



## INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

# Mullahs and Modernity

A journey between Iran's modern and traditional sides

text and photos by Mark Godfrey

**M**ainstream media conceptions of Iran were not a good preparation for our arrival in the country from neighboring Turkmenistan. Tehran is a place familiar to many from international news channels and Hollywood films. Both frequently shape Western perceptions of Iran as an unfriendly theocracy with a rebellious underground. But things aren't as clear-cut.

The easy availability of those same Hollywood releases on Tehran's streets was a hint of the popularity of Western culture in Iran. George Clooney's *Syriana* was one of dozens of invariably American releases I found for a dollar on the footpath downtown. In the opening scene a young Iranian woman dons her thick shoes, cape and scarf over jeans and sleeveless top before stepping out into a Tehran sunrise after an all-night party of rock music and alcohol.

I felt like I recognized that girl every day I went to Cafe Naderi, a legendary institution in Tehran's embassy area. It seems the cafe hasn't changed its decor (or waiters) since its heyday in the 1950s. Today's clientele remains mainly composed of Tehran's intellectual classes, but has also become an unlikely hangout for the city's cool youth. Girls wearing expensive clothes and make-up let their headscarves fall precariously back. Men with fashionably long hair worked with gel prop guitar cases against the tables and take long drags from cigarettes. One of them told me of his rock band, which plays Franz Ferdinand covers. A cup of coffee can be stretched over several hours of talk and amateur philosophizing at the Cafe Naderi, one of those superb interludes of calm and culture in an otherwise noisy, smoggy city.



1. Heading off home after the pilgrimage to Khomeini's tomb
2. Cafe Naderi - hangout of the young and trendy
3. Trying to catch a glimpse of Khomeini's tomb
4. Hanging on by a thread - headscarves in Cafe Naderi work their way loose

An utterly different but equally intriguing Iran is a subway ride away, on line 1 of the city's modern metro system. After 40 minutes we pulled into Haram-e-Motahar, a station built to serve the shrine in which lie the remains of the bearded, charismatic cleric who radically changed Iran when he came to power in the late 1970s.

The Imam Khomeini Shrine has been 16 years under construction, since the ayatollah's cancer-induced death in 1989. By the lived-in look of the scaffolding and the respectful absence of builders, it won't be finished anytime soon. There are few places in which to see such a microcosm of the faces of Iran. The country's large ethnic Azerbaijani minority look and dress more like Europeans next to the browner skin and white kameez-style shirts of ethnic Afghans and Pakistanis from the south.



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*The Khomeini Shrine – under construction*

They join Shias visiting from Iraq and Saudi Arabia in flowing capes and keffiyeh headdresses, here to pay homage to a man credited with reviving the fortunes of the Shia faith when he became Iran's Supreme Leader in 1979. All weave past scaffolding-clad buildings painted in gold with elaborate motifs, eventually filing into the vast building which houses a large box-like tomb containing the coffin of the leader.

Pressed against the metal-glass walls of the tomb women in black chadors peer inside. The sound of the keening from a railed-off, women-only section lends a somber tone that's lifted by the sight of bored kids twisting about on the many carpets spread on the ground, grabbing the legs of fathers who twist beads in between turns at peering into the tomb which is lit in a low green, the color of piety. Nearby, old men bend over on prayer mats.

The pilgrims who pay homage to Khomeini are worlds away from

## A national inclination towards hospitality shines through the endless conversations a foreigner inevitably ends up having with pilgrims

Cafe Naderi's trendy clientele. But Iranians are too friendly a people for this to be a grey, somber place. A national inclination towards optimism and hospitality shines through the endless conversations a foreigner inevitably ends up having with pilgrims from northerly Tabriz and southerly Zaheda who alight in the huge bus park.

The Khomeini Shrine is remarkably laid back compared to other shrines to founding fathers. Outside the main hall, shops sell pizza and Coca-Cola beneath portraits of Khomeini and Shia prophet Imam Reza, the scholarly imam whose early death in 816 AD is commemorated in Mashad by one of the most important shrines in Shia Islam. After prayers and pizza, couples take the leisurely walk back to the train station.

Downtown, the two Irans are juxtaposed again at two museums.

Overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Museum of Contemporary Art on Kargar-e Shomali Avenue features iconic works, like Andy Warhol's portrait of Mick Jagger, in its permanent collection. A temporary exhibition of excellent news photography from the Iran-Iraq war took up much of the modern building when we visited.

Exhibitions at the Martyr's Museum near the former US embassy are a more permanent reminder of the eight-year Iran-Iraq conflict which defined 1980s Iran. English audio explanations are provided at some of the exhibits of stained battle gear and dead mullahs' cloaks, explaining the life and teachings and untimely end of clerics and volunteers who died for the Islamic Revolution. Explanations of the guerilla attacks on Tehran's Islamic government may be one-sided, but they help nonetheless to convey an oft-lacking understanding of the longevity of Iran's internal struggles.

Neither stagnant soviet nor stridently secular, Iran's combination of modernity and traditionalism made this a fascinating visit. In keeping with these contrasts, the Trans-Asian Express was a great way to leave the country. The border crossing to Turkey was a kind of coming out: scarves and long sleeves gave way to tight jeans, free-falling hair and lots of lipstick. As we pulled away from the decrepit but friendly border crossing and into eastern Turkey the tension of the military presence outside the window was dissipated by the sound of beer cans being ripped open. The party lasted the full two-day trip to Istanbul. ■

### Travel Tips

Visas can be obtained from the Iranian embassy in Beijing (13 Dong Liu Jie, Sanlitun, 6532 2040/4871/2/3), though there are special requirements for US citizens.

Iran Air flies Beijing-Tehran twice weekly (Tue, Sun), RMB 6,070 round-trip. The Tehran-Istanbul train departs from Tehran three times a week; information and tickets (around USD 60) are available from travel agents in Tehran or at the International Terminal of the Tehran Central Railway Station.