

CAMPING IN KABUL

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I'm going to be the only tourist in Kabul. At least, that's what I was thinking as the plane from Dubai touched down between military helicopters and fighter jets. Less than three hours later, I witness the following: a small man, holding up a tiny banner, walking amongst the rubble of several bombed-out buildings, followed by people with white sun hats and sky-blue lip protection, who are busily snapping off photos of bullet holes in the walls of the buildings—a Japanese tour group.

Kabul is a funny city. Does that sound absurd? Good. Very good. The Theater of the Absurd was invented in France as a means of demonstrating the insanity of the world and the lost people within it. Not to mention as a reaction to the horror of two world wars. And today, Afghanistan has produced a more contemporary variety. It's called Kabul.

In the city center, I am confronted with the feeling of the absurd on every street corner. A shepherd leads his flock through the endless stream of cars, minibuses and mopeds. A Toyota Landcruiser with TV screens in the seats overtakes a donkey cart, whose owner has nailed on the license plate of a car. In the restaurant Deutscher Hof, Gunter Völker from Tabarz, Thuringia serves traditional knuckle of pork and sauerkraut along with German dark beer on tap. On the street, a woman stretches out a hand to me with festering craters where her fingers once were. There are Internet cafes with Italian espresso machines and high-speed connections. Everywhere cell phones are ringing and SIM cards are being sold, along with hands-free phone kits and EasyChargers. A sign advertises: "Bike Rental, Car Rental, Security Service with up to 3,000 Armed Men." And in the bazaar, where alcohol is forbidden, merchants offer their cooking oil in 4.5 liter Johnny Walker bottles into which they drop large-format photos of half naked women—sex sells. Even in Afghanistan.

In the past few years, Kabul's population has shot up to an estimated 4 million. The city can't cope with so many people: mountains of trash, water shortages, inadequate hygiene. There is a danger that cholera and dysentery could become epidemic, the child mortality rate counts among the highest in the world, and the traffic is murderous enough, let alone the air. Ten years ago, there were so few vehicles in Kabul that one could walk down the middle of the street. Now, a roaring, smoldering cascade of metal forces itself through even the smallest side streets. Countless generators poison the air. At night, the headlights of cars are refracted in exhaust, turning the city into a shadow play. In addition, the wind stirs up dust from the rubble of buildings and vapor off of fields fertilized with excrement. Sometimes human. Sooner or later everyone gets the Kabul cough. Compared to this city, Lima or Calcutta is a health spa in the Alps.

I'm staying at the Mustafa, a mid-range hotel. My cell is just big enough for the plank I'm sleeping on. There's no fan. Pinkish red plaster peels from the walls. The toilet is at the end of the hall. At night, the power goes out. I feel my way back through the darkness of the long corridor—when suddenly, I bump into someone. Resisting the urge to scream, I become aware of a long robe, beneath it, something hard. My hands graze a beard—a rather luxurious beard. When the lights go back on, I find I'm embracing a Hun-like Pashtun in a nightgown. He indicates his machine gun and says, "AK 47. Good. Very good." Then we say good night.



In the morning, I meet a group of American tourists in the bazaar. They've booked a "Kabul City Tour," part of a package tour that takes customers on a day-long excursion to visit all of the sights: mosques, mausoleums, the gardens, the Bird Bazaar, and the old fortress walls. All of this is organized by a company by the name of The Great Game Travel Company. There are two other similar travel companies in the city. Slowly, it becomes clear to me: Kabul has discovered tourism. Despite war, crises and kidnappings, excursions are still available to see the remains of the Stone Buddha of Bamiyan, as well as hiking tours in the northern province of Badakhshan. The pioneers of the travel scene are already sending kayaks down the Panshir River, going snowboarding in the Hindu Kush, and floating on hang gliders over the sapphire-blue Band-e-Amir lakes. I meet a Czech backpack tourist, leafing through a guidebook: "Afghanistan"—hot off the presses from *Lonely Planet*.

