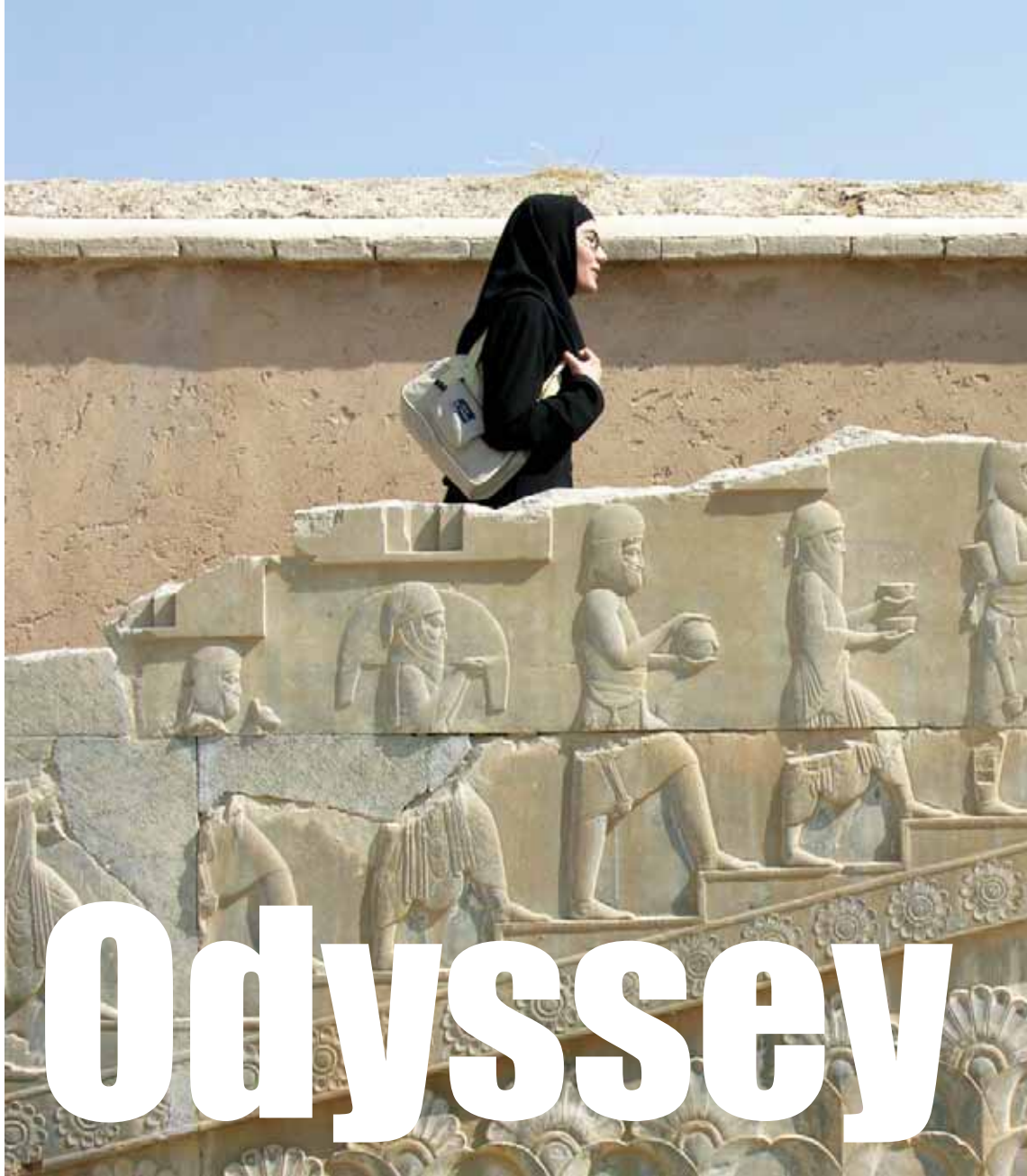




Tiled interior of Imam Mosque



View from Imam Mosque



Odyssey

Iranian

*Lou Mullineux
discovers why Iran
deserves to be back on
the traveller's map.*

FACT FILE

A two-week introduction to Iran, taking in many of the destinations Lou visited on her trip, costs from £2,100 per person. For further information please contact Lou on 01993 838 209. We are also running an escorted group tour to Iran in May 2008. Please speak to Lou for details.



