

Walking the streets of western Afghanistan

Each morning on our way to work we greet the green-clad guards at the gate with a hearty Salaam as we put our hands on our hearts, just as they do. We head down Herat's main road in the direction of the Hospital, where already vehicles and people are flooding in and out the front entrance. This is the third largest city in Afghanistan, fewer cars and chaos than in Kabul, less violence over the past few years as well.

So we wander down the street enjoying the sounds of a busy morning, along the way we encounter the usual amount of people selling cold drinks, perfume, and random trinkets that no one ever seems to buy. Every now and then there is the familiar site of a dusty figure slumped over in deep sleep on the sidewalk. Up ahead taxi drivers have parked their cars outside the hospital and are taking advantage of the down-time, and the cooler morning temperature, to hand-wash their cars. They hardly notice the two tall bearded western men with their clean shaven western clad Afghan interpreter as we stroll by without saying a word.

The few blocks remaining til the office go on as usual with children zipping past us on rickety Chinese bikes. We pass the Saffron shop which features a sign in English and Dari reading "Fine, Pure, Afghan Saffron." A little boy and a little girl stand outside the door of their home wearing little school bookbags over crisp green school shirts. They stop everything to stare at us, like most children do.

This city known as a famous stop along the ancient Silk Route doesn't make the international headlines very often. Herat is overshadowed by the regular reports out of violence prone Kandahar and even Kabul these days. Stories of people going to the hospital, school or work, don't qualify as interesting or newsworthy. Yet all I see every day are interesting people and stories the world doesn't know and has decided are not possible here.



Just when I thought I understood this place, I'm surprised as we return home from work by a battalion of the Afghan National Army in 6 or 7 light armored vehicles outside the hotel. Inside there are soldiers, Afghan and even a few Americans, wandering the halls. Outside my window and at various points

throughout the hotel, Afghan military stand (or sit) guard. My calm and lovely day in this charming city has been interrupted by the arrival of VIP's from government and military for the "handing over of security" ceremony which is about to take place for Herat. After a string of attacks over the past week, some of which are the Taliban's response to these hand-over events, the authorities are obviously determined to keep anything from penetrating the walls of this building, which is the building I – a non VIP – happen to be staying in.

In a month that has seen powerful political leaders attacked and killed, sometimes even by their own bodyguards, I hardly feel safe as I sit at dinner with fat 4 star generals and heavily armed Afghan military police sitting at the table next to me.

By morning the next day they're just about gone. A few soldiers remain in their vehicles looking us over as we walk out the front door and start our morning walk to work. (Perhaps they're surprised Westerners walk the streets, as so many are not allowed by their employers' security restrictions.) By the end of the work day all the military vehicles are gone. In their place, the cart venders have returned with their papaya-looking-fruit and watermelons. The hotel has regained its calm and welcoming atmosphere and we even take an evening stroll to celebrate. As we pass one of the many pharmacies along the road some kids take notice of us, as always. One smiles at us and shouts a quick "Hello Sir!"

Security experts and Afghanistan veterans will surely point out the danger that lies beneath the calm anywhere in this country. They would remind me and insist that just when things look good, they can and will get bad. One side effect is that we are told to only expect the worst and we behave accordingly. Me, whenever possible, I want to keep walking the streets and seeing the beauty. If some of us don't, how will we ever know *the other* truth about this amazing country?