



Afghan Diary

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From the Editorial Desk: In the second of her diary excerpts, Mary describes a visit to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, for the Eid festival. She also travels to the frontier with Afghanistan for a short border crossing, to get her visa for Pakistan renewed. As her work with the Afghan Women's Network progresses, Mary hopes to be spending more and more time in Afghanistan. For the moment, she is working primarily with the AWN headquarters, in Peshawar.

I returned to Islamabad for the first time since I arrived. It was an opportunity to see if my initial impressions were the same, after several weeks. I stayed for one night – the drive takes three hours one way from Peshawar – and my aim was to track down through the U.S. Embassy and UNHCR lists of journalists working in Pakistan. Mission accomplished.

Islamabad was not as I remembered. It was much better. The city is a network of neighborhoods built along planned street configurations – each community is assigned a letter, each street is assigned a number and everything is laid out in a grid. Some of the homes are larger and more impressive than Beverly Hills mansions. Along the sides of the roads are sprawling strip mall shopping centers.

The Muslim influence in Islamabad is strong, but it is not nearly as pervasive as in Peshawar. Let's put it this way. I was able to walk alone in the shopping centers, jog on the street, wear Western clothes and uncover my head. I got a few looks, but it's nothing like Peshawar.

The police stopped my driver on our way through one neighborhood. The driver had crossed the white line at a traffic light and the police were standing, watching. An officer motioned the driver to the side of the road, demanded his license and reprimanded him for breaking a rule of driving. As the officer was talking, he noticed me in the back seat, and demanded 500 rupees from the driver before returning the license and sending us on our way. He walked back to the other police officers, still gathered on the side of the road.

The driver got out of the car to negotiate and five minutes later, he returned with his license. I asked if he had paid the 500 rupees. The driver said, 'No ma'am. He told me he just wanted money for the Eid holiday. I refused. So he just gave me my license.'

I found an outstanding bookstore in Islamabad that believe it or not, sells American political books. I was stunned to see Arianna Huffington's 'How to Overthrow the Government' sitting on a shelf. Pakistan could teach Huffington a few things about political and military coups.

The shopping was extensive, but the prices were higher than I expected. A Levi's chain store, for example, sold men's oxford-style shirts for about the same price as they cost in the U.S. A leather briefcase cost about \$30. Leather shoes were about the same price. Universal Bakery was my favorite find for baked goods. Yet again, the prices were pretty consistent with an international city. Tiny butter cookies cost 10 rupees each. Six of them cost roughly a dollar, which is about what I figure they cost at home.

The most impressive part of the city is the section where the government buildings are located – the Supreme Court, Parliament and the Prime Minister's offices. They are massive and pristine white buildings, at least as impressive as the ones in Washington D.C. But where were the people? I did not see anyone going up or down the steps of the Supreme Court. No one was rushing around the Parliament. An odd quiet surrounded these official buildings, as if there had been an evacuation. I am told the quiet is standard, but the hushed atmosphere surrounding the buildings struck me as a comment on the democratic process.

The Eid Sacrifice

The Eid holiday was the week's big event. Commercial life halts altogether for days – actually, for nearly an entire week – as people celebrate. No one seems sure which day of Eid week is the actual holiday. Afghanis celebrate it on one day, Pakistanis on another.



Left: Sadiqa's younger sister and two cousins ham it up for the camera at an Eid party

Eid consists mainly of slaughtering and sacrificing animals, and eating non-stop. For anyone who needs an Eid primer, as I did, the holiday relates to the story in the Koran when Allah asks Prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice the thing that is most important to him. So Ibrahim takes one of his sons to the top of a mountain and prepares to slaughter him. Moved by Ibrahim's religious devotion, Allah intervenes and

commands Ibrahim to spare the life of his son and, instead, to sacrifice an animal.

And that is exactly what Muslims do. They slaughter a cow, goat or lamb and split the animal into three parts. One part goes to the immediate family, one part goes to relatives who cannot afford their own animal, and one third goes to the poor.

Have I mentioned I am a vegetarian? I waited until noon on the official Eid day before leaving the house, thinking I would miss most of the slaughtering. I had been warned to prepare myself for the killing and goring of the animals, which takes place on the side of the road.

Clearly I did not wait long enough, because as I came out of my driveway, I saw a donkey cart piled high with animal innards. I did not look long enough to provide a detailed description, but it was long enough to know what I was seeing.

