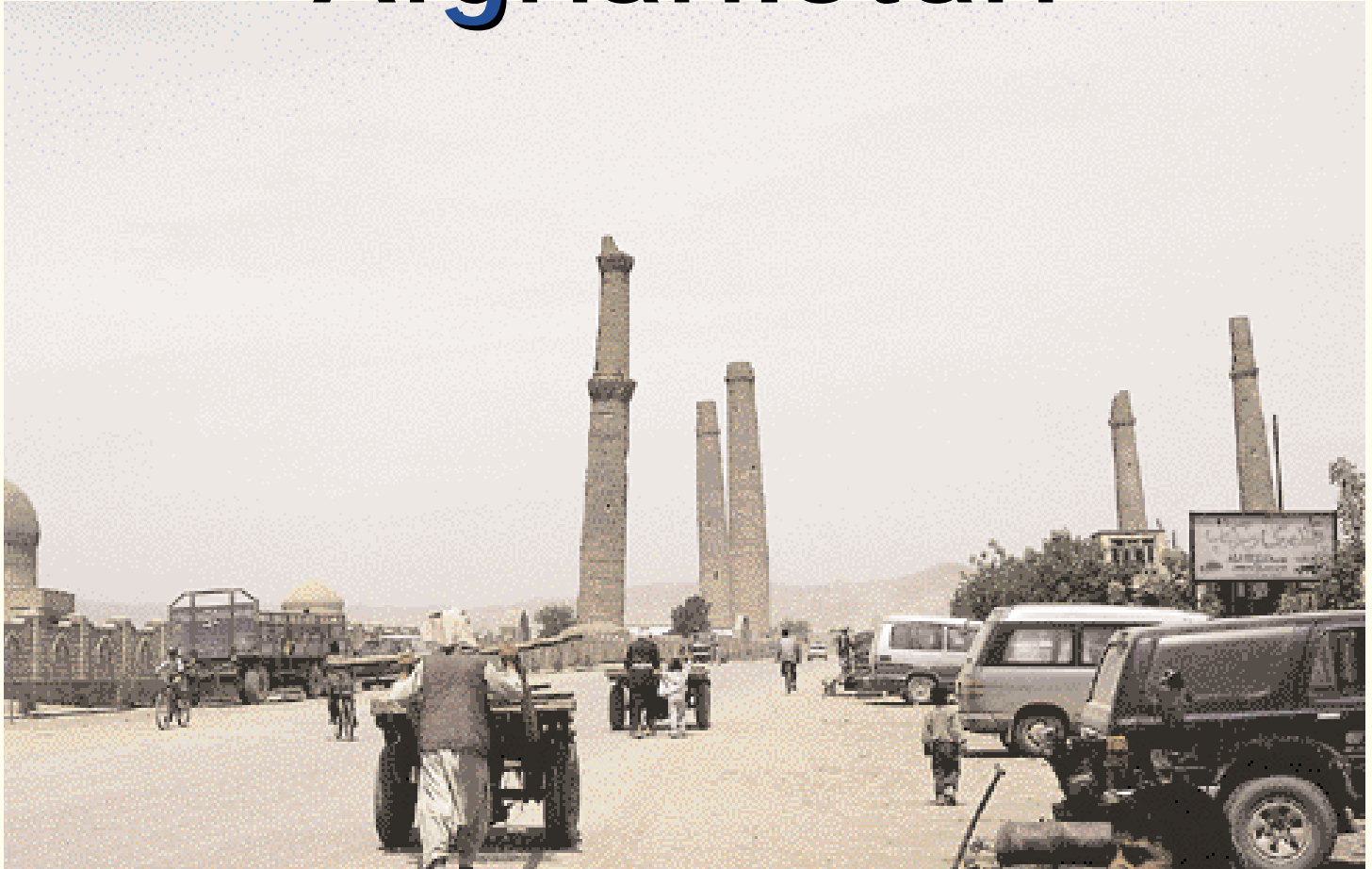


Afghanistan



Herat (Hann/ Hinterland).

