

Greece-Turkey-Iran-UAE-Oman Tour Trip report

12 January > 23 January 2003

When we left Ankara in the afternoon the weather was nice, temperature about 15° C. and a sunny sky. The more we came to the east temperatures dropped again, and on higher altitudes there was snow again. After some 420 km. we stopped for the night near the city of Sivas at a petrol station.

The next day we continued our journey to the east, the weather was still good enough. The weather was our biggest concern now, because winters can be very severe in these parts of Turkey. We had to cross some passes of more than 2000m., but luckily they were all free of snow. After we had seen some Iranian trucks coming from the other direction we knew all roads would be passable. We decided to continue to the city of Dogubayazit, to some people better known as Dogs Biscuit! When we passed the city of Agri, some policemen stood along the road checking the traffic. Of course we had to stop, and one of the policemen asked for our passports so I gave my passport and he wanted me to come to their car a few meters away.

And after I said it was too cold to come out of the car, I followed him because he walked away with my passport. He then said I had to pay 20 \$ for driving too fast! But I was very sure this was not a speed control, so I said to him I would not pay at all. But he just kept on asking for those 20\$ and I kept on refusing to pay anything! This discussion went on for a while, but then one of the other policemen grabbed the passport out of the hands of his colleague and gave it back to me and said I could go!

After this silly incident we arrived in Dogubayazit without any further problems. Here we drove up to the Ishak Pasha palace, because just below this palace is the Murat camping where we wanted to stay for the night. This place we visited also the first time we went to Iran, 3 years ago, at that time there were several other travellers staying here. But this time there was nobody, except some Turks having dinner here. One of the owners recognized us immediately, and said we were welcome to stay. Although this place is in 2000m.height, temperatures did not drop below zero that night.

After filling our watertanks we drove back down to Dogubayazit to do some shopping before we carried on to the border. And in the morning of this 14. January we arrived at the Turkish- Iranian border, where we passed a long line of waiting trucks. At the border there was business as usual, enormous chaos of waiting trucks, cars and busses. Because they were building a new customs office, all the different offices where you normally have to go through, were now concentrated in a number of portable cabins and containers. This making it easier for us to proceed, and in an half hour we managed to get all the necessary paperwork done. But then we had to wait for more than an hour before the Iranians were willing to open the gate!

On the Iranian side they also had built a new customs building, but this one was already finished. Once we entered this building the Iranian officials were very helpful, and after finishing all the paperwork one of the officials went with us to have our car checked. All the time we were busy getting through the customs our dog Lex had stayed inside the car. So, before I wanted to open the

door of the car I warned the man who wanted to check our car about the dog inside. After he saw our dog he got very frightened, and ran away! Some other officials who had seen this started laughing, and after a while everybody came outside to look at this dangerous animal! As a result of this the guy who wanted to check our car didn't even want to get close to our car anymore! After this funny incident we could carry on, but after we left this main building we got 2 more checkpoints where some other paperwork had to be done. Long live bureaucracy !!

But finally we entered Iran, and after some km. we went to a petrol station to fill our tank with some diesel.....This is always a surprise, in the first place because of the price and in the second place because of the great mess it most of the time is here! We filled our tank with some 90 litres, and had to pay the unbelievable amount of 1.30€!! Since the filling hoses have no automatic stop it is always tricky once your tank gets full, and of course this happened to me. As a result a few litres of diesel gushed all over the place!! This makes the floor at petrol stations of course a very dirty place to be!What did you say about environment protection???

Once we were in Iran we also connected our laptop to the GPS in order to get a better view of the roads and the direction we were going to. Because there are no good road maps of Iran, the GPS and laptop are a good help finding your way. You also can store the route you have driven. From the north of Iran we went in a south easterly direction towards the city of Orumiye.

Going this way we came along the vast Lake Orumiye, a salt lake of 6000km.² On the northern shore we found a place to stay for the night. Big parts of the shore have a thick white salt crust. Also in and around this lake there are some 50000 flamingos staying every year.