Up and down the street, men were holding up freshly cut animal skins as if they were showing off their bounty. Some were carrying piles in their arms, others had them loaded onto the crossbars of their bicycles. I had the same reaction when I am watching a scary movie. I covered my eyes, but peeked out from between my fingers so I would not miss anything.

These sacrificial animals had looked adorable in the days leading up to Eid. Their owners had decorated them with festive head ornaments and painted their fur with bright colors. Sporting such a fancy look, the animals had seemed to strut, not walk. Now they had been reduced to carcasses.

The Celebration

Sadiqa, my colleague from the Afghan Women's Network, invited me to her home for Eid – the Eid day celebrated by Pakistani's, that is.

Although Sadiqa is from Afghanistan, she celebrates the Pakistani Eid, too. I met Sadiqa's father, whom she calls the 'nicest man in the world.' As I have come to understand the story of Sadiqa's life (which I hope she will allow me to share some day) I know why she refers to him in such loving tones.

Of course, in jest, I keep telling her that my own father is the nicest man in the world and that we have a competition on our hands. Her father, indeed, has a wonderful spirit. I could tell this by watching him, and the way he glowed around Sadiqa and his other children. In a culture that encourages fathers to treat daughters – and husbands to treat wives – with something like indifference, I was impressed by the energy of this man. I wanted to take a picture, but it felt inappropriate and intrusive. Although he works in Kabul and only goes to Peshawar every two months, I have a feeling I will see him again.

I also met Sadiqa's younger sister, the one closest to Sadiqa in age. A few months ago she married a man from England and during this Eid festival she still had the glow of a new bride. Sadiqa's much younger sister and four of her younger brothers also drifted in and out of the house. All were curious about me. We had tea, tea, and more tea, cookies, cakes and snacks. As I said earlier, Eid is about eating too much.

The custom is for families – relatives and friends – to visit each other's homes. Sadiqa told me she can remember the time when she lived in Afghanistan and her family visited 30 homes in one day for the Eid festivities. One of her brothers ate so much that he leaned over and vomited

all over the floor. I remembered doing the same thing so many times as a child on Halloween night, after stuffing into my stomach as many chocolate bars as I could fit.

After tea, we took a taxi to two different parks in Peshawar. One was pretty typical: open grassy areas, men throwing balls, a small zoo with birds and a few deer. I am not a great fan of zoos, and this one was even sadder than most. The animals seemed to have little food and nowhere to graze.

Then we went to a park for women and children. Sadiqa explained that it was created when local women complained they did not feel comfortable around the men in the co-ed park. After having spent just 20 minutes in the first park, I understood. There, men just stared, as if they felt that the open space gave them even more freedom.

Later, I went to the home of Sadiqa's aunt – her father's sister – for more Eid tea. Her aunt, the husband and children arrived in Peshawar, Pakistan, a few years ago and built a three or four room house on a tiny piece of land off the main road in University Town, not far from where I live. This Peshawar's busiest thoroughfare, and their little neighborhood looks like something out of 16th century London.



Left: Young girls at the Eid party

The children, Sadiqa's cousins, were thrilled with my camera and had fun hamming it up, posing for pictures. Sadiqa's aunt was curious about the U.S. and my impressions of the people I have met. I told her that the Afghans I know have been so warm and make me feel like one of the family. As I was leaving, she invited me, with a sense of urgency, to please return to her home for dinner as soon as I could arrange it.

In Search of a Visa

During Eid, the rain started and created floods and caused deaths in many parts of Pakistan, including Islamabad. In Peshawar, there was some flooding, but the rain created more of an annoyance than an emergency. Then again, that is a bit cavalier of me. I am lucky enough to live in a house that has a roof made of slate, four concrete walls and gas heaters. For those in Peshawar-area refugee camps, living in mud huts or tents, the rain was devastating. It melted their homes.

The mud made even the shortest walk from the car to the house both filthy and slippery. There was no way to escape feeling dirty and after three days, I was pretty tired of it. The rain did not

help my mood when I went to the Afghanistan Consulate to get a visa so that I could travel over the border the following day. My visa for Pakistan is the kind that requires me to leave the country once a month, and going over the border into Afghanistan was my quickest and easiest option.

I went to the Afghan Consulate with a Pakistani official from the International Rescue Committee, whose job it was to help me navigate the visa process. For example, a woman cannot enter the Consulate through the same door as a man. I would never have known if the IRC staff member had not pointed me in the right direction and saved me from embarrassment.

