

Chapter Nine



It was a huge relief when, in mid-September, the searing temperatures started to subside. I had been in Iran for nearly seven months and had been riding out the summer hiking through the mountains around Tehran and impatiently waiting for the onset of the milder weather. With autumn on the horizon, I readied my kit and prepared to set out on the road. I was planning on heading north to the Caspian shores once again, but this time towards Rasht on the landlocked sea's north-western shoreline. I had talked through my itinerary – a long trip travelling anti-clockwise around a large swathe of the country – with a well-travelled friend a week previously and was about to set out for the bus station when my telephone rang. 'Are you still thinking of heading north? I have a friend you should meet who can give you a lift,' said Anoush, a resourceful type who saw it as his personal mission to furnish me with as many different experiences and perspectives as he could during my time in Iran.

And so I found myself in the back of a black Nissan Patrol, Franz Ferdinand's bass riffs reverberating through me, staring at a sticker on the dashboard that read in English, 'A good tool is hard to find'. Were it not for the sea of endless, unchanging yet somehow intoxicating dust stretching as far as the eye could see, and the imposing majesty of the Alborz disappearing into a tawny horizon, I could well have been back

in England. In the driver's seat was Raam, drumming his hands on the steering-wheel and singing along to the music as we sped west out of Tehran. We were heading towards Karaj and beyond into the wilderness of an ancient road now alive with plastic bottles and bags being swept this way and that by gusts from passing cars, occasionally so thick the earth beneath was lost to sight; Raam to visit some friends near Rasht, and I to set out on a journey of nearly two months that was to take me through some of the most ancient and revered sites of Iran.

Over the course of the next couple of years Raam would become one of my closest friends and an invaluable guide to youth culture in Tehran. He was the lead singer of a rock band, a form of music deemed illegal in Iran – and to make matters worse he sang in English. The underground music scene was thriving, he told me, with so many young Iranians wanting to express themselves through the music they loved and, despite the government's best efforts, had easy access to through the internet. Young musicians would congregate at certain houses and underground locations discussing current trends in international music and jamming with one another, covering everything from classic rock to contemporary chart hits. Slowly, as relationships developed and common tastes were discovered, bands would form. The bigger the reputation of a musician or band, the more talented musicians would seek them out in the hope of joining forces. That is how Raam came to be the frontman of a band named Hypernova.

Hypernova had been playing clandestine gigs for a couple of years and had gained a considerable underground following thanks in no small part to Raam's charisma and his witty, probing lyrics. As we drove to Rasht, Raam told me about the trials and tribulations of being in an illegal rock band in Tehran, about gigs in abandoned factories being raided by the police and about how they were busy recording an album in a hidden basement that had been sound-proofed and turned into a studio. However bleak his tales of life in Tehran occasionally became, they were always punctuated by raucous laughter. Despite his often miserable appearance, Raam was a true exponent of *hal kardan* – the Iranian art of finding the joy in every situation.

Hal kardan literally means 'having a good time' but this translation does not properly convey the idea and feeling behind the Persian words. The concept of *hal* reveals a lot about the hedonistic side of the Iranian character. With implications of living for and revelling in the moment – appreciating it as a Baudelairean moment of spiritual elation

that lifts you from the ennui of daily life – the word *hal* (pronounced as an American would say ‘hall’) suggests experiencing pleasure with mild mystical undertones. Iran has a torrid history full of suffering, and the attraction of pure elation can be easily understood as a psychological counter-measure and traced back to the same source in the national psyche that produces the corrosive, dry humour and ability to make light of adversity which Iranians have perfected.

Raam had spent part of his youth in Canada and thanks to his tongue-in-cheek English lyrics and the healthy online presence Hypernova had developed, the band had managed to attract a certain amount of foreign media attention. They were hoping, Raam told me excitedly, that once they finished recording their album, they would be invited to play at the South by Southwest festival in Texas and try to take on America.

