

PERSIA
AND
THE PERSIAN QUESTION

CHAPTER XIX
FROM TEHERAN TO ISFAHAN

Then pomp and pleasure dwelt within her walls,
The merchants of the East and of the West
Met in her arched bazaars.
All day the active poor
Showered a cool comfort o'er her thronging streets.
Labour was busy in her looms,
Through all her open gates
Long troops of laden camels lined the roads.
SOUTHEY, *Thalaba the Destroyer*, bk. v.

After some weeks spent in the enjoyment of the hospitality of the British Legation, and in the interesting and often highly-charged political atmosphere of the capital, it was with no slight reluctance that I again resigned myself to the tender mercies of the *chapar-khaneh* and the Persian post-horse, and started forth on my 800 miles' ride to the Gulf. In justice, however, to a much abused institution and animal, I must observe that along the stretch of road from Teheran to Shiraz, which is the most frequented in Persia, the former is in a better state of repair, and the latter is sprightlier in his movements, than in other parts of the country. Execrable horses and an inhospitable track had been the distinguishing features of my ride from Meshed to Teheran. With a tolerable mount, with the chance of European converse and entertainment in the Telegraph stations, encountered at distances of from sixty to seventy miles along the road, and with the prospect of great cities and world-famed ruins before him, with leisure to rest in the one or to linger over the other, the

southward journey soon loses the visionary horrors with which the traveller has credited it, and proves to be deficient neither in comfort nor charm. To the student of works on Persia it will present little novelty. It has been traversed by almost every visitor who has either entered or left the country on the south, and it has on many occasions been excellently and conscientiously described.¹ There remains for me the task of faithfully depicting its features as they now exist, and of doing somewhat fuller justice to the great and historic cities through which it passes than is commonly rendered by the scribe of travel.

Along the first section of the road, namely, from Teheran to Isfahan, the following is a table of the post-houses and distances :—

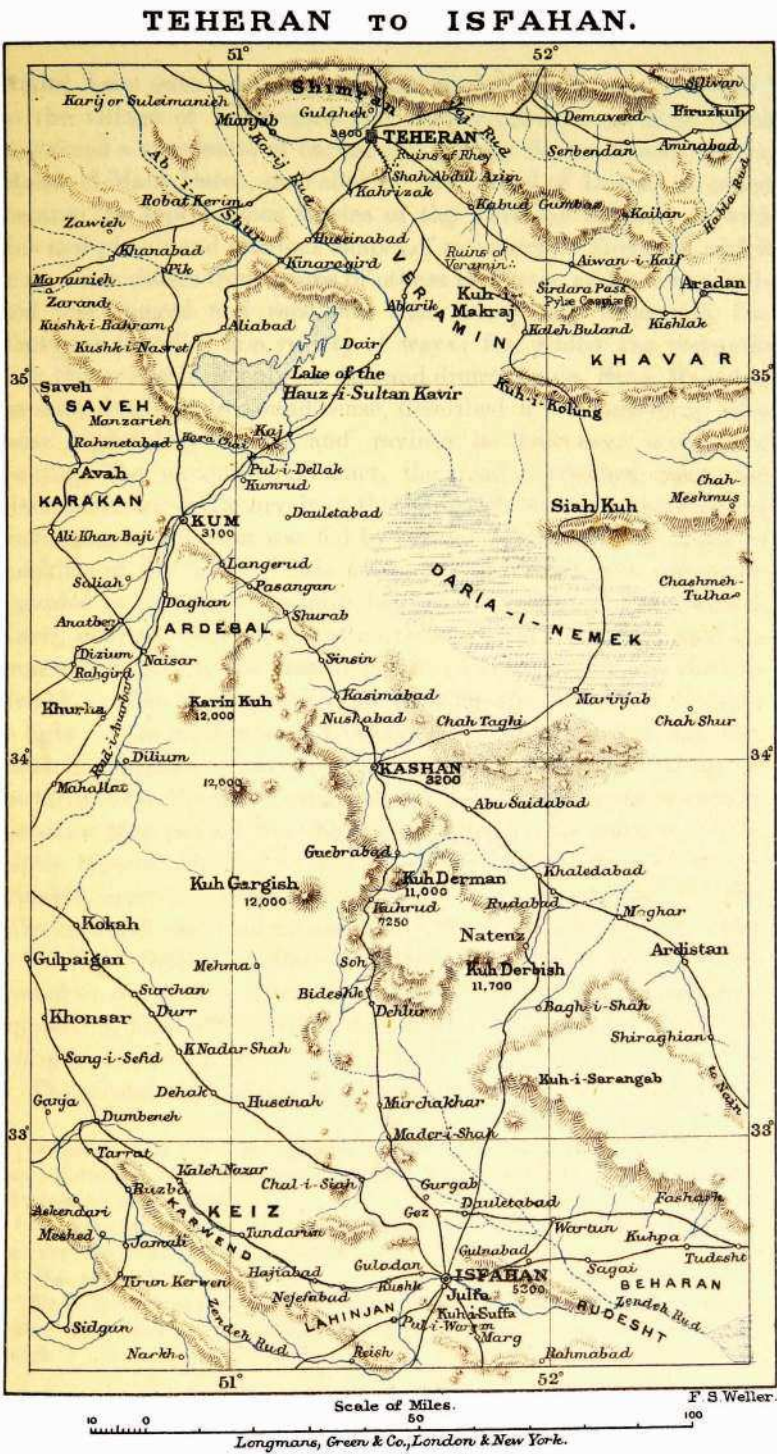
Name of station	Distance in farsakhs	Approximate distance in miles	Name of station	Distance in farsakhs	Approximate distance in miles
Teheran†(3,800 ft.)	—	—	Kuhrud (7,250 ft.)	7	26
Robat Kerim . . .	7	28	Bideshk (Soh †) . .	6	25
Pik	6	24	Murchakhar . . .	6	24
Kushk-i-Bahram . .	4	16	Gez	6	24
Rahmetabad . . .	6	25	Isfahan † (5,300 ft.)	3	12
Kum † (3,100 ft.) .	4	14	Julfa	1	4
Pasangun	4	15			
Sinsin	7	26			
Kashan (3,200 ft.) .	6	22	Total	73	285

