

The First NPCA-Sponsored Journey to Iran, 1999

By Bill Brandon (Shiraz, 1964-6)

Considerable planning lay behind the first National Peace Corps Association sponsored tour of Iran in May 1999. It started with one of those conversations over beers on the periphery of an academic conference in fall 1997 between me and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) who served elsewhere. In the standoff between the U.S. and Iran, we asked ourselves who were the equivalent of the retired vets who played a major role--including friendship visits to Vietnam—in smoothing relations before Washington and Hanoi started talking to each other? The obvious answer was the roughly 1800 Peace Corps Volunteers who had served in Iran, only with major differences: we had not killed anyone; many of us had mastered the language; and most of us developed deep friendships with individual Iranians and a respect and appreciation for Persian culture.

Organizing a group of RPCVs who had served in Iran to promote reconciliation between the two countries seemed to me to be possible, because there was now a stabilized national organization of RPCVs and staff—the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA)--to sponsor such a visit. Moreover, an initiative was especially timely, because Iran's first reformist President, Mohammed Khatami, had campaigned on a “dialogue among Civilizations” to counter the “clashing civilizations” envisioned by Harvard's Samuel P. Huntington. President Khatami (1997-2005), who was inaugurated August 3, 1997, was still in his first year when the idea was pitched to the NPCA President.

I proposed the idea in an email or letter to Chic Dambach, NPCA President; perhaps a week later I was surprised to receive a telephone call from him. He told me that shortly after getting my proposal he attended a conference where he met leaders of Friendship Force and learned about that nonprofit, which promotes people-to-people exchanges. Friendship Force was planning its first exploratory trip to Iran in the summer of 1998; he suggested that I might want to join the small group aimed at determining whether Americans could travel safely in Iran. At the time Iran was still recovering from the Iran-Iraq war, had not received many U.S. tourists, and was not perceived as a welcoming place.

Friendship Force, based in Atlanta, had been founded with a ceremony in the Rose Garden during Jimmy Carter's presidency by Wayne Smith (1934-2004), a former Presbyterian

missionary to Brazil. In the waning years of the Soviet Union, it was important in promoting international understanding by sponsoring thousands of Soviet-US homestay exchanges for which It received a Nobel Prize nomination in 1992.

I readily agreed to Chic's suggestion that I join Friendship Force's initial delegation to Iran to prepare for an NPCA-sponsored RPCV group in 1999. Thus, in May 1998 I found myself returning to an Iran that I had last visited in the summer of 1976. Wayne Smith led a group of nine, several of whom were well-travelled Friendship Force devotees. Most seemed old to me at a time when I was in my mid-50s; the exception was a practicing dentist who was perhaps a little younger than I and who often joined me on excursions during rest periods. One traveler had spent a brief period in Iran before the Revolution; I was the only American who spoke any Farsi. Friendship Force linked up with an Iranian tour company (Iran Doost, if memory serves), which had links with the foreign ministry and/or the tourism authorities that helped to smooth the way for a tour by Americans. We hit the usual high spots: Tehran, Isfahan (staying in the hotel converted from a caravansary just behind the Masjed-i-Shah), and Shiraz; on the way back we visited Qom for a few hours and the historic Bagh-i-Fin, the classic Persian garden where the reforming vizier Amir Kabir (Mirza Taghi Khan-i-Farahani) was assassinated in 1852 on the orders of the Qajar Shah he had faithfully served. Although Friendship Force recognized that homestays were not feasible in Iran, the tour company did arrange evening home visits with families in several of the smaller cities on at least two evenings.

Taking advantage of my appreciation of Iran, I convinced the tour leaders to add a visit to the new campus of the University of Shiraz atop what seemed a small mountain on the west of the city. That dramatic structure was very different from the old liberal arts faculty (*Adabiyat*) where I had taught three decades previously. A young and seemingly religious professor with a PhD in linguistics from Australia invited us to his classroom where young women were on one side of the classroom and men on the other; he had a male student recite the flood story from Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic, which invited reflections on commonalities in our Islamic-Judeo-Christon heritages. Also, having developed a taste for what middle class Iranians might regard as the somewhat unsavory underside of Iranian society, I prevailed on the tour company to take us to a Zorkhaneh, where the unique ancient Iranian physical training or *varzeshi-i-pahlavani* (heroic sport) continues to be practiced. (Usually, women are not allowed entry to these drum-driven militaristic exercises, but an exception was made for us.)

Several useful pointers did emerge from this trip. Perhaps the main one was to stay in the kind of hotels in town that we would have frequented as PCVs rather than in grander pre-Revolution American hotels in the suburbs. In Tehran the Friendship Force group stayed in what had been the Hyatt Crown Tehran near Evan Prison, which was renamed the Azadi Grand (but in 2007 was remodeled and renamed Parsian Azadi Hotel). It was largely empty (except for a small conference of clerics who arrived during our second day in Tehran), which led me to observe that service is lousy when a hotel has almost no guests. But the real problem was that the bus took forever to get to the interesting palaces, Bazaar, and museums in central Tehran. Consequently, a major criterion for choosing lodgings for next year's trip became middle level hotels with western toilets in locations where one actually encounters interesting street life on walking outside the hotel. Moreover, such hotels were less expensive.

