

## In Iran: Text and Photos by Adam Jones

Copyright © 2013 Adam Jones, Ph.D.



All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-9918522-0-8

**Copyright Notice:** The text of this book is copyright-protected and may not be reproduced for non-commercial or commercial use without the author's express permission, with the exception of brief passages reproduced for review purposes or scholarly citation. All photos linked in the text are published under a Creative Commons 3.0 license. They may be freely downloaded, and may be reproduced for non-commercial or commercial purposes if attribution is supplied. For further information, see "A Note about the Photo Links," below.

### About This Book

What is it like to travel in the Islamic Republic of Iran? In June 2012, Canadian scholar Adam Jones and his companion Griselda Ramírez made a 26-day, 7,000-kilometer private tour through the western half of the country, accompanied only by their guide, Mahmood, and driver Samad. They visited most of Iran's major cities along with many smaller towns, and traveled to remote frontier areas of Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. *In Iran* guides us from the suburbs and cemeteries of Tehran to the dizzying vistas of the Zagros and Alborz mountain ranges ... from the salt flats of Lake Orumiyeh to the splendors of ancient Persepolis ... from the wastes of the Central Desert to the cosmopolitan charms and classic architecture of Shiraz and Isfahan. Along the way, the reader absorbs much of Iranian history, politics, culture, and geography; gets to know Mahmood and Samad; and encounters an array of Iran's dynamic, diverse, and ever-welcoming people. Uniquely, the text of *In Iran* incorporates links to hundreds of vivid

images that Jones, a widely-published photojournalist, captured throughout his Iranian journey. The photos provide a constant and colorful accompaniment to this entertaining, informative, and up-to-the-minute account of one of the world's most controversial and misunderstood countries – and one of its most historic and enduring civilizations.

## About the Author



Adam Jones, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia in Kelowna, Canada. He was born in Singapore in 1963. He is the author or editor of over a dozen books, including [\*Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction\*](#) (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2010). Jones is also a [photojournalist](#) whose first book of photography, [\*Latin American Portraits\*](#), appeared in 2008. He is a dedicated traveler who has lived and/or voyaged in over 75 countries on every populated continent.

## Dedication



For Griselda, again.

## A Note about the Photo Links

Apart from footnotes and the occasional Wikipedia page or other source, all hotlinks in this text open to color versions of images relevant to the passage of text. These images

are housed on my [Flickr site](#), and you will need an Internet connection to open them. Thumbnail images in the text also link to their Flickr counterparts. Where you see phrases with separate hotlinks on each word (i.e. a discontinuous underline), these are links to different but complementary images.

All photos are posted under a [Creative Commons 3.0 license](#), meaning that you may freely download them and use them in any of your personal projects, whether non-commercial or commercial, as long as I am credited (preferred credit: "Adam Jones, Ph.D./Global Photo Archive"). I also ask that you inform me of the usage at [adamj\\_jones@hotmail.com](mailto:adamj_jones@hotmail.com).

Photos are available in high-resolution format, suitable for print publication, photo printing, computer wallpaper use, and so on. Right-click on the regular Flickr image and then select "Original" to access the high-resolution version. There are also hundreds of photos from the Iran journey that are not linked to this text. See the [full gallery](#) of 781 images; note the slideshow function for convenient viewing.

## Map of Iran



Map courtesy [www.WorldAtlas.com](http://www.WorldAtlas.com)

See also a [more detailed map](#), showing most of the towns and cities visited on this journey.

## Preface – Istanbul, Turkey



Midnight, Ataturk airport. It has been a day of delays and stress at the German end – two-and-a-half nail-biting hours spent broken down on the scheduled one-hour train ride from Marburg to Frankfurt; ninety minutes late arriving in Turkey. But the connection is made. I look around the hall at a scene that seems ... *normal*. A diverse group of passengers: businesspeople, a long-haired artiste-type gent, women young and old, most with their heads uncovered. We are apparently the only western tourists. But apart from a curious glance or two in our direction, no-one pays us much attention.

The Airbus 330 is perhaps two-thirds full on this red-eye flight to ... Tehran! Did I really write that? Years of casual imaginings, sixteen months of planning and preparation, one trip aborted last summer by visa logistics – and here we go at last.

