

## UNDER WESTERN EYES



**Skiwiman is the penname of a British tourist who has recently visited some cities in Iran. The following is the log of his trips around Iran.**

## Arrival in Tehran

(Part 1)  
By Skiwiman

I'm not a morning person. Let's clarify that before we begin. Knowing that will allow you forgive me all manner of indiscretions and misbehavior.

It did not begin well. To be honest it began yesterday morning at 5.00 am when the alarm clock interrupted my slumbers.

I distinctly remember laying my head on the pillow but a short time before. Surely, it couldn't be time to get up already? Ah, the snooze button. An evening person's best friend. I allowed myself one press of the said button before hauling myself out of bed and getting dressed.

Worry not dear reader about my bypassing of the shower. I had cleansed myself the night before knowing that I would be in no fit state of consciousness to take command of a shower so early in the day.

It was a good thing I did not make too much use of the dear snooze button as father arrived at my back door half an hour earlier than scheduled.

I had expertly packed, but snug suitcase (well it's more of a sports-bag-looking-suitcase with wheels) the night before in favor of the large (oversized-sports-bag-looking-suitcase with wheels) suitcase allowing extra room for any Persian goodies I would purchase on my trip. The statutory required camera daypack was at the ready. Passport? Check. Money? Check. Suitcase? Check. Good to go.



SKIWIMAN

I drove to George Best Belfast City Airport as my father isn't the fastest driver in the world.

The hop and a skip to Heathrow terminal one was a joy after having to sit and listen to a business man/office worker complain merrily to a colleague about everyone who wasn't there whilst I was having my morning coffee and Danish.

Having completed what should be part of the London Marathon, walking from Terminal 1 to Terminal 3.

It is long enough - I checked in with Iran Air. The security man made us move from the orderly line we had formed to across the hall, just so we could line up again close to his security box on wheels where his assistant duly applied "Baggage Accepted" stickers to our bags before we had passed the security check, and lined up again where we started! Ah, the joys of petty officialdom.

Iran Air did afford the opportunity to meet a real live Iranian. As it turned out his name was Reza. He was greatly surprised that I was heading on a tourist trip to Iran.

After telling him that my travel plans involved a group tour and that we would have a local guide to keep us out of trouble, he assured me that I would not get into trouble.

Iran Air proved to be most pleasant with edible food and legroom aplenty. Reza kept up the chat and the almost six hour flight flew in. By the time we landed, I was well versed in Farsi/Persian and ready to take on the locals.

Immigration was bit of a free for all. Iranians are not good at staying in line, and some people kept pushing in at the front of the respective queues, to be vociferous annoyance of those already there! Still it kept me amused in the wee small hours of Friday morning.

The Immigration Policeman was a bizarre character. After his official duties were attended to, my passport was flung down and his attention very deliberately turned to the next in line. Relieved that my existing plans for the evening had not been circumvented, I moved quickly to the baggage carousel and the scrum that was the x-ray machine at the exit.

That was until my attention was attracted by our tour guide holding up a ridiculously small notice, which when I left the queue to read said we were to change US \$100 or US \$150 at the bank prior to exiting the arrivals hall.

Owing to my state of extreme tiredness I thought I'd been diddled by the cashier as I could only count around R600,000 in notes. Turns out the R1,000 note (or was it R100,000 - really can't remember) was in fact a R1,000,000 note!

After a seemingly endless bus journey into Tehran with the inside temperature showing as 38 Celsius we arrived at our hotel, and checked in.

I finally got into bed at 4.21 am, Tehran time, 19 hours after getting up! Still, at least I would have two and a half hours before I had to get up.

(Source: *Tourists' personal blog*)  
(To be Contd.)

# Towers of Silence



Zoroastrian tower of silence in Yazd

Compiled by our staff writers

A tower of silence or dakhma is a circular, raised structure used by Zoroastrians for exposure of the dead.

There is no standard technical name for such a construction. The common dakhma originally denoted any place for the dead. Similarly, in the medieval texts of Zoroastrian tradition, the word astodan appears, but which today denotes an ossuary.

In the Iranian provinces of Yazd and Kerman, the technical term is deme or dema. In India, the term doongerwadi came into use after a tower was constructed on a hill of that name. The word dagdah appears in the texts of both India and Iran but, in 20th century India, signified the lowest grade of fire temple.

