

# Journey to Iran

by Madhu Sangita and Maarten Ophiel van Leer

Our trip to Persia, which we, Ophiel Maarten and Madhu Sangita van Leer together with Eva and Arnold Polivka from Vienna started on April 17, 2019 for nine days, we found to be very inspiring and successful in terms of our planned peace project, to perform the B-minor Mass here in collaboration with Iranian musicians and singers. Eva and Arnold are traveling to Iran for the seventh time, have learned some Farsi and love this country. Both draw and paint a lot and Arnold presents many people with his drawings and poetry during the week.

Thanks to the good organization by Mitra Pourrezaee, tour operator of the Mahan Company (Iranian travel company), who had previously been fully informed about our plans, we were received warmly everywhere and saw wonderful sights, visited sacred shrines, found us at cultural events (a fantastic concert with the famous Iranian musician Keyhan Kalhor and a play by a free theater group) to which we were invited.

All this went hand in hand - the circumstances and encounters were always with us, they sometimes even felt like a miracle to us, so that we could make first preparations on the spot for our project "Music for Peace in Iran."

On our relatively short journey, we were able to get an idea of the country, the people and their way of life. We felt some of the restraints which with they have to live and how they are suffering from inflation.

Persia, the land of hospitality, beauty in poetry, Sufi stories, music, gardens and architecture (the most beautiful mosques in the world, the traditional atrium houses).

Persia, the land of past civilizations (Persepolis), the underground waterways in the desert and the cities, the lions and camels, the small sacred palm doves and sanctuaries of various religions.

Persia, the land of deserts with caravanserai along the Silk Road, the nomads and sheep, the high snow mountains (over 4,000 meters high, the highest mountain called Demavand over 5000 m) in the north and the sea with lovely islands and black, white and red deserted sandy beaches in the south.

Persia, the land of fragrances (orange trees and roses), colors, herbs and herbal medicine, spices (such as saffron), tea and rice cultivation, gemstones (including turquoise), mineral resources (such as copper) as well as handicrafts, Miniature painting, mosaic making, instrument making and, of course, the carpet weaving, just to name a few.

## Travel Report Iran

### Day 1 - April 17, 2019 Arrival in Tehran

During the night we have met Eva and Arnold Polivka at the Istanbul airport, who from now on will accompany us in Iran. On arrival at Tehran airport, in addition to our passport, we are asked to show our visa, which we had applied for well in advance at the Iranian consulate in Frankfurt or rather Vienna. Right at the airport we are greeted by our tour guide, Mrs. Mitra Pourrezaee. When changing money we get for our € 100 over 15 million Iranian Rial ...

After a long taxi ride, where we notice the tall, snow-capped mountains behind the city, we reach a newly renovated hostel in the old city center of Tehran, in the style of a traditional



Iranian house. The courtyard, whereupon the different rooms have views, with a small pond and fountain to linger, invites us. When renovating, the owner had had an eye on using beautiful materials. We are received in a friendly manner and right away feel very well.

Immediately we meet in the same hostel, can this be a coincidence? Schirin Zareh in the reception room. She is a longtime pupil of Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, born in Tehran, singer and performer, living in Berlin. She sang the B-Minor Mass in Dachau in 1996. She agrees to introduce the Persian Sufi poetry to us in Farsi, German and English next year during our planned choir tour, and to sing along to it.

We walk through the streets of Tehran with a traffic which is chaotic to our view, then



through quiet lanes to a restaurant in the Nagarestan garden, where we enjoy our first traditional Persian meal. In the old bazaar of Tehran, we drink tea at the Haj Ali Derwish Tea House, a tiny establishment run by a real „tea-dervish“ who makes a heart contact with all his guests. We are presented with commemorative coins, photographed and an interview about our project is immediately sent via Instagram. The next day more than 400 people



had reacted.