‘Everyone buys into this idea that we’re all hell-bent on destroying America. The whole Great Satan thing,’ the car swerved as Raam convulsed with laughter. ‘It’s just propaganda. Most people I know love America. They’re obsessed by the culture and spend their lives trying to engineer ways to move out there. I’ve been to the States but the other guys in the band, they’ve never left Iran. They’ve got their fantasies about what life is like over there. I just want to get some place where we can actually have a shot at a career in music. And if it works out ... well, then the guys may yet get to live out some of their sordid fantasies.’ Raam’s eyes shut momentarily as he chuckled at this thought.

‘I swear this place gets bigger every time I drive past it,’ said Raam as we approached Karaj. Originally a small settlement built to house workers building and operating the dam nestled in the folds of the mountains to the north-west of Tehran, it has become a sprawling town well over a million strong and growing by the day. Karaj is typical of the social problems Iran faces as it fails to tackle the rush to urbanisation that threatens many smaller, rural settlements and traditional ways of life. It is not uncommon to come across near-deserted villages devoid of anyone between the ages of sixteen and sixty. The empty promise of money and the prospect of work have caused Tehran and its suburbs to explode, sprawling chaotically in every direction to accommodate a population that has, in a few decades, gone from 2 to nearly 20 million.

After a couple of hours we had arrived at our first port of call, the oasis town of Takestan. Like so many Iranian towns, Takestan just appears out of nowhere. And again, like so many Iranian towns, its sudden appearance out of nowhere is explained by the abundance of water that flows beneath the earth as it runs down from the snow-capped mountains in

the distance. Most of the country's small towns have very little to flaunt but what they do have they proclaim with a vengeance. In the case of Takestan the local produce is grapes. Grapes were everywhere; on the town placard, on bumper stickers, on posters in windows, and of course the grapes themselves were being sold by the side of every crossroads in town, piled high on stalls, in wheelbarrows or out of the open doors and boots of cars. Small, round and incredibly sweet, they were delicious to eat and, so an enthusiastic local told us as Raam bought a big bunch, excellent for wine-making.

★ ★ ★

Wine-making originated in the fertile region that straddles modern-day Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The history of wine-making in Iran is long and rich despite its current illegal status. It was frequently used in Zoroastrian ceremonies, and monarchs from the ancient Elamites in the second millennium BCE to the Safavids in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE and the Qajars in the nineteenth century CE were famed for their wine-drinking bouts. The famous Shiraz vine also originates from the ancient province of Fars but, as with much of Iranian history, the true origins of wine-making have been clouded by time and commingled with mythology. Zoroastrian cosmogony states that Ahriman made an attempt to sabotage the creation of the world by Spenta Mainyu, the Spirit of Good, by slaying the Cosmic Bull but this attempted sabotage backfired: 'For when the bull expired, its brain and other organs were scattered over the ground and fertilized it, and from its severed members every kind of grain and healing plant sprang up while from its blood the vine arose "from which wine is made".'¹

A slightly more poetic and less gruesome version of the mythological origins of wine are cited in the *Nowrouznameh* attributed to the celebrated astronomer-poet Omar Khayyam. The ancient king of Herat, Shemiran, was approached by an eagle begging the king for help. A snake had wrapped itself around the majestic bird's neck and was slowly strangling the life out of it. The king ordered his son, an exceptional marksman, to kill the snake. This the prince did with the shot of a single arrow. The eagle, thus liberated from the deadly beast, circled the castle three times in thanks before flying away. A year later to the day, the eagle returned and dropped a few seeds on the exact spot where the prince had freed it. The king ordered that the seeds be planted. Several years later, the vine that grew from the seeds bore fruit

in bunches that in autumn ‘turned black, juicy and appetizing’. Seeing that the grapes were so full of juice, the king ordered that they be pressed. ‘After several days the juice began to bubble and boil, but they waited until it became once more calm and lucid and a rich ruby-red, and they all agreed that this must be the end product.’ Not wanting to risk ingesting the unknown liquid himself, the king summoned a prisoner who had been condemned to death and instructed him to drink, stipulating that if he survived he would be pardoned and set free. The prisoner grimaced as he drank a cup of the red liquid with tentative gulps. The moment he finished it, he asked for another. ‘Upon drinking the second glass he became very jovial and merry, and began to sing and dance, losing all his bashfulness and forgetting completely the presence of the king.’ Again, he asked for another cup, saying ‘Give me this third glass for now I do not care if I die.’ He drank heartily, ‘after which he became very drowsy and fell into a deep sleep, from which he did not arouse until the next day.’ Once the prisoner regained consciousness, the intrigued king questioned him on his experience of the previous day.