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Can tourism be revived?

London - * Geoff Hann

Afghanistan has disappeared from the tourism map because of wars and unrest. But what chances has it in making a come back? And what are its tourist attractions? The following article tries to answer these questions.

According to conventional wisdom, when a country has seen its infrastructure devastated and invasions, civil wars, and every form of internecine struggle, during the past 30 years, tourism is possibly the last thing on anyone's mind. But not according to modern philosophy inspired partly by the increase in international travel, that says tourism can be an important factor in renewal as it can bring finance, knowledge and an abundance of goodwill - if managed well and that's the vital caveat.

Afghanistan has always been essentially a trading crossroads described as 'The Cockpit of Asia'. Its central position has, since very ancient times, been something that could not be ignored. Some very important empires, the Bactrians, Greeks after Alexander, and notably Mahmud of Ghazni in the 10th cent AD, amongst others emerged due to its geographical location. In our most recent times, an event of extraordinary significance: the rise of the Taliban, their rapid control of most of the

country and their subsequent fall had a tremendous impact on Afghanistan and the region. We are still evaluating the historical significance of the Taliban and the lessons to be learned from their short rule.

The country has a long history of appeal to tourists albeit some of its physical manifestations have been damaged. Kabul Museum and the great Buddhas of Bamiyan may be beyond repair but there is the promise of so much waiting to be rediscovered: mountains, deserts and ➤



Islam-Qalaa-the boarder check point (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

اسلام قلعة - نقطة الحدود (مجلة العالم).



Coins from different countries and ages (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

عملات من بلاد مختلفة وعصور متعددة (مجلة العالم).

tribal people of varied ancestry greeting visitors with a wonderful hospitality. In the West there is also a hidden asset. Afghanistan, for almost 30 years, has been closed to ordinary travellers. This is almost unique in Asia. and a lure for modern tourists and adventurers.

Then and now

I cut my teeth in tourism by travelling overland with groups through Afghanistan to India in the 1970's, just as the so called 'Hippy Trail', from the West reached its peak and declined. Crossing from Iran and

arriving in Herat in those early years was to experience scenes reminiscent of the Middle Ages: no large buildings, streets full of camels and horse drawn vehicles. The evening cool time brought out dignified men dressed in colourful robes, who strolled through the streets greeting each other with time honoured courtesies. A bow, hand on heart and 'Salam aleikum salam , haletan chetor ast?' 'Khobam' would be the answer Today many things have changed but not the natural courtesies. Afghanistan was dragged forcibly into the modern world. A quick 10-day personal visit, travelling West

to East through the country in Nov/Dec 2002, my first since 1981, sorted out the practical details. It was still fascinating, it was safe (relatively), and Hinterland could operate there. It turned out to be a real adventure.

The group of 12 intrepid travellers, of whom only one was under the age of 40 and the eldest was 75, flew to Tehran in April last year, into the face of a snow blizzard when landing in Mashad the next day. Unusual weather for an unusual journey was the gloss on this somewhat sleepless experience. We spent an extra day recovering in the Shrine City of Imam Reza.

It was very pleasant to walk through the city centre. The great shrine absorbed us for hours, the immense scale of the present construction of courtyards around the shrine itself amazed all. A very pleasant evening meal prepared in Iranian style and a social visit to a tea house relaxed and settled us into the manners and customs of the east.

An early departure for the border would hopefully set the pattern for the coming days. Much purchasing of bottled water and snacks for the journey had taken place the previous evening . Clean water is a difficulty in Afghanistan but bottled water is widely available in the cities, even though it is expensive by local standards.

Iranian roads are excellent intensifying the shock of Afghan roads. But first is the border experience. Crossing some Asian borders with your own vehicle and a group of Westerners can be a traumatic experience fraught with misunderstandings: language, culture and even downright hostility. However with due diligence in prior document preparation for clients and vehicle, plus a resignation to your kismet (fate) and many mutterings of inshallah, this experience eventually passes.

