

WHERE
DERVISHES
REST

A MODERN JOURNEY
IN SEARCH OF MEANING

*One Pilgrim, One Tourist, and
Seven Days Across the Mystic
Heartland of Iran*

USMAN ASLAM

A MEMOIR OF TRAVEL, SOULS, AND SILENCE

WHERE
DERVISHES
REST



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Heartland of Iran

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A QUICK NOTE ON THE DIGITAL COMPANION & MEDIA HUB

Throughout this book, you will find QR codes and links scattered across the chapters. Scanning them will take you to our dedicated Digital Media Hub, where you can view photo galleries and additional media from the exact locations described in the text.

Before you get overly excited and expect National Geographic-level photography... lets manage expectations early:

- **The Camera Gear:** These photos were not taken on a fancy DSLR with a \$2,000 lens. They were captured using a low-tier, budget smartphone that was fighting for its life against poor lighting, and shaky hands.
- **The Photographer:** I am an IT guy and traveler, not an author, nowhere close to be a photographer. Framing, lighting, and "rule of thirds" were completely accidental when they happened to work out.
- **The Hit Rate:** Out of the hundreds of photos uploaded to the hub, roughly **10 of them are actually great**. The rest? Kept strictly for historical proof, geographic documentation, and the sheer authenticity of the journey.

Consider the media hub a digital scrapbook rather than a high-art exhibition. If a photo looks a bit grainy, just blame the local WiFi, the humidity of Gilan, or my budget phone!

How to Access:

- **Master Hub URL:**
 - <https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest>
- **Chapter Specifics:** Scan the QR code printed at the end of each chapter, or use the direct parameter links (e.g., ?album=qazvin) to jump straight to that location's gallery.

DEDICATION

To **Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.)**,

the supreme master and beacon of spiritual light—for whom, and around whom, every single mile of this journey was undertaken, and whose enduring heritage guided our every step across the lands of Persia.

And

To my dearest friend, companion, and mentor, **Ali Raza—**

whose wisdom inspired this quest, whose presence made every road a joy, and whom I hope to have standing shoulder to shoulder with me for the rest of my life.

And

To my beloved daughter, **Ayesha—**

the little scholar of our home and the only book reader in the family. May this story of distant roads, ancient shrines, and deep wisdom inspire your own lifelong love for reading and discovery.



LIFE IS ZEST FOR THE JOURNEY

*"Beyond every station lies yet another station of yours,
Life is nothing but the zest for the journey."*

— Allama Iqbal

Since the light of the galaxies was first scattered and the heavens and the earth were filled with color, giving rise to life on earth and above, every creation has been bound to journey after journey. Be it the clay of Adam or the mortal frame fashioned from it; the binding of the wandering soul within that frame and its journey to the Gardens of Paradise; or its stumble from grace into the reverse journey down to the lowest of the low—at every turn and in every place, only a journey lies ahead. It may be a matter of moments, or of years, centuries, and eons. After all, life and death themselves are but names for a journey—coming from one realm and transitioning into another.

In earthly life, this very zest keeps a select few restlessly driven. They set out to see those distant worlds whose stories they heard in childhood, or felt without touching through the pages of books. A lingering longing remains in the heart to discover how those places truly are in reality.

It was to touch the physical reality of that truth that this journey was undertaken. How could such feelings ever be fully expressed in words? This is merely a record—a memoir—so that whenever the memory of these places returns, reading it may stir a sense of deep stillness and peace within the soul. Perhaps it holds no delight for the reader, for as the Persian verse reminds us:

*"The garment of words is far too narrow for the majesty of truth,
Truth is the mirror, and speech is the rust that dims it."*

— Ali Raza

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PREFACE

The Spark, the Calling, and the Open Road

"In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. All praise belongs to Allah Subhana wa Ta'ala, the Almighty who granted us the time, resources, good health, and safe passage to undertake this extraordinary journey."

Every profound journey begins long before the first step is taken. It starts as a quiet longing, a lingering desire, or a sacred intention that waits for its appointed time to unfold.

For us, the grand catalyst of this Persian expedition was my lifelong best friend, **Ali Raza**. As a dedicated author and lover of spiritual history, Ali had set his heart upon a noble literary dream: to research and write a comprehensive biographical work on the supreme master, **Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.)**, and to humbly dedicate that work to the master's maternal grandfather, **Hazrat Syed Abdullah As-Somaei Az-Zahid (R.A.)**.

Yet there was an even deeper, ancestral heartbeat driving this trip. Over a century ago, Ali's own great-grandfather had undertaken a spiritual journey across Persia, traveling to these exact same sacred lands and visiting these very sanctuaries. For Ali, this expedition was both a literary quest and a deeply personal ancestral pilgrimage—a chance to trace the exact spiritual footsteps his forefather had walked more than a hundred years prior.

Ali knew that true historical depth cannot be gathered merely from behind a desk or within the quiet walls of a library. He did not want to rely solely on existing texts written by others across centuries; he wanted to breathe the air, walk the soil, gaze upon the mountains, and touch the sacred earth where Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.) spent the formative first eighteen years of his life. He wanted to witness the geographical roots of the *Ghaus-e-Azam* with his own eyes.

As for me, I am by no means an established author or scholar—this book is my humble first attempt at putting pen to paper and capturing the world through my eyes. I am, at heart, simply a traveler and a wanderer, drawn by the lure of new horizons, historical mysteries, and the open road. But as the old proverb goes, a journey is judged by the company you keep. In joining Ali on this sacred quest, I was blessed with the absolute finest travel companion one could ever ask for: a true friend whose intellectual curiosity, humor, and unwavering devotion turned every kilometer into an unforgettable lesson.

Yet, embarking on a deep geographical expedition through the mountains and ancient districts of Iran would have been an immense challenge without a guiding hand. For this, we owe a debt of profound gratitude to our dear friend, **Yaqoob Brahvi** from Sweden. Possessing an immense, legendary love for the Sufis, Dervishes, and mystics of Islam, Yaqoob had walked these very paths and visited these remote sanctuaries long before us. With incredible generosity, he mapped out the routes, identified the obscure locations, and shared crucial historical landmarks with Ali, making our navigation across Persia immensely smoother and clearer than it could ever have been otherwise.

What began as a friend's literary vision and ancestral calling quickly evolved into a shared adventure of a lifetime—a journey woven with ancient shrines, unexpected detours, rich culinary discoveries, warm Persian hospitality, and endless moments of heartfelt laughter.

This book is the record of that journey: a story of two friends following the footsteps of saints, guided by providence, and discovering that the road itself is often the greatest teacher of all.



CHAPTER 1

The Gatekeepers of Khorasan: Passports, Consulate, and Holy Names

"The true journey begins not at the border, but at the embassy door."

Every great pilgrimage requires a trial by fire. For modern seekers of wisdom, that trial doesn't involve traversing harsh deserts on camels or fending off bandits on the Silk Road. No, it begins in the quiet, climate-controlled arena of international diplomacy: getting the visa.

Our trial began in Pakistan.

Filled with optimism and a quiet reverence for the dervishes whose tombs we intended to visit, we opened the official visa portal of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Forms were filled, passport scans uploaded, and prayers whispered into the digital ether. A few days later, the response arrived.

Rejected.

