

# Kish Island

October 2006

I first heard of Kish in 1975, maybe 1976, or latest 1977. It was sometime before the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the unrests which started at least a year earlier. In fact, there was no sign of the forthcoming revolution at all.

At the time, Kish had become famous for its unique luxurious hotel, its casino and the fact that it had a landing strip that could accommodate the Air France Concorde supersonic airplane<sup>1</sup> full of girls provided courtesy of Madame Claude. Whether this last plan was actually carried out by the Shah's "high-class" pimps<sup>2</sup> before "all hell broke loose" with the revolution, I can't say for sure but the rumor was certainly well entrenched.



All of this on a small - it is still missing from most maps – backward, isolated, Muslim, almost Arabic island lost in the Persian Gulf<sup>3</sup> not too far from the Iranian coastline.

Kish was, for all practical purposes, only for "The Happy Few", in reality the "ugly few" I am tempted to say.

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<sup>1</sup> Mehrabad, our main and at the time only international airport in Tehran couldn't!

<sup>2</sup> I looked in two American thesauruses for an alternative word but pimple, pomp, primps, pimply etc... were listed instead. Pimp didn't exist. I can't believe how puritanical and intellectually dishonest the American establishment really is!

<sup>3</sup> Or is it the Arabic Gulf, or the Arabo-Persian Gulf? Frankly I don't understand why we made such a big fuss when somebody called it the Arabic Gulf; I never saw anybody in Geneva get up in arms because someone "dared" call their lake Lac Lemane instead of Lac de Genève.

Neither the lower and middle classes of the country nor the poor or more accurately, the very poor locals, of course, had access to the luxurious hotel and much less to the casino or the real or fictitious girls of Madame Claude.

Actually, the indigenous population, whether it had access and could it afford it or not, still wouldn't have wanted to go – and neither would I; I felt uncomfortable enough at the Persepolis Arts Festival<sup>4</sup> where I had to go as our national TV's photographer during my military service.

Each thing in its right time and place.

With this state of affairs in the mid seventies and the amazing fact that la crème de la crème “au chocolat” was even proud of it, it is remarkable to hear some people still being surprised that there was a revolution in our country!

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After the establishment of the Islamic Revolution, we did not hear of Kish for sometime. I guess we were too busy with the revolution itself and then the war to bother.

In the early nineties, under the presidency of Mr. Rafsanjani whose one of many titles was “Sardar Sazandegi<sup>5</sup>”, someone realized that it would be better to try to use the place and the infrastructure that was already there than let it go to waste.

It was decided to build it into part a Free Zone and part a “Tourist Paradise”. Sort of a Bahamas in the Persian Gulf, I guess. A small Iranian Dubai many thought or hoped. This time it would be open to the public, with an Islamic twist and of course without the casino, the Concorde and the Madame Claude's girls!

The ideas “Islamic” and “Tourist Paradise” being in conflict, notwithstanding the inherent talent of us Iranians for doing something and pretending its something else, this was a difficult task to pull off.

So, the place became half a shopping destination for consumer goods that were brought into the mainland semi-legally and half a vacation destination for Iranians that were fairly well off but could still not afford a vacation in Europe, Dubai or even Antalia.

A far cry from any kind of worldly paradise!

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Thirty years after the maiden (no pun with Madame Claude intended) flight of the Concorde on Kish Island, I had mentioned to my wife Nini that it might be a good idea to go to Kish for a couple of days and also take my secretary, her daughter, my driver and our servant for a couple of days vacation together.

This idea slowly became a promise and then an obligation.

At one against five, I had no chance of calling off the trip.

In fact, other than the forced transformation of a conversation into a promise and then into an obligation, courtesy of Nini, I really didn't mind...

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<sup>4</sup> Another contributor to the revolution. It was a super “avant-garde” festival that would have had trouble finding an audience even in Paris or London, let alone in the Shiraz of the seventies

<sup>5</sup> Sardar is an old Persian title with military connotations with a similar meaning to that of general. Sazandegi is construction. “Sardar Sazandegi” thus can be translated into “the great builder”

So, we booked our flights with Kish Air and three rooms in the best hotel of the Island and on Wednesday October 6 during the month of Ramadan

*Ahmad, Hamzeh, Nini, Azin, Ms. Valizadeh*

**Parvin V**, my secretary

**Azin**, her daughter of thirteen

**Ahmad**, my driver

**Hamzeh**, our young house servant and part time office boy

**Nini and I**

were off to Kish Island; all of us for the first time. For Hamzeh, it was his maiden flight.



The “Kish Air” plane was clean and much better maintained than what is common on our other domestic lines. It also left on time.

Actually, it took off a couple of minutes ahead of schedule!

I read later that Kish Air was the most punctual airline in the world, which given the small size of the company doesn’t mean that much but still it is praiseworthy. The service also was better than what one is accustomed to.

