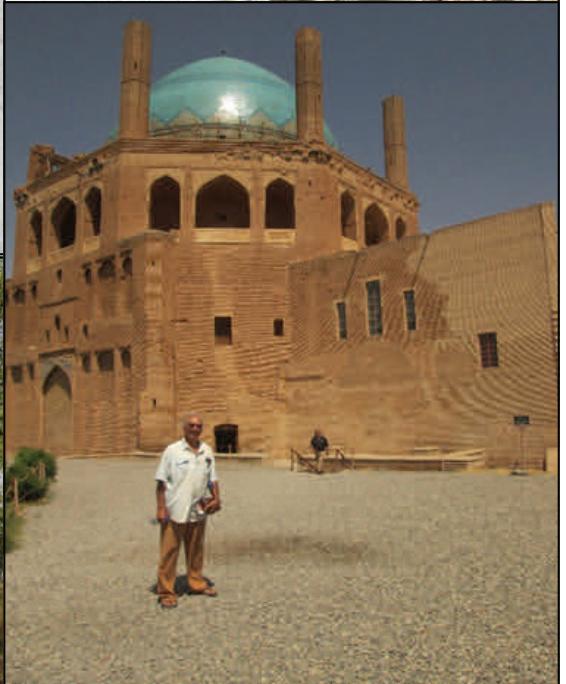


SEVEN MONTHS IN IRAN - 2013

PART TWO OF TWO

Written by Hossein Rojhantalab

Part two of this two-part series describes the second half of Hossein and Tami's road trip in Iran and covers the west/northwest and east /northeast journey, eventually returning to Tehran and finally home to Portland, Oregon. (If you missed Part one, it was published in the April 2014 News Flash which is available on our website.)



West to Northwest - Hamadan



Taghe-Bostan, Hamadan

table with a pestle, of sorts. Leaving Hamadan, we drove to Malayer and Tuyserkan, where we purchased delicious local white walnuts and sweet grape paste for a car snack. The important feature in Tuyserkan is a 2000 year-old sycamore tree—magnificent! We then drove Southeast through the most beautiful Lorish mountainside to Boroujerd, at 5200 ft in Lorestan.

Lorestan

This province is home for the Lorish people, and their music and food, as well as more gorgeous waterfalls. From Boroujerd, we drove SE through the Zagros Mountains to Khorramabad, and visited the Falakolaflak Arg. We picnicked at Bisgeh and Greet waterfalls, drove to Azna, and made a valiant attempt to hike all the way to a snow tunnel! We enjoyed the amazing vast grassy highlands there, and were hosted to tea by a Lorish shepherd. Very friendly and hospitable people!



Majid grazing his sheep in the foothill of Snowy tunnel, Azna

On the way to Hamadan we visited Ali-Sadr cave, the most amazing water cave in the world, 10 miles long, 70 million years old and a local water source from as far back as 10,000 BC. The following day, we ate a picnic lunch with hundreds of Iranians on a rock under the Ganjnameh waterfall, famed for its 500 BC stone cuneiform inscription. We walked our hotel's neighborhood to reach Ibn-Sina and Baba-Taher tombs, then drove to Lalejin, a center of pottery and ceramic production well-known in all the Middle East. There, we visited a pottery factory where the potters insisted that Tami crawl into their enormous, recently unloaded kiln, to experience the womb-like warmth of that mysterious space. We had lunch nearby and ordered the lamb 'dizi'. It's a stew of lamb, potato and onion that the customer mashes together at the



Bisgeh waterfall, Khorramabad

On one occasion about nine random people assembled to help Tami get back to our hotel when they were convinced she was lost, because I'd left her alone as I disappeared down the street in the dark of night to buy bread. Quite hilarious and endearing. Little did they know that she was just waiting for me to catch up, after stopping to buy bread herself.

Ilam (Kurdish, border to Iraq)

We drove west through the Zagros and Kuhdasht to Ilam at 4500 ft, once the summer capital of the Elam dynasty. At one point, we drove to Dareshahr, an amazingly pleasant route full of flowers gracing dramatic rocky hillsides. We found several historical bridges in the Bahram-e-Choobin Gorge, and visited the ancient ruins of Koozeh Garan Hill. We made a memorable visit to the museum there, displaying local artifacts from 8000 BC. Hossein bought a pair of Ilam-Kurdish pants and wore them for the rest of our trip, much to the amusement of his family members, and was quite conspicuous even in the Kurdish region. They are particularly comfy, with wide, blousy legs.