We stared at the screen in disbelief. Iran! A neighboring brotherly nation, linked to us by centuries of Persian poetry, shared history, and mutual affection for spicy food. To be turned down by a world superpower is one thing, but getting a cold shoulder from next door hurts differently. Naturally, in true Pakistani fashion, we immediately blamed the green passport. We muttered lighthearted curses at our unlucky little booklet—the only document on earth that can turn a simple weekend trip into a five-stage interrogation process. *"Even Iran doesn't want us!"* I lamented. *"What do they suspect we're up to? The biggest threat we pose is persuading someone to part with a treasured family recipe."*

Refusing to let administrative doom crush our mystic dreams, we shifted our base of operations across the Arabian Sea to the United Arab Emirates.

On May 15, 2023, the application was resurrected. This time, I was joined by two long-time friends and ex-colleagues: Ali Raza and Muhammad Usman. Between the three of us, we had survived corporate deadlines, endless tea breaks, and years of office gossip. Traversing the mystic heartlands of Iran seemed like the natural next step in our camaraderie.

We submitted the online forms from Dubai and waited. Twelve days later, on May 27th, the golden email arrived: *Visa Approval Granted*.

There was, however, one minor hiccup in our grand diplomatic expedition. While Ali and I had received our digital approval emails, Usman's application had come back with a cold, unexplained rejection.

The green passport was redeemed—partially. Two out of three wasn't bad, unless you were the third guy standing in Dubai heat.

With our online approvals secured, the next step was the physical visit to consulate as the last step for the visas.

Since Usman had been living in Dubai for years, his place became our temporary base of operations—and Usman himself our designated driver. On Thursday, July 6, 2023, he proudly marched us down to his trusty Honda City. It was a 2013 model painted in a color the factory probably called 'Urban Titanium,' but in reality was pure 'Urban Squirrel'—unassuming it practically had stealth technology against human interest. A humble, unpretentious little vehicle that had survived years of scorching Dubai commutes. Usman started the engine with an undeniable surge of excitement, clearly thrilled to be driving his old office crew on a diplomatic mission instead of a routine grocery run.

Now, reaching the consulate was an adventure in itself, entirely thanks to Usman's driving style. Usman operated his mouse-colored Honda City with a unique brand of low-altitude flight, insanely fast, yet somehow impeccably legal. He never broke a

traffic rule, never ran a red light, and never technically speeded, but he pushed the absolute physical limits of smooth deceleration. The absolute pinnacle of this horror show was his U-turns. Sitting in the back seat, every tight U-turn felt like centrifugal force was trying to hurl me straight through the side door and into Dubai's manicured hedges. Naturally, this high-speed, sharp-turning trip to the consulate was no exception—we arrived Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran, not just eager for visas, but deeply relieved to be back on solid ground.

Inside the Consulate

The consulate building itself feels like a quiet portal to Tehran dropped right into the middle of the UAE's sleek concrete landscape. Built with distinctive Persian aesthetic touches—subtle geometric tilework, heavy wooden doors, and an air of quiet, dignified authority—it stands as a diplomatic fortress that somehow manages to look both imposing and welcoming. Stepping past its perimeter feels like crossing an invisible border before you've even boarded an airplane.

At the entrance security desk, we surrendered the ultimate modern lifeline: our mobile phones. Stripped of our digital tethers, we stepped into the waiting hall.

The atmosphere inside was surprisingly calm. Soft Persian murmurs filled the air, intermingling with the quiet rustle of official papers. When our number was called, we stepped up to the counter to face the gatekeeper of our destiny.

The visa officer was a man in his early forties, fair-complexioned, with the cool, unbothered composure of someone who has seen ten thousand passports this month alone. He took our documents, his eyes darting smoothly between our printed details and our actual faces. We braced ourselves for the standard barrage of questions—*Why are you going? Where are you staying? Who is funding this?*—but the interrogation never came.

Instead, he stamped a slip of paper, pointed down a hallway, and casually directed us to a separate room to pay the fee.

We walked to the cashier, paid, returned with our official receipt, and handed it over. He gave a slight, polite nod. We were done. The entire ordeal—the very thing travelers spend weeks agonizing over—had taken less than twenty minutes. It was so impossibly smooth that we walked out into the Dubai heat wondering if we had missed a step.

Usman: The Mission and the Miracle

Naturally, Usman hadn't just come to the consulate as our chauffeur, while we were at the cashier desk to pay the fee, out of nowhere he turned into a man on a mission to demand answers.

Usman stepped up with a look of tense frustration, ready to face whatever bureaucratic mountain stood in his way, he went to the visa officer window. The visa officer glanced at his passport, typed a few commands into his system, and casually solved the mystery: the copy of Usman's Emirates ID uploaded on the website was unreadable. Before Usman could even begin an apology, the officer reached out, took the physical ID, dropped it onto his desk scanner, and clicked a button. Just like that, the rejection dissolved into a fresh approval. In a span of thirty seconds, Usman's cloud of anxiety and lingering anger evaporated into pure, radiant excitement. The "tourist" was officially back in the game.

The Name Game

It was only when we received the final visas in our email inboxes that we noticed the subtle clerical magic that had just taken place.

Ali Raza looked down at his e-visa. Under *Visa Type*, it read clearly: **Pilgrim / Ziyarat**.

Usman and I looked down at ours. Under *Visa Type*, both of our e-visas read: **Tourist**.

We stood outside the consulate entrance, passports in hand, taking in the hilarious irony.

"Look at this!" I shouted, pointing dramatically at the PDF on Ali's glowing screen. "*This is absolute discrimination! Pure, unadulterated bureaucracy at work!*" Because Ali carried the classic Shia double-name of *Ali Raza*, the system had automatically stamped him as a holy traveler destined for the sacred shrines of Mashhad and Qom. Meanwhile, Usman and I—carrying names deeply rooted in Sunni tradition—had been relegated to the status of ordinary sightseers, apparently deemed worthy only of taking selfies at historic bridges and buying saffron in the bazaars.

"*They think you're going to fast and pray,*" I teased Ali, "*while Usman and I are apparently just here for the kebabs and ice cream.*"

Ali grinned, dimming his phone screen and slipping it into his pocket with supreme satisfaction. Categorized or not, the digital doors to Khorasan were finally open. The dervishes were waiting, and three friends—two 'tourists' and one official 'pilgrim'—were ready to hit the road.



CHAPTER 2

The Dubai Shuffle: Old BMW, E-Gate Disaster, and Airport IT Support

"A spiritual pilgrimage requires two things: divine grace and a complete surrender to airport absurdity."

When our visas finally arrived on July 6, 2023, the clock officially started ticking. We had a ninety-day window to make the trip happen, with a single-entry pass that granted us exactly seven days on Iranian soil. Seven days to cover hundreds of kilometers, visit ancient shrines, and absorb centuries of Persian mysticism.

There was, however, one tragic plot twist to our squad.

Muhammad Usman—the third pillar of our triad, expert U-turn performer, and the man who had fought a thirty-second duel with the Iranian consulate scanner—could no longer join us. His wife was expecting their first child. Now, even the most dedicated seeker of spiritual wisdom knows that leaving your pregnant wife alone in Dubai to go wandering around with dervishes in Khorasan is a fast track to a *very* un-spiritual catastrophe at home.

And so, our grand trio was reluctantly trimmed down to two: Ali, the officially anointed "Pilgrim," and myself, the humble "Tourist."

The German Chariot

September 23, 2023. The day of departure.

My journey began with a morning flight from Lahore to Dubai on FlyDubai. The plan was a masterpiece of budget-travel logistics: land in Dubai, hang out during a long layover, and then catch the evening flight straight to Mashhad.

