

Sahand - Kandovan - Urmia Takhte Soleyman

May 11 - 13, 2006

Another visit to Iran of my old¹ and faithful touring partner Fred G was the “excuse” for going on this tour.

I invited my friend Ali-Mohammad N to join us.

My dog Tommy, as usual, was of the party too.

I have to remember to wash him prior to the next outing because when we came back I saw that his hair was everywhere and we had to wash and vacuum clean the car for hours to get rid of it. Some of his furs stuck in my throat thanks to the recirculation A/C are still there!

Fred and I had planned on a desert trip² but I asked him to change the plan because I had too much work to take off 4 days, which would have been the time required.

So enjoyable and perfectly organized, “without really trying”, this substitute tour turned out to be that when we came back, we were all glad we went on this one instead of the desert trip.

The focal point of our trip was of course the skiing expedition.

To this effect, I consulted with my friend Mr. Shahmoradpour³. He suggested that we come to **Sahand**. On top of that, he very kindly offered to be our host at the new lodge that he had built at the base of the ski lift for dinner and the night. He also said he would run the already closed for the season ski lift just for us the next morning. That way we would already be about halfway up the mountain before starting the climb to the top!

It was “an offer I couldn’t refuse”.

Even so, I had the nerve to still want to also check the skiing possibilities above **Kandovan!**

So, I immediately and graciously accepted his invitation “*subject to final reconfirmation*” which is a very useful expression, I have learnt in my business life - it means YES but with all options still open on your side – very convenient!

DAY ONE (Thursday)

Fred, Ali-Mohammad, Tommy and I started according to plan on Thursday at 5 am from Amanieh and drove practically straight to **Sahand** (abt 600 km), with just a short breakfast stop in Zanjan.

We reached the ski lodge at the base of Sahand at about one in the afternoon.

¹ With the years passing by, the term has acquired a more literal sense for both of us!

² See my “Desert” report under <http://www.amanieh.com/tours.htm>

³ He is the head of the skiing and mountaineering federation of the region; proficient, hardworking and dependable

From Tehran, one drives to Qazvin, Takestan⁴, Zanzan and then on to Mianeh⁵ and finally 15 km before Tabriz, left towards the **Sahand** skiing area.

- On the way, a few kilometers before Zanzan, on the left one can distinguish in the distance the dome of the Mausoleum of Oljeitu in Sultanieh⁶. It is described by Arthur Pope⁷ as “*one of Persia’s supreme architectural achievements*”.

There is a large billboard advertising the site so it is difficult to miss.

Nevertheless, the visit would have set us back at least 2 hours, so I passed this time because we had to be at **Sahand** as early as possible in order to have the time to inspect the snow conditions of the slopes at **Sahand** and above **Kandovan**.

- A few kilometers before Mianeh on the right of the road there is beautiful 15th century bridge⁶.

The **Sahand** mountains, south of Tabriz encompass at least 17 peaks around the main dormant volcano which culminates at about 3700 meters.

It is a very large plateau with old rolling mountains and valleys. In this season, the landscape is green and stunningly beautiful – really! The scenery reminds me, even though I’m not religiously inclined, of the Old Testament.

We went to inspect the snow conditions – excellent spring snow, stayed about half an hour and drove on straight to **Kandovan**. It is about a one-hour drive on the Tabriz to **Urmia** road and then another half an hour to **Kandovan** via Osku.

Kandovan is a unique village.

- Simple, yet intricate:

The first thing that crossed my mind when I entered the village was that I would have loved to play hide and seek there at age 10 or even now!

- Old, yet modern:

Apparently, it dates back to at least 1600 years. Yet it is very modern in terms of structure, space, efficient use of the natural terrain and energy savings!



From **Kandovan** we went as high as possible with the Patrol until the snow covering the track stopped us.

There were quite good skiing possibilities here too but Mr. Shamoradpour’s offer was really just too good to even think of staying and camping here. Maybe the next day, I thought.

After an abgusht⁸ stop in Osku for Fred who enjoyed it immensely, we promptly returned to **Sahand** to have dinner and spend the night in the ski lodge where Mr. Shahmoradpour and his staff treated us like proper VIPs.

⁴ Literally “vineyard”. The history of the town goes back at least to the Sassanid period

⁵ Literally “Midway” presumably of Tehran and Tabriz

It was an important town during the Sassanid period but lost its importance after the Mongol invasion

⁶ See my Kamal report under <http://www.amanieh.com/tours.htm>

⁷ He is reputed to be the topmost expert on Iranian architecture

⁸ Literally “meat juice”, a typical and very popular Iranian stew

DAY TWO (Friday)

The next morning we woke up at 6 and at 8, the ski lift was ready to take us up. Because of little snow at the bottom of the hill, Mr. Shamoradpour's workforce actually had to pull down the ski lift poles with ropes so that we could catch them!

From then on, it was total bliss.

We took one normal run with the ski lift for primers and then the second time took the lift to the top where we would start climbing to the peak at about 3600 meters. The weather and snow conditions were perfect with a very smooth buttery spring snow that was very pleasing, easy and safe to ski on. We were back in the ski lodge before noon.





We now had two options: spend the night in the area and also ski the slopes above **Kandovan** the next morning or move on. We decided to move on and by early afternoon, we were on our way to **Urmia**, which includes a short hop by ferryboat over the lake of the same name. We found a decent Hotel (Sahel) relaxed a bit and went straight for a dip in the lake.

Urmia, whose etymology is “cradle of water” – I guess one could more simply just say “source” - , is one of the places believed to be the birthplace of the prophet Zarathustra⁹ ca 3600 B.C. It is the capital of the West-Azerbaijan province. Azeris, Kurds, Assyrians and Armenians live here. During the Pahlavi reign, it was well known for its wines and was called Rezaiyeh.