† = Telegraph stations.

Three roads lead, or have been followed in recent times, from Teheran to Kum, a distance of about 100 miles; and the history of their competition has in it something peculiarly Persian. The first of these roads is the old caravan track, which was pursued by every traveller up till the last decade, and has been frequently described. It left Teheran by the Shah

¹ I may cite the following : J. P. Morier (1809), *First Journey*, cap. x.; (1811) *Second Journey*, cap. x.; Sir J. Malcolm (1810), *Sketches*, caps. xiv.–xvi.; Sir W. Ouseley (1811), *Travels*, vol. iii. cap. xv.; W. Price (1811), *Journal of British Embassy*, vol. i. pp. 19–28; Colonel J. Johnson (1817), *Journey from India*, caps. ix. x. Sir R. K. Porter (1818), *Travels*, vol. i. pp. 367–406; J. B. Fraser (1821), *Journey into Khorasan*, cap. vi.; Baron C. De Bode (1840), *Travels*, vol. i. pp. 5–42; R. B. Binning (1851), *Two Years' Travel*, vol. ii. caps. xxvii.–xxviii.; J. Ussher (1861), *Journey*, cap. xxx.; A. Vambéry (1862), *Life and Adventures*, caps. ix.–xi.; J. Bassett (1874), *Land of the Imams*, p. 145, *et seq.*; A. Arnold (1875), *Through Persia by Caravan*, vol. i. caps. xiii.–xv.; Madame Dieulafoy (1881), *La Perse*, caps. ix.–xi.; Mrs. Bishop (1890), *Journeys in Persia*, vol. i. letters x.–xii.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-08085-9 — Persia and the Persian Question
George Nathaniel Curzon
Excerpt
[More Information](#)



Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-08085-9 — Persia and the Persian Question
George Nathaniel Curzon
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

