

## Shah Abbas the Great: tracing the 1000km walk from Isfahan to Mashhad

Just in time to coincide with the British Museum exhibition about Shah Abbas the Great, the Iran Society 2008 Travel Grant has allowed me to finish tracing the route of the Shah's famous 1000 km walk from Isfahan to Mashhad. This report will describe my November 2008 trip to Iran – as well as telling some tales from my earlier 'pilot' visit and exploring a little of what I am now learning about Iranian water systems and supplies, especially in Safavid times.

The story starts with Eleanor Sims ringing me to ask how I felt about the possibility of teaching a new Birkbeck course about Shah Abbas. I immediately protested that, as she was aware, my special interest was the later Timurid architecture of Khorassan – and that I couldn't possibly claim to know enough about the Safavids to teach anybody anything! Some negotiation later, and inevitably tempted by the prospect of working with Eleanor as a supportive mentor, I started reading . . . and reading . . . and reading. Much of what I read was fascinating, some was infuriating, but the most immediately tantalizing was Professor Charles Melville in his 1996 paper on Shah Abbas' 1000 km walk<sup>1</sup>.

Melville's paper sets the walk in the context of other famous kingly walks and also explores the several visits the Shah made to Mashhad during his reign. The various potential rationales for these trips include linkages with military campaigns; Shah Abbas's well-documented personal piety; and his own historical links with Mashhad. There was also a need to restore Safavid ideological legitimacy after the disastrous reigns of the two previous Shahs and the possible profaning of the tomb of Shah Tahmasp by the Uzbeks. For the ever-practical Shah Abbas, promoting *ziyaret* (religious pilgrimage) to Mashhad could not only bolster the town and its commerce, but also reduce the flow of gold out of Iran with the annual Meccan *hajj*<sup>2</sup>. Specifically for the 1601 walk, a vow (*nazr*<sup>3</sup>) was reportedly taken by the Shah, although the details of this are not altogether clear.

Professor Melville helpfully summarises and critiques the two best known contemporary accounts of the walk (by Iskander Beg and Munajjim Yazdi). These offer quite different ideas of the duration of the walk (28 and 66 days respectively). Melville also introduces a recently discovered account, probably by a Mirza Muhammad Salih Munshi. This, whilst not being without its own problems, adds

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<sup>1</sup> C Melville, Shah Abbas and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad, *Pembroke Papers* 4 (1996) 191-229.

<sup>2</sup> There are various traditions about one *ziyaret* to Mashhad being worth more than seven – or even one thousand – Meccan *hajjs*.

<sup>3</sup> Melville says that this may be "more nearly a votive offering". Melville 1996 p198

some support to Yazdi's version of events. As Yazdi was apparently charged with measuring how far the Shah walked, using a rope (*tanab*) as a measuring device, he might well be expected to be more accurate in his rendering of events than the potentially eulogistic version of Iskander Munshi. Professor Melville grapples manfully with various contemporary European descriptions of Iranian journeys and the British War Office Quarter-Inch maps, to present summary tables of the Great Shah's likely itinerary. These he declared the most definite conclusion he could reach "short of retracing the route on the ground, which is at present impractical"<sup>4</sup>.

A retracing of the walk sounded much more 'practical' than some of my previous trips to Iran<sup>5</sup>! So I was keen to be at my task as soon as possible! However, I realised immediately that no-one could even attempt to walk the 1000km until the Shah's stopping places were definitively found. The latter therefore had to be my mission.

I planned to record the stopping places both photographically and using GPS. Some of the locations are obvious – the plane tree at Natanz and the *ribat* (fort) at Ahuan, for example. Others seemed findable – Kashan and Damghan are well known, though it is perhaps less clear exactly where Shah Abbas may have stayed within each of the towns. Yazdi had named other halts which Professor Melville could not find on the maps, 'Birka by caravanserai of Khwaja Qasim' and 'Imamzadeh' are two examples – although Melville usually suggested possible options. I also realised that the place names in Melville's paper were written in English: as well as being 400 years old, there might be difficulties with the pronunciation and so understanding – not only because written Persian has fewer vowels than English, but also because of what I already knew of the significant regional differences in Persian accents, especially in rural areas.

With all this in mind, I had to set some criteria for a stopping place as being 'found'.

It seemed clear that Shah Abbas must have always needed shelter and, above all, water on his journeying. I also felt that – especially as he was walking to a religious shrine – he was likely to have visited important mosques in places that he came to. I therefore determined that if it wasn't clear from the names of Yazdi's stopping places<sup>6</sup>, I would seek out caravanserais, water supplies and the Friday mosques at any location I was labelling as a stopping place. I needed to focus on positions or buildings that were known or thought to be from the time of Shah Abbas or before,

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<sup>4</sup> Melville 1996 p200

<sup>5</sup> Many thanks to the Iran Society for contributing to the funding of my 2008 photographic exhibitions at the Brunei Gallery, related to my walking of the Bakhtiari Kuch.

