

Afghanistan revisited

* By Geoff Hann

At last, tourism is alive and doing well in Afghanistan. However there is no doubt that there is still a long way to go and the country is rated as uncertain, insecure and, by some Governments, positively dangerous. But agents from tour companies based in Kabul and Pakistan made their presence felt at the World Travel Market in London last November and announced their programmes. Several UK companies successfully operated tours last year and, somewhat surprisingly, a US company also organised a group tour. Individual travellers and writers are visiting again and many book projects are underway. Despite the daily hardship of so many ordinary Afghan people, the air of optimism is unmistakably apparent.



Minaret of Djam

منارة دجام

Entering Afghanistan by road can be a daunting experience as so much is being rebuilt, especially the scenic section from Pakistan to Kabul via the Khyber Pass and Kabul Gorge. Truck loads of essential supplies give tourist vehicles a safe passage. Further inland small vans and trucks grind their way forward on minor roads with the essentials to reconstruct once abandoned houses and villages: roof support poles, mats and tools. The refugees are returning with their bedding and gaily woven bags with all their personal possessions.

The lifeline of Afghanistan in today's world is its accessibility and the opportunity to exploit the transit trade. The road system is vital: since 2002 all major roads have been under construction. During 2005, the final section of the Kandahar to Herat road, the roads leading to the Salang Tunnel in the Hindu Kush and the road from Jalalabad to Kabul should be completed. This will restore and improve the transport network. Many countries have made a contribution to reconstruction and to schemes for new roads.

Tourism, will of course follow these trade

routes. But once the transport problem is overcome, tourists will have to combat the lack of accommodation and facilities. This is difficult and relies almost entirely on private entrepreneurs. Security is also an essential consideration. Only very brave or far sighted individuals risk their money in insecure conditions. The last elections were surprisingly successful and illustrated the willingness and craving of the nation for a stable country, after many years of total anarchy.

There are many outlets for adventure tourism at this stage in the country's development. ➤



Central Afghanistan



Ladies selling bread

بائعات الخبز

Last year my company, Hinterland Travel, ran a successful tour which has significant implications for the future. We travelled to Kabul from Pakistan and visited the mountains of the Hindu Kush and Bamiyan Valley. We then crossed the mountains to Herat. Strange as it may seem, the central route is now much easier to use because the various factions, who fought for this terrain for years, enlarged the tracks.

Bamyan Valley, and the routes leading to it, are strenuously beautiful. The destroyed Buddha's, Afghanistan's most famous monuments, are the Taliban's epithet - another chapter in the continuing history of man's destructive impulses.

When we arrived at our Bamyan hotel, we discovered a very interesting seminar was in progress: a UN-funded, five-day, education and instruction forum for the judiciary of Bamyan Province, led by a dedicated American prosecuting lawyer with an able Afghan -Australian lawyer. Discussions centered around the application of Sharia Law in conjunction with Afghan State Law and the impact of international law as recognised by Afghanistan. It was fascinating and heart warming that such a seminar could take place at all and the level of intellectual discussion was impressive.

We continued our journey through the mountains: Hazar was the first tribal area en

route. Many villages had been torched by the Taliban and, at first, a melancholy pervaded the landscape. Chakcharan, the centre of Afghanistan, was a marked contrast to the depression of the past - busy and energetic but the people were still waiting for the Americans and their promises of democracy, equality and a better life.

A hard - almost impossible - journey by four wheel drive along the Hari Rud River took us to Djam, with the Ghorid minaret/tower of victory - a wonderful, totally isolated monument, rediscovered by the West in the 1950's. I first wanted to see this monument 30 years ago. On my most recent trip to Afghanistan this dream came true. Sadly no attempts are being made to preserve a magnificent historical, archaeological site.

Little villages and UN tented schools abounded in the region where we were greeted with the most generous hospitality. The carpet dealers in Herat told me that kilims from the region were now quite scarce, but every encampment seemed to have its looms and stretched webs.

Arriving in Herat, I was almost shocked to see the development that had taken place since my previous visit only a year ago. The city's roads were completed and new office-shopping complexes along the main street were rising rapidly, along with new shoe and clothes shops and IT centers. The traditional,

low rise buildings had been torn down. As a Westerner, I am not sure this is the kind of progress I like, but the changes in Afghanistan cannot be denied.

The next section of our tour took us north-east from Herat to Mazar-e-Sharif, a previously unknown tourist route. The road was terrible and the weather unbearably hot but the country was wonderfully wild and the welcome friendly, watchful, totally curious, suspicious and only appeased by so many grey beards and old Western ladies.

Obviously we could not possibly be Western, or government spies. This is smugglers' country, close to several borders. Our route encompassed Murghab, Maimana and Sheberghan to Mazar - a four-day trip through Afghanistan's tribal areas.

Finally back down to Kabul via the Salang Tunnel, much improved and the conduit for future trade from the Stans to Kabul and the subcontinent.

I predict a healthy future for tourism in Afghanistan. It is a privilege to be involved in developments in a country that entices me to return again and again. ■

* Geoff Hann is the proprietor of Hinterland Travel (www.hinterlandtravel.com) which specialises in tours of Afghanistan and Iraq. This year a tour of Iraqi Kurdistan is planned. Contact: hinterland@btconnect.com