



5/3/07 - 5/4/07

### **Fun With Mom In a Country of Contradictions**

I'm sitting here, in a traditional mud built compound, our home for the next week, with my laptop playing hip-hop for entertainment, wearing a traditional "shawar qamise" and sunglasses. Though I am a khareji (foreigner), this illustrates the contradictions found in a country trying to develop out of medieval times into the modern world.

Yesterday we made the 10-hour trip yesterday from Kabul up to Bamian. This is a small town up in the mountains that exist in the middle of the country. The trip up was primarily on a bad dirt road, which wound its way up mountainsides and through beautiful little green valleys. A little scary at times, as the road is not very wide and trucks bring goods back and forth on it, with people passing in terrible places with 500 to a thousand foot drops below. The farmers here

who create amazing irrigation systems, at times literally getting water to flow up hill, work every arable piece of land. These farms are truly fascinating; Afghans are industrious, wonderful gardeners. Everything is ordered and neat, well designed and done the same way it has been for thousands of years.

With the exception of cars, cell phones and electric generators, the outer provinces of Afghanistan are a trip back to the middle ages. Families work their fields; men move the dirt and create the irrigation systems, women and children plant and harvest the crops. They still till the land with oxen and wooden plows. It was interesting to move from the ethnic Pashtun areas in the lower valleys, to the Hazara areas in the higher valleys.



The Hazara are an ethnic minority that has been persecuted by other Afghans for millennia. They are a Mongoloid looking people who I believe have their roots in the Chinese Buddhists that expanded along the Silk Road. Bamian is the heart of Hazara territory and is actually quite safe for westerners. The big draw here is a set of large Buddha statues carved into a mountainside that is now a UN World Heritage site. It is



also a place of almost unparalleled beauty, green valleys and stark mountainsides carved out by the heavy snows that come in winter. The taller mountains are steep and still full of snow; they would be fantastic to snowboard on if you could access them. The whole trip up I kept making the van stop so I could jump out and take pictures. I've seen quite a few places in the world by this point, but it might be the most beautiful

landscape I've ever had the pleasure of traveling through.

We only had a few small problems on the trip. One flat tire and the framing that holds the spare under the back of the van kept getting knocked out of place by the roughness of the road, but all in all a pretty smooth journey up here. We arrived at the home that had been rented for 6 months, sight unseen. It was a little bit of a shock to see what we would be living in. My big question before coming here was if there would be



furniture. I didn't imagine that we would be showing up to a traditional mud dwelling. I think even the Afghans with us; Yasin and his son Faisal, Asef and Same were a bit surprised. There are some things that as Americans we don't even think to check on before renting a new place. Like, will there be a water source and access to electricity! The khinuraab (toilet) situation is a little grim, as it is merely a second story hole in the floor that can be accessed on the outside by a man that comes around every few days to collect it and then it gets spread on the fields (fertilizer!).

We immediately started planning what needed to be done to make it a place we could enjoy. Within half an hour we found a man that would organize a team of painters to come the next morning. The floors are made of dried mud, so we are going to buy plastic covers and then rugs to cover these. They will hook up the electricity to the public system, which runs



from 7pm to 10pm, and then we also have a generator. We will buy a cistern to put on the roof for water, for now we have 5-gallon jugs. Its basically like camping, but more dirty. I wish I had my tent so I could just escape into a nice clean, scorpion free place. As it is I have to sleep on a charpoy that is an afghan version of a cot. These are cheap and are ruining my back. It takes me an hour every morning to truly straighten up.



We finished our first night in Bamian by going to a restaurant, which serves in a family style. It was full of mostly travelers, single men. Mom was the only woman present and we were stared at the whole time. These for the most part did not seem to be hostile stares, just curious. I'm sure that most of these people have not seen many foreigners before. It's also pretty strange to see a woman out of the compounds at night. We'll be cooking our own food the rest of the trip. It's more comfortable and less likely to give me dysentery. I've made it a week and a half without any signs of sickness, oh I hope this lasts but I'm not counting on it.

Today we went about getting the painters started on their work. Oh what I wouldn't do for a nice Ace hardware. Finding paint is a difficult chore and often what we do find has been sitting around for a decade and no good. It is also very difficult to find colors that will work, that will cover all of the stains on the walls. We are essentially trying to paint mud and mud with plaster on it. The painters are another issue. They are good hard workers, but really terrible painters. They slop the paint everywhere and have no concept of straight lines. The end result was that we did as much work as they did and had to direct them all day or it would have looked like crap. I think they get the concept now and will be better about it tomorrow. We were all pretty exhausted by the end and

have resolved to just mix up enough paint for the whole day in the morning and leave them with strict instructions. We're going to have to trust them to do the job themselves or we won't have any fun on this trip. Once the walls are painted we can get something on the floors and the place will feel much more livable. The outside walls were for the most part finished by the end of the day and we feel a little better already.

I had my first day of frustration with Afghanistan today. I couldn't really pin



down why, but getting anything done in this country is a challenge. Nothing goes smoothly or according to plan. This is a good lesson for internationals working in Afghanistan. It takes patience and understanding of the culture, as well as a willingness to let certain notions go. You need to adapt your projects to the logistical realities and realize that things are not going to go exactly as you want them. The end result, if you get there, will be an amalgam of your wishes, the local reality and way of doing things. You must let go of certain things and keep the larger picture in mind. I, having just come from the states looked at what had been accomplished at the end of the day with the work of all of us and our three painters and was frustrated. My mom and Norm, having lived here for two years, looked at what was accomplished and were impressed, especially as it was a Friday (their Saturday). At one point I, having gotten extremely frustrated, sat myself in a corner of one of the mud rooms for a half an hour and calmed myself down. I realized there was no point in butting my head against a brick (mud) wall; I needed to let things go. I re-emerged from the room and felt better about things. I chose my next little project and got back to work. This trip is about the process and the learning, not about any end result.

At the end of the day, with the painters gone we sat around in our new furniture (plastic chairs) and drank warm Heineken at \$2 a can. We looked at our nice red walls with blue trim and laughed about the day. I really enjoy the Afghan people; they are so



wonderful when they accept you. The guys we have with us, Yasin, Asef, Same and little Faisal are just great. I can hardly talk with any of them besides Yasin, yet the communication is there. They love us and we love them.

