Filming on the Road

Traveling in Afghanistan 1970



BY HANS DARMSTADT

CHAPTER 1

Travelers on Film



Our film team.

Ann, Rudi, Eva, Gerd, Manfred, Hans
Afghan Travel 1970
50 Reels of Kodak Ektachrome film,
Bauer and Beaulieu 16mm cameras.
Hans Darmstadt describes the trip.
December 2024

Received a letter from Rudi, at Poste Restante in Bombay that Ann, a Welsh girl whom Rudi had met in Oz, would join him, Gerd and Manfred for an overland trip to Afghanistan to do a travelers' movie, and would like to be with it. Of course. I contacted Eva in Stockholm and took to the road going north.

She came to Delhi and we went across via Amritsar to Pakistani Lahore, the cultural, literary centre and Capitol of the Punjab, and to the 3.000 years old Taxila, conquered by Alexander, with its great museum of the Ghandarva Culture, where one can visualize the craftsmanship of the Greeks and their influence on Buddhist monuments, sculptures and artifacts, where the features of the Buddha's and Bodhisattvas resemble those of the ancient classical faces of Greece, their robes and garments, looking like the ones worn in old Hellas.

Nearby Islamabad, the newly installed Capitol, is like any new designed city, immature. It lacks soul and the growth of many generations neighbourhoods, hasn't got an atmosphere, that has observed, grooved, and suffered the changes and encounters of history, and gained a patina.

Another pearl on the string of roads we travel is the melting pot of Peshawar, where you can find people from any tribe and race in Central Asia. It attracts smugglers, drug traders, bandits, merchants and warlords like a magnet. The borderland of opportunities.

With a bountiful bazar, castles, forts, historical architecture and elaborate mosques in abundance. Bearded men in big turbans, long shirts, stiff waistcoats, and baggy pants, some wearing rifles like shoulder bags. Women in plissed burqas mostly in sky blue, some in earthen colours, tell that the majority over here is of Pashtoo origin, that makes about half of the population of Afghanistan. It is the biggest tribal formation on Earth, stretching from east Persia all the way into India. In Afghanistan they dominate the South. It is said their number is more than 40 million.

The surrounding villages are industrious with gun and rifle replica production, using local steel with ancient tools and techniques towards a perfection that only an expert can tell what is a fake or a real Colt 45 or a Winchester 73. Over here it's a handicraft.

From the Peshawar Valley we move via Jamrud through the portal of one of the most fascinating passes in history and geography, the Khyber.,The Gateway to Afghanistan and the

Occident. A trading route for treasures and merchandise since a time that even preceded the Silk Route.

And a breakthrough for numerous conquerors approaching from the west, forcing their path to rob the myriads of booty



Gerd, Ann, Rudi, and Manfred.

of India, expand their influence and grab chunks of the land, and control the power over its people.

Cyrus, Darius, Alexander, Ghengis Khan, Tamerlane, Mahmud of Ghazni, the British, the Soviets and the US, were some of the invading forces, that had put their fingers in the pot and nearly all got burned in the end.

The road climbs up to 1000 meters on these harsh and rocky ridges to Ali Majid, a fortress sitting like a crown on top of the ruggedness. Named after a shrine built in honour to Ali, the cousin of Prophet Mohammad, who supposedly had visited the place.

Passing merchants and travelers stop here for prayer and to immerse in the presence of bliss.

Two bloody battles with the British had been fought here at the narrow passage of the gorge. The walls along the road cutting through the rocks are lined with memorial plaques of the regiments, of which numerous British men got killed in action. They all got in but many didn't make it out alive.



Eva and I.

And on curves the road to Landi Kotal, where the tribals shop their supplies for the villages.

At Torkham we reach the border to Afghanistan. This whole area, stretching until beyond the Khyber, is controlled by Afridis, a powerful clan of the Pashtoo. They are known as fierce fighters, who even battled the Moguls, and took a lot of the intruding Britishers' lives.

They regard the frontier region as their own domain, and



Load Bearers in Istalif.

close it in the evenings, when no outsider is allowed to enter their area, except with an Afridi escort. Even police and military personnel are off limits at night.

Jalalabad is the first city we reach, and one of the biggest in the country. It is one of the fruit gardens of the land like Herat, Kandahar, Kundus, Istalif. Afghanistan's fruits are very sweet, getting a lot of sunshine.

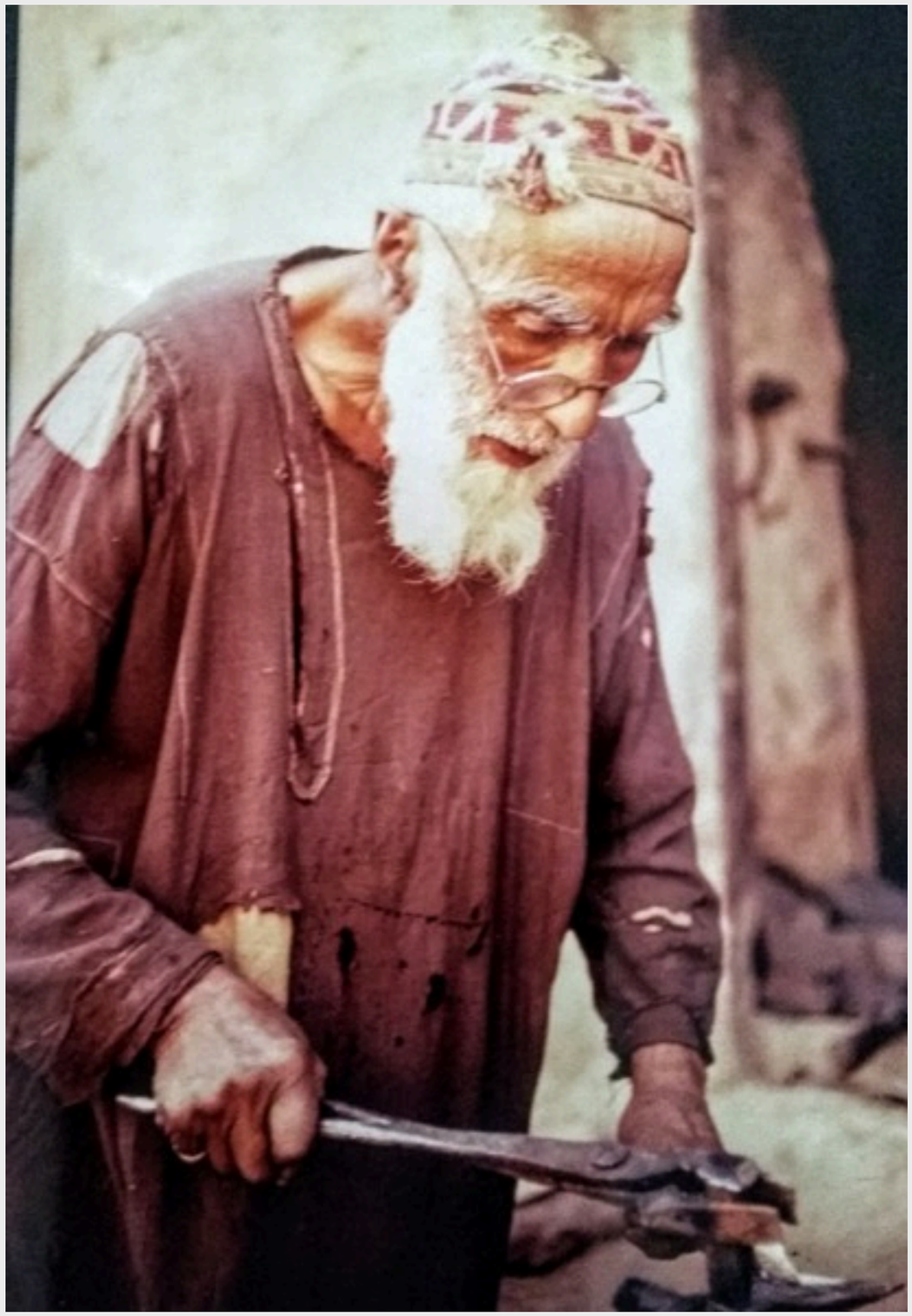
From here the road crawls up through the Tang-e Gharu Gorge, a mountain pass into the Hindu Kush, – looking eerie with its grayish blue bizarre cliffs and boulders, winding partly along the Kabul River, that dug its bed through the limestone walls on the way down to the plains, shaped and molded – distorted ruggedness of the rocks.