<sup>6</sup> As for eg a specific bridge, fort, and the plane tree, still extant in Natanz.

whilst realising that this would be complicated by the tendency to label all Iranian caravanserais as ‘Shah Abbasi’ and also by the extensive building programme during the reign of the Great Shah (edifices might truly be ‘Abbasi’, but be constructed after the 1601 walk).

This report is ostensibly about the Iran Society sponsored trip in November 2008 but, as intimated above, I think it is necessary to first briefly describe here the ‘pilot’ I carried out in March. For practical reasons, this concentrated on the second half of the Shah’s trip.

As shown in Figure 1 below, Abbas first walked northwards from Isfahan to Kashan. Partly because this route was so well-travelled – and therefore had so many paths – Melville describes this part of the journey as the most difficult to determine definitively exactly where the Shah went. After Kashan, Abbas went north-eastwards over the salt desert towards Dehnamak (just east of Garmsar). Melville cites contemporary reports of the “horrors of th[e] salt waste” (visible below as white) in this area, and also discusses the post-walk building of a causeway along this part of the route to help travellers along their way. After leaving the desert, the Shah then turned eastwards along the “well-worn” road to Mashhad.

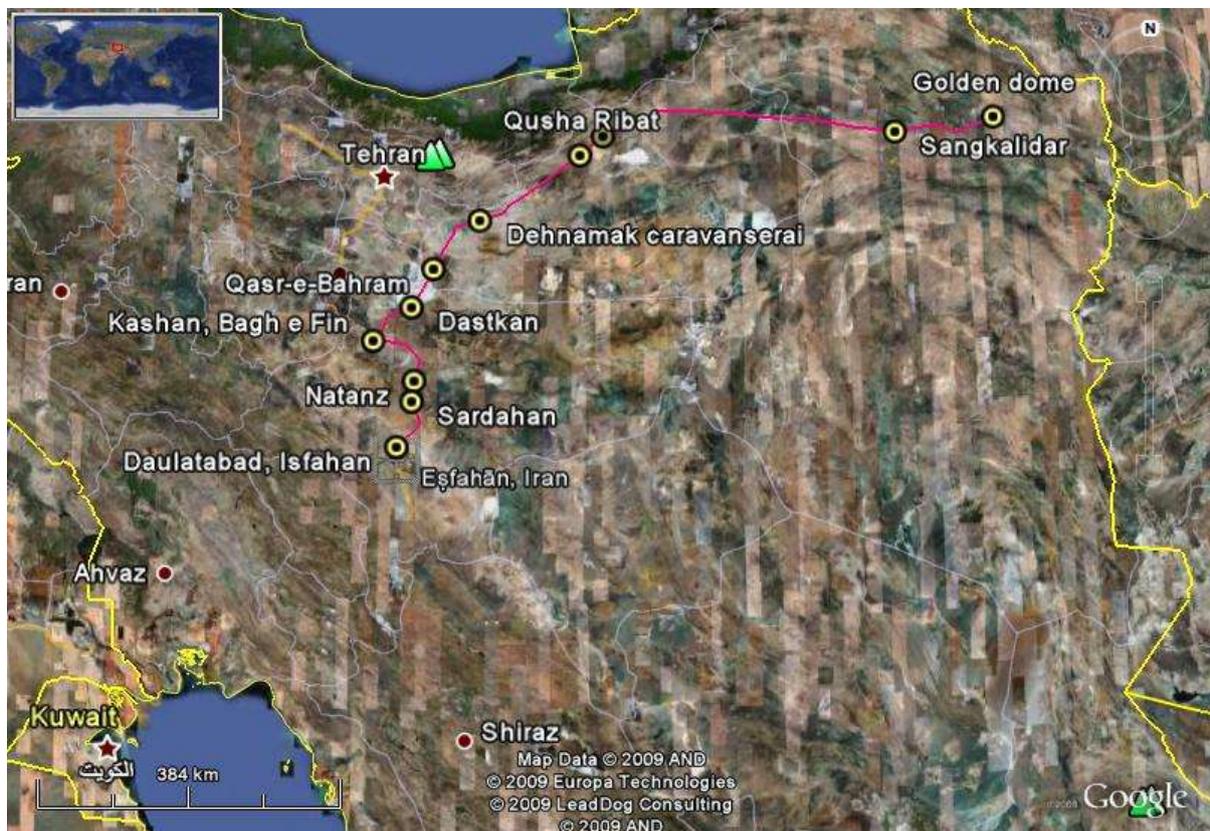


Figure 1: The Shah’s route from Isfahan to Mashhad. Only a few of the stopping places are shown, for clarity. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009

I duly started in Isfahan, where the very friendly and well-informed staff of the *Miras Farangii* (official cultural service) showed me the Daulatabad location of Masjid Tuqtchi – now a busy roundabout – and told me that if the Shah had been there, he must also have visited what was now a public park, the Park of the Birds. This was where travellers entering and leaving Safavid Isfahan had bathed, rested and changed their clothes as necessary. I suddenly felt very close to Safavid life – the Shah washed here! I was also aware of the continuities (and discontinuities) that are always a part of Iranian life – Isfahanis still enjoy this place, even if it is now open to all and not just the elite.

