

## **A PLACE FOR TOURISM IN AFGHANISTAN'S RECOVERY?**

Paul Clammer



**Friday Mosque at Herat**

The 1970s marked the heyday of tourism in Afghanistan. Over 90,000 tourists a year visited Afghanistan, one of the country's biggest foreign currency earners. The country was a popular destination in its own right, but also as a stop-off on the overland route to Kathmandu, when Chicken Street was a famous way station on the 'Hippy Trail'. With the country's reconstruction slowly under way, is it too soon to talk about tourists returning to Afghanistan?

At first glance, many people working in Afghanistan might think the idea of promoting tourism here is eccentric at best. In April, Mirwais Sadiq Khan, the Minister for Tourism, was killed in fighting in the normally stable western city of Herat. A visit to the Afghan Tourist Organisation in Kabul generates more enthusiasm than any existing infrastructure for visitors, but there is also recognition that recent events have put Afghanistan back on the international map.

Slowly, a few intrepid tourists are starting to return. Hinterland Travel, run by Geoff Hann who first visited Afghanistan in the 1970s has brought several groups since the fall of the Taliban. 'My last tours, although with relatively small numbers, opened up the eyes of our clients to a country of outstanding rugged beauty, and hospitable people,' he said. 'My impression was that we astonished local people that we were there at all but also encouraged them.'

Is Afghanistan ready for such tour groups? Bamiyan was once the jewel in Afghanistan's tourist crown. Despite the destruction of the giant Buddhas, the Bamiyan valley remains one of the most beautiful parts of the country, and it interesting see how a recovery of tourism might take place here.

On the bluff near the Governor's office in Bamiyan sits the ATO's sole hotel in Afghanistan. Over tea, the manager, Abdul Khalil talked about his 33 years working at the hotel.

'We would have 150 or 200 hundred people a night staying here. People came from all over the world to visit Bamiyan,' he said, recalling the mid-1970s.

Old photos show groups of happy tourists relaxing on deck chairs outside luxury yurts. Abdul Khalil isn't harking back to a golden age however. He is determined that tourists will return to Bamiyan. At the end of the compound, labourers were working hard to finish six new yurts for visitors. A high wall currently surrounds the compound, but that too will change. "It must be knocked down," said Abdul Khalil, "because it blocks the view of the valley. No good for tourists."

Tourism in Bamiyan - and indeed the rest of the country - cannot proceed in a vacuum. It must follow other solutions to the area's problems. Upgrading the road to Kabul should improve access and bring further economic benefits. Phone links between Bamiyan and the capital are scant at best. UNESCO have surveyed the Buddhist remains along the valley, and there is talk of a visitor's centre to display and preserve the rubble of the destroyed statues. For that to happen there needs to be a solution to the dozens of families still living in the old monk's caves that dot the cliff-wall.

Four hours west of Bamiyan are the lakes of Band-e Amir, possibly Afghanistan's most outstanding natural sight. The deep lapis lazuli blue of the waters are a shocking contrast to the plain colours of the surrounding mountains.

Visiting the lakes is already popular with Afghans. It is not uncommon to see middle-class Afghan families at the lakes, as well as NGO workers with time off from Bamiyan and Kabul. This domestic tourism is in tandem with more traditional reasons to visit the lakes, as people still travel to Band-e Amir to take the waters for their reported curative properties.

The majority of visitors content themselves with visiting Band-e Haibat (the suitably named 'Lake of Awe'), the most accessible of lakes. Next to the mosque overlooking the water, there is a small restaurant serving local fish and offering beds for the night.

Visitor numbers to Band-e Amir can only increase, but there is little infrastructure in place to cope with tourists. On a recent visit it was possible to see empty drinks cans floating on the lake. What measures can be put in place to deal with garbage disposal and sanitation? There are two boats with outboard motors on the lake, raising potential pollution concerns of the pristine waters, and also erosive action on the natural dam walls of the lake. It is essential that factors like this be addressed to safeguard the status of the lake, while making it possible to attract visitors there to benefit the local region as a whole.

Back at the ATO office, the staff offer up a copy of *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, by the doyenne of Afghan studies, Nancy Hatch Dupree. While its discussions of ancient sites are impeccable, at over 25 years old, as a guidebook it is felling a little long in the tooth. It's a gap in the market that others are rushing to fill. *The Survival Guide to Kabul* by Dominic Medley and Jude Barrand was first conceived as a pamphlet sold by Kabul's street kids, and a primer for the many NGO workers who have flooded into the capital since November 2001. Since then, it's been a sleeper hit picked up by Bradt Travel Guides, and found its way back to Kabul in the rucksacks of hardy backpackers.

'There are already plenty of travellers coming through,' says Dominic Medley. 'I am a great advocate of more engagement with the local population in Kabul. Tourists can do this more than those of us working here or travelling in white land cruisers and confined to compounds.'

Lonely Planet - the guidebook giants who grew out of the original hippy trail in the 1970s - are also getting in on the action, for the first time including Afghanistan in their guide to Central Asia, along with the more obvious tourist destinations of Samarkand and Bukhara.

As a country whose recent history has meant that it has sat outside the development of mass tourism, Afghanistan finds itself in a rare position to learn from the experiences of other countries. A sustainable and sensitive approach can be applied, involving local communities that can benefit directly from outside

visitors. Nepal is regarded as a tourism success story, with thousands of visitors every year trekking in the Himalayas, but that success has not come without problems. Everest Base Camp is covered with the detritus of mountaineering expeditions, and porters are subject to harsh working conditions. This problem is not unique.

With a little foresight, Afghanistan can avoid such a fate, as it develops its own outdoor activities to attract foreign visitors. It is already possible to arrange trekking trips in around the Wakhan Corridor on the Pakistani and Tajik sides of the border. There is no reason why Badakhshan province couldn't ultimately benefit from adventurous trekkers. In September 2003 a British NGO operated a successful trekking tour through the Panjshir valley to the Anjuman Pass. While this was primarily a fund-raising activity, it could act as a possible model for future tour groups.

Encouraging tourism is clearly not a panacea for Afghanistan's problems, but a return of tourists would certainly reflect an improvement in the country's stability, further aiding recovery. While western governments continue to advise against their citizens travelling to Afghanistan, both individuals and tour operators will be reluctant to visit the country. Stability is paramount for tourism in Afghanistan. Given the right conditions however, Afghanistan has the potential to benefit considerably from tourism- not just economically but also culturally, through helping to reconnect the Afghan people with the outside world after decades of isolation.

Cambodia and Lebanon are examples of countries that have been wracked by civil war, but are now popular with foreign tourists. In a corner of the ATO office in Herat hangs a framed poster of Afghanistan's Year of Tourism from 1967. The slogan reads "Tourism- Passport to Peace". Ironic or prophetic?

Paul Clammer has written the Afghanistan chapter for Lonely Planet's forthcoming guidebook to Central Asia. He also runs the Afghanistan travel website [www.kabulcaravan.com](http://www.kabulcaravan.com). A shorter version of this article has already appeared in *Kabul Scene* magazine.