

Iranian Air

Iran. The name evokes impressions of ancient history and great civilisations, ornamental Persian decor and lyrical poetry, but also a sense of danger in today's political climate. **Allie Dunnington** discovered a welcoming destination for the adventurous balloonist.

For centuries Iran was the link between East and West, Orient and Occident. Recent politics, though, have thrown the country back into the pot of perceived dangerous countries in line with North Korea and Cuba. Sanctions have been implemented and international businesses have had to stop their trade.

TEHRAN BOUND

I am sitting on one of BA's last flights into Tehran before termination of their service. Only having re-introduced the London-Tehran route a couple of years ago, BA stated that the route 'doesn't make enough revenue to justify the service'. We (Phil, my husband, and I) are glad that they are at least still serving wine on board!

On touch down all the ladies pull out their compulsory head scarves. Having travelled around this fascinating country four years ago I am keen to go back. But

this time I won't leave without bagging my balloon flight!

Immigration is super swift and without any problems. "Welcome to Iran!" Meraj Ghamari, the local balloon pilot, and our tour guide Hussein Ismailzadeh, are waiting for us. Hussein speaks excellent English. We hit the early Sunday morning rush hour. Sunday in Iran is not a rest day as in western society. Here the equivalent is Friday. So traffic is dense and slow heading into the 10 million mega city that slopes down from the base of the Alborz mountain range towards the desert. The city centre is hiding in the middle of this fairly modern metropolis, with many high-rise buildings and five-lane roads.

After a good breakfast with fresh feta cheese, aubergine mash and local bread, we visit the Palace and National Museum. It's getting hot. Tehran can suffer temperatures up to 40 degrees in the summer. It is September, but there is no sign of cooling down and it hasn't rained for months, we are told.

BALLOONING COUNTRY

After this cultural exploration we head out to the ballooning area to the north-east of the city, near the town of Damavand. Mount Damavand is a snow-capped volcano rising up to 5,700m and we are promised a glimpse of Iran's tallest peak during our balloon flight tomorrow. We drive a couple of hours on a motorway, climbing up to 2,000m, and we reach our hotel. It looks like a construction site from outside! Luckily it's a lot better inside. We are dead tired, having only had an hour's sleep on the aeroplane.

05:30. Time to meet Hussein, who will be our driver on this trip, and find Meraj and his balloon team somewhere out in the dark countryside. We are surprised



Above: All smiles. Allie and Phil, with tour guide Hussein on his first balloon flight.

to see a delicious looking breakfast laid out in front of us with bread, walnuts, cheese and hot tea. But even better, I see a balloon being prepared by the crew. Meraj has six enthusiastic young students who assist him with his passenger flights.

Without much delay, he inflates his blue and white Kubicek 105 and we get in. Meraj heats up the balloon. As we gently rise up into the fresh, clear morning air, so the sun rises from behind the mountain range and illuminates the landscape around us. We are flying over farm and agricultural land, but I also spot many luxury villas with small swimming pools – they belong to wealthy Tehran families, who use them as holiday homes or commute back to the big city for work.

BURNER TIME

Meraj passes the controls to me and then to Phil. I turn to Hussein, who has a broad smile on his face. "What do you think of this, Hussein?" I ask. "It's my first time in a balloon. It's great. Do you think I could also learn this?" he says. "Yes, of course you can!" With this, Meraj raises the subject of how to get a British licence.

Winds are benign and we float slightly back towards the mountains. There are lots of suitable cut stubble fields, but also

a number of power lines. My scarf keeps annoying me as it constantly falls over my face. Many Iranian women would rather do without it and as soon as they are out of public sight, take it off. But it's compulsory by the religious government to wear it, together with loose clothes that don't show any contours. Arms must be covered at least over your elbows and your ankles should not show either.

CAKE & FIZZ

After 45 minutes it is time to land and we descend into a field with a few horses at the far end. The crew is awaiting us and pull the balloon closer to the truck, where we deflate. With so many hands the kit is quickly packed away and it is time to celebrate. Meraj has laid out a table with a big chocolate cake and Spanish non-alcoholic sparkling wine! I have logged Country Number 89 – after four years!

The next day, we start our long drive across the Alborz mountains, heading for the Caspian Sea. This is the largest inland water in the world. It also seems to be one of the wettest places! As soon as we start our descent from 3,000m to sea level, clouds build up and it starts to drizzle. The rain won't stop for the next three days. Gone is the idea of a beach holiday!

Instead, we visit the Aeroclub at Ramsar, a popular holiday destination and the site of the last Shah's summer residence. With dark clouds threatening to break out we book a ride in a Magni 8 AT gyrocopter. It's breezy, it's bumpy, but the flight along the coastline is worth the adventure.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT IRAN

- It's a dangerous country – Iran is actually very safe to travel around
- Everybody drinks coffee – no it's tea!
- Persian and Arabic are the same languages – no, they're quite different.
- Women are not allowed to smoke shisha – they love it and do!
- The country is desert – no, there are even rice-paddies by the Caspian Sea
- Men's toilets are the same as everywhere in the world – no, men use squat toilets in separate cubicles
- People don't speak English – many speak excellent English, often with an American accent
- Islam is a single religion – not really: Shia and Sunni traditions are as 'competitive' as Protestant and Catholic were in times of the Reformation
- There is a daily call to prayer – no! In Iran there is surprisingly no call to prayer like in other Islamic countries.



Above: Pilot Meraj flanked by guide Hussein, guests from the UK, and his exuberant crew.

Afterwards we are invited for a chat over tea by the chief engineer and the gyrocopter captain. Suddenly heavy rain interrupts our conversation. As we get up, the captain passionately embraces Phil and says: "I love you!" Not quite sure how to interpret this gesture of fond attachment, we run to our car through the torrential rain. Iran is definitely worth a visit and people are ever so welcoming and friendly!

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Above: Post-flight celebratory cake and non-alcoholic fizz is laid on.



Above: Allie and Phil against the backdrop of snow-capped Mount Damavand, a 5,700 metre stratovolcano, the highest peak in Iran and the highest volcano in Asia.

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Above: Allie, wearing obligatory head scarf, is thrilled to fly in her eighty-ninth country.