

Afghanistan



A visit only a year
after the Taliban
takeover...

October 2022



Arriving into Kabul

With great expectations, and a bit of worry and uncertainty as to the current security situation in Afghanistan. We checked in at Islamabad International Airport to our Flight (KAM-Air) to Kabul mid-afternoon. A hassle free check-in and flight to Kabul – only 40 minutes. The arrival procedures at Kabul International airport went very smooth. Checking visa of course and a few documents to fill-out, collecting luggage and out we went. Our **local guide Nawruz** met us and took us with the driver to check in at **our hotel Sofi Landmark in central Kabul**. He provided us with local (traditional) clothing so that we would not stick out as a sore thumb (haha). The hotel was located inside a building with security scanning. There were then four separate bullet-proof doors before coming through into the reception.

We went out for a quick and very good pizza at seemingly safe and good place in Kabul and talked through the program and some changes which we had to make to fit everything in. Early evening as we are planning for a very early start tomorrow morning. 95 % of the Afghan people today live under the poverty line. This figure used to be around 25-30 % before the Taliban take-over in August 2021. Just about everything was closed for the first 8 months after the came to power. Once leaving the car, people immediately approach and ask for money.





Kabul-Bamiyan



We checked out and were on our way around 7 o'clock AM. Leaving Kabul on a Friday morning turned out to be a very good idea. No traffic at all. We stopped at a local market for a few early photo-shots. The road up to **Bamiyan** was mostly good with asphalt and a few potholes and damages due to the recent war. Not as many checkpoints as I had thought – all in all 6-7. At the one just before entering Bamiyan, they were very thorough and went through every little thing in the bags. The Taliban were however not unfriendly and even posed with us for pictures.

We arrived at Bamiyan at around noon and **checked in to our guesthouse, Noorband Qala Hotel** which was quite ok and even offered wi-fi. Lunch was taken at a very simple local restaurant with "chambre séparé" for all the guests. The first visit was to **the main site of the former Buddha statues** which were destroyed by the Taliban's already back in 2001. The only thing left now is the empty niches where they were standing. Three niches separate in all, and many caves were the people used to live when the first came and settled here in the sixth century. The Buddha statues were from that time as well. People had lived in the caves until some 50 years ago. We continued to visit some other sites such as **Shehre Zuhak (the red city) built into a mountain wall**. **Shehre Gholghula (the city of screams)**. We also saw a few old and destroyed Russian army tanks from the war in the 90-ies.





Bandi Amir National Park

After a visit to the local authorities for registration we continued out to visit the beautiful Bandi Amir national park. The lapis lazuli-colored lakes of Bandi Amir are five in total and only 1 ½'s drive outside of Bamiyan. We started out however driving to some caves outside of Bamiyan where rumors had it a local female teacher had been teaching a group of girls. When we came, we were however informed that she had left three weeks ago for Iran permanently. This was sad news as I had hoped to meet with her help contributing to her work to maintain this hidden school going.

When back in Bamiyan later in the afternoon we went to the local market to stroll around and see what was on offer. I purchased a new scarf and some nuts to bring home. We took dinner at a local restaurant in town. The restaurants all have separate rooms for the dining guests, and one eats on the floor on carpets spread out.





Bamiyan – Mazar-e Sharif

Had to get up at 04:20 AM as we were leaving at 05:00 AM. Add to that no working electricity when showering and packing-up. Anyway, we made it and left on time pitch dark. **We had a scheduled 12 hour ahead of us to reach Mazar-e-Sharif. The trip took 13,5 hours. The famous – or rather infamous – Salangang Pass up through the mountain, built by the Russians back in the 90-ies** qualifies as one of the very worst roads I have ever been on. and I have travelled extensively in Africa as a reference. The road is also the main link between the north and Kabul, hence very long ques with trucks going in both directions. This was truly a nightmare. Part of it was on semi-open tunnels filled with dust and just about impassable roads.

We went through a few rural villages (shambles really) along the way. We were told that some were inhabited by Pashtuns, others by Hazare, Uzbeks, Tadjik or Turkmens. All except the Hazare can coexist and live in the same villages and they all support the Taliban lead government. Some of these villages along the way were not possible to visit before the Taliban took over in August 2021. They controlled this road and would not let anyone pass – certainly not foreigners. This has now changed when they have come into power. What really sadden me was all the women, covered with burkas carrying children, standing in the middle of the road begging, having traffic passing them on both sides. These were all widows from recent war where their Taliban husbands had been killed. They now had to make a living and were left to fend for themselves. Truly a sad sight.