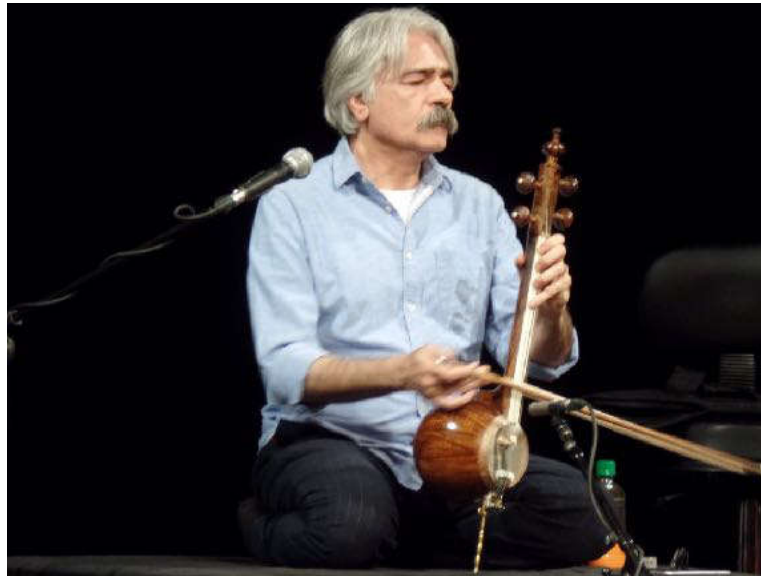
We had in mind to visit different possible concert halls, to test these for our project. On the very first day we visit two: First a huge hall of the Ministry with over 3000 seats. Outside we are greeted by Dr. Ali Azari, who is well versed in concert organization and is willing to take on organising our project. The acoustics in the hall seem acceptable to us.

We take a taxi back to the hostel and change clothes for the evening to visit the Rudaki Hall, now called Wahdat. This concert hall, built in the time of the Shah, is the home of the Tehran Symphony Orchestra. With four round balconies, the hall is similar to an opera house and can accommodate over 800 people. A conversation with the Iranian musician Keyhan Kalhor, winner of the contest "Best Musician of the Silk Road" is planned. He greets us kindly and invites us to his evening sold-out concert. However, he finds no time to talk through the ensemble's acoustic rehearsal. We can be present at the acoustic re-



hearsal and talk to musicians of the ensemble in the cloakroom. At the end of the concert, he gives us the message that we may get in contact with him regarding a possible musical collaboration. For the concert we can take a seat on the "Vip" gallery, where in the past probably the Shah himself sat ....

The concert, Keyhan Kalhor as a soloist with the Miniature String Quartet, four young gifted Iranian musicians plus Tony Overwater, a Dutch double bass player, is very impressive, moving between arranged composition and improvisation around melodic themes and mo-



tives. The last piece, Silent City, was composed after the chemical weapons attack in the Iran-Iraq war, making a whole city "silent." It moved from oppressive sounds in a limited use of the musical scale (like minimal music) through a mournful solo up to a music of hope for all mankind.

Day 2 - April 18, 2019 - Tehran

We walk through Tehran, pass shops and cross busy roads to reach the Sufi tomb of Safi Ali Shah. The house is closed. After a short moment, passersby ask us what we are waiting for. Somebody is brought in, who lets us in.





The Dargah itself is designed like a hall of mirrors, glass around the alabaster sarcophagus with many flowers. A very peaceful atmosphere meets us, also in the garden and in the adjoining auditorium. A vigorous man who calls himself Dervish comes to bless sweets on the sarcophagus for visitors. We have a lively talk with him and are invited to tea.

Then we drive with two taxis to the north of Tehran, where we visit in a huge luxurious hotel the possible concert hall No. 3. It is a huge theater hall, but rather unsuitable for musical purposes. Not far from the hotel, we drive to lunch in a mountain valley with rushing



brook, a destination for many Iranian families. Here we can dine on the edge of the rocks in a traditional way in a circle, sitting on a carpet. It is very cold, but we are happy about the clear mountain air. The return trip by taxi takes over an hour ...

In the evening, Maarten and Arnold discuss our next steps on the roof terrace.

Day 3 - April 19, 2019 - from Tehran to Kashan

After breakfast, a minibus is waiting for us, the driver Jaffar is a very nice, quite sporty man, who will drive and accompany us for four days. We are now joined by Bardia, a photographer and tour guide who will document our journey.

Today we drive 3 hours through mountainous desert landscape to Kashan, a town with many clay houses and a very nice old towncenter. It is Friday, the holiday, while driving we see people everywhere who are also on the road and enjoy the blossoming nature caused by the previous rain. We photograph beautiful flowers and find wild mountain tea. Once in



Kashan, we stay overnight in a traditional Iranian house and enjoy the courtyard with roses and fountains. Here we meet for the first time tourists, also from Holland. In the afternoon we visit a former rich patrician house, now a museum, very impressive in its ornamentation and features.