‘When I started to drink at first I found it bitter, but when it reached my stomach I yearned for more. After the second glass I felt a glow of merriment and joviality, and I lost all bashfulness and was unable at this stage to find any difference between Your Majesty and myself. When I drank the third glass I fell into a deep sleep.’² True to his word, the king released the man and immediately passed an edict requiring the drinking of wine on all occasions of state and celebration.

★ ★ ★

As with any drive from one side of the Alborz to the other, the scenery gradually became softer and more stunning the closer we got to the Caspian. We left the dusty drabness of Takestan and the identical roadside villages of the plain – each comprising a baker’s, two mechanics and a few grocers dangling colourful tat in an attempt to ensnare passers-by – behind us as we moved towards the tiered fields, hexagonal tin hats and yellows, browns and greens of agricultural communities nestling among the mountains. The rolling green hills and a patchwork of fields again felt distinctly European until the road twisted into another valley to reveal a series of trees planted in the shape of the four-pronged symbol of the Islamic Republic, a graphic

that reads *Allah*. Next to it was a similar-sized rectangle of greenery that had once depicted the *Shir-o-Khorshid*, the now outlawed ancient royal emblem of the Sun and Lion. Descending through the mountains, we cruised towards Rasht, the principal city along the Iranian rim of the Caspian sea. Like its surroundings, there was a freshness and viridity to the place, a tangible sense of excitement at having outgrown the state of a sleepy seaside town. The city looked much like countless others in Iran, but the atmosphere had a certain relaxed, rural charm to it.

We drove right through Rasht and on into its suburbs. Alarmed, I told Raam that we had passed the guest-house I had planned to stay in. He just laughed. ‘Oh, how little you know about Iranian culture, my friend.’ This was to be the first of many times I would be ‘taken hostage’ by Iranian hospitality.

★ ★ ★

Having bobbed along a dirt road for a few kilometres, we pulled into a dishevelled driveway and parked in front of a couple of small bungalows. On the porch of one sat Alla, his portly frame supported by a rickety bench straining under his weight. His fingers were stuffed into chunky, stone-encrusted rings. He wore a vest and baggy shorts and, as his sandals flapped towards us, Raam jumped out of the car and ran over to him. Putting one hand on Alla’s curly locks and the other onto his sizeable and equally curly beard, Raam shook his head from side to side. ‘It’s good to see you, my friend. Where’s Atta?’

‘Here,’ came a lackadaisical, nasal voice as a slouching youth ambled around the corner, a rifle with a double-barrel slung over his shoulder. Alla and Atta, two brothers – the first in his mid-twenties and the other his late teens – had been Raam’s neighbours in Tehran until they decided to turn their backs on city life and settle at one of their favoured fishing spots. Being natural outdoorsmen they used to flee Tehran to hunt and fish at every opportunity. It was on one of these excursions that they heard about a fishery that was available for rent. Without hesitation they renounced their comfortable urban life for a simple rustic one. Since then, they have been running the 30 hectares and eighteen freshwater pools of this sizeable operation breeding various types of carp: grass carp, bighead carp and silver carp (known locally as *fitofag*).

We were given a tour of the fishery and introduced to their tawny Great Dane before grabbing some rods and indulging in an obligatory spot of evening fishing. They had purchased the dog to chase off poachers; the rumour amongst locals was that the two city boys had tamed a lion. Once we had caught our dinner, our hosts decided it was time to let the festivities begin. We clambered into Alla's rusty pickup and headed to the local *kababi*. There, to my surprise, a bottle of *aragh* – the prevalent moonshine of the region – was ordered. In reply to my bemused look Alla pointed to nearly every table, where people were openly enjoying a drink with their steaming skewers of lamb, apparently oblivious to the fact that drinking alcohol carried a severe penalty in the Islamic Republic of Iran. 'This is the North. Things are a little different here,' Alla explained. 'They've got whisky and vodka too, but I wouldn't go near that.' On the way back we drove past a toothless local standing by the side of the road who gave Alla a friendly wave. 'And that's where to get opium,' he smiled and, with a single outstretched finger, pushed up the peak of his cap in greeting.