We had started on the right foot or in this case wing...

The flight from Tehran takes about one and a half hours. We arrived early in the morning in a fairly large, clean and modern airport.

In the baggage area, the representative of the hotel welcomed us and then guided us to one of the small buses awaiting the hotel guests and off, we were. The weather was beautiful: very warm but not hot, a light breeze and clean, very clean air; much cleaner and less humid than Dubai, which is not so far away.

On the way to the hotel, Nini didn’t waste any time. She almost forcefully took the microphone from our guide and started talking and joking with to the small audience. She has a knack for striking a conversation with complete strangers as though they were old friends.

The mood was set.

I was looking at the beautiful clean sea and the empty sandy beaches.

I already knew that if I didn’t look for what is not there - the famous “Tourist Paradise” - I would like Kish.

### The Island

Kish would have been known at least since the time of Alexander the Great by some of the following names: Kamtina, Arakia, Arakata, and Ghiss.

It would have been an important commercial center during the Ilkhanid<sup>6</sup> era. Some people also believe that there was an important glass manufacture on the Island during this period but I have not found any reliable study on that.

What is sure is that it was a coveted Island for its natural beauty, pearls and specially strategic location by Iran, Oman, Yemen and other powerful states around the Persian Gulf and beyond as far as Portugal and England at one time or the other of its history.

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<sup>6</sup> See details under “Links” page 8

Kish is a small island; about 15 x 7 km. You can go around it by bicycle<sup>7</sup> in just a few hours.

There are only 20,000 residents. The native population of the Island is a mixture of Arab and Iranian and thus they are darker skinned than the average Iranians.

I am told that the yearly tourist turnover is at least 1.5 millions.

We were there during the fasting month of Ramadan, which because Muslims prefer not to travel during this time, is the least crowded period of the year.

*Ruins of the old city of Harira*

Most of the residents that have come here from all over Iran, whether they are taxi drivers, waiters or shopkeepers are happy. They think they have a good deal here. Just because of this, the service is much better than in other places in the country where the staff at the lower echelon of the tourist industry is usually unhappy with their lot. The indigenous population of Arabic origin is very small.



There are many hotels and restaurants, good taxis and bad shopping malls. Some of the places of interest are a site with the ruins of the old city of Harira and a famous “Dolphin Park” which, we were told is the only one or the largest one in the Middle East.

Who cares?

Still it is the major attraction of the Island. We booked to go there the next day.

In addition, an old stranded “Greek Ship” is also one of the major attractions. Why? It beats me.

Various sport activities are also available: tennis courts, scuba diving schools, a go-kart rink etc...



### The Dariush Hotel

The Dariush Grand Hotel, as it is officially known, is a spectacle in itself.

Built by the Iranian entrepreneur Hossein Sabet, it's a free interpretation of Persepolis! It could have been a disaster but it is not. The decorative stucco replicas are well made as is the hotel in general. If one is a little forgiving of some of the “poor taste” of the decorations here and there it is quite an achievement.

In a country where it is a major task to even repair one's bathroom - I just went through the ordeal - Mr. Sabet deserves to be decorated for such an accomplishment in a remote place where practically everything, including the labor, has to be imported from the mainland or abroad!

With its architecture inspired by Persepolis, which one can like or dislike - snobs “artists” and “intellectuals” will hate it – the hotel is quite good.

<sup>7</sup> Fairly poor quality bicycles are available for rent

Most of the people actually love its decoration and atmosphere, reminiscent of the old glory of pre-Islamic Iran. In a way they feel that by appreciating it they are also somehow protesting against the establishment that emphasizes everything Islamic in our history and tries, without much success, to attenuate our pre-Islamic past.

Mr. Sabet is not just another entrepreneur; he has a mission!

In the morning, there is a breakfast buffet in a huge Apadana<sup>8</sup>-esque hall that manages to cater efficiently to an army of invading hungry tourists of all types and ages.

The hotel even has a free wireless internet access, which I found very helpful. I think this service should be standard in all hotels.

The staff is efficient and friendly.

The rooms are small but clean and comfortable, the view on the Persian Gulf in front, paradisiacal.

Perhaps this is what is meant by "Tourist Paradise", I thought to myself...

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We spent the rest of the day on a free tour of the island organized by the hotel. It was pleasant and not so long as to become boring.

In the evening, we booked a restaurant recommended to us by a friend. It was terrible. Especially the smell, which was a mixture of greasy meaty scent with intermittent vapors of a toilet somewhere in the background, was objectionable.

The decoration was a poor and cheap imitation of a Mediterranean seafood restaurant. We were about the only patrons so I managed to at least, somehow, ask the manager to, in turn somehow ask the live musician / singer to be so kind to turn down the volume of his blaring electronic musical instruments. After a while he stopped altogether which was a relief!

The service and food were bearable.

