

Iran Travel Journal

By: Rick Steves

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Part 1

- 1 In the spring of 2008, my TV crew and I traveled to Iran to film Rick Steves' Iran, Yesterday and Today — a one-hour travel special which appeared on public television stations across the US in 2009.
- 2 We produced the TV show to understand and humanize Iran. As we put the show together, I kept this journal to remember and share my personal experiences, lessons learned, and opinions that were shaped by my trip.

Mission: Understand Iran

- 3 Last year [2007], a friend from the Washington State chapter of the United Nations Association called me and asked what I could do to help them build understanding between Iran and the US, and defuse the tension that could lead to war. I answered, "The only thing I could do would be to produce a TV show on Iran." Over the next few months, I wrote a proposal for a TV show — no politics, just travel. The working title was Iran: Its People and Culture, Yesterday and Today.
- 4 Today I walked into the Iranian Embassy in Athens and picked up the visas for my crew and me. It's official: I'm heading to what just might be the most surprising and fascinating land I've ever visited.
- 5 Like most Americans, I know next to nothing about Iran. This will be a journey of discovery. What's my hope? To enjoy a rich and fascinating culture, to get to know a nation that's a leader in its corner of the world (and has been for 2,500 years), and to better understand the 70 million people who call this place home. My mission? To share these lessons through a public TV special.
- 6 The permissions were so slow in coming that the project only became a certainty about a week before the shoot. (I had a contingency plan for filming in Istanbul.) Like excited parents-to-be who want to tell the world but hold back until everything looks okay, I couldn't announce our plans until we knew for sure the trip was a go. Because the US does not maintain a diplomatic relationship with Iran, the only way we could communicate was indirectly, via the Pakistani Embassy. Here in Greece, it was strange to go into a relaxed, almost no-security Iranian Embassy...and walk out with visas. We were on our way.

- 7 Our 12-day Iran shoot will cover Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, and Persepolis. I'll travel with my typical skeleton crew of three: Simon Griffith (director), Karel Bauer (cameraman), and me. We'll also have the help of two Iranian guides: One is a Persian-American friend who lives in Seattle. The other will be appointed by the Iranian government to be with us at all times. This combination will be fascinating...and tricky. We want to be free-spirited, but don't want to abuse the trust of the Iranian government.
- 8 Why is Iran letting us in? They actually want to boost Western tourism. I would think this might frighten the Iranian government, since these tourists could bring in unwanted ideas (like those that threatened the USSR, prompting its government to keep most tourists out). But Iran wants more visitors nonetheless. They also believe that the Western media have made their culture look menacing, and never show its warm, human, and gracious side. They did lots of background research on me and my work, and apparently concluded that my motives are acceptable. They say that while they've had problems with other American network crews in the past, they've had good experiences with public television crews.
- 9 I hope they understand that, although our approach will be apolitical, that doesn't mean we will simply glorify Iran. While I'm excited to learn about the rich tapestry of Iranian culture and history, I can't ignore some of the fundamental cultural differences. For example, I intend to show the state of Iranian women, which is sure to be very delicate. (Cafés that allow crews to show women breaking modesty regulations can lose their license.) And I hope to learn more about why Iranians always seem to be chanting "Death to America."
- 10 I travel to Iran with plenty of anxiety. We considered leaving our big camera in Greece and just taking the small one. I even made sure all my electrical stuff was charged up before flying in. And there are questions: How free will we actually be? Will the hotel rooms be bugged? Is there really absolutely no alcohol — even in fancy hotels? Will crowds gather around us, and then suddenly turn angry? Will the food be as bad as I remember from my 1978 backpacking trip through Iran?
- 11 While I'm exhausted from a month of guidebook research and TV filming in Europe, I need to be fresh and quick-minded for on-camera interactions with people on the street (we hope for lots of this), and to simply stay healthy. I'll lose a night's sleep as we fly in, arriving in Tehran at about 4 a.m.
- 12 We have a very sketchy script to start with. It will evolve over the next week and a half. Each day, after a long day of shooting, I'll massage what we've shot and learned into the script, print out a new version, and come up with a shooting plan for the next day. My hunch: By our last day, we'll have a fine show.

