



I left for Afghanistan on the 7th of November to shoot a video documentary for one of my clients, The Asian Development Bank. The ADB (www.adb.org) is an NGO (a non-governmental organization, like

OXFAM, Mediciens Sans Frontieres, etc). It is made up of 60 member nations, with the Japanese having the most influence. Its overarching goal is poverty reduction, as Asia has over 800 million living below the poverty line of \$1/day.

When I first started working for the ADB, in 1996, I was ambivalent about its work, but I have watched it evolve in response to anti-globalization critics and now I am happy to associated with it. In most of Asia, it is the ONLY voice for the environment, because of the money it provides and its strict policies. I have been very impressed with the people I've worked with and seriously considered taking a fulltime position with them earlier this year that would have involved moving our family to Manila. After moans of protest from my daughters and threats on my life from their friends, I chose to remain a consultant, living in Los Angeles, at least for the time being.

The ADB is one of the lead agencies in the rebuilding of Afghanistan, along with the UNDP (UN Development Program) and the World Bank. The ADB is in charge of education, transportation (road building and repair) and agriculture (at the moment, essentially repair and building of irrigation systems.) The ADB will be lending \$550 million in concessional loans (1.5% interest, paid over 30 years) in addition to \$50 million or so in outright grants. When I say lead agency here, that means that the work will actually be done for the most part by other NGOs, with the ADB providing technical assistance, an overview, and funds. In addition to shooting the documentary, I set out to shoot some PSAs (Public Service Announcements) to air on CNN.

I always wanted to go to Afghanistan, since I was first aware of it as a kid. In the early seventies, when it was on the hippie trail across Asia to Katmandu, I REALLY wanted to go and was very upset when the Russians invaded. I followed the next twenty years with sadness and was approached about going early in 2001 to make a clandestine film about women under the Taliban. Like the rest of the world, I have followed with fascination since 9/11. I was opposed to the US invasion and bombing that followed.

A year ago, after the fall of Kabul, while there was the heavy fighting in Tora Bora, I was offered the chance to go as Peter Arnett's producer. I was torn; I wanted desperately to go. Although I knew it was truly dangerous (four journalists were killed as I was preparing to go at that time) I felt it was my destiny to make the trip; it seemed all my travels were a preamble to this journey and I'd never been in a war conflict country. I believed I needed to go to find my limits and also to spread what light I could, to bring a different kind of loving energy than that which I assumed most of my countrymen were putting out. At the same time, I was scared, as were Judie and the girls. I spent a month preparing, getting gear together, getting my teeth worked on, full medical checkup, preparing camping gear as well as camera gear, preparing myself mentally, physically and emotionally. When the trip was pushed back to where it conflicted with other work and I couldn't go, I reacted with profound disappointment and profound relief. A year later I was given another chance, as we generally are in this bountiful and fantastic life.

It took two days and four flights to get into Afghanistan. There are no commercial flights in, as there is no airport able to handle international flights. Even the Kabul airport, the biggest, has no landing lights, no emergency crews, no fire department. The airports are controlled by US forces, with varying levels of presence and visibility. In Mazar e Sharif, the field looks deserted with a Jordanian tent hospital encampment at one end. Kandahar airport, on the other hand, is frightening- the huge amount of materiel, vehicles and personnel. The whole airport is camouflaged and dug in, sandbags everywhere. The place is SECURE.

Rather than go through a blow by blow, first we went here, then we went here account, here are some impressions. It's tempting to make definitive statements, but I only was there for a short time, I don't speak either of the two languages (Dari, very similar to Farsi, is spoken in the north and Pashtun, close to Urdu, in the South) and I

don't qualify as a serious student of Afghanistan. So with that caveat, here goes.

Throughout the country, not in every place, but in many, the roads are littered with destroyed or abandoned tanks, APCs and other military vehicles. I don't think I'm exaggerating to say that we saw over two hundred husks, sometimes a dozen in a half kilometer.