Kermanshah (Kurdish, and Lakish, border to Iraq)

Kermanshah contains a prehistoric settlement that dates back to 10,000 BC. It was the capital of the Sassanid dynasty and is rich in historical sites. We visited UNESCO World Heritage Sites Taghebostan and Bisotun, as well as the historical village of Hajij, and spent one lovely night in the historical border city of Paveh. This particular stretch of Zagros highway led us on one of the most beautiful drives of our trip, as it passes through Alp-high remote villages leading to the city of Marivan, and affords beautiful views of lakes, like the Zarivar. This region includes the border with Iraq, which accounts for the fact that many Iraqis have migrated to Iran here, and live comfortably in Kermanshah.



Driving from Paveh to Marivan through Zagros, above timberline

Kurdestan (Kurdish, and Lakish, border to Iraq)

This is the land of the Kurdish people. In the picturesque drive from Marivan to Sanandaj, the Zagros Mountains changed color several times. A highlight of Sanandaj was the Asef Divan mansion displaying Kurdish artifacts, mummies, and regional culture in a beautiful anthropology museum. On the way north, we visited the World Heritage Site of Takhte Suleiman and the Karaftu Caves sitting at 340 ft above the ground. We climbed 180 steps to wander through the complexes of rooms connected via various tunnels and corridors through the rocks. These caves were inhabited for centuries, beginning around 300 B.C., and belong to the Ashkanid dynasty.



Karaftou Cave



Guardian angles at Takhte Soleiman

West Azerbaijan (border to Iraq, and Turkey)

Habitation in this area dates back to 6,000 BC. The Assyrian and Armenians who live here today are Christian, and are permitted to make spirits and wine. The prominent feature is Orumieh Lake, the largest inland salt lake in the Middle East, and its amazing islands and a major (although decrepit, due to the receding waters of late) resort. We drove to Khoy city to visit a World Cultural Heritage Center, the tomb of Shamze Tabrizi, who was a mystical Sufi poet and spiritual soul mate of Rumi. After five days in Ourumieh, we drove over the bridge that took us to the eastern shore of Lake Orumieh, but not before visiting an Assyrian village to purchase a sample of the local *raisin* vodka. Quite delicious!



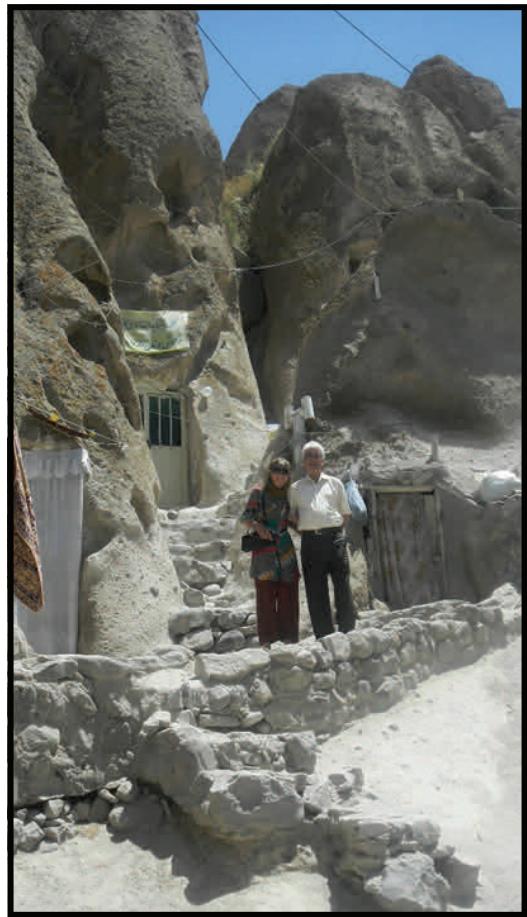
Driving on salt shore of Orumieh Lake

East Azerbaijan (borders Republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nakhchivan)

We found a great hotel in the capital of the province, Tabriz, with a fantastic array of breakfast delights each morning, included in the price of the room. It's a modern city inhabited in late 2nd millennium BCE. Hossein's close high school friend, Yadi, joined us there and we traveled to nearby sites, first along the beautiful Aras river to picnic at Asiab Kharab waterfall, and later hiked up to St. Stephanos monastery. The next day we drove to Kandovan, a stone cave village dating back to 13th century. It was so picturesque: little dwellings carved into morel-mushroom-shaped formations in the mountainside, one on top of the other, resembling a beehive. After lunch, we drove in the direction of Sahand Mountain [12500 ft.], encountering fields of wild poppies, honey beekeepers tending their hives, and a miniature snow tunnel.



Asiab Kharab Water falls with high school friend



Kandovan village on the foot of Sahand Mountain



Day hike to Ghaleye Babak

We said good-bye to Yadi, who flew back to Tehran, and drove on to the city of Maragheh, where we were taken on a tour of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi observatory built in 1295. That same tour led us to several underground Zoroastrian temples all discovered in the last twenty years. In Maragheh, we were also treated to a visit to one of the most fascinating archeological sites ever! A team of archaeologists allowed us to wander through their latest dig, in process—six million-year-old fossils, including the largest fossil mammoth skull ever found in the world, measuring 76 centimeters! The collection of bones had been deposited there after a volcanic eruption of Mt. Sahand and subsequent flooding of the river below. The experience was captivating!

