

Letter from Heart

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To a visitor from Kabul, the western city of Herat seems like paradise.

The differences between the two cities strikes you immediately: leafy avenues compared with dusty thoroughfares, clean streets instead of heaps of rubbish, and perhaps most shocking of all, working traffic lights which actually appear to have the power to stop drivers, instead of chaos.

I'm definitely not in Kabul any more. In fact, I don't even feel like I'm in Afghanistan.

Herat, the capital of the province of the same name, has long been known for a quieter, calmer pace of life than exists in the capital. Former governor Ismail Khan, who ruled the province as his personal fiefdom, made sure the city was clean, orderly and well-run.

With electricity available 24 hours a day, clean streets, and lots of parks, I can easily understand why "I love Karzai" is scrawled on almost every available surface in the city - including the five shaky minarets that are all that is left from the once-magnificent 15th century Musalla complex.

Not that the city is without its problems.

A recent clash between police and soldiers left two women dead, sparking a protest that led to an additional casualty. At present, law and order appears to have been restored.

Given the level of insecurity elsewhere, an outsider can easily ask what's not to love.

But what seems like paradise to a visitor feels like a city on the decline to its residents, especially since Ismail Khan left for Kabul to take up the post of minister of water and energy.

"When Ismail Khan was governor, the city was clean. If even a one-metre stretch of road was damaged, it would be repaired the same day," said Farhad, 22, a resident of Herat.

Deputy governor Mir Abdul Khaliq admits that construction projects moved more quickly when Ismail Khan was in town. "We used to be able to spend the money we received in customs duties on the city," he said.

Herat's location at the juncture of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, make it a convenient crossing spot for trucks ferrying goods across borders, so there was plenty of money generated by customs duties to spread around.

But not any more.

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While some religious shines in Herat have fallen into disrepair, no expense has been spared on maintaining the tomb of Ismail Khan's son, Mirwais Sadeq, and two of his bodyguards, who were assassinated in March 2004. *Photo by Wahidullah Amani.*

"Now that our income goes straight to Kabul, we have to ask the central government to allocate funds from the budget," complained Khaliq.

Local residents say the decline in the city's revenues has affected other municipal services as well.

There are fewer traffic police on the streets, and taxi drivers say that the officers recently went on strike to protest low wages. Privately, drivers say that the new city authorities are no longer allowing the traffic police to accept kickbacks from taxi drivers, which prompted the walkout.

Gulam Farooq, 23, behind the wheel of his yellow-and-white Toyota Corolla cab, was jubilant. "Seventy traffic police have left their jobs and now we can drive as fast as we want, there's no one to control us," he said.

But to a Kabul resident used to the free-for-all traffic patterns of the capital, Herat's drivers may be fast but still seem remarkably well-behaved.

Herat is well-known for its religious shrines, the most famous of which is Gazar Gah, housing the tomb of 11th century Sufi master Abdullah Ansari. Believers come from all over to visit the shrine and pray, some hoping for miracle cures.

Bismillah, 65, said that he has spent his whole life serving the Gazar Gah shrine. He offers visitors water from the sacred place where Ansari spent the last 40 days of his life.

"If someone drinks the water, God will take away all his sickness," he said, adding that he charges no money for the water, although he gratefully accepts donations.

Gazar Gah is in bad repair, desperately needing reconstruction.

A few hundred metres down the road is another shrine where no expense has been spared. This is the tomb of Ismail Khan's son, Mirwais Sadeq, a former minister of aviation and tourism. Mirwais, then 31, was assassinated along with two bodyguards in March 2004 by political rivals of his father.

The three graves stand in a tall mausoleum swathed in marble and surrounded by parks and flowers.

In spite of the high regard in which many Heratis hold their former governor, this was one step too far.

"Ismail Khan spent too much money on this shrine," said Sherjan, a city cab driver. "He is trying to get people to turn away from the holy shrine and come here instead."

One of Herat's most curious shrines is Ghaltan-e-Wali, where another Sufi mystic is buried. According to the shrine's caretaker, people come from all over the world in the hope of gaining their heart's desire.

Whether the seekers want money, love or a cure, they can obtain it by lying down on the sandy ground and starting to roll over. If a person is pure of heart, they will be seized by the spirit and will roll very rapidly, a sure sign that their wish will be granted. Sluggish rolling indicates that the supplicant is a sinner,

and his wish will go unfulfilled.

I tried my best, but I was unable to roll. I felt nothing – just a bit foolish.

Mohammad Jan, 50, is the shrine's caretaker, having inherited the position from his father.

He said it is a rewarding job in many ways, "There was one man who wanted to marry a girl, but her parents were against it. He came here, he prayed and he rolled, and the next day he came and said he was engaged. He gave me a pocketful of candy."

According to Muhammad Jan, the shrine attracts close to 500 people every day.

Adam Khan, 58, has come to the shrine to be cured of a neck ailment, "I am hopeful, because nobody leaves this shrine disappointed."

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Location: Turkmenistan
Iraqi Kurdistan
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