They remain as a testament to the might and scope of the Soviet forces as well as to the determination of the Afghans. They are sad, making me think of men burned alive inside, as well as a reminder that technology moves on. Where the tank was the killer app. of WWII, they

were deathtraps once the Stinger shoulder-launched missile was introduced. It's very easy to find children to climb on the tanks for a photo and I avoided doing that (until the last day), although I did see some tiny boys using a 50 mm Howitzer cannon as a seesaw and couldn't help myself. By the end of our stay, I felt that the dead tanks should be gathered and used as scrap. After 20 years of war, I think the Afghans don't need any more reminders of their warrior personae.



There is tremendous war damage, the war was so protracted and the country has so far to come in rebuilding. In many areas, rebuilding either has just begun (on a very small scale) or has yet to begin, so you can see miles of devastation in Kabul and it's hard for the uninitiated to know whether it was damage from the Russians, from *mujahideen*, or from last year's US bombing.

Then there are the landmines. Because of the way I work, running up a hill to get a better shot, or going 100 meters off road to put a

pump or a shed in the foreground, I had to be very conscious in a new way. There were occasions, for the first time in my life, where I would say, "That's good enough" and get the shot from the road. When we went to the Zhare Dhasht refugee camp outside Kandahar (actually an IDP [internally displaced persons] settlement; refugees come from outside a country, whereas these were all Afghans, displaced either by drought, ethnic strife or the war) the long sand road was heavily mined on both sides and had plenty of dramatic



signs saying so. My traveling partners got out and took pictures in front of these signs. That would be the last thing I would do; it would only serve to worry my daughters. As it was, I had a hard enough time before I left convincing them I would be safe and wouldn't do anything

stupid. Tana gave me a few letters to read on certain dates before I left and in them she wrote, "Be careful of what you eat. And don't do anything stupid. Seriously, though. And keep your mouth shut. Don't do anything that you're going to regret."

Driving through the countryside, the very picturesque wattle buildings (often walled compounds around an interior garden, so the trees are safe and so woman can go about freely) an attractive café au lait color, the same as the earth, would have large white roman letters painted on and these were signs that a de-mining crew had been through and that the area immediately around that house was safe.

The UN Humanitarian Air Services office in Mazar shared space with the UN de-mining squad and there was an informal exhibit of mines, both anti-personnel and anti-tank and they were so innocuous looking, just little plastic shapes. Some looked like the things they bring you in Mexican restaurants that keep the tortillas warm. Others look like toys, some are painted yellow, just like the food packages the US dropped. It was heartbreaking to look at them, to see so much pain and misery in such innocent-looking packages.

We flew exclusively on UNHAS flights and I loved it. (No airport security check-in(!!) although we did have to weigh every bag and pay excess baggage fees beyond our fares.) Luckily we were able to get on every flight we wanted. For security reasons, the flight times are changed every day and that day's times are only announced early in the morning. The morning we left to come home, we expected to be at the airport at 10:30 and it turned out we had to be there at 7:30. We found out in time.

One of the best parts of the trip for me was interaction with UN agencies and meeting UN workers. For my entire life, I have held the United Nations in high regard; I've felt the UN is the only hope for world peace and have felt shame at the way the United States has used the UN for its own purposes and the way we've ignored our financial obligations. This trip was a wonderful opportunity to see it in action and I wasn't disappointed. We flew on UNHAS flights, we stayed in UN guesthouses and we met many wonderful dedicated workers. The first time I flew on a UN flight was a hugely emotional experience for me.