The next evening was no better; except that this time we went to an open-air place, so at least we were spared the odors.

Still, we had a good time both here and there.

On a subsequent trip we went to "Shandiz"<sup>9</sup> which I can recommend both for its food and its "Folklore". In a way it reminded me of "La Coupole"<sup>10</sup> in Paris.



<sup>8</sup> The famous audience hall in Persepolis

<sup>9</sup> There are actually two of them, one close to the center and another one in a garden in the outskirts.

<sup>10</sup> Famous Parisian restaurant of the 30s. Has lost most of its panache but still lingers on under "modern" management

After a copious breakfast and a substantial number of sandwiches prepared semi-illegally by Nini for lunch, Nini, Parvin, Azin and I we went to the beach. Poor Ahmad was on a shopping mission for Madame so he could not join us. Hamzeh went along with him.

I never imagined that “working class” Azeris like Ahmad that are supposed to be macho could be so terrified of their wives.

Even at distance of over a thousand kilometers, he was never quite at ease, constantly fearing a phone call from Madame or one of her reps (children) that under normal circumstances would never even think of calling their father.

They called often: An order to buy such and such an item or to announce the sickness or death of this or that relative or remote acquaintance. In short any excuse not to let him enjoy his vacation and to remind him who’s the boss!

### The Beach

The sea is clean and transparent. I have seen a more see-through sea only in Brazil off the Island of Paraty<sup>11</sup>, which by the way is a “Tourist Paradise”!

The first day we went to a secluded place by taxi so that we did not have to separate the men (actually only one man) from the women. Normally we would have had to go to segregated beaches!

We were in a semi-illegal or fully but mildly illegal position but since only Nini and I were swimming while Parvin kept her “hejab” and Azin was still a child, even if we were caught it would not have been a serious offense.

Beautiful sand and sea but still...

A far cry from any kind of worldly paradise!

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The next day, we met Mr. Sabet!

He is a star.

Having spotted him and obtained confirmation from one of the already befriended hotel staff that this was indeed Mr. Sabet in person; Nini walked straight up to him, introduced herself, complimented him, flirted in a fun way and in short charmed him.

She called me over and introduced me as the King of Steel, my family as one of the most prominent families in Iran, enumerated the languages I could speak; described how good I was at this or that sport, etc, etc...! It was all so exaggerated that I didn’t feel embarrassed.

Mr. Sabet also took it with a grain of salt, started talking to me in Russian and we became “friends”.

I told him about our excursion at the beach the day before; he immediately called one of his staff sergeants. He invited us to go to a private beach where this time we could swim as long as we wanted without the slightest worry of being interrupted by anyone.

*Statue in garden*



<sup>11</sup> Beautiful historic island somewhere between Rio and Sao Paulo. See under “Links” page 8

It was a private “Tourist Paradise” just for Parvin, Azin, Nini and I. We even had our own private guards to protect us from other guards!  
Ahmad and Hamzeh were busy shopping for cheap stuff that they could have just as easily purchased in Tehran for the same or lower price!

### The Go-Kart Rink

I can't say how good it is because we didn't get around to go but there is one and it works.

### Scuba Diving Clubs / Schools

I checked four. The best one is Hava Darya. They even have a UL<sup>12</sup>. Great for taking pictures of the island from a bird's eye view. It was not operational when we went there because of high winds. I can't wait to try it on a future trip.

### The Harira Ruins

Very little is known about them but they are there and the scenery of the remains by the sea is surrealistic.

### The Dolphin Park.

Except for the audience of veiled and semi-veiled women, it was like being in Disneyland.

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Late in the evening, we took the last flight back to Tehran.

Outside of the baggage area, Ahmad's wife, accompanied by her son and grandson as lieutenants, was standing assertively almost like a general savoring victory.

She was there not to welcome him but to remind him that the vacation was over right there and then.



*The lobby*

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<sup>12</sup> Ultra Light Aircraft

**Links**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kish\\_Island](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kish_Island)

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

<http://www.paraty.com.br/iindex.asp>

<http://www.factbites.com/topics/Kish,-Iran>

<http://dariushgrandhotel.com/>

<http://www.thepersiangulf.org/cities/kish.html>

<http://www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers3/Barshan114.pdf>

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

<http://iranarch.blogspot.com/2006/05/discovery-of-glassblowing-workshops-in.html>

<http://www.iranchamber.com/geography/articles/kish.php>

[http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Geography/persian.gulf/kish\\_island.htm](http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Geography/persian.gulf/kish_island.htm)

<http://www.iran-daily.com/1383/2086/html/focus.htm>

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<http://www.restoaparis.com/fiche-restaurant-paris/la-coupole.html>

[http://www.gonomad.com/destinations/0504/party\\_in\\_paraty.html](http://www.gonomad.com/destinations/0504/party_in_paraty.html)

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