The winding road climbs to sprawling Kabul, a big nest of fortress looking mud huts, square buildings with high walls, hiding what's happening inside the kinship.

At midday an old canon on top of a hill blasts a shot to signal that it's noon time.

We had the gathering and reunion at the Behzad Hotel in Shar-e Naw, where Chicken Street, littered with Hippy buses, was the place of wheeling and dealing for the people on the road.

Ann, the Welsh beauty, Rudi, happy to introduce this jewel of a chick to Eva and me, who hadn't met her yet, Gerd our chameleon who would transform into any type, in particular local situations, already looking like an Afghan, and Manfred, our technical genius with a sixth sense, made us six in numbers.



Metal worker in Balkh.

They had arrived in a 14-year-old VW bus from Germany, with a gas operated fridge for the films that are vulnerable when exposed to the heat, a stash of around 50 reels, a Bauer and a Beaulieu, both 16mm cameras, and an Uher professional tape recorder.

The bus had been transformed into a comfortable, livable space for the trip.

Gerd and Manfred, usually occupied the front seats, doing most of the driving.

Manfred took care of the car and all the mechanics and technicalities.

Gerd, when co-piloting, crumbles the charass, building reefers to pass around to the back, where the rest of us, flaked out on a big mattress, select rock n roll and world sounds on the music machine, serving tea, drinks and snacks to the front, while landscapes, people on foot and on donkeys, camel caravans, horse riders, villages, desert, nomadic Kotchis, mountains, dunes, sandstorms, green valleys, occasional poplar alleys, are trailing past, outside the slow moving windows.

Rudi and Gerd are the cameramen. Both had already some experience of shooting in Oz, where they had done reporting on local sports events.

It was supposed to be a documentary about the ‘Travellers Trail’ from Istanbul to Kathmandu. The highway of the



Gerd always crumbling some charass for a smoko.

curious youth, looking for adventure and freedom, to expand their horizons after being choked by the old garbage piling up in society and in the heads of a generation that is lost in careers and consuming.

They are looking for something fresh, and find a lot in old traditions that are still alive, vibrant, and so colourful, so inviting, so hospitable and so livable.

To give it a red thread, Manfred and Hans were the four eyes of observation, who looked at all the sceneries, happenings, peoples, cultures, rituals, encounters. To witness what was floating along. A spontaneous painting with the light and shadows of the moments.

Their eyes were supposed to talk through the lens of the camera.

The story, which really wasn't one, starts in Istanbul, where Manfred arrives with an organized tourist group.

While nosing around the magnificent bazaar, the colourful life around Sultan Ahmed and Galata Bridge, watching the howling ferries crossing over to the asian side, the queues of Hippie buses and the long-haired, bearded freaks at Lale Puddingshop, convince him, that the way he came is not the way to travel.

He takes his gear, gets on the road, and starts hitchhiking east, along the Black Sea coast, the Caucasian Mountains, Persia, and into Afghanistan, where on the curves of a

Mountain Pass, he, the newcomer, gets a lift on a truck, that has already a passenger on top of the sacks of grain, Hans, a cat, already on the road for years. They become friends and do the thing together.

All along, we filmed what we thought was interesting, but everything was interesting, we could have zoomed non-stop all the time, but had only 50 rolls of Kodak, that gear is costly, and our wallets were wearing thin. So, we did select, believing that whatever we had caught, were the best gigs of the scenes we took.



Blacksmith having a charass smoko.

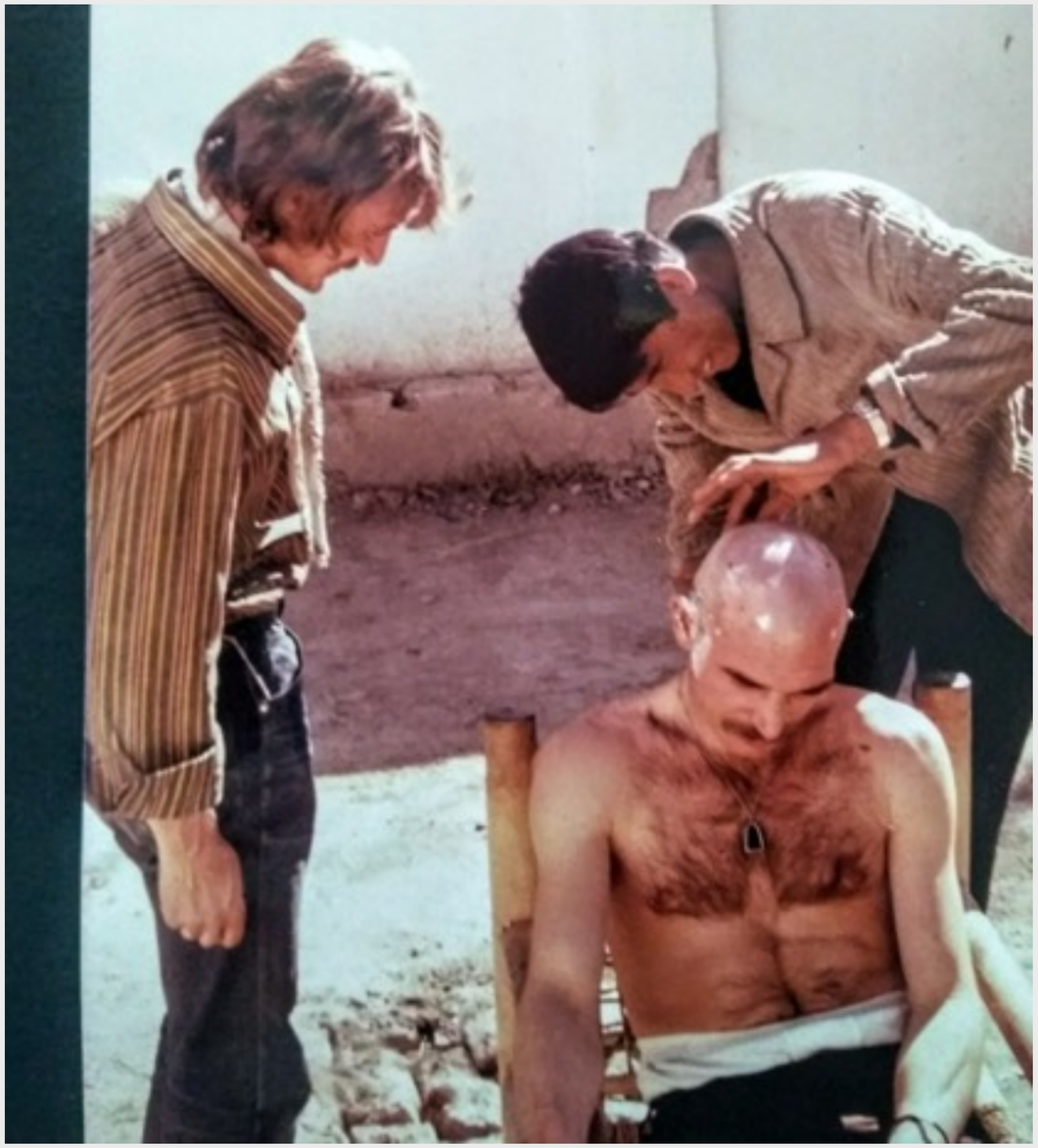
The film never was the centre of importance. We just were carried away by what was happening. All that mattered to all of us was to enjoy. The uniqueness of the land and the people, who had grown out of that soil, out of a nature that seams hard, powerful, and hostile to those who don't understand it. Its appearance, the visible brutal beauty. The meaning, its soul, is a warmth of the heart, the honesty, and the genuineness.

