

UNDER WESTERN EYES



Foreign tourists' and reporter' memories from Iran, especially in recent years, are full of wonder and happiness. Influenced by comprehensive western media propaganda, they have a biased and distorted attitude toward Iran and upon arrival in Iran, they become surprised by the peace, security and special hospitality in this country.

In this column, gradually you will read these tourists' and journalists' memories from their stay in Iran and their real touch of life in this country.

Rick Steves is a famous TV reporter who traveled to Iran accompanied by his group to produce a TV program about Iran. Based on his real touch of Iran, he made an interesting program named Iran Travel Journal (with an estimated 25 million viewers). He also released a valuable DVD about Iran and wrote a written travel account.

Breakfast in a village

(Part 2)

By Rick Steves



And there are questions: How free will we actually be? Will the hotel rooms be bugged? Will crowds gather around us, and then suddenly turn angry? Will the food be as bad as I remember from my 1978 backpacking trip through

Iran?

While I'm exhausted from a month of guidebook research and TV filming in Europe, I need to be fresh and quick-minded for on-camera interactions with people on the street (we hope for lots of this), and to simply stay healthy. I'll lose a night's sleep as we fly in, arriving in Tehran at about 4 a.m.

We have a very sketchy script to start with. It will evolve over the next week and a half. Each day, after a long day of shooting, I'll massage what we've shot and learned into the script, print out a new version, and come up with a shooting plan for the next day. My hunch: By our last day, we'll have a fine show.

The pilot said, "We're taking this plane to Tehran"... and nobody was alarmed.

Flying from Istanbul's Atatürk Airport to Tehran's Khomeini Airport, I think about the airports my fellow passengers likely used—Reagan and De Gaulle. The airports are named after four very different 20th-century leaders, but each one left an indelible mark on his nation.

The plane is filled with well-off Iranian people. Their features are different from mine, but they dress and act just like me. As so often happens when I travel, I'm struck by how people—regardless of the shapes of their noses—are so similar the world over.

As we all settle into the wide-body jet, I wish the big decision-makers of our world weren't shielded from an opportunity to share an economy cabin with people like this.

I made this same Istanbul-to-Tehran trip 30 years ago. Last time it took three days on a bus, and the Shah was on his last legs. Wandering Iranian towns in 1978, I remember riot squads in the streets and the Shah's portrait seeming to hang tenuously in market stalls.

I also remember being struck by the harsh gap between rich and poor in Tehran. I was 23 years old. I believe that was the first time in my life I was angered by economic injustice.

My first visit to Iran 30 years ago gave me a rich- vs.-poor case of culture shock.

My Istanbul-Tehran trip is quicker this time—three hours rather than three days.

The pilot begins the descent. Looking out the window at the lights of Tehran, the sight reminds me of flying into Mexico City at night. Greater Tehran has more people than all of Greece (where I was just traveling).

I'm starting this trip a little bit afraid. I don't know what's in store for us. We are anticipating a challenging and extremely productive 12 days here.

Tehran is a mile-high home to 14 million people.

I was hesitant to tell anyone about this trip until it was actually happening. One day into this experience, we are definitely here. Four-lane highways intersecting with no traffic lights, "Death to America" murals, and big, warm, welcoming smiles...Iran is a fascinating and complex paradox.

Tehran, a youthful and noisy capital city, is the modern heart of this country. It's a smoggy, mile-high metropolis. With a teeming population of 14 million in the metropolitan area, its apartment blocks stretch far into the surrounding mountains.

I step out onto the 15th-floor balcony of my fancy hotel room to hear the hum of the city. I enjoy the view of a vast, twinkling city at twilight. Fresh snow whitens the mountain above the ritzy high-rise condos of North Tehran.

Cars merge through major intersections without traffic lights as if that's the norm. Surprisingly...it works.

As I look straight down, the hotel's entryway is buzzing with activity, as the hotel is hosting a conference on Islamic unity. The circular driveway is lined by the flags of 30 nations.

(To be Contd.)

Endangered Persian leopard



Iranian leopard's stare as unique as itself

(Photo: Seyyed Babak Musavi)

Compiled by our staff writers

Persian leopard is the biggest leopard subspecies in the world and is the largest existing animal from the felidae family in Iran. This beautiful animal can be found in Iran, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and some other countries.

There is scant information available about its home range and where it spreads in Iran. But taking into account that this rare animal like other felines is territory-seeking and its territory is not normally less than several acres, it can be assumed that this species is scattered all over a vast area covering the whole Iran and central Asia. This kind of leopard has been spotted in Kiamaki heights in eastern Azarbaijan, jungle park in Shiraz, jungle park in Golestan province, Lorestan heights, and Khash heights in Sistan Baluchestan province.