It's a brief, uneventful flight. The highlight is the breakfast menu, which comes with a full range of alcohol for those so inclined. I hadn't expected a booze offering on a flight to Tehran, but I reach gratefully for a can of Efes Pilsener, and sip it meditatively. Last beer for nearly a month, I reckon. Did I really write *that*?

As we begin to descend, the previously uncovered women passengers don their *hejab* headscarves, and a few pull on manteaux (the grey uniform that the theocracy has assigned to Iranian womanhood). Griselda heads to the washroom to do likewise, and emerges looking [very pretty and stylish](#) in her flowery scarf and blouse. She's been looking forward to this dress-up.

## Day 1 – Tehran



Immigration is a breeze. The official smiles at me as I hand over my Canadian passport. A quick flip through to make sure the visa is in order, a stamp, an “Okay!” I roll out the phrase I’ve been practicing for the last few hours: “*Dastet darnakane*,” thank you very much. I fumble it, but he gets the message and his face splits in a wide grin.

On the other side of the perfunctory customs check, we spy the bearers of a PTA sign – Pars Tourist Agency, with whom we’ve arranged our itinerary, guide, and driver.

[Mahmood and Samad](#) are their names. The former is an immediately likable younger guy from Shiraz, where the company is based; Samad hails from Iranian Azerbaijan in the north. We exchange pleasantries – I’m surprised and pleased to see them grasp and shake Griselda’s hand in public. Isn’t that not done here?

We pile into the Peugeot station wagon that will be our major means of conveyance for the next four weeks, barring a breakdown or a head-on collision. A long drive on the freeway into Tehran from the south, then dun-colored neighborhoods of serried cinder-block housing – the capital’s working-class districts.

Our abode for this first day and night is the [Hotel Khayyam](#), at the end of an [alley](#) with automotive shops all around (there are dozens of them on this street – commerce here clusters according to genre). Our guidebook writes that it’s a “quiet place with helpful, engaging service but worn, overpriced rooms and squat toilets. Long-discussed renovation can’t come soon enough.” The guide was published in 2008; it was probably researched in 2006. The renovation hasn’t occurred, but the worn room is clean enough. As for the “overpriced,” before the day is out I will hand over 4,500 euros. But that’s for our entire 26-day tour, all-inclusive except for dinners and incidentals. I’m relieved to get rid of part of the wad of fresh 100-euro notes that I’ve been carrying around for a week-and-a-half now.

On the ride in, I’d asked Mahmood about our schedule for the day. He reels off a list of museums. “Too many museums,” I protest. “We want to be out and around,” especially to see the Imam Khomeini shrine and the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, where the remains of hundreds of thousands of victims of the horrific Iran-Iraq war are entombed.



A deal is struck. After washing off the sweat and stress of the previous twenty-four hours, we pile into a taxi and head to the National Museum of Iran. Usually such places put me to sleep after an hour – especially when I’m running on next to no sleep at all. But the museum, packed with [relics](#) and statuary from two millennia of pre-Islamic [Iranian culture](#), is a manageable size with plenty of interesting content.

The next stop is the Glass and Ceramics Museum, an unexpected treat. It was built as a private mansion with an architectural blend of Persian and European elements, and the [interior](#) is stately and gorgeous, packed with well-presented and annotated exhibits from ancient times through to French and Bohemian glassware of the nineteenth century.

The beauty can’t keep us from catatonia, however. We plead for an hour’s siesta before heading on to our afternoon engagements. Another taxi ride through streets now congested with traffic, but not terrifyingly so, as we’d expected. It is Friday, after all – the Muslim holy day. On top of that, it’s the first of four days of national holiday to commemorate Imam Khomeini’s death at the grand old age of 91. Everywhere there are [banners](#) reading in Farsi: “We bid you greetings, Ruhollah” – the Imam’s given name – and Khomeini’s portrait is ubiquitous, sometimes twenty meters high on the side of buildings.