In 2003 the Afghan border of Islam Qal'eh was a sea of apparent chaos, but an interesting experience for our clients. The officials looked at us somewhat incredulously. 'Were we an NGO?' 'No!' 'Were we military?' 'Most definitely not' 'What, then, were we doing here?' We were a breed unseen for possibly 25 years - a group of Western tourists. Eventually, smiles, some a little unbelieving, broke out on everyone's face. 'Ok, you are very welcome.' ➤



Kabul – view across the centre (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

صورة من وسط كابول (مجلة العالم).

Herat

Then began the road journey to Herat. The new road, under construction, culverts and all, runs parallel to the dusty dirt track. Unless you want to completely wreck your vehicle much care needs to be taken. I could not help remembering the journeys of the past - the 125 kms to Herat were not a problem. By the look of the new road hopefully in the coming year that will be so again. It was nightfall before we crawled into the city and found the hotel where I planned to stay. A very friendly taxi driver drove ahead to help us find it in the dark.

The next day, our walking tour through the city confirmed my view that Herat offers more for the tourist than any other city in Afghanistan. It bustles with an air of trade with Iran which is obviously increasing by the day. The glories of Islamic architecture are best seen in the fabulous Masjid-I Jami or Friday Mosque, a Ghoriid Mosque of the 12th century. The Timurid Musalla Minarets and tomb of Queen Gahwar Shad has the most marvellous decorated tile work. The tomb of the Poet Jami also lies in the city. The great citadel/fort dominates the city. Legend says it was first built by Alexander the Great. The violent recent battles in the city

destroyed many buildings but also cleared the ground and the citadel could be seen much as it was centuries ago. Just six kms outside lies Gazargah, a special, splendid place. The tomb of the great Sufi saint and poet Khwaja Abdulla Ansari, who was born in Herat in 1006 and died here and tombs of past Afghan leaders and kings often referred to by poets and past travellers, greet visitors. For many centuries dervishes and savants made their way to this island of peace. The people of the city stared at us, a bunch of somewhat elderly foreigners, gaping at the buildings they take for granted. Tourists are still a curiosity and the locals want to know about them just as much as they want to know about the locals.

Our visit to the mosque, where we talked to the skilled workman repairing and making new tiles, coincided with the end of prayers and we were soon surrounded by a great crowd of inquisitive worshippers asking many questions. There is an eagerness for news, a hunger for normality and a great pride in being Moslem and Afghan. The hospitality, the variety, colour and often exquisite carpets of the region fed a hunger in our travellers to acquire such glories. I had to remind them of such mundane things as

customs duty, physically carrying the items and excess luggage problems but to no avail - we became a carpet train and certainly contributed our share to the balance of trade in Herat.

Our journey had just begun. We had plenty of baggage already - a variety of very colourful bags appeared - lovely handicrafts in their own right. It was time to leave on what used to be known in the early days as the Russian concrete road to Kandahar. We soon encountered militia road blocks of a fairly indeterminate nature, perhaps for tax gathering. The road was dreadful, broken concrete blocks stretching endlessly into the distance with signs of the conflicts and occasionally dreaded mines. Great care is needed and it soon becomes second nature to avoid certain dangers.

The landscape unfolded, stark, brutal only exceeded by man when you came across the destroyed fuselage of an aeroplane by the side of the road. This was the entry to the legendary Desert of Death, waterless and inhospitable. But we found occasional wayside tea and struggled on over the lumps of concrete. Preservation of our vehicle assumed paramount importance and the journey took longer than planned. Our ➤



Afghan carpets (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

السجاد الأفغاني (مجلة العالم).



Kandahar is important to Afghan Islamic traditions and the foundations of the Afghan state. The Shrine of the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed is one of the holiest shrines in the country.

The ancient history is also important: Alexander founded a city here and his ancient remains are close by. In modern times, Kandahar was the headquarters of the Taliban.

vehicle had to survive for three weeks. At night we stopped at a Chai Khana –there was nothing else. Just a kilometre down the road was an old Russian hotel, now destroyed and full of armoured vehicle carcasses. So, after another session of ' Who are you?' at the local chai house we opted for the local fare and bedded down with other travellers. It was important to confirm the reason for our visit - establishing normality depended on our credibility.

