

A Snapshot of Afghanistan

Reviews / Asia / Afghanistan



We're flying low over the Hindu Kush when the plane is struck by lightning. An old afghan springs to his feet, and ignoring the entreaties of the air stewardesses begins shrieking "God will not let us die!" over and over and over again. Given the trembling fuselage, the black twists of tornado outside the window, this is not a popular mantra amongst fellow passengers. Across the aisle from us the pop idol types barely react. Fleshy and vulgar in animal print leggings – cooing over duty free Tommy Hilfiger, they're a horrible pair, if not sisters, still united in their spite and meanness. Behind them sit their bodyguards, humiliated and red-eyed from a vigorous tongue-lashing that's been going on since we left Dubai. Forget the storm, it's this topsy turvy balance of power that's held my attention given we're about to land in a country where to call women second class citizens is to grossly overstate their position in society. But then Afghanistan is already proving to be a country of bewildering contradictions.

A week earlier, I'd been sitting in the Afghan embassy in London. The young woman in the visa department was beautiful if surly. She looked up from my required letters of recommendation. "You're visiting a school." She stated flatly.

"Yes"

"Marefat High School."

"Yes."

“Does it educate girls?” She asked and the question hung in the air between us.

It was 1996 when the Taliban imposed its iron grip on the country, stripping women of their civic and social rights and banishing them from schools, universities and the workforce. If a decade of allied intervention has greatly improved life for women, the Taliban have nevertheless made it quite clear what happens to brave little girls who dare cry education for all. Over the last few years, pupils, teachers and schools have all been shamefully targeted, Marefat among them.

Does Marefat educate girls? You bet it does.

The embassy woman was wearing a short black dress, demure, yet close fitting enough to accentuate the curve of her breasts.

“Yes, it educates girls.” I said and waited for a flicker of solidarity. Nothing. Only a piercing stare as she stamped my form.

It’s hard to know what to expect of this proud and embittered country – this Babylonian land of fractured beliefs and landscapes. *Don’t stay more than five days. Don’t take the same route twice. Don’t go at all.* Travel tips have not been in short supply.

“You’ve been a good wife.” My husband said in a heavy hearted fashion as I left for the airport.

“Thanks.” I replied solemnly, trying to hide my excitement. Finally, after months of date juggling my colleague Christa and I were finally going .

“*Salaam alaikum,*” the air stewardess says as we jolt onto the runway, “welcome to Kabul.”

The airport bus is empty and stationery – clapped out with worn pink velvet seats and a bullet hole in the windscreen that has sent a spider’s web of cracks across the glass. The doors are too warped to close. The soldier guarding them becomes fractious when asked whether, at some point, the bus might be expected to go anywhere. “Car parking C. I told you. Wait inside. “

“All our security passes have been confiscated, “ our contact Nate texts us, “it’s a giant pain in the ass.”

After ten minutes or so, an old woman cranks her bad hip onto a seat.

“Where are you going?” She demands through her chadri. “ Where are you staying?”

“With friends.” We tell her.

“What street?”

We pretend we cannot remember.

She continues to regard us suspiciously until the driver finally gets on. Reddish lashes, eerily pale eyes. He asks 20\$ for the supposedly free ride. We pay up. What do we know? We're just HTH's, “Happy To Helps.” the worst kind of do-gooders – ignorant and eager.

Nate is waiting for us in the car park. His driver speaks no English. His head of security is called Umer. A convoy of armoured vehicles is holding up traffic as we head into Kabul. “The US military flexing their muscles.” Nate says as I watch them roll slowly by. Time after time history has proved there is no conquering this country and yet, here we go again...