It felt like being in a cross-cultural brotherhood. A reflection of a deep engraved pattern of the Pashtoo code of honour, that mirrors in the social behaviour. It is even adopted to a certain extent by the other ethnicities, like the Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbek, and a bunch of smaller groups, like the Turkmen, Baluchis, Kyrgys, and a few more, that make up Afghanistan. It contains courage, self-respect, justice, and hospitality. Its application is strict and can be severe.

If you are accepted as a guest, you are protected with the life of the host. If you come as a hostile, you have bad cards.

The sisters are confined to their own domains, according to their tradition. When outside their homes they are mostly dressed in a burka, a dress that covers the body from head to toe, even the eyes are hidden by lattice slits, to display their modesty, to convey honour and respect towards others. It is the duty of the men to guard their dignity and shield them from insult, harm and danger.

There were two English girls in their early twenties, running around in spaghetti tops and miniskirts. It is offensive in a



Manfred looks on while Hans is getting a permanent.

place with centuries tight moral and dress code, deeply rooted in their ancestral rules.

There comes an old Mercedes with two young guys, who ask the chicks if they would like to be invited to an Afghan wedding party. They gladly want to, and jump into the car, another offence. The car drove out of town, and the girls got raped. The guys got caught and sentenced to 10 years in jail.

Family members approached the girls and offered a big sum



Manfred and I hitchhiking on a truck.

of money, in order to buy freedom for the rapists. Similar to the use of blood money, that someone's family would be willing to pay, after someone had killed a person.

Ann and Eva used to drive around by themselves, and felt it was the safest country for women, traveling on their own.

Every day was a feast. Life lived in a way as it really moves. Colourful, naked and honest in its hardship, enchanting in its beauty. We were on a stage, in a play of a different level of

being, within the reality of a people, living in the here and now. Keeping the way that tradition had taught them. Ignoring the flood of glitzy temptations, dripping in from the West. The Pashtoo code of honour contains includes being independent and possessing leadership. They are quite resistant to trickery.

We became friends with Ian, a Brit with a Morris Minor, who was hanging out at the Behzad. Ann, who was into pottery, and Eva, wanted to do another trip to Istalif, one of the most beautiful places in the country, famous for its ceramics, mostly adorned with a sea-green turquoise glaze. A township blooming in a green valley on a 1.600-meter elevation, embraced by a range of greyish sand-coloured mountains, and known for the sweetness of its grapes, from where its name derives. The ancient Greek rulers named it Stafylia, meaning grapes, that are grown in deep ditches for protection to give the fruit some shade against the scorching sun, and to save the irrigating waters from evaporating.

The irrigation system is quite genius, developed and applied over thousands of years, adjusted to the climate and soil, it can make the water even flow uphill by a steep downside run.

There was an irrigation expert from Akron Ohio, sent by US Aid to teach the Afghans how to do it. He became deeply depressed for nobody followed his instructions. They all laughed at what he was trying to teach and what he was talking about.

Istalif had suffered total destruction in the first Anglo-Afghan war, when retaliation troops of General Pollock, were dispatched from Kabul to surround the town. They raped and massacred even woman and children and burned people alive.

The girls took the bus and we joined Ian in his little car to do a trip to Band-e Amir, a patch of six lakes, high up in the Hindu Kush, on a 3.000 meters plain in the centre of Afghanistan's mountain desert.

In this country everything is high, the mountains and the desert, the townships and the people and we as well.

As the ascent got steeper from the elevation of Kabul at almost 1.800 meters, the little car started huffing and puffing, and



Gerd, Eva and me.

sometimes had to be pushed, since five big blokes were too much weight for the fight up hill. Then the water started boiling in the cooler and steamed off. In order to save our drinking supply, we had to wait until the thing cooled down, then we started peeing into the radiator, and stuffed snowballs from the white patches along the road into the system.

A Chai Khane appeared, a secluded mud hut in the wilderness, with a bunch of Afghans gathering in front. The door was locked, it was Ramadan. We all felt the pangs of hunger and thirst, having abstained like the locals from



Carpet seller in Kundus

eating, drinking, and even turning on, from sunrise to the darkening curtain of dusk, trying to feel what it's like.

They rolled out their prayer carpets, bowed, prostrate, rose, and bowed again, in the rhythm of their prayer.

Light switched on inside the house, turning of keys in the lock, the door opens and a silent group of men take their place on the woollen carpets that cover the clay benches. At first there was only the smacking and slurping of everyone digging in to the food. Then slowly and softly some talking arose after the thirst was quenched and the hunger stilled, getting livelier, and the whispering turned into chatter.

The door opened and in came a longhaired, imposing figure, with a Rubab, a multi string kind of lute.

The talking abates, the host serves him chai. He takes his bow and starts caressing the strings with affectionate strokes, plucking gently in between, painting the waves of sound throughout the room, to carry and cradle his melodious voice.

A wandering Dervish with his feet on the soil and his head in the sky, a free man.

His soundings and songs melting the gathering into a feeling of oneness, telling mystical poems that move the audience into serene moods, lingering on deep into the night. One after one stretches out on the carpets, lulled into a world of dreams and imagination, floating on the waves of mind.

Reality had changed into a different one.

At twilight, before the crack of dawn, when people rise up for ablution, to purify for the morning prayer, he has disappeared, but the imprint he left on us never left us.

We continue the trip through the barren desolation in its untouched beauty.

There appears a lonely teahouse, like most of the buildings made of clay, fascinating in its simplicity.

We are the only guests, and want to put it on screen. The carpets and the Russian samovar are the only adornments of the mud hut in its clay colours, and the small windows do not allow much light into the dimness. We don't have lamps to light up the room, there is no electricity anyway, but we have a couple of Styropor sheets we use, to reflect the bright sunlight in through the window from the one outside onto the one inside, to whatever we want to film.



Young boy working in the Chai Hane.