En route to Khomeini’s final resting place, we persuade Mahmood to drive us to the [“US Den of Espionage”](#) – as the old American embassy has been known ever since the 444-day hostage debacle of 1979-81. It’s now an exhibition space, rarely opened to the public. The high walls are plastered with demonic-looking cartoons (the Statue of Liberty as a [grinning skeleton](#) seems popular), and the [old embassy sign](#), a bas-relief, shows the duress of hundreds of rocks and hammer blows.<sup>1</sup>

“Stay on this side of the street,” Mahmood urges us, “there are security cameras over there and they’ll stop you taking pictures” – so I give the Sony’s super-zoom a workout. Then we’re off to see the shrine of the man who presided over it all.

In its 2008 Iran guide, Lonely Planet described Khomeini’s huge monument as “look[ing] more like a shoddily built and empty aircraft hangar than one of Iran’s holiest sites.” Its [exterior](#) has improved since – there are four massive minarets under construction, and some more ornate designs around the core hangar-like structure.

As we’d hoped, it’s a good day to visit. Families on pilgrimage have [pitched tents](#) under purpose-built canopies, and we get our first glimpse of the Persian passion for picnicking. There’s also a kitchen serving free meals for pilgrims in need. The wandering pair of westerners draws friendly attention: we field salutations of “Salam

---

<sup>1</sup> It is the only time we will see this sort of garish (and clearly antique) anti-Americanism on display in the country. “The most striking thing about anti-Americanism in Iran is how little of it actually exists,” writes Afshin Molavi. “Iran is not Egypt or Saudi Arabia or Jordan, where anti-Americanism is rife among the people of those key US allies. ... Most Iranians, I found, would rather go to America than chant ‘Death to America.’” More generally, Molavi perceives an “irony”: that “Iranian nationalism, which for a century had been wrapped in the language of self-determination from foreign meddlers, had seemingly lost its antiforeign edge.”

aleykom,” and a demonstratively devout Shia tugs at a wind-wrapped flag of the third Imam, then kisses it, [posing happily](#) for our cameras.

The security check entering the shrine is intensive, down to removing the battery from my mini-flashlight and peering into the chamber. No cameras are permitted. Griselda enters by the separate gate for women. Inside, though there’s a space reserved for women alone, the sexes mingle in the main area. Here the work-in-progress is more evident, with tacky canvas backdrops covering the construction sites with images of what’s to come.

It’s intriguing to observe the visitors and worshippers, most of all the devotees of several other imams who were close to Khomeini. Their tombs lie in the public space, just outside the glass-walled enclosure where the man himself is buried. Children, women, and men kneel and stroke and embrace the low, flat sarcophagi, and many lean forward to plant reverent kisses on the marble.

[Behesht-e Zahra](#), the cemetery of the martyrs, is only a few hundred meters from Khomeini’s shrine. We pause there for half an hour. Mahmood shows us a few graves: “This one – fifteen years old.” Perhaps one of the adolescent boys sent through the front lines as human minesweepers, with a plastic key around their neck guaranteeing entrance to paradise if they were martyred in the holy cause.

I break away and stroll by myself, awed by the row upon row of [tombs and tributes](#), most with a glass box in which letters or belongings of the lost loved ones are stored. On one grave [a woman in full chador](#), a black and boxy shroud, sits stone-still on the grave of her ... husband? son? father? brother? I cannot see her face to guess her age. At another gravesite [a young man](#) kneels and swishes water from a Pepsi bottle over the sarcophagus, then sweeps his hand around to wash the stone clean. Tears prick my eyes.

Back to the Hotel Khayyam. An exhausted nap. The Internet connection is out, so there is no way for me to let friends and family know that I haven’t been arrested at the airport by Revolutionary Guards and worked over in some rancid torture chamber. I spend the evening reading a couple of chapters of David Garrow’s riveting book [Bearing the Cross](#), about the civil-rights struggles in the US Deep South. My bed, I reckon, is about a meter wide, and feels unstable enough that I wonder if I will roll off it in the middle of the night. But I sleep the sleep of the dead.

## Day 2 – Alamut Valley / Gazor Khan / Qazvin



Our ambitions for this day require an early start; we are at breakfast by 6:30. Thin, foldable bread – quite agreeable – a wan cucumber and sliced tomatoes; jam and processed cheese; tea from a teabag. We munch resignedly on these spartan rations.