We hit a lot of places in our ten days. We flew into Mazar e Sharif in the north and spent two days with a Japanese NGO out in small villages, hours away on dust roads. We spent time in and around Kabul, to the west into Pagman and up the Shimali plains (a no man's land scorched by the Taliban to protect them from the Northern Alliance front line at the bottom of the Panshvir valley.) We went to Kandahar in the hot south. The country is vast, the different regions so different, different climates, topography, people, languages, architecture. At the end of every flight, it was like stepping off the plane into another country, every one exotic in its own way. No matter where we were, I found the landscape enthralling. There are mountains everywhere, whether they are still wooded on the western and northern edges of the Shimali plain or bare in every other place we visited. Being in a high mountain plain is magical; you're always a little out of breath, the light is different, everything jumps out at you. It feels like being on the top of the world, even though it's not necessarily that high. Certainly it makes everything seem more extraordinary and timeless.

Even though he was a Tajik (and the majority of Afghans are Pashtun,) Ahmed Shah Massoud's presence is felt EVERYWHERE and he's practically a saint at this point. He's the Northern Alliance commander who was assassinated September 9th, 2001. His picture

is everywhere, in photos, on posters, on HUGE posters and embroidered into carpets. I learned a tremendous amount about him and about recent Afghan history from an excellent new book by Jon Lee Anderson, "The Lion's Grave." It collects Anderson's pieces for the New Yorker and intersperses emails to his editor that show how difficult and dangerous it was to get around and to get his stories. Although the emails are often self-serving, they do flesh out the story and the book was invaluable. Anderson is especially useful in sorting out the various warlords and giving concise bios.

The warlord situation is still very volatile and is the biggest danger the country faces, in my minimally informed view. A national army is slowly being created, but it is small (1200 when I was there) and they are young, inexperienced warriors. The warlords refuse to release any of their men, lest they be used against them. Karzai has no power over the warlords and everybody seems to be waiting to see what happens. Karzai seems to have lost part of the authority he had since the assassination attempt in September and his subsequent adoption of US soldiers as bodyguards. In addition to the safety issues of having various militias holding power in pockets all over the country and lack of central authority, the warlords are holding on to monies, tariffs, profits that the nation needs.

Everywhere we went there were men with AK-47s, it's almost as if the guns were fashion accessories. Different men, different outfits, I had no idea who was what, who was police, who belonged to what army. For all that, I practically never felt in danger, maybe just a few times. At the same time, I found it impossible to know when a situation was "safe" and when it wasn't. I am used to having a sense of security as well as generally knowing when a situation is not safe and in Afghanistan, at least at this time, and in the short time I was there, I just couldn't tell. In the north, in and around Mazar, which according to the world press, conventional wisdom and the people in Kabul, is unsafe and wild, all the aid workers feel perfectly safe and walk around freely. UN rules for workers, at least in Kandahar, is that no one is to walk in the city. Before I was apprised of this, I walked alone from the UN security office to the World Food Program guesthouse where we were staying, about a mile and I only encountered smiles. Anytime I encountered soldiers, no matter how fierce looking, when I would pull out my still camera, thinking they were approaching me to tell me to stop, or worse, to take my camera, they would invariably want their picture taken. This never ceased to amaze Ian, one of my ADB colleagues. "Why do

they insist on having their pictures taken when they know they will never see the picture?," he'd ask. I think it's because during the Taliban period, photography was prohibited, and it will be years before the majority of people will be able to afford a camera. I felt the vast majority of the Afghans wanted their pictures taken just to say, "See me, I'm here. I exist, I survived. Remember me." Maybe even "Show and tell the world."



It's not as if there are tourists swarming around, taking snaps of every kid. In fact, that was one of the great things about being in Afghanistan. There was no tourist or even for that matter, consumer culture. What a pleasure to see a rich culture whose only sign of American influence is occasional Coca Colas (from Pakistan, and very

occasionally from Iran-the Iranian Coke is highly regarded.) There were no billboards (except of Massoud and once, in Kandahar, an anti-drug statement.)

