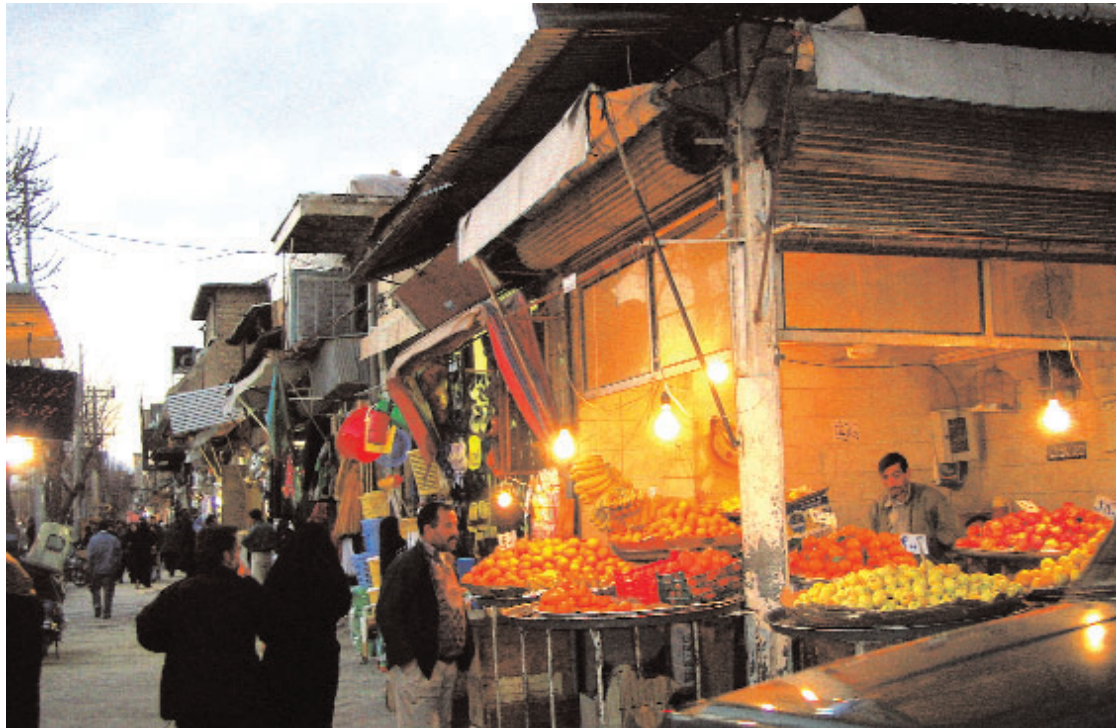


Culture clash

After returning to her native Iran after many years, **Kamin Mohammadi** found a stimulating country full of warmth and passion, belied by an internal struggle between eastern tradition and western desires



THERE ARE FEW places in the world right now whose name is more loaded than Iran. With pronouncements from the White House and its representatives regularly making headline news, negotiations over the nuclear issue moving back to centre stage every few weeks, and the label ‘axis of evil’ firmly embedded, there is not much that is said about Iran that is positive. But as I, and the thousands of other Iranians living in the Grove know, reducing our country and countrymen to terrorists and militant fundamentalist Muslims is not only unrepresentative, but it does a serious disservice to those interested in world heritage.

Having spent 26 years of my life in London I recently went back to Iran for an extended stay. And despite the repressive regime and the Islamic hejab that I had to adhere to as a woman, I enjoyed my time there more than I ever expected. Like many other Anglo- or American-Iranians that I have met, I too felt torn between my two identities, and had grown up feeling ashamed of the images of Iran that proliferated in the West: bearded men and covered up women chanting ‘death to America’ as they punched the air; Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that toppled the Shah, pronouncing a fatwa on Salman Rushdie; the American hostage crisis. Meanwhile, our own memories of Iran spoke of a different country altogether: a graceful place with a poetic language that expressed itself in elaborate courtesies, where the women are feisty and where every truck driver can quote 14th-century poet Hafez; a land rich in variety and plentiful produce, full of laughter, kindness and wry humour, and the fragrant sensuality of walled gardens and feasts of mouthwateringly delicious food.

In Iran I was constantly surprised and charmed. Instead of terrifying fanatics disapproving of my British accent and immodest gaze, I found everywhere a friendly curiosity in my life in London, and a warm welcome from my vast family who shamed me with their generosity and love. After years of being from a small unit of four, I was absorbed into a

huge tribe of aunts, uncles and nearly a hundred cousins, presided over by my tiny grandmother, a figure who had loomed large in my childhood.