One and a half hours before sunset, we head towards the desert of the Kavir National Park. Our driver finds his minibus unsuitable for the off-road and returns to the starting point. Here we can change to a jeep, which brings us swiftly through the landscape to a well, where we refresh ourselves with salty water. Then we drive to a high dune at the beginning of the sandy desert, which we climb. Here we admire the view of dry salt lakes and desert and experience the silence. We are touched, as at the same time the sun goes down over the dry salt lake, and on the right the full moon rises over the sandy desert. Bardia films here with the help of a drone ....

The long way back in the dark is interrupted by a visit with tea in the just renovated Maranjaab Caravanserai, formerly in use by caravans on the Silk Road. Only after midnight we arrive at the Ecolodge in Kashan again.



Day 4 - April 20, 2019 - from Kashan to Isfahan

In the morning we visit the traditional bazaar of Kashan. In the old part is a very beautiful hall with dome and rich in ornaments. In the old bath house, for generations a teahouse, we drink saffron tea with pastries. This room formerly served as a meeting place for the Sufis, which somehow can be felt in the atmosphere.





Then follows a long drive to over 3 hours to Isfahan. We stop at a caravansary for our lunch, now in full sunshine.

Arriving in Isfahan, we reach a traditional hotel with atrium. Here a surprise awaits us: The Persian storyteller Parvis Mamnun, residing in Vienna and native Isfahan, introduces us to



the world of Persian stories and wisdom. He is accompanied by an Iranian singer and musician. All of this had been organized by Eva and Arnold for us and a group from Vienna who had attended a seminar on Iranian herbal medicine.

Day 5 - April 21, 2019 - Isfahan

Today we will visit the great Shah Mosque in the center of Isfahan. On the way, we stop in front of the shop of a miniature painter, Hossein Fallahi. We marvel at this extraordinary art of the very small painting on camel bones and the masterly expertise shown here. The road leads us to a huge rectangular square, "Naqsh-e-Jahan", where two mosques and an ancient palace are located. We marvel at the dimensions. The constant ringing of bells on the horse-drawn carriages, which make their rounds here, completes the magnificent picture.

The great Masjed-e Shah, now officially Imam Mosque, is overwhelming in its size and blue splendor. Most beautiful ornamentation and calligraphic verses on the mosaics as far as the eye can see. In the central dome, almost in the middle, a spot is marked on the ground, where the echo comes back from all sides. If you speak or sing here you get the feeling as if the sound is being amplified within oneself. The vibrations resonate mainly in the heart area.

Then we visit on the left side of the square the Ali-Qapu Palace, also from the early 17th century, a five-story magnificent building, provided with a large balcony with slender columns. On the walls are very beautiful female figures as frescoes. We climb over unusually



high steps on the staircase in the upper rooms, possibly the music room. Special wall decorations with omissions show oriental musical instruments and vases. With a "Dona nobis Panem" we test the acoustics and inspire the other visitors.





Opposite this palace is the Sheikh Lotfollāh Mosque, a little smaller than the Great Mosque but also very impressive, with many gold colors. You could see a peacock in the dome, changing its tale depending on the position of the sun.



The large square is surrounded by arcades, in which the bazaar is situated. We visit a small part of the bazaar.

Then we walk towards the Zayandeh River, where since the flood a few weeks ago a lot of water is flowing and look at the beautiful Chadschu Bridge with its many arches.



In the late afternoon we drive to a suburb of the city. We are amazed to find ourselves now in a modern shopping center; On the upper floor of the center are cinemas and a large concert hall, which is kindly shown to us. In fact, this hall indeed could be suitable for the



B-Minor Mass.

By chance, in one of the other halls, a theatrical performance of "Count Dracula" will be shown in Farsi. After we had amused ourselves at the funny poster, we are invited as guests to this performance. The actors of the independent theater group are very grateful for our interest. In the evening we return to the Chadschu Bridge. Under the arcades, music is played attended by a large audience.

Day 6 - April 22, 2019 - from Isfahan to Shiraz

Today we have the longest trip, almost 600 km or six hours ahead, from Isfahan to Shiraz in the central south of Iran. From the highway we enjoy the beautiful landscapes and look at barren mountains. For some time, an open small van drives in front of us with a young camel, which always raises its nose when the car drives faster or when raindrops fall.

1 1/2 hours before Shiraz, we stop in a beautiful landscape with many trees at a nomad family, which has a large herd of sheep and goat. We are received in a friendly manner.