Nate's driver pulls the car sharply off the main road. Steel doors slice shut behind us and we're suddenly in a compound of sorts. Two stories washed with fluorescent lights and the smell of new carpet. Nate's dog, a boisterous mongrel with severe cabin fever boxes her master to the floor, rips into our suitcases, then dashes outside to chase flies around a courtyard encircled with barbed wire. It's afternoon but curtains are drawn across all windows. Behind them, the glass is daubed with thick black paint. In the days that follow, I become increasingly depressed by this window blindness. This is a country I've always wanted to see. Pinned to my office noticeboard is a picture of a beautiful, green Kabul. A Liberal arts student, long shiny hair uncovered, walks alongside two boys with drooping moustaches and John Lennon glasses. Here was an intellectual Kabul, a progressive, philosophical Kabul where women went to university in bell-bottom trousers and held hands. But that was the seventies. Today this city is a war zone, ravaged by thirty years of conflict and the only way I will see it in the days to follow will be through stolen glimpses from a car window.



Kabul's morning colors are Mondrian. Blocky buildings of orange, mint and lemon washed in mountain light. Women shrouded in indigo blue glide through the streets. How different are their snapshots of life to mine? The half destroyed scaffolding; goats eating trash by the roadside; telephone wires looping round each other like black snakes. In the market, bananas and eggplant are heaped on rickety barrows. An ANSF soldier, gun parked under his arm, counts out change for a bag of dates. All around motorbikes growl, exhausts rattle and engines belch out oily fumes. A symphony of pollution in the air while in the sky, a storm hangs over a city permanently holding its breath. It's April. The snows have melted. The spring offensive is as inevitable as the blossoming of the almond trees. There is a frisson on the wind; of energy, of defiance, of fear.

Our driver makes a U turn, then another. "If you weren't sure where the school was," Nate scolds them, you should have scouted it."

Happy though we are to be in Nate's care, we're not entirely sure who he is. Ex US

military for sure, eyes and ears on the ground, some sniffing out of Al Qaida cells, a vague reference to the years spent easing kidnapped Americans out of the Bolivian jungle. The biggest danger here, he tells us, is wrong place, wrong time stuff. Bombs. Bad luck. And then there's kidnapping. Westerners have always been the bread and butter of that particular trade. Though Christa and I are worth diddly squat – on paper we tick a few boxes. Both journalists of sorts and then Christa's mother, the indomitable Baroness de Souza who co-founded Marefaat is currently speaker of the House of Lords. "Take Christa!" I have practiced saying, "she's so much better connected..." And Nate's kidnapping MO, we're mildly interested to hear? Straight to the ATM machine?

"Oh, it's not about the money." Nate replies cheerfully. "It's about making them understand they've taken the wrong people. It's about making them understand the shit that's gonna come down on their heads if they harm you, if they sell you on to another faction because that's the very last thing you want, believe me." We do believe him, we do and whoever Nate is, we resolve to do precisely as he says.



We're in the district of Dashte Barchi now, where the school is located. Faces in the street have changed. Wider eyes, flatter bone structure attesting to Mongolian ancestry of the Hazara. Anyone familiar with the Kite Runner will remember its doomed hero Hassan

– the hare lipped servant of a wealthy Pashtun family. The Hazara are his people. Victims of appalling oppression and multi ethnic massacres, the Hazara have been forced to re-locate from country to country where they have endured life beneath the lowest rung of every societal ladder. Dashte Barchi is one of the poorest areas of Kabul, but these Hazaras are lucky. Those who fled to Iraq, to Iran and Syria have not fared so well.

The Mercedes is crawling along a narrow rutted road and suddenly there it is; a sign above a blue doorway, “Marefat school for learning. The future starts here.”



Marefat began as an ideal, the tenets of democracy taught in a mud hut in a refugee camp. It had thirty kids then and a young fiercely voluble young man, Aziz Royesh whose vision was to build a center of academic excellence rooted in the local community of his

hometown. Ten years on, Aziz's impossible dream is not only a reality, it's something of a miracle. It's 'break' as we arrive and the courtyard is jostling with kids. Marefat has almost 3,000 students and an academic record so excellent that virtually all progress on to University, many scooping up international scholarships.

Small problem though. The original school building, built mostly by the kids parents was constructed on a fault line. Health and safety in Kabul is not a government directive but a matter of faith. The seismic proof foundations of a new building have been laid but work needs to resume now, before the winter snows freeze the city's construction fingers and the children's education along with it. On our return to London, Christa and I will face the humbling task of bowl-begging half a million dollars and if that isn't a frightening prospect, tell me what is.

