

5th travel account: Positive information from Afghanistan

Supplemented by small anecdotes from someone soon to be mentioned....

My trips to Afghanistan seem to have lapsed into, not a yearly but a two-yearly basis. This trip was organized similarly to the one in the summer of 2009 (see 4th travel account), so that this report will be kept a little shorter.

A special difference this year: I had a German escort with me.

I am not old but I am also not very young any more, but moreover aware that energy can dwindle very quickly. Managing a project like this one is extremely manifold and time-consuming. I receive a lot of help with certain tasks (a big thank-you to everyone for the various dedication), but it boils down to the fact that if and when I give up my work on this embroidery project, it will die! At the beginning of the year I started thinking about approaching a possible successor, which I did and spoke to Sarah at the beginning of Spring. I asked her if she would like to become acquainted with the complexity and time-consumption of this project during the next few years, as she knows it since it's beginning. I thought we could phone extensively with each other once a month (she studies in Bremen), and I would inform her of all progress so that she could grow into it. I received Sarah's answer 3 days later; she wanted to gather an opinion on-site and asked if she could accompany me in September as she had free time then. At the age of 24 one can be very spontaneous!

That is true! I am still very thankful to Pascale for her equally spontaneous positive reply. I was able to experience a trip that has impressed me like no other in my whole life. The magic of the orient.....

The lady at check-in in Frankfurt was shocked that we wanted to travel to Afghanistan. Her parents were from Iran which she associated with pure danger. Of course we did not change our plans due to her misgivings, took our boarding cards and her best wishes and waited for our take-off. Unknowing, we boarded the aircraft to ascertain that we were to sit in business-class, first row! The lady at the counter probably thought: if those two are travelling to Afghanistan, then they should enjoy some comfort on the way there!

Just as we wanted to take our seats, a stewardess asked us if we could change seats. She told us that a blind passenger was coming on board. As then a man with sunglasses was brought in, I wasted no more thoughts concerning her request.....and so we took off in direction of Hindukusch 1. Class!! * in german blind means clandestine too.*

Our trip began on September 3rd for 3 weeks, as long as the trips before. I would have preferred to travel during the school summer holidays because I still have a school "child", but Ramadan started on August 1st (for 1 month) which would have made work impossible.

The trip was organized according to the same concept as in the summer 2009. We flew to Herat (and flew back on September 11th) and again were wonderfully received by Rateb and made many visits to the embroiderers in the Hazara colony of Sharak. Although they were very reserved, we were able to chat with them casually. For our part we had a new suggestion to make.

Shaima Breshna, an agile Afghan woman with visions for her land, has initiated and leads a project called "Azezana" in the area around Kabul. Silk thread is dyed herbally there and hand-woven on the weaving loom, resulting in wonderful scarfs. You can learn more about this project on her very

appealing website: www.azezana.net. In the spring I was able to present her with a kilo of undyed strands of silk in a quality that can be embroidered.

The thread manufacturer Madeira in Freiburg gave us this silk in addition to the packages of silk thread that they usually give us for the project (only silk is used for this embroidery work). We met Shaima in Kabul and she gave us strands of herbally dyed silk thread. The palette of 8 colors turned out very well, Sarah and myself were overjoyed. Not only because of this but also because of the cooperation of two projects which is a rarity.

We presented this new twine palette to the embroiderers in Sharak with the instructions, never to mix them with the industrially dyed threads. This time we ordered more 4 x 6 cm squares, but also some which are half the size, 4 x 3 cm. We also had a special order of diamond shapes with various angles. These orders are made using both yarn qualities (you can see an assortment in one of the various [picasagalerie-webalbums](#) (in google: "Picasa pascale Goldenberg").

We reserved a day for visiting the nomads in Shotordaran.

We were welcomed not only by many children but also several sheep, even red ones which I especially liked – these had their fur marked with henna.

