

5/6/07

“Wonders” in Afghanistan

Today we packed up the van and headed out to Bandiamir lakes. The road out of Bamian heads generally west and is not in very good shape. It took a little over 3 hours to drive to the lakes and it was a really rough ride, on both people and car. First we passed through a system of canyons, following a small fast flowing river. There were small farms on any land that was relatively flat and could have water run to it. I’m constantly amazed at where Afghans can get water to run.

We eventually made our way out to wide open tundra-like land where men and young boys watched over herds of fat-tailed sheep and goats. We passed through a couple of small villages of Hazara people that obviously did not see many foreigners. These people seem to lead a tough life, not much different than their ancestors had thousands of years ago. The faces of some of the children were red from the sun and malnourishment. Little 11-year-old boys have the faces of 40 year olds.

At one point we stopped in a village; the name escapes me, that had recently had an international donor build a medical clinic and two long buildings that are supposed to be shops. While I’m assuming the clinic is well used, only a third of the duchans (bazaar shops) were, most locked up and empty.

This project cost about a million dollars, is actually quite useless, and is after only three years beginning to disintegrate from the elements. It looks like crap and is thoroughly un-Afghan. Why build a bunch of shops for people when they have no economy? This makes no sense and is just one example of the misuse of international donations to the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

Though obviously well intentioned, this money is going to waste. It would have been more effective in helping these people if it had been put into the building of their local economy. Not many people drive up to this village because the road is so bad. These people need roads and access to cash economy. I doubt that the project was devised by someone that had spent any time in the community, or even in Afghanistan for that matter. The people of Afghanistan have been through so much and deserve the help of the international community. They comprise the largest refugee population the world has ever seen. They are frustrated that even 5 years after the fall of the Taliban there is little improvement in their daily lives. Yes, girls can now go to school, but if their parents can’t afford to let them away from the farm because they are too poor to give up the time away, then they won’t be allowed to go. What is the solution? I’m not sure but this is not it. This is a country that needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. There is literally no infrastructure outside any of the major cities, and that which is in the cities is



dubious. Kabul, until this spring was living on 3 hours of electricity a day. It took 5 years to get to this point in the city that is the heart of Afghanistan's economy. The outlying villages have far less. Up here in Bamian there is no city electricity, nothing to do with garbage or sewage and there are probably around 100,000 people living in town and the surrounding area.

It's not solely our job, but I believe that America has let these people down. We made promises of a better life without the Taliban and have not even come close to fulfilling this commitment. We jumped on to Iraq and are pouring billions of dollars into the rebuilding of that country, while still fighting a large insurgency/ civil war there. I've heard one statistic that claims the money spent over two weeks in Iraq is more than that spent throughout the past 5 years in Afghanistan. I would hazard to guess that there is a larger percentage of the afghan population that is happy to have America here compared to the population of Iraq. We could make such a difference here, but if we don't act quick enough there will be someone else, a local warlord that makes an offer that the Afghan people will take up in a desperate bid for a better life. There are two things that would make a huge difference here, roads and electricity. If we gave them this, the afghan people would truly be strong allies and would cast out those elements that fight the development of their nation and way of life. They are hard working, industrious people that given the chance will build a great country. There is immense potential to develop their natural resources in a way that would benefit the whole country.

Okay,
off of my
soapbox and
back to the
trip. We
rolled on
through the
high plains
with the
sporadic
herds of
sheep and
goats, as well
as the
occasional
winter wheat
fields being
prepared (this



is a horrible practice that causes huge amounts of erosion). We eventually got to the high point and started going down hill. Occasionally throughout this high grassy area we would see the red painted rocks that indicate the presence of mines. These people are pasturing their animals and herding them through these areas where mines were placed; probably in this case by the Russians and people are still dying from them.

We got to our first glimpse of our destination. We could see one of the upper Bandiamir, which are a series of five large, emerald blue lakes of incredible, unmeasured depth. The contrast to the barren landscape makes the blue of these lakes all the more



startling. The place we stopped was actually the same place that my mother had stopped as a little girl on her first visit, a picture of her taken in the same place that I had a picture taken of myself. We



continued to work our way down to the lakes, the road getting even more fun and finally got to the bottom. These lakes seem to have been formed by mineral deposition damming up the exit. So the lake level is about 40 feet above the valley floor, with small waterfalls running off the edge. I've never seen anything like it before and would love to learn more about its natural history, though I have a feeling that there hasn't been much research done given its isolation. This series of five lakes could be a wonderful place to do speciation research, especially on the fish and amphibians. The bottom of the largest has never been discovered, probably due to a lack of sophisticated equipment, but there have been attempts. It was recently declared a UNESCO natural heritage site, so development has been halted and the few local people that have been living around it are subsidized so that they don't upset the area too much with

farming. Unfortunately Afghans, like most third world people, don't have a concept of garbage control and garbage is starting to pile up a little. Its not bad yet, but will become so if the area becomes easier to access and outdoor ethics are not instilled in the visitors.

It would be a shame ruin such an amazing place with plastic bags and aluminum cans. Mom and I couldn't help but pick up a large bag of garbage while we were there. It wasn't much but the purpose was more to provide an example to the Afghans with us and those local people that saw us doing it. I think they are just blind to the garbage at this point, as most Americans were until about the last 50 years.

We wandered up to the edge of the lake and went to a place that had a ledge where you could get in and out. The lake literally drops off immediately, and I mean immediately, to some incredible depth. In some places you could jump in and not be able to pull yourself back out, and you're not jumping off a cliff, but from lake level. It's kind of intimidating even to someone that's a decent swimmer. Everyone looked a little apprehensive, so I lead the way; changed into my swimsuit and leapt in. As I predicted my breath was immediately taken away by the cold of the water and I swam back to the ledge and got out. The water was bearable on the ledge because the sun warmed up the foot and a half of water there, but once you stepped off the ledge it was ice cold. Once they saw me do it, Norm, Asef and Same went and put their suits on. The Afghans didn't have shorts, but used light pantaloons that they rolled up to above their knees and then blew air into from their waistline. I didn't understand why they did this until I saw them attempt to swim.