When Ali and I walked out of Dubai International Airport, we were met by a two-man welcoming committee. There was Usman,

taking a brief leave of absence from fatherhood prep, and Kamran Shaheen—another long-time friend and IBM sales engineer who navigated Dubai with the effortless, cool confidence only tech guys possess.

Kamran was our designated driver for the afternoon, and his chariot was a absolute legend of European engineering: a 2005 silver BMW X5. This car wasn't just a vehicle; it was a battle-hardened veteran. It was living out its twilight years on the scorching asphalt of the UAE, creaking with ancient wisdom, riding with personality, and stubbornly refusing to retire. Piling inside felt like riding in a historical artifact that still thought it was a luxury cruiser.

We zoomed off to Usman's place for a proper home-cooked lunch, catching up, laughing, and refueling. Whenever we gather at Usman's, there is a sacred, unwritten rule of hospitality: the first meal *must* be Biryani, capped off with a classic, indulgent fruit trifle. Today was no exception. Fueled by aromatic rice and sweet nostalgia, we spent a few joyous hours reminiscing before Kamran's silver BMW deposited us right back at Dubai Airport's Terminal 2.

The E-Gate Betrayal

Now, DXB's Terminal 2 is the black sheep of Dubai's world-famous airport family. While Terminals 1 and 3 look like futuristic space stations equipped with indoor waterfalls and Duty-Free palaces, Terminal 2 is small, packed, and unapologetically functional. It is essentially a mega-bus station with jet engines attached. But credit where it's due—even a budget Dubai terminal operates with an efficiency that makes our homeland airports look like chaos theory in motion.

We joined a long, snake-like queue to drop off our checked bags. After shuffling forward inch by painful inch, we checked our luggage, secured our boarding passes, and marched confidently toward the automated E-Gates.

In Dubai, E-Gates are a game of high-tech roulette. On any given day, the futuristic glass doors might demand your passport, require a scan of your boarding pass, or simply glance at your face with facial-recognition cameras and let you pass like royalty.

I stepped up first. The camera scanned my face, beeped happily, and the glass doors slid open smoothly. Easy.

Then came Ali.

Ali stepped into the booth. The camera stared at him. Nothing. He scanned his boarding pass. The machine beeped in cold disapproval. He tried his passport. Red light. The AI system had completely washed its hands of him. The machine politely gave up and ordered him to go stand in line at the manual counter.

I stood on the other side of the glass barrier, grinning from ear to ear. Naturally, I couldn't let this slide.

"You see that?!" I called out, pointing dramatically at him through the glass. "That's the VIP treatment for you! That's the *Pilgrim Visa* at work! You're on such a high spiritual frequency that the modern world's machines can't even comprehend you!"

Ali burst out laughing, clearly enjoying the tease. He gave a theatrical wave and sauntered over to the human officer like a visiting state guest, while I stood on the other side thoroughly enjoying my moment of petty victory.

The IT Audit & The Golden Word

Once Ali was cleared by a human officer who was far less intimidated by his "pilgrim" status, we reached the departure lounge. We killed an hour absorbing the electric mix of excitement and that subtle, nervous fear of the unknown. We were finally heading into Iran.

Eventually, the gate opened, and it was time to board.

At the counter stood a boarding agent—a young woman in her early twenties, remarkably thin, staring intently at her computer

monitor with a look of pure administrative frustration. We handed over our passports and boarding passes.

She scanned them, typed ferociously, paused, and typed again. A frown deepened on her face.

Because our flight back to Dubai was booked out of Tehran rather than a simple round-trip from Mashhad, her software was having a complete meltdown. She couldn't locate our return flight.

"Are you flying back with FlyDubai?" she asked, her voice dripping with suspicion.

"Yes, absolutely," I replied.

Now, being an IT consultant by profession, I have a fatal flaw: whenever an error pops up on a computer screen nearby, my brain *must* debug it. I instinctively leaned forward over the high counter, craning my neck to see what software she was running and where the system had choked.

She caught me dead in the act.

She stopped typing, looked up at me with supreme, icy authority, and said: "Sir. Step back."

I immediately backed off two steps, raising my hands like I had just been caught trying to hack the Pentagon. *Fair enough*. Nobody likes an unsolicited IT audit at the boarding gate.

Still unable to fix the issue, she grabbed my boarding pass and marched over to her supervisor. The senior officer was a man in his mid-forties, sporting the relaxed, completely unbothered body language of someone who had seen every glitch in aviation history.

He listened to her frantic explanation for about three seconds, glanced at my paperwork for half a second, casually waved his hand, and uttered the ultimate, magical Arabic word that solves all problems in the Middle East:

"Khelaas." (*Finish it. Let them go. No problem.*)

With that single, glorious word, the digital crisis evaporated. The agent printed our clearances, handed back our passes, and waved us through.

We walked down the jet bridge, stepped onto the plane, and sank into our seats. The engines hummed to life.

Next stop: Mashhad.

Landing in Khorasan & The Silent Border

The best thing about FlyDubai is their strict minimalist philosophy: they don't offer you food. If you want a snack, you pay; if not, you sit back and contemplate your hunger. Two hours and fifteen minutes of meditative fasting later, around 10:00 PM local time, the wheels hit the tarmac in Mashhad.

Mashhad Shahid Hasheminejad International Airport turned out to be a pleasantly modest affair. It was a small, cozy airport that immediately brought back fond memories of Pakistan's Sialkot airport—functional, compact, and completely free of Dubai's flashy glitz.

Naturally, as we walked toward immigration, I braced myself for the standard border routine: the probing questions, the serious looks, and the interrogation about our stay.

I stepped up to the booth first. The immigration officer—a dignified woman in her forties—took my paperwork, stared at her screen, and didn't utter a single word. She didn't even stamp my physical passport. Instead, she cleanly stamped the printed e-visa sheet, handed it back, and waved me through. I was in Iran in less than sixty seconds.

Then it was Ali's turn. He walked up, got his quick stamp, and stepped out of the booth to join me. But just as he turned around, the officer called him back.

It turned out she had accidentally scanned his expired old passport, which was stapled inside his new one.

I stood a few feet away, watching him walk back to the booth, and immediately seized the moment. I couldn't just stick to the usual "Pilgrim Visa" routine—it was time to diversify the humor.

"Look at that hospitality!" I called out to him with a grin. "She just couldn't bear to see you leave her counter so soon! The people of Khorasan are so thrilled you visited their country, they're literally calling you back for an encore!"

Ali shook his head with a laugh, got the mix-up sorted in ten seconds, and officially joined me on the other side of the border.

Calculators, Currency, and the "Taxi" Guy

We collected our checked luggage and bumped straight into the next obstacle: a massive, snaking queue for customs. There was no green channel here. Every single piece of baggage entering the country was being put through a heavy-duty X-ray scanner—a government effort to catch merchants bringing in bulk electronics or commercial goods to dodge taxes.

Once cleared, we found ourselves in the arrivals hall holding Saudi Riyals and a pressing need for two modern survival tools: local currency and a working SIM card.

This was our very first lesson in Iranian travel: when English fails, the smartphone calculator becomes the ultimate universal translator. We walked up to the exchange counter, typed numbers back and forth on a screen with the money changer, and walked away with a thick stack of Iranian Rials that made us feel like instant millionaires. Next, we secured a local SIM card pre-configured with a working VPN—because navigating modern Iran without a VPN means saying goodbye to WhatsApp and the rest of the digital world.

Stepping out of the terminal, the night air hit us.