The pilot said, "We're taking this plane to Tehran"...and nobody was alarmed.

- 13 Flying from Istanbul's Atatürk Airport to Tehran's Khomeini Airport, I think about the airports my fellow passengers likely used — Reagan and De Gaulle. The airports are named after four very different 20th-century leaders, but each one left an indelible mark on his nation.
- 14 The plane is filled with well-off Iranian people. Their features are different from mine, but they dress and act just like me. As so often happens when I travel, I'm struck by how people—regardless of the shapes of their noses — are so similar the world over. As we all settle into the wide-body jet, I wish the big decision-makers of our world weren't shielded from an opportunity to share an economy cabin with people like this.
- 15 I made this same Istanbul-to-Tehran trip 30 years ago. Last time it took three days on a bus, and the Shah was on his last legs. Wandering Iranian towns in 1978, I remember riot squads in the streets and the Shah's portrait seeming to hang tenuously in market stalls. I also remember being struck by the harsh gap between rich and poor in Tehran. I was 23 years old. I believe that was the first time in my life I was angered by economic injustice.
- 16 My Istanbul–Tehran trip is quicker this time — three hours rather than three days. And every main square and street that was named "Shah" back then is now named "Khomeini." On my last visit, all denominations of paper money had one face on them. They still do today...but the face is different. At Khomeini International Airport, the only hint of the Shah is the clientele (many of those flying in are likely his supporters who fled Iran for the West in 1978, and are now back to visit loved ones).
- 17 As the pilot begins our descent, rich and elegant Persian women put on their scarves. With all that hair suddenly covered, I notice how striking long hair can be — how it really does grab a man's attention. Looking out the window at the lights of Tehran, the sight reminds me of flying into Mexico City at night. Greater Tehran has more people than all of Greece (where I was just traveling).
- 18 I'm starting this trip a little bit afraid. I don't know what's in store for us. We are anticipating a challenging and extremely productive 12 days here.

Tehran: Heavenly Pistachios a Mile High

- 19 I was hesitant to tell anyone about this trip until it was actually happening. One day into this experience, we are definitely here. Playful Revolutionary Guards, four-lane highways intersecting with no traffic lights, "Death to America" murals, and big, warm, welcoming smiles...Iran is a fascinating and complex paradox.

- 20 Tehran, a youthful and noisy capital city, is the modern heart of this country. It's a smoggy, mile-high metropolis. With a teeming population of 14 million in the metropolitan area, its apartment blocks stretch far into the surrounding mountains.
- 21 I step out onto the 15th-floor balcony of my fancy hotel room to hear the hum of the city. I enjoy the view of a vast, twinkling city at twilight. Fresh snow whitens the mountain above the ritzy high-rise condos of North Tehran.
- 22 As I look straight down, the hotel's entryway is buzzing with activity, as the hotel is hosting a conference on Islamic unity. The circular driveway is lined by the flags of 30 nations. Huge collections of flags seem to be common here — perhaps because it provides a handy opportunity to exclude the Stars and Stripes. (Apart from the ones featured in hateful political murals, I haven't seen an American flag.)
- 23 A van with an X-ray security checkpoint is permanently parked outside the entrance. All visitors who enter the hotel need to pass their bags through this first. It's interesting to see that Iran, a country we feel we need to protect ourselves from, has the same security headaches we do.
- 24 Back in my room, I nurse a tall glass of pomegranate juice. My lips are puckered from munching lemony pistachios from an elegantly woven tray — they're the best I've ever tasted (and I am a pistachio connoisseur). I cruise the channels on my TV: CNN, BBC, and lots of programming designed to set the mood for prayer. One channel shows a mesmerizing river with water washing lovingly over shiny rocks. Another shows the sun setting on Mecca, with its Kaaba (the big black box focus of pilgrim worship), in real time.

Part 2

Jumping Through Hoops in a Society on Valium

- 1 Iran has presented our crew with some unique hurdles. Today we dropped by the foreign press office to get our press badges. There a beautiful and properly covered woman took mug shots for our badges and carefully confirmed the pronunciation of our names in order to transliterate them into Farsi.
- 2 The travel agency — overseen by the "Ministry of Islamic Guidance" — has assigned us what they call a "guide," but what I'd call a "government minder." Our guide/minder, Seyed, is required to follow our big camera wherever it goes — even if that means climbing on the back of a motorcycle taxi to follow our cameraman as he films a "point-of-view" shot through wild traffic (photo page 16). When he's not holding on for dear life, Seyed slips a tiny camera out of his pocket and documents our shoot by filming us as we film Iran.

