

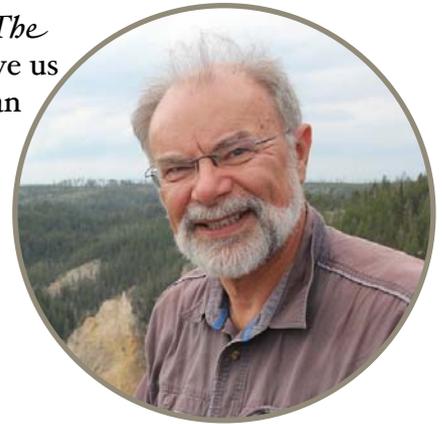
GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
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# IRAN – WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE?

*Stephen Codrington*

As the British journalist, Peter Beaumont, wrote in an article in *The Observer* in March 2012, “a better understanding of Iran might save us from catastrophe”. Beaumont is of course a journalist, rather than a scholar or academic, but his stark and simplistic statement encapsulates the nature of information that the general public often receives as the basis of forming its opinions about Iran.

With such thoughts in mind, almost 50 people gathered at Saint Ignatius College on an unseasonably cold and wet November afternoon to hear Stephen Codrington share his insights - and a couple of hundred of his photographs - on the topic of Iran.



Stephen began his address by providing some context, including media reports and a video to demonstrate how Iran is often portrayed negatively in the Western media.

By contrast, Stephen's analysis followed a clear geographical emphasis. Noting that the borders of Iran coincide almost perfectly with the elevated, rugged and tectonically unstable terrain of the Zagros and Elbruz mountain ranges, Stephen quoted from Robert Kaplan's article in the *New York Times* of 7th September 2012 (“Geography Strikes Back”), which said in part:

“If you want to know what Russia, China or Iran will do next, don't read their newspapers or ask what our spies have dug up - consult a map... More than ideology or domestic politics, what fundamentally defines a state is its place on the globe. Maps capture its key facts of history, culture and natural resources... The state of Iran conforms with the Iranian plateau, an impregnable natural fortress that straddles both oil-producing regions of the Middle East: The Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.”

Stephen's address developed the theme of Iran's unique geography to balance the media stereotypes by posing the question “what is the reality?”, using evidence from his several visits to Iran in recent years to address the question.

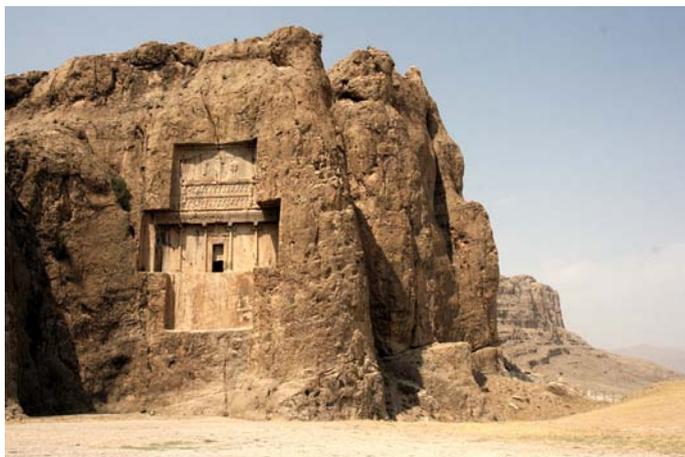
Stephen's talk focussed on central and southern Iran, commencing in the large, polluted capital city of Tehran, a city that Stephen described as having “an elusive charm”. With a population of more than 7 million people, Tehran has spread enormously in recent decades as a result of rural-urban migration, resulting in a sprawl of concrete blocks and congested roads seemingly filled with manic drivers. Notwithstanding its overall appearance, Tehran has some gems that reflect its historical past, such as the large, covered bazaar, the Sa'd Abad Complex (which was the summer home of the Pahlavi Shahs) and the Golestan Palace, built during



the Qajar Dynasty of 1785-1925. Perhaps less of an architectural gem, but still impressive in a different way, is the huge new Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini that is under construction in Tehran's outer south-west.

Stephen's analysis of Iran's cultural geography proceeded in a broad anti-clockwise circuit to the south of Tehran, starting in the relatively small city of Kashan. Kashan claims to have been the starting point of the three wise men's journey to Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Christ, a claim which is supported by the theory that the wise men were magis, or Zoroastrian priests. Today, Kashan provides some exquisite examples of traditional Persian style houses (such as the Khan-e Borujerdi) and the Fin Garden, which is said to reflect the Persian view of paradise.

Stephen spent some time sharing the history and significance of Persepolis, without doubt the finest and most lavish palace complex constructed during the late Achaemenid Empire



between 518 BC and 350 BC. A very worthy UNESCO World Heritage site, Persepolis was both grand in scale and detailed in execution, especially in the use of highly symbolic reliefs on its stone walls. In some ways, the nearby complex of four cliffside royal tombs known as Naqsh-e Rostam was even more visually impressive than Persepolis, given that its state of preservation was better and its vertical scale was more imposing.