In the morning of 15.January we drove further along the western shore, some snow had fallen that night. In this region there is also living a Christian minority, in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century foreign missionaries were particularly active in this region, and many locals were converted to Protestantism or Catholicism. But there are also Chaldean, Armenian, Assyrian and Nestorian churches.

As we passed some villages we indeed saw churches standing in the middle instead of the usual mosque! A special sight in an Islamic country.

After we had reached the southern end of the lake the road went up in the mountains again, and the weather turned also bad again! We followed the road towards the city of Kermanshah, which runs mainly through the mountains of Kordestan province. After some km. it started snowing, and for the rest of the day we experienced the same blizzard as we did in Turkey!!!

But this time it was even more dangerous because of the traffic, many cars don't have their lights on and some drivers take enormous risks by trying to pass slower cars on steep hills and in corners!! Also in the cities the traffic is horrendous, and in many places there are no signs were to go or they are only in Farsi. In these situations its good to have a GPS.

When we reached the village of Harsin the road becomes unpaved, with a lot of snow on it and because it is still snowing and it was already 21.15h. we decided to stop at a petrol station and stay there for the night. It had been snowing almost all night, because the next morning everything was covered with a lot of snow. But by the time we got up sun was shining, after breakfast we followed the unpaved road to Horramabad again. After a few km. we saw a car trying to get up a steep snow

covered slope without having 4WD and without chains! After almost sliding off the road and into the deep, I gave the driver the advice to turn and go back to Harsin. But even turning was very tricky under these circumstances, and after helping him to turn his car we could carry on again. Further along the road we saw many more cars without 4WD in serious trouble! But in Iran you don't have to be afraid nobody helps you, there is always somebody willing to help you!

By the time we reached Horramabad the road was free of snow again, and had turned into a new paved road. Just outside the town of Nurabad we stopped for a coffee break, and after a few minutes a car stopped and 2 men came to us to welcome us and invite us to come to their home to have tea and a chat! This is what we have experienced many times during our earlier visit to Iran, and it always gives a good feeling to meet these people who have such an open and warm approach to strangers. But this time we could not go with them, because our visa was only valid for 7 days and we had still a long way to go. After explaining the situation they could understand our decision.

Once in the city of Horramabad we had difficulties finding the right way out again, and here also a police car stopped and after explaining our problem they drove in front of us to lead us out of the city. They even stopped other traffic to let us through!

From Horramabad we took the road to Ahvaz, this is in southerly direction towards the Persian Gulf. After we had a lunch break at a small restaurant were we also were able to fill our water tanks again we continued our journey to Ahvaz. Also typical in Iran are the many roadblocks which you have to pass, mostly they are situated at the entrance of cities and towns or at junctions. We always try to stay behind another car in order to stay out of sight of the controlling policemen or soldiers, and many times this worked out fine

Following the busy road to Ahvaz temperatures began climbing again, because this road descends to sea level once you are in Ahvaz. But before we reached Ahvaz we decided to find a place to stay for the night, and after a while we found a track leading into the mountains. Here we found a nice spot to stay for the night.

On the 17. January we got up early because it was still a long way to go to Bandar Abbas, the city we were driving to in order to get the ferry to the UAE. We also wanted to visit Chogha Zambil, a pyramidal style of building known as ziggurat. It is the best surviving example of Elamite architecture, and was build some 2500 years ago. Originally it had five concentric storeys but only three remain reaching a total height of some 25m. You also can find cuneiform inscriptions on many of the bricks. Once this area was fertile and forested, but nowadays its bleak, barren and in summer very hot. But while we were there the weather was very nice, some 20° C. and sunny.

Because this day was a Friday, week-end in the Middle-East, there were also some Iranian families visiting this building. But we had the impression they had more attention for us and our dog then for this 2500 year old building! Also in this region you can see many big pictures of soldiers along the road and in cities and towns, they all died during the terrible war against Iraq during the 1980's. Coming from Ahvaz we arrived on the shores of the Persian Gulf, and from here we went along the coast down to Bandar Abbas. Along this coast there is also a concentration of oil industries, which is not always a pleasant sight.