So, even though we weren't throwing money around, we were welcomed. I remember in Kandahar passing through the main Street going out of town to the south and the east, there was always an elegant, classic Afghan-looking older traffic cop, white hair and beard, wearing a white motorcycle helmet, who would let vehicles with foreigners through, saying, "Welcome!" Did anyone know me as an American? Probably not and I don't know that there would have been a difference had that been the case. Dinner one night in Kabul was typical, there were seven of us and we were seven nationalities: Afghani, British, Dutch, Finnish, Filipino, New Zealander, and American. Another dinner: Bosnian, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Danish. The Afghans for the most part are very happy to have us; as long as we are there, they are safe from ethnic fighting, and there is hope. It's obvious to everybody that this is the last best hope for Afghanistan. While the eyes of the world are (at least a little) still focused there and while money is still coming, this is the opportunity to create infrastructure (and recreate infrastructure that was destroyed during the past twenty years.)

At the same time, the Afghans need to see results soon, they need to see jobs created, they need to reap the benefit of the money that's been coming in. The four-year drought has killed many of the farm animals and people have nothing to do. It looks as if the drought will end this year and that will be the single biggest help in getting the nation back on its feet. In the meantime, men are sitting around and watching all the fat white aid vehicles. If the foreign aid money doesn't translate into a better life for the man in the street soon, I expect the positive feelings will change.

Up until now, most aid has focused on emergency relief, getting the Afghans food and tents to get through last year's winter, but now the goal is long term growth, training teachers, building schools, rebuilding roads, rebuilding irrigation systems that were destroyed, replacing crops and trees that were burned. This takes much more time and in some ways is hard to justify when immediate relief is still needed, when hundreds of thousands are still displaced, living in tents or less. All the aid workers I met are concerned that the world doesn't lose interest and "move on" to other stories, other tragedies. The Afghans themselves fear stories of famine in Africa, thinking their money will go away.

It is a hard road they have in front of them. The most basic industries have been destroyed. The everyday things a poor country like Bangladesh made for itself 30 or 40 years ago are being imported from Pakistan: jellies, soap, cloth. In the time since the wars began China has come on the scene bigtime. How can Afghanistan expect to compete with that manufacturing powerhouse two countries away? Rough, pink Chinese toilet paper is everywhere (everywhere in the very few places one finds toilet paper, that is.)

Women. What to say here? It's bad and it's not just the *burkha* (pronounced boor-HA, 2nd syllable accented, the R burred) which is seen everywhere; in Kabul, maybe only 80% of the women wear it. In the countryside it's practically 100% and I don't see that changing anytime soon (although in an interesting twist, some of the warlords are pushing to outlaw the *burkha*, by having their wives abandon it publicly as examples; it seems that various assassins have worn a *burkha* to get access to their targets.) The country is extremely conservative; the holy war in Afghanistan is a war against change, not against infidels *per se*, and was so as far back as during the pre-Russian era, when they were fighting Afghan Marxists. Women don't

feel safe outside the *burkha* and won't for a long time, even though it causes fungus on their scalps (these days *burkhas* are made from a beautiful blue polyester fabric that doesn't breathe but that catches the light beautifully and stands out against the dried mud background) and eyes troubles as well (constantly trying to focus through the screen.)

Islamic (Arabic mostly) culture has always appealed to me, mainly because of my early wonderful experiences with Muslim men in various countries, the quality of friendship they showed me was different from that in the west. I was taken with aspects of the religion, enjoyed Sufi teachings, the idea of a direct relationship with God, with no intermediary was especially appealing. I found myself defending the religion over the years. It infuriated me that Americans would judge it by our standards, by our beliefs at this tiny moment in time, judge it without bothering to learn anything about it, without ever having spoken to a Muslim, just a categorical rejection. And yes, much of that was over the status of women.

I've tried to understand the treatment of women in the most extreme countries. I believed Muslims when they'd say that women were respected and that segregation was to protect them from men's baser impulses. I tried to go beyond our values and accept these cultures on their own terms. I'd have arguments with my wife Judie who like so many others couldn't or wouldn't hear any of it. Perhaps my defense went beyond my feelings and beliefs; certainly, I've been known to be contrary. Perhaps I could defend Islam passionately because I really couldn't completely conceive of the difficulties of women.