Of course, Iran is the Islamic Republic and this was impossible to ignore in my hejab and observation of restrictive laws. But I also saw that in many other ways Iran hadn’t changed – the sensuality of the land seduced me all over again: the captivating scent of orange blossom and the song of nightingales in Shiraz’s verdant gardens, the magnificent Doric columns of Persepolis soaring out of the desert, the beautiful snow-capped mountains surrounding Tehran, the dazzling turquoise tiles of Esfahan... and everywhere the delicacies that were laid out in front of me at each dinner table and which I devoured with unseemly greed: sweets dripping with honey and scented with rosewater washed down with scalding black tea; buttery rice stained with saffron and served with a multitude of different stews made of herbs, beans and lamb, or walnuts and pomegranates; yoghurt with mint and garlic; fish stuffed with herbs and spices; sweet lemons, fresh pistachio nuts and untold varieties of berries... So many more culinary riches than the typical rice and kebabs that most travellers are offered in hotel restaurants. At a film festival I met a Frenchman who complained bitterly about the monotony of the food being served in his hotel, so I tutored him a little on the delights of Iranian cuisine and sent him off on a tour of traditional restaurants that dish up food from the different regions of Iran: as a visitor, the chances are that you will be invited to eat at someone’s home at some point, but if not, there are ways to seek out some culinary adventures.

For me, I had the best of both worlds. As a traveller I was able to tour the monuments of Esfahan, the gardens of Shiraz, the fire temples of Yazd, the caves of Hamadan and the ruins of Persepolis with an appreciation of their place in the world’s heritage, but as an Iranian I was able to appreciate the nuances of pleasure available to those who understand where to find it. And I don’t just mean the artists’ wild parties in the north

This page: some of the wonderful spices found in Iranian markets

Opposite page: typical street scene in Shiraz



of Tehran and illicit screenings of banned films, but also the pomegranate stall whose fresh juice transformed my every morning in Tehran, visiting the beauty parlour with my young cousins as they maintained the long slim eyebrows now in fashion, the French manicures they assiduously applied, finding a perfect cappuccino in Tehran's new cool French-style cafés, the new strong make-up colours and the rage for yoga and bellydancing that had overtaken Tehran. I was fortunate to be reviewing Tehran's annual film festival for a well-known guidebook while I was there. Making my way across the overcrowded town every morning through the horrendous traffic – Tehran's population makes up one-fifth of Iran's total; that would be equivalent to 50 million people living in New York City – I had my first taste of what it would be like to live and work in Iran. And despite the immense time it took to get anywhere through the choking pollution, the trees canopying the town's artery street, Vali Asr Avenue, and the rushes of springwater flowing down its joobs (wide gullies that run down the sides of each street) made my heart soar every day. I had lived in Tehran as a child and it seemed that a lifetime of London's quaint streets and civilized driving had not managed to completely replace the charm of neon shop signs, fearless pedestrians dodging the heavy traffic, and concerto of car horns.

I would wholeheartedly recommend Iran as a travel destination to intrepid grovers. For the sake of giving up alcohol for a few weeks, you will be able to discover this ancient country, the world's oldest piece of land occupied by a single nation, which has, in its 3,000-year history,

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boasted one of the greatest empires the world has seen – the Persian Empire stretched from Europe to the Indus 2,500 years ago. Most tours spend two or three weeks here, taking in a broad spectrum of Iran's most important centres. Be sure to perfect your haggling skills before you come as traditional arts and crafts are well worth bargaining over and taking home. And don't neglect the capital, Tehran. Although it is a sprawling modern city with terrible traffic and no obvious charms that can compete with the splendours of somewhere like Esfahan, it does have its own vital energy which is worth tuning into. As well as the best museums, there is a thriving modern art scene and new café culture which will give you an idea of how schizophrenic life is in modern Iran, especially in the wealthy leafy northern reaches of Tehran where, in its sophisticated shopping malls, you could be forgiven for forgetting that you are in the Islamic Republic altogether.

Iran has an overwhelmingly young population, with 70 per cent of the 68 million population under 30, and with access to the internet and satellite television (which is officially banned but unofficially tolerated), the younger generation are more like their western counterparts than the country's image would imply. The two identities I have struggled with through my life is something that modern Iran is also struggling with: an internal culture clash between tradition, religious strictures and modern – western – desires. With its charming culture, ancient monuments, historic art and architecture, and modern bustle and debate, there is no doubt in my mind that Iran is one of the most stimulating – and misunderstood – places on earth.