The airport parking lot was practically empty, except for a couple of parked cars and two men standing near the curb, deeply immersed in conversation. They had the universal, relaxed body

language of seasoned taxi drivers waiting for the late-night flight. One of them, wearing a crisp white polo shirt, glanced at our luggage, made eye contact, and offered the international magic word: "*Taxi?*"

There were just a couple of cars parked in a big parking lot and two guys who felt like taxi drivers talking to each other. One of them, wearing a crisp white polo shirt, asked, "Taxi?" We nodded. Out came the trusted mobile calculator once again. Tap, tap, tap. A few numbers were passed back and forth, a fare was settled without a single spoken sentence, and then things took a slightly cinematic turn.

Without a word, the driver grabbed our luggage and immediately turned around, striding off in a direction that felt completely away from where logic dictated the main taxi stand should be. Walking behind him in the dark parking lot, a wave of mild confusion—and slight late-night panic—set in. I looked at him closely: he was extraordinarily tall, absurdly skinny, and sported a thick, retro mustache that looked like it had been lifted straight out of a 1970s Persian action movie.

We followed this towering figure into the shadowy corners of the parking lot until we finally arrived at his chariot: a white Peugeot that felt like it was easily a million years old. When he stuck the key in and cranked the ignition, the engine roared to life with a rattle so loud it sounded like a bucket of loose bolts being shaken inside a blender. But hey, it ran! We loaded our bags into the trunk, hopped in, and minutes later, we were cruising through the quiet night streets of Mashhad.

Mashhad at night had a quiet, hypnotic beauty to it. As the taxi glided down the broad, tree-lined avenues, the modern world seemed to soften under the warm, amber glow of the streetlights. Neat, wide boulevards stretched out before us, almost completely emptied of daytime traffic, flanked by elegant Persian storefronts with closed metal shutters covered in flowing Farsi calligraphy. Every few blocks, vibrant neon signs of small Persian eateries,

saffron shops, and sweet vendors hummed softly in the dark, casting crimson and gold reflections onto the asphalt.

The air floating through the cracked taxi window was crisp and dry, carrying a distinct, enchanting mix of scents—a subtle blend of diesel exhaust, roasted tea, and the sweet, lingering perfume of damask rosewater that seemed to drift straight from the heart of the city. Huge decorative arches illuminated with cool green LED lights spanned over major intersections, signaling our approach toward the central sanctuary. For a city that hosts millions of pilgrims every year, its night streets felt remarkably peaceful, moving with a calm, dignified rhythm that instantly welcomed two tired travelers into Khorasan.

When we reached our destination, we paid the fare, unloaded our bags, and I instinctively offered him a warm, deeply Pakistani blessing: *"JazakAllah Khair."*

He paused, looked at me for a second, and muttered a brief reply that sounded less like a polite acceptance and more like an uncomfortable correction. It hit me right then—either using a traditional Sunni expression of thanks was a minor cultural misstep in the Shia heartland of Mashhad, or he simply wasn't prepared to receive spontaneous theology lessons from two tired Pakistani tourists around 11:00 PM. Either way, we gathered our luggage and made a swift retreat toward the hotel entrance before my linguistic experimentations got us into any further trouble.

Room 101 & The Night Ahead

Our taxi pulled up to the hotel. Stepping inside was like taking a gentle step back into the late 1990s—a warm, nostalgic interior defined by dark brown woodwork, beige floor tiles, and heavy red carpets lining the halls.

Finding a place to stay, however, had been an adventure long before we ever boarded the plane. In the modern world, booking a room is usually a matter of three clicks on Booking.com or Airbnb. But Iran operates in its own financial parallel universe due to

international sanctions, meaning standard booking platforms are entirely blank.

After hours of scouring travel forums in a mild panic, I stumbled upon a forum thread on TripAdvisor. A helpful traveler had mentioned a boutique travel agency based out of the UK—run, as far as I could tell, by British-Iranians who had cracked the code of cross-border hotel reservations. A few frantic emails and international transfers later, our first night in Mashhad was officially secured. It was a leap of faith, but standing in that brown-paneled lobby, it was a relief to know the reservation actually existed.

At the front desk stood a young receptionist who checked our reservation details with practiced speed. Then came a twist that caught us off guard: he politely requested to keep our original passports at the desk for the duration of our stay. Keeping passports in a foreign country always triggers a mild sense of vulnerability for any traveler, but running on zero options and full trust, we handed them over.

We took our room key and headed up to the room, dropping our heavy bags onto the floor.

Ali took a quick look around the room—taking in the brown wood paneling, the slightly dated furniture, and the 1990s aesthetic—turned to me, and said, "Does this feel like a 5-star hotel to you?"

I couldn't help but laugh. The online booking description had proudly advertised it as a 5-star property, and while it was perfectly clean, comfortable, and pleasant, it was nowhere near international 5-star standards.

"Not even close," I agreed. But given that the nightly rate was ridiculously nominal—a bargain by any international standard—neither of us had any intentions of complaining. We had a cozy bed, a roof over our heads, and a journey to begin. We refreshed ourselves, splashed cold water on our faces, and got ready to head out.

It had been a long day of transit—from Lahore and Dubai to the silent counters of Mashhad.

We looked at each other. Sleep was an option, but the energy of the city was calling. Just a short distance away, glowing in the heart of Khorasan, lay the sprawling, mirror-lit complex of Imam Ali Reza's shrine.

We grabbed our hotel keys, stepped back out into the cool night, and set off toward the sanctuary.



CHAPTER 3

The Sanctuary of Khorasan: Emerald Lights, Mirrors, and the Eighth Star

"In the court of the King of Khorasan, the noble and the destitute stand on the exact same carpet."

Refreshed, but operating on pure adrenaline, we went down to the hotel lobby to ask how to get to the shrine. The young receptionist, doing his absolute best with limited English, pulled out a small, visiting-card-sized map. He drew a quick line with a pen, handed it over with a smile, and explained that it was a simple ten-minute walk.

Up until that moment, I hadn't fully processed that our very first stop in Iran—within hours of landing—would be the monumental shrine of Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (R.A.). It was an incredible stroke of luck that our hotel, booked through that obscure UK-based agency, happened to be tucked right in the neighborhood of one of the greatest spiritual epicenters of the Islamic world.

Stepping out onto the street, the cool midnight air greeted us once again. After walking for just two or three minutes, we reached a massive roundabout. The area was buzzing with late-night energy. Dozens of long-distance buses were parked along the curbs — vehicles that had clearly transported devoted pilgrims from every corner of Iran and neighboring countries.

The sidewalks were alive with small carts and brightly lit stalls. Vendors were selling everything from colorful prayer beads (*tasbeih*), embroidered caps, and religious souvenirs to warm winter clothes and glowing neon trinkets. The ambient scent of burning wild rue (*Espanol*) and sweet saffron tea drifted through the air. Walking through that bustling market, feeling the gentle hum of anticipation

around us, gave us that unmistakable, goosebump-inducing feeling: *we were getting very close.*

The Rise of Mashhad: From Sanabad to the Center of Khorasan

Before we even stepped foot inside the outer gates, the grandeur of the complex begged a deeper question: how did a quiet Persian village transform into the spiritual heartbeat of an empire?

Before it was a bustling metropolis of millions, the city was merely a quiet, unassuming village called Sanabad, resting in the shadows of the ancient Silk Road city of Tus. Everything changed in 818 CE with the burial of Imam Ali al-Reza (R.A.). Over time, Sanabad transformed into "*Mashhad-e-Reza*"—literally, "the place of martyrdom of Reza"—as pilgrims began settling around the sanctuary. While historic Tus was laid to waste by the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, Mashhad survived and thrived, shielded by the sacred reverence of the shrine. It reached its political and cultural zenith under the Timurid and Safavid dynasties, eventually being declared the imperial capital of Persia under Nader Shah in the 18th century. Today, it stands as the beating heart of Greater Khorasan—a city born from a single sanctuary that grew to connect centuries of Persian heritage, Islamic scholarship, and global pilgrimage.

