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Finding Gold in Afghanistan

Today was one of the best days I've spent here so far certainly a highlight of the trip. It started with our visit to the giant Buddha's that we've looked at from a distance the past week, but haven't had the chance to explore. We hired a "guide" that said he was an archeological student from Kabul, however whenever I asked him about the history of the area he either knew none of the details, or couldn't voice them in English. He mainly kept us from wandering into areas that were potentially still mined.

These Buddha statues were carved out of the face of a cliff in the 2nd and 3rd century AD, considered the most impressive depiction of the Buddha and until the Taliban destroyed them could probably be considered one of the great wonders of the world. Amongst them are literally hundreds of caves that the people who inhabited the valley of Bamian, the Kushans, lived in. This was a defense against raiders such as Ghengis Khan's grandson who razed the valley in the 12th century AD. As



Buddhism spread westward along the Silk Road, Bamian became a center for the study of Mahayana Buddhism, with hundreds of monks living in and around the statues. As we climbed the tunnels up above the Buddha's, our guide explained the existence of slots with views of the Buddha. Apparently monks would come and pray, sleeping in these slots, allowing people to walk over the top of them, remaining undisturbed in their meditations.

When the Taliban arrived in the valley they saw the Buddha's as false idols and sent the Hazara people up with dynamite to destroy them. There are still lots of chunks that some people want to try and use to reconstruct the Buddha's. Though I consider the destruction of the Buddha's a terrible tragedy for the world, it is a good example of how horrible extremism in religion can be. Why would people be so insecure in their own ideas that they have to destroy such beautiful icons of another system of

beliefs? Maybe they should remain in destruction, as a reminder of what the Taliban was all about. When they destroyed the Buddha's they got the attention of the world and it was really the start of the Taliban being viewed in a negative light. The Buddha's have

now been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site and have the protection of the international community, for whatever that's worth.

After seeing the Buddha's we went back to the compound and left Same and Asef to work on getting it ready for our departure the next day. They wouldn't have been nearly as excited to do what we were setting about next. We took Rahim our landlord and went up into a high mountain valley above Bamian. We drove the car as far as we could on the bad dirt road and then got out and walked. We were bringing a sun oven, donated by Caroline Firestone, of the Firestone Tires fortune to a widow with four children that my mom had met on a previous visit a few months previous. She had promised she would return in the spring with a development program and aid, she was keeping her promise which is something I think these people are not used to. Too often



internationals show up making big promises and then don't follow through.

This is a very beautiful mountain village that reminds me of pictures I've seen of Nepal or Tibet. These people truly live the same as they have for thousands of years. We stopped at the first main dwelling and were welcomed by a man and his family. Invited to chai, we sat down and were served tea, nan and maste (a creamy yogurt-like product that I couldn't eat for fear of dysentery). Mom saw a "nemad" (rug) that the man had made and asked if he could make more. This was another opportunity to try some "micro-industry" development in a small village that needs access to cash. As before, when negotiating the price we could buy the final item at the man came up with an astronomical amount that we could never come close to paying. We couldn't sell it for even 1/4th of what he was wanting.

As on previous days we were a bit perplexed at this, I don't think they understand that if they develop their own village industry they will make far more money in the long run, but we can't do this at the prices they are quoting



us. We stopped the negotiations there, leaving it for another time, as the main point of our visit was to develop good relations with the village, helping this poor woman. Yasin and mom also talked with the man about the need for a small portion of land for use in building a school building and small widows garden; to teach English as well as how to grow something other than potatoes and wheat. At first he said that it wouldn't be possible to find land

unless purchased. Yasin told the man that they are an organization that is trying to help his village, not turn a profit. That the problems the village faces are theirs to solve not ours. We want to help facilitate the development of the village literacy and well-being but are not going to do it without the full support of the people there. My mom has always, even before coming to Afghanistan, tried to instill self-sufficiency in the people she works with such as the women on welfare that was her previous focus. She is not interested in just handing out aid, as it does nothing in the long run but enable a begging mentality. Her programs are about empowering people to change their own circumstances, which is much more effective to their well-being over the long-term.

This man offered to help us transport the sun-oven the rest of the way up the valley to the widow's house. This took about half an hour and was a decent climb. The widow lives



in a little mud dwelling that is pretty much a hovel with no compound walls. The inside is dark and damp with no furniture and really nothing other than a few blankets spread on the mud-made floor. As word of our arrival spread we had quite the little crowd of villagers, aside from the widow and her daughters. Yasin went to work explaining why we were there, as my mom had made a promise and was keeping her commitment to her and the village. He then went about explaining how to use the sun

oven. As I ran around taking pictures of the scene it looked pretty funny. These villagers spend almost their whole life in this tiny little village. We must have seemed like aliens

descending on them with two kherejis (mom and I) and this sun oven that looks like something from outer space.



