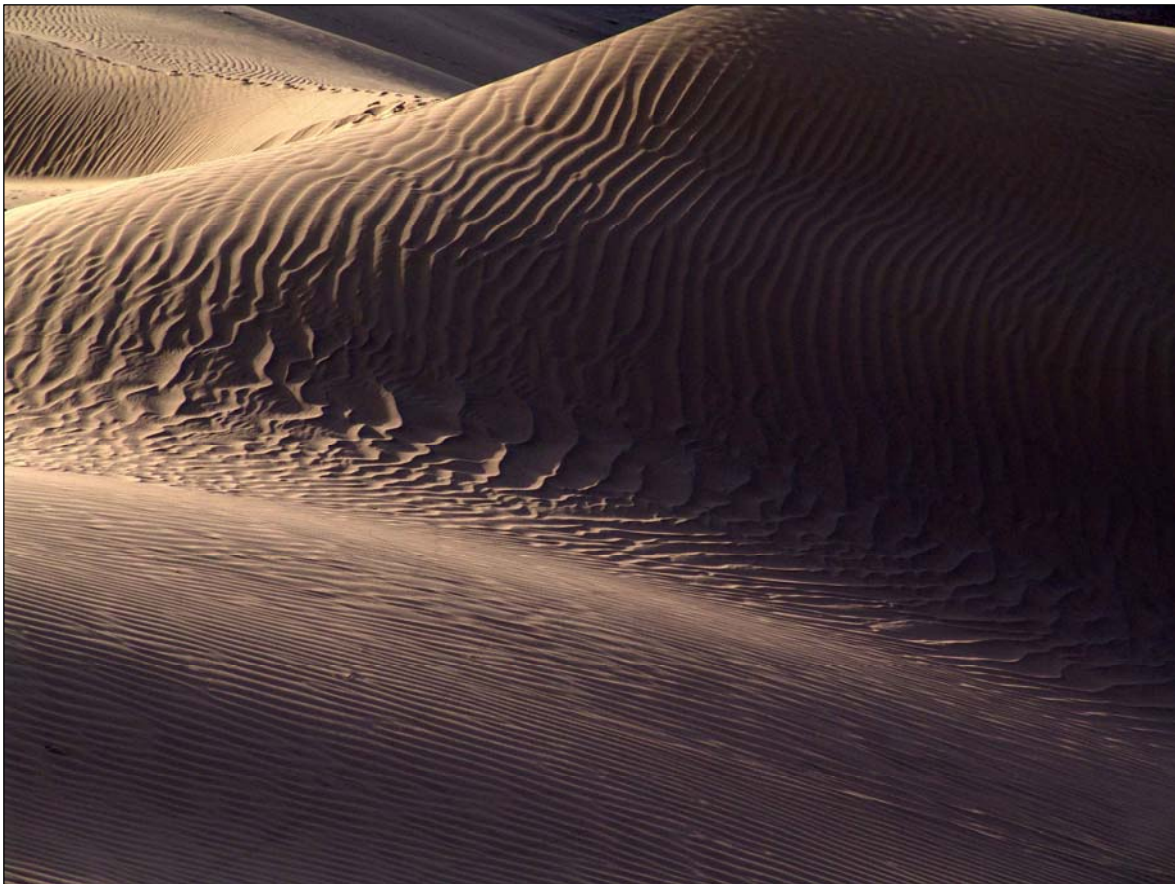
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natanz>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dasht-e\\_Kavir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dasht-e_Kavir)

### **Thank you**

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J-M Houtcieff