On the ground in front of one of the simple houses lay a pile of felt. I could not determine straight away what it was. As I was taking an interested look at the material, one of the men came over and threw it over his shoulders: it was a shepherd's cloak, a –Shapan Namadi- ! It was a bit torn and repaired in many places. It was a coat that must have seen a great deal and could surely tell a lot of stories. I fell in love with it, which I think one could see, as the cloak was instantly offered to me as a gift. From that moment onwards I always had an imaginary sheep-race with me; if I wanted to I only had to stick my nose into the pocket of my cloak.

We decided to initiate a small project with the nomads: we ordered 10 of these „Shapan Namadi“ in various sizes. The nomad women still make these shepherd's cloaks today, with immense effort, for their own use. It will take a while until they arrive, because the young animals cannot be shorn before winter for this large order. In addition to that, the freight takes time as well. You will be informed when the cloaks arrive! With this project, we hope to play a little part in helping the nomad women to earn some money, that we can convey stories of the nomads throughout Europe and of course, we hope that that this old felting technique is not completely forgotten.

At several places the gravel path to the nomads was marked with piles of dry hay on the edge of tiny fields. I hadn't noticed that 2 years ago and mentioned it to the village eldest. He replied "yes, we have become very modern, we are making food for the animals". You need to know that traditionally, nomads do not prepare feed for the winter. They accept that the weaker animals will die and that during especially hard winters, even the majority of the animals, which happens very often.

Before leaving the nomads I ask the village eldest, who also acts as a teacher, what kind of future he foresees for his children? He answers without hesitation: "None! Take them back to Germany with you".

IN LAGHMANI

Visiting the 4 villages of Laghmani was a pleasurable recurrence for me; for Sarah everything was new!

Sherifa, a sewer, died just before Ramadan. Otherwise several women had changed accommodation. Having no home of their own, several poor families wander from house to house among their relatives. People squeeze together to make room for another family. That can go well for a while, then the poor family moves on to the next relatives. This is an example of deepest poverty but also of active solidarity.

Many houses have just been restored or newly built, something I had not noticed during the past years. It is a sign that 10 years after the end of war, the people have a little money and enough faith to start rebuilding. A sewer tells me how she and her children made their own bricks, forming them and laying them out in the sun to dry, then to build walls with them. In these new buildings, cement floors are replacing the previous mud ones, which is probably more healthy as the damp mud floors the people live and sleep upon causes early rheumatism.

Everywhere there were more cows and calves than ever. They are usually bought for a mere few months, to be sold later (before the winter) for a little more money. During my first visit in 2005, a cow was a rarity. Part of the milk is for the calf, the rest is immediately used to make yoghurt.

I noticed that many women, whilst being in their own yards, were showing their body curves. In 2005 I had noticed that the women were dressed more or less in sacks, so that absolutely nothing of their figure was visible at all. Apparently this did not mean that the women had discarded their "Tshadri" (the full veilage). We learned by interviewing 5 women, that wearing the Tshadris is an old tradition in these villages and has nothing to do with the Taliban's ruling. As far as could be remembered, the women in these villages had to wear a Tshadri.

Controverse to the German tradition that a guest presents the host with a gift, the Afghans have the tradition of gifting the guest and so we were given many delicious dried mulberries. One family though, gave us pairs of real trendy sandals. Pascale didn't hesitate and slipped her feet into hers and, with an elegant swing of her hips, provided the women with a catwalk, receiving much laughter from them.

It was very heart-warming to learn that the girls, 3 sewers among them, would be doing their school graduation in November. They belong to the first era of girls managing a complete school career after the Taliban era. Amongst them is Fatemah who is adamant upon becoming a teacher: depending on her graduation results, she can register for examination. If she passes this she can start her studies in Tsharikar on March 22nd. She belongs to the pioneers in a village where many fathers still do not allow their daughters to go to school.

We, the 3 responsible people from Freiburg have decided to end the alphabetization programme. It has run successfully for 3 years but now the girls have got older, become engaged and were no longer permitted to leave their yards or they had so much housework to do that they rarely had time to attend lessons. The groups got smaller and lost its own dynamics. As a special closing action we

decided to furnish 4 larger libraries, one for each village. This was an idea from Freiburg and also wished for there.