The local bus departed before first light and we soon followed. A long day ensued, very trying for the driver struggling over the lumps of concrete. Prayers were said to hurry the reconstruction that had been planned and authorised. The Herat - Kandahar journey will take only one day when the new road is completed. Tired and hot we only wanted to be in some sort of hotel by nightfall.

Kandahar

We did not plan to spend two nights in Kandahar due to security considerations.

But flexibility is the key to successful travel in Afghanistan. Our vehicle needed some repairs and we had to stop. Kandahar was an interesting oasis. Before the Russian invasion it was the fruit bread basket for much of Asia, its grapes and pomegranates justly famous. I was thrilled to see signs of the revival of this agriculture albeit interspersed with unwelcome poppy production. The city is important to Afghan Islamic traditions and the foundations of the Afghan state. The Shrine of the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed is one of the holiest shrines in the country. The ancient history is also important: Alexander founded a city here and his ancient remains are close by. In modern times, Kandahar was the headquarters of the Taliban.

It was a mere 90 kms to the Pakistan border and not much further to Quetta. Because of its location on the trade route, Kandahar is full of hotels, restaurants and markets. The Pakistani influence is strong in finance and among the merchants. An undercurrent of

Islamic confrontation can be sensed by the most sensitive travellers. The city is renowned for its embroidery, an entrepot for silks, tribal embroidered hats, waistcoats, interesting markets and historical sites.

However, it remains for Westerners and many travellers, a city with a turbulent past and present, so care is required. We opted for an excursion the next day out of the city to Lashkar Gar and Bost. A bone shaking, armed escorted ride took us to this fabulous site, the winter residence of the Ghaznavid Sultans, destroyed by the Mongols, rebuilt and finally devastated by Timur in 1221. Wonderful remains here, the great arch is justly famous. In many countries this would be the pre-eminent historical site.

The roads did not get any better. It took us two days of careful driving to reach Ghazni, approximately 352 kms away. We were not alone: batches of buses and trucks, some carrying extraordinary heavy loads, struggled around us. Now we were travelling on what used to be known as the ➤



The main road to Ghazni (Hann/ Hinterland)
(From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

الطريق الرئيسي إلى غزنة (مجلة العالم).



Ghazni _ Ghazavid Tower / Minaret (Hann/ Hinterland)
(From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

غزنة-برج / مئذنة الغزنوي (مجلة العالم).

American road. Built of tarmac as opposed to the concrete or tank road of the Russians, this road has deteriorated to the point of being almost non existent in most places. Tarmac needs more maintainance. But during these days we were met with heart warming hospitality. No one wanted any trouble but they also wanted to protect us. Good news for the future - we met a team of Indian engineers along with some UN employees surveying the road. Reconstruction may have started already.

Gazni

We finally reached Gazni, a famous city with a continuous military history, a Buddhist past and somewhat turbulent present. The natural kindness and warmth of the towns people

prevailed and endeared me to the town. The great fortress mound is visible for many kms and just beyond are the two towers or minarets built by Masud 111 and Bahramshah, Ghaznavid rulers. These are Gazni's famous sites. The brickwork on the towers is a feast of Islamic art of the period 1000 to 1100 AD. Further on are the remains of the Palace of Sultan Mas'ud and the Mausoleum of Sultan Mahmud, the great conqueror of the tenth century.

Kabul

Our exploration of the south was almost complete and the final 145 kms to Kabul was on a newly constructed road which wound through the hills before descending into the Kabul Valley. Such was the ferocity and the

struggle between the factions for the control of Kabul that de-mining around the city's outer perimeter will take years to complete. It is possible to fly from Kabul to Herat but the dry southern deserts of Afghanistan are an experience not to be missed.