The Eighth Star: The Legacy of Imam Ali al-Reza (R.A.)

To understand the sheer magnitude of what we were walking toward, one must understand the man resting inside.

Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (766–818 CE)—revered as the Eighth Imam by Shia Muslims and held in immense, affectionate esteem by Sunni Muslims—occupies a unique place in Islamic history. A direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) through his grandson

Imam Husayn (R.A.), Imam al-Reza was globally celebrated during the Abbasid era not for worldly ambition, but for his extraordinary intellectual depth, profound humility, and unmatched spiritual mastery.

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma'mun, the court at Marv became a grand stage for theological debates. Al-Ma'mun famously invited scholars of every major faith and philosophical tradition—Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and rationalist theologians—to debate the young Imam. Historical accounts, such as those documented by Islamic historians like Ibn Jarir al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir, note how Imam al-Reza consistently captivated the realm with his deep knowledge of sacred texts, logic, and gracious debate etiquette. He spoke to every scholar using their own scriptures and languages, earning universal respect across religious lines. For Sunni scholars, including classic historians like Al-Dhahabi, he was honored as an exemplary scholar of the Prophet's lineage (*Ahl al-Bayt*), a master of jurisprudence, and a towering figure of ascetic piety (*zuhd*).

The sanctuary itself has a dramatic history spanning over a millennium. Originally built around the tomb of Imam al-Reza in the early 9th century in the small village of Sanabad (which eventually grew into the city of "Mashhad," meaning *the place of martyrdom*), the shrine faced cycles of destruction and rebirth. It was destroyed by Ghaznavid raids and later rebuilt by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century.

Its grandest expansions, however, occurred during the Seljuk period under Vizier Nizam al-Mulk, and later during the Safavid dynasty (16th–18th century). Shah Abbas the Great famously walked on foot all the way from Isfahan to Mashhad to show his devotion, ordering grand renovations that added the signature gold-plated domes, sweeping courtyards (*Sahn*), and world-renowned tilework. Today,

the complex covers over one million square meters, making it one of the largest mosques in the world by surface area.

Eternal Neighbors: The Luminaries Buried in Khorasan

Over eleven centuries, the magnetic pull of the sanctuary transformed it into a sacred resting place for some of Persia's and the Islamic world's most influential historical figures. Resting within the sprawling grounds is the legendary Abbasid Caliph **Harun al-Rashid**, whose original tomb became the centerpiece around which the shrine was first built. Centuries later, **Goharshad Begum**, the visionary Timurid empress and wife of Shah Rukh, was laid to rest nearby after leaving her immortal mark on the shrine through the construction of its famous Goharshad Mosque. Surrounding them in the outer courtyards and marble vaults are towering scholars, jurists, and grand poets—such as **Sheikh Baha'i**, the brilliant Safavid polymath, architect, and philosopher whose tomb remains a popular stop for pilgrims. In Mashhad, emperors, scholars, calligraphers, and commoners all found their final rest under the exact same golden dome, drawn together by the enduring sanctuary of Imam al-Reza (R.A.).

Currency, Gemstones, and a Priceless Gift

As we walked past the roundabout toward the shrine, we realized we had a minor financial problem. The stack of Iranian Rials we had acquired at the airport had already been eaten up by the taxi fare and the local SIM card purchase. If we wanted to survive the night—and perhaps indulge in some late-night dining after our shrine visit—we needed to find a currency exchange, fast.

The pedestrian-only zone leading to the sanctuary was a vibrant, narrow market lane flanked by dozens of tiny, brightly lit shops. Since commercial money changers were closed at that late hour, we started asking shopkeepers if anyone could exchange Saudi Riyals.

Eventually, we were pointed toward a cozy jewelry shop specializing in natural stones and traditional silver rings.

Now, Ali has a keen eye for precious gems. Naturally, a simple currency exchange immediately morphed into an impromptu gemstone inspection.

By the time the numbers were being typed back and forth on the calculator, the shopkeeper had realized we were from Pakistan. As he counted out the cash, his eyes suddenly caught the shimmer on my finger.

I was wearing a very distinct silver ring set with six small, diamond-cut yellow sapphires fitted into a black silver band—a ring that Ali Raza had gifted me nearly ten years ago. It's the kind of piece that commands attention. The shopkeeper motioned for me to take it off so he could inspect it. Intrigued, he then glanced at Ali's hand, noticing the bold, deep red ruby ring Ali was wearing, and asked to see his as well.

The shopkeeper tapped his desk, looked at my yellow sapphire ring, and then pointed to a rather plain turquoise ring he was wearing on his own finger. He gestured, asking if I'd be willing to trade mine for his.

I shook my head with a polite laugh: *No way.*

Seeing my hesitation, he gestured toward his glass display cases, offering *any* ring in his entire shop in exchange for mine.

That was a huge moment of validation. If a professional Persian jeweler in the heart of Khorasan was willing to trade anything in his shop for my ring, I knew I was wearing something truly special. But more than its physical value, the ring was a gift from my dearest friend, making it completely priceless.

Trying to bridge the language gap, we struggled to explain why I couldn't part with it. Finally, the magic Arabic/Persian word popped into my head:

"*Hadia!*" (A gift!)

The jeweler's eyes lit up in immediate understanding. He smiled, nodded with deep respect, and handed the ring back to me. But having understood the power of a *Hadia*, he turned his gaze straight to Ali with a playful grin, gesturing toward my ring as if to say, "*Hadia' that to me?*"

We all burst out laughing at his sharp Persian wit.

He then reached into his drawer and proudly pulled out a thick wad of Pakistani Rupees, offering to trade them for our Saudi Riyals. I almost laughed out loud. Pakistani currency is barely accepted beyond our own borders—and half the time, it feels like a struggle to use it inside our own country—so seeing a stack of PKRs sitting in a shop in Mashhad was a hilarious surprise. We politely declined his offer and insisted on fresh Iranian Rials instead.

We finalized the currency exchange, pocketed our fresh stack of Rials, and walked out into the cool night, enriched by both the cash and a memorable moment of market banter.

The Courtyard of Infinity

With our pockets refilled and spirits high, we resumed our walk toward the sanctuary. Between us, we were carrying a single, simple drawstring bag—our entire worldly lifeline in Iran, holding our fresh stack of Rials and those precious stamped paper e-visas.

We soon reached the grand outer perimeter—a wide, sweeping avenue completely blocked off from vehicular traffic. At the main entrance, security guards conducted a polite, thorough bag check. Once cleared, we stepped through the monumental portal.

What met our eyes blew us away.