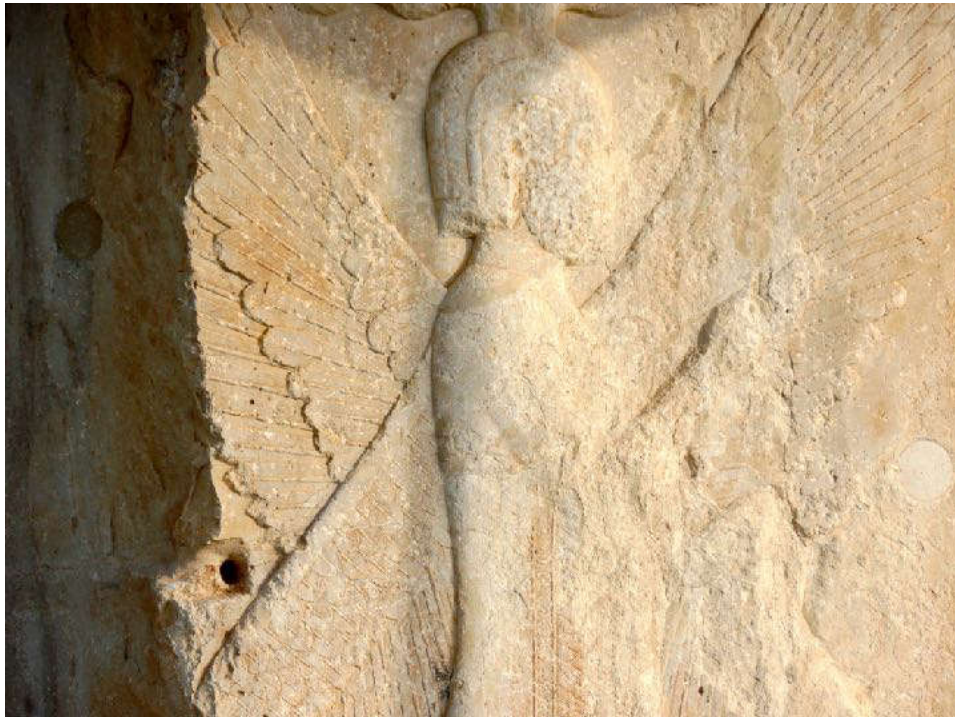
A little boy plays with a lamb. It is time to milk what we are allowed to try for ourselves more or less successfully.

The women have prepared food for us with their daughters. We are also allowed to wear the traditional clothing of the nomads during a short time.



In the afternoon we will visit, not far from the nomads, the Pasargad monument, with the tomb of King Cyrus II, who lived in 6th century BC and is still revered as the king of peace. During his lifetime he respected the different religions being practiced.

Close to the tomb, raised on the top of a small pyramid, there are excavations of the remains of the palace. We walk to the former "Gate Palace". On a huge vertical stone we see a relief of an angel with four wings. The special crown possibly symbolizes the



connection with the heavenly spheres. We get into a meditative mood and feel connected to a higher world in this archaic atmosphere.