Neither of them could do much besides a doggie paddle and they used this air in their pantaloons as a flotation devise. The end result was absolutely hilarious, though I was a little scared that I was going to have to rescue one of them. Asef called this method the "paghmani system"



because he saw Same do it, who is from Paghman an area outside of Kabul that has a decent sized lake called Carga, which I believe I mentioned in one of my first entries. We had quite a few laughs at this "Paghmani system" and it became a running joke for quite a while.

Faisel looked like he wanted to jump in but Yasin can't swim at all so I told him I would take the little boy in. He had been holding Faisel's arm tensely the whole time we were near the edge, fearing the boy would fall in. The lake drops off so immediately that there is really no wading except in a few areas where a tiny bit of a ledge exists. Yasin could see that both Norm and I were good swimmers and allowed me to take Faisel into the water. He splashed around on the ledge a little bit and then I took his arms and dipped him into the deep part so he could be completely submerged. He loved this and I wished Yasin could do this with him, though I had fun connecting with the child that I couldn't talk with at all as I have very little Dari and he knows no English. Eventually we did get Yasin to stand on the ledge and play with Faisel and this made us all happy to

see. It was quite the funny scene, four Afghans and three Americans on a jaunt to this amazing lake, Norm and I in our American swimsuits, the Afghans in their pantaloons and little naked Faisal. Mom could have gone swimming as there were no other Afghans around to glare at her, but she would have had to do it in full clothing, not that much fun.



There wasn't a whole lot of swimming, just in and out because the water was so cold, but it was good to get a little bit of a bath as there were no bathing facilities back in our compound in Bamian and it had been a few days since my last shower. We finished up our "swim" and wandered back to the van. We tried to get to some of the upper lakes but a bridge was washed out and we couldn't access the road. I offered to drive us back home and was glad that Yasin relinquished the steering wheel. For one its easier to be the driver on bad roads as you can anticipate what's coming up and brace for the swerves and sudden stops, secondly I have been driving a lot longer than any of the Afghans and was afraid that Asef might be the next in line to spell Yasin. Yasin is a good driver, but hauls ass on these roads and it's quite

a rough ride. I went just a touch slower, as its not my own car, and the ride was deemed by all to be much smoother and worth the extra few minutes it took us to get home. He'll probably let me do some of the driving on the ten hour trip back to Kabul, as Norm is flying home earlier I don't really want to be subject to Asef's driving. I wanted to prove myself to Yasin. I'm sure he trusts my driving now, though I have no desire to drive in Kabul, as this is another matter entirely. I've driven in some crazy places, such as Mexico, but there is not a traffic light or dividing line n the city of about 2.5 million and I don't want to get into an accident in a foreign country with someone else's car.



When we got back to the compound all of us were tired from the long day. We found our “wonderful” painters finishing up for the day. I saw that an ant nest I had noticed the past few days that is on the edge of our “patio” was really active, with ants spreading out everywhere. Someone had spread a white powder out from the entrance, at first I thought that someone had found an insecticide and they were trying to escape. This was not the case and one of the neighbor boys hanging out explained that Dauood the painter had put flour out to feed the ants. I looked at the boy incredulously and asked why they were feeding our ants that I didn’t want there in the first place and was planning on killing. He said that the ants were considered some sort of good luck charm and to feed them would bring luck to the person or some sort of nonsense. Now, I’m a person that loves animals, plants and all sorts of insects, but there are plenty of ants in the world, they are probably the most successful land animal in the world. The ants are not suffering. This, at the end of a long day, from painters that had been a real pain in the ass already was just too much. The whole “straw that broke the camel’s back” analogy is perfect. I stomped over to a five-gallon jug of water and very animatedly dumped the whole thing on the ants, washing away the flour. Not only was this in front of our painters, but our landlord and several other guys that were milling around for some reason. Several saw how upset I was and decided it was time to leave the crazy Khereji as my mom called me, for the day.

The whole trip I had made every attempt to ingratiate myself to the locals, but this was too much. Most of them couldn’t understand a thing I said, but I made it clear that if they wanted to have good luck, they could feed their own goddamn ants, in their own houses and deal with the mess themselves! I was wearing full Shawar camise and my scarf was wrapped around my head to protect it from the sun. My mom looked at me and asked me to remove it because I looked pretty scary with it on when I was mad. I wasn’t so much mad as flustered and incredulous, once the painters left, quite quickly after this

display I just laughed with mom and Yasin who knew exactly what I was feeling at this moment. Yasin said that whenever you work with Afghans they surprise you with the things they do that make no sense at all to anyone but themselves. I don't speak Dari, but I doubt that the painters will make that mistake again; this communication needed no words to be understood.

I finished up the day by making a quick meal of spaghetti that we all inhaled and was the most satisfying meal we'd had so far. I was really tired and started to feel a bit of a chill that didn't bode well. The night ended with a sudden windstorm that blew up with a bit of rain. I heard our garbage spreading throughout the compound and ran out to see it blowing everywhere. I had tried so hard to instill a division of garbage for the Afghans: burnables, organic and true garbage such as plastic. My system was rolling all over the compound in disarray. Same and Asef heard me get up and came out to help get what hadn't blown away put into one of the rooms. Asef called this the "garbage dance". Oh Afghanistan, you really do know how to put someone on their heels.