When we get close to the lakes, the veil of night falls like a curtain and we get lost. The dust tracks cross each other, our sense of direction is gone, a pitch-black darkness swallows the landscape, our headlights beam forlorn into nothingness. No lights from a settlement anywhere in sight and after the sun went away, the cold creeps into our bones.

We decide to call it a day. Five big blokes crawl into that little car, body to body, and pile our Afghan fur coats on top of us. That saved our lives. We all agree that we have had the iciest night ever.

As the sun rises, we scramble out frozen stiff and start jumping and moving around to get the blood turning. The inside roof of the car is completely covered with a layer of ice.

Led by the warmth and light of the morning, the pain of the night vanished into the joy of the day, when we finally find the track to the jewels. From emerald green to sapphire blue, the lakes lavish brilliance, enhanced by the purity of the water and the clearness of the sky, unfold their beauty, embedded in the valley of snow-capped peaks of the surrounding mountain chains.

The Grand Canyon of Afghanistan.

From here the Balkh River descends to the place that was once called the Mother of Cities.

Balkh was an ancient centre of Zoroastrians, even supposed to be the birthplace of Zarathustra, as well as an important pillar of Buddhism. It was the first Kingdom of Iranians, and Alexander married Roxana of Bactria, after killing the king of Balkh.

It was ransacked and plundered by invading Arabs who forced Islam on to the people.

The great mystical Poet Maulana al Balkhi, known as Rumi and founder of the Whirling Dervishes was born here. He left as a child with his family before the approaching Mongol army towards Konya in Turkey.



Preparing a chillum in a Chai Hane on the way to the North.

The Afghans consider him a native of their land.

Turkey claims he belongs to their country, where he has spent most of his life, and rests in his tomb in Konya.

The Persians insist that at the time he lived, Balkh was part of the province of Khorassan, that belonged to Persia at that time, and the fragrance of his wisdom was transmitted in Farsi.

But he is beyond being claimed or belonging, beyond nation, time, or faith. The perfume emanating from his poems is absorbed by whoever is inhaling it.

It is said that Genghis Khan sent two emissaries to the King of Balkh demanding ransom in order to spare the city from being conquered. The King beheaded the men and speared their heads at the city gate.

The Khan's hordes fell over the city like a thunderstorm and smashed the place into a heap of destruction, killed indiscriminately whoever came into the reach of their scimitars, and piled the heads into towers around a crater that was all that was left of the splendour of Balkh.

Now it is an insignificant little town with a big history within a landscape of ruins and rubble, where you can visualize in the shapes of broken buildings and in the lines of forms that changed their appearance, the grandeur it had blossomed in.



Gerd, Manfred and I at the lakes of Band Amir.

You scrape the ground with your feet, and may find some shards of ceramic, glass or tiles. People are still looking for coins, beads, bits and pieces.

Manfred found a bangle and two arrowheads, probably made of bronze. They had an oxidized green patina.

We have a kebab at the outskirts, when we hear the song of the Zang. The slow, melodious rhythm of the camel bells. And here they come, about a dozen of them, leisurely moving on their big, fluffy, soft looking feet, big eyed, aloof and detached. Loaded with tents, firewood and sacks of commodities, led by a Kuchi clan member. The woman in colourful embroidered garments, richly adorned with elaborate jewelry. Tough men, tanned, carved, and gnarled by the sun, the sand and the hardships.

The Kuchis are something else. The nomadic segment of the Pashtoo.

They sprout out of the desert, bloom, unfold into splashes of colour within the sandy, monochrome, barren desolation, then wither, fade and disappear, hardly noticed by society. Anonymous. Even their cemeteries are rare and most are buried in the sand and forgotten where they were.

They are herders and traders, load their homes on the camel's back, carry water and milk in goatskin bags, and move from grazing grounds to trading grounds to grazing grounds.

Often in conflict with the Hazaras, when encroaching onto their pastures, with lots of ever hungry sheep and goats.

Huge fierce looking dog's trailing along. They are called Kuchi as well, can weigh up to 80 kilos, and guard the caravan and livestock against thieves, robbers, and predators. They are fearless and powerful, loyal and independent, and are able to hunt their own food.

Settled Afghans use them as fighting dogs, a thrill over here, with gambling involved, with sometimes heaps of money changing hands. Mostly outside the township, where loads of people gather around the fighting field, feverishly exited, watching these giants growling, biting, wrestling each other,



A Tea Hane in Balkh.

being separated before they kill or get killed, bleeding and sore.

The owners hold them on heavy chains, sometimes two guys per beast, before they let them off for the struggle.

We see one dog getting exited, jumping up all of a sudden, the holder falls down, the beast running its way, dragging the guy who hangs helpless onto the chain, through the dirt.

The kids, a bunch of unkempt, dusty, wild rascals, are the possessors of freedom within this endless space. It’s all theirs. They're growing up in a far out way. Give a hand when needed. Run, jump and play their games, while the caravan is moving on in the rhythm of the camel's gait.

The desert is a mystery in itself. A room without walls, that stretches as far as your eyes can see, further than your feet can walk, all the way to where sky and earth or ocean move into each other.

It is like an ocean. A sea of stillness. Where the heaving waves



Afghanistan. Ann and Eva having Kebab and Hookah outside Balkh.

are frozen dunes, that can be moved and transformed, and lifted up to the sky, and blown away for a thousand miles, by the breath of the wind when it gets into rages.

Wilderness in its raw rough beauty.

Emptiness – apart from some townships, caravans, goat-hair tarps of the nomads, there is nobody there.

Solitude. You are alone, confined to yourself, forced to be with yourself, to listen to what grows inside your head, of what it's all about, undisturbed. Confronted with the skin you're living in.

Silence. Sound is swallowed by the vastness. The quietude goes so deep, that you can sense the secret whispering of the sands.

The other day we were on the way to Bamian. It's not far from the lakes, same province.

The Hindu Kush, and most of the highlands are inhabited by the Hazara. One of the biggest minorities. They are traditionally herdsman, and rotate their grazing spots according to the season, since winter covers the pastures on the higher levels with snow and ice.

It's said that they are Mongols, leftovers from the troops of Ghengis Khan, that mixed with Turkic and Iranian Tribes. A Shia majority with a large segment of Sunni.

They are the most persecuted group of people in Afghanistan, who suffered discrimination, massacres, and genocide.

In the 19th century, more than half of their people were killed during a pogrom by a powerful rival alliance.

On the way, in the middle of nowhere, the rear axle broke. It was getting dark. No traffic.

We waited for bloody hours, until finally, we see the lights of a car. Manfred and Gerd hitch a lift to the next habitation, and we hang on smoking joints and dancing in the moonlight.

Luckily, we're not up yet in the upper regions, so the temperature is kind to us.



Bazaar in Balkh.

In the morning the boys are back again on a small truck that tows us to a village. They even have a post office with a telephone. After hours of trying, Manfred gets through to Germany.

The news is, it will take about three to four weeks to send that thing over land by truck, and costs a small fortune.



Kochi nomadic tribal woman.

Manfred, always eager to find solutions, chats using hand language with the blacksmith and the mechanic at the local garage, that looks out of the Stone Age. They say they can do it but we are very doubtful. And we are very wrong. Within three days we're on the wheels again, on a new axel, handcrafted from an old iron rail thanks to the genius guys who can do miracles they performed, so that we could roll on again.