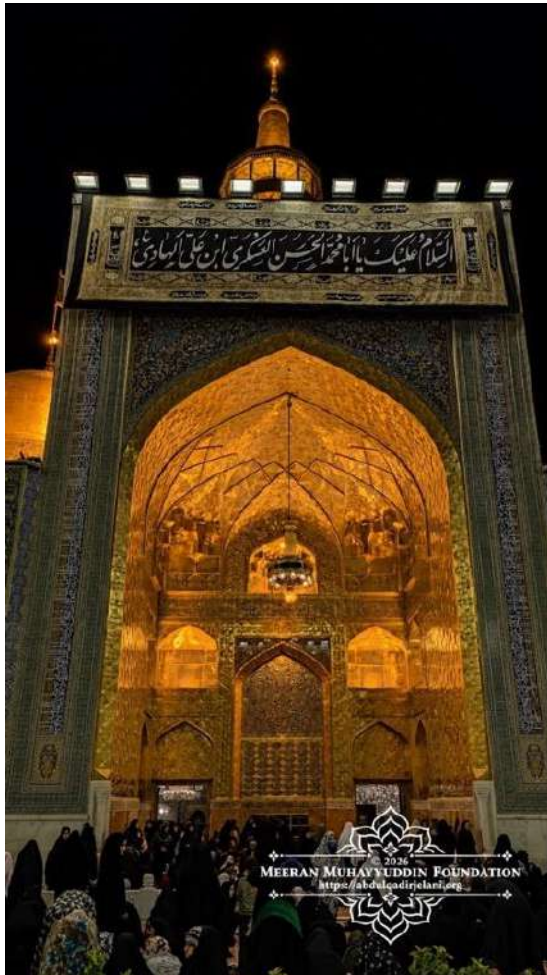
We stepped into a vast, open-air courtyard (*Sahn*), where polished marble stretched out beneath our feet like still water, reflecting the warm glow of the surrounding arcades. Intricate blue-and-gold tilework lined the tall, symmetrical facades framing the avenue, leading the eye straight to the center: a magnificent grand entrance crowned by a single golden minaret that blazed against the ink-black Khorasan sky. A delicate sliver of a crescent moon hung quietly beside it. Even past midnight, people drifted through—families with tired children, women wrapped in black chadors, solitary pilgrims walking slowly—yet the space felt remarkably calm, vast, and deeply inviting.



We took a few quiet moments to snap some pictures, taking in the grand scale before slowly making our way toward the central structure.

As we walked along the outer perimeter, we were drawn toward a monumental archway that stopped us dead in our tracks—a towering golden *Iwan* glowing like liquid fire under the night sky.

Deep within its cavernous, honeycombed vaulting, warm light spilled through intricate golden lattice grilles. Below, gathered along the marble floor at the base of this glittering shrine facade, dozens of female pilgrims wrapped in black chadors sat and stood, peering through the lower arches, praying and weeping quietly in their designated sector. Being our very first visit, Ali and I naively paused for a moment and thought, *“Ah, this must be it. This is as close as people get.”*



Standing before that colossal golden portal, watching the raw, unrestrained devotion of the people around us—many with tears streaming down their faces—a sudden, unexpected wave of emotion welled up in my own chest. It was a heavy, spiritual magnetism that catches you completely off guard beneath such radiant majesty. I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and managed to compose myself. But then, traveler’s intuition kicked in. Looking closely beyond the seated crowd, I noticed a steady stream of men moving past the golden alcoves and disappearing deeper through an entryway off to the side.

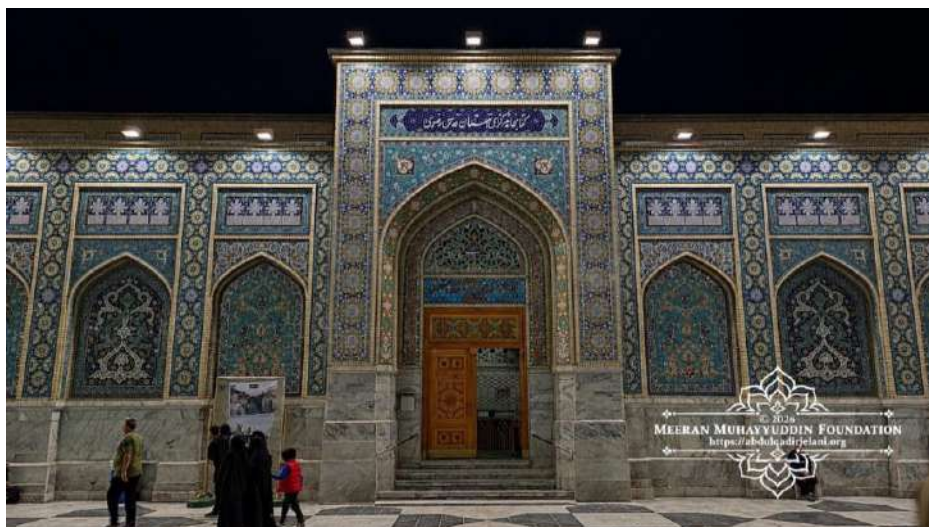
I nudged Ali. *"They're going further in. Let's follow them."*

Books in the Midnight Hour

As we navigated the winding corridor, passing under one magnificent tiled archway after another, Ali’s eyes suddenly caught a sign overhead: **LIBRARY**.

If there is one thing in this world that can instantly distract Ali Raza from any path, it is a hall full of books. He froze, his face lighting up with irresistible curiosity. A bibliophile at heart, he couldn't possibly walk past a historical library in the heart of Khorasan without checking it out.

We arrived at the grand library building, its exterior glowing under bright floodlights against the night sky. The facade was breathtaking—covered in intricate, vibrant blue Islamic tilework framing a massive arched wooden doorway that was open just enough to peek inside. Standing in front of this quiet sanctuary of knowledge, surrounded by its timeless elegance, Ali looked like a kid in a candy store. We snapped a few photos in the courtyard outside, soaked in the peaceful atmosphere as visitors quietly strolled past, and then resumed our quest for the tomb.



The Treasury of Wisdom: The Central Library of Astan Quds Razavi

The quiet, magnificent hall we had stumbled into was merely the gateway to the **Central Library of Astan Quds Razavi**—one of the oldest, largest, and most prestigious repositories of knowledge in the Islamic world. Officially active for over a millennium (with historical endowment records dating back as far as 974 CE), this vast institution preserves a jaw-dropping collection of over **3 million digital and physical resources**, including more than **120,000 rare historical manuscripts** and priceless lithographs. Among its most guarded treasures is a priceless collection of ancient Kufic Qurans written on parchment, some dating back to the 1st century of Islam and attributed to the handmanship of early Caliphs and Imams, including Imam Ali (R.A.) and Imam al-Reza (R.A.) himself. It also houses world-renowned scientific, astronomical, and medical treatises written by polymaths like Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Biruni. Standing in that midnight atrium, it was mind-boggling to realize that just behind those closed security gates lay eleven centuries of unbroken human intellect and sacred art.

Down into the Emerald Heart

The path pulled us deeper into the complex. The architecture grew increasingly intricate, with high vaulted ceilings covered in mirror-work (*Aineh-kari*) that fractured the light into thousands of shimmering stars.

Eventually, we arrived at a transition area where pilgrims were pulling out small plastic bags, removing their shoes, and carrying them along. Ali looked at the pile of plastic bags, then looked at me.

"Let's not carry our shoes inside plastic bags near the Imam," Ali said quietly, a mark of deep, old-school reverence. "Let's leave them right here."

We placed our shoes neatly in the holding area and stepped barefoot onto the cool, polished marble floor.

The interior was alive with energy. A gentle, unspoken traffic system was in place: one side of the vast hallway was dedicated to those moving inward, while the other side accommodated those heading out. We joined the flow of incoming pilgrims. After taking ten or twelve steps, the floor gave way to a short flight of descending stairs. The architecture was whispering a subtle truth: *the grave of the beloved Imam lay lower than the earth outside, buried deep in the humbled heart of the sanctuary.*

We descended the steps, turned a couple of corners, and suddenly stepped straight into the central chamber.

