

AFGHANISTAN BEFORE

INTERNATIONAL: AFGHANISTAN BEFORE THE INVASION

by JULIA GUALTIERI of the CHARALATAN

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With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan grabbing world news headlines, people have taken a sudden interest in the politics of the Persian Gulf region. But most journalists reporting from the region have ignored the culture and attitudes of the people who have dug in to defend their soil from foreign aggression. The Charlatan's Julia Gualtieri gives a different perspective on the Afganistan crisis based on her travels through the country before the current political turmoil.

Julia Gualtieri

Afghanistan is a land of harsh beauty and sharp contrasts between bleak desert, snow-capped mountains and lush valleys; between nomad, villager and city dweller; between the tall, blue-eyed, fair-skinned Afghans and the short, dark, narrow-eyes Mongolians.

The harshness of the land has made the Afghans a tough people — there's a saying that if an Afghan child makes it to the age of seven, nothing will kill him save a bullet.

More than any other of the 30-odd countries my family drove through during our 30,000-mile, 15-month odyssey, it was Afghanistan for which I

have special feelings. I felt an immediate rapport with the Afghan people and their culture. It seems to possess a magnetic attraction that mesmerizes those who visit it.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that for years, Afghanistan's borders were closed to visitors. Only since the '60s has there been widespread travel throughout it.

Or perhaps it has to do with the fierce pride of the Afghan people — a deeply entrenched quality that enabled them to withstand the British and prevent themselves from being conquered by them. Throughout the centuries, the Afghan tribesmen have been known for their warrior prowess. Even before all the conflict ravaging the country today, most of the tribesmen, nomads and villagers we saw carried rifles as a matter of habit.

Of all the cultures we experienced during our trip, the Afghans had been the least influenced by the West. The inhabitants lead lives segregated in small, isolated villages or are nomadic, making it extremely difficult for that which is Western to influence them.

Consequently, tales of Afghanistan, the most "backward" of the Asian countries,

were transmitted by word of mouth along the ancient caravan route, today paved with 20th century asphalt.

For us, tales of fierce Afghan brutality against Westerners heightened the mystery surrounding Afghanistan, adding a fearful thrill to it. We always listened to such stories of gore with a sense of skepticism, but it was nonetheless true that the Afghans did not hesitate to apply their moral code to the Western travellers, and, if crossed, the Afghans could make the consequences gruesome indeed.

In contrast, the Moroccans, Egyptians, Turks, Iranians and Indians seemed very much in awe of us and the culture we represented. Whenever we stopped our VW van in one of their villages, they'd crowd around us, pressing their noses tightly against the windows, and elbowing each other out of the way to get a better look at these strange "nomads". It can be quite disconcerting to have hundreds of pairs of dark eyes staring silently at you.

The Afghans, on the other hand, stood back a bit from us, silently watching, but not seeming to be as completely awed. And they didn't beg for food or money with the

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pathetic, imploring eyes of the Indians, which haunt me to this day.

These people seem to exude a sense of dignity and strength that defies the defeatist attitude of people in other countries overcome by poverty. The following vignette illustrates this.

Bargaining is a way of life in Eastern countries. While we were in Bamain, a village in the Hindu Kush mountains famous for its colossal Buddha monuments carved out of the rock face, my father tried to negotiate with the proprietor of a chai house about renting a dung hut for our nightly quarters.

My father paid an amount he thought was sufficient, but the Afghan brusquely thrust his hand aside, throwing the money to the ground and spitting on it, swearing at us in swift Pushtu. Rather than accept an amount he thought too low, he told us to go sleep somewhere else. Apparently, it was a matter of pride and honor, and only when my father said he'd pay the price he wanted, were we able to stay.

Our experiences in other countries had shown that any entrepreneur, from store owner to street hawker, would take whatever they were offered for their wares, rather than lose the sale completely.

To me, it's this pride and honor that infuses the Afghan rebel tribesmen with enough will and strength to fight against the 20th century Soviet military technology with 19th century rifles and 13th century techniques.

The one road to Kabul, the capital, from Herat, near the Iranian border, is a stark black strip cutting straight across the brutal Afghan desert. Through mile after mile of unchanging desert, there are only two major towns along the two-day journey from the border to Kabul.

Despite stories of nomad hostility towards Westerners, we were lucky enough to have the rare and memorable experience of being invited into a camp of the Kuchis, the nomadic tribe indigenous to Afghanistan.

Acting as the envoys, my mother, sisters and brother preceded my father into the camp, for it is considered improper for any man from outside the tribe to enter a camp uninvited when the men are out with the herds and the women left alone.

We were welcomed by the Kuchi.

The Kuchi women greeted us by bringing out the welcome rug, on which we were invited to join the already-seated women and young women. They were dressed in traditional brightly-colored mirror-work dresses, with their hair tightly braided through glass beads.

As we departed, we gave them some empty glass bottles. They expressed gratitude and friendship by taking off some of their distinctive jewelry and giving it to us.

These nomadic women, with their unveiled faces and colorful clothing mosaiced in mirror-

work embroidery, contrast sharply with the women of Kabul. The first time I saw a woman in that city, all I could see was a solemn figure coming towards me, completely enveloped from head to toe, a ghost in the traditional *chadori*, with only a slight strip of mesh for eyes. I was being stared at, but wasn't able to see the woman's eyes.

Dichotomies are common in Kabul, where Western influence is more evident than elsewhere in the country. The omnipresent Coca-Cola advertisements are juxtaposed with signs in Pharci and Pushtu advertising Afghan products, and even an occasional pantsuit can be seen from beneath the hem of a *chadori*.

And in many Eastern cities, the bazaar in Kabul throbs with the essential life of the city, life that for the most part seemed untouched by the modern technological world. There, loud cries of vendors compete and mingle with the haunting cries of the meuzzin chanting the call to prayer.

Amid all this my father sits on the curb of the street having his beard trimmed Afghan style by a barber wielding a six inch straight razor.

This leaves the Muslim tribesmen outside the city, who are an entity to themselves, hiding-out in the rugged foothills of the Hindu Kush. The Khyber Pass of this area has been traditionally fraught with conflict and tension.

The Pathans, the tribe indigenous to this area, were caught in the bureaucracy of the British when they divided the territory in the late 19th Century between Pakistan and Afghanistan, separating the Pathan tribe between two countries. The Pathans, by tradition, history, race and language and temperament Afghans, are nonetheless a fiercely independent people and have been fighting ever since to establish a country of their own.

Before crossing the Khyber pass we were issued warnings not to drive after dusk as this was when brigand Pathan tribesmen seized the opportunity to make frequent raids on passing vehicles. It was well known that buses were the prime targets. They were often forced to stop by rifle carrying Pathans for passengers' jewellery and money.

At one point along the pass, where the view was particularly magnificent, my family stopped to take pictures. Suddenly our car was pelted with rocks by a tall, grey bearded Pathan, a rifle slung across his shoulder. As we scrambled back into the car and continued on our way through the dangerously twisting switchbacks, he followed us with the stare of his hard blue eyes.



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