After the demonstration my mom told the widow that it was her responsibility to the village, to use the oven and find how many different ways it could be used to cook. If she was successful then more ovens would be brought for more families. At this the widow looked so upset, she could feel the pressure and was nervous she would fail. It was kind of touching really. After the fact I asked my mom whether she had put too much pressure on the poor woman. She said that pressure was what she wanted the woman to feel. Otherwise the woman may not really try to learn how to use it. It will also be empowering for her to become successful and play her part in helping out her village. Mom will bring more aid regardless, but the pressure on these people is key. It's not just a handout but a responsibility. These people must be active in the process of improving their lives.

In the middle of the demonstration a man

that was the elected village headman showed up, watching everything with great interest. Though we had passed by his rich dwelling on the way up, we had purposely avoided the invitation for chai by his wives, as it would have sidetracked us for at least another hour. He's not the one that needs any help, as he owns most of the land in the village; yet we knew we would need to deal with him at some point for the future of the development program. We left the widow and her daughters, giving them some money as well, which is probably what they were more immediately interested in, promising to return in one month. I'm sure they believe my mom this time.

The headman and a few others escorted us back down the hill. When we arrived at his compound we talked with him about the need of finding a small plot of land, which a school could be built on, as well as a bit more for a widow's garden. The school is needed in the village because as of now only





the boys are allowed to go down the mountain for class, the girls needed back home to get the household chores and farming needs taken care of. With a school in the village the girls can attend half a day and do their work the other half. The garden will be used to reintroduce a subsistence level of farming. Right now they grow only cash crops, primarily potatoes and wheat along with their fruit orchards. They don't get the nutrients they need because the cost of them in the bazaar is prohibitive.

When we reached the headman's compound we discussed the need for a small plot of land for a school and garden. He stated that he should receive a salary for his time in searching out this land. This was a ridiculous request as he owns most of the land and knows where he could put the school and garden. Yasin laid into the man. He told him that the man was the elected leader of his people and it was his responsibility to take

care of them, not ours. Another man could replace him, especially if it was found out that he failed to help an aid program enter the village. Yasin smoothed things over a little by saying that when they returned they would bring an oven for the headman's family as well as others in need. I think the man got the picture, yet mom says that this was just the opening volley in the negotiations, so we'll see.

As we left the man's house and the whole conversation was related to us, we told Yasin how proud we were of him. He said exactly what mom would have told the man and didn't even need to consult her. He has learned my mom's way of doing things and the two of them are an awesome team. He is so important, as it is crucial these days in Afghanistan to have a man as the lead negotiator in certain circumstances. If he is seen just as a translator for my mom, things go differently. Most of these rural people don't really know what to do with my mother, as her strength and personality as a woman are so alien to them. At first they think they can railroad her as any other woman, or just don't take her position seriously it's so foreign to them. Yasin continues to be impressive and is gaining strength and confidence under my mother's leadership.

On the walk down to the car we were all happy with how things went, discussing all that had occurred. One last little thing that made the day even more special was the arrival of a little "sag-e-chopan" (sheep herding) puppy. Yasin had been looking for one to take home they whole trip. This is a very special breed of dog that exists in the highlands of Afghanistan. These are huge dogs that traditionally are used for sheep herding, yet often these days get turned into fighting dogs for sport. They are very intelligent and have an interesting look to them, as their ears are cropped as a defensive measure in fighting with, traditionally wolves and more recently other dogs. Yasin bought the puppy off of a little boy for 500 afs (\$10), making both of them extremely

happy. When the transaction was finished mom told the puppy, “ You just won the lottery” which is a saying they use when they rescue street dogs and cats from abusive homes or the street. The dog will have a much easier, happier life with Yasin. He was so excited about his new puppy, though his wives probably won’t be. I came up with her name on the way home. Zorine, which means “golden” after the name of the place we got her; “village of the golden oat”. When we got back to the compound we fed her a huge meal, as she was so skinny. This cemented the relationship and she was instantly ecstatic to be with us, running circles around the compound and playing with everyone’s feet.

It was a wonderful day. I had so much fun taking pictures and it was incredibly rewarding. New ideas about what I should be doing with my life have been circling through my head, especially after



this experience. But I’ll formulate them further before sharing them. Tomorrow we leave Bamian and go back to Kabul, none of us are looking forward to the drive back down the terrible road, but we’ll all be happy to take a shower and enjoy a little bit of comfort, such as electricity and soft beds after a long, yet successful week in the mountains.