As Alla regaled us with the fishing tales that appear to be universal fare amongst angling enthusiasts the world over, we settled down to a meal of expertly filleted and grilled fish and rice back in Alla's bungalow. We ate the meal, hastily prepared by the two brothers, from the traditional *sofreh* spread, off the floor of the room that we all later bedded down on; a pile of cushions and rugs in the corner of the single room that all shared, as was customary – provided, of course, that the company was all the same sex.

The following morning I awoke to find Raam bolt upright, wide-eyed and trembling with excitement. 'You missed them, they were incredible,' he beamed. He had awoken to see three jackals curiously eyeing the bungalow, no more than 6 metres away, and had been waiting motionless, camera in hand, for the past forty minutes in case they reappeared.

★ ★ ★

When he heard that I was planning to explore the local area, Raam insisted that he accompany me. The road west from Rasht – past Fuman and up towards the lofty heights of Khalkhal – traces its way through valleys of dense forest snaking up the mountainside. Without warning, the compact green of the forest was disrupted by an explosion of soft yellow glowing invitingly from above. This was the mountain village

of Masuleh, with its houses arranged neatly so that, as at Abiyaneh (the village near Kashan I had visited with Mr Toor Host), the roofs of the dwellings on one street level functioned as the pavement for the street above. On approach, Masuleh seemed the epitome of the quaint mountain community and yet it all rang hollow when we reached the village streets. They were awash with the tacky tat of a tourist trap. The whole extraordinary array of Iranian confections, from the flapping red pancakes of *lavashak* and the chewy, cake-like slices of *conjed* (sesame, crushed walnuts and honey), right through to the shiver-inducing sourness of *gharaghoroot* (obtained by boiling the water left over from the yoghurt-making process which metamorphoses into a brown substance somewhat resembling fudge in all but taste) – all these and much more were laid out on trays and tables the crowds were herded towards by toothless old women desperate to make a sale.

Then came the village bazaar. The narrow alleys were crammed with dangling wares and postcard carousels. Silver-haired stall-keepers with the weathered hide of mountain villagers, beaten by a lifetime of winter chill and summer heat, occasionally beckoned to us with a half-hearted gesture, as if knowing that these visitors too would not provide salvation. The heavy, knitted socks, the rugs with their bands of vivid colours and simple animal pictography, the roughly hewn copper bowls and trays would remain untouched for another day. Here, like many a mountain village I had visited in the Andes, was a community that had transformed itself from the harsh daily struggle of a self-reliant, traditional high-altitude people to one of complacent dependence on selling worthless trinkets to a dwindling stream of tourists. UNESCO has made this village a protected site to preserve its traditional beauty but the mixed blessing that is the tourism industry at once provided a cure from financial ailments whilst simultaneously compromising the cultural integrity of traditional life. For romantic eyes like my own, the process of redefinition had irretrievably corrupted the soul of this village. Abiyaneh, its terracotta-coloured twin, had thus far managed to embrace the industry with a touch more decorum.

Curiosity had led Raam to carry on driving an hour or so past the village along the old, barely travelled mountain route that led to the hot springs of Khalkhal. We drove up through the clouds until the asphalt road turned into a bumpy dirt track, but so magical was the scenery that we were impelled to keep on going. Our car was briefly engulfed by the mist that swirled about the valley like a raging sea until we climbed through it to be dazzled by the sharp, ethereal light and crisp

air beyond. Here, the panorama – rolling hills with alluring, soft curves of emerald-green, the odd tree standing dutifully on guard, its shadow stretching over a carpet of gently swaying grass – suggested anything but the Middle East. At this altitude the colours of the green hilltop poking through the white sea of rising mist like a verdant glacier and the perennial backdrop of the blue sky were so vibrant and alive as to give the whole scene an otherworldly feel.