In the late afternoon we decided to stop for a break in an Acacia forest along the road, after a few minutes another car came to the same place. An Iranian couple had come out to have a pick-nick. After a while the man came to us to ask us if we would like to join them, and we had a very pleasant

afternoon together. It were Fatemeh and Amir, both working for an oil company and living in nearby Mashahr. By the time we wanted to go on again they invited us to come to their home and stay there for the night. Although we had still a long way to go and we had just 3 days left before our visa expired, we decided to go with them. We could not refuse such a generous offer by such warm and friendly people! Sometimes it seems to us that it is predestination when you come across certain people. And this was such an occasion.

After we arrived at their home we went to a restaurant nearby to have dinner, this is all in a sort of village owned by the oil company. During our talks Fatemeh and Amir told us that they would like to emigrate to Canada, because they are tired of waiting for changes in the strict religious government who rules Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Main reason for them to emigrate is to find more freedom and having more chances to develop themselves. There is already family of them living in the U.S. and Canada, that is why they choose for Canada.

After this pleasant stay we continued our journey the next morning along the coast. We came across vast plains called sabkachs, near the port of Bandar Ganave the landscape became more attractive again with sand dunes and a long deserted beach. Unfortunately we had to carry on, because time was running out for our visa!

Also in this region we saw large water wells with a dome shaped roof, and houses with so called wind-towers designed to catch even the lightest breeze and direct them to underground living rooms. Both are very necessary in the hot summers.

In the evening of this 18th January we stopped in a palm oasis somewhere along the road for the night. Having a nice Iranian dinner cooked by José in the bright moonlight! The next day the road went more inland again and here it looked some times more like a desert, but after some time we came back to the coast again, here we came along some ugly industrial and oil complexes and the enormous oil tankers waiting off shore to be filled.

In the evening of 19. January we finally arrived in Bandar Abbas, the largest port of Iran. Because the people here are used to go shopping in the evening it was very busy. First thing we did was to search for the Valfajre -8 shipping company office, we found the office just a bit outside of the city along a road leading to the seafront. Here we also found a place to stay right on the beach, first thing in the morning was to visit the office.

At the office we had a warm welcome, and after we had explained our plans the man who helped us said the ferry to Sjarjah would depart on the 22nd of January. The information we had was that this ferry would sail 3 times a week, but due to economy problems this was reduced to 1 depart a week. So, now we had to wait 2 days but a bigger problem was our visa who expired the next day!

Next morning we visited the police headquarters of Bandar Abbas in order to get our visa extended for those 2 days. When we came to the police station mentioned in our Lonely Planet travel guide as the place to be for visa extensions, the guards at the entrance told us the office had moved to a new building somewhere in the city. After trying to explain to us how to get there, it was a bit difficult, one of the guards offered to drive with us to show us the way. Inside the new police headquarters there was a special office for the so called 'Aliens Affairs.' After we had explained our problem to the officer in charge, he spoke good English but with a strange accent, he said he had to ask a senior

officer because a transit visa can be extended with 1 day only. After a while he returned and said this would not be a problem, but what else could we do if it had been a problem? Just vanish in the air?

He needed 2 photographs and we had to fill in some papers, after this we had to go to the local Bank Melli to pay for the extension. This is one of the very inefficient ways we experienced in Iran, why couldn't we just pay at the police station? The Bank Melli was of course in the heart of the city, but despite the crazy traffic we managed to park the car right in front of the building. I rushed inside while José waited in the car just in case the car had to be removed. Inside the bank it was very busy with long queues of waiting people... But I was lucky, I experienced this several times before, as a foreigner or stranger you often get special treatment and as a result a very friendly woman helped me!

After a short time we could return to the police station again, but once back the officer who had helped us had gone and his office was locked! Nobody knew where he had gone, but he maybe would return, or maybe not.... While I waited in the police station I had a chat with all kinds of people, police officers, visitors and soldiers. These soldiers are stationed at police stations to do all the work the policemen don't like to do themselves!