Unfortunately, most of the women had not finished embroidering. I recollect; I had decided for each woman how many squares were to be delivered each quarter –between 10 and 100-. This decision was made considering age, ability and then of course how well her embroidery could be sold on the EU-Market. The woman cannot decide herself to deliver more work. This summer we had a double problem: the summer with it's many chores (garden- and farmwork, cleaning, conserving for the winter etc.) left little time and energy for embroidering. Also, we had just past Ramadan and during this the women had even less time and energy for sewing. Those women who deliver less work are permitted to deliver more the next time, but only once. Accumulating over several periods is not possible because they would just hurry their work to acquire the amounts and the quality of embroidery would diminish in the long run.

Noticeably impressing were the examinations this year. To be precise, it is a competition as only a certain number of sewers can be newly taken into the programme. There were 3 sessions as 2 villages were tested together. The material was distributed 2 days beforehand and the women came on the day with half of an embroidered square. Many women presented very poor work, they admitted to having started practicing to embroider 2 days beforehand, honestly thinking that they would have a chance with us and were unhappy and angry when I sent them away! There were many young women (between 16 and 20) amongst the candidates, even 3 sisters in 2 villages. The respective mothers were always present, placed directly with her daughter(s) to help and advise. The girls were so nervous that they were noticeably trembling when they started the test. We had to calm them down by telling them that they could take their time and they should breathe deeply. Then we sent the mothers away after all (they kept creeping back though), so that the girls had peace and quiet for themselves and their sewing. These generations of girls really have great potential, but reality is that they will be married soon, will have children and spend all their energy rearing them and experience has shown that the quality of the embroidery gets weaker.

The work with Sarah in my opinion was excellent. For no second did I regret taking her with me. I have been organizing the work here for years as I have thought best. Some decisions are made with Khaled and Lailuma but generally I move the boat here. This time I realized that we were a tandem, Sarah's opinion will count, we lead the work on site together. Sarah was very active, nevertheless more of a viewer. She always had very good ideas or solutions and was always in agreement with me (how wonderful!). I found it to be a very successful combination of my age(s) and long experience on site and her easygoing directness towards the village people with her youth and fresh views.

I am constantly asked „is it not too dangerous?“, even here I am told “it is much too dangerous”! Each trip has had its distinctiveness. The present situation in the first years determined whether I would get a visa or not. If somebody had been kidnapped, then it was difficult to get one. In one year the big Lorga Jirga congressed. In 2009 I flew back the day before the President elections, which made the circumstances very precarious with assassinations/attentats here and there. This year did not look good either because at the end of spring the Governor of the province Parwan in Tsharikar, 10 km away from Laghmani had been murdered. Then 2 German tourists disappeared in the same region. Nevertheless, the visa's were no problem (Sarah's first time). It can take several hours or days until a visa is issued. In September when we had already reached Kabul, the 2 Germans were found murdered, probably victims of highwaymen. During our stay there were fights between Taliban

sympathizers and Americans on several days, directly in Kabul. Then we have to stay inside or just don't go into these areas (that are closed up anyway).

This year there was a double jubilee in September: 10 years after Ahmad Shah Masoud's death on September 9th, then 2 days later September 11th. They were peaceful remembrance days.

I do not think that one can travel through Afghanistan as a tourist. It is surely recommendable to travel in the company of an Afghan who is at home in the area. I definitely would not travel alone as a woman. I myself always behave very passively and cautious and have never been in a difficult or dangerous situation.

Altogether I have a very positive impression of the whole development, in the villages as well as in Kabul. The roads are improving; police manage to take charge of the traffic at times. I was impressed by the alleys of little conifers. These were planted in the middle of the wide avenues. They were about 1,50 m high and deep green (and of course very dusty), which means that they get watered regularly and that nobody has misused them for firewood! I think that is a wonder, and though there **are** no wonders, it is a good sign that positive things are happening in Kabul and Afghanistan!