- 3 While this sounds constraining, Seyed is a big help to our production. Whenever we film a place of commercial or religious importance, a plainclothes security guard appears. Then we wait around while Seyed explains who we are and what we're doing. No single authority is in charge — many arms of government overlap and make rules that conflict with each other. Seyed makes our filming possible.
- 4 Permission to film somewhere is limited to a specific time window. Even if we are allowed to film a certain building, it doesn't mean we can shoot it from the balcony of an adjacent tea house (where we don't have permission), or from any angle that shows a bank (banks cannot be filmed).
- 5 Many readers of my blog have skeptically predicted that our access to Iran would be very limited, to only the prettiest sights. (Meanwhile, Iranians I meet are convinced that I'll doctor our footage to make Iran look ugly and dangerous.) In reality, it's far less restrictive here than I expected. Seyed has not stopped me from going anywhere. And, when pushing the limits set on our filming, I actually feel a righteous confidence. Some subjects are forbidden for reasons of security (banks, government, military) or modesty ("un-veiled" women). But because the government understands I'm not filming an "exposé," we are free to shoot all that we need to — including some subjects that are far more potentially provocative, such as anti-American or anti-Israeli murals (more on these later). Bottom line: I already feel I am getting the Iran I came for.
- 6 And we are free to talk to and film people on the street. When our camera is rolling — or when Seyed's is — it reminds me of my early trips to the USSR, when only those with nothing to lose would risk talking openly. But at other times, such as when the crew sets up a shot, I'm free to roam about on my own and have fun connecting with locals. Routinely, I'll look up from my note-taking or memorizing my lines to see curious locals gathered, greeting me with smiles, and wanting to talk. When I explain where I'm from, the smiles get bigger. I have never traveled to a place where I had such an easy and enjoyable time connecting with people. Locals are as confused and fascinated by me as I am by them. Young, educated people speak English.
- 7 Even early in the trip, it's clear that the people of Iran are the biggest joy of our visit — everyone's mellow, quick to smile, and very courteous.
- 8 From a productivity point of view, it seems as if the country is on Valium. Perhaps Iranians are just not driven as we are by capitalist values to "work hard" and enjoy material prosperity. I understand well-employed people here make \$5,000 to \$15,000 a year, and pay essentially no tax. (Taxes don't matter much to a government funded by oil.) While the Islamic Revolution is not anti-capitalistic, it feels like a communist society: There seems to be a lack of incentive to really be efficient. Measuring productivity at a glance, things are pretty low-energy.

- 9 But that doesn't stop human ingenuity. Just as I'm marveling at some example of Iranian inefficiency, I see an old man with a beautifully carved walking stick ingeniously designed with a small flashlight in its handle to light his way home through his poorly lit village late at night.

Part 3

No Credit Cards, Alcohol...or Urinals

- 1 Traveling through Iran, my notebook quickly fills with quirky observations. Reading the comments readers share on my blog (some of whom are upset with me for "naively" trying to understand "our enemy") is thought-provoking. The whole experience makes me want to hug people and scream at the same time. It's intensely human.
- 2 One moment, I'm stirred by propaganda murals encouraging young men to walk into the blazing sunset of martyrdom. The next, a woman in a bookstore serves me cookies while I browse, then gives me free of charge a book I admired.
- 3 While English is the second language on many signs, there is a substantial language barrier. The majority of Iranians (a little more than half) are Persian. Persians are not Arabs, and they don't speak Arabic — they speak Farsi. This Persian/Arab difference is a very important distinction to the people of Iran. My film crew and I hear over and over again, "We are not Arabs!"
- 4 The squiggly local script looks like Arabic to me, but I learned that, like the language, it's Farsi. The numbers, however, are the same as those used in the Arab world. Thankfully, when I needed it, I found that they also use "our" numbers.
- 5 Iran is a cash society. Because of the 26-year-old American embargo here, Western credit cards don't work. No ATMs for foreigners means that we had to bring in big wads of cash...and learn to count carefully. The money comes with lots of zeros. One dollar is equal to 10,000 rial. (If you exchange \$100, you are literally a millionaire here.) A toman is ten rial, and some prices are listed in rial, others in toman...a tourist rip-off just waiting to happen. I had a shirt laundered at the hotel for "20,000." Was that in rial (\$2) — or in toman (\$20)? Coins are rarely used, and there are no state-issued large bills. Local banks print large bills to help local commerce. To tell if a bill is counterfeit, you rub the number with your finger — if it's the real deal, the warmth makes the numbers momentarily disappear.
- 6 People here need to keep track of three different calendars: Persian and Islamic (for local affairs), and Western (for dealing with the outside world). What's the year? It depends: After Muhammad — about 1,430 years ago, or after Christ — 2,000 and some years ago.