Heading north, we drove to the town of Kalibar and visited historical Ghaleye Babak, a rocky castle hideout high in the mountain, from where the Persian hero, Babak Khorram-Din commanded forces fighting against Arab invaders into the region for twenty three years (815-837 AD). The climb was formidable, the air was thin, but it was so picturesque, we were transported! Next stop was a lovely natural hot spring facility, where I took a dip in the most pristine spring water in my life.

Ardebil (borders Republics of Azerbaijan)

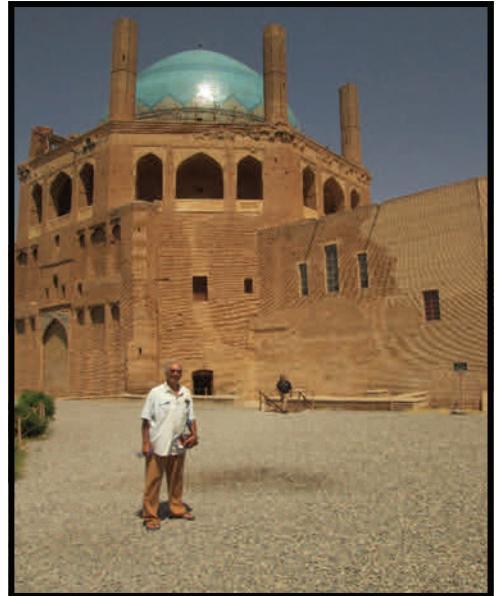


American built vestige high in Sabalan Mountain

The history of this province dates back to 500 BC and is filled with ruins and natural beauty including Mt. Sabalan [15800 ft.] and several hot springs. We stayed three nights in the quiet town of Meshkinshahr. We were driven on a bumpy jeep ride to near the peak of Mt. Sabalan, where there is the vestige of a hiker's camp, built by 'the Americans' to accommodate mountain climbers who come from all over the world to enjoy the beauty of this dramatic snow-capped mountain.

Later in the day, we

drove through the most beautiful valleys and finally found the incredible UNESCO-protected cemetery we were looking for. It was basically a field of peculiar stone characters—tomb stones from the Sassanid dynasty, all of them sporting charming faces without mouths. In Ardebil, east of Meshkinshahr, the highlight was Sheikh Safiedin Ardebili's mausoleum, a complex composed of a group of stunning architectural structures. We took dozens of pictures of the interior of the mosque there, the ceilings are an intricate hollow web of carved tile patterns, designed to enhance the acoustics of the place. We were captivated.



Soltanieh Dome, Zanjan

We drove over a curvy, foggy pass called Gardane Heyran to the ports of Astara, and Anzali and stayed four nights with our friend and his son in Chamkhaleh. The four of us drove to Rudbar and over the Zagros mountains to Zanjan, and stayed with colleagues who teach at Zanjan university, and visited the bazaar, of course! Our last stop before the grueling drive into Tehran was the Soltaniyeh dome, standing at 160 ft., the third tallest dome in the world. We stayed six days in Tehran, celebrated Tami's 60th birthday, with four different parties by friends and relatives, and visited a few villages north of Tehran before departing on our last adventure, toward the East.

East to Northeast

It got warmer as we headed toward the desert region, land of ghanats, abanbars, and yakhchals. In Semnan, we stayed at the Darband hotel at the foot of Darband cave tucked high in the Alborz Mountains. The weather was quite pleasant and we visited the bazaar and famous city gate, built during the Qajar era. The next day we drove to Damghan, a 7,000 year old city, and had an evening picnic in a park adjacent to our hotel.

Piereh Almadar tower, and Tarikhaneh, the oldest mosque in Iran, lead the way to the bazaar there. On our way to Cheshmeh Ali, we stopped by a lake in the mountain, and snacked on fresh pistachios, grapes and melons. Next we drove on to Shahrud, which reminded Tami of her childhood

home of Pasadena, and stayed two nights in nearby Bastam. We visited Bayazid-e Bastami mausoleum, Kharaghani tomb and drove to the foot of the Abr Jungle [cloud forest]. The next day we drove to Neyshapour, once the capital of Khorasan, now a rundown city, still a big name in turquoise production, and visited the aramgahe (tombs) of the great poets, Abu-Attar and Omar Khayyam whose famous work, the 'Rubayat' has been translated into more than ten languages. The Omar Khayyam museum was a highlight that celebrates his works in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and poetry.