The atmosphere inside was utterly indescribable—a space lit by a ethereal fusion of deep emerald green and soft white lights, reflecting off millions of microscopic mirror tiles covering every inch of the ceiling. In the center of this glowing universe stood the *Zarih*—the massive, beautifully crafted silver cage enclosing the sacred grave of Imam Ali al-Reza (R.A.).

The room pulsed with raw, concentrated devotion. People were pressing forward, reaching out with tears in their eyes, trying to touch the intricate steel grills of the enclosure. I moved into the crowd, attempting to get closer, but mindful not to push or disrupt the delicate peace of the pilgrims around me.

When I reached a respectful distance, I paused. I raised my hands, offered my heart felt *Salam* to the noble grandson of the Prophet (ﷺ), and quietly recited Surah Al-Fatiha. In that overwhelming, timeless moment—surrounded by green light, soft whispers of prayer, and centuries of history—the rest of the world simply ceased to exist.

When I lowered my hands and stepped back out of the dense crowd, I looked around. Ali was nowhere to be seen, swallowed up by the sea of pilgrims.

Knowing better than to wander aimlessly through the massive labyrinth of the central chamber, I made my way back toward the exact doorway we had used to enter, leaned against the marble wall, and waited for my friend to emerge from the emerald light.

After about five minutes of standing by the doorway, I spotted Ali emerging from the crowd.

One look at his face, and I knew the moment had completely overwhelmed him. His eyes were heavy, his cheeks glistened with tears, and his quiet, humbled expression spoke volumes. He had been deeply touched by the sacred atmosphere of the *Zarih*.

He walked up to me, still silently processing the experience, and we instinctively looked for a quiet spot to sit down and absorb everything that had just transpired. We found a grand, archway door leading into the hall with a few wide marble steps. Being mindful of the other pilgrims, we chose opposite sides of the massive doorframe—I sat on one side, Ali on the other, leaning our backs

against the cold marble while keeping the central pathway completely clear.

For the next fifteen minutes, we sat there in profound, intimate silence.

Ali kept weeping quietly, letting years of emotion, devotion, and reverence pour out under the glowing emerald lights. Beside him, I sat in a state of absolute, unshakeable peace. There were no words exchanged, no need for conversation, and no urge to move. It was just two friends, far from home, resting in the peaceful sanctuary of the King of Khorasan—one washing his heart with tears, and the other wrapped in a quiet, serene stillness that neither of us would ever forget.

For Ali, this moment carried a weight that stretched far beyond our own lives. More than a century earlier, in the early 1900s, his great-grandfather had undertaken the long, arduous journey to this exact same sanctuary—traveling across borders in an era of horse carriages, dusty roads, and months of hard travel. Standing on the very same ground where his ancestor had once stood to pay his respects made the circle complete. It wasn't just a travel milestone; it was a quiet reunion across generations.

When we finally stood up from the marble steps, we slowly made our way back out into the open air of the grand courtyard (*Sahn*). The crisp midnight breeze washed over us as we found a quiet spot to sit down right on the vast, polished floor.

For the next thirty minutes, we sat side by side in peaceful silence, looking up at the illuminated golden dome blazing against the pitch-black Khorasan sky, a dark green flag fluttering quietly from its crest. Beside it, the towering golden minaret and glowing arched portal cast a warm radiance over the courtyard below. Around us, a dense gathering of pilgrims moved at a gentle pace beneath the tall, closed courtyard umbrellas, bathed in the soft hum of late-night devotion.

We snapped a few quiet photos together to preserve the moment—simple snapshots to remember the exact feeling of standing under that golden dome—before finally gathering ourselves to leave the sanctuary and step back into the city streets.



The Silent Walk & The Search for *Chelow*

We began walking toward the hotel in complete silence. No words were needed. Some experiences are too heavy for immediate conversation; they just need to sit in your chest for a while.

Fortunately, my brain has a built-in compass for remembering paths and routes, so navigating back through the sprawling, late-night streets of Mashhad was effortless. But as the hotel came into view, our elevated spiritual state was suddenly interrupted by a very physical reality: our stomachs were screaming.

It was well past midnight, and it was time for the most important ritual of any first night in a new country: our first authentic dinner.

Instead of going inside, we turned back toward the market lanes to find an open restaurant. Every travel vlog and blog about Iran insists on one absolute truth: you cannot leave the country without eating proper *Chelow Kebab*. So, we hunted for those magic words.

Just a short walk from our hotel, we spotted a cozy, minimalist diner with seating for no more than fifteen people. Outside, a printed menu on the wall proudly featured the word *Kebab*. Inside, the place was completely empty—just the owner, the grill, and two starving travelers.

Sizzling Charcoal & Mechanical Eating

Communicating our order proved to be another hilarious game of hand gestures and nods. We essentially tried to convey: *"Bring us the absolute best meat you have in this establishment."*

The owner, reading our hungry eyes with practiced ease, guided us toward the holy grail of Persian cuisine: **Chelow Kebab** (tender grilled meat served over a mountain of buttery, saffron-infused rice) and **Koobideh** (minced lamb/beef kebabs pressed onto long flat skewers and grilled over red-hot coals).

We sat at a table and endured a excruciatingly delicious twenty-minute wait. The air inside the small diner filled with the intoxicating aroma of sizzling fat, charcoal smoke, and melting butter.

When the platters finally hit the table—steaming mounds of fluffy rice topped with a golden layer of saffron, seared tomatoes, and

juicy, perfectly charred skewers of meat—all table manners evaporated. We didn't talk. We didn't pause. Driven by sheer exhaustion and pure hunger, we ate in complete, ravenous silence and cleared our plates without taking a breath. Every single bite of the tender, spiced meat dissolved in our mouths, making the long journey from Dubai entirely worth it.

While the *Chelow Kebab* was fantastic, it was the **Koobideh** that completely stole the show—juicy, perfectly seasoned, and meltingly tender with every bite. It was a unanimous, undisputed victory: Koobideh was crowned the undisputed champion of our first Iranian feast.

To wash it all down, the owner gestured toward a cold pitcher of *Doogh*—the savory, mint-infused Persian yogurt drink (the local cousin of our Pakistani *Lassi* or the Middle Eastern *Laban*). Tart, fizzy, and refreshing, it was the perfect end to a legendary meal. We paid our bill in fresh Rials, offered our genuine gratitude to the chef, and stepped back out into the cool night air.

Mystery Smoke & Room 101

With my stomach full, it was time for my non-negotiable post-meal ritual: a cigarette.

I spotted a tiny tuck shop open across the street, glowing like a beacon in the dark. We crossed over to stock up for the next day, grabbing armfuls of snacks—chocolates, mini cakes, packets of chips, and a few 500ml water bottles to keep in our room. While paying, I asked the shopkeeper for a pack of cigarettes. He handed me an unfamiliar box that strongly mimicked a classic pack of Marlboro Reds from the outside, but bore a completely foreign brand name in Farsi.

I flicked a lighter, took a drag as we strolled the final few yards back to the hotel, and immediately winced. It was, without a doubt, one of

the most horrible, harsh cigarettes I had ever tasted in my life. But running on zero alternatives, I powered through it anyway.

We walked through the brown-paneled lobby, retrieved our room key from the young night receptionist, and went upstairs.

The moment the room door clicked shut behind us, the sheer weight of the day hit us like a tidal wave. We were so bone-tired that we didn't even bother to speak, joke, or even look at each other. Shoes were kicked off, jackets were dropped, and we collapsed straight into our beds like two turned-off machines. Within seconds, the lights were out, and two exhausted travelers drifted off into a deep, uninterrupted sleep in the heart of Khorasan.