The bus scrambles up a dusty pass, and when on the crest, a green valley opens up, two and a half thousand meters high, that squeezes and winds between the Hindu Kush and the Koh-e Baba Mountain range. Rolling hills glaring from ocher to brick red in the midday sun, framing the greenness. The surrounding peaks wear snow caps.

The eyes trail in between the trunks of a pretty alley to the end of it and look at the Buddha – a giant, fifty-three meters tall, carved in more than a hundred meters high sandstone cliff, that stretches almost vertical, further than three thousand feet. A distance away is another one, 35 meters.

The wall of the sandstone rock is pockmarked by holes, more than a thousand caves carved into it, some of them decorated inside by oil paintings, still remaining in remarkable shape, many connected by passageways and tunnels, left by thousands of monks, who had used them as monasteries, meditation and prayer rooms.

The colossal Buddhas were carved from rock into image, fifteen hundred years ago.

We are in a sacred space, thinking of all the dedication, contemplative energy, and worship poured over the place by countless faithfuls during all those times.

Climbing up on to the Buddha's foot having a hookah, we got so stoned that I nearly fell off, losing my balance.

Bamian is the capitol and the centre of the people who call their homeland Hazarajat.

We make it our base for a couple of weeks and do sporadic excursions in different directions.

It is a relaxed environment. The farmers are tilling their fields, the herders move their flocks to the pastures, and the shopkeepers invite you for a chat and a chai.

The tea houses are cozy, warm and homely where we have our meals.

For breakfast we munch this delicious roti, a sweetened, crispy flat bread with chai sabz, the green tea, or chai mekes, milk tea with spices like cardamom, ginger, black pepper and clove.

For lunch and dinner, we have kebab or kabuli pulao, tender lamb covered by a heap of safran rice with shreds of carrots



Rudi and me on the Salang pass.

and raisins, with doogh, a yogurt drink with herbs and mint. It's all mouth-watering.

The khazi is outdoor in the field, where we join when in need, a row of men with our metal pitcher, and squad like chicken on the roost.

Filming out, a stretch of waving dunes, ascending up to a mountain chain, Gerd caught three moving spots in his tele-lens, far away, moving in from out of nowhere, where patches of snow mingle with caramel plots of earth.

Coming closer, they appear to be people. A longhaired bloke with a silver handled walking stick, flanked by two good-looking chicks.

Ira tells us that they are part of a bunch of people who call themselves Rainbow Gypsies, a mixed international dance theatre group who came from Paris, and are on the way to India, to meet their Guru, called Maharaji, a thirteen-year-old spiritual guide, that some people call the fat kid.

They are dressed in very elaborate, colourful attire, like ready to appear on stage. And this landscape is a mind-blowing platform for performances, where every patch of colour is a choreography.

The whole gang we meet later on during Eid ul Fitri, the end of Ramadan, when the Muslim world leaves the fasting for feasting and celebrations.



Gerd filming Manfred and Hans who just had a hookah on the foot of the giant Buddha which the Taliban blew up. Got so stoned that I nearly fell off the Buddha's foot.

Just across the road from the Behzad was a group of Afghan musicians jamming, playing from the rich repertoire of traditional sounds and songs. With young male dancers, dressed in swanky embroidered waistcoats and traditional garments, moving to rousing rhythms like in a frenzy. Intoxicating, that the soul bird started fluttering inside the body, turning the limbs to rattle and sway.

Then comes a troupe of girls and boys, colourful as a rainbow, the Gypsies. Putting up an impressive scene worthy of big stages in London, Paris, Rome, or wherever. Moving bodies painting pictures in space, dancing poetry into motion.

We watched them every night of the three of Eid and everybody else did as well, fascinated.

Three weeks ago, we were thrilled watching a furious fight for the headless cadaver of a goat, at a Buzkashi game. The BBC, being here to do a Docu on Afghanistan, in which the national game is an obligation to shoot, paid the teams for a set-up. The crowd got really worked up and went bonkers. The game is a passion all over Central Asia, the heartland of the tradition of the horsemen.

Kyrgys, Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Uyghur, Pashtoo, they all have it pulsing in their blood.

Today is the big event in honour of Zahir Shah, the venerable King. Thousands flock around the square of the encounter. Since it is a ritual for the Shah, it takes on a special dimension.

The riders give all of their force and their heart. They crash into each other, push, beat and whack the opponents, trying to throw them off their horses, slash men and animals with their wood-handled leather whips which they clench between their teeth when they need their hands free for grabbing the carcass, covered in dust – some of them bleeding – from the twirling clouds stirred up by the hoofs in gallop, sudden stops or turns on the spot.

Getting bruised, injured, broken bones and sometimes even killed.

The wilderness they grow out of grows inside as well, becomes part of themselves and breaks out into a display of untamed bravery and fearless daring.

The winner of the Chapandaz beams with pride when receiving the trophy.

The men and horses had been groomed and trained severely.

Going north to Kundus, we have to cross the Hindukush via the Salang Pass. A road of great beauty, snaking its path up to nearly 4.000 meters. The views onto the surrounding snow-capped, desert beige mountain chains, the shapes, forms and jittery lines of the valleys that are slithering through and along the laps of the rocky giants in their emerald attire are overwhelming in their majesty.

It reveals your insignificance in the face of the vastness of creation.

Soviet engineers have dug a tunnel through it to shorten the trip, but we rather take the high road littered with obstacles and divine outlooks, every meter missed is a loss.

It’s said that the trade between the North and the South over this Pass is going on for at least the last 4000 years. The whole country is crammed with remnants of historical cross cultures from all directions. There are caravan serais left alive and thriving from the Silk Road time.

Thinking of the meetings and the clashes, the wars and the wisdom, the affluence and interchange of cultures, faith,



Buzkashi.



Buzkashi.

traditions, history, about the confluence of the big language groups, like the Turkmen, the Semitic, the Indo-Irano – ,root to most European tongues – , all meet here, pollinating each other, composing, inspiring music, poetry, arts that paint each other's colours, flow into each other's inspiration, and about the philosophies and ways of reasoning, underlying the intellectual expression of these diverse language roots, pondering about the bloody brilliant thought patterns the old Greeks had left and mated with the contemplative reflections of the East.

We are here to shoot the reaping, harvesting, the final touching and smoke testing of one of the most important agricultural products – hashish. Shots of the planting and sowing we had done already at the beginning of the season. Now we are going to have a look at the unfolding, the last stage. When the caretaker steps out of the dusty work within the heaps of pollen, getting into the first flash, that rests in the palm of his left hand like a slap of clay from the potter's wheel. He's kneading with his right thumb the sticky dough of the pollen composition, gives it shape and an almost shiny surface, rolls it between the palms of his hands into macaroni-size snakes, and presses a bunch of them together into a fat sausage.

Smoking it, was very aromatic, it had a bouquet of freshness and a kind of purity about it.

Coming straight from the source was even more upgrading. Mazar-I-Sharif, the Tomb of the Saint.

Almost a thousand years ago, a Mullah of the village had a dream. In it, Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, appeared and revealed, that at a certain spot he was secretly buried. The Mullah spread the news, and a tomb was erected that unfolded into the beautiful Blue Mosque, that defines the City. Clad in shiny tiles of turquoise blueish glaze, it stands out as a beaming majesty.



Buz Kashi player.

Even the real resting place of the initiator of Sufi techniques and Master of Eloquence is supposed to be the holy City of Najaf in Iraq. Many believers come here on a pilgrimage, for prayer and Baraka, the blessings of the revered presentness.