Bamiyan – Mazar-e Sharif (II)

One of the villages we went through was Cheshmi Shir. A Taliban stronghold for years, and where they formed their government before taking power back in 2021. Today we were stopped a few more times on-route at various checkpoints. They opened your luggage go through everything were their dirty hands and a smirk on their faces. I felt they were provoking us a bit more today, but we stayed calm.

We stopped in Samangang to visit the Takhti-i-Rustam stupa from the 4th century. It had recently been damaged (2020) by the Taliban as they thought it contained a Buddha statue inside. If they had read up on history and gone to school, they would have known that all Stupas are solid. We reached Mazar-e-Sharif in evening and went for a quick dinner and then checked in at our guest house in the city.

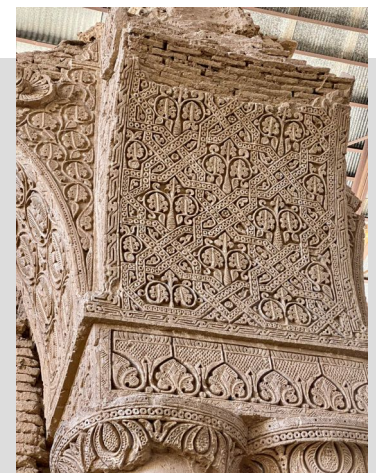




Mazar and Balkh region

Slept in this morning – well deserved. We started out by going to the local authority to register. This must be done in all cities visited these days. One must write down ever site one wants to visit and get it approved. They do check as there are Taliban’s at all places heavily armed making a point of checking your documents and taking a picture of you. We drove out to the **ancient city of Balkh and Bactria** with remains from as early as 1000 B.C. The birthplace of the Zoroastrian is located inside of Balkh with columns dating back to 4th century A.D. This place was later turned into a mosque and used by the Muslims. Part of the Balkh fortification has always been under control of the Taliban and has therefore not been possible to visit before 2021. **The area is still very sensitive requiring a Taliban escort “security detail” throughout.** We saw women in Burkas and children begging everywhere we went. It is truly a very serious situation with people not getting food for the day.

Back in Mazar with wandered through the bazar area with all the local produce on sale. Clothes, spare parts, vegetables, fish, meat etc. Very colorful and interesting. We have strict instructions not to take any pictures of women. Again, all women are fully covered in their burkas so there is not really any risk that one will see any faces, but then again – those are the rules since long. Even before the Taliban takeover last year. Mazar is well known for its ice cream making. We tried some delicious mango and pistachio ice-cream.





Mazar-e Sharif (I) to Kabul

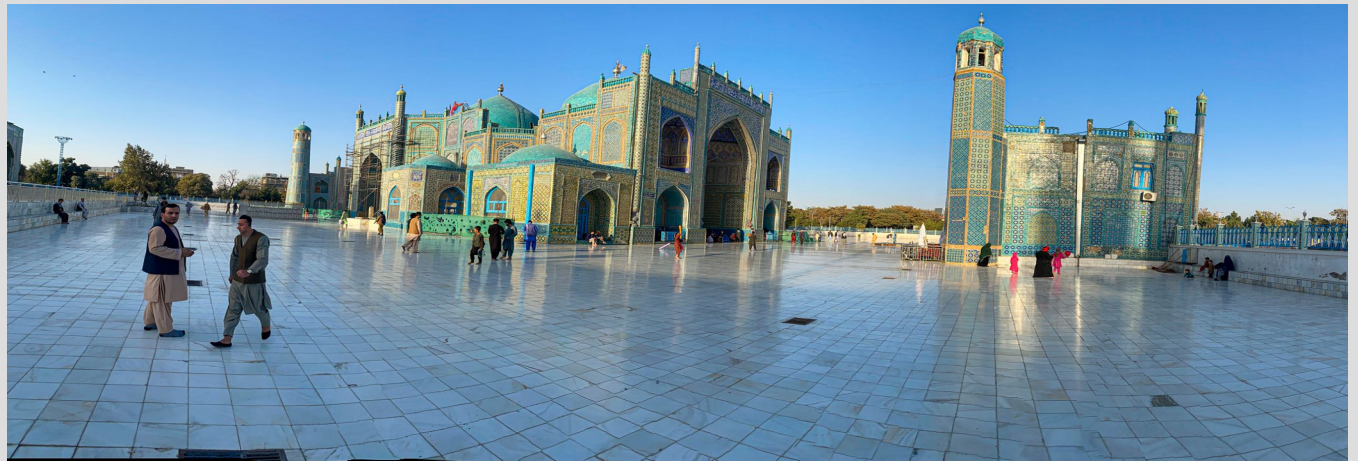
Last, but not least, the main event of the day – a visit to the famous Hazrat Ali Mazar mosque in the center of town. A magnificent mosque indeed. We went just before sunset wanting to catch with the best possible light. We were not allowed inside the mosque, however. The Taliban security also watches over you to make sure you don't take pictures where women might feature. And yes, do come up and look at your mobile or camera.