More importantly, I also found out that I needed a special desert permit for the second section of the trip, from just past Kashan to Dehnamak, and that this permit was only obtainable in Tehran. So I travelled back up to Tehran, where the *Noruz* (Iranian New Year) holidays meant that the necessary stamp was locked in an office, with the keyholder only expected back after his vacation.

I therefore set off towards Mashhad, hoping to be able to then travel down through Khorassan via Torbat Heydariyeh and Nain back to Esfahan, to where my elusive permit might hopefully be faxed. This also allowed me to start with the easiest-to-find part of the journey, as the Shah's stopping places were all on or near the main road to Mashhad. I don't have space here for my serious falling out with my first driver or my brushes with the police (understandably not expecting a lone foreign woman to be out interrogating villagers – they always ended by being as enormously hospitable as all Iranians always are). Suffice it to say that I learnt that Yazdi's distances were a huge help; that old men often knew vast amounts about their local area (if I waited, usually around 45 minutes, for us to start to agree on pronunciations); and that random taxi-drivers would get obsessively interested in my quest and the history I often knew much more about than they did.

Most importantly of all, though, I found that tracing the journey as I was, a stage at a time, made me look at the country and the countryside in a completely different way. Instead of hurtling as fast as possible and enclosed in a plane or train or coach or speeding car between Tehran and Mashhad like most Iranian city dwellers, I was experiencing a whole different land and quite different ways of life. I was starting – just starting – to better understand a whole different world, that of Safavid-style travel in Iran.

I also became obsessed with water. The Shah's party must have needed it – in the fierce desert winds around Dehnamak, and the knee high thornbushes in the loose sandy soils around Ahuan. There were some gorgeous little streams and other water

sources – for example right next to the caravanserai at Mehr (with mulberries growing wild alongside the water), and just in front of the *ribat* (fort) at Sangkalidar. Here a little girl persuaded me to climb with her right over – yes, over! – the crumbling two-storey building to get to the front entrance. We could have simply walked around – but I didn't know that when I started climbing – and this has to be one of the more memorable ways to visit a building! All too often, however, the same sad water story was told to me: a long time ago, villagers would say, we had a spring, then there was a *qanat* (traditional underground canal system), but now the *qanat* doesn't work, and we have *poomp* (an electric pump). What, I agonized silently, is going to happen when the pump dries up?

By the time I got near to Mashhad, I knew how to find the stopping places. I could spot the useful old men at fifty metres, and avoid the garrulous timewasters. The last of my stream of taxi-drivers, himself an 'Abbas', didn't want to leave my side. He was the one I had to thank for finding Sakhdar when night was falling and I was getting very tired indeed. This was the last of the Shah's recorded halts as he cut north-east across the Alborz Mountains to Mashhad. But I knew my driver's wife was worrying – after all, Agha Abbas had left Sabsevar two days previously on what was supposed to be a 20km job. So I paid him off, and set off to revisit my old Timurid haunts on the way back round to Isfahan.

At Torbat Heydarieh, I bumped into the *rais* (Chief) of *Miras Farangii* for Mashhad. I told him about my work on the *cuerta seca* tiles from the Timurid *madrese* in Khargird and he wanted to meet me again – but in Mashhad, and in a few days time. Although this was going to put my whole schedule out, I thought it was too good an opportunity to miss – and so agreed. I resolved to use the time to follow Shah Abbas some more. Little did I know quite how much I was about to do and see!

Although I hadn't walked to Mashhad, I knew that Shah Abbas hadn't walked either, on his several visits before the 1000km pilgrimage. In 1588, he probably rode into the town, but in 1598, 1599 and 1600 the Shah had dismounted from his horse to walk from the place where the golden dome of Imam Reza came into sight. Now, of course, the golden dome was only visible from close within the busy metropolis of Mashhad, but I resolved anyway to walk a small *ziyaret* (a pilgrimage) of my own, in emulation of Shah Abbas and also out of respect for Imam Reza. I found out that Teppe Salaam (literally the 'hill of greeting') was one of the places where pilgrims to Mashhad traditionally dismounted to walk as they saw the golden dome, so decided to walk the 20km from there up to the shrine complex. I'm a keen walker, but this was the first time I have ever walked any distance along a motorway. In truth, I

cannot recommend it as a pleasant day out – but I certainly felt a sense of, albeit hot and grimy, achievement when I at last reached the shrine and donned my *chador*.