There's even a Minister of Tourism in Afghanistan, a dangerous job in this country. The first person that held the position after the fall of the Taliban, Abdul Rahman, was lynched by a mob at the Kabul Airport shortly after taking office. The second of Afghanistan's Ministers of Tourism, Mirwais Sadeq, was shot and killed en route to a business meeting in Herat. Nasrullah Stanekzai, the third Minister of Tourism, is still alive but was dismissed almost overnight after a shift of power in the government suddenly put him in the wrong party.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fates of his predecessors, but the man sitting across from me who currently holds the position of Minister of Tourism, Professor Ghulam Nabi Farahi, does not seem particularly ecstatic when he talks about the future of tourism in his country. "A thousand tourists last year," he says. As he speaks, he rolls the light blue pearls of a chain of prayer beads through his fingers. He never once raises his eyes from the TV screen in front of him where an Afghani Elvis sings "It's Now or Never." "This year, 1,500. Next year, twice as many." He wears a light blue shirt with a white collar and white cuffs along with a silver striped tie. The temperature on the air-conditioning unit reads 65 degrees. On the walls, there is a poster of the Ruins of Delphi in Greece, on the table, a dish full of candies. Everything appears quite tidy.

The promotion of tourism is an important goal for the government, the Minister of Tourism tells me. President Karzai has reiterated that several times. But the media presents only "bad propaganda" about the security situation in Afghanistan, even though many cities are quite safe, he says, still watching TV: Kabul, for instance, Herat, Bamiyan, Mazar-e Sharif. Which areas should I maybe avoid as a tourist? "Anyone can travel where he wants to," the Minister of Tourism says. He's glued to the screen now as a clown with an invisible shotgun fires at his audience. "Everyone is responsible for himself." And with that, the interview is over.

Beckett would have loved Chicken Street in downtown Kabul. Camus as well. The only thing that you can't buy on Chicken Street is chickens. You'll find those a little further along on Flower Street. There is, however, an endless string of souvenir shops. In the windows, you'll find everything: blown glass from Herat, embroidery from Uzbekistan, coats made from the fur of the last snow leopards, lapis lazuli, Central Asian antiques, kilims and Persian rugs. Some of the rugs feature the face of George W. Bush wailing bitterly, others depict the World Trade Center in flames as an F-16 squadron flies over an outline of Afghanistan. Printed beneath in spidery script are the words: "WAR ON TERRORISM 9/11 AMERICA AND AFGHANISTAN HAPPY VICTORY!!!"

On Flower Street, I meet Gul Agha Karimi, who invites me into his house in order to tell me about the 90,000 hippies who passed through Afghanistan every year on their way to India and Nepal. They enjoyed the undisturbed beauty of the country, the extraordinary hospitality of the people and the best dope in the world—the vision of the Summer of Love. For them, a reality. There was only one route and it went through Kabul. They met up in the Sigis Restaurant on Chicken Street and partied in the Green Hotel all night and into the morning. "Camping in Kabul" was their motto.

"All the hippies knew me. They all loved my super Payan camping," old Karimi tells me, full of pride. We're sitting in his living room surrounded by a big-screen TV, VCR, DVD, satellite receiver and several stereos. Unfortunately, there's no power. "The hippies went barefoot," Karimi recalls, rubbing the rough soles of his feet on the edge of the living room table as we drink syrupy-sweet orangeade. "We thought, how poor these people are, by Allah. Look at them. They can't even buy themselves some shoes." He accommodated as many as 300 hippies at his campgrounds where, now, his small grocery store and eleven, boxy, single-story houses for his extended family sit. "I made 1,000 dollars a day," Karimi boasts. Tourism had been one of the country's most important sources of revenue. Afghanistan was, as they used to say, "mellow." It could become that way again. Soon, very soon. Yeah, Afghanistan.

At the end of 1978, the hippie-dream came to an abrupt halt. Under cover of night, fighter jets flew in over Kabul, some of their bombs falling scarcely 100 yards from Karimi's campgrounds. On the next day, the hippies were gone. The communists staged a coup and seized power. When Islamic forces rose up against them, the Soviets moved in. There followed three decades of war and civil war that reduced the country to rubble. And now, finally—Karimi takes off his cap puts it over his knee—we've come full circle. Since the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001, camping is back in. This time behind reinforced concrete, sandbags and barbed wire. White Landcruisers (the most visible sign of the presence of international aid organizations in conflict areas of the world) pack the streets of downtown Kabul at noon. The United Nations and its retinue of do-gooders have landed on Kabul—and with them the harbingers of globalization: speculators and tourists. The freaks are back on Chicken Street.