We move through the classrooms, taking turns to make inspirational speeches: Education for all! How much we in England care! But even as the girls cheer, I'm wondering, do we really? Unless we can somehow bottle and take home this gratitude, this hunger for knowledge, how can we possibly make people care?

I have a sudden flash of the clichéd deprived inner city school, the sprawled legs, and chewing gum, the weapons checked at the school gate. I think of my own children, brought up in a country where we take democracy and education for granted who consider learning the worst kind of drag and it makes these afghan kids determination to belong to another, better world that much more poignant.

Aziz tells us we must choose one girl to host us for lunch. Diplomatically, democratically we insist on picking names out of a hat. Three sisters "win." Flanked by our men in black, we follow Sugra, and Neema and Anisa along the broken streets, Aziz, behind us, carrying trays of eggs and flat bread.



At the girls house, we are met by a woman with a weathered face and calloused hands. I'm about to greet her as grandmother before realizing it is their mother. Neema's parents fled first the Russians then hard line Islamic rule to raise their eight children in a refugee camp. Their path home has not been easy. The eggs disappear into the kitchen. Soon, there is the smell of onions sweating in a frying pan. We eat lunch sitting cross-legged on a colorful plastic tablecloth. Aziz talks like a brilliantly articulate intellectual on speed. The girls pass round plates of half scrambled omelets filled with fried tomatoes and I eat like a starved person.

Later that afternoon we hold an impromptu debate on equal rights between seniors. "What happens when you're married to a girl who's earning good money?" We ask the boys, "as much money as you. You have a child. Who makes the supper? Who changes the diaper?" The boys exchange panicked looks. Their culture has taught them it is the nature of the afghan woman to "accept the supreme man over their heads", but Marefat is teaching them that it is their social responsibility to help their sisters claim back their rights.



“I want to be the first female president of Afghanistan. Women can be better politicians than men.”
Fawzia, 10

“We are as good as men,” Anisa cries. “and we will prove it.” These girls will have to prove more than that. They must prove that they can square the ideals of democracy and feminism with being a good Moslem. And maybe it’s all too much too soon. A quiet bespectacled boy stands up. “Better to show respect.” He says. “Go slowly. Be cautious.” But the girls are on fire. Not for them the long arm of political change. They have watched their own mothers put up and shut up. Education and employment is the goal of their generation’s revolution and as I watch them, hands stretching in the air, a line of Rosa Parks, waiting and willing their bus to come along, I fear for them. For all those throughout history who have conspired take away the rights of their fellow humans, there have been others who have paid in blood to live in a world of their choosing. What happens when Neema decides to burn her headscarf? When Sugra angers a cleric or Anisa nudges the line of tolerance too far? As allied withdrawal slides into view, the future of Afghanistan looks increasingly unstable. What will happen to the dreams of these girls should Marefat fall under the jubilant return of the Taliban?



It’s dusk. We’re on a rat run. A road made of built-up rubble with steep drops on either side of the car. Ruins of the old city rise out of the ground, the same color as the earth. Small kids hug the verge in a mish mash of polyester and traditional costume. On the walls of a whitewashed building, the long snouts of AK47’s are silhouetted against the darkening sky. The atmosphere in the car is tense. The address for the evening, originally vetted by Umer, turned out to be have been wrong. The correct address is in the no-go area of the mountains.

We’d been standing on the roof of the new school building with Aziz and Jawed, a Kabul born academic and our host for the evening. Below us, rinsed in the orange light of late

afternoon, a group of boys were playing football, kicking up small puffs of dust with their shoes.

“Make your excuses. “ Nate said curtly when informed of the mistake. “ I’m pulling you out.”

I handed the mobile back to Umer. Umer is Pashtun. He’s a nice man, a thoughtful man, whose son was born with a foot facing backwards. Umer’s son will probably never play football but Nate, whose special operations exterior masks something infinitely softer, is helping him to get the operation free in the US. Jawed, our academic friend is Hazara. It is his parents who are hosting us for the evening – his brother who is roasting lamb.