‘Everything’s so clean up here ... even the sheep,’ chuckled Raam as a lonely shepherd and his flock appeared along the road – the first signs of life we had seen since leaving Masuleh. He was right; the sheep’s fleeces had the pure sheen of fresh-fallen snow, the dirt road somehow lost the appearance of dirt and even the shepherd, a mountain-dwelling nomad, looked as though his clothes had been freshly washed and pressed. We pulled over and basked in the beauty of the place as low-hanging clouds drifted so close we could reach out and touch them.

As we drove on, still near Masuleh, we happened on an isolated roadside inn that our stomachs dictated we stop at. Here, reclining on carpet-covered *takhts* (raised wooden platforms with stiff cushions for backrests, found in most traditional restaurants and many homes for *al fresco* dining), we ordered an array of kebabs, rice, garlic yoghurt and fresh bread. I asked Raam for a sip of water from the bottle he had just set on the table. ‘Help yourself,’ he replied, ‘only you may want to order something to mix it with,’ he added under his breath. So it was that we feasted on kebabs and moonshine in a remote mountain village deep in the heart of the Alborz Mountains; I sheepishly, my companion with admirable gusto.

The intoxicating mixture of tender lamb, moonshine and the idyllic surroundings soon set my mind drifting and, as Iranians so often do, reflecting on this country to which I at once belonged and was alien. As I looked around me I knew that, at that moment, for all its fatal flaws and contradictions it most decidedly was mine – the overt opulence of old royal chambers, the daunting grandeur of past palaces, the imposing scale and occasionally exquisite skill of its ancient bas-reliefs, the sensuality of its architecture and its landscapes, the refined delicacy of its miniature paintings, the intense spirituality of its poetry, even its maddening people and their uncanny skill at not meeting their capabilities – all these were mine. This was a land of opulence and sensuality, a nation as decadent as it was devout; able to tolerate, to borrow a line from the poet Hafez, ‘preachers who from the height of their pulpits sparkle in their sermons, when back at home devote themselves to business of a different sort’. No

amount of austere Islamic fervour could hide this reality. Iran is a land of contradiction; of snow-capped mountains and arid salt plains, of lush jungle and interminable desert. Its people are as schizophrenic as the land they inhabit, torn by the cosmic struggle of light and darkness – of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman – that has been fated to rage within their souls.

★ ★ ★

The following morning it was time for Raam to return to Tehran with the car, leaving me to carry on my journey north. As we said our good-byes, Raam grabbed my head with both hands and landed a wet kiss on my forehead. With that, he clambered back into his car and drove off in a cloud of dust and laughter.

I boarded a local bus driving past Gisoun, a beach Alla had recommended I visit. After about half an hour I was dropped off at a T-junction and watched the bus trundle off, trailing thick plumes of black smoke from a dangling exhaust. Opposite me sat a battered cart resting on two warped wooden wheels, an empty bottle of water resting on the improvised counter and a bag of potato crisps hanging from a wire, bobbing in the gentle breeze. ‘How do I get to Gisoun beach?’ I asked the heavy-set vendor sporting a straw hat perched languidly on his head and with very little to sell. He raised a podgy finger and with a silent nod pointed to a road that led deep into the thick forest. I had not been walking long when a passing car slowed down. The young driver, in Ray-Ban shades, Nike T-shirt and blue jeans, eyed me curiously and offered me a ride. He was a recent graduate attempting to make a living selling real estate in the region to those newly enriched in Tehran. The 6-kilometre drive went by in a flash of high-speed machismo as the young driver regaled me, a complete stranger, with lurid tales of past conquests which competed with blaring German Trance music, negotiating the twists and turns of the road with a casual palm as his other hand, elbow perched on the open window, ran a comb through his gelled hair.

Gisoun beach was not the quiet, sandy strip of secluded seaside jungle I had anticipated. A *chadori* woman sat perched on the steps of one of the dilapidated iron shacks generously described as ‘villas’, thick brows surveying her eight screaming children busy chasing an innocent chicken while their vest-clad, mustachioed father fanned flaming coals in preparation for meat-laden skewers. Colourful, circular cafés with thatched roofs catered for loud, littering crowds. A forlorn young woman stood ankle-deep in the sea, staring wistfully at the soft spume of breaking

waves, her chador flapping in the salty breeze. It did not take much to induce me away from the crowds, moving along the beach in search of a suitable, more secluded spot to camp.