Zoroastrian tradition considers a dead body—in addition to cut hair and nail-parings—to be nasu, unclean, i.e. potential pollutants. Specifically, the corpse demon was believed to rush into the body and contaminate everything it came into contact with, hence the Vendidad (an ecclesiastical code given against the demons) has rules for disposing of the dead as safely as possible.

To preclude the pollution of earth or fire, the bodies of the dead are placed atop a tower—a tower of silence—and so exposed to the sun and to birds of prey. Thus, "putrefaction with all its concomitant evils is most effectually prevented."

The towers, which are fairly uniform in their construction, have an almost flat roof, with the perimeter being slightly higher than the center. The roof is divided into three concentric rings: The bodies of men are arranged around the outer ring, women in the second circle, and children in the innermost ring.

Once the bones have been bleached by the sun and wind, which can take as long as a year, they are collected in an ossuary pit at the center of the tower, where—assisted by lime—they gradually disintegrate and the remaining

material—with run-off rainwater—runs through multiple coal and sand filters before being eventually washed out to sea. The ritual precinct may be entered only by a special class of pallbearers.

The earliest reference to ritual exposure comes from Herodotus where the historiographer describes the rites to have been secret, and "vaguely" that these first occurred after the body had been dragged around by a dog or bird. Further, the Magi (a term that eventually came to signify a Zoroastrian priest but may not have meant that in Herodotus' time) practiced this quite openly, before they finally embalmed the corpse with wax and laid it in a trench.

While the discovery of ossuaries (in both eastern and western Iran) dating to 5th and 4th centuries B.C. indicates that bones were isolated, that this separation occurred through ritual exposure cannot be assumed burial mounds, where the bodies were wrapped in wax, have also been discovered.

The tombs of the Achaemenid emperors at Naqsh-e Rostam and Pasargadae likewise suggest non-exposure, at least until the bones could be collected. According to legend, Zoroaster is himself interred in a tomb at Balkh (in present-day Afghanistan).

While general exposure of the dead is attested from earliest accounts, the ritual customs surrounding that practice appear to first date to the Sassanid era (3rd — 7th century C.E.). The use of towers is first attested in the 16th century.

### In Greater Iran

In the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition, the towers were built atop hills or low mountains in desert locations distant from population centers. In the early twentieth century, the Iranian Zoroastrians gradually discontinued their use and began to favor burial or cremation.

The decision to change the system was accelerated by three considerations: The first problem arose with the establishment of the Dar ul-Funun medical school. Since Islam considers

unnecessary dissection of corpses as a form of mutilation, thus forbidding it.

Secondly, while the towers had originally been built away from population centers, the growth of the towns led to the towers now being within city limits. Finally, many of the Zoroastrians themselves found the system outdated.

Following extended negotiations between the Societies of Yazd, Kerman, and Tehran, the latter gained a majority and substituted the dakhma with a cemetery some 10 km from Tehran at Ghassr-e Firouzeh (Firouzeh's Palace).

The graves were lined with rocks, and plastered with cement to prevent direct contact with the earth. In Yazd and Kerman, in addition to cemeteries, orthodox Zoroastrians continued to maintain a dakhma until the 1970s when the dakhmas were shut down by law.

### In India

Following the rapid expansion of the Indian cities, the squat buildings are today in or near population centers, but separated from the metropolitan bustle by forest gardens. In Parsi Zoroastrian tradition, exposure of the dead is additionally considered to be an individual's final act of charity, providing the birds with what would otherwise be destroyed.

In the past several decades, the population of birds of prey on the Indian subcontinent has declined by 99.9% (as of 2008) primarily due to diclofenac poisoning of the birds following the introduction of that drug for livestock in the 1990s.

The few surviving birds are often unable to fully consume the bodies. Parsi communities in India are currently evaluating captive breeding of vultures and the use of "solar concentrators" (which are essentially large mirrors) to accelerate decomposition. Some have been forced to resort to burial, as the solar collectors work only in clear weather. Vultures formerly disposed of a body in minutes, and no other method has proved fully effective.



### HISTORIC BATTLE

## Battle of Stirling Bridge

The Battle of Stirling Bridge was a battle of the First War of Scottish Independence. On 11 September 1297, the forces of Andrew Moray and William Wallace defeated the combined English forces of John de Warenne, 7th Earl of Surrey and Hugh de Cressingham near Stirling, on the River Forth.

