

## True Tales of a Traveller Series

### 08: Overlanding P1

Finally, in the early morning, the bus arrived at the border. It was very cold; in the final few hours of the night I had put on my sheepskin jacket and wrapped my sleeping bag around myself to stay warm.

As the passengers disembarked, I saw a couple of wraith-like figures emerge from the shadows, dressed in nondescript grey-brown clothing. One made his way to a Pakistani man who appeared to be heading to the closed gate of the customs building, perhaps to check the opening times; the other came to me: "Change money? Want Iran money?" he asked.

I brought out my remaining wad of ragged Pakistani rupee notes without even thinking that I had not looked carefully at the official exchange rate. I handed the notes to the man. I knew I was taking a chance but I consoled myself that the total value was probably less than ten pounds sterling anyway! Carefully, he counted the thick wad, stated the amount, looked at me for confirmation - it seemed correct as far as I could guess - and then gave me a dozen or so crisp new Iranian rial notes in return, also handing me back a few small denomination Pakistani rupees as well. "Tea", he suggested, pointing to a nearby tea stall, "Border is still closed."

I did a few warm-up exercises to get the blood flowing again after the most uncomfortable bus ride of my life, and then took the money-changer up on his tea suggestion. Shortly afterwards, an Iranian border guard came forward and opened the gate. Three people, including myself, walked into Iranian territory; one was the other target of the money-changers, he seemed to be a Pakistani as he was dressed in the traditional garb of the region. The other was dressed in Western-style clothes, and seemed to be too light-skinned to be a Pakistani; I assumed him to be an Iranian. In his thirties, he was dressed quite smartly and, I thought, he had certainly not reached the border by bus from Quetta.

I followed these two into the customs building, along a passage with a huge painted mural of the Ayatollah Khomeini on the right side. After the Ayatollah mural were the words "Not East. Not West. IRAN." This mural was followed by another painted wall just before entering the customs building proper, which urged: "Down with the United States, the USSR, Israel and Britain".

Despite my tiredness, and despite feeling as rough and ragged as something just blown in by the wind, I found this a little amusing. I could understand why Iran hated the United States, Saddam Hussein's backers. Even before the war with Iraq, the US had been on terrible terms with Iran for allowing the former ruler to take refuge there.

I could also understand the enmity with the USSR, the ever-expanding godless communist empire, that had in recent years spread to Afghanistan, and therefore to the very borders of Iran.

As for Israel, like the vast majority of Muslim countries, Iran did not recognise the country as such, and refused to refer to it as anything else but the 'Zionist entity'. Iran did not hide its wholehearted support for Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian Liberation Organisation, at that time in exile in Tunis.

How exactly did the UK qualify for this 'down with' sentiment, I asked myself?

But as I walked into the customs building, I reminded myself that this was no laughing matter. The immigration staff at this border had to see propaganda like that every day, and in a few moments I would be handing them a British passport.

There were two counters in the immigration building, one on each side of a painted walkway; the Pakistani man passed the one on the left quickly, while the Iranian man seemed to be having a harder time at the counter on the right. I naturally chose the counter on the left, and as the Pakistani moved on, I walked forward, and placed my visa-stamped passport on the counter.

The woman at the counter was headscarved, but her face was uncovered. This was something of a relief to me; I had been expecting burkas. At first, this perhaps made me feel a little more relaxed. I looked at her entering my name into a logbook of border entries, which she asked me to sign. When I signed it, I noticed that the previous day's entries included a total of only two names - and I knew both of them! They were Duncan and Barry, the Scot and the Australian I had met at the hostel in Delhi. I felt momentarily elated; I

may even meet up with them, I told myself. But I was also astonished; how could there possibly have only been a total of two foreign nationals entering the country in an entire day I asked myself? As far as I knew, this was the only border crossing.

But then, as the woman looked over my British passport and my visa, my mind turned back to the writing on the wall outside the customs building: 'Down with the United States, the USSR, Israel and Britain'.

During the night, to stay warm, I had put my thick sheepskin jacket over the Israeli army jacket I had bought three years previously when working as a volunteer at Kibbutz Magen - which I otherwise rarely wore. After my warm-up exercises, I had taken the sheepskin jacket off again, but kept the Israeli army jacket on. Apart from that, I was wearing the Israeli army pants that I still wore on almost all my rough travels. It suddenly hit me that I was dressed as an Israeli soldier. What a stupendous oversight! I was trying to enter Iran, a sworn enemy of Israel, dressed as an Israeli soldier! I made an involuntary movement at the shock of my realisation, which the woman behind the counter noticed.

Suddenly, I felt very nervous. The uniform, I was sure, meant nothing in Pakistan; Pakistan's adversary lay to the east. But now, it seemed I was leaving south Asia and entering the Middle East. Military uniforms may share many similarities, but there were also differences, too. I wondered if people in Iran, who I assumed saw plenty of anti-Israel propaganda on their TVs and in their newspapers, would recognise an Israeli soldier's uniform? I couldn't be sure, but in any case it didn't seem an advisable form of dress for entering Iran. But it also didn't seem easy to remove the jacket without drawing attention to myself. I decided to leave it on, and took out a cigarette to calm my nerves.

The woman at the counter was still poring over my passport and visa. I asked her if it was alright to smoke, and she ignored me. In those days, in sharp contrast to 15 or 20 years later, smoking was generally assumed to be acceptable everywhere where it was not explicitly prohibited. I hadn't noticed any 'no smoking' signs, but this was a government building, and I wanted to be sure. So I waved the Marlboro packet in front of her as I took out a cigarette. She did then look up, and at that moment I realised my Marlboro cigarettes were about as good a symbol of American capitalism as could be found. With my British passport, Israeli army uniform, and American cigarettes I had already boldly displayed three symbols of the four 'down withs' on the painted wall outside. All I was lacking was a hammer & sickle emblem somewhere on my person!

But the woman behind the counter seemed more concerned with my passport, and I noticed then that she had been comparing my passport photo with a wad of photocopied images held to a clipboard. I caught a glimpse of some of the police mugshot-type photos when she adjusted the sheets of photocopies, and held one in place as she called over a man who was obviously a supervisor.

A couple of sentences were then exchanged between the supervisor and woman, and the supervisor took the clipboard from her and held it up as he assessed me, obviously comparing me with a photographic image on the clipboard. "Look over there!" he suddenly told me brusquely, pointing towards the custom building's exit as he held up the clipboard. I did so. By this time, despite having taken off my sheepskin jacket, I was feeling very hot under the collar, to say the least. I felt a drip of sweat running down the left side of my face, and told myself that this had to be at least one difference between me and the person in the photocopied mugshot!

After a few moments, the supervisor seemed to relax. He cracked some joke with the customs counter woman as he put the clipboard down, and they both laughed. He turned to walk away, and seemed for a moment to have almost forgotten about me, but then suddenly he turned back, looked towards me and said, "Yes, yes, OK," as he pointed to the building's exit. "Welcome to Iran!"