Mazar, in the olden days, used to hide in the shadow of the brilliance of Balkh. Now it overshadows the formers crumbled glory with its beauty in blue.

The capitol of the Balkh Province has a Tajik majority with a large Uzbek and Hazara presence. The Pashtoo make only a third of the population and there is a more liberal flair around, especially concerning the hijab. You can see more female faces, a less strict dress code and behaviour north of the Hindu Kush.

Two hours' drive to the East, we come to Aqcha, at the rim of a huge area of swamps, where a few rivers terminate, disappearing in the spongy surface, loosing themselves in the sand.

The place of Turkmen and Uzbek habitation is known for carpet knotting, picturing mainly Buchara and Elephant Foot designs. Manfred is into carpets and wants to score a couple.

Heading east again, past Mazar, we enter the gate of Khulm, the ancient Silk Route caravanserai, with it's incredible bazaar, where time doesn't seem to move.

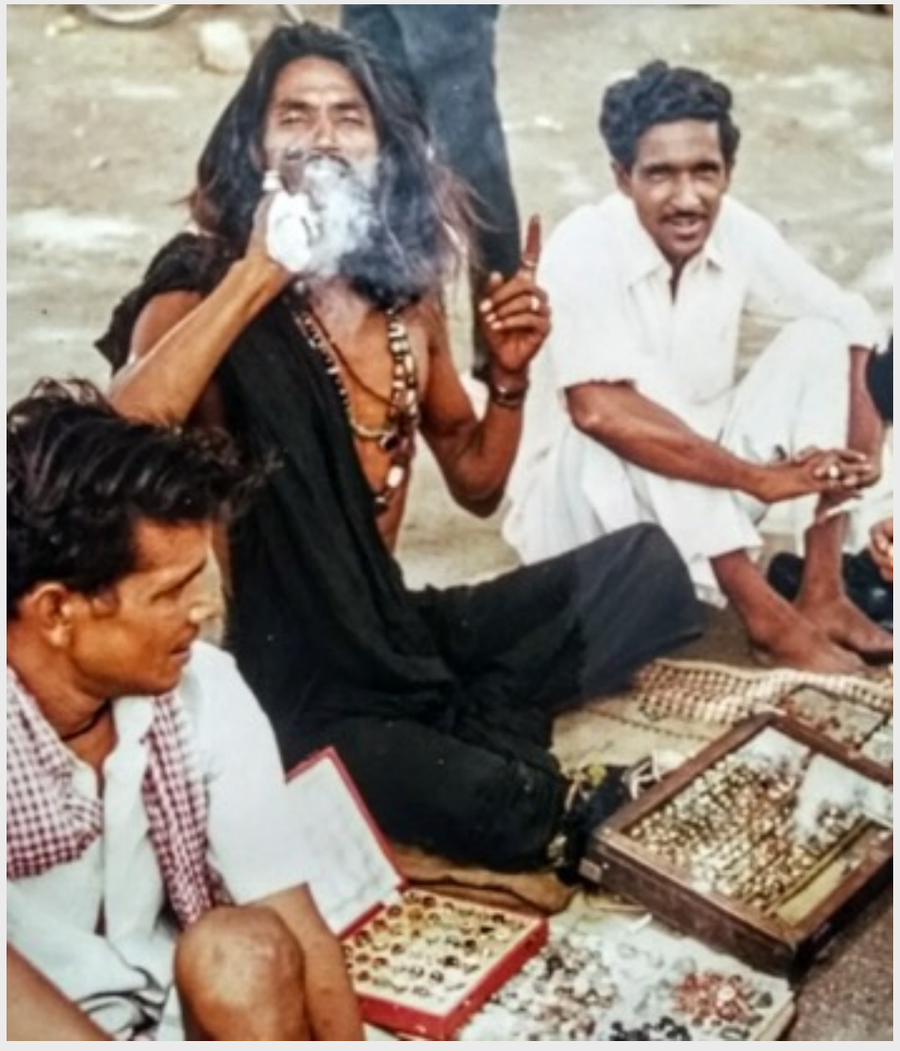


Our film team.

Traders, pilgrims, craftsman, travellers, Kuchis, congregate like hundreds of years gone by, in this antique labyrinth of trading where the different crafts and dealings have their own lanes.

The blacksmith and the copper carver, the tailor and the carpenter, the spice seller, fruit merchant, carpet knotting, food stalls, tea hangouts, villagers offering their homemade, homegrown groceries, veggies and fruits.

Located in between Mazar and Kundus, at the foot hills of the Hindu Kush, facing the plains, in which the Amu Darya, – the Ancients called Oxus – terminates, after its sources descend from the icy lofts of the Pamir and Tien Shan. Here it ends up



You want us to join for a chillum man?

after running more than 2.000 km over rocks, down the mountains, through desert, steppe, grassland, valleys of green, that are fed by its waters. Evaporating partly in the hot sands of the lowlands and draining its weakened body, split up in many arms, spilling into the Aral and Caspian Sea.

The Hindu Kush is the watershed, that feeds the Amu Darya and its tributaries in the North from its Glaciers, as it does the Indus to the South.

There is a gang of guys squatting around a Hookah outside a tea shop, blowing clouds of smoke like a steam engine. We utter the Salam and squat beside to join and have a go at it, knocking me flat on my back, and we all get choked by coughing fits to the amusement of the Afghans.



Musician in Masar i Sharif.

Herat, the mighty oasis, Pearl of Khorassan, is the bastion of the west. Embraced by a fertile valley, where the soil is fed by the waters of the Hari River, that spreads fertility on its 1100 km travels through the different formations of nature. It is marked by the staunch, powerful beauty of Majid Jami, clad in soft coloured turquoise tiles, that gives sparkle to the mud and brick city, where the dwellers keep their privacy behind earthen walls.

There is a beautiful Tomb of Abdullah Ansari, a mystical poet and spiritual master, who lived a 1000 years ago and is still alive in his deep going poems. He is the Saint of Herat.

Places of worship emanate an air of absorbance of sacredness, peace, and a different existence. One's behaviour changes by stepping over the threshold.

It feels suiting, and cool among the tiles covering the interior and swallowing the heat.

Pilgrims and worshippers release a waft of humbleness and surrender to the source of their faith.

Fragrance of sandal and rose oil spice the air. Some people are lost or entranced in their prayers. The sarcophagus is covered with brocaded cloth and rose petals, the light is soft and warm.

The fortified citadel, a huge powerful structure, towering above the place as if watching and guarding the sacred Majid. After being built by Alexander, it was conquered, ransacked,



We sharpen your knifes and scissors .

crumbled and beaten, many times along with the city. But it re-emerged, was rebuilt and reborn again, as the point of crossing it had always been, for camel caravans, merchants, pilgrims, adventurers, travellers, from West, South and Central Asia.

Gerd meets Karin, a young American journalist, traveling around Asia and now Afghanistan.

She fits into our gang like she had always been there. In later years she advances to become bureau chief for the WP South America stationed in Argentina. She met and interviewed Fidel, and wrote a biography of Colin Powell. [Karen DeYoung – *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell*, 2007.]

Through her we met an American professional film team. They lived in a big villa, a bit out of the centre, had top cameras and equipment, even rails to move the cameras on,



Manfred gets a gun in Herat.

and lighting gear, enabling them to create a stunning illumination.