In the fast-fading light I stumbled upon a boy no more than twelve years old. The faint fur of his top lip was the first sign of impending adolescence. His slow, rural drawl, slightly oversized tongue and disproportionate features, along with a lackadaisical amble, all conspired to give him the impression of being a touch slow. But this was far from the reality. Armin informed me that the sizeable farmhouse above was his, that his uncle was away tending to business in another village and that he might not return for a day or two. He offered me a room in the house and breakfast for 5,000 *tomans* (roughly five dollars at the time). I declined, explaining that I had my heart set on camping. He insisted a number of times before eventually agreeing to let me camp on his lawn for 3,000 *tomans*. I suspected he was more desperate for the company than the money. Just as I had set the tent up on the beachfront, Armin reappeared with a rug and some eggs for the following morning. I thanked him but explained that I had no pan. He then insisted I join him at the house for breakfast before disappearing into the night, paying no heed to my feeble objections and eventual thanks. Ten minutes later he had returned with an excessive pile of fire-wood and lit a fire. He sat down with me, this time upon my insistence, for a simple meal of bread, cheese, onions – which he bit heartily into like an apple – and tomatoes.

One glance at the English scrawl in my notebook had Armin very excited at the prospect of trying out his handful of English words. He noticed my surprise at his easy recognition of the foreign script. A saturnine look overtook his youthful features as he launched into the story of his grandfather who not so long ago owned the entire stretch of beach until he was stripped of it by deceitful developers. They duped him into making his mark (he was an illiterate farmer) on a document that entitled them to develop the land and, once certain specified conditions were met, forced him to sell it on to them at an extortionately low price. This was the sad plight of countless villagers the world over but here, played out between the lush verdure of the Alborz and the melancholy grey Caspian Sea, the story seemed all the more doleful. It was made even more depressing by the detritus of modernity which was taking over the seashore – the cans, bottles and plastic wrappers that outnumbered the shells and driftwood. More depressing still was Armin's indifference to all this.

The pleasant sea air and soothing sound of gently breaking waves ensured a good night's rest. My slumber was momentarily disturbed, though, by an invisible old man who, from the darkness beyond my tent-flap, warned me of lurking 'cutthroat' thieves. The thoughtful comment spurred me to hurriedly pull my bag into the already cramped tent, zip it shut and lie coiled, pocket-knife in hand, until my anxiety was overpowered by fatigue and I again drifted off.

I awoke to the clucking of chickens busy strutting around my tent. Poking my head out, I saw a line of cows ambling across the beach silhouetted against the morning sun twinkling on the surface of the ocean. A solitary bull eyed my tent quizzically, its snout poking over the rickety fence between us. Armin soon came to fetch me for the promised breakfast and the news that my nocturnal visitor had been none other than his uncle, who had returned from his business late last night and who, in Armin's own words, 'enjoyed a drink as much as he did a joke'. After a hearty breakfast of fried eggs and tomatoes, fresh flat bread, cheese and mint leaves washed down by glasses of tea, I bade Armin farewell as he washed our dirty dishes with water from the adjoining well, humbled by the hospitality of my young host. As I turned to leave, he noticed the plastic bag full of rubbish I had in my hand. 'Let me take that for you,' he said, 'the dogs'll eat it.' He emptied it on the lawn metres away from his front door and turned back to the dishes.

★ ★ ★

The heat and humidity dissuaded me from walking the 6 kilometres back to the main road I had left yesterday. It did not take long to find someone willing to drive me to Hashtpar, a village that straddles the main road leading north. From there it was a short but heart-stopping ride in a *savari* taxi to Astara. I stuffed myself and my backpack into the back of a tired looking Paykan, next to two passengers and behind two others – six passengers in a four-seater. Before I had managed to press myself into the back of the already cramped car, the driver slammed his foot down on the accelerator and we lurched forward. As I tried to disentangle myself from my unamused co-passengers, the car wove in and out of traffic indifferent to which way it was going, overtook on blind corners and occasionally screeched to an unannounced and very sudden halt to drop off and pick up passengers, oblivious to anything else on the road. *Savari* drivers as a breed consider themselves masters of their fate, unassailable by mishaps and quite oblivious to the death toll

amongst them in a country with the highest car-crash fatality rate in the world. My fingers were slowly burrowing deeper and deeper into my thigh with every terrifying kilometre of the journey. However terrifying *savaris* may be, I came to learn that they are almost always the fastest, cheapest, easiest and quite often only means of getting from one place to the next in Iran.