Tanya and Richard, for example. Tanya is a nutritionist from South Africa, Richard a political scientist from Australia, both in their early 30s. I get to know them during lunch in the Herat, an Afghani restaurant. Richard wears a full beard, the local style of long shirt and traditional, loose-fitting short pants. Tanya, white clothes and a headscarf. They came to Kabul via Pakistan on their yearlong trip through Asia, traveling over the Khyber Pass and through the tribal lands in an overfilled minibus. "Afghanistan has fascinated us ever since university," she says beaming. "This trip to Kabul is something we've dreamed of for a long time." Are they crazy? Self-destructive adrenaline junkies? Over the course of our conversation, it becomes clear that they are genuinely interested in Afghanistan and wanted to see with their own eyes what it's like here.

Later, Alan joins us. He's Irish, in his mid-50s. He's backpacking through Central Asia, having arrived in Kabul via Tajikistan. "The media always shows the same images," he says as he takes grilled pieces of lamb from a skewer and puts them onto his plate. "Suicide bombings, kidnappings, these video messages from al Qaida. And then you're standing in front of the vegetable stand in the bazaar, you want a couple of tomatoes and the guy is smiling at you. And all of the images you've got through the media just suddenly fall away and all that's left is the interaction between two human beings—as human beings." That alone, he tells me, makes all of the risks of traveling to Afghanistan worthwhile.

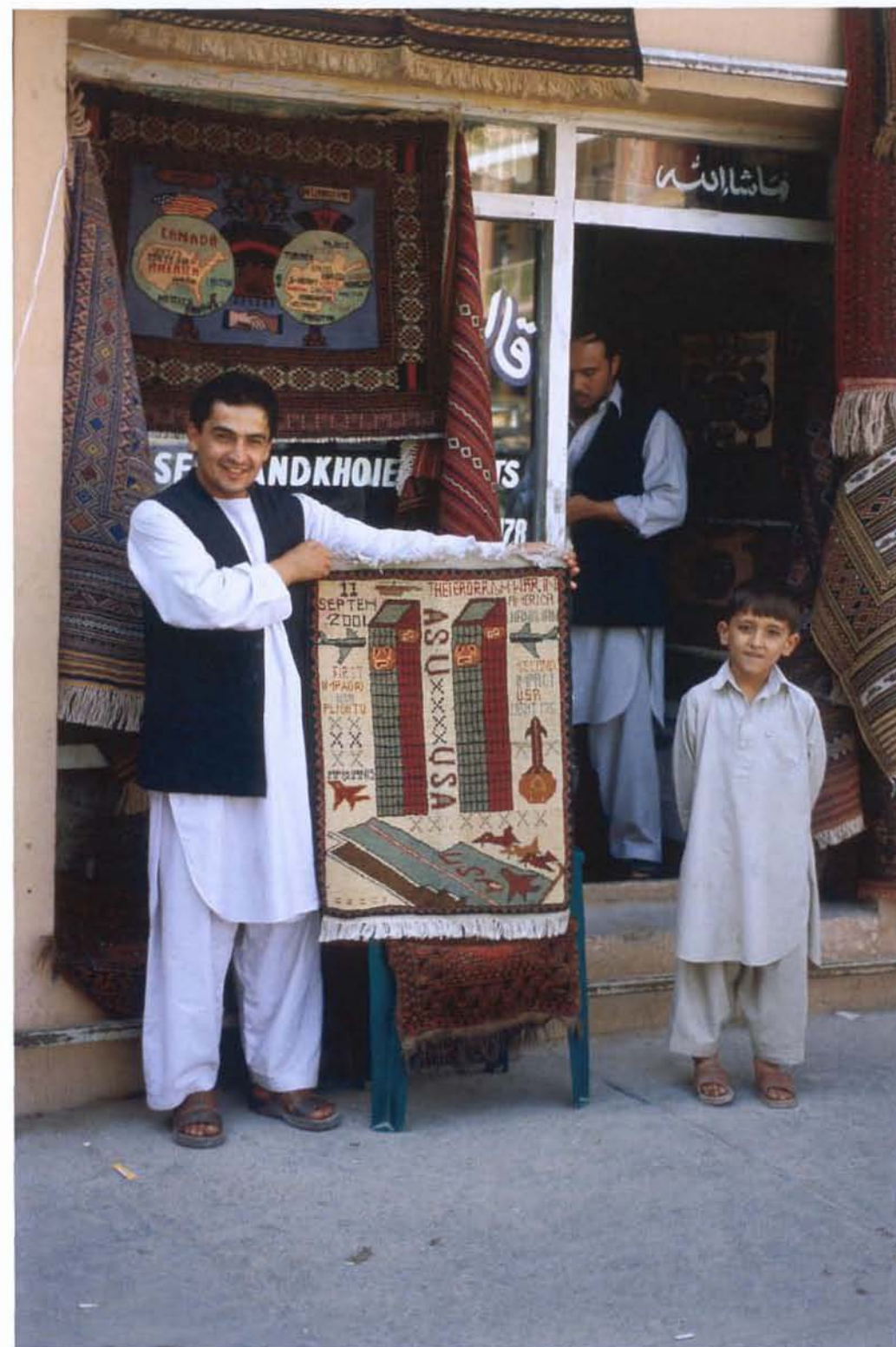
And the risks are considerable. The official warnings from governmental organizations all over the world make it sound as if any foreigner who so much as sets foot on Afghani soil is as good as dead: "...the threat of terrorism or criminally motivated acts of violence..." "...terrorist attacks throughout the country..." "...armed robbery in Kabul, even during the day..." "kidnappings" "...interurban travel only in armed convoys..." This afternoon, as I make my way down the to the bazaar surrounded by a stream of Afghanis, there suddenly appear in front of me several armored cars. Above, a soldier cowers behind a machine gun. It's then that I notice the flags on the sides of the car and understand: These are my countrymen. These are Germans. Just identify yourself, say anything. "Hey. How's it going?" I hear myself saying. "You okay up there?" The man takes his hands away from his weapon, shoves his sunglasses up onto his forehead and calls out, in a Berlin accent—horrified, "What... man, what the hell are ya doin' down there? You can't just... just run around here like that." The convoy springs back into motion, and the soldier calls out as it pulls away, "Hey, just take care of yourself!" I have the feeling the soldier experiences Afghanistan from the perspective of a prisoner. Maybe he can't imagine in his armored world that out here, there are also completely normal, peaceful Afghanis.