In the previous decades, this animal has been mistreated to the extent that the threat of its extinction came imminent. However, officials took serious measures and imposed a ban on leopards' hunt and provided the animal with a good condition for living in the preserved areas and it contributed to renewed growth of this species around the country.

Hopefully 65 percent of the whole population of this species lives in Iran. This is a good news for people who love nature and environment. Although this species of leopard possesses a large body, it is satisfied by just one prey per night. The animal does not hunt domestic animals (but when it is urgent). It is a responsible animal that usually inhabit heights.

The revival of this animal in Iran brought back the balance in the region's ecosystem, protected environment, and jungles.

Description

The Persian leopard is said to be one of the largest of all the subspecies of leopards in the world. It can grow to up to 1.5 to 2.7 feet tall at the shoulder, and weigh as much as 70 kg. Before 1990, when Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkmenistan were the Soviet republics, the scientific names of the leopard used in these countries were P.p. tulliana and P.p. ciscaucasica, whereas the name P.p. saxicolor had been traditionally used by the western specialists for the cats in Iran and, partially, Afghanistan. There are currently a few hundred left in the world.

Range and Habitat

It is found in Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and northwestern Afghanistan. Habitat varies from mountain steppe to grasslands, or anywhere having a reasonable amount of cover and a supply of prey. Unconfirmed reports of big cats in the far southeast of Turkey might also pertain to these animals.

Persian Leopard in Armenia

In Armenia, the Persian leopards live in the juniper sparse forests and, to a lesser extent, in arid and mountain grasslands, subalpine and alpine meadows. Their haunts are extremely rough and rocky places with plenty of cliffs. This predator uses the same trails during regular movements, so knowing where they are, the researcher can find the evidence of leopard existence such as scats, tracks and scrapes. The leopard in Armenia is threatened by disturbance, poaching, and wild fire, but which of these factors are most stressful for this cat is still unclear. The leopard can also be found in the Shikahogh State Preserve.

"In Armenia, people and leopards co-exist since the early Holocene and by mid-20th century these big cats were relatively common in the country's mountains. In 1950-1970s, the local leopard population was rising and spreading northwards as shown by increase in the rates of the centrally planned skin purveyance and more skins coming from northern Armenia.

Persian Leopard in Azerbaijan

The Persian leopard lives in the southern regions in Azerbaijan, primarily in the Talysh Mountains, Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan. Despite occasional sightings, it was not clear whether leopards had been extinct in Azerbaijan by the late 1990s until a species was caught on camera in March 2007 in the Hirkan National Preserve.

Persian Leopard in Georgia

There are very few leopards left in the wild in Georgia. At present, they primarily live in dense forests, although several have been spotted in the lowland plains in the southeastern region of Kakheti in 2004. Over the last 60 years, there have been several sightings of the leopard around the Tbilisi area and in the Shida Kartli province to the northwest of the capital.

Persian Leopard in Iran

The habitat of the Persian Leopard is mainly found in the Alborz and the Zagros mountain ranges. These ranges cover a vast area starting from the borders with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia,

extending to the Caspian littoral region and on to Turkmenistan and western parts of Afghanistan in the Alborz range.

Along the Zagros range, leopard habitats extend to the south of Iran, close to the Persian Gulf. The habitat of the Persian Leopard may cover a wide area of Iran, but leopard populations are scattered, fragmented, and threatened. Human settlements and activities are the main threats for the species.

The Persian Leopard's main prey in Iran is Bezoar goat (*Capra aegagrus*) and wild sheep (*Ovis orientalis*). On occasion, leopards may prey on Boar (*Sus scrofa*), Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus maral*) and domestic animals such as camels, goats, sheep or dogs. The principle threats to Persian Leopard survival in Iran are population fragmentation and loss of habitat due to human population encroachment, poisoning and poaching. The Persian Leopard is a flag-ship species and its presence is a sign of the health of the entire ecosystem. The Persian Leopard is an apex predator in most of Iran's provinces. The leopard's chances for survival outside the protected areas of the Department of the Environment appear very slim.

Diet

A leopard's diet varies depending on where it thrives. The Persian leopard's diet varies from small mammals and birds, to larger animals such as, deer, antelope, Bezoar ibex, and occasionally wild boar.

Threats

This species is listed as endangered and commercial trade of this species is prohibited by international law. The Persian leopard has been threatened due to persecution, habitat loss, and poaching. It is also one of the animals in western Asia which is suffering from warfare in its mountain range. Seyed Babak Musavi, an Iranian photographer, wrote about an occasion that Persian leopard had been seen in central Alborz. He described an expedition in which his group photographed the leopard. You can read the story.

Leopards photographed

Ranging across the southern border of the Caspian Sea, the Alborz Mountains (which stretch 3500 kms) are home to the largest population of the endangered Persian leopard.

The Central Alborz Protected Area (CAPA) is one of the oldest and largest reserves in the country and holds a number of Persian leopards roaming across the Hyrcanian forests.