The capital now has a vastly inflated population due to the return of refugees and the continuing turbulence in outlying parts of the country. For the tourist or traveller the attractions of the city are reasonable hotels and guest houses, a variety of foods and restaurants plus access to goods and purchases not available anywhere else in Afghanistan. Contacts with the outside world via internet and telephone are easy enough in this pulsating city. The climate is mild and tolerable for much of the year. For the powerbrokers of this particular world and the merchants, Kabul is where eventually, you have to do your business.

Tourists are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity and variety of a street like Chicken Street. There are few streets anywhere in the world that offer such a concentrated number of shops with all the artefacts the country has to offer. Guide books, lapis lazuli, carpets, embroidery, weapons, jewellery, anything! Just ask. The price of course is much higher than elsewhere in the country but you can buy whatever you want. Kabul is also a city of monuments, some shrines, city walls and fortress and of course, for the Afghans, markets sellings goods from all over the world. Kabul is preparing itself for the coming seasons. From the Intercontinental Hotel downwards refurbishment is the order of the day in all hotels. Government ministries and other institutions are having to be built from the basement up. A drive around the northern and southern suburbs will give you an idea of the total destruction caused by the internal struggles of the last 20 years. Much has to be done. The empty shell of the museum, tragically looted, has many promises of international assistance - hopefully some of these will be kept.

International flights are beginning to come to Kabul and there is no doubt that tourism will soon start. The tourist headquarters is ready and waiting and a trickle of dedicated tourists have already graced it with their presence. Many excursions will be ➤



Kandahar airport (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

مطار قندهار (مجلة العالم).

facilitated as the tourist infrastructure develops and travelling out of Kabul will not be a problem. Ghazni, Bamiyan and Jalalabad will be the easiest cities to visit.

Bamiyan

For our particular tour, refreshed and cleansed, we headed north to the mountains - the home of different ethnic tribes: the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen. The mountains of the Hindu Kush are justly famous - high, snow bound for much of the year and full of hidden valleys and mountain rivers. Before we attempted the Salang Tunnel and Pass, which is the main road route to the North and Mazar Shariff, an excursion had to be made, to the Buddhist Valley of Bamiyan, only 223kms from Kabul. Here were one of the great wonders of the world, the great statues of Buddha with an amazing 55 ft figure unhappily destroyed by an act of iconic vandalism, unequalled during the past century. However the caves, niches and ruins of the kingdom and earlier city destroyed by the Mongols and now damaged by the Taliban, are still there. A new hotel camp has been opened and the neighbouring ancient cities/ fortresses on the peaks along with the famous and most beautiful lakes of Bande- I- Amir are all waiting to be discovered.

Salang Tunnel

This whole area was fought over by warlords and was a front line until the factional conflict ceased just four years ago. The demining of the entire region will continue for years. If you want to reach the north beyond the mountains then the choice is the tunnel or the long way round. However it is very encouraging to note that the dreaded Salang Tunnel, a feat of great sixties engineering which has badly deteriorated, is now being renovated. The Agha Khan Foundation is busy funding bridges and village structures in this area. There are many Ishmaelis in this region. The road and tunnel experience was not a good one for us. We had to use chai khana on our return due to a very late May snow blizzard which resulted in chaos and blocked the road. Once the tunnel and approach roads are renovated, such storms will not be such a problem. The scenery however is superb. This is another world, so far removed from the hot deserts and dryness of Kandahar. This main road to the north also connects with Tajikistan and brings you out onto the endless Central Asian plateaux that stretches for thousands of miles.

Lining this road we come across the skeletons of tanks, armoured vehicles and ruined villages - a testimony to the absolute stupidity and greed of war mongers. The

people in the north are more used to foreigners and were not quite so incredulous at our presence as those in the south. There are some ancient sites, excavated in more peaceful times, now neglected, that are of great importance to the understanding of the ancient past. They include the temple ruins of Surkh Kotel - a Kushan site, the ruins of the stupa and monastery of Aibak, near Samangan - all isolated and waiting for visitors, explanations and care.