They must be loaded with footage, judging by the amount of film containers. A big dream for beginners like us.

Journalists came around, and naturally photographers as well, like that guy who was after the snow leopard, climbing up to extreme heights on the trails of Pamir. Showing pics of barren rocks, dwindling views, yaks and Marco Polo sheep.

We liked the place, it was informative and entertaining. We always used to visit it when we were in Kabul.

One day we arrived from a trip down South, and the villa was off limits for visitors. All doors were guarded by Police.

What is going on here, what happened?

The team had a flourishing exchange with California, delivering Black Afghan, prime quality, in film roll containers. The police smelled it, or maybe got a hint. But what they smelled most was the money to be made, and they took good care of the enterprise. For every confirmed court date there had to be fees and fines, paid appropriately to the level of finance estimated, to be befitting.

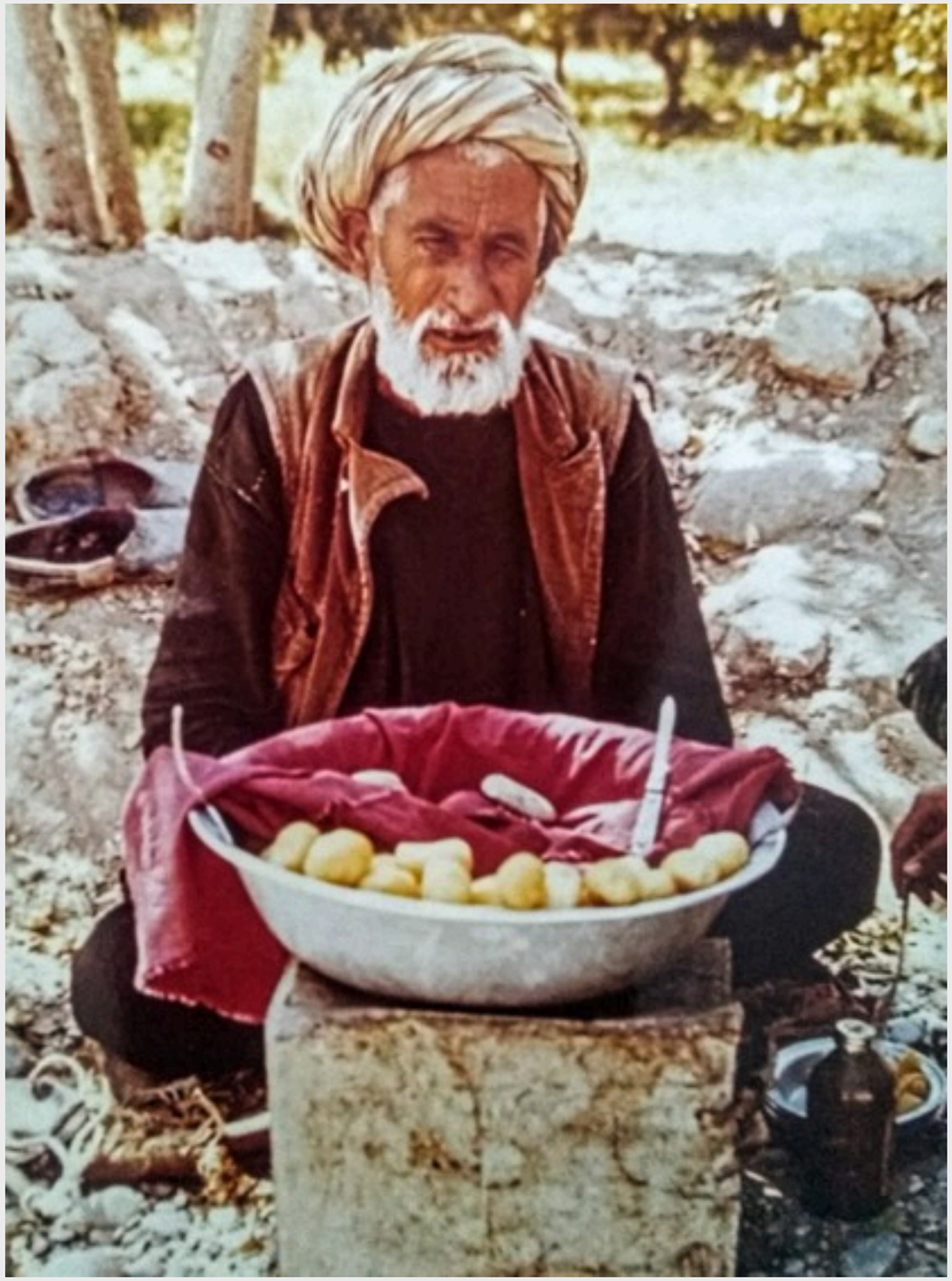
The court appointments were postponed, canceled, rearranged. That was going on and on to keep the fat cow milking.

The team couldn't leave house arrest and whatever was needed like food, drink and commodities had to be brought and catered by the police and they weren't cheap.

The case was dragging on and wasn't solved before we left the country.

In contrast, the customs at the airport caught a British hippie with 1.5 kg. After finding out that his pockets were empty, they felt pity and gave him back a 100 gr. for on the road.

Mahmood made Ghazni the Capitol of the vast expand of land he conquered. From the west of Persia to the Indian Punjab in



Street seller with snacks.

the east and the Aral and Caspian Sea to the north.

He fashioned it into a magnificent jewel, that rivalled even Baghdad in importance and brilliance with the jewels he robbed from India on his numerous marauding campaigns.

Again and again he would raid and return loaded with treasures, after ransacking cities of wealth like Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, and Somnath the sacred pilgrim site dedicated to Lord Shiva.

As possessed as the Sultan was, by conquering, looting and robbing, he became curious about spirituality. He surrounded himself with poets, philosophers, artists and writers, and turned Ghazni into a centre of Persian poetry and literature, and admired the way of the Sufis. He made his slave servant Ayaz his companion and took advice and guidance from him. There are numerous tales of the King and his slave, displayed in the 'Conference of the Birds' by Attar.

In the nearby countryside, covered by a thick shiny blanket of snow, we find a small teahouse. Smoke curling from its mud chimney. Coziness and warmth envelopes us after being out for a while at minus 20. A lovely chai masala with lots of ginger and a flatbread hot from the clay oven is served. The samovar whispers, the guests slurping their tea and get into the bread.

That's all you get right now, bread and tea. The passes are decked with snow, and since 3 weeks no transport comes through up here on 2.000 meters height. There is a lack of commodities like food.

The door opens and with a light tripping, more of a dance then a step, the most beautiful dog I have seen, a Saluki, a Persian Greyhound enters the circle of men and stretches out on the best carpet of the hut. With an aristocratic posture, a high held head, and a detached look from his bewitching deer eyes. Everyone in the round tears an edge of his bread, feeding the hound.

Dogs are supposed to be dirty in Islam, and not allowed in human living quarters.

A Saluki is an exception and supposed to be clean, and they look very clean, like horses, they look clean too, until the dog finds a heap of horseshit. He will roll around in it and through and over. It's his perfume. Salukis love horses, having a hunting relationship for 1000's of years, often riding on the horseback with the hunter to exhaust the game.

Some people like Bedouins depend on their hunting skills for survival.

The keeper of the house takes his rifle, and invites us for the hunt.