Fresh pistachios picked from orchard

We headed south to the desert region, stayed in Gonabad, and two nights in Birjand. Looking at the map, we could see that we were a mere 200 miles from Khur, the furthest point into the desert we had travelled on our first trip months before, making our journeys almost a complete circle, from different directions! Some desert highlights were the Furg Citadel, and Paeen Shahr Castle, as well as shopping the bazaar for the nicest dried fruits and saffron! It was getting very hot, so we headed north toward Razavi Khorasan. On the way we visited Jame-mosque in Ghaen Shahr, where you can find the best saffron in the country.

We visited Bozarjomehr Tomb, and drove to the tiny town of Bidocht, where we were delighted and surprised to find an excellent WiFi connection, so unexpected in this little outpost. While there, we drove through pistachio orchards to a gigantic ice-house, and with the help of the locals, drove through the desert to the oldest, longest and highest water volume ghanat in Iran.



Hossein and Tami invited to a typical Iranian picnic



Yakhchale Kowsar [Ice house] in Bidokht

Next we drove to Mashhad and stayed in a pleasant, hillside hotel in Torghabeh that reminded us of the dwellings that climb the steep hills of Cinqua Terra in Italy. Mashhad is the second largest city in Iran and is a pilgrimage site for Shiite from around the world. We spent a couple of hours in the vast Imam Reza Shrine, walked through Goharshad mosque and shopped in the impressive bazaar where Tami purchased a beautiful ring with a carved Yemeni agate. We walked through the Nader Shah Museum, ate great food and enjoyed talking to foreign pilgrims.



Outskirt of Imam-Reza's Mausoleum

On the way north we stopped in Tus and visited the tomb of Ferdowsi, the great 10thth century poet who, by writing the book of Shahnameh, the book of Kings [a thirty-five-years' effort, now translated in multiple languages] revived the Farsi language. We visited Ferdowsi's amazing museum where some of his stories were shown in 3-dimensional sculpted murals.

Next we headed northwest to Bojnourd, Azadshahr, and Gonbad in Golestan province, home to four different ethnic groups. We stood astounded at the base of the 1100-year-old, 60 foot-tall Gonbadeh Kavous, a monolithic tomb of King Kavous. Then, we drove south to Abr-Jungle area and picnicked by several waterfalls. As so often was the case on our journeys, we were surrounded here by kindly Iranian tourists wanting to practice their English, and in this case, competed with each other to help us over the narrow mountain paths to the waterfalls.

The next day, we drove to Bandare Turkaman Gomiahn lagoons in Gorgan, and drove along Gorgan's great wall, the second longest in the world, ate 20" long eggplants and other delicious foods.

Heading home to Tehran, we drove westward along the Caspian Sea, passed through Sari, Babul, turning south at Amol. From there, we took the Haraz road and drove through the Alborz Mountains and into the city .



As everywhere else in Iran, the people loved us in Bandare Turkamen



Flash photo of Tehran from Milad Tower

The last month of our trip we lived in Tehran, a modern city of twenty million, with lush streams of water flowing from Alborz Mountains north of town, down both sides of boulevards and main streets. We rented a brand new furnished apartment on the 5th floor of a five-story building in the tony uptown section of Tehran with a view of the Alborz Cascades and downtown Tehran. We hosted friends and family, visited several museums in Tehran, and enjoyed plenty of lunch and dinner picnics.

We frequently took the fast and dependable metro to various attractions like Tehran's world-famous huge bazaar, and strolled through the old neighborhoods of Hossein's childhood. We tried out our chef skills in our cute kitchen, and, with the help of Hossein's sisters, cooked Iranian dishes from fresh produce we bought in the local daily markets .



Tami in the courtyard of Khane-Honarmandan, Artists' House, in Tehran

We have had two interviews, one on OPB and the other on Portland's community station KBOO, and have started writing about our trip to Iran:

<http://www.opb.org/radio/programs/thinkoutloud/segment/seven-months-in-iran/>

<http://kboo.fm/content/atriptoiranthesitestheeventsandtheextremehospitality>,

You can listen to some beautiful Iranian music, three sets of recently recorded music in Queen Elizabeth Hall in London:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2013/11/131101_l93_derkhshani.shtml?s

Life After Intel Thoughts

Hossein and his wife have made two other major, memorable trips: a twelve-week road trip in Europe from Sept 2010 - Nov 2010 prior to retirement, and a four-month trip to North Africa from November, 2011 until March, 2012. Besides travelling, Hossein spends his time gardening, reading, and playing the Djembe Drum --a wooden drum played with the bare hand hitting the skin-head with an open palm.

When asked for any tips on how to make the transition to retirement easier, Hossein said, "Learn how to take it easy and enjoy life." Reading his journal, it is apparent that he lives his philosophy. If you are interested in more information about his trips or his life after Intel, he can be reached at 2013iranroadtrip@gmail.com.

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Tehran Metro