José had gone back to the car because the car stood in the full sun and Lex was still inside. While she waited in the car a woman who lived nearby invited her to come to her house to have lunch, and after José had explained she could not go with her she even brought some food to José! Another example of the great hospitality of many Iranian people we met! She also said to come to her house after I would have returned.

After a few hours of waiting the disappeared officer had returned again, and I got the passports back with the extended visa. Now it was time for a lunch, and we went to the house of Mozhdeh the woman who had invited us. After having a very nice meal and a coffee, and after showing us photos of her family we said good bye to this very friendly and kind woman.

This whole story took a full day, and we decided to go outside the city to find a quiet place to stay for the night. After some searching we found a place in an Acacia forest.

The morning of the 21st of January we have breakfast outside in the sun, and because there are no other people in sight José leaves her Iranian dress and scarf off. Until 5 o' clock in the afternoon we stay at this place, and do some things we could not do before.

After having returned to Bandar Abbas, we did some shopping and we had a meal outside a small Kebab restaurant. We also did want to fill up the fuel tank of our car, but this was easier said than done. Not one of the petrol stations we went to had diesel, because the petrol is so cheap only trucks and busses have diesel engines. Because they are not allowed to drive in the biggest part of Bandar Abbas the petrol stations did not have diesel. After asking at yet another petrol station somebody with a car offered to guide us to a petrol station where they had diesel. In the meantime it had become late again, and we went to the beach near the shipping office, where we had to go next day.

Next morning we went to the Valfajre-8 shipping office again to get tickets for the ferry to Sjarjah in the UAE. Here we got a paper for the port authorities so that they knew where we were coming from, the tickets we had to buy at another office in the same building.

After this we went straight to the port, some 3km. further. Once inside the port we had to go to several offices and all kinds of officials to get all the paperwork done. Luckily we got assistance from one of the employees of the port who accompanied us to all these offices. After this was done, it took the biggest part of the day, we had to go to a separate part of the port where we had to wait until we could get on board. 7 o'clock in the evening we got a final passport check, and at last we could get on board. There were some 32 other passengers, and 4 other cars. These cars were all new, and were imported into the UAE.

First thing we did once on the ship was to ask if we could stay in our car for the night, this ferry did not have cabins and the trip would take some 10 hours. After speaking to the captain one of the crew members let us know that we had permission to sleep in our car. We were very happy with this because now we could stay with our dog Lex and we could sleep in our own comfortable bed. The car deck was also open on both sides and there was enough space to walk around, and because of all this we had a comfortable journey to the UAE.

At 22.30h. the ferry left Bandar Abbas for Sjarjah.

In the morning of the 23rd of January at 8.15h. we arrived in the port of Sjarjah, UAE.

We first had to go through customs to have our passports checked and to get visa. After this we could drive our car off the ferry into a large building, here a special trained dog had to check all the luggage of the other passengers and our car. After this I was told I had to go to the shipping office, in order to get the right papers to clear the car. But the strange thing is that this office is in downtown Sjarjah, some 10km. away from the port! So, first I had to walk to the main gate of the port here I had to explain where I was going and after this I took a taxi to the city. After having returned to the port I had to go to several offices again to get all the right paperwork, this all was even worse as it had been in Iran. We thought the UAE had a more efficient way of handling!!

After we went through all this bureaucracy, we finally could leave the port at 12.30h.

Now we had arrived in a total different world again, full of luxury and wealth! But also a normal traffic with cars stopping for people crossing the street and even stopping for a red traffic light! We also went to a Carrefour supermarket to get some food, it is always a bit strange to walk through these big shops after you have been in a country where these shops are unknown. But here they even sold food for our dog, and after we bought enough food for the coming days we went to an internet-café to send and receive some e-mails. During our stay in Iran we had not been able to do this.