Early start again as we must travel back to Kabul. An estimated 10-hour drive. It took us 12 hours even though we skipped lunch. We dreaded having to pass the Salangang pass once more on our way back. It was less traffic this way as they had not let the trucks onto the road yet. They were all queuing up for miles, waiting for the clock to turn four so they could continue down to Kabul. This not to congest the bad road to much and blocking it all together.

The only site on route was an old castle Tashgurgan which was the base of the ruler at the time back in the 19th century.

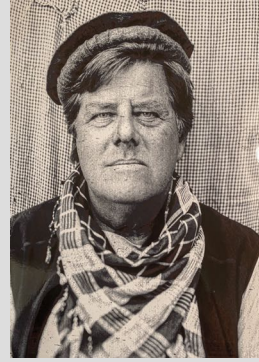
The dirt and sand from the road up in the mountains had gotten in everywhere in our car and our clothes. Difficult to breath and coughing a lot. It was sure nice to come back to Kabul and check in to our hotel and to take a shower. We took dinner at the Barg restaurant. The same one we visited upon arrival a week ago.





Mazar-e Sharif (II)





Kabul (I) – Box Camera man

Today it was **finally time to go see the Box Camera man in Kabul**. I saw a few years back a traveler who had chanced on this portrait photographer in Kabul using a very old Camera Box in his work when taking portrait pictures. There was also recently a short interview from another journalist/traveler who had been to interview him. I had therefore requested our fixer to organize so that we could go see him and his work. All arranged we agreed to meet Mr. **Haji Merzamaan** in his home in the outskirts of Kabul. We were invited into his home and sat down to take tea which is customary always when visiting someone at their home. He explained about this work and should us some of his pictures. He then set out to prepare this old camera in his inner yard. The camera is over 100 years old, and he came into possession of it some 50-60 years ago when he started his work. We took turns to pose on a chair while he started to take pictures. The negatives were then later brought to his shop nearby to be developed and processed into pictures. Here, he now had help from his two sons who also now were in the business slowly taking over, as he himself is now 76 years old. We got a couple of these black and white slightly grainy and old looking photos. It is rumored that he is the only living person still using this old technique. His hope is that his two sons now will carry on the business not to lose the knowledge. We were very pleased with the whole visit, and so was he apparently as he hugged and kissed me before leaving.

Time to do some sightseeing then in Kabul. We covered the old bird market which was much larger than the one we visited in Peshawar, Pakistan and more genuine. We continued with **the mosque and tomb o Sha do Shamshira, Barbour Garden and Chelston palace**. The national museum was unfortunately closed by the time we arrived. We had a very good lunch with lots of choices and some lovely pomegranate juice and coffee with our meal.





Kabul (II)

Our second day in Kabul started out as the first day with 2 hours of nose bleeding. I think this is due to the very polluted air and dust especially up at the infamous Salangang pass in the mountain. I have also been coughing constantly due to this. The stomach is also not functioning since coming to Afghanistan. Otherwise, all is fine. We started out by **visiting the famous Bookseller in Kabul**. The very same one **Åsne Seijerstad has written a book about**. He had an incredible assortment of books related to Afghanistan and the whole region. There were a couple very nice picture books that caught my attention. Many of which has been sold out since long elsewhere. Not cheap mind you. Many starting off around 65 \$ and up to 250 \$. He had a service also where he could ship books all around the world.

We then went to see **the Sahki shrine and mosque**. This is where the Taliban's killed over a hundred persons only a few years ago in a suicide mission outside the mosque. Many of the victims were buried and commemorated with a marble inscription outside the mosque. All text had been scratched off by the Taliban's since they came into power in 2021. We continued up to **Bibi moro hill** which gave us a good view overlooking all of Kabul

Time to leave Kabul. Our guide, Nawruz and the driver, took us to the airport to check in for Islamabad. We had to transit in Islamabad with a night layover as there were no other connection.