The women's entrance is a nondescript steel door set into the concrete outer wall of the consulate, at the bottom of a few stairs. It reminded me of entering through a cellar door. I knocked and, several minutes later, a woman opened the door and led me inside a cold, damp, concrete room, like a holding cell. She patted me down, looked through my handbag, and confiscated my mobile phone. She gave me a ticket to retrieve the phone later, and sent me on my way to where a pack of men hovered outside the door of the consul general's office. Later, I was told that it was a particularly busy day at the consulate because it was the first day back after Eid.

There was no organized way to see the Consul General, or whoever was stamping passports. The men, and a few women, crowded around outside the office door, waving papers in the air and demanding attention. Every few minutes, a man from inside the office would open the door, push his way against those in the front of the crowd so he had a place to stand, and shut the door behind him. Then he looked over the crowd and pointed to those he would let inside. I waited about half an hour and, when it was my turn, I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, forced my way through the crowd to the open door, and burst my way into the office.

Compared to this, the process inside was comparatively easy. The passport official stamped my passport and handed it back.

To the Khyber Pass

My trip through the tribal areas to the border was spectacular. I traveled in the back seat, while a driver and a guard armed with a Kalashnikov rifle traveled in front. Ambushes are not uncommon in the tribal areas, making an armed guard a requirement for IRC staff.



Left: The Khyber Pass

The wide expanse of the Khyber Pass, with the mountains as a backdrop, was like a breath of fresh air after Peshawar. The Khyber Pass is a barren place – I remember just one major town between Peshawar and the border – and it is difficult to believe that anyone can make a life there. Yet, I saw scores of men crouching on the side of the road and many women carrying silver water cans on their heads, traipsing in long single lines on their way to the water tank for their day's supply.

After an hour of driving, we arrived at the border. I expected something special to mark this major point of contact between the two countries, but there were only a handful of shops and a rundown hotel, plus a cluster of small Pakistan and Afghan passport offices. The streets were jammed with people milling around, but I could not figure out what they were doing. Some seemed to be just waiting, but for what? To cross the border? Maybe. The driver told me that some people who do not have proper visas or passports pay money for the right to get across.

IRC's plan was for me to get my passport stamped on the Pakistan side, drive into Afghanistan, wait about half an hour and then return over the border again. The only problem with this is that a single entry visa for Afghanistan requires a stay of at least 24 hours. I was not sure I would be able to pull off such a quick turn-around.

Inside the Pakistan passport office, roughly 50 men were hovering inside the small, dark, damp room waiting for the two passport officials to review their documents. The passport agents sat behind a folding cafeteria-style table and they typed file information on an old-fashioned, manual typewriter. No computers. No filing cabinets. The poor lighting made it nearly impossible to see.

One of the passport agents motioned me to a chair, and I immediately sat down. Later I found out that his name is Rajeem Gul. He peered at my little blue book and asked, 'What is your occupation?' When I told him I am a journalist, his eyes lit up. I was not sure if that was a bad thing or a good thing.

'What do you think?' he asked. 'Does the U.S. have an interest in what is going on here?'

I was not sure what he meant, so I asked him to clarify. 'Does the U.S. care about what is happening in this part of the world?' he asked. I told him that yes, it does – and if not, it certainly ought to.

‘Everyone is concerned about globalization,’ he said. ‘I think we are all humans. The world has become a global village.’

Then he offered me some tea, as is the custom. When I refused, he asked: ‘What can I do for you?’ he asked. ‘I think journalists deserve great respect. We hope you will understand the truth here. Terrorists are hurting people.’ With that, Rajeem stamped my passport and sent me on my way over the border.

Quick Return

I spent my required one-half hour in Afghanistan, before heading back into the Pakistan passport office again. Rajeem was still on duty and he recognized me immediately. He did not look very happy.

‘Why are you back again so quickly?’ he asked. I told him that I only had to pick up a document over the border, have a quick meeting, take a few photos and head back to Peshawar. He looked puzzled and turned to his colleague behind the desk, explaining the situation. When he turned back to me, he said, ‘The rule is that you must spend 24 hours in Afghanistan before returning.’

I told him I was not aware of that requirement and had been planning a one-day trip. I dropped my eyes and looked sorry.



Rajeem Gul

He took down all of my local information – my employer and other details. In the midst of the questioning, I asked him if I could take his picture and his name and include him in something I am writing. He agreed and seemed very excited at the idea. As I snapped the picture, he noted my information in a book and told me I could go. I already was dreading the prospect of going through the same process again the following month.

Posted by Laura Jones on Oct 12th, 2006