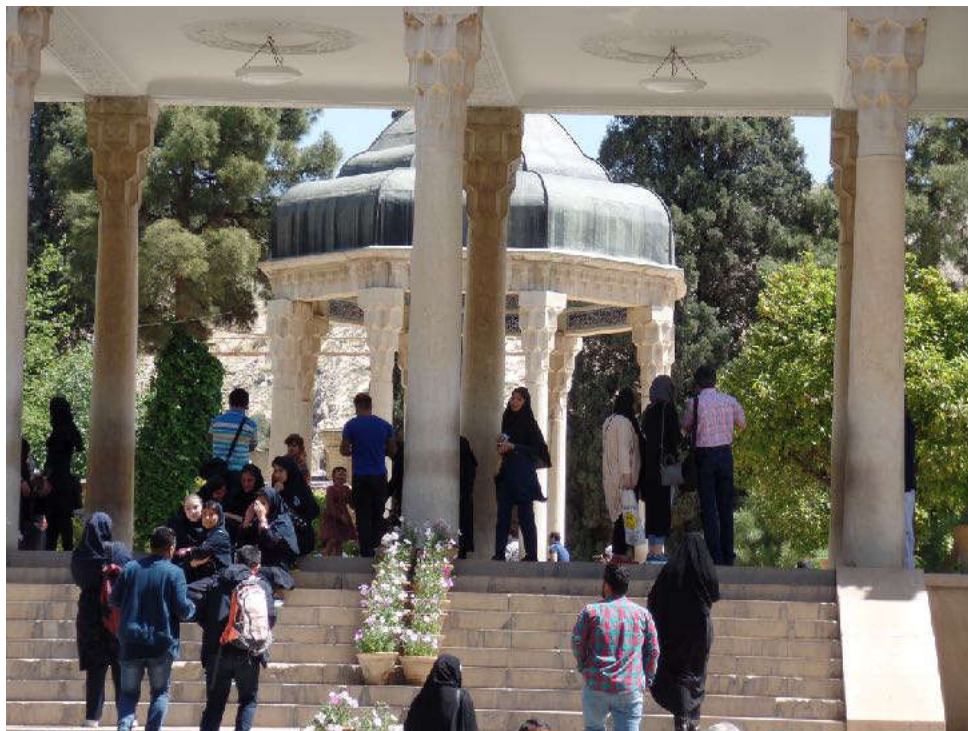


Although it has become dark, we would like to gather some impressions of Persepolis, the royal residence of King Darius I (5th century BC). We stand in front of the already closed gates and are impressed by the dimensions of the cuboids, which have been joined together to form a huge wall. The entrance stairs, accessible to horses, rise to the right and left. A night watchman shows us photos of the monument and Mitra explains.

Day 7 - April 23, 2019 - Schiraz

After breakfast, we meet with Mitra for a planning discussion regarding the planned choir tour. We develop a preliminary travel scheme for the group and the concerts.

Then we head for the tomb of Muhammad Shams ad-Din Hafiz, the (Sufi) poet of the 14th century, who is loved by all Iranians. Immediately we are caught by the harmony of the garden and the beautiful atmosphere. Under the canopy of the tomb we feel invited to meditate. Hafiz is often considered in connection with Rumi as a mystic of the heart. Many



Iranians use the "Divan" of Hafiz, with all 486 Ghazals, as a kind of oracle book in daily life.

In the immediate vicinity of the tomb is the concert hall of Schiraz, which we then visit. Here one notices immediately the beautiful entrance hall, with lots of wood and statues of musicians. The Concert Hall seats over 700 people and has good acoustics. Of all the



halls tested this one seems to be the „easiest“ for choir singing.

Dr. Ali Azari, who has joined us again as he is based in Shiraz, leads us to an art exhibition in the Textile Art Gallery, a former cloth factory, designed by the architect Mehrdad Iravani-an. In the sunshine, we enjoy the formal language of steel, iron and lines. The exhibition with café is often visited by young Iranians.

Nearby we eat for lunch at the Haft Kahn restaurant, designed by the same architect, with live music. We are amazed that there is a restaurant with different cuisine on each floor of the seven-storey house. Each restaurant has a different layout, with live music playing everywhere.

In the afternoon we watch in a screening room of Dr. med. Azari our film "Celebrating the Divine in Vienna", in raw version. Ali Azari tells us that in his opinion a concert of over 2 hours is clearly too long for Iran ....

In the evening we walk to a small mirror mosque, with a saint tomb in the middle. The whole interior is furnished with small mirrors on the stucco work and gives a very special atmosphere.

Day 8 - 24 April 2019 - finale in Schiraz

In the morning we visit the famous Nasir-ul Mulk Mosque, where a prayer hall with colored windows lets in the light of the sun in all colors and bathes the hall in colorful light. We meet a lady friend of Eva and Arnold, also called Mitra, who will accompany us on this day. She has been engaged with Sufism for a long time, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan was no stranger to her. She did not know him personally because she could not travel to Europe, but she read several books by Hazrat Inayat Khan in English. She leads us to the half-o-





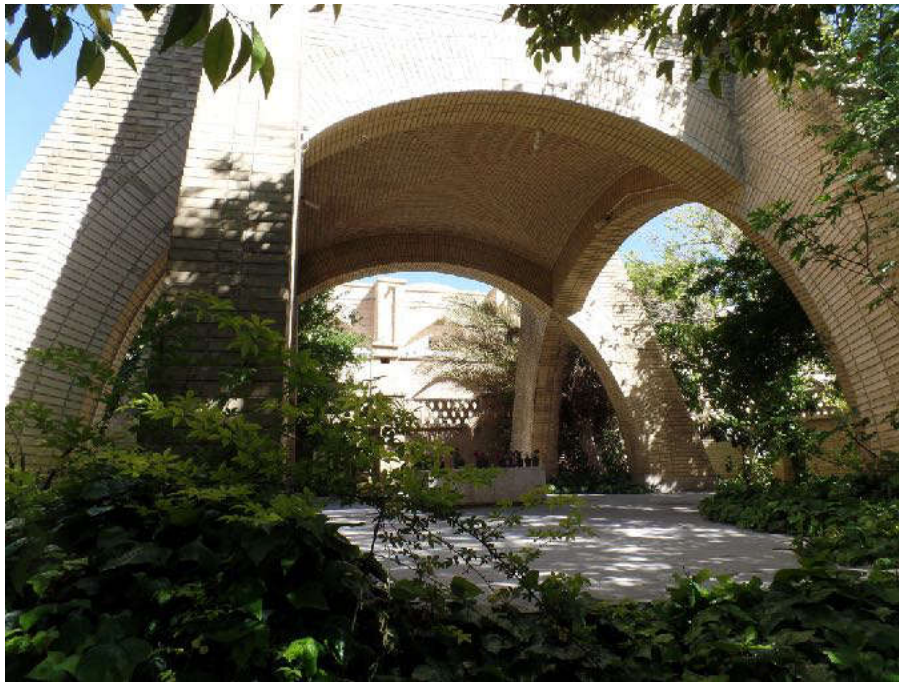
pen Sufi tomb of Sheikh Ruzbehan Baqli, with many reliefs on the sarcophags. Here we attune ourselves, together with Mitra, to this Sheikh.