Samad speeds us out to the western hinterland of Tehran, around the looming [Independence Monument](#) built under the Shah, and past [the biggest portrait yet](#) of Ayatollah Khomeini, towering over a roundabout. The city is huge: even with light traffic, it is a good thirty or forty minutes before we reach its outskirts. The crosstown journey offers another chance to observe Persian picnickers in their full glory. Even in the early-morning hours, it seems no patch of rough roadside gravel is too humble for an extended family to have smothered it with a carpet and settled in for a spell of recreation.

We branch off in the direction of Qazvin, then again toward Alamut. Our surroundings begin to change rapidly. Brown and shapeless sub-urbanity gives way to fields and valleys. Eventually, a vertiginous series of switchbacks leads us into the [foothills](#) of the massive Alborz mountain range, the highest in the Middle East, with several peaks over 4,000 meters and one, Mt. Damavand, reaching a whopping 5,671 meters. The ride also carries us deeper into the psyche of the Iranian male driver (there's no ban on women driving, but we have yet to see one at the wheel). Samad handles the twists and turns expertly, but he is as aggressive as everyone else on the road – manufacturing any opportunity to overtake, and cutting corners around blind turns. Strikingly, for all the jockeying and one-upmanship, there's almost no use of horns – something we had noted in Tehran as well.

The scenery is ravishing: wildflower-strewn hillsides, rushing streams of runoff from snowcapped peaks, the morning haze gradually lifting as we wind our way through walnut groves and [cherry orchards](#) to the small village of Gazor Khan. Above us loom the fortifications of Alamut Castle, one of many built by the notorious “Assassins” of Hasan-e Sabbah (1070-1124), who were only finally suppressed under the Mongols.



Anyone who knows a thing or two about psychotropic substances knows that the word “assassin” is derived from “Hashish-iyun,” a reference to the drug that Sabbah’s Ismaili sect supposedly imbibed before committing all manner of depredations. Modern research, however, suggests that Sabbah has received the kind of bum rap usually reserved for those who swim against the tide in sectarian waters.

I’ll let the historians debate that point: the climb’s the thing. It’s a tough one, and when Griselda and I weave our way past the assembled [donkeys](#) at base camp and follow the families of day-trippers up the path, it’s soon clear that my companion won’t make it. The altitude and the baking sun leave her feeling faint after just a few minutes, and gasping, she seeks a shady spot to sit and rest. I ask Mahmood if he’ll stay with her, and up I scramble: sheer drops of hundreds of meters off to my left, glowing-white Alborz peaks punctuating [the vistas](#).

At the summit, I gulp down some of the fresh spring-water spilling from taps thoughtfully provided by the relevant authority. I’m already impressed by the regularity of such watering-holes in city and country alike. I glance at the unremarkable foundations of the long-destroyed castle, then pause to drink in the [sublime scenery](#) and refreshing breeze. I scamper down to find Griselda restored, her blood-sugar levels bolstered by some sweet drink Mahmood has rustled up for her.

Lunchtime, and the first true magic of the trip. Mahmood and Samad negotiate for a bag of cherries, and the vendor persuades us to abandon the generic restaurant we’d planned on dining at, for a “traditional” restaurant just around the bend. It turns out to be a private home with a few seating areas in the garden, including a delicious spot under the shade of walnut trees, raised a little off the ground and covered with carpets. There we sit as the family bustles about and the father does what otherwise non-culinary men in macho cultures do: he fires up the charcoal and starts grilling meat.

It’s wonderfully tender chicken kebab – the only thing on the menu, as it transpires – and it arrives with the almost effervescent rice I’m already learning to love, fresh herbs from the garden, and freshly-picked cherries for dessert. A hookah pipe is brought out – mint and peach is our chosen flavor. As we men puff on it, I pull out my little extension speakers and hook them up to my netbook. Soon the romantic strains of Sarah McLachlan and Sade are wafting through the shady grove, and Mahmood plugs his cellphone into the speakers to share some appealing Iranian pop, by singers both resident in Iran and based abroad. For a *pièce de résistance*, he plays me three folk songs with himself on very creditable vocals, accompanied by a friend on guitar.