★ ★ ★

Astara is tucked into the northern tip of the western shores of the Caspian. It is both a port and a border town. Shopping malls, the bazaars of the twenty-first century, have mushroomed all over the place, displaying the flood of cheap Russian goods that have saturated the market from across the Azeri border. Neon signs and strip-lights hummed characterless arcades into life as groups of shoppers floated idly between small shops disgorging surplus stock out of their doors. Chaotic piles of jeans, shirts, trainers and sunglasses tottered precariously, labels displaying the Cyrillic script of their country of origin. From out of the dreary folds of chadors strutted legs clad in faded blue denim, imitation designer frames sat on heads draped in black and the latest smartphones were pressed to every ear. These sights are familiar in Tehran, Shiraz and Esfahan but were surprising in a distant provincial town the size of Astara. The profusion and prices of DVD players, wide-screen televisions and digital radios showed that the god of consumerism had pervaded even the far reaches of the Islamic Republic.

Other than discount shopping and illicit black cans of imported vodka, Astara has little to offer the traveller. After dark, I decided to wander towards the border. Until 1991, this had been the border between Iran and the Soviet Union, between the so-called 'Free World' and the dark, sinister empire (as it was then portrayed) of communism, when – until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – Iran was a staunch ally of the Americans in the Manichaean struggle between the West and the Soviets. After the fall of the Shah in 1979, the new Iran created an uneasy friendship with Moscow, but with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, this became the border with the Republic of Azerbaijan.

'Don't loiter or you'll get shot by the guards,' advised the friendly man I had stopped for directions. A 3-metre-high concrete wall complete with razor wire, turrets and searchlights ran along the bank of the

river that separates Azerbaijan from Iran. A heavy gate blocked access to a bridge leading to foreign soil. A shuffle in a guard tower above was enough to send me scuttling back through what resembled a seedy dockyard. I had seen enough to persuade me that there was little worth seeing.

★ ★ ★

The Astara–Ardebil road, through the Gardane-ye-Heyran, a meandering drive over forested foothills and through fertile valleys, is famed for its beauty. Sir Roger Stevens compared it to the English South Downs and the friend in Tehran who had suggested the route called it ‘a slice of heaven’ – both comparisons proved justified. Somewhat immunised by the *savari* experience of the previous day, I hired a *savari* ‘*dar bast*’ (literally closed door), meaning I took the taxi exclusively for myself.

We sped along the valley floor beside a barbed-wire fence the other side of which lay the Republic of Azerbaijan. The forest covered both sides of the border in a rich, leafy canopy. My driver, his wrinkled face red with excitement, extolled the virtues of Iran whilst pouring abuse on all other nations he had visited – always for the purpose of pilgrimage. No journey through Iran would be complete without a vitriolic rant from a cab driver on the woes of modern life. This particular man’s social analysis was quite straightforward and delivered with considerable gusto. It went something like this: there are no jobs for young men, which means they cannot afford their own places, which means they cannot marry, which invariably leads to laziness and loose living, meaning promiscuity and drug use (disturbingly prevalent in Iran and on the increase, with some statistics claiming it has the highest percentage of addicts of any country on the planet).

‘Work and marriage are the mortar that holds together the bricks of society,’ he yelled, swivelling around to thrust a clenched fist bearing his wedding ring millimetres from my nose. When he asked about my life, I quietly muttered that I was not married, nor did I have a job to speak of. He took a long look at me in his rear-view mirror before swearing that he would work until the day he died. I fell silent, trying to decipher the meaning of this last sentence as we sped towards Ardebil.