

5/5/07

In The Heart of Afghanistan

Today we set the painters up with enough work for the day and went out to explore. We drove 45 minutes to an ancient and abandoned fortress built in the 6th century AD by the Shansabani kings. This is an abandoned refuge from invaders. It is located on an isolated outcropping of rock, maybe 800 feet above the river valley of Bamian. The people built these dwellings high above where they farmed, as a defensive measure from



raiding barbarians such as the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan's grandson in the 12th century. There were a couple such fortresses in this high valley that was once home to hundreds of thousands of people. When the Mongols invaded in the 12th century they laid siege to Sharizahak (the red city) and also a nearby fortress aptly named the "city of screams". The people here were decimated by the Mongols, but eventually incorporated them into their bloodlines, which can still be seen in their facial features.

When we arrived at the turn off from the main road we were stopped by a "poopy little man" as my mom called the short soldier. He said that if we wanted to see the ruins we had to purchase a ticket (45 minutes) back in Bamian. We were slightly put off to say the least at there was no sign indicating this anywhere, nor was this the case just two months earlier when my mom had been to the ruins. Yasin started to drive down the road anyways and the soldier went and grabbed his gun aggressively. We stopped and he reiterated his demand that we return to Bamian and purchase tickets. Yasin stepped out of the car to talk to the man. As it appeared he was getting nowhere, my mom got out of the car and walked stridently up to the man, whom she towered over. She expressed her anger and then called for Norm to come out and "beetle" his eyebrows at the man angrily, as he is the big Khereji (foreigner) man. Slowly our group gathered momentum with the man as all of us seven of us, Faisal included, got out of the van and surrounded the man. I couldn't say anything but I took off my sunglasses and did my best to "beetle" my eyebrows angrily, (though I wasn't quite sure what that was supposed to look like) and generally huff about. My mom had Yasin translate for her. She said that this was a ridiculous thing not to sell tickets at the location and if she had to go back to Bamian she was going directly to the governors office. She said she was an acquaintance of the governor and demanded to know the soldiers name and his commandant's name. I could see the little soldier's resistance start to crumble and he went inside a building, bringing out a quiet looking, younger soldier. It was finally agreed that we would pay the young soldier 500 afs. (\$10) to be our guide up to the ruins. We had no problem with this, paid the man and he jumped in our van with us, with his machine gun.

This was a good example of a couple of things that happen constantly in Afghanistan. As I mentioned in an earlier entry there are "25 million kings" in this country. Anyone in any position of power typically tries to enforce whatever rules he

sees fit to, when he wants to. It's a fairly arbitrary decision and often has no basis in the reality of the situation. Yes, someone probably did make the poor decision to sell tickets to the ruins in Bamian. However, it was obviously not that big of a deal given the soldier relented in the end. If he truly did have orders not to allow anyone access without a ticket, then he should have stood by these orders and prevented our entry without fear of losing his job. As it was, we did what is needed so often in this country to get anything done. We made a big scene, dropped phony names, threatened the man's job and made a general nuisance of ourselves. It was kind of fun, though I would not have been the first one to start bitching out a man with a gun. My mom has gotten used to this and is unafraid of "poopy little men" with machine guns.



So we went on our way and parked the van for the walk up the ruins, which were amazing. These dwellings are perched high on the sides of the mountain and cliffs, constructed of mud that was also molded into designs. I tried to imagine what they looked like when first built and what it would have been like to live high up above the valley with thousands of other people. The defensive nature of the choice to build up

there was immediately apparent. Walking up the path was difficult enough, let alone trying to take the city while being defended by its inhabitants. We had to stay on the path and I was introduced to the white and red rocks that are found all over Afghanistan. These were painted to indicate the presence or lack of mines left over from the various wars that Afghanis have been subject to for the past 25 years. I really wanted to hop around the rocks and explore the ruins further, but the young soldier with us got very distressed whenever I crossed over a red rock, so I stopped doing this and stayed on the path. I probably would have been fine, but I guess it's not worth the chance.