I have visited the shrine several times, and usually try to slip in without exciting interest. Now I was too tired to avoid attention, and found myself whisked off to the official ‘Office for Lady Foreigners’. This was not anywhere near as dull as I confess I had feared. I longed for a drink – of water, of anything – but all the lady guides wanted to engage with me (simultaneously!) in what ended as two hours of intense theological debate. They exclaimed at my initially stated disbelief in Paradise after Resurrection. This, they told me gravely, was not one of the fundamental beliefs that many people usually had a problem with. They were thoughtful and thought provoking. They were very earnest, and all completely delightful. I was proud to meet them, and they ran backwards and forwards getting the literature that they hoped would most appropriately dispel my evident spiritual doubts. Eventually they gave me some orange squash and insisted on lots of photo-taking. They invited me back the next day for some of the special Holy Food of Imam Reza – the family I was staying with were unashamedly envious of this when I got home – and took me off to hear the amazing trumpet and kettledrum salute to the setting sun from the *Naghareh Khaneh* (Drum Tower), a small pavilion over the entrance portal to the old court of the shrine built in the time of Shah Abbas. They also advised me that President Ahmadinejad was coming the very next day to speak in Mashhad. I had read so much about the salutes and kingly goings-on when Shah Abbas entered a town, that all this seemed completely appropriate. Since the Iran Society is avowedly non-political, I won’t comment here on what it was like to hear Ahmadinejad speaking – whilst listening from within a huge and very enthusiastic crowd in one of the holiest spots in Iran.

After all that excitement, I had run out of time to get back to Isfahan and try again for a desert permit. I had had a great *Noruz*, but this trip had to come to an end.

In November 2008, however, and supported by my Iran Society Travel Grant (thank you!), I was back to complete my mission.

I had chosen November as this was the time of year that Shah Abbas had himself walked – I wanted to try to walk more (preferably not along motorways this time!), and was keen to know how amenable the winter climate and day length might be. I also planned to try out the rope-measurement technique used by Yazdi, and find out both how easy it was, and how accurate it might be. My biggest practical problem, I knew, was the desert permit: I wouldn’t be able to use standard taxis for this section of the journey, and needed to find both a suitable vehicle and a driver with desert

experience. I also wanted to find out more about water, and perhaps even go down a *qanat* myself.

With all this in mind, I set off to Isfahan. My first priority was the *tanab* (rope) for measurement. How long should it actually be<sup>7</sup>? Did anyone know anything about the measurement technique? Who could I get to help out with the actual rope-handling? The Isfahan *Miras Farangii* staff, as ever, were ready to help out with my queries and recommended one of the Islamic Azad (Khorasan) University lecturers, Khanom Doctor Ghassemi Sichani, as currently responsible for teaching modern architectural measurement techniques. She in turn suggested a master builder, Agha Mohandes Montazer, as having the most extensive relevant historic knowledge.

Meeting Agha Mohandes Montazer was an enormous privilege. This is the man who is currently responsible for the renovation of the old Julfan houses. Especially for an architectural historian, there can be no better person to walk round New Julfa with. He knocks anywhere and everywhere and is welcomed in. He showed me some of his works-in-progress, and his most favourite completed masterpieces. We'll just, he would say, nip in here and I'll show you the earliest known use of mirror-pieces in Safavid architecture – these are deliciously sparing, so much more lovely to my eyes than the Qajar versions. Then we trotted discreetly around a university classroom, even though it was actually in use, to view a very very special *muqarnas* before popping into another house to gaze upon a superbly restored stucco fireplace hood, with a whole galaxy of tiny stars dancing across its curves. A newly refurbished wooden window screen was simultaneously huge and ethereally lacy, and we stopped while Agha Mohandes Montazer stood back and directed the workers hanging off the building, as they carefully put it in place. I told him I was interested in water supply systems, so he showed me the traditional wells in Isfahani attics – reaching down to the town's long-established water system, and situated high up in houses to get enough water pressure for the courtyard fountains. Then we got down to my real business with the *tanab*. Agha Mohandes Montazer explained how Iranian measurement units (*zira*) are based on the standard dimensions of bricks, how rooms (and so buildings) are worked out in terms of bricks and domes, and how traditional rope can only be made as long as the longest buildings (twenty domes in a row, so around 100m). He described the two different sorts of rope – strong for men being lowered down wells and into *qanats*, less strong for everything else. He decided that Shah Abbas' *tanab* would have been nearer to 50m than the 40m Professor Melville had suggested. We headed off together to where he thought the

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<sup>7</sup> Professor Melville discusses various possible interpretations of this. See ref 38, Melville. 1996 p222  
7 of 18 – caroline.mawer@gmail.com – 25 march 2009

best quality not-very-expensive rope was to be found, and got the shop assistant to measure all the decent rope he had available, tying several lengths together to get as near as possible to our desired length, and carefully marking measuring points near the ends of the rope as well as recording exactly how long the new *tanab* was.

I had already been out trying to find some of the stopping places just north of Isfahan. Professor Melville had not been able to find the *ribat* of Qazi Ahmad in any source or contemporary itinerary, and suggested that it might equate to Dombi. On the ground, however, things were much more straightforward and even the youngest of the traffic policemen knew that the village of Bagherabad was also called Qazi Ahmad. A derelict mud-brick corner was most definitively shown to me as the only remnant of the oldest building in the village, but just next to that was an old mud-brick *ribat*. Since Siroux had documented both a caravanserai and an impressive barracks in nearby Dombi<sup>8</sup>, I dropped in there too. The derelict caravanserai was easy to find, the barracks less so – until I showed an old shepherd Siroux’s technical layout plan. He immediately – and very impressively, I thought, especially when I found out that the man was completely illiterate, and the building was in a state of considerable disrepair – recognised this and climbed into my taxi to show me the way.