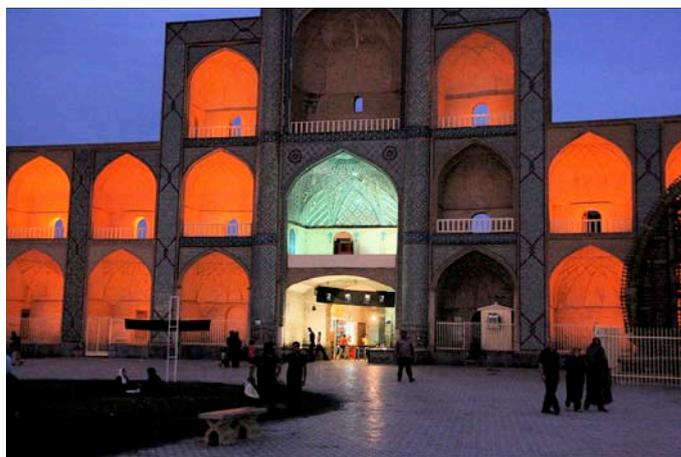
The modern city of Shiraz is located just a short driving distance from Persepolis. A city known for its cultural sophistication,

Shiraz provides many insights into today's mix of traditional Persian culture with contemporary Iranian life. Stephen's description of Shiraz began at the Bagh-e Eram (Garden of Paradise), proceeding to Sa'di's Tomb and Hafez's Tomb (both popular places for courting couples to spend time together), the Qu'ran Gate, the Shrine of Ali-ben Hamza (which non-Muslims can enter), the Khan Madrasah (a Koranic college for mullahs), Bagh-e Naranjستان (the Orange Garden) and the extensive Vakil Bazaar, a large covered market area. While showing photos of the cave where the Sufi mystic, Khwaju Kermani, spent his life, Stephen made a special note of Kermani's famous saying which could be the traveller's credo: "Travelling is like the root of a tree reaching out".

Pasargadae is known as the birthplace of Persia as it was here that Persia's first king, Cyrus the Great, established his capital in 546 BC.

Today, little of the city remains apart from Cyrus' tomb, which is a site of nationalistic pilgrimage for many Iranians.

Yazd is a city with half a million people, and home to Iran's largest community of Zoroastrians. It claims to be the oldest living city in the world, a claim that is, of course, echoed by several other cities around the world. Nonetheless, Yazd's old city centre is a fascinating maze of narrow laneways and adobe buildings, often topped with wind towers to cool the building below by drawing



hot air upwards in convection currents. Not unexpectedly, many of Yazd's sites revolve around Zoroastrianism, and particularly interesting examples included the Towers of Silence on the city's outskirts, and Ateshkadeh (the Fire Temple) where the flame has been continuously burning since AD 470. Some of Yazd's sites derive from the nation's dominant religion of Islam, with some noteworthy examples being the Jameh Mosque (with its 48 metre high minarets) and the Amir Chakhmaq Mosque, one of Iran's most spectacular sights as its facade is illuminated each evening.

After discussing the significance of carpets to Iranian households, highlighting especially the carpet industry in Na'in, Stephen concluded his address by looking at Iran's third largest city,



Esfahan. Located beside the Zayendah River, Esfahan is known for its ancient bridges. Stephen focussed on two of these masterpieces, the Khaju Bridge (built in 1650) and the Shahrestan Bridge, built in the 12 century. Sadly, Esfahan's bridges are no longer the scenic wonder that they once were as the Zayendah River now often dries up in summer as a result of poor water management upstream.

Esfahan boasts Iran's largest mosque, the Jameh Mosque, which is sometimes referred to as a museum of Islamic

architecture because of the variety of styles employed over the centuries during its construction. The Jameh Mosque had two interesting features that are shared by many other mosques in Iran: first, non-Muslims can enter, and second, the Islamic prohibition on the depiction of living things seems to be violated as there are several large portraits of senior religious personnel in Iran.

The Chehel Sotun Palace was re-built after a fire in 1706, and features the most elaborate frescoes that are likely to be seen anywhere in the world. The walls of the palace feature historical frescoes on a grand scale that portray significant events in Iran's history, while other frescoes show detailed depictions of life in past centuries. The vibrant colours of the frescoes reflect the excellent renovation work that is currently being undertaken.

Esfahan's covered markets, the Bazar-e Bozorg, are among the most extensive in Iran. In addition to occupying several streets, they encircle Imam Square, the emotional heart of Esfahan. Built in 1602, Imam Square is huge, second only to Beijing's Tian An Men Square in area. The Square is flanked by some of Esfahan's (and Iran's) finest buildings, notably the Ali Qapu Palace, the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and the huge Imam Mosque.



Stephen concluded his address by discussing the practicalities of visiting Iran, including visa regulations and the dress code for women, before answering a range of questions from the appreciative audience. As the audience left the lecture room to enjoy afternoon tea, they were farewelled by a selection of Iranian music selected by Stephen.