This outcropping, I don't really call it a mountain because it is set apart all alone and less than a thousand feet above the valley floor, was used by Mujahadeen against the Russians, as well as the Taliban against the Hazara of Bamian. It is the perfect place to use as a defense against invasion from the east. There were old dug out spots that held large howitzers and anti-aircraft guns. Empty ammunition cans and caves dug into the hillside with evidence of soldiers having lived in them. At the very top we came on a large gun





that was either broken, or too much hassle to try and bring back down the treacherous trail; a helicopter probably brought it up in the first place.

As we stood at the top, next to this gun I was struck by the understanding of why it has historically been so difficult for invading armies to take Afghanistan. The mountains are a great

equalizer; they don't allow large armies to utilize most of their complex machinery of war. Tanks get bogged down in valleys where they get bottlenecked in passes and can be taken out by a handful of men sitting on the hillsides above with rockets. The Russians lost so many soldiers in their 9-year attempt to take Afghanistan and many attribute this as one of the main reasons the Soviet Empire fell. The people of Afghanistan are historically a very warlike society of different tribes, none of which will stay subject to another's will, especially that of imperialist non-believers. Given America now has soldiers here in Afghanistan, I worry that our government will make the mistakes that the Soviet Union made. I actually think that in some ways it's a good thing that we moved on to Iraq so quickly. In most areas of Afghanistan there is not much of an American military presence, it's my impression that the majority of Afghans sees us less as an occupying army and more of a stabilizing force. Afghans seem to fear other Afghans as much or more than they do us. The years between the fall of the Russian supported communist regime and the takeover by the Taliban were the worst for most Afghans, as it was a time of warlords vying for control, with at one point three separate armies fighting over Kabul. There is a reason why the Taliban were embraced by most when they first won. People wanted stability, though the form of stability that ensued was realized eventually by most to be absolutely undesirable.



We eventually finished playing tourist and descended back down to the valley floor. We gave the young soldier that was our "guide" another 250 afs., as he was actually pretty nice and didn't rush us even though we took endless numbers of pictures.

I could tell he was pretty amused by us. He made \$15 more that day because we showed up and I hope this makes it a little easier for the next people who want to go see the ruins. When we got back to the “poopy little man” we gave Same some bakshish to give him, our attempt at smoothing things over with the locals. He slipped it into the soldier’s hand subtly and we could see he was a little surprised at the tip. He opened the gate and let us back towards Bamian.

We returned to our compound and our painters hard at work, though truly doing a terrible job by American standards. It’s interesting to see Afghans at work. They make great farmers but are truly unskilled at anything remotely technical like plumbing, electricity or painting. The average American knows more about these things than most people here that claim to be specialists. I was talking to mom and Norm and we decided that for one reason, most Afghans don’t even have these items in their home. Secondly, in America the cost of labor is so expensive that we learn to be independent and do things ourselves. We learn to paint our own homes, work on our own cars, and do our own basic carpentry. Here in Afghanistan you can always hire other people, a base wage is usually around four to five dollars a day, with specialists not usually earning much more than 6 dollars a day. Everyone with any money has a houseful of servants to do what is needed. On the surface this seems great, though Afghans make terrible servants. But I’m glad that I grew up learning to do household basics on my own. I can cook better than most, I’ve done roofing, painting, plumbing, electricity, drywall, and wall-to-wall carpet, have a good basic knowledge of cars and lots of landscaping. I think we often surprise the Afghans by the breadth of knowledge Americans have on these subjects. They seem to think that because we are rich Kherejis we are soft and incapable like their own elite. Its kind of fun to know how to do all these things yourself, although great when you can afford not to. In a country like this, if you want to have things done well by our own western standards, it is crucial to be able to direct your workers with efficiency. It is rare to find anyone that

really knows what they are doing. People need work so desperately that they will call themselves a specialist at anything to get a job. Its important to not get too frustrated at this, we have pretty high standards for work as Americans. Find a good hard worker and teach him how you want it to be done.



But be ready to repeat yourself because they so often just do what they want anyways. They are Afghans; a historically proud independent people and one must take them for what they are worth or be continuously frustrated.