A few minutes later in Zarnegar Park: On a bench, in the shadows of a pine tree, a bearded man sits in traditional Afghani clothing—simple, cream-colored—with his two small boys. In front of the bench, standing in the dust, is a plastic leg. The foot is hidden in a brown, woolen sock and a leather sandal; the rest is a bare, shiny, white. A leg without a body. The man sees me looking vexed, smiles and with a gesture, invites me to sit down. The boys slide over. I sit. Nobody really seems to know what to do next. We continue to sit in silence. Then, without any introduction, he says the following to me in English: "It happened in my house."

During the civil war, Qasem, who owned an electrical appliance store, fled, like many Kabulis, to Peshawar in neighboring Pakistan. Under the strict control of the Taliban, the security situation quickly improved. He came back and cried tears of joy, he says, but when he got home, he saw his house in ruins. He went inside to see if anything could be saved—that's when the mine exploded that tore off his leg.

Again, we are silent. Afghanistan is littered with millions of land-mines and unexploded munitions. No one knows exactly where they are. Every year, they claim hundreds of Afghani lives, among them many children. Qasem leans back against the bench seat. Beneath his robe, the stump of his leg slips out. It has healed well. He takes his cap from his head and hangs it on the prosthesis as if on a hat stand. All at once, he says, "Do you see the trees, the sky, the birds, the rose blossoms around the fountain?" Then after a while: "I could have died. Instead, life has given me two sons."

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Perhaps it's the silence that wakes me up the following morning, Friday, the Islamic Sunday. The traffic that normally rumbles by my window in the Mustafa, today produces only a soft murmur. In the blue morning sky, doves glide peacefully over the city. Then, something strange happens: As if in response to a hidden signal, a flock of 40, perhaps 50 birds makes an abrupt right turn toward the south. A split second later a dull boom jingles the crystals on the lampshade in my room. When I arrive in the breakfast room, other hotel guests are crowded in front of the television. Breaking news: CNN shows rubble lying around, clouds of smoke rising. A suicide bomber has hurled himself into the middle of a convoy. In Kabul, Afghanistan. The doves, the boom—still, it seems as if the news is coming out of some far away place. It's only then that I start to feel goosebumps crawl over me.