FROM TEHERAN TO ISFAHAN

3

Abdul Azim gate, passed the shrine of that name, and proceeded to the village of Kinaregird (i.e. Border-town), soon after which it entered a succession of barren and gloomy defiles known as the Malek-el-Maut Dareh, or Valley of the Angel of Death,¹ so called because the superstitious fancies of the Persians infested it with jins and ghouls and fabulous shapes of monsters.² This pass, which in no sense differs from scores of others in Persia, and is a hundred-fold less rugged and repellent than many, has impressed the European traveller in a variety of ways; for, whilst the romantic Ker Porter saw in it only 'a dun and drowthy vale,' Sir J. Malcolm, for once forsaken by sound sense, described it as containing 'the most frightful precipices and ravines he had ever seen.' On quitting the mountainous tract, the road debouched upon the Hauz-i-Sultan, or Reservoir of the King, where was a caravanserai containing a tank that was fed by several *kanats* on the northern outskirts of the *kavir*. This *kavir*, or salt desert, was commonly regarded as the most westerly bay or extension of the Dasht-i-Kavir, or Great Salt Desert of northern Persia, and must have approached, further to the east, if it did not actually join, the Daria-i-Nemek, or Sea of Salt, which has been for the first time brought to light in the present year.³ Popular legend avers that the sea, which is supposed to have covered the whole expanse, dried up on the birth of the Prophet; but attributes the still surviving swamps to the sweat that poured from the brow of Shamr, the murderer of the saintly Husein, who fled to this wilderness in the agony of an inextinguishable remorse. After traversing the *kavir*, which was over ten miles in width, the road crossed the Kara Su, or Kara Chai river by the Pul-i-Dellak, or Barber's Bridge, a stone structure either erected or repaired by some famous barber of the past, commonly supposed to have officiated in that capacity to Shah Abbas.⁴ It then proceeded to Kum.

The second road, which is followed by the wires of the Indo-

¹ Jeremiah ii. 6 has been appositely quoted: 'A land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought and of the shadow of death, a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwells.'

² For local legends about it, *vide* Malcolm's *Sketches*, cap. xvi., and R. B. Binning, *Two Years' Travel*, vol. ii. p. 202.

³ *Vide* cap. xxiii.

⁴ Sir R. Ker Porter is at his very best in describing this functionary, whoever he may have been, as 'the public-spirited barber and honest shaver, Poohl-Dowlak'!

European Telegraph, is the so-called carriage-road before spoken of, that was constructed by the father of the present Amin-es-Sultan in 1883–84, and was originally supplied or intended to be supplied with a service of *telegas* and *tarantasses*, for the more affluent pilgrims to the sacred shrine. For their comfort, too, a series of magnificent tile-fronted caravanserais (rented by the present Amin-es-Sultan) were erected at Aliabad, Manzarieh, and Kum, the distances being as follows: Teheran to Huseinabad (six *farsakhs*), Aliabad (eight), Manzarieh (five), Kum (six); total, twenty-five *farsakhs*, or ninety-one miles. The carriage service appears to have been a failure, or at least to have been inadequately patronised from the start; but as this section of the road has now been purchased from the Amin by the association who are responsible for the new Teheran-Burujird-Shushter wagon-road, there is a chance of its being properly organised and worked.

Now, however, occurs the interesting part of the story. Soon after the construction of the new road, the *kavir* of which I have spoken, and across which ran the old caravan track, became covered with a salt lake of considerable size: a phenomenon which excited such general interest that it was visited by the Shah, and received the honour of a description from the royal pen in the ‘Iran’ of May 10 and 19, 1888. which was translated by General Schindler and published with a map in the Proceedings of the R.G.S.¹ His Majesty discreetly attributed the formation of the lake to ‘waters bubbling up in the *kavir* like fountains from underground;’ but it must be added that other and less fortuitous explanations prevail. According to one account, a dam on the Kara Chai below the Pul-i-Dellak burst in 1883. so that the waters of the river poured through the gap into the depression of the *kavir*. But according to another and the more probable version. the dam did not collapse of its own accord, but was intentionally cut by the Amin-es-Sultan or his agents, in order to swamp the old caravan track, and force traffic and travellers on to the new road and into the new caravanserais. Anyhow. there is the lake;² and as it now receives the overflow of two rivers,

¹ Vol. x. (1889), pp. 624–633.

² The Shah said it is 30 *farsakhs*, or 120 miles, in circumference. This is a ridiculous exaggeration. That the lake, or rather a lake on the spot, is not an altogether novel phenomenon is evident from Mounsey, *Journey through the Caucasus*, p. 173. He crossed the *kavir* on March 28, 1866, and found it covered by a lake nearly a mile broad, after the melting of the snows.

FROM TEHERAN TO ISFAHAN

5

the Kara Chai from Saveh, and the Rud-i-Anarbar (sometimes miscalled Ab-i-Khonsar and Ab-i-Jerbadehan) from Kum, there it is likely to remain.