“The girl’s safety is a question of honor for my family.” He says.

“I do what Mr. Nate says.” Umer declares and suddenly tribal horns lock. “They are under my protection.” Umer insists.

“If the girls die. “ Jawed counters quietly, it would bring great shame. My family could never let this happen.”

Christa and I eyeball each other. Too ignorant to unravel the tensions, the degrees of religious or political extremism, the ethnic and cultural nuances of this country, we do, nevertheless, have a code of our own. As a nation, Britain can rival any other for moral and spiritual decline, but damned if we can stand the idea of someone’s parents being put out.

“You entrusted your safety to *me*.” Nate says grimly when we ring back to tell him we’re going. You promised to do what *I said*.”

Talk at dinner is NGO led - gender mainstreaming, activism versus advocacy. The roast lamb appears, fat spitting and speared onto six foot blades. Toffees are washed down with hot sweet tea and it’s late by the time we head home. The streets are curfew empty.

Torches flash at our windscreen. Our driver slows the car for Umer to show his pass and the police wave us on.

Nate is waiting up for us arms crossed. “Is this what it’s gonna be like when my daughter starts dating?” He jokes, but it seems we are forgiven, if only for now.

In the night I wake to the sound of sirens. Kabul’s soundtrack for the foreseeable future. We have only another day here but I want to stay. Places where you can get lost in the

lives of others have always been catnip for me, and I'm beginning to feel Afghanistan's pull.

On our last night Nate takes us to his favorite restaurant, La Taverna where we eat Lebanese food and drink red wine hidden in chipped blue and white tea-pots. "What no baklava?" I complain as the owner, Kamul brings us a slice of his famous chocolate cake. On our next visit to Kabul, Nate, still mildly offended by my diva behavior, suggests an alternative restaurant. As we're getting ready to leave a blast shakes the compound. La Taverna has been targeted. We sit in the darkness listening to the tat tat tat of gunfire – comforted by the swift response of ANSF forces . It doesn't take long to realise that it had not been ANSF but Taliban, storming the dining room on the heels of the suicide bomb and shooting diners as they ate. Twenty-one people die in La Taverna that night including its owner, Kamul. We won't eat out again in Kabul, but we won't stop coming back either. I guess you sign up for what you sign up for.

There's no hugging out in the open of Car Parking C. A terse nod to thank Nate is all that's permitted. In the airport we shuffle slowly through security, secondary security, extra security. We're searched, x-rayed, scratch n sniffed, our faces, eyes and souls examined. The flight is delayed. We buy a 14-dollar bag of almonds and offer them round our fellow travellers.

"They're bad quality," says a contractor, "you've been ripped off." But the nuts buy us friends: A quiet UN guy from Nepal. A pharmaceutical rep who tells us Afghanistan's cache of opium is being raped by the allies and the Chinese. The young Afghan whose uncle was publicly beheaded. "I'm dying to go into politics." He says, seemingly without irony. "Make this country great again."

And maybe that is to be Afghanistan's future. To be great, to be green, to be civilized and at peace. Many believe it. Maybe the Taliban really are less hard line, ready to talk. Maybe rights so fiercely fought for will not be easily relinquished. On the plane I fiddle around with a photo on my computer, changing the color of the Kabul sky from grey to blue, as though that might be all it takes. There's a guttural sound and I realize the man occupying the window seat is watching me. Mullah? Cleric? Talib? I have no way of knowing. He leans over the empty middle seat and stares without embarrassment.

"Kabul?" He says. I nod warily.

Street scenes suddenly give onto an image of the Marefat girls in their distinctive blue and white uniforms. The mediievally beautiful Neema stares straight at the lens. Panicked I switch files; randomly landing on a recent visit to Saigon and the iconic photograph of a

wounded US soldier falling from a helicopter. Appalled I stab at the keyboard, but the Mullah/Cleric/Talib stops me with his hand.

“Good.” He says.

I look at him even more uncertainly. His beard is made up of a thousand wiry springs.

“ Good photo.” He nods at the fallen American hero and smiles slyly.

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