

Taliban tourism's dangerous appeal

Last Updated: Sat, Dec 6, 2008, 00:00

Don Duncan reports on tourism in a country where the lines separating peace and war shift as easily as those between the past and the future

AS AIRPORTS GO Dubai International is one of the more luxurious, an oasis of high design, chic lounges and upscale retail. But that's Terminal 1. Terminal 2 feels like a dark secret, barely signposted and difficult to locate. It has garish counters, stained walls and no air conditioning, so real-world smells, banished from the duty-free paradise of Terminal 1, come back full force.

As the destinations begin to flip across the departures board, it becomes a little clearer why this place has earned a reputation as the terminal to hell: Baghdad, Basra, Tehran, Islamabad, Karachi, Peshawar and, finally, my destination: Kabul, in Afghanistan.

Once a crucial stop on the hippy trail from Europe to India, Afghanistan has been wiped off the tourism map by its wars, a destination of extreme danger in our imaginations. But to travel there is to realise that there are two Afghanistans: the one we all know about - a country of conflict, particularly in Helmand and Kandahar - and one that is at peace, although with varying levels of stability, from jittery, paranoid Kabul to carefree Mazar-i-Sharif.

This first version of Afghanistan makes the entire country too dangerous to visit at the moment. But the second version, the one obscured by the headlines of body counts and insurgency, is worth visiting when peace returns to Afghanistan.

At the airport to meet me when I arrive, before the summer, is Muqim Jamshady, the 28-year-old owner of Afghan Logistics Tours, one of Afghanistan's two tourism companies. There is no solo backpacking here. To enjoy your stay, and stay safe, you need someone familiar with the country.

I adapt quickly to the Nato and Afghan soldiers, checkpoints and sandbagged entrances. Very soon the beauty begins to seep through. In late afternoon thousands of kites soar into the clear sky above the poorest parts of Kabul. Tracing the lines down from the kites, you find hundreds of laughing faces: fathers and sons and groups of boys on street corners, on fences and on rooftops.

Afghanistan is full of such unexpected moments of beauty. And surprise. Philip Behan, a 25-year-old civil servant from Dublin, was in Kabul earlier this year when six people were killed and six injured by a suicide bomb at the Serena Hotel, one of the biggest Taliban attacks in Kabul since 2001. "Sometimes you'd feel unsafe," he says. "Walking around freely was kind of hard."

Behan made the trip, primarily to Kabul and surrounding areas, to take photographs and discover the people. By the time I get to Kabul, three months later, things are better, and I can walk around most neighbourhoods on my own, leaving my guide at the car. The line separating the two Afghanistans shifts on a daily basis. A guide-cum-driver such as Jamshady costs about €35 a day and keeps you on the right side of that line.

"Sometimes the whole population knows something and the tourist doesn't know," says Andre Mann, an American who runs Great Game Travel, the other tourism company in the country.

"The local officials, security networks and international organisations that we have relationships with all give us a heads-up if they see a shift in tactics by the Taliban or a change in security in a certain road."

Since the Serena Hotel attack, security has been higher around western establishments in the city. Popping down to the pub for a beer in the evening is no simple task. Going, say, to the Hare and Hound pub (Gandamack Lodge, 00-93- 700-276937, www.gandamack lodge.co.uk), on Sherpur Square, means having an armed driver pick you up at your hotel.

From the street the Hare and Hound looks nothing like a pub, as it's hidden behind a wall of sandbags. The door is metal. You knock, show your passport, get frisked, then pass through a series of doors, each of which is locked behind you before the next one opens. The final door opens into an English-style pub that smells of beer.

Kabul has an awkward kind of cosmopolitanism. At dusk you find many young Kabulis skateboarding up on Swimming Pool Hill in T-shirts and Diesel jeans, their long surfer hair blowing in the wind.

The hill is named after an Olympic-sized pool the Soviet Union built for its soldiers during its occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Taliban left it empty but used its high diving board: alleged criminals and homosexuals were pushed off it. If they survived hitting the concrete, they were judged innocent. Few did. The young Kabulis now come to the empty pool for its smooth concrete floor. The pavements that development has brought to Kabul are too rough for their skateboards.

The view from Swimming Pool Hill is breathtaking: a panorama of Kabul with, in the foreground, boys whizzing by on boards in all the styles of California.

The city is the inevitable first port of call for anyone visiting Afghanistan, and it is certainly worthy of a few days. But security requirements make for a particularly chaperoned experience. Going north to Mazar-i-Sharif changes all this. Afghanistan's fourth-largest city, 45 minutes by air from Kabul, is in the heartland of what was the Northern Alliance, the regional force that defeated the Taliban in 2001.