We witness the amazing speed of the hound and the tricky, skilful leaps and jumps of the hare, on the glistening white of the covering snow, that extends up to the horizon.

Now the mighty old citadel looks grey and crumbling, having withstood the wars and the fighting.

The beautiful minarets, with their gold brownish glazed tile ornaments, have survived the calamities of times, even having lost half of their height in an earthquake, they still stand proud, their solid 20 meters.

The Tomb of Mahmood reflects majesty and beauty. It's the centre of the centre of town.

It tells visitors tales of a great king, a rascal and a lover of mystical poetry.



Manfred getting a carpet.

On all the trips around we hardly see any concrete. The whole country lives in clay and fired mud brick huts, dwellings, castles, mosques and palaces. Its harmonizing, integrating into the natural surroundings, colours and shapes. Wherever one travels, one can see the chimneys of the kilns, standing upright like minarets throughout the landscape, towering different forms of the kilns, with their remarkable architecture, that expresses the local traditional feelings for shape.

While East Pakistan was fighting to gain independence from the dominance of West Pakistan, the West had bombed a few targets in India, that was unofficially supporting the Bengals. It led to an all-out war and the formation of Bangladesh.

Borders, air and maritime space were closed, and it blew our further plans to continue overland to Kathmandu.

We spent Christmas in Kandahar, and bought ourselves and to the companions, presents at the local flea market which specialized in used American military outfits.

Manfred found an air force suit for almost nothing and I fetched a pair of Frye boots for 5 bucks. Ann scored *The Sufis* by Idris Shah, in the second-hand literary section, that I got from her as a present.

After Gurdjieff's *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, handed on by Peter Brown in Goa, it was another inspiration towards the mysticism of Islam.



Landscape where they use the clay for bricks.

The Afghans loved the uniforms, the market was full of turbans, the men were thrilled to have stars and stripes of the ranks on them. Fitting to the variety of rifles they were carrying around from automatic to flintlock.

They looked wild in their beards, baggies, long shirts, big turbans, and waistcoats, wearing a general's coat over it, or a wing commander's jacket. Nearly every dude had a piece. And a round little tin box with a mirror on top, containing chewing tobacco, and kajal eyeliner to protect against the powdery desert dust, underlining the eyes and enlarging the looks adding to their strong personalities.

The city, on a 1000 meter level, was like so many places in this area founded by Alexander, but nearby ruins were unearthed that go back to more than 7000 years.

It is the centre of culture and traditions for the Pashtoo nation since more than 300 years.

Ahmed Shah Durrani conquered vast stretches of land with his kinsmen, from India in the East to Persia in the West, Turkestan up North.

He became the founder and father of modern Afghanistan, was declared emperor by the Loya Jirga and made Kandahar the capitol of his empire.

His colourful tomb prides the centre of town next to the Shrine of the Cloak, a mantel, supposed to be worn by the Holy Prophet on his Miraj, one of the most sacred relics in Islam, presented to him by the Amir of Buchara.

Kabul is a mosaic of all the different cultures in the country, and reflects their customs and diverse ways of living. With Western influence seeping through the firm layer of tradition, it pictures a contradicting image to the almost archaic rulings of Kandahar.

A careful opening towards modernism. Besides burka and headscarf, there are some female faces to be seen, without hijab.

There are young Afghans, who lean to the left and talk about progressive changes, communism, and even revolution.



Christmas in Kandahar. Gerd, Manfred, me and Eva.

The rumours of dissatisfaction with the present situation and upheaval comes mainly from young, privileged, well-educated students.

Yusuf, who had studied in Moscow comes around when we are in town, smokes and drinks vodka in secret. He wouldn't dare to even touch a fag in the presence of elder brother, telling us that his father would kill him if he knew.

He makes his living in flogging uncut lapis in the Soviet Union and coming back with a suitcase filled with fancy scarfs.

Sometimes, when he is having a go at the booze, he breaks into tears, lamenting the backwardness and lack of freedom.



Ann comforting Manfred having the love blues.

We decided to split up. The war situation across the border was chaotic and unpredictable. going east impossible.

Ann, Rudi and Manfred were to return to Germany. Eva, Karin, Gerd and me, to hang on, and to try to get to India somehow, sometime.

We sold the bus to some travelers, and had to do the deal in no man’s land, since we had to take the thing out of the country and out of the passport. Gerd took it along with the buyer into the space between the Afghan, Pakistan border,

and we bought the Morris from Ian for the three to drive with to Europe.

It was winter, the little car with the small wheels and no snow chains had to plow up and down the mountain passes on the way. Most problematic at the Iran–Turkey frontier, past Mt. Ararat.

But Manfred, our angel of the roads, brought them safe to Germany with four lovely Noorestan chairs tied on top of the roof rack.

After about a week, we learned that Swiss Air had the



A Hookah shop in Kandahar.

permission to open a flight route from Karachi to Bombay.

There was an Overlander London - Kathmandu bus, stranded in Kabul as well, and announced, that it was going down to Sindh, to Karachi. We did the booking and took the old bus across the sandy planes, strewn and dotted with Dhargas, tombs, and Sufi graves, visited by pilgrims and worshippers from all over. It's quite a people's movement, popular among

the lower classes, intellectuals and artists, who are looking for the inner meaning of the revelation. Contrasted by fundamentalists who see it as an affront and deviation from the teachings of the Holy Book.



Eva and Hans in Kabul.

On Thursdays, the holy day of the Sufis, and on Urs, the day of departure from the earthen realms of the Saint, the gatherings take on a festive dimension. Crowds come together, spearheaded by Qualandar and Malang, the wandering dervishes, mostly free of any binding, be it a Sheik, Order or Tariqa. They roam around the country, having left their material desires on the Path to Fana, the annihilation into the source of all that exists.

Wildly dressed in colourful rags or patchwork robes, longhaired, bearded, adorned with beggar beads, rings, necklaces, and ritual and ceremonial gear.

Intoxicated by the wine of love and devotion, dancing, whirling, singing, drumming, Zikr, the repetition of the most beautiful divine names and attributes.

The bus was loaded with freaks. Chillums and joints had never a brake, Rock n Roll blaring day and night. A sweet old Liverpudlian Grandma about seventy, sat brave and a bit lost in the front row clutching her little handbag and everybody tried to be nice to her.

On the way down from Peshawar to Multan, the radiator started leaking getting worse by the hour. Deja Vue. Many had an idea, but none would work. We tried it with oats that quell, with eggs that get fried and hardened, with chewing gum that sticks, but nothing would close the bloody leak.

We got stuck in Jacobabad, the frying pan of Pakistan. It was hot. We spent three sweaty days on the spot.

When we got on the go again the heat followed us. Sometimes we had to duck below the windows to avoid the scorching breath of the Deccan wind breezing through the openings.



Manfred.

In Sukkur we crossed the mighty old Indus on who’s banks some of the ancient civilizations like MohenjoDaro and Harappa blossomed. A five thousand years old story that swept across the centuries, and we are part of it, language related. Great Great grandmother’s tongue. There must be that running thread through genes and genesis. If our tongue utters the same sound system, then our minds can't be far away from each other.

Coming from a place of tranquility and space, landing in the polluted, noisy, hectic, overcrowded megacity, Karachi, is a comedown. Karachi is a funky, far-out, groovy place, but our minds and emotions were in a different set, like to take it easy on a nice beach. So, we are looking forward to the flight, to take us up again.