After this we went to the east coast of the Emirates, near the city of Kor Fakkan we found a place to stay for the night between some Acacia trees and a date palm plantation near the sea. It had turned dark again, and so this first day in the Emirates came to an end.

Next morning we had breakfast outside with all the luxury food which we bought in Sjarjah. This day we wanted to relax, after our strenuous trip through Iran, we spend the day by doing some walking on the nearby beach where Emirate families were having their Friday pick-nick. Some families were flying kites, which was a nice sight. Other families were just driving along the beach in their luxurious 4WD, and when they saw us walking with our dog Lex all the attention went to our dog! Some people in the passing cars even hold their little children outside in order to get a better view on Lex. But all this attention was always positive, as we experienced during our journey.

Before we arrived in the Emirates and Oman we had a little doubt about how people would react on having a dog, because for the people of these countries it is very unusual to have a dog. You also almost don't see any stray dogs in both countries. On many times it was a benefit to have Lex, because he often was a reason for people to make contact with us. He also became the most photographed dog of both the Emirates and Oman we think!

Later in the afternoon we went to a place nearby to stay for the night, it was a very nice spot just a bit off the beach near a large palm forest and with a wonderful view over the ocean with some fishing boats bringing in their catch.

The 25th of January we got up early in order to get an insurance for our car, we went to the city of Fujairah some 30km. back along the coast. After visiting several offices, none of them was able to sell us a car insurance. They told us to go back to Sjarjah, there would be better possibilities there. So we had to go back all the way to Sjarjah again to get this fixed. After some searching we found a company willing to supply us with a car insurance, and we also went to an internet-café to send some e-mails and to send photos for our website. Late in the afternoon we went back to the east coast again, and found a place to stay for the night on the beach near Kor Fakkan where we saw a fox scavenging the garbage left by the Friday pick-nickers.

Next morning we went to the wadi Mahda, this part actually is Omani territory but there are no border checkpoints. This eastern part of the Emirates is dominated by the Hajar mountain range, it extends some 700km. from Musandam in the north almost to Ras al Hadd in the east of Oman. Throughout the Hajar mountains many so called wadi's cut deep into these mountains, most of these riverbeds are dry but there are also a few wadi's where water flows throughout the year. Also many of these wadi's are accessible by car, but you always have to be aware of sudden rains which can flood these wadi's in a short time.

In this wadi Mahda there was no water flowing during our visit, only the falaj system contained water. These man made water channels are used to irrigate the palm plantations.

When we stopped at a water basin in the middle of a palm plantation, there were 3 girls sitting on the edge of this basin. One of them spoke good English, and after some chatting they invited us to meet the rest of their family who were sitting in the shade of a big Mango tree a bit further along the road. Here we met their parents and an older sister who spoke excellent English. We were invited to join them and have lunch with them, and also Lex was fully accepted and had to join us while sitting on the floor. The rest of the afternoon was spent eating, having coffee and we showed them our photo books of our family and friends and the travels we made before. These unexpected meetings with such kind and hospitable people is what we like so much in our travels.

After this nice afternoon, and after we had some clothes washed at the basin, we returned to the coast to the same place on the beach to stay for the night.

In the morning of the 27th January we first cleaned the inside of the car, this too has to be done! In the afternoon we went to the north along the east coast to the town of Daba, this town is divided in an Emirate and an Oman part. Further to the north begins the Musandam peninsula, which is also Omani territory. There are no border check points in this town either.

We went just outside Daba to the north where there is a long beach with on one end sand dunes butted up against limestone cliffs. We saw a nice spot to stay, but we had to cross the sand in order to get there. This turned out to be a rather difficult way, to get there was not too hard but after I had

turned the car to drive back a little bit the car got stuck. But this also wasn't the biggest problem, the worse thing was that we got stuck very near to the sea where the high tide just had started! After some digging and after deflating the tyres we managed to get on the higher part of the beach again! After this we decided to stay on a part of the beach where it was easier to get away again. This beach also was a favourite place to go to for the local people, as we experienced that late afternoon, it got pretty crowded with complete families.