But the Amin-es-Sultan, having successfully defeated the old caravan-route, had yet to deal with the postal authorities and the s. Postal road *chapar* service; and here a further disagreement between him and the Amin-ed-Dowleh, Minister of Posts, is said to have been the reason for which a third road started into existence, still more to the west, and at the time of my visit to Persia, in 1889, was taken by the *chapar* rider to Kum. This was the track that I pursued.¹ Leaving Teheran by the Hamadan Gate, it follows the main caravan-route to the west, to a little beyond the village of Robat Kerim, the single wire to Baghdad, originally erected by English engineers, and afterwards handed over to the Persian Government, taking the same direction. At about sixteen miles from Teheran I crossed the slender stream of the Karij, flowing in a deep fissure between high banks, by a single-arched bridge. Robat Kerim is a straggling village with a filthy ditch running down the main street. Thence the road to Pik is as devoid of interest as it is wholly destitute of life; although running as it does over a level expanse, it is a welcome stage to the *chapar* rider. Low ranges of hills enclose the plain on either side; and towards one of these the track wends, plunging into a series of rolling hollows and undulations about four miles before reaching Pik. Demavend and the Elburz range were always behind me, the one snow-robed, the other snow-besprinkled; and with every quarter of an hour they took on a different light, from pink to ashen grey, through all the dwindling gradations of rose and saffron, as the afternoon died down into dusk. At Pik I found a *chapar-khaneh* with two separate towers and *bala-khanehs*, one of which had the usual overplus of open windows and flapping unshut doors. From there the track cuts across the surrounding fields in an easterly direction, and enters a low pass in the surrounding hills, down the further slope of which runs a stream strongly impregnated with salt, on its way to the new lake, which flashed before me in the morning sun, its borders marked by a glittering fringe of saline scum. I may here

¹ It has since been superseded by a more direct route, starting from Teheran by the old caravan-track *riā* Kinaregird, and joining the carriage-road; the total distance being charged as 24 *farsakhs*.

quote, as a sample of His Persian Majesty's style, the passage in which he described the surrounding scene:—

At this season (April) when most of the camels had brought forth their young, the greenness of the plains, the clearness of the air, the lake and the reflection of the sun on its waters, the vastness of the plain, the many camels and their young, the camel men and their children who were all busily tending the camels, the black tents of the Nomads, the many flocks of sheep, which were grazing in the plain, were wonderful to see.

Skirting the west shore of the lake the carriage-road from Teheran is here first encountered, driven in a bee-line across the valley (which is about sixteen miles in width), and joined by the *chapar* route on the crest of the further hill. On descending from this ridge by an easy pass on the south, we come to the magnificent new caravanserai of Manzarieh, with gorgeous tile-covered façade and emblem of the Lion and Sun sculpted in stone. Further down, and just before reaching the solitary post-house of Rahmetabad, the river Kara Chai, which flows from Saveh,¹ is crossed by a prodigious stone bridge, the most solid construction of the kind that I had so far seen. Another low ridge is climbed, another valley opens out, towards the southern end of which extends the belt of mingled brown and green that in the East signifies a large city. Above it the sun flames on the burnished cupolas and the soaring minars of Fatima's mosque. As we approach, the sacred buildings loom larger, and are presently seen to consist of two domes overlaid with gilded plates, and five lofty minarets, disposed in two pairs and a single standing in close proximity to the larger dome. Emerging from small clumps of trees, or standing in soli-

¹ Saveh is interesting as being Marco Polo's 'city of Saba, from which the three Magi set out when they went to worship Jesus Christ: and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. And above them there is a square building, carefully kept. The bodies are still entire, with the hair and beard remaining' (Yule's *Marco Polo*, vol. i. p. 73). The localisation of the home of the Magi at Saveh arose, no doubt, from a purely arbitrary application of the text in the Psalms (lxxii. 10)—'The kings of Tharsis and of the isles shall give presents; the kings of Arabia and Saba shall bring gifts'—whence it was supposed that one of them came from Tarsia in Eastern Turkestan, the second from Arabia, and the third from Saveh. No trace of either the sepulchres or the legend is found in the pages of any traveller in Persia subsequent to Marco Polo, and he himself said that, when he asked the people many questions, 'no one knew anything except that there were three kings who were buried there in days of old.' (Vide Keith Abbott (1849), *Journal of the R.G.S.*, vol. xxv. pp. 1–8: and Madame Dieulafoy (1881), *La Perse*, caps. ix. z.)

