

## **Less than 48 vivid hours Iran in 1991**

The long flight from Istanbul via Frankfurt arrived late in Tehran, and my empty stomach rumbled as I staggered through the crowded terminal of shouting hordes. It was past midnight, and my bedraggled fellow South Australian travellers no longer looked like delegates on an Agricultural Trade Mission. Background noise hit decibels a coalition of Iranian cheetahs might envy if they weren't a struggling species. Made uncertain by noise, fatigue and menacing customs officers, like the others, I surrendered my Turkish rug to officials to keep until our departure. I was ready to obey all instructions in return for safe passage and a place to lay my scarfed head.

In spite of waking on the morrow in a gracious Persian hotel with mosaics and burnished lamps, I was bleary eyed and forlorn after only a few hours' sleep. My ears still thrummed from the deafening screams at the airport as I answered the knock at the door. Beautiful eyes from the hijab of the housekeeper and her shaking head made me well aware there was nothing noble or dignified in the way I looked. Nor how I was dressed. I capitulated as she adjusted my own hijab's scarf before I could begin the day's full meeting schedule in a culture whose rules I little understood but dared not breach.

Clutching my day's running sheet, briefing notes and a box of promotional brochures, I faced my first dilemma: my driver waiting in the foyer spoke no English and I no Farsi. Communication was not helped by body language, my bewildered face half obscured by the harsh material of the hijab. We must have smiled and gestured a lot for soon the machinery of the Australian Ambassador's office had me exiting a busy central square of Iran's capital and arriving on schedule at the first university.

Met by a professor, I was warned men had to ignore any proffered handshake. I was well aware that he was superintending a situation which could offend. I might be menstruating and unclean, mercifully they would be too polite to ask.

Around the table were seven other well prepared academics eager to find out about South Australian Education opportunities in agriculture. No battles there nor at subsequent meetings, and a pleasant solo lunch in a restaurant proceeded smoothly, menu ordering and payment negotiated by my driver. I relaxed with gentle thoughts as I ate whatever came, kebabs, rice, salads and spicy side dishes. Not unfamiliar though unnamed, the food was delicious.

More meetings and then after the final one, the lead speaker jumped into my car and ordered the driver take us to his house. Beaming, he introduced his warm and hospitable wife who urged me to shed my hijab as I was now inside her home. Over coffee pot and watermelon, we launched into exhilarating conversation about literature broadly, poetry, and specific novels by DH Lawrence and Scott Fitzgerald. A friendship could have ensued but my letter from Australia never received a reply.

That pleasant interlude denied me time to shop even though I knew Iran to be famous for its cotton napery. I did however snatch a few moments to purchase a couple of table cloths in the hotel shop before the evening cocktail party at the Embassy.

In welcome, the Ambassador told me I could take off the hijab in his Australian residence. So I stood around with many of the men I'd met during the day feeling awkwardly curvaceous in the dark navy, neck to mid-calf-length dress I'd thought so demure at home. When the local guests left, out came the gins and tonic for the brazen visitors. I would never understand the changing rules, just obeyed them, noting the religious police outside when I left the embassy, hijab reinstated, for the journey back to the hotel.

Bright lights and milling passengers in the airport again set the stage for yet more drama and agitation as we departed the next day.

Firstly, we collected our carpets from the customs store where we'd deposited them on arrival, and with the associated paperwork proceeded quite a distance to the customs check. The men passed through smoothly. I however was designated a separate aisle for females. The problem was, the men had the group paperwork.

I queued and tried to bluster my way through, but the officials wouldn't let me past with my paperless carpet. I shrank all the way back to where I'd just collected it to get another piece of paper. The minutes ticked by, the paperwork seemed to take forever, not helped by the fact that I was now without my hijab, having returned it to the embassy staff. After an age, and much mimicry and gesturing, I had a piece of paper stamped in Farsi which I hoped would enable me and my carpet to leave Iran.

My lack of proper dressing was evoking many stares as I pushed a pathway back to the women's queue. Beyond, my fellow male delegates were signalling and pointing to their watches. I remained silent across the distance, but my pulse raced as I realised departure time was upon us. Ahead the female officials slowly body searched and chattered with no regard for any timetables but their own. My panic would make no difference. Then a wailing erupted, and curtains were rapidly pulled around a woman ahead. It seemed she had gone into labour and was about to deliver in this crowded airport. Shouts and screams escalated.

As chaos followed, I somehow took the chance and barged through to my colleagues. We fled to the departure gate. As we were boarding I said, "I'm not sure I even like this rug bought in Turkey just a week ago." A tight-lipped and deservedly icy retort followed: "You WILL like it!" I still do.