Back in Isfahan, I had also been putting together a measuring team to help me with the rope handling. According to Iskander Munshi, a team of six men had been supervised by the court astrologer to measure each day’s journey. I could only fit three into a taxi (along with me and the driver) and determined that this would have to do. On the appointed morning, two of the planned team were unaccountably replaced – and the father of one of the female students helping out also turned up. I argued that surely he was not needed. Luckily, I failed in my representations – since Agha Baktashian turned out to be easily the most sensible member of the Rope Team (myself included!).

We set out for Sardahan. Siroux describes this as “un nom toujours fameux”, as one of the rare places actually indicated on early maps – and as giving the impression of an Italian palace somehow transplanted to Iran, with the extravagant theatrical effects even extending into the stables<sup>9</sup>. The Team tried to get into my methodology of finding stopping places – initially brushing me aside to ask young men (who, as usual, knew very little), then taking part of my advice and asking old women (who

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<sup>8</sup> M Siroux, *Anciennes voies et monuments routiers de la région d’Isfahan*, 1940 IFAO Tome LXXXII pp107-109, and p147

<sup>9</sup> Siroux 1940 pp167-170

were quite definite, but wrong), and eventually deigning to ask me exactly who I thought might be able to help. I pointed out an old man squatting by a courtyard house door, and they descended on him. He vehemently denied any useful knowledge and I just as vehemently insisted that he did know, we just had to be patient and try different pronunciations. I think now that the Team may have interpreted my suggestion as an insinuation that the poor man was somehow purposely withholding information. They immediately started haranguing the old fellow. They were all much taller than him, even if he hadn't been bent over with age, and closely surrounded him. I began to fear for him. I even wondered if I could see the tiniest glint of fear in his own eyes! Just as I was thinking I needed to call my ravening horde of interrogators off, he said: "Do you mean 'Sardahan'? Of course I know where that is!". And the Team and their unfortunate victim all exclaimed triumphantly, and the man's tiny wife relaxed mightily and tried to sell us their home-grown saffron. The whole Team were tremendously excited by their victory, while I felt pleased that I had shared the finding process with them – but determined not to let them loose on any more innocent passers-by!

In sight of Sardahan, I asked the driver to stop at a handy (and usefully immobile) road sign. I'd deputed Agha Baktashian to take the lead with the front of our *tanab*, walking towards the ruin while his daughter, Mahdie, was to wait until her father signalled that the rope was taut, when she could move forward. Khanom Doktor Ghassemi, as the only one of us with any certificated measuring expertise, was put in charge of the GPS, and stayed at each rope-front-place, until Khanom Mahdie caught up (Figures 2 a,b,c below). I ran around, supervising, helping with the GPS and taking photographs. After some very minor teething difficulties, this system was surprisingly easy, and could be done at normal walking speed.

After we had arrived at the caravanserai, I asked Agha Baktashian to lead off up round some nearby small hills. Professor Melville had discussed how some of the apparent measurement anomalies that he had identified in Yazdi's account might be due to Shah Abbas and his rope team having to follow the undulations of hills, and not always being able to walk in a straight line. I wanted to check this out. Agha Baktashian had taken my initial request to walk straight towards the distant caravanserai impressively literally, and I now tried to get him to relax his regime.

'Imagine', I suggested as he made to walk in a straight line over a cliff-edge, 'that you're walking with Shah Abbas. You wouldn't lead the Shah this way, would you?' He regarded me scornfully. 'Shah Abbas', he said gravely, 'wouldn't be messing about walking in circles around these hills, now would he?'



*Figure 2a: Agha Bakhtashian sets off towards Sardahan. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*



*Figure 2b: Agha Bakhtashian signals to his daughter, while Khanom Doktor Ghassemi takes a GPS reading. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*

This was difficult to argue with. By now, his daughter had her chador tied round her waist, and Khanom Doktor was puffing wearily up the splendid hills with her trousers tucked dustily into her boots, so I decided to call it a day, and we all made, measuring as we went of course, for our initial road sign. There, our picnic was waiting (Figure 2d) – including some scrumptiously ripe persimmons from Khanom Doktor's garden.