Later the same day, I meet Osama bin Laden. In the Bird Bazaar in Kabul, behind the Pul-e-Kishti Mosque, in a narrow side street, little more than a dirt road, crammed with the booths of traders: There are hundreds of cages, chirping at every pitch, the sharp smell of droppings. The ground is littered with grain and seed. Thrushes, canaries, and parakeets, favored for their songs, puff themselves up. Partridges and pigeons ruffle their feathers. Flies, dust, and down ride a current of oven-hot air through the bars of the cages out into the street.

A bird dealer offers me a budgie imported from Germany: 1,000 afghanis for it, roughly 20 dollars. He sees that I'm not interested but invites me anyway into a cave-like back room for tea. "Allow me to introduce myself, I'm Osama bin Laden," he says and points to a second man holding a finch between each of his fingers. "And this here, this is Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban." They double over with laughter. The most wanted man in the world, who in Kabul is called simply "OBL," pours me a tea and yells in the direction of the other bird dealers out in the street, "And all of them—al Qaida!" Big laughs. "They all belong to al Qaida!" The birds join in. Is this gallows humor? Sarcasm? Ridicule? Difficult to say. In Kabul, jokes about the protagonists of the crisis in Afghanistan are popular. As I'm leaving, the bird dealers inform me that in Dari and Pashtu, the two most important languages in Afghanistan, a new Spanish word has come into use of late: Anything that one perceives as horrible or unbearable is called "Guantánamo."

Beneath an enormous pack of cigarettes with the slogan "Enjoy the taste of America!" I flag down a taxi and head out of the pulsing downtown into Western Kabul—into a completely different world. It's quiet. Dead quiet. Whole districts, destroyed in the civil war by feuding Mujahidin, lie in ruins. Houses that have almost become stone and desert again remind me of an archeological dig. On a hilltop above the field of rubble, the Darul Aman Palace once flaunted its neoclassical magnificence. Now it's a shot-at, bombed-out and burned-up shell of its former glory. Afghanis in rags, despite the danger of landmines, rummage for anything usable. In an archway blackened with soot, emaciated youths shoot heroin into their arms with rusty needles. A young woman clings to life in the delirium of some horrific skin disease that eats away her face.

Not more than 10 minutes later, I have to ask myself, how, when I was packing for Kabul, did I somehow forget to think about swim trunks. On Street 4, in the part of the city called Qala-e-Fatullah, I find myself in L'Atmosphère again, yet another of Kabul's parallel worlds. The "Latmo" is, according to the brand new *Lonely Planet*, one of the most beloved international meeting places in the city, a place for the young and the beautiful, a place one simply has to have experienced as a visitor. Next to a swimming pool in a secluded garden, foreign bathers are able to relax, laying their bulletproof vests aside, for a moment, next to tropical cocktails, sun creams and the newest *Vogue*. Two American women glide through turquoise green water. French people slurp pastis. Journalists sit in the shade of pomegranate trees, typing stories about the attack this morning in their laptops—in swimming suits, occasionally sipping a gin and tonic... heavy explosion... sip... one dead, countless injured... sip... terror, al Qaida, Taliban. An army helicopter flies in from the west and circles around the pool, the only place in Afghanistan with a lot of half-naked women. The pilots prefer to cruise the Latmo on Friday, the Muslim Sunday, when the most beach babes are out. Afghanis? They have to remain outside. Because of the ban on alcohol for locals—so the owners claim.

Establishments like the Latmo count among the many refined venues for the absurd, with actors who play their own audiences: employees of the countless registered aid organizations in Kabul, consultants with daily fees of \$1,000, bodyguards and other trigger happy security ninjas with perfect six packs. There are supposedly as many as 15,000 foreign civilians currently in Kabul, more than the U.S. Army has stationed in the whole of Afghanistan and three times as many as the 4,800 NATO led troops, who are supposed to provide order and security in the capital.

Sitting by the pool, I get to talking to Rahraw. He is half Afghani with an Italian passport and works in radio. He says it's a sad fact that most of the foreigners who live and work in Kabul don't come any closer to the city than armored limousines, security services and barbed wire allow. "But how are you going to help someone you never meet?" Rahraw asks, frowning. "How are you going to do something for someone you don't know—or when you don't know anything about the way they live or what they think or how they feel. Someone whose fears and joys are foreign to you?"

Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanis' expectations of the international community have been high. But many fail to find visible results. They characterize the aid organizations as "cows that drink their own milk." Also, the lifestyle of many foreigners in Kabul arouses the anger of the people: freely available alcohol, brothels disguised as Chinese restaurants, parties. Later that evening, Rahraw invites me to such a celebration. The music is loud—house, techno—the bar has a wide selection: South African Shiraz, French Bordeaux, cans of beer cooled in a barrel of ice water. And Johnny Walker Red Label, the same bottles that the merchants in the bazaar will later fill with cooking oil.

Forty, maybe fifty people dance on the well-lit terrace, as devout Muslims in the surrounding houses try to sleep. Their neighborhood is pitch-black. Only the spire of a minaret floats in the night sky—a luminous eye, admonishing. Somehow threatening. "Not safe here," says Rahraw and points to the wall around the garden that's barely three meters high. "For a rocket, no problem." He's right. The dance floor is an easy target for terrorists. It's probably the most dangerous spot in all of Afghanistan. But nobody thinks about it. We're the international community, the world as guest in Absurdistan. We work for the United Nations, for governments, for editors, for aid organizations. We come from Europe and America, as well as from Ethiopia, Columbia, India and Turkey. We drink. We dance. We laugh. Should we be sad instead?

"We're happy about everyone who comes to help us," an Afghani art professor tells me a few days later. "But everyone should behave according to the customs in our land." Integration. We attach a great deal of importance to it in Europe.

When the beer is empty, I leave. I wheeze the entire night. The Kabul cough. I have to get out. Out of the city. Breathe. See a little nature: trees, water. The next morning, I take a taxi to a place that one would hardly expect to exist beyond the ravaged edges of this city: the Kabul Golf Club. "We get golfers from absolutely every country," explains Afzal Abdul, my golf instructor, in traditional Afghani garb. "Just none from China, Russia, Pakistan. No French, or Greeks, or Koreans. We also don't get any..." Who are the best? "We Afghanis," Abdul says in all earnestness.

The golf course belongs to a former warlord. It's the only one in Afghanistan. The landmines were removed, three soviet tanks and a rocket launcher taken away. The only thing missing now is grass. The nine holes are barely distinguishable from the surrounding, dusty, sunburned hills; the greens are not green but black, designed with a mixture of sand and motor oil. The highlight has to be the bombed-out army bunker after the first hole. Two rounds cost 10 dollars. One year's membership, 60. I leave it—much to the amusement of my instructor—at a couple of amateurish hits and wander up to Qargha Lake.

On the shores of this immense reservoir, a surprisingly idyllic landscape awaits. Afghani families have made themselves at home on platforms in the water. Protected from the wind by billowing curtains, they sit on rugs and smoke water pipes. Pakistani music drifts out of loudspeakers. Colorful paddleboats lie on the shore.

There comes a point when I can't accept every invitation to have tea anymore, so I walk a little further along the shore and sit down on a lonely bench. I enjoy the clear lake air. Breathe. Without this scratching in my throat and lungs. Off in the distance, a motorboat draws a line of spray across the silver gray surface of the lake. Behind it rises the jagged ridge of the Hindu Kush. Its silhouette dissolves into a reddish haze. Moments of peace, of beauty. For the first time on this journey, I have the feeling that I've arrived, that I want to stay. Ah, Afghanistan!

I only notice the men after they've crowded around the bench I'm sitting on: six long bearded Pashtuns with AK-47s. They wear traditional Afghani garb and are scowling at me. Are they bandits? Some warlord's soldiers? Taliban? "Passport! Passport!" barks their spokesman, a giant with a scar slashed across his right eye. I give him what he wants. The Pashtuns crowd around my passport to study it. Almost 200 countries produce passports. My life now seems to depend on whether I have one of the right ones.

All at once, the Pashtun slaps the passport shut, calls to a man walking along the shore with a vendor's tray and orders Pepsi. A can for everybody. Even for me. He gives me my passport back and says, "Germany good! Germany very, very good!" They take me over to the street and insist on calling me a taxi. Because there are bandits here. Finally, a car comes. The Pashtuns stroke their guns and shake my hand. I get in and the taxi takes off—back to Kabul.