Legend has it that one of the “Three Wise Men” that journeyed to Bethlehem for Christ’s birth is buried there in the Christian church of St Mary¹⁰.

Lake Urmia, covering an area of 5200 square kilometers (140 x 55 km) is the largest lake inside Iran. It is marked by over 100 small islands, which are stopovers of various migrating birds, pelicans and flamingos, among others. The water is very salty; so much, so that you don’t have to swim to stay afloat and neither fish nor even flora can survive in its waters.

Its salty water and mud are supposed to have therapeutic effects for rheumatisms.



DAY THREE (Saturday)

Our goal was **Takhte Soleyman**, via Naqadeh¹¹, Mahabad¹² and Miandoab¹³.

From Urmia, the road follows the lake shoreline; with in this season especially, breathtaking landscapes.

It being the beginning of the week I had to check my mail and make a few calls. We stopped at an ‘Internet Café’ in Mahabad. To my great surprise, they had a very fast connection, much better than ours in Tehran!

Somewhere between Miandoab and Takab, we saw, not so far from the road, Kurdish women dancing in their colorful traditional dresses. It was a wedding. Music and even a singer were of the party.



⁹ Other candidates are **Takhte Soleyman** and Sabalan, ca 3600 B.C.

There is more consensus on where he died which would be Mazar-e-Sharif in present day Afghanistan

¹⁰ “Persia: An Archeological Guide”

¹¹ The very famous Hassanlou Golden Cup was discovered in one of the nearby hills of the same name

¹² The region of Mahabad was the centre of the [Mannaeans](#), who flourished in the early 1st millennium BC

They are believed to be the ancestors of the Kurds

¹³ Literally “Between Two Waters”

I went to inspect. I told one of the older men that I had a foreign guest, that we all would like to participate for a while in the festivities and of course offered a gift for the bride!

We were immediately warmly invited, offered tea and sweets and were even welcome by the women who let us very graciously take pictures.

Since then I sent them their photos.

They didn't really believe I would actually do it and that it was just "tarof"¹⁴.

They in turn called to thank me and invited me to another wedding.

I also didn't think they would actually call - touching!

We reached the **Takhte Soleyman** area late in the afternoon.

Our first stop was at "Zendane Soleyman" (Salomon's prison).

According to Sylvia Matheson, in her book "Persia an Archeological Guide", it apparently has been occupied since as early as 900 B.C. and was a religious sanctuary.

The shape of the well has remained intact although not much remains of the structures. In prehistoric times, a deep well filled the crater.



There is so much to say about **Takhte Soleyman** itself that it is wiser not to say anything and refer the reader to the many books and studies that have been written on the subject¹⁵, still:

- It is one of the major archeological sites in Iran.
- Sassanid¹⁶ kings made a pilgrimage on foot here after their coronation in Ctesphion¹⁷ to receive their "divine investiture". About 600 km as the crow flies which is probably at least 1000 km by the roads of ancient Persia!
- It is the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary but it is believed to have been a pagan site even before the advent of monotheistic religions.
- It is on the United Nation's UNESCO World Heritage list.



We left the **Takhte Soleyman** in the evening. Driving straight through, we arrived in Tehran at about 1 am.



¹⁴ An Iranian form of extreme politeness which is nice but should not be taken literally

¹⁵ There is a good description in by Sylvia Matheson in her book "Persia an Archeological Guide"

¹⁶ The fourth dynasty of the second Persian Empire (226 – 651)

¹⁷ Near present day Baghdad!

During these 3 days, we covered parts of the Iranian provinces of Qazvin, Zanjan, West and East Azarbaijan.



Qazvin

Agricultural and urban settlements are thought to have existed here since 5000 B.C.

The city itself is a former capital of the Persian Empire.

The name “Qazvin” or “Kasbin” is derived from Cas, an ancient tribe that lived south of the [Caspian Sea](#) millennia ago.

Zanjan

It is well known for its handicrafts, carpets and grapes.

The history of the capital Zanjan goes back at least to the Sassanid period.

The city was devastated by the Mongol invasion. From then on, it lost its importance.

In the mid-19th century, Zanjan became a center of the young Baha’i religious movement and was partially destroyed in 1850 when government troops captured the town to suppress the Baha’is¹⁸.

Sultanieh, of course, among other sites, is in the Zanjan province.

East and West Azarbaijan

They are the result of a recent administrative division of the old Azarbaijan province into three. Ardebil being the third one.

The name Azarbaijan or Azerbaijan comes from the middle Persian “Adur Paiyigan” which means “The Guardians of Fire”, a reference to the holy Zoroastrian fire that burned in what is the present town of Takab.

Tabriz and Ardebil have both been capitals of Iran.

¹⁸ © 1993-2003 Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

Tabriz or Tauris as it was known then was even the capital of Armenia in the 3rd century AD!

The history of the region goes back to the Elamites¹⁹.

Photos

- Page 2: *Kandovan*
 Page 3: *Shamoradpour, Micky and Ali-Mohammad at the summit*
The slope with our tracks outstanding, courtesy of Photoshop
 Page 4: *Lake Urmia dusk view*
Lake Urmia map
Wedding
 Page 5: *Fred and Ali-Mohammad coming back from "Zendane Soleyman"*
Takhte Soleyman, view of the lake
Takhte Soleyman, well preserved structure
 Page 6 *Map of our route*

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¹⁹ **Elam** is one of the most ancient [civilizations](#) on record. Elam was centered in the far west and southwest of modern day [Iran](#) (in the [Ilam Province](#) and the lowlands of [Khuzestan](#)). It lasted from around [2700 BC](#) to [539 BC](#). (Wikipedia Encyclopedia)