*Figure 2c: Khanom Mahdie catches up. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*



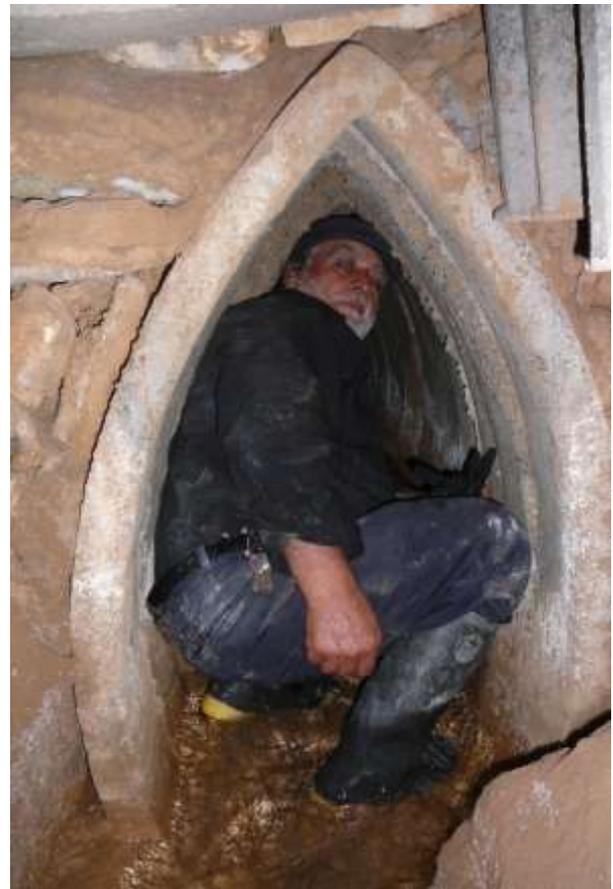
*Figure 2d: The Rope Team enjoy some well-earned persimmons. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*

Tired but happy, the team dropped me in Natanz, and themselves headed back for Isfahan. Many of you will have been to Natanz, so I don't need to describe here the stunning 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century shrine of Shaykh Abd' al-Samad. From the point of view of Shah Abbas' walk, the important thing is the ancient plane tree immediately facing

the shrine, as this is where the Shah reportedly camped spent some time in Natanz and surrounds: visiting the Safavid caravanserai, with its conspicuous stone water control system; and managing, eventually, to get a trip down a *qanat* (see Figures 3 a,b below). I was also introduced to the immensely impressive desert culture of nearby Badroud. Here, I learnt about the ancient Pahlavi-related language of Baadi. This is still used on the desert edge from here round to Semnan and I wondered if it was going to be another complicating factor in my search for the named stopping places. I also marvelled at the desert navigation of the splendidly knowledgeable ex-mayor of Badroud. He even managed to drive across unmarked desert in the dark with the car lights on: whilst this meant we avoided dunes and ditches, there was no chance of seeing the stars that Shah Abbas' group must have used to guide their way.



*Figure 3 a: The initial section of the qanat I went down. The lower part is old, the upper reinforced by concrete blocks. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*



*Figure 3b: After the initial section, we entered a narrower section, supported with traditionally-shaped hoops. This muqanni (qanat worker) is 20cm shorter than me so you can see it was a tight squeeze! Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*

After Natanz, Shah Abbas' next stop was the caravanserai of Khwaju Qasim, which Melville could not be sure about, but suggested might be near the village of

Dehabad. That was therefore my first port of call, and I was pleased to not only admire the most enormous field of solar panels I'd ever seen (powering the local *hamam*) but also to meet a man who suggested that maybe I meant Hajji Qasem – whose name was associated with at least one of the two *ribats* in the village (Figure 4a below). Even more excitingly, he was himself a Qasem, as were twenty of the families in the village. We naturally needed to share tea and *gaz* (one of the most delicious Isfahani sweets) after this discovery, and as he and his wife showed me photos of their twin boys, I exclaimed that they had blue eyes. “And I”, he said, though he was traditionally reserved, and had not looked me in the face at all whilst we were talking, “have eyes the same colour (hazel) as you” (Figure 4b below). He was right, and told me that all the Qasems have light eyes. So maybe I'd found not only the place and the family, but even the eye colour of a man from 400 years ago! Agha Qasem is not Hajji, but was, he told me, a Mashti<sup>10</sup> and proud of it.



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Figure 4a: The ribat at Dehabad. Agha Qasim is standing at left.  
Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009



Figure 4b: Agha Qasim, with his hazel eyes only just visible.  
Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009

After Dehabad, my driver (a gentlemanly retired coachdriver from Badroud) and I quickly found the likely *imamzadeh* stopping place (out of more than 40 in the surrounding region) and then made it into Kashan. I don't think Agha Ghassempour often came into the city, as he was both intimidated by and lost in the traffic. We had to hoot at (and stop for) any Badroudi he recognised, but we eventually met up with the man who had faithfully sworn that he had a permit, desert driving experience and a suitable vehicle. None of these three assertions were in any way true, and as this was the fourth 'driver' who had tried to 'help' me in this particular way, my

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<sup>10</sup> A Mashti is someone who has visited Mashhad.

patience was sorely tried. I agreed, however, to finish the day by knocking three more stops off my list, working my way up to the boundary of the permit area.