Griselda, by this time, has disappeared to the bathroom. She’s still absent a half-hour later. It turns out that upon exiting, she’d been welcomed and sat down by the mother and daughter of the family, and given the cheerful third-degree that we’d been led to expect: What is your work? What is your relationship with the Mister? Are you *really* not married, with no kids? With just the females in the house, Griselda tells me, the headscarves come off, the body language changes, and stories are exchanged – to the extent permitted by her limited English, that of the adolescent daughter, and a handy dictionary. Gris returns beaming from her induction into [the sisterhood](#).

Returning down the precipitous mountain roads, we make a pit-stop at picturesque [Avon Lake](#) – cars, campers, picnickers; men splashing around heroically in their swimming trunks; girls and boys yelping as they join in; adult women, who may swim only fully clothed and in *hejab*, looking on a little poignantly from the shore.

Samad steers the Peugeot around the switchbacks and into the sometimes head-on traffic with all the energy of our morning ascent. I would be a nervous wreck by this point, and probably an automotive one as well. We descend from those glorious highlands to the plains, and to the outskirts of the city that will be home for the next two nights: Qazvin.

### Day 3 – Qazvin



Arriving mid-evening, we'd taken the opportunity of a promenade along Taleqani Boulevard, running past our abode at the Hotel Alborz. We'd dipped into a shop to buy bags of pistachios and sweet dried grapes as our dinner snack, and were impressed by the vitality of the [nighttime street scene](#). Most shops were open on this holiday, and the sidewalks were thronged. Griselda was struck in particular by the [women's formal wear](#) on display in the windows – sheer fabric clinging to the lithe mannequins, plenty of strapless gowns and décolletage, and not a sleeve in sight. Hardly the stereotypical image of the Islamic Republic. But the *hejab*, which Afshin Molavi pithily calls “the most visible reminder that the Islamic Republic is still in power,” is only for public display. Behind closed doors, many Iranian women are clearly eager to show off their up-to-date fashion sense – and the shopfront display of such outfits seems downright brazen.

Qazvin the next morning, by contrast, is somnolent. It's the penultimate day of the Khomeini commemorations, and several of the key sights, including the main museum and the small but elegant 16<sup>th</sup>-century palace of Shah Tahmasp, are closed to visitors. Mahmood guides us through the [bazaar](#), which is unexpectedly lively with commerce, including a row of stalls a couple of hundred meters long selling the succulent vegetables and fruits of the region. We wander around the courtyard of the Jameh Mosque, admiring the varied tilework (of both the glazed and the so-called “seven colors” variety). Then it's time for lunch at a well-appointed restaurant across the street from our hotel. We're invited to try *ghemeh nesar*, a Qazvini dish. It supplies us with our first hint of genuine cuisine in Iran: a gossamer mound of saffron rice with small, tender

chunks of beef and tiny, tangy berries, with fragments of orange peel. I daub some yogurt over it and savor every mouthful.

The rest of the day is our own. We take the opportunity for a stuporous siesta, still recovering from the exertions of getting to the Islamic Republic. When we decide on an early-evening stroll, our path takes us again through the bazaar and beyond to the [Imamzade Hoseyn](#) – where more magic descends. This is the shrine to Hoseyn, son of Shia Islam's medieval eighth Imam (though Shiism was implanted late in Iran, under the Safavids in the sixteenth century). We have arrived as prayers are concluding, the throngs spilling out just as we are entering. We have also struck the golden hour of light, with the [courtyard](#) bathed in a rich glow and its centerpiece, the glittering cut-mirror facade of Hoseyn's tomb. ("In Islam," notes Elaine Sciolino, "mirrors symbolize purity and the light of God.")

Suddenly it seems I cannot aim my camera without finding a [memorable Iranian face](#) to focus on. The fact that the ambience has switched from sacred to sociable means that snapping away evokes no glares – in fact, several women approach us to offer their young children as subjects. I find myself chatting with a gregarious young man who says he's an English teacher hereabouts – the usual "Where are you from?" and "What do you think of Iran?" By the time our brief talk is concluding, kids and mothers have congregated to watch, and to listen to the unfamiliar tongue. Again the warmth and hospitality feel like few other countries I have known. I am even the object of a shyly flirtatious glance or two from local ladies – or am I imagining things?