Over the years I've spent time in many Islamic countries and haven't had my worldview challenged. I'd been in Yemen in '93 and not seen a female face throughout the country. I've seen women managers in Indonesia and Malaysia. This trip was different. Maybe it was having teenage daughters and not being able to even imagine them here, but I don't think so. A turning point for me was interviewing an IDP in a refugee camp (through an interpreter.) He had recently arrived with his wife and family and told us his story in some detail. We interviewed him in his tent, with his wife sitting silently, unmoving, in her *burkha*. He told us about being Pashtun, living in the north, in a predominantly Tajik area, how he feels it's unsafe to return home. His wife has tuberculosis and he himself had an injured knee. He was bitter throughout the interview and at one point, our interpreter

asked, "Aren't things looking up? You're here getting food and health care (there was a large MSF (Medicins Sans Frontieres) facility in the camp) and you've got your wife and whole family together with you". He angrily replied that he hated her and would get rid of her if he could. Is that the whole country and culture? Of course not, but I can't forget it. I met with a woman in Kabul who ran an NGO that served battered women so awareness of a sort is growing, but it's still a grim situation. Women aid workers (foreigners) told me they are uncomfortable being out and about and that they must always be very cautious about how they behave, dress and talk. They keep their arms and legs covered to the wrists and ankles and they always wear a shawl, slipping it down from their heads to their shoulders when indoors in ex-pat company. It's a draining experience day to day and when they take their mandatory week off out of country after every six weeks in-country (a UN rule to prevent or postpone burnout) they just collapse. I guess that one thing that I can say with some degree of certainty is that life is not yet that different for most Afghan women post-Taliban.



After a week or so of seeing only ex-pat women's faces and no woman's arm or leg, we arrived at the Kandahar airport to a hallucination; four tall, tanned blondes, tight red tops and the tiniest white miniskirts taking pictures of each other. They were Washington Redskinettes, in town to entertain the US troops. Even though they were well out of sight of the man in the street, the sight of them was shocking and felt more alien than anything I'd seen in the previous week.

When I was preparing to go last year, post-9/11, it was much more dangerous than this year and I was fitted for serious body armor, with ceramic plates. This time there was no talk of needing that, but I did borrow a Kevlar police vest and took it along. I never wore it. Once in Afghanistan, I couldn't imagine wearing it. First of all, it was uncomfortable (that wouldn't have been a problem had I thought I was in danger) but more than that, it would have been obvious that I was wearing it. In Mazar e Sharif, our first stop, we were guests of

Peace Winds Japan, an NGO (www.peace-winds.org). We stayed in their residence compounds (one of which had been the Taliban security headquarters in that town), we ate with them, we went to their projects. It would have been an insult to wear the vest, as no one else was.

The one time I was afraid, when we were left in the desert in Kandahar, no driver, no interpreter, I didn't have the vest with me; I'd left it in Kabul to save weight and space.

For the most part we were well taken care of; we had housing, a vehicle and interpreters arranged before we arrived. One of the things we were set to cover was the groundbreaking ceremony for the repair of the road from Kandahar to Spin Boldak. Spin Boldak is the sister city to Quetta on the Pakistan side of border and a major entry point for goods and returning Afghans. The road was destroyed during the most recent wars and its repair is a major step to economic recovery.