- 7 Of course, the Islamic government legislates women's dress and public behavior. Men are also affected, to a lesser degree. Neckties are rarely seen, as they're considered the mark of a Shah supporter. And there are no urinals anywhere. (Trust me. I did an extensive search: at the airport, swanky hotels, the university, the fanciest coffee shops.) I was told that Muslims believe you don't get rid of all your urine when you urinate standing up. For religious reasons, they squat. I find this a bit time-consuming. In a men's room with 10 urinals, a guy knows at a glance what's available; in a men's room with 10 doors, you have to go knocking.
- 8 Our guide, Seyed, makes sure we're eating in comfortable (i.e., high-end) restaurants, generally in hotels. I wasn't wild about the food on my first trip here in 1978. It's much better now...but still not very exciting. (If French and Italian are the top cuisines in Europe, someone has to keep Norwegian cooking company at the bottom.)
- 9 Restaurants use facial tissue rather than napkins; there's a box of tissues on every dining table. Because Iran is a tea culture, the coffee at breakfast is always instant. Locals assure me that tap water is safe to drink, but I'm sticking with the bottled kind.
- 10 Iran is strictly "dry" — absolutely no booze or beer in public. While I keep ordering a yogurt drink (similar to Turkish ayran), local would-be beer-drinkers seem to fantasize: They drink a non-alcoholic "malt beverage" that tastes like beer and comes in a beer can.
- 11 I can't help but think how tourism could boom here if they just opened this place up. There are a few Western tourists (mostly Germans, French, Brits, and Dutch), but they all seem to be on a tour, with a private guide, or visiting relatives. Control gets tighter and looser depending on the political climate, but basically American tourists can visit only with a guided tour. I've met no one just exploring on their own. The Lonely Planet guidebook dominates — it seems every Westerner here has one. Fortunately, it's good. Tourists are so rare, and major tourist sights are so few and obvious, that you bump into the same people day after day. Browsing through picture books and calendars showing the same 15 or 20 images of the top sights in Iran, I'm impressed by how our short trip will manage to include most of them.

Clipped Wings and Conformity on Campus

- 12 I was excited to visit the University of Tehran, in hopes of filming highly educated and liberated women and an environment of freedom. I assumed that in Iran, as in most societies, the university would be where people run free...barefoot through the grass of life, leaping over silly limits just because they can.
- 13 But instead, the University of Tehran — the country's oldest, biggest, and most prestigious university — makes BYU look like Berkeley. Subsidized by the government, the U. of T. follows the theocracy's guidelines to a T: a strictly enforced dress code, no nonconformist posters, top-down direction for ways to play, segregated cantinas...and students toeing the line (in public, at least).

- 14 Hoping to film some interaction with students, I asked for a student union center (the lively place where students come together as on Western campuses). But there was none. Each faculty had a cantina where kids could hang out, with a sales counter separating two sections — one for boys and one for girls.
- 15 In the USA, I see university professors as a bastion of free thinking, threatening to people who enjoy the status quo. In Tehran, I found a situation where the theocracy was clearly shaping the curriculum, faculty, and tenor of the campus. Conformity on any university campus saddens me. But seeing it in Iran — a society which so needs some nonconformity — was the most disheartening experience of my whole trip.

Part 4

Death to...Whatever!