The north has much more to offer than I have written about - Kunduz - a medieval city, once walled, other cities, the mountains and lapis lazuli mines hidden away in the east.

Mazar - I Sharif

Our time on this trip was limited. We had to see Mazar - I Sharif. scene of much fighting over the last few years and the capital of the north. It also is home to the most prestigious and religious shrine in Afghanistan - Hazrat Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. Many thousands come to this shrine to worship every year inspired by legend, tradition and above all faith. Who are we to argue about what brings us to God? The shrine is the focal point of the city. After its latest renovations a colourful, almost pretty building with harmonious architecture and tile work has emerged. The city itself is quite modern, with some scars of the most ➤

recent conflicts. Like Kabul it is the place for hotels, food and rest before moving on. Nearby is a treasure, that of the ancient city ruins of Balkh, believed to be one of the world's oldest cities. Tradition mentions shrines and rites going back to the 5th century B.C. Alexander founded a city here, Buddhist remains abound and city walls stretching at least 12 kms are still there. The ruins of Noh Gumbad, one of the oldest mosques in Asia, have decorations synonymous with those in Samarra from 8th century Iraq. Not least, Balkh is the birthplace of the Sufi poet Rumi. A university city, the Islamic home of learning and piety, destroyed by Genghis Khan but revived under Shah Rukh. The Shrine of Khawja Abu Nasr Parsa has wonderful work. Anyone who is interested in art, history and culture has to see this ancient place.

Returning to Kabul by road from the north should be a days run, albeit a long one. But nothing is certain in this world and the weather defeated us. The flights from Mazar are usually full, testifying to the popularity of Balkh.

For many tourists Kabul would be the point of departure from Afghanistan, and they would take international flights out of the capital. But there is one last adventure for those with time and imagination: Kabul via the Kabul gorge to Jalalabad and out of Afghanistan via the famous Khyber Pass to Peshawar in Pakistan. These passes reek of history and are blood soaked from the centuries that saw the foundation of modern Afghanistan and the curtailment of Sikh and British colonial aspirations of the 18th and 19th centuries. The departure from the Kabul Valley into the Kabul Gorge is through spectacular country. The road is also under repair and should be completed soon transforming a major trade route. Jalalabad has an interesting Buddhist past, is somewhat turbulent at times but has a good market for northwest frontier goods and a reasonable hotel. The carpets in this region are interestingly varied.

The region up to the border with Pakistan once supported numerous refugee camps and it was good to see that many of them were empty. At the border itself a stream of people were crossing on foot. It was easy to negotiate a passage from the Afghan side.