Then we go to the Naranjestan Ghavam Museum, a 19th century house, built by a wealthy merchant, with a lush (rose) garden, mirrored hall and archeological art museum in the basement. There we are attracted by music and discover a jeweler who exhibits his stones and jewelery here, sings Sufi songs for us and accompanies himself.





In



the afternoon we visit a former Sufi Khankah, which now houses the tomb of Ibn Khafif under temple-like brick arches, the shape of which reminds us of the Universel in Suresnes.

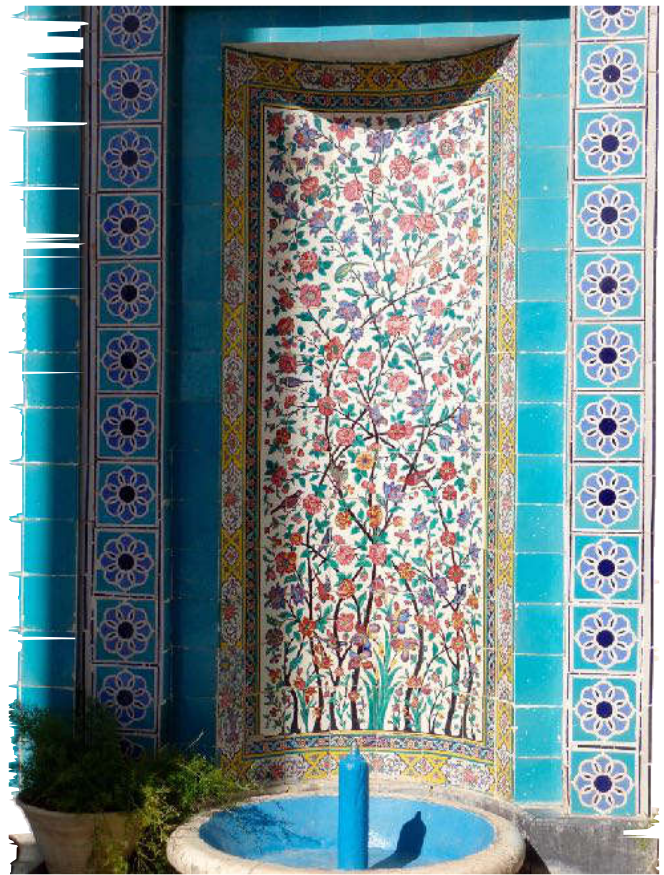
In the taxi we drive to the Saadi Mausoleum, also a famous Sufi Dargah with an inviting garden area. We notice the peaceful atmosphere: Saadi was a scholar, narrator and also a mystic.



On the evening of our last travel day in Iran we are invited in the private apartment of Mitra, our tour guide. She has cooked a traditional thick soup for us. Her two adult daughters are very interested and interview us



with vi-



deo footage to put on the tour operator's website. Around midnight we take a taxi to the airport and arrive at our home the next morning.

We thank Mitra Pourrezaee for her heartfelt commitment and the good organization of our trip through Iran; our thanks go also to our tour guide and photographer Bardia for the lively company and support and to our attentive bus driver Jafar.

Our big thanks go to Eva and Arnold Polivka for the profound preparation and time management during the trip; especially for their pleasant and friendly company, and that they shared their knowledge of the country, its people, Persian poetry and Sufi mysticism with us.



Madhu and Maarten Ophiel van Leer

Oestrich-Winkel, 29th april 2019