Many people cherish a romantic notion of ancient Persia, with its marching empires, bustling caravanserais and beautiful architecture. Mention to these same people that you are planning a trip to Iran, however, and you will be met with a look of bewilderment. It is certainly not your typical travellers' destination of choice. So it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I boarded my evening flight to Tehran in early January, savouring a final solitary glass of red wine on the aeroplane before venturing into the unknown. Most of the women on the plane were, like me, dressed in Western-style clothing and it was only upon landing in Tehran that headscarves were fixed and coats were adjusted to comply with the compulsory Islamic dress code. To me this epitomised the fascinating contrast between east and west which is always apparent in Iran, and was to constantly surprise me throughout the duration of my trip.

Tehran is not exactly a beautiful city. It is bustling, energetic and noisy, as you might expect of a city with 14 million people (and, it appears, a similar number of cars). But, with the stunning Alborz

mountains as a backdrop, snowcapped in winter, it does have a certain air of distinction about it. With a plethora of museums to keep you occupied it is well worth spending a few days here.

Next stop on my busy itinerary was the desert city of Yazd. With its adobe old town, Zoroastrian pilgrimage sites and of course, the commanding Amir Chakhmaq complex (which you can climb for excellent views of the city), Yazd is an important destination in its own right, with the country's most characterful accommodation options to boot. I stayed in the Mehr guesthouse, which has been lovingly restored over recent years to win an honorary UNESCO prize.

From Yazd, we drove onward to Shiraz, a pleasant if somewhat misleadingly named town given Iran's strict no-alcohol policy. The city brims with culture, but it is the magnificence of nearby Persepolis that truly commands respect. Sacked by Alexander the Great in retaliation for the destruction of Athens, Persepolis boasts some stunning and varied architecture, from the imperious Gate of All Nations to the exquisite Court of Apadana. Stone carvings show subject



Persepolis

peoples from Ethiopia to India paying tribute to a throned Darius. The detail is incredible – look closely and you will see the laces on the subjects’ shoes. One visit here wouldn’t do it justice, so I came twice, and on both occasions I was one of only a few visitors wandering around at leisure. Where else could you find such an important world heritage site left for your own quiet contemplation?

Driving northward through the Zagros mountains, I reached Shah Abbas the Great’s showpiece, Esfahan. The centrepiece of Safavid rule, Esfahan was designed to impress, and it certainly does, even today. The architecture is breathtaking, with intricate detail in the design and vivid blues and yellows on the walls. My visit coincided with the start of Ashura (the mourning of Imam Hussain who was martyred at Karbala), and the imposing Imam Mosque was thronged with worshippers entering to the accompaniment of solemn chanting and praying. Offered a most welcome cup of tea at the gates, I stood in awe of the proceedings and watched, in anticipation of my tour the next morning when I would finally get to see inside.



The wealth of historic and architectural wonders in Iran is justifiably renowned, but for me the most memorable aspect of my visit was the genuine welcome I received wherever I went. Despite Iran’s difficult political situation this is an incredibly hospitable country. From the women who stopped me in the street to shake my hand (and in one case, to give me kisses!), to the policeman who tapped on our car window to present me with a bagful of pistachios - not to mention the shopkeeper walking down the street with a plateful of freshly baked nan bread who insisted that I try a piece while they were still warm - Iranian people are among the most friendly and approachable I have ever met, keen to meet and chat with Westerners and to share with us their remarkable country.

Lou Mullineux
Iran Specialist



Ancient citadel, Kharanagh