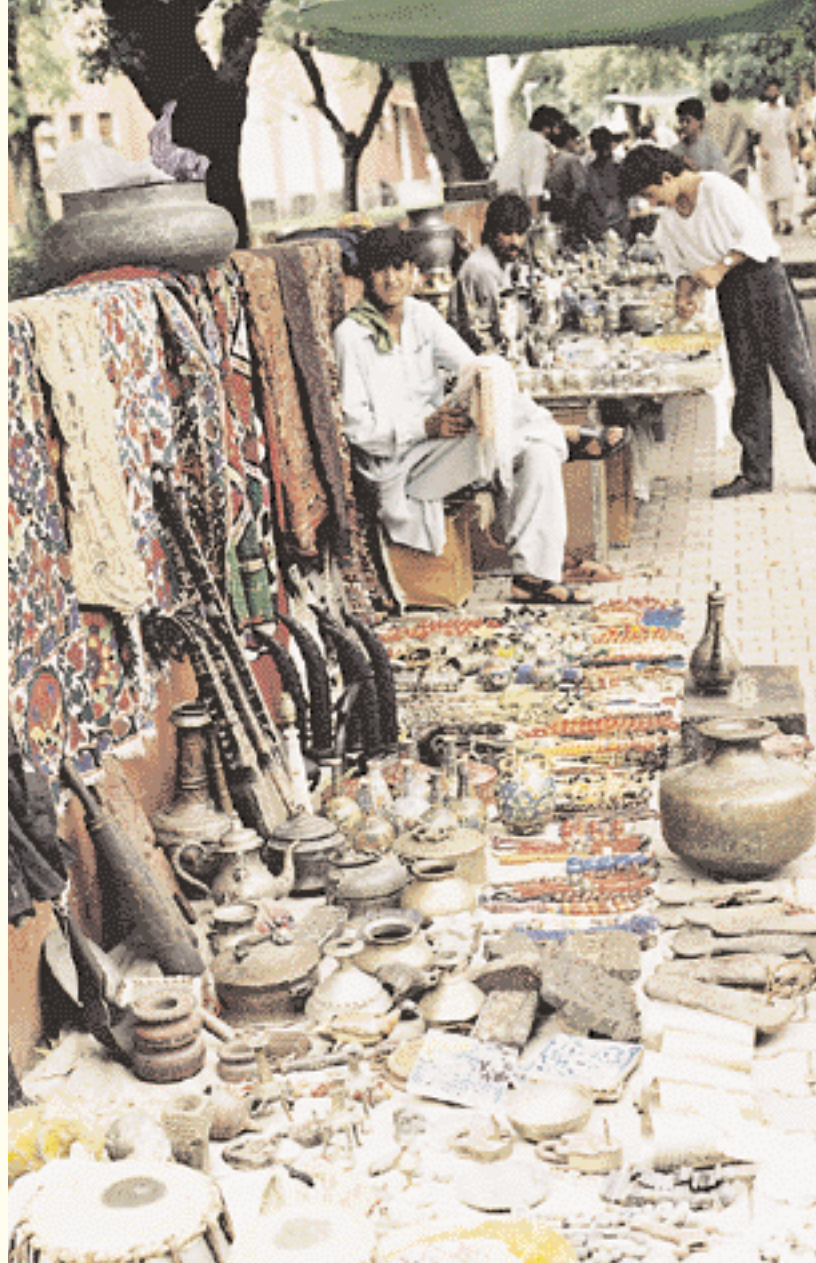
Pakistan is justly famous for its very often efficient bureaucracy which we experienced. I approved of the air of aggressive equality amongst those waiting to get in - or out - of Pakistan.

The Khyber Pass is redolent of last century and looks the part. Forts, north west frontier soldiers and the strange atmosphere of Landhi Kotal, the rail head and traditional smugglers town. The fortified large houses, rumoured to belong to very important black marketeers were overlooked by a huge Buddhist Stupa. Welcome to what is now a very curious ancient/modern

pulsating city, Peshawar - the premium city in the North West Frontier Province, with a very large Afghan population, a city of deep political intrigues, some Islamic orthodoxy, yet full of merchants, money changers and smugglers. What more could you ask from a city at the beginning or end of your Afghan journey?

This journey into Afghanistan proved one point. The potential as a major tourist destination is immense. It has all the natural advantages, a diverse landscape, deserts, mountains - complimented by beautiful handicrafts - Afghan carpets are world renowned - archaeology, some beautiful buildings and a tremendous historical past that inspires the imagination. But the greatest asset is probably the genuine hospitality of a very diverse people.

How can this tremendous potential be realised? Only by the daunting list of a massive investment in roads, air



Carbets and antique- the one of the tourist attractions (From the archive of "Al-Aalam" magazine).

السجاد والتحف سوق السياح
المفضلة (مجلة العالم).

connections, hotel infrastructure and the trappings of tourism -well trained guides, hotel management, tourist literature, clearing and investment in ancient site management. A variety of transport also has to be hired and maintained. Finally and not least, security for the traveller is essential. A tall order you may rightly say. But the development of tourism has begun and should be encouraged. Afghanistan welcomes everyone with an open heart and a receptive mind. ■

* Geoff Hann is the director and founder of Hinterland Travel, 12 The Enterdent Godstone, Surrey RH9 8EG United Kingdom, tel/fax: 01883 743584; email hinterland@btconnect.com. He has been leading tours to Iraq since the 1970s.