We flew from Kabul to Kandahar on the biggest jet I'd seen in the country (most of the UN flights are small 18-seater turboprops) with some government officials, reporters and ADB staff. We arrived at the Kandahar airport, which had the huge US military presence. It was very hot out on the tarmac as we waited and realized that there was no vehicle, no driver, no interpreter and no lodging arranged for us and that everyone else would be returning to Kabul immediately after the ceremony. We had all our gear, including lights as we anticipated interviewing the Japanese ambassador (Japan was giving most of the money for this road project.) We watched as all the officials got into vehicles and we were left there, the highest ranking ADB person saying, "Don't worry." As the cars started to drive off I worried and we managed to find a UN vehicle with a driver. He wasn't supposed to carry non-UN people, but he took pity on us and took us to the site of the ceremony, a huge tent, out in the desert, 7 or so miles from the airport, still 15 miles from Kandahar.

The tent had a PA, seats up front for the dignitaries and about 200 guys with AK 47s. Not that we hadn't seen plenty before, but all these guys were dressed in different outfits and we had no guide to tell us what to do, when to worry. There were about 20 women sitting in their own section. The ceremony dragged on. It was hot, there were a few cans of soda brought out to the few foreign

dignitaries. The Chinese ambassador spoke Farsi, he'd been posted in Iran, everyone was suitably impressed. (Dari, one of the two Afghani languages, is a version of Farsi.)

Suddenly it was over, everybody left the tent, me leading them, walking briskly backwards, my camera much bigger than anyone else's, granting me the prime position. It was very hot, we made it out past all the parked Land Cruisers and Mercedes, past barrels of oil and road paving machinery, to the road where a ribbon had been stretched. The Governor of Kandahar cut the ribbon, someone held out another ribbon, the Japanese ambassador cut that one. I got bumped and two men came in carrying a goat. One of the guys slit its throat and all of a sudden the Mercedes and the Land Cruisers were there, the dignitaries were pushed into the cars and they all went barreling down the road, to the point of the actual beginning of the repairs, miles away.

All our contacts were gone, to who knows where? Fortunately, I had insisted on leaving our gear in the UN car and the driver, whose name was Daoud, didn't leave us, although he was in some trouble for taking us in the first place. He radioed the UN office and we were told to report to the airport. We drove back and waited for the head UN guy who showed up hopping mad, mad at Daoud for being commandeered, or rather at whatever official had commandeered him, mad at us for being there, for causing him to come out to this road, but mostly mad because he'd been invited to the ceremony, a waste of his time, keeping him from his work, he'd driven the half hour out from Kandahar and it was all over! The ceremony started early and was finished by the time it was originally scheduled to start. Luckily we managed to convince the UN chief that we were wronged as he was and though there was no room at the UN guesthouse, he arranged for us to stay at the UN World Food Program guesthouse. He told Daoud to take us there.

As the next day was Friday and Daoud had the day off, I arranged for him to drive us and be our interpreter. In a matter of a half hour we went from having nothing to having everything we needed in Kandahar; vehicle, driver, interpreter, housing. Daoud turned out to be the



Afghan I became closest to in our time there. He was warm and we quickly bonded. We talked about God and I told him that I thought that God needed humans to do his work. He liked that.

Daoud told me about his family, how they'd fled the Taliban, they went to Pakistan, their houses had been destroyed, that they had a pomegranate orchard that they were bringing back to life. He made me promise that the next time I came he would take me there, as it was far away and our time was short. It was obviously of prime importance to his family, a symbol of their existence; if the orchard was doing well and yielding fruit, they (and by extension, the entire country) were coming back to life.

While I was there, I got an email from a friend who wants to "adopt" an orphan in Afghanistan. Angry at US policies post-9/11, he asked me to be on the lookout for a young person he could sponsor. I had no idea how to find such a boy or girl, but Daoud was the answer to that. I asked him to find someone who couldn't go to school otherwise and he promised to do so and to manage the money. I left him with some money and had no doubt in his honesty.