I also figured that while RPCVs didn't need quite such extensive rest as the Friendship Force crowd, unscheduled time could be used to go out on our own and mix with Iranians. Using rest periods to roam worked for me at first, to the dismay of our guide/handler. But when we got to Isfahan, I was warned that conservatives were such a threat there that if out alone and heard speaking Farsi, I might end up in jail or beaten for being a British spy. Laughable! Nobody would mistake my feeble Farsi efforts for the skilled agents the Brits might send—but I treasure that compliment on my Persian. And I resolved that on any future RPCV trip to err on the side of giving my fellow travelers greater freedom to roam outside the group; in retrospect, sometimes I may have countenanced too much independence.

Based on the positive experience of the Friendship Force trip, NPCA agreed to sponsor a trip to Iran in collaboration with Friendship Force in summer 1999. NPCA advertised the trip in its communications with members; Friendship Force handled the logistics in the U.S. and contracts with the same Iranian tour company. Harriet Kuhr, a Friendship Force staffer who had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Africa, handled arrangements for Friendship Force; we worked closely together both in the planning and during the trip. Because the cost was covered by what the travelers were charged, NPCA was not at any financial risk. Ultimately, 27 individuals travelled to Iran including 16 who had served as PCVs in Iran (see Appendix). Partners and two children of Iran-PCVs—Jeela Bently and Jake Musgrave Nelson (who was born in Iran)--made up most of the remaining travelers, although several RPCVs who served in other countries were also included. One of the latter told a fellow traveler on the plane leaving Iran that he was Baha'i, so

Iran held both great significance and danger for him as the land where Baha'ism originated but was now persecuted as blasphemy.

One innovation we introduced was an optional half-day meeting in the Dulles airport to take advantage of the fact that flights to Germany (where we changed planes in Frankfurt the next day) depart in the evening. Since most of us arrived by air from other U.S. locations, we could take slightly earlier flights and have a chance to get to meet the group, hear about some of the changes in Iran since the revolution, and learn from recent female travelers to Iran about the reality of the dress code. Tagi Sagafi-Nejad, a PCIA member and Peace Corps language trainer, was helpful in lining up Iran experts to brief our delegation.

We again did the highlights: After several days in Tehran, a stay in Shiraz (Persepolis and Pasargadae), and on to Isfahan for a couple of days. The return to Tehran was by way of the village of Abyaneh, the UNESCO World Heritage Site where reddish houses are built one above the other on the side of a mountain. Also, on the way back to Tehran the trip was capped off with a half-day *gardesh* in an expansive bagh belonging to a relative of one of the tour directors.

Donley Smith brought his guitar on the trip, so sing along was included, even if the loud boomboxes of pre-revolutionary Iran seemed to have disappeared. Part of the entertainment consisted of a revolt by the women who forced the men to wear hijab in the privacy of the bagh. And, yes, we men learned that it was hot and confining to wear dark coats and total hair-concealing scarves at the end of May in Iran. On the way to the UNESCO village, we stopped to inspect a qanat. Our guide quickly exhausted his knowledge of qanats but fortunately Jeff Gritzner stepped in with a wealth of knowledge combining cultural as well as technical aspects of this ancient system of water management. Lesson: Former PCVs make great travelling companions, who are often more knowledgeable than local guides! This trip also included a visit to a functioning Zorkhaneh. Many of the male PCVs serving in Iran had not previously witnessed this unique Iranian exercise.

Throughout the trip Tom Putnam filmed the group and its activities with the intention of making a documentary of our journey back to Iran where so much had changed from our introduction to the country in the 1960s and '70s, but so much continuity could also be discerned. From the perspective of the organizer, my only disappointment was that we could not act in the capacity of a delegation facilitating reconciliation between the two proud nations. Thus, wreath laying and formal interaction with authorities was not in the cards. I should have tried to connect with

people who could make such arrangements well before we departed. But the conservative reaction against Khatami and his opening to the West had already begun. So, travelling under the official radar might have been the only way we could have gone. As we were leaving Dulles airport for Tehran reports reached us that another plane of change-seeking Americans had been denied entrance to Iran.

APPENDIX: Iran PCVs on the 1999 Return to Iran Journey

Ernie & Sue Bentley	Bill Brandon (group leader)	Dee Fink
Jeff Gritzner	Paul Levering	Dottie McCulloch
Bob & Phyllis McPherron	Barbara Nelson	Griff Nelson
Paul Pirozzola	Tom Putnam	Donley Smith
Emily Wells	Guenther Vogt	

Epilogue

In October 2002 the NPCA sponsored a second somewhat more expansive 12-day Iran trip, again in collaboration with Friendship Force. Peter Russell (Bandar Pahlavi, 1965-67) led the trip and then NPCA President Dane Smith (1999-2003) was among the group of 22 RPCVs. This trip has been well documented (peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/2629/1010768.html) and is part of the considerable interest and activity by former Iran PCVs that led to the formation of Peace Corps Iran Association in 2011. Although the description and itinerary posted online in 2002 mentions the 1999 RPVC trip, the first NPCA-Sponsored trip to Iran appears to have generally been forgotten. I agreed to research and write the above account at the urging of PCIA webmaster Doug Schermer (Semnan, Shahrud, 1966-67), who is gathering material on the history of PCIA as we prepare to dissolve the organization.

The 1999 NPCA-Friendship Force Iran trip was clearly the first sponsored return to Iran by RPCVs. It may well have been the first NPCA-sponsored trip to any country. When the trip was proposed in late 1997 or early 1998, it was clear to me that sponsoring travel was not something with which NPCA was familiar (in contrast to the seeming universal practice of university alumni associations!). When planning the details of the trip with Friendship Force the next year, I made sure that NPCA should receive some funds from the travel to cover overhead costs, but

President Dambach declined to accept the funds for fear of compromising NPCA's nonprofit status.