

4/28/07

Wow, I'm here! I was picked up yesterday afternoon from the wonderful Kabul airport by mom and Norm after 40 hours of some of the most grueling air travel I've ever experienced. Everything went fairly smoothly, no real problems surprisingly enough. Dubai was an interesting experience. I had originally been told by my mother and Mahbouba that I could check my bags all the way through to Kabul, however that was not the case. I had to claim my bags and transfer them to a second terminal to check them into my Kam Air flight to Kabul. I wanted to stay in the main terminal as long as I could, yet as I got shuffled through the system at the airport I found my self with bags on a trolley outside of the airport. I tried to get back in, and had been told by a few people that I could check my bags through at the international terminal and then go over to the other terminal closer to my departure time. I eventually, through many different communication attempts with tall Arab men in all white, found that this was not the case and that furthermore, I had to take a taxi (no free shuttle) to the other terminal. I couldn't get back into the main part of the terminal, which is actually very nice with lots to do, because I didn't have a departure ticket from that terminal. With nothing else to do, I got a taxi and went to the second terminal, went through security, only to find that I couldn't check into my flight for another 5 hours. So I was stuck in this area next to the check in booths that had no facilities or services (no toilets!), and couldn't go back out to the toilets or the one snack bar available, because the security guards didn't want the hassle of checking my bags again (there were 8 of them sitting around with nothing to do, but for some reason this would have caused great problems). I had no options but to post up and try and sleep sitting, with my head resting on my luggage. Didn't happen. Now I should remind you that I had just completed 17 hours of flight and had been awake for more than 24 hours by this point.

I met two Afghan Canadians returning to Kabul for the first time since they had fled the violence 20 years previously. These men were more nervous about going to Afghanistan than I was, and they spoke the language and blend in. They couldn't believe I was going, and were very concerned for me. They advised me not to leave Kabul for any reason. They were very nice, and I eventually felt safe enough to leave them watching my luggage while I went outside security to get some water and go to the restroom. By 5 am I was able to check in, go through more security, and get to the departures section of the terminal where I could buy some food, use the restroom and relax for another 3 hours until my flight left.

While waiting to depart I met a man working for NATO in Kabul. He had been in the country for 4 months and lived in the main international area where most foreigners spend all of their time. Much different than how mom and Norm go about things. He also seemed amazed that I was going for "vacation" and also advised me not to leave Kabul. He said that most of the country was fine, but there were certainly "no go" areas for westerners. It was the random acts that could happen anytime, anywhere to watch for (hard to do when their random). This man was very nice, and he talked me through the Kabul arrival, so that it would go smoothly. I just followed him when I got off the plane in Kabul, and was able to get through the various steps smoothly and efficiently (as much as possible in a dimly lit baggage claim with Afghans running around all over the place), most foreigners not having a clue what to do. I passed through one last security

screening as I left the airport (what's the point?) and found mom and Norm waiting by the parking lot. Everything was less hectic than I had imagined it. Way easier than getting through the Addis Ababa airport in Ethiopia. I was not accosted by people trying to carry my bags for me or get me a taxi, which was a pleasant surprise.

I was so excited to see mom and Norm, and I could tell mom was relieved to have me there safe. We drove the "scenic route" to my parents compound in the Karte Se neighborhood, and I got to see Kabul for the first time.

Oh the smells of the third world. It is always the first, thing I notice, even as I step off of the plane in a country like this. Dust, burning garbage, kerosene, dirty fuel burning cars, uncensored male body odor, open sewers and the occasional wafting of cheap cologne/perfume. This menagerie assaults



someone from the developed world, as we are unaccustomed to the quantity and intensity of smells in our sterile lives.

We got to my parents house, which is very nice and comfortable, with oriental rugs and handmade fabrics all over place. They have collected some beautiful hand carved wood furniture that would probably cost a fortune in the states, but is quite affordable here. The garden is started and promises to be a nice little green sanctuary later this summer. Their animals are many, and the politics are intense, yet they provide endless entertainment.

We went to the Marastoon compound where the new Parsa office is about to open. It promises to be quite the organization. I met Yasin, his second wife Salia and



their son Osmond, along with Salia's brother Assef. They are wonderful people that I immediately felt comfortable with. We toured the whole compound and met some of the orphans out playing. They are very curious about me, but on the whole, polite and respectful. I saw their football field, covered in rocks, and not level at all, with piles of stones as goal posts. Most of them run around in bare feet. I talked with Yasin

about finding someone work the field until smooth and well graded, and am going

to have some real goals built. This will be my little contribution to the compound. Their gardener costs only 4 dollars a day to hire, so I think that for the price of about \$50 I can get them a nice place to play football. Under Taliban rule there was no playing allowed by children, so there are not many playfields in Kabul.

We had a wonderful little meal at the compound of chicken tandoor, rice and some sort of spinach dish, with fresh watermelon and bananas as desert. Yasin's son Osemond ran around all over the place, but as typical of Afghan families was included in everything. I think I will like Afghanistan. It is truly different than Africa, I feel less foreign here, less out of place, less of an object to be stared at. Afghans seem truly friendly and hospitable, at least the ones that I have met so far. I'm happy to be here, and look forward to seeing more of Kabul and the outer provinces. It is truly an amazing country.