FROM TEHERAN TO ISFAHAN

7

tary prominence are to be seen the conical tiled roofs of scores of *imamzadehs* erected over the remains of famous saints and prophets, whose bones have been transported hither and laid to rest in the consecrated dust of Kum. There were formerly said to be over 400 of these structures in and around the city. Some of them are in good repair and contain beautiful panels or lintel-bands of tiles with Kufic inscriptions from the Koran. Others are in a state of shocking ruin, the blue tiles having peeled off their cupolas, upon whose summits repose enormous storks' nests. The landscape is framed on the south by a range of hills of splintered outline and peculiar sterility, whose forbidding aspect is in harmony with the traditional and fanatical superstition of the holy city.¹

The approach to the town lies through richly-cultivated fields; and at the very end of the road, which supplies a vista thereto, flashes the holy Fatima's dome. Immediately outside the gates flows, in the direction of the new lake, the Rud-i-Anarbar, which is crossed by a substantial bridge of nine arches. Some of the houses on the further bank have two storeys, with windows and balconies overlooking the stream—a more advanced degree of exterior embellishment than is usually attained by Persian domiciles. The remainder of the city, viewed from the outside, consists of a multitude of squat clay domes, the roof of nearly every building being shaped into half a dozen or a dozen of these protuberances. I traversed the entire length of the bazaar on my way to the *chapur-khaneh*, which, having recently been shifted, is now situated in a caravanserai opening out of the bazaar. The latter is vaulted throughout, and consists of one long alley, with a few parallel and transverse aisles. The roadway is broad, the shops large and well-furnished, and the jostle of human beings, camels, donkeys, horses, and cattle, was greater than I had yet seen in Persia. I subsequently retraced my footsteps to see as much of the mosque as is permissible to a Christian and an unbeliever. Outside its encircling wall extends a vast necropolis, adorned with thousands of stone slabs and crumbling mounds. A conjurer had selected this incongruous spot as his theatre, and was holding spell-bound a large crowd. I

¹ The name Kum is fancifully, but improbably, derived from *Kuh-i-mis*, mountain of copper, a mineral which is undoubtedly found in the adjacent hills. Its ancient name was Kumindan, or Kumidan, and it was one of seven villages which, in the eighth century A.D., were formed into a town, and called Kum.

rode up to the gateway of the big court of the mosque and, gazing in, not without attracting a large concourse of the curious, could see an immense quadrangle, with arched and tile-faced recesses all round the walls, and a tank for ablutions in the centre. Fraser, in 1821, entered the mosque in disguise, and visited the tomb-chamber. A Dr. Bicknell, who had already been to Mecca, made a similar entry in 1869, disguised as a Haji. Arnold, in 1875, having entered the outer court, remembered that discretion is the better part of valour, and beat a retreat; while any less adventurous Giaour must be content with what he can see through the open gate.

Kum is the site of the second most sacred shrine in Persia, and the Westminster Abbey of many of her kings. I have already spoken of the solicitous regard for the welfare of his devotees that led the Imam Reza to scatter his relatives while living, and their corpses when dead, throughout the country that he loved so well. At Kum are deposited the remains of his sister, Fatima-el-Masuma, i.e. the Immaculate, who, according to one account, lived and died here, having fled from Baghdad to escape the persecution of the Khalifs; according to another, sickened and died at Kum, on her way to see her brother at Tus. He, for his part, is believed by the pious Shiahs to return the compliment by paying her a visit every Friday from his shrine at Meshed. Kum¹ appears to have existed from an earlier period, although we may be absolved from accepting the legendary Persian foundation by Tahmuras or Kai Kobad. It was not, however, till it became the sepulchre of the illustrious Fatima, nor, after that, until the Shiah faith had become the national religion, that the town attained its reputation for especial sanctity. It was, of course, sacked by Timur, and has been in a state of greater or less ruin ever since. As the quaint Herbert phrased it, 'in the Sable weed she is still apparelled; for great Coom is now onely *magni nominis umbra*.' Nevertheless, under the patronage of the Sefavi sovereigns, the city revived; fine quays adorned the banks of the river; extensive bazaars and handsome caravanserais received or

¹ Kum has been described at greater or less length by a succession of eminent travellers, whose works I have so frequently cited that I need not recapitulate them here: Sir T. Herbert (1627), J. B. Tavernier (1632), Sir J. Chardin (*circa* 1670), J. Struys (1671), C. Le Brun (1703), Sir J. Malcolm (1800), J. P. Morier (1809), Sir J. M. Kinneir (1810), Sir W. Ouseley (1811), Sir R. Ker Porter (1818), J. B. Fraser (1821), R. B. Binning (1851), J. Ussher (1861), Colonel Euan Smith (1870), Mrs. Bishop (1890).