However, because of the dense forests and low density of the species, there is an extremely low number of direct observations by game guards and local people.

During a survey launched in September 2005 in the area, a family of a mother with two adolescents has been photographed using a camera trap in March 2007 outside of the core area of CAPA.

The leopards killed a village cow on the evening of March 5, just one kilometer away from a village at an elevation of around 1600 meters. The cow was found by the owner on a rocky cliff covered by forest, over a deep valley. When the carcass was shown to us on the evening of March 9, the leopards had just left the place, covering the hindquarter of the cow by soil.

Later, all the three leopards were recorded feeding at 01.00, 03.00, and 05.00. It seems that the family had spent the night on and near the kill and regularly fed on it. Then, we spent the time between 07.30 and 17.00 to observe the leopards from a hidden place, just 100 meters away from the kill on the opposite slope. We saw the crows flying over the carcass and sitting near it.

Since leopards return regularly to their kill during a few days to consume it, we installed a camera trap to a tree around 1.5 meters away from the carcass for two nights.

We were lucky to obtain 21 pictures from the leopards and surprisingly of no other animal. It was interesting that despite abundant fresh fox tracks on the snow and mud, there was no photo of a fox taken. The leopard family arrived at the kill at 22.00 on the first night and spent less than 20 minutes feeding.

No animals were observed to approach the cow. The leopards did not come back to the kill during the second night until 05.00 when the whole family was photographed on the cow. On 11 March, when we returned to pickup the camera, the remains were not covered by soil anymore, and it seemed that the leopards had consumed the preferred parts of the cow.

Since 20 March, seven cows and two sheep have been attacked in an area of more than 30 square kilometers. In a few cases, the leopard family was observed. As the wolf has been very rare in this area during the past few years, all the losses have been related to the leopards by local people.

It is necessary to assess the present high conflict between people and leopards by the Iranian Department of the Environment to reduce the present growing mortality of the species, particularly in Central Alborz Protected Area.



CELEBRITY

Shajarian, symbol of Iranian traditional music

(Part 2)

Early work

He studied singing at the early age of five under the supervision of his father, and at the age of twelve, he began studying the traditional classical repertoire known as the Radif. Shajarian started his singing career in 1959 at Radio Khorasan, rising to prominence in the 1960s with his distinct style of singing. Since then, he has had an illustrious career that includes teaching at Tehran University's Department of Fine Arts (among other places), working at National Radio and Television, researching Iranian music, and making numerous important recordings. The great ancient poets of Persia (Iran) have illustrated their feelings, senses and thoughts through poems. One can read, study and really enjoy these poems, but in order to feel the whole greatness, one should just listen to the heavenly voice of Shajarian.

Music groups

Shajarian has not always been in music groups, but he currently does the vocals for the Masters of Persian Music with his son Homayoun Shajarian, as well as two other masters, Keyhan Kalhor and Hossein Alizadeh.

Significant works

Rast-Panjah concert with Mohammad Reza Lotfi in Rast-Panjah (1976).

"Be Yade Aref" with Mohammad Reza Lotfi in Bayate Turk (1986).

"Sepideh" with Mohammad Reza Lotfi and the Sheyda Ensemble in Mahour.

"Bidad" with Parviz Meshkati and the Aref Ensemble in Homayoun (1985).

"Astan e Janan" with Parviz Meshkati and Naser Farhangfar in Shur (1982).

"Nava" with Parviz Meshkati and the Aref Ensemble in Nava, Se-gah and Dashti (1986).

"Dastan" with Parviz Meshkati and the Aref Ensemble in Chahar-Gah (1987).

"Cheshmeh Noush" with Mohammad Reza Lotfi in Rast-Panjah.

"Shab,Sokout,Kavir" with Keyhan Kalhor based on the folk music of Khorasan (2000).

"Bedun To" with the Masters Ensemble in Nava and Bayate Turk (2002).

"Faryad" with the Masters Ensemble in Raast-panjgaah (2003).

"Eshgh Danad" with Mohammad Reza Lotfi in Abou Ata (1981).

"Chehre be Chehre" with Mohammad Reza Lotfi (1977).

Bam Art Garden project

After 2003 Bam earthquake, Mohammad Reza Shajarian initiated a project to help the people of Bam. He also performed concerts in favor of people of Bam. After years of silence in Iran, his performance for the people of Bam was an outstanding humanitarian step towards his own people. He is widely known and accepted as the Singer of the People.

Awards and distinctions

Nushin medal (2008)
the UNESCO Mozart Medal (2006)

Nominated for Grammy award in Best World Music (2006)

Nominated for Grammy award in Best World Music (2004)

Iran's best classical vocalist (2000)

Golden Picasso Medal (1999), one of Europe's highest honors presented by UNESCO in France.

National radio and television golden cup (1977)

Prize presented by Turkish parliament speaker (1976)