We sample our first Iranian fast-food on the way home: a surprisingly good cheese-and-mushroom pizza in a little joint where the menu carries the Pizza Hut name and logo, and where the English greeting "You are welcome to our shop" is emblazoned above the counter. The extent and (at street level) reliability of English-language signage is something I hadn't expected. So too the gender-bending scene that has played out during the day in the Hotel Alborz. Downstairs, a young English-speaking woman in black chador staffs the reception desk; upstairs, it's a middle-aged man wearing white gloves who vacuums the hallway, tidies our room, and replaces the linens.

At the Alborz, which is a distinct cut above the dingy Hotel Khayyam in Tehran, we are surprised to find BBC World on the television – along with our first Internet connection. Salvation! Now I can let family and friends know we've arrived safely and are enjoying ourselves in Iran ... but forget about posting the news to Facebook. The site is banned, along with (allegedly) millions of others. Keying in the site's address brings up a page in Persian, with the depressing English word "filter" the only thing I recognize. No Flickr, either – so uploading my precious photos will have to wait until I can figure out a way around the firewall. But I can access most of my favorite newspapers online, albeit with most photo links broken. Stories critical of Iran slide through unblocked, but an article on the *Guardian* website about a French porn star cannibalizing his lover links only to the same stern "filter" injunction. It seems certain keywords are enough to render a report unreadable. (I swear I wasn't that interested anyway.)

This isn't the end of the Internet tale, of course. Mahmood has already filled us in on how tech-savvy young Iranians use proxy I.P. addresses to circumvent the censorship –

and indeed, Griselda has a number of Iranian doctor friends on Facebook. Perhaps I'll get Mahmood to show me the trick. In the meantime, I send email and photo attachments to Mom in Canada, and ask her to post them to Facebook on my behalf.

## Day 4 – Bandar-e Anzali / Masouleh



I first saw Iran from around ten thousand meters' altitude. On the London-to-Bangalore run with British Airways a few years back, the captain's voice came over the intercom to announce that we were flying over Iran's Caspian Sea coastline. It was a crystal-clear, brilliantly starlit night. I woke Griselda, and we gazed raptly out the window at the silhouette of the great sea below, demarcated by a nearly unbroken string of electric light, hundreds of kilometers long. The image stays with me as one of the most mystical I've ever seen.

It must be said, though, that this stretch of coast looks better after midnight and from thirty thousand feet. Iranians are proud of it, and make it a center of their holiday-making – the Persian Gulf shoreline to the south, rock-strewn and infernally hot, holds little appeal. The Caspian coast, by contrast, gets more rain than anywhere else in the country, which is actually a tourist attraction in this otherwise parched land. Best of all, it lies only a couple of hours of maniacal driving from the capital.

As a result, the almost continuous stretch of illumination that I'd seen from the British Airways jumbo proves, up close, to be a scruffy string of garish holiday homes and jerry-built hotels. The beaches are of black sand, and when we stop at Bandar-e Anzali to stroll among the merrymakers, I'm struck by how bland and tatty it all looks. The Iranians on their last day of the Khomeini holiday, however, are [picnicking with a vengeance](#), weaving along the shore on all-terrain vehicles, and splashing around in the surf. There are even a few women swimming, in *hejab* of course. All that wet clingy clothing actually seems rather sexy – sorry, ayatollahs.

We've made our way to the coast along a major freeway and through some intriguing landscapes. This is an especially mineral-rich part of Iran, and the land is scraped and scoured by extractive industry and massive road-building and [bridge-building](#) projects. We pass an artificial lake behind one of the country's major dams, the whole area also dotted with [wind-powered turbines](#).

Heading into Gilan province, we are entering the heart of Iran's rice-growing region. Who knew Iran had a rice-growing region, let alone a sizable one? But most of the day will be spent within sight of lush green [paddies](#), many of them clustered along the banks of the Sefid Rood river, second-longest in the country. At times the landscapes remind us of Laos or Cambodia.

In addition to being the last day of the holiday break, this is also, I learn, the national Day of Men. That's right – a Man's Day! Now, don't start with that "Every day in Iran is Man's Day" stuff: don't distract me with wider truths. So what happens on Man's Day? I ask Mahmood. "The women in our lives give us, like, socks," he scoffs. "On Woman's Day we're supposed to give them gold and silver."