- 1 Traffic is notorious in Tehran. Drivers may seem crazy, but I was impressed by their expertise at keeping things moving. At major intersections, there are no lights — everyone just shuffles through. People are great drivers, and, somehow, it works. I think I'll actually drive more aggressively when I get home.
- 2 While the traffic is hair-raising, it's not noisy. Because of a history of motorcycle bandits and assassinations, only small (and therefore quieter) motorcycles are allowed. To get somewhere in a hurry, motorcycle taxis are a blessing. While most Iranians ignore helmet laws, I'm more cautious — I'd rather leave a little paint on passing buses than a piece of scalp.
- 3 Adding to the chaotic traffic mix are pedestrians, doing their best to navigate a wild landscape. Locals joke that when you set out to cross a big street, you "go to Chechnya." I'm told that Iran loses more than 30,000 people on the roads each year (in cars and on foot).
- 4 While in Tehran, we're being zipped smoothly around by Majid, our driver. Majid navigates our eight-seater bus like a motor scooter, weaving in and out of traffic that flows down the street and between lanes like rocks in a landslide. To illustrate how clueless I am here, for three days I've been calling him "Najaf." And whenever a bit of filming goes well and we triumphantly return to the car, I give him an enthusiastic thumbs-up. But today, Majid patiently explained that I've been confusing his name with a city in Iraq...and that giving someone a thumbs-up in Iran is like giving them the finger.
- 5 While traffic is enough to make you scream, people are incredibly good-humored on the road. I never heard angry horns honking. While stalled in a Tehran jam, people in the neighboring car see me sitting patiently in the back of our van: a foreigner stuck in their traffic. They roll down their window and hand Majid a bouquet of flowers with instructions to give it to the visitor. When the traffic jam breaks up, we move on — with a bouquet from strangers on my lap.

- 6 Later, as we struggle to drive along a horribly congested street, Majid declares, "Death to traffic." Then he says, "Because we can do nothing about this traffic, this is what we do. We can all say, 'Death to traffic.'"
- 7 The casual tone of Majid's telling aside made me think differently about one of the biggest gripes many Americans have about Iranians: Their penchant for declaring "Death to" this and that. Does Majid literally want to kill all those drivers that were in our way?
- 8 The experience makes me wonder if Iranians' "Death to" curses are not so different from Westerners who exclaim, "Damn those French" or "Damn those teenagers" or "Damn this traffic jam." Even though this technically means "die and burn in hell"...of course we don't mean it so severely. (The same goes for some English-speakers' liberal use of the "f-word," which is also rarely intended literally.)
- 9 Don't get me wrong: All those "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" murals are impossible to justify. (Can you imagine Americans tolerating "Bomb Iran" banners in their towns?) But I will say they seemed very incongruous with the people I met. Do the Iranians literally wish "death" to the US and Israel? Or is it a mix of international road rage, fear, frustration — and the seductive clarity of a catchy slogan?

Friday: Let Us Pray

- 10 Esfahan, Iran's "second city" with 3.5 million people, is a showcase of ancient Persian splendor. One of the finest cities in Islam, and famous for its dazzling blue-tiled domes and romantic bridges, the city is also just plain enjoyable. I'm not surprised that in Iran, this is the number-one honeymoon destination.
- 11 Everything in Esfahan seems to radiate from the grand Imam Square, dominated by the Imam Mosque — one of holiest in Iran. Dating from the early 1600s, its towering facade is as striking as the grandest cathedrals of Europe.
- 12 We were in Iran for just one Friday, the Muslim "Sabbath." Fortunately, we were in Esfahan, so we could attend (and film) a prayer service at this colossal house of worship.
- 13 Filming in a mosque filled with thousands of worshippers required permission. Explaining our needs with administrators there, it hit me that the Islamic Revolution employs similar strategies to a communist takeover: Both maintain power by installing partisans in key positions. But the ideology Iran is protecting is not economic (as in the USSR), but religious.
- 14 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has inspired a fashion trend in Iran: simple dark suit, white shirt, no tie, light black beard. Reminiscent of apparatchniks in Soviet times, all of the mosque administrators dressed the part and looked like the president.