John de Warenne had won a comfortable victory over the aristocracy of Scotland at the Battle of Dunbar, and his belief that he was now dealing with a rabble seems to have affected his judgment.

The small bridge at Stirling was only broad enough to allow two horsemen to cross abreast. The Scots deployed in a commanding position dominating the soft, flat ground to the north of the river.

The Scots waited as the English knights and infantry made their slow progress across the bridge on the morning of 11 September. The disorderly Scottish army of 1296 was gone: Wallace and Moray's hold over their men was firm.

The two commanders now waited until as many of the enemy had come over as they believed they could overcome. When the vanguard, comprising 5,400 English and Welsh infantry plus several hundred cavalry, had crossed the Bridge, the attack was ordered.

The Scots spearmen came down from the high ground in rapid advance towards Stirling Bridge, quickly seizing control of the English bridgehead.



### MASTERPIECE

## Stunningly beautiful film

"Vertigo" (1958) is one of Alfred Hitchcock's most powerful and deep films in widescreen. It is a film noir that functions on multiple levels. At the time of the film's release, it was not a box-office hit, but has since been regarded as one of the greatest films ever made. The work is a mesmerizing romantic suspense/thriller about a macabre, doomed romance - a desperate love for an illusion.

It is an intense psychological study of a desperate, insecure man's twisted psyche (necrophilia) and loss of equilibrium. It follows the troubled man's obsessive search to end his vertigo and becomes a masterful study of romantic longing, identity, treachery and death, female victimization and degrading manipulation.

The film's screenplay, written by Alec Coppel and Samuel Taylor, was based upon the 1954 mystery novel "D'Entre les Morts" by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac.

Hitchcock's masterpiece was the recipient of only two Academy Awards nominations, Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, and Best Sound, and it was left without a single Oscar statuette.

Both James Stewart's performance and Kim Novak's marvelous transformations - from Madeleine to Judy, and to Judy (pretending to be Madeleine) - are rarely matched in the history of cinema.



### CELEBRITY

## Baraheni, prolific literary author

Compiled by our staff writers

Reza Baraheni (born 1935 in Tabriz) is a renowned Iranian novelist, poet, and critic.

He is the author of more than sixty books of poetry, fiction, literary theory and criticism, and currently teaches at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto.

He had been the president of PEN Canada from June 2001-June 2003. He was also the Hart House Review's feature writer (poetry) for its 2007 edition when the magazine decided to go with a theme on exiled writers/artists.

His works are in Persian language and English and have been translated into a dozen languages. Moreover, he has translated into Persian, works by Shakespeare, Kundera, Mandelstam, Andric, and Fanon.

His most famous work is "The Crowned Cannibals," writings on repression in Iran, which recounts his days in prison against the Shah of Iran.

Winner of the prestigious Scholars-at-Risk-Program Award of the University of Toronto and Massey College, Baraheni has taught in the University of Tehran, Iran, University of Texas in Austin, Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, the University of Toronto and York University.



He has also been Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford University, Britain, Fellow of the University of Iowa, Iowa City, and Fellow of Winters College, York University.

In numerous articles and several books written on Baraheni's fiction, poetry and literary theory, fellow writers and critics have testified to the deep impact his literary output has had on the Iranian literature of the last four decades. There have been numerous special issues of literary periodicals on his poetry and fiction.

The publication of the French translation of his novel in Iran, "Les Saisons en enfer du jeune Ayyaz" (2000), and two recent novels, "Sheherazade et son Romancier" (2002), and "Elias a New York" (2004) have gained him comparisons with Georges Bataille, Jean Genet and many other French and world authors.

Two plays of his, "Enfer" and "Queskes" (a three-part play), directed by Thierry Bedard, the outstanding modernist director, in the main section of the Avignon International Festival in July, 2004, were widely reviewed by the major press in France and other parts of Europe. A third play, "Exilith," based on his short novel, "Lilith," also directed by Thierry Bedard, was performed in several festivals in France, and in Geneva.

Baraheni has won numerous honors and awards, among them: Human Rights Award of the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada (2006), a Canada Council of Arts Grant (2005); the Sepass Award in Canada, for Life-long Achievement in Literature (2005); The Yalda Life-long Achievement Award (2003); The Iranian Critics and Journalists Award (2000); Scholars at Risk Program Award of Massey College, the University of Toronto (1999); an award from The International Freedom to Publish Committee of the Association of American Publishers (2000); and The Overseas Press Club of America Award (1977).