

5/7/07 – 5/8/07

### Learning Afghanistan

The past two days have been fairly uneventful for me, as I came down with a slight cold. I was laid up in bed with a bit of a fever and congestion. As mom put it, if this is the only sickness I come down with I can count myself lucky. At least I haven't gotten dysentery, which is sort of amazing and due to the fact that we've been for the most part cooking for ourselves. Really it wasn't so bad to be ill, giving me an excuse to rest and recuperate. I've been running at full speed since I got here, not sleeping much and it was no surprise to me that I got sick. Though to catch a cold in such heat was sort of a shock. I'm sure jumping in the cold waters of Badiamir didn't help. But this was worth it as the lake was amazing.

A few things did happen though while I was in the delirium of my fever. Its interesting the contrast between American and Afghan needs when they are ill. When an Afghan gets sick he/she wants the whole family to ring around their bed expressing sympathy and just generally being present. My mom at one point said, "you are so American", as I just wanted to be left alone. I didn't want anyone to see me and our Afghans were constantly trying to check in on me, peeking through my uncurtained window. "Colin, you fine? Colin you Mariz (sick) fine?" these questions were put to me at least once an hour. I tried not to be grumpy with them as I know it was just concern, they care about me greatly, but this is hard to feel when you are feverish and just want to be left alone. Afghans really are all about their families and are used to being with lots of people, Americans very independent and valuing their space.

While I was laid up in bed the compound was worked on further. Our wonderful painters finished up their painting and then had to spend an entire day cleaning up the mess they made of the window trim. They actually had to remove the panes of glass and use acetone and razors to clean them up. It took longer to clean up the mess they made

than it would have taken to tape off the windows and do a good clean job in the first place. I think they actually got this by the end of the day. There was really only one of the three that had done any painting before and I'm sure it wasn't for a westerner. This



job was actually good training for them and they are probably the best and most experienced painters in town now. You really have to teach your workers everything here. Their standards of a good job are just totally different than ours.



horrible, it takes a long time to get anywhere and is really hard on the automobiles. The only things that seem to be bringing any money into the communities are their potato and wheat crops, Afghans love their carbohydrates.

They couldn't find any rugs in these villages where traditionally they are made. They found women that said they could make them but could not afford the upfront costs of wool and dye. Yasin and mom decided they would experiment with buying the materials themselves, then providing these to the women that would use these items to make their nemads. This should bring down the overall price right? So they spent an entire day buying wool, often 1 or two balls at a time. I wasn't there to see it but they would arrive in a village and ask for wool, next thing they knew people were running to their houses pulling out whatever balls they had and trying to sell them. They settled on a standard price for their wool and tried to stick to it, but some balls were a little under weight and some over. In the end they probably came out all right as far as what they spent. They bought almost 50 kilos of handspun woolen yarn and some un-spun bags. I guess Yasin was totally in his element, loving every moment haggling with these old village ladies. Mom said it was quite the scene. I was disappointed not to be there to see this and take pictures.

Later that evening some women from a nearby village showed up to discuss making these rugs. Rahim our landlord had set us up with these ladies from a nearby village. They said the wool was good quality and they could do it. They also had some examples of their own work, which looked good. They tried to sell these to us, but were asking for prices that were far above what could be sold in Kabul. In fact, surprisingly the farther from Kabul we get and closer to the source, the more expensive these items

On the 8<sup>th</sup>, while I was sick, mom and Yasin started working on their ideas for economic development in the area. They want to take things that these small villages do well and facilitate the development of "micro-industry" for lack of a better term. The idea came out of our search for gelams and nemads (different types of handmade rugs) in these small villages. They thought, "lets get to the source of these items, they should be cheaper here than in Kabul". In this way they could use the fact that they are going back and forth anyways to stimulate the market by undercutting the price of these items in the city. They don't want to make a profit off of it, as an ngo they could likely get their costs subsidized by international donors. They will provide work for people who need it. There just isn't enough of a market right now for people to devote their time to the making of these things. Not many people even get up into these small villages, the roads are

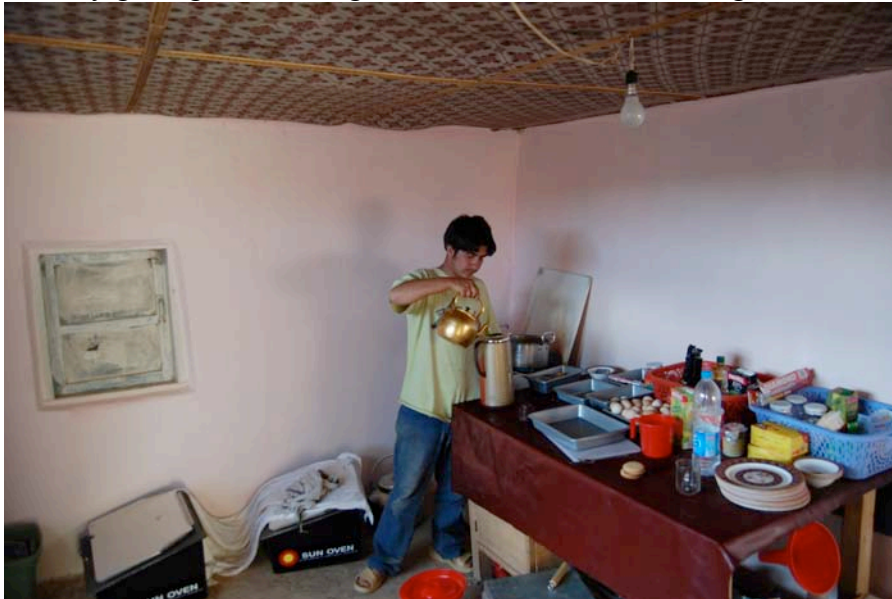
seem to get. Quite the interesting phenomena, I've never seen anything like it and it's a little perplexing. Mom discussed colors and patterns that would sell well. I have a notion that these women are going to drive a hard bargain for their services but we'll see, this is



somewhat of an experiment. Next thing to do is buy some dye and set them on their way.

I started feeling much better that night, my fever seemed to be gone and I was able to get up and have dinner with everyone. It was another meal cooked by Same, as neither mom or I had time to put one together, and though we appreciate his cooking and hard work he really only knows how to cook one thing, Kabuli palaw. This is a staple dish in Afghanistan and is essentially rice with raisins, maybe carrots and goat meat. Already getting tired of Afghani cuisine. I've been eating lots of fruit, which is fresh and

tastes great.



That night as we were lying in bed, Yasin started telling me about his life in Afghanistan during the past 25 years. He is 31 years old and has spent virtually his whole life in a war zone. He lost 7 immediate family members to various aspects

of the fighting. Some to rocket fire, some to direct attacks and war related violence, several to land mines. He also lost his good friend while in university. They were riding on his bike, I believe going home from school, Yasin on the back, his friend peddling. A rocket exploded in front of them, shrapnel hitting his friend and killing him. Yasin didn't get a single scratch on him, but had to watch his friend die in front of him. He says that there isn't a single person in Afghanistan who doesn't have a family member that was killed during the war. This is probably true.

I don't want to try and tell his story; I don't know that I could do it justice sitting here after the fact. It was just amazing to talk to Yasin about this. He is such a caring and compassionate man. There is only a four-year difference in our ages, yet our lives have been so different. He has two wives and takes care of quite an extended family, including in-laws. He is tireless in his work to make his country better. I pray, for the sake of his country, that he becomes a leader in the new, developing Afghanistan. This is what my mom is grooming him for and I hope it works. Hearing his story and seeing how hard he works makes me want to be a better person in this world.