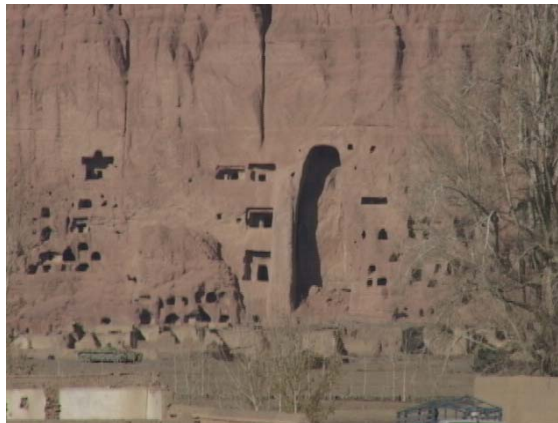
I didn't see any opium poppies, it was out of season, I believe, but on the road an hour west of Kandahar, Daoud suddenly stopped the car and asked if I smelled something. He pointed to some fields by the side of the road. They were full of cannabis. He cautioned me that I couldn't enter without armed guard, as the farmers would think I was trying to steal their crop. Hash use is supposedly high among Afghans, resulting in late arrival for work, as well as absence. Because of Ramadan, I didn't get to see this.

We were there during the month of Ramadan and I'm sure that made our trip different than it would have been otherwise, but I can't say exactly how. Ramadan (pronounced Ramzhan in Afghanistan) is a month of fasting, during which Muslims neither eat, drink nor smoke from dawn to dusk. It's a time of reflection and quieter in just about every way. I'm sure it was safer than it would have been in another month. The few restaurants and coffeehouses that exist are closed in the daytime and most other shops have truncated hours. During Ramadan, the main event of the day is *iftar*, the evening breaking of the fast. A lot of the people we were with were trying to conserve energy and one of our translators complained of a headache from the fasting. We drank water during the day (not openly) but usually we didn't eat; it was hard to come

by food and although we'd brought things like powerbars and flatbread, we'd just have a bite or two. As the day would come to an end, our hosts and drivers would get increasingly restless and once the moment came, we'd stop and they'd find something, anything to eat. Usually the first thing would be dates, the idea being to break the fast with something sweet. Like nearly everything else, the dates were imported, in this case, from Iran. We'd see huge cubes of them in every market. Sometimes what they wanted first and foremost was a cigarette.

The food was not bad, but the menu was limited, essentially kebabs and *pilau*, a rice dish made with raisins, thin strips of carrots and orange rind, and once or twice almonds. A huge mound would be served, usually hiding a big piece of beef. Tasty, but oily. Fresh tomatoes and onion were occasionally served with the kebabs, but the water they were washed in was suspect. I tried carefully to cut the skin away once and was rewarded for my attempt to eat fresh vegetables with a violent 36 hours of diarrhea (for the record, that was a first in 30 years, since I ate meat that I knew had gone bad in Turkey.) The best thing put in front of us was a local melon, kind of like a crenshaw, yellow, football shaped, with a sweet blush pink flesh called *garbooz*. It was fantastic, as were the pomegranates.

Diarrhea was still in the house as we left Mazar and headed to Kabul. Unfortunately, our small plane had no toilet and it was a puddle jumper. As we were taxiing down the runway to begin the second of three legs, I knew I was in trouble. Praying to be able to make it to the next stop, I was in agony. I burst out of the plane as we landed at Bamian, I waved a roll of toilet paper at a soldier and he nodded me to a ditch by the strip. There I found an anti-aircraft shell, a perfect souvenir.



Bamian is the home of the giant Buddhas the Taliban destroyed. It is a gorgeous small mountain valley, a dangerous and thrilling approach by plane. The mountains are filled with caves that have been inhabited for years. We were only there twenty minutes, but it's an obvious prime tourist attraction of the future. UNICEF is

planning on rebuilding the statues and I can imagine the tour planes and buses there in ten years.

I saw very few old people, by that I mean 60 and up, maybe a dozen or so in all the places we went to. Looking hard, I realized the people who look old are my age, that I'd be an elder in Afghanistan. The average life expectancy is 47 years.