Mahmood is in fine form today, and the mostly dull stretch along the seacoast gives us a chance to delve into politics seriously for the first time.

"Most people in Iran feel some respect and affection for Ayatollah Khomeini," he tells me. "We have a sense that he was truly committed to the social-justice teachings of Islam. He wanted to bring water and electricity to the poor, and improve people's lives." His comments typify a phenomenon that Afshin Molavi has noted: "The children have found fault with their fathers, yet like so many children of dysfunctional families, they retain an enduring loyalty to the father figure and a therapeutic silence about his faults."

But then Khomeini died, followed soon after by his son Mustafa – Mahmood says conspiracy theories abound, even though Khomeini *père* was ninety-one when he passed. His replacement as Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, seems less revered. He's often depicted in portraits alongside his more illustrious predecessor, usually the sign of a yawning credibility gap.

I ask Mahmood if he participated in the "Green Movement" which swept Iran at the time of the 2009 elections, seeking to head off a second term for President Ahmadinejad and install Mir-Hossein Mousavi in his place. No, he says; he stayed home. "With the work I do with foreigners, I would have been an easy target. There were Revolutionary Guards everywhere. A lot of people disappeared into jail, and haven't been heard from since."

To go with his preferred political disengagement, Mahmood has ambitions shared by a substantial proportion of younger Iranians: to leave the country and make a new start overseas. He has Australia in mind. His Iranian-émigré girlfriend, Tanya, is already based there, and nuptials may be impending.

Before leaving Bandar-e Anzali, we take a rapid speedboat tour around the nearby Anzali swamp – supposedly the largest freshwater lagoon in the world. It's in rough shape.



The entire Caspian Sea is a cesspool of Soviet and post-Soviet industrial pollution, combined with overfishing and tons of untreated sewage pouring in from all the coastal nations. The lagoon's water level has dropped by several meters, and what's left is scuzzy with trash – “pick up after yourselves” clearly not being one of the lessons inculcated by the Islamic Revolution.

There's some impressive port infrastructure, however – originally developed by the Russians, whose presence and influence in northwestern Iran has waxed and waned over the past couple of centuries. And there's a [half-built mosque](#), its steel dome shimmering atop a skeleton of girders, looking like one of the alien spacecraft in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*. Has the project been abandoned? I wonder aloud. “It will be completed,” Mahmood says. “In Iran, a mosque is the only project that is never abandoned.”

The scene shifts when we leave the coast and head inland toward Masouleh, one of Iran's best-known tourist destinations. It's late afternoon by the time we arrive in this [picturesque village](#) of 1,500 souls and, on this day, at least as many tourists – all of whom seem determined to drive their vehicles as far as possible up Masouleh's single narrow road. The result is an amusing traffic jam: advantage, pedestrians. We walk uphill past a revolutionary banner in Farsi and somewhat mangled English: “We condole the anniversary of the heart rending departure of the spiritual leader and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the bloody rebellion on the Khotdad [June] 15 [1979].”

Masouleh clings to steep and lofty hillsides, with [houses](#) built in semi-detached style, in part to increase their resistance to earthquakes. (A devastating 1991 quake in the Caspian region killed 40,000 Iranians.) They're also [piled higgledy-piggledy](#) on top of each other, so that the roofs of those below serve as the verandas of those above. Narrow stone paths wind through the village, which is still [thronged at this hour](#) with Iranians squeezing the last drop of excitement from their holidays. One advantage of being a foreigner in a land where nearly all the other tourists are nationals: observing them in festive mode becomes part of the visitor's learning experience. We're the only westerners in evidence, and the welcome is again effusive. One man even shouts greetings, and seeks to strike up a conversation, from twenty meters away and two stories' height. Griselda decides she wants to play more dress-up, and we spend an hour in a photo studio getting her kitted out in traditional mountain attire for portrait shots. I would look ridiculous; she, of course, [looks wonderful](#).

We scarf down a tender chicken kebab with Mahmood and Samad, before retreating to our room at the Masouleh Hotel. It's notable for a useful stool-like contraption which fits over the squat toilet and adapts it to westernized bums; also for a double-bed with the hardest goddamned mattress I've ever slept on – “like a table” is Gris's verdict. But sleep I do.