- 15 To film the service — which was already well underway — we were escorted in front of 5,000 people praying. When we had visited this huge mosque the day before, all I had seen was a lifeless shell with fine tiles for tourists to photograph. An old man had stood in the center of the floor and demonstrated the haunting echoes created by the perfect construction. Old carpets had been rolled up and strewn about like dusty cars in a haphazard parking lot. Today the carpets were rolled out, cozy, and lined with worshippers.
- 16 I felt self-conscious, a tall pale American tiptoeing gingerly over the little tablets Shia Muslim men place their heads on when they bend down to pray. Planting our tripod in the corner, we observed.
- 17 As my brain wandered (just like it sometimes does at home when listening to a sermon), I felt all those worshippers were looking at me rather than listening to their cleric speaking. Soldiers were posted throughout the mosque, standing like statues in their desert-colored fatigues. When the congregation stood, I didn't notice them, but when all bowed, the soldiers remained standing — a reminder that the world was dangerous...especially in mosques. I asked our guide, Seyed, to translate a brightly painted banner above the worshippers. He answered, "Death to Israel."
- 18 Despite this disturbing detail, I closed my eyes and let the smell of socks remind me of mosques I'd visited in other Muslim countries. I pulled out my little Mecca compass, the only souvenir I've purchased so far. Sure enough, everyone was facing exactly the right way.
- 19 Watching all the worshippers bow and stand, and pray in unison, at first seemed threatening to me. Then I caught the eye of a worshipper having a tough time focusing. He winked. Another man's cell phone rang. He answered in a frustrated whisper as if saying, "Dang, I should have turned that thing off." The mosaics above — Turkish blue and darker Persian blue — added a harmony and calmness to the atmosphere.
- 20 I made a point to view the service as if it were my own church, just north of Seattle. I was struck by the similarities: the too-long sermon, the "passing of the peace" (when everyone greets the people around them), the convivial atmosphere as people line up to shake the hand of the cleric after the service, and the fellowship as everyone hangs out in the courtyard afterwards. On our way out, I shook the hand of the young cleric — he had a short slight build, a tight white turban, a trim Ahmadinejad-style beard, big teeth, and a playful smile. In the courtyard, a man hit the branches of a mulberry tree with a pole as kids scrambled for the treasured little berries.
- 21 Esfahan TV, which had televised the prayer service, saw us and wanted an interview. It was exciting to be on local TV. They asked why we were here, how I saw Iranian people, and why I thought there was a problem between the US and Iran (I pointed out the "Death to Israel" banner for starters). They fixated on whether our show would actually air...and if we'd spin our report to make Iran look evil.

- 22 Leaving the mosque, our crew pondered how easily the footage we'd just shot could be cut and edited to appear either menacing or heartwarming, depending on our agenda. Our mosque shots could be juxtaposed with guerillas leaping over barbed wire and accompanied by jihadist music to be frightening. Instead, we planned to edit it to match our actual experience: showing the guards and "Death to Israel" banner, but focusing on the men with warm faces praying with their sons at their sides, and the children outside scrambling for mulberries.
- 23 It occurred to me that the segregation of the sexes — men in the center and women behind a giant hanging carpet at the side — contributes to the negative image many Western Christians have of Islam. Then, playing the old anthropologist's game of changing my perspective, I considered how the predominantly male-led Christian services that I'm so comfortable with could also be edited to look ominous to those unfamiliar with the rituals. At important Roman Catholic Masses, you'll see a dozen priests — all male — in robes before a bowing audience. The leader of a billion Catholics is chosen by a secretive, ritual-filled gathering of old men in strange hats and robes with chanting and incense. It could be filled with majesty, or with menace...depending on what you show and how you show it.
- 24 We set up to film across the vast square from the mosque. My lines were memorized and I was ready to go. Then, suddenly, the cleric with the beaming smile came toward us with a platter of desserts — the local ice cream specialty, like frozen shredded wheat sprinkled with coconut. I felt like Rafsanjani (he looked to me like Iran's moderate former president) had just interrupted my work to serve us ice cream. We had a lively conversation, joking about how it might help if his president went to my town for a prayer service, and my president came here.

[Parts 5–6 have been omitted. [Read the full travel journal.](#)]