We went to many schools, or rather many places where children were being taught. Often they were outside, some were in tents, some were in buildings that had their windows and doors blown out. In Kabul there was one school where they would cover the windows and doors with plastic and blankets so the children could go through the winter. There aren't anywhere near enough teachers (this is one of the largest components of the rebuilding effort-training teachers.) The teacher who impressed me the most was an 18 year old named Islamuddin who is himself a student, but who has an English class that he teaches. I filmed him for a PSA and was moved and impressed by the level he had managed to help his fellow students achieve. I loved his classroom, no windows or doors, one wall had "columns" remaining standing around what might have been doors or windows. The walls were a gorgeous pale, pale green and the low, soft sidelight was more beautiful than anything in the biggest Hollywood feature.

Although I went without plans and not knowing what we'd find, I managed to get material for several PSAs. These required a very different mindset from the documentary shooting, more like writing a poem than an essay or a story, finding a perfect encapsulation of an idea, situation, concept, emotion. These PSAs involved kids pumping water, a girl and her tiny brother, Islmauddin the teacher, a medical tent at a refugee camp and various faces.

Getting home was worse, much worse than arriving. Again, four flights, Kabul> Islamabad> Dubai> Frankfurt> LA. The flight out of Kabul to Islamabad left early in the morning and my next flight to Dubai was at 3 the next morning. The last thing I wanted was to get re-oriented to a new country and culture. I wanted to keep my Afghani memories and sensations as close as possible, as long as possible. I didn't want them pushed out by new experiences.

Islamabad is the newly created capital of Pakistan, wide boulevards with grand government buildings, richer diplomatic neighborhoods,

not the kind of place I wanted to explore anyway. Nearby Rawalpindi is more colorful, but notoriously dangerous for foreigners these days, so I just visited the vast Al Fahd mosque, built with Saudi money and able to handle 100,000 worshippers. I ate in our fancy hotel and that was my big mistake. I got sicker than sick and spent four hours in the filthiest public toilet outside the Islamabad airport. I went to the airport 6 hours before I needed to check in, to help my soundman get his gear through and pay his excess baggage and was stuck there. Luckily, the hotel I had checked out of had a desk there and a man named Sada Hussein (same name, local variation) recognized my misery and watched my gear as I made my continual trips to that indescribable hole. Angels come in many forms and with various names.

The jelly belly pretty much cleared by the time I was in Dubai, but it had taken its toll and I was thoroughly disoriented. These trips are always somewhat unsettling; we do and see so much in such a short time, upload a tremendous amount of information and experience, too much to take in and when the whirlwind stops, we're back home and there's no way to come down smoothly. This time it was worse than usual and I felt I'd really been torn out of a picture, there was no background to stand on, all the touchstones were gone. I hadn't had enough of Afghanistan and I hadn't properly said goodbye. My father had suffered a mild heart attack while I was gone and had had bypass surgery while I was flying home. All my energies shifted towards him.

Several weeks after returning home, I was given the opportunity to pick fruit from a friend's orchard several hours outside LA, up near Fresno in Tulare county. They had citrus trees, satsumas and pomellos (exotic tangerines and grapefruits, respectively). Right next to their land was a pomegranate grove, one that had already been harvested and here I finally came home.

The pomegranate tree is small, spiky, unattractive and unyielding, hard and painful to pick. These trees had few fruit left on them, the pickers had already been through. Most of the fruit was rotting, but not all, and what we picked was hard won but delicious. There was one tree that had many fruit still left on it, all exploding, blush pink on the outside, with the blood red seeds breaking through. It was like a Frida Kahlo painting. As I picked these fruit in the cool dawn light, walking alone down long aisles, reaching deep into the branches, getting stuck and cut no matter how careful I was, I

reached across the world and was back in Afghanistan. I was back with Daoud and was myself connecting our two worlds. We're all picking and eating, talking and sleeping. Doing the same things, through time and space, all connected.