I therefore headed off with my new 'driver', in yet another trusty Peykan, towards the desert area. Khosh Ab (literally, 'good water') turned out to be a dip in the ground where watermelons still grow in season, as the water table is so high, while Dastkan (Figure 5) is a trough, with a bucket-well of supersweet water, surrounded by the crusty white beginnings of the *Darya Namak* (literally, 'salt lake').



Figure 5: Dastkan: A sweetwater well on the edge of the Darya Namak – note the white crust of the Darya Namak in the background. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009

Just before Dastkan, however, is Maranjab. This impressive desert castle was almost certainly built in the reign of Shah Abbas, although after his walk. As it was a Friday, it was packed with daytrippers from Tehran and other cities, trying their luck with the area's camels and enjoying the inevitable picnics. There, I made contact with a proper desert driver, with a proper desert vehicle. Now, we agreed, I just needed a permit. He told me that this would take him a week or two to sort out, whereupon I declared I was going that very night to Tehran to get the permit for myself. Back to Kashan we went, with just enough time in hand before the coach for a quick, but very exclusive, late-night wander around the sublime *Bagh-e Fin* (Fin Gardens).

In Tehran, Mehri, always my hostess-with-the-mostest, has known me for many years and wasn't at all surprised to see my clothes and me somewhat the worse for wear for scrabbling around underground in a *qanat* or two. She was, however, more concerned with the desert idea – reasoning that if it was dangerous enough to require a special permit, perhaps I shouldn't be going. I, of course, brushed these concerns aside, and set off to find the right person in the Department of the Environment.

In no other country than Iran could the bureaucrats in a central government Ministry insist, partway through our lengthy negotiations, on giving me a full (and delicious) kebab lunch. After this, we all eventually agreed that I could not only have a permit, but that they would introduce me to a much better driver/guide than I'd managed to find for myself.

Meeting up with Agha Reza Chahkanouei<sup>11</sup> was a huge stroke of luck – he lectures on ancient caravan routes, and has an intimate knowledge of the deserts of Iran alongside a great interest in history.

The next day, we started back down the road to Kashan, stopping off for an idyllic breakfast at a tea-house perched in the traditional manner over a very cute stream. Whilst the man frying our super-fresh eggs was asking Reza if it was alright to offer me some fresh roses, I started to get the idea that this part of my trip was going to involve much less 'roughing it' than I had expected!

We skipped through Kashan – stopping off for me to have an unexpected but very welcome dip in the Spring of Solomon, the 2000+ year old stream that waters the Fin Gardens – and made for the desert area. Agha Reza and I had been swapping facts and ideas about Shah Abbas and ancient water systems – and he wanted to show me Nooshabad, a small town near Kashan which has an amazing four storey underground 'water city'. After this, I had my first taste of Reza's completely delicious camp-cooking. Never before have I eaten so well when camping! Never, to be honest, had I thought that an Iranian man might be such an excellent cook! Never have I ever travelled with such a completely stocked store of fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts, meat and everything that I might ever imagine wanting to eat! Not the slightest sign of 'roughing it', either physical or intellectual!

As dusk fell, we passed Dastkan, and I at last got out of the vehicle and started walking. Reza had brought along a colleague of his, a superfit if diminutive ski instructor, so two of us could walk and the other drive the vehicle. I was keen to see

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<sup>11</sup> Email [info@irannaturetours.com](mailto:info@irannaturetours.com) if you want to use his excellent services.

how easy it might be to walk across the forbidding salt desert area (see Figure 6 below), listed in Yazdi's reckonings as including the longest section (11 farsakhs or 66km) of the walk. Somewhat to my surprise, it was immensely easy. The salt crust was firm, and as dusk fell and the whole of the Milky Way came out to light the track, it was difficult to imagine a better place to be. Eventually I was coaxed into halting, we devoured another huge and scrumptious meal, and tumbled into our tents (with the treat for me of a home-made hot water bottle to fend off the nocturnal desert cold).



*Figure 6: The Darya Namak.  
Image © Agha Reza Chahkanouei: info@naturetours.com*



*Figure 7: Sefid Ab caravanserai – with the remnants of the overground water supply system.  
Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*

The next few days included more walking, more delicious 'picnics' Reza-style, scheduled check-ins to the guards of the game reserve we were now in, a trip to the two caravanserais at Sefid Ab (with small overground water canals from nearby springs – see Figure 7), a wander round the oyster (yes, we must somehow be on an ancient sea floor!) fossil beds of the area, and . . . what must be the most beautiful hills in the world. These are a smaller, concentrated version of all the gorgeous multi-coloured mountains of Iran. With all the game animals in the vicinity, I could immediately understand why Shah Abbas would want to build a hunting lodge in the area. As Yazdi does not include any of the three Safavid buildings in the environs (each around 5km apart) within his list of stopping places, it seems likely that they were not yet built when Shah Abbas did his 1601 walk. I mused that the Shah might perhaps have decided on their construction as he walked through the wonders of the surrounding area.