It is the most secure area in the country. Walking around on your own is unproblematic. The city has great little stores where you can buy crafted wood, woollen hats, Uzbek embroideries and handmade carpets, some of which depict key moments in Afghanistan's recent history: the end of the Soviet occupation, in 1989, the World Trade Center attacks, in 2001, and the arrival of the US-led coalition forces later that year.

I stay at the Barat, one of just two hotels in Mazar-i-Sharif. It stands opposite the Blue Mosque, a complex of pools, green areas and zones of prayer that every evening becomes a bustling confluence of life. The sunsets are sublime: the dying rays catch thousands of white doves, the splash of children playing in the fountains, the flowing movement of burkas and wisps of smoke from men gathered to chat.

At the hotel I have a floor to myself, as do each of the six other guests. Some have come with a mission. A woman from Switzerland wants to understand the plight of people with disabilities; she is using a wheelchair and wants to see how a country where 10 per cent of the population has been disabled by war and disease is dealing with the problem. (Not very well is the answer.)

Others come to experience the immediacy of Afghanistan's past, a raw unveiling of history that is palpable in a way you won't find in other destinations. "Standing on the ramparts of Alexander the Great's fortress in Balkh [a 30-minute drive from Mazar], you can see, in the distance, rubble from the conflicts in the 1980s with the Russians," says Martin Elling, a business consultant from New York, who recently visited for a week. "You can see thousands of years of living history."

Afghanistan's most recent history is of particular appeal. "Taliban tourism" could be one description of it. Just as other tourists are drawn to remote places for their unspoilt beaches, many visitors to Afghanistan are drawn by its unspoilt history, untouched remnants of the war against the Taliban in 2001, artefacts from the birthplace of the so-called war on terrorism.

Qala-i-Jangi, a 19th-century fortress 20km outside Mazar whose name means House of War in Persian, is the site of the Taliban's final resistance against the Northern Alliance and US-led forces in this part of Afghanistan in 2001. About 300 Taliban fighters held by the Northern Alliance in the fortress rose up and fought for seven days before being subdued by heavy artillery fire.

Today the bullet holes along the walls of the fortress remain unplastered. Rusty remnants of tanks and heavy artillery lie strewn around. Graffiti scratched in Persian and Urdu into black scorched walls declares "Long live the Taliban" or, referring to a Pakistani Taliban fighter who died in the conflict, "In memory of Mullah Mohammad Jan Akhond".

My guide in Mazar, an upbeat 28-year-old named Shoib Najafizada, knows this because he was there during the battle, as a translator for the US army. Many of the Afghans who worked as military and media translators in 2001 are being called on as guides, so tourists get first-hand testimony about some of the most crucial moments of the Taliban's fall.

The Taliban is still alive in the country - in the Afghanistan at war, along the border with Pakistan. Over the past months it has been advancing on the US-armed forces there.

Andre Mann of Great Game Tours is reminded of the fragility of the situation when he shows visitors battle sites. "More often than not a Black Hawk or an Apache helicopter will fly over, and it is clear that what I am describing is still going on," he says. "These battles we describe could be the future as they have been the past."

This is exactly the appeal for those who dare to visit.

*Afghan Logistics and Tours. 106 Ansari Square, Street No 1, Shar-e-Now, Kabul, 00-93- 798-442211 or 00-44-1962-738492, www.afghanlogistics.tours.com

*Great Game Travel. Street 3/1 House 3, Proje Wazirabad, Proje Taimani, Kabul, 00-93- 799-686688 or 112 High Street, Hollywood, Co Down, 048- 90998325, www.greatgame.travel.co.uk

The tough business of tourism

Muquim Jamshady realised there were advantages to speaking English when he started to earn more money than he had ever dreamed of translating for US-led coalition forces and for international media during the fall of the Taliban. Within a year he established Afghan Logistics Tours, providing translators for media, military and diplomatic services. The company is still more a logistics provider than a tour operator, says Jamshady; tourism represents about 10 per cent of his business. "But we hope to increase our tourism to 60-70 per cent once Afghanistan gets more peaceful." In Kabul Afghan Logistics Tours has cars, interpreters and drivers; in other cities it has a network of guides who, when you travel out of the capital, become your translators, buddies and, if need be, bodyguards.

Go there

British Airways (www.britishairways.com) and Air France (www.airfrance.ie) fly from Dublin to Dubai via London and Paris. From Dubai, Ariana Afghan Airlines (www.flyariana.com) and Pamir Airways (www.pamirairways.net) fly to Kabul. Ariana also flies between Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. Use one of the companies mentioned on this page to arrange travel in Afghanistan once it is safe to do so. See www.foreignaffairs.gov.ie.

© 2017 irishtimes.com