

Khor / Malek Shah / Sijan (Tassua)

March 1, 2004

Tassua, which is the eve of “Ashura”¹ one of the most important Shiite religious mourning days, this year fell on March 1. Both Tassua and Ashura are public holidays in Iran; even ski resorts and sports clubs are closed.

- Imam Hussein, martyred on the day of **Ashura** is, I think, the most admired religio-political hero in Iran. Having sacrificed his life, against all odds, for his beliefs he represents the true independent spirit. As such he has a vast following among religious and even non-religious Iranians.

- **Khor** is an almost forgotten ski area about 80 km (by road and of course much less as the crow flies) from Tehran off the Chalus road. It has only one old ski-lift and is only open on weekends: Thursdays and Fridays here. It is at the end of a large valley in the Central Alborz Mountains².

- **Malek Shah** is the peak in the range of mountains South-East of the Khor ski slope.

- **Sijan** is the closest village to the Khor ski slope but is not on the way to it. We went there (by mistake) very early in the morning before starting our tour and returned there after the tour to see and participate in the Tassua mourning ceremonies.



Our tour comprising the climb of the Khor piste and then the climb of the Malek Shah is very similar to the Abak tour. You first climb the piste for about one hour, just like in Shemshak and then have to lose a little altitude (again just like before climbing Abak) before beginning the climb of the Malek Shah. It took us about 3.5 hours - again about the same as for Abak. The mountain itself is also similar to Abak in size, shape and vertical drop – so much for similarities!



It's not so late in the season but due to the unusually hot weather this year there was little snow on the piste. On the way back at abt 1 p.m. it was so hot and the little snow left so soft that I had a lot of difficulties skiing down because I kept “sinking in”. Marco had fewer problems and blamed my poor technique in this type of snow while, I of course think it has more to do with my skis and weight (abt 90 kg including the rucksack)!

Still we could ski down all the way to the car parked at the base of the closed ski lift.

We rested just a little and drove to Sijan (abt. 6 km) to attend the Tassua ceremonies.

¹ Anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein on the 10th of the lunar month of Muharram (approx. October 680 AD). It was also a very effectively symbolic date used during the Islamic revolution. It played an important role mobilizing the masses for the huge pre-revolutionary demonstrations

² The main mountain chain in Iran

Sijan is a large size village. The most impressive thing, other than its people which were very welcoming and also good looking, is that the water in the “joub”³ is “drinking quality”! During the 10 days Muharram mourning period the village fills up with its sons and daughters who live mostly in nearby Karaj or Tehran but have kept their roots here. The people that I talked to are rightly very proud of their village and conscious of keeping it clean and safe from the polluting Tehranis like us who “attack” the area during the summer.



As soon as we arrived, at abt 2:30 in the afternoon, we were taken into the Husseinieh⁴ and served lunch. Iranians, especially in the villages are very hospitable. We were treated as guests and as such received special treatment.

It is a tradition to serve meals during the mourning period. I was told that over 800 people were served before us that day for lunch. From the pots and pans that I saw and the number of cars parked outside which blocked the entrance of the village, I don't think it was an exaggeration.



It is very difficult to describe the Tassua-Ashura mourning ritual because although it is officially a mourning ceremony it has all the attributes of a village feast: the rhythmic mourning motions with



the accompanying sound of winds and percussions in the procession, the meals and of course the Tazieh⁵ which is the religious theater culminating the ceremonies. Most important the mood is that of a village feast with absolutely everyone participating.



Some people, like my wife and to a certain extent even myself, have problems with all the sacrifices (sheep being beheaded) that are taking place about every 50 meters on the procession's route but in the village atmosphere context, if one doesn't look too closely, I did not find it disturbing. Quite to the contrary I found it proper that the richer villagers were offering all this meat to the rest of the population!

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Photos:

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Map of the route (in blue) from Tehran to Khor.

Malek Shah (inset: Marco D. near the top)

Page 2 in Sijan top left to right:

Entrance of shoemaking shop,

Young boy with “chains” used for self flagellation,

Young girl with child,

Old man holding the “Alam”⁶,

Sheep being sacrificed in front of the procession

Links:

<http://medweb.uni-muenster.de/~siamak/german/damavand.html>

www.ashura.com

<http://www.fabonline.com/Articles/IMAMSz3TheLifeofImamHussein.htm>

<http://www.chris-kutschera.com/tazie.htm> (in French)



³ Open canalizations very common in Iranian villages, towns and cities. Unfortunately usually with sewage water running

⁴ A permanent or temporary building mainly used for the mourning ceremonies of Imam Hussein

⁵ It existed under other forms before Islam, but that's another story

⁶ The Alam is the very big (in this case abt 90 kg.) and ornamented “banner” of Imam Hussein