Of course, I took the opportunity of visiting the architectural remains, in their various states of preservation. There's Ain-ol-Rashid (the caravanserai for commoners), Qasr-e-Bahram (called Abbasabad/Siahkuh in the literature – this is where the Shah is supposed to have stayed with his entourage, and where I slept) and the *Haramserai* (quarters for the Shah's wives and children). Each has – or had – an impressive water system: Qasr-e-Bahram and the *Haramserai* are served by a small overground canal (see Figure 9 below), similar to that at Sefid Ab but running over 10km from the nearby hills, while Ain-ol-Rashid even has underground water pipes. In the evening, the game rangers based at Qasr-e-Bahram told me about their work. As well as all the animals I had myself seen (various gazelle, lots of jackals, and a large and very purposeful snake), there are still some of the very rare Asiatic Cheetah in the area. These are the animals seen in Safavid book paintings perched, ready to make a kill, on the backs of hunters' horses and it was exciting to hear that the rangers had seen pawprints of three juveniles in this last year.

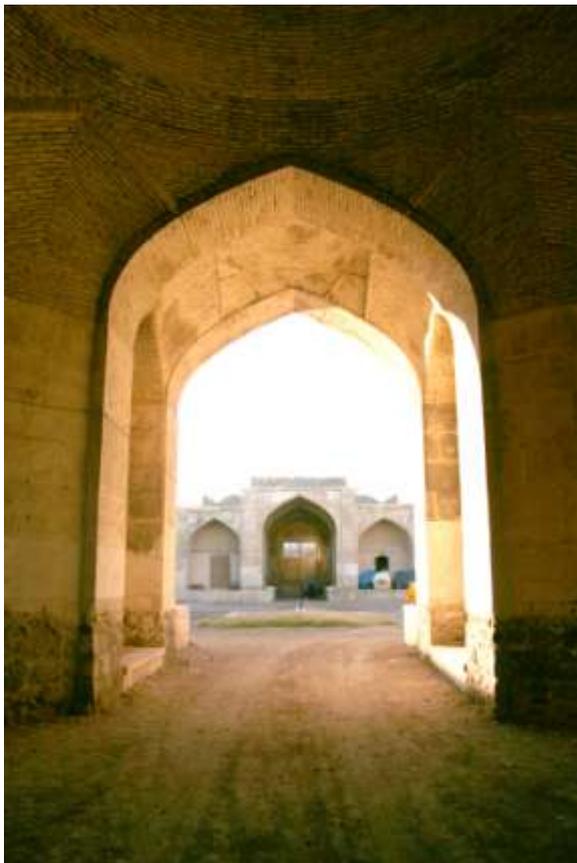


Figure 8: The entry into Qasr-e-Bahram caravanserai – this was shut behind us at night. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009



Figure 9: The 10km overground 'canal' leading to Qasr-e-Bahram. Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009

All too soon, I had to leave. Northwest of the desert 'castle' complex is 40km of salty mud. This is crossed by the remnants of the *Rah e Sang Farsh* – the 'stone carpet'

causeway that Shah Abbas ordered constructed sometime after his 1601 walk, to help travellers along their way (see Figure 10 below). Luckily for us, there had not been enough rain to make the mud really muddy, but I was still impressed by the labour and skill which had traversed such a large area of boggy mire with a paved road lasting over 400 years. The mud is criss-crossed by rivers which, leaching salt from the ground they pass through, are edged with white crusts (see Figure 11 below) and we quickly found the remains of the bridge where Yazdi recorded that the Shah had passed by.



*Figure 10: Me on the Rah-e-Sang-Farsh: the stone causeway crossing the salt mud.  
Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*



*Figure 11: Shur-ab: one of the salt rivers.  
Image ©Caroline Mawer 2009*

As the Sang Farsh came to an end, we looked for the spring which was Abbas's first stopping place out of the *kavir* ('salt desert') area. Local agriculturalists pointed us at the now-dry site of *Shah-i Cheshme* (the 'Shah's spring'), whilst themselves using pumped irrigation to (successfully, if perhaps temporarily) reclaim the salty local soil.

Dehnamak, the first stopping place I had found on my *Noruz* trip to Mashhad, was now almost on the horizon, and there was only one more stopping place to find before then. This involved some heated discussion – Reza said the Shah would have gone to the nearby town of Garmsar, I pointed out that this was out of his way and that the Shah wasn't a man to back-track. Eventually we got more used to local (Turkic) pronunciations and place-names and agreed that an elderly man's suggestion of a local village – now uninhabited, with the drying up of the local *qanat* – might well be just what we were looking for.

We'd done it!

Back in UK, I've plotted all my GPS readings of 'stopping places' on Google Earth, and checked my distances against Yazdi (report being drafted). I've submitted a proposal to a Paris conference on caravanserais. I've spoken to two groups of students and

will be talking at the British Museum about the trip. I'm actively investigating other architectural and historical reports of the desert buildings, in the context of the Safavid 'Royal Way' from Isfahan to Farahbad. Now I'm looking for a publisher – I think the stories of the Shah's walk and my journeyings, alongside the historic and current issues around water, would make a great book!

Many, many thanks to the Iran Society for their support with my November trip.