Album: Mashhad

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=mashhad>

CHAPTER 4

On the Silk Road: Blue Shirt, Turquoise Kings, and the Path to Attar

"The road is wider than your worries, and a good companion makes even an ancient highway feel short."

We woke up around 8:00 AM, feeling remarkably recharged despite the chaos of the night before. A hot shower later, we were ready to test out the complimentary breakfast included in our room rate—courtesy of our bargain-priced, allegedly 5-star establishment.

We headed down to the dining area, where two hostesses greeted us at the door with a warm, cheerful volley of fast-paced Farsi. Naturally, I understood precisely zero words. Channeling the ultimate international sign language of tired travelers, I simply held up our room keycard, pointing at the printed room number like a man presenting evidence in court. She took one look, matched it on her clipboard, smiled, and ushered us in. We had passed the breakfast security clearance.

The spread was a fascinating mystery. Aside from the universal, undeniable presence of fresh eggs and custom omelettes, there was a long table filled with dishes that looked entirely foreign by sight. We spent a full 30 minutes slowly navigating the buffet like culinary explorers, trying different spreads and sipping on various teas. One of them was brewed from deep red dried leaves—it had a sharp, refreshing tang that tasted surprisingly like a hot lemon tea.

As we finished up and made our exit, one of the girls called out with a bright smile, offering what was clearly either a "Thank you" or a "Have a wonderful day" in melodic Farsi. It was a sweet, warm start to the morning.

We went back to the room, packed up our drawstring bags and luggage, and headed down to the lobby for checkout around 9:00 AM.

This time, a sharp young woman was running the front desk. To our immense relief, she spoke fluent English. She quickly retrieved our passports, finalized our bill, and listened as we pitched our next request: we needed a reliable rental car with a driver to take us out of Mashhad to Nishapur—specifically to the tomb of the great Sufi poet Hazrat Farid ud-Din Attar.

"And if possible," I added, "it would be fantastic if the driver understands some English."

She picked up the phone, made a couple of animated calls in Farsi, and turned back to us with a reassuring nod. "A driver will be here in 20 to 30 minutes."

We sank into the lobby sofas to wait. True to her word, about 25 minutes later, a young man walked through the glass doors. He was wearing a bright blue shirt—a garment that, little did we know, would become an iconic, recurring visual marker for the rest of this entire trip.

We negotiated the fare, which took all of five seconds, grabbed our gear, and walked outside.

Now, as established, Ali has an incredible intuition for reading people, whereas I have a sharp, relentless eye for vehicles—hence my deep emotional trauma over airport shuttle software, missing X5s, and rattling vintage Peugeots.

As we approached our ride, I looked at the clean, well-maintained sedan, leaned toward Ali, and whispered in Urdu: *"Car looks good."*

Ali took one look at our young driver's friendly face, turned to me, and replied: *"Driver is a good guy."*

Just like that, our new ride passed both the automotive and human inspections in under sixty seconds flat. We popped the trunk, loaded our bags, slid into the seats, and hit the gas. Next stop: **Nishapur.**

The Jewel of Khorasan: The Storied History of Nishapur

As the modern concrete edge of Mashhad faded into open highway and rocky desert landscapes, we were essentially riding on the ancient veins of the Silk Road. And few cities along this historic trade route hold a legacy as vast, radiant, and tragic as **Nishapur.**

Founded in the 3rd century CE by the Sasanian king Shapur I (from whom it derives its name, *New-Shapur*), the city grew to become one of the four great capitals of Greater Khorasan alongside Merv, Herat, and Balkh. By the 10th and 11th centuries under the Samanid and Seljuk empires, Nishapur was a glittering metropolis—a global hub of trade, science, Islamic scholarship, and literary genius. It was world-famous for its mines producing the finest turquoise (*Firooza*) on earth—a deep, brilliant blue gemstone that decorated royal crowns from Baghdad to Constantinople.

For pilgrims from South Asia, Nishapur holds an even deeper, intimate spiritual lineage. It was from this very soil that **Hazrat Khwaja Usman Harooni (R.A.)** hailed—the legendary Sufi master and spiritual mentor (*Murshid*) of Hazrat Khwaja Moin-ud-Din Chishti (R.A.) of Ajmer Sharif. Walking through Nishapur, you realize that the spiritual currents flowing through the shrines of Delhi, Ajmer, and Lahore were first kindled right here in these quiet gardens of Khorasan.

Yet, Nishapur's history is equally defined by staggering resilience in the face of apocalypse. The city survived devastating earthquakes, but its defining historical tragedy struck in 1221 CE during the Mongol invasions. Genghis Khan's armies laid total

siege to the city, utterly razing its grand libraries, academies, and palaces to the ground.

Despite such total devastation, the spirit of Nishapur refused to vanish. It rebuilt itself around its immortal intellectual giant: men like **Omar Khayyam** (the legendary mathematician, astronomer, and poet of the *Rubaiyat*) and **Hazrat Farid ud-Din Attar** (the master Sufi poet whose spiritual works inspired generations, including Rumi). Riding toward it, you couldn't help but feel that we weren't just driving to another town—we were approaching a city of legends.

Descendants, Turquoise, and "Welcome to Iran"

As the sedan glided onto the open road, natural introductions began. Our blue-shirted driver introduced himself as **Syed Sajjad Mousavi**. He was a quiet, polite young man belonging to the lineage of Imam Musa al-Reza (R.A.)—a highly respected family background across the region. Knowing we were riding with a *Syed* added an extra layer of warmth and respect to our journey.

Knowing Nishapur's global reputation for world-class turquoise, Ali's internal gem radar immediately pinged. He leaned forward and asked Sajjad if we could make a quick detour into a local market to look at some raw stones and silver rings.

Sajjad's face lit up. He held up his hand to show off his own ring—a bold piece set with a large, vibrant yellow stone—and told us he had bought it directly from a close friend who ran a gem shop in town. Since it was still a bit before 10:00 AM and most market storefronts were shuttered, Sajjad pulled out his phone and made a personal call, persuading his friend to head over early and open the shop specifically for us.

We pulled into the city center of Nishapur, parked along a quiet street, and walked over to a cozy, snug shop. Sajjad's friend—a stylish, good-looking young guy sporting a sharp mustache—unlocked the door and welcomed us in.

With Sajjad acting as our dedicated translator, we asked to see authentic *Husseini Feroza* (the highly prized, deep-blue Nishapur turquoise) along with several other regional stones. Tray after tray was pulled out from under the glass display cases.

Now, thanks to a teenage internship at a gemstone shop back home, Ali possesses a sharp eye for identifying real gems from clever glass or synthetic imitations. He picked up the cold stones, held them against the light, checked their matrices, and gave me a subtle nod: *Every single stone here is 100% genuine.*

While Ali was meticulously inspecting the gems, he pulled out his phone to send a quick text update back home, only to notice that WhatsApp had abruptly stopped working. Our "sacred VPN"—which had been faithfully bypassing the regional firewalls—had officially breathed its last breath.

Seeing him stare blankly at his frozen screen, the shopkeeper smirked, offered a witty line in Farsi, and then he translated it for us with a laugh:

"Welcome to Iran!"

We all cracked up at his dry Persian humor. Humor aside, business was conducted: we picked up a couple of finished rings and three or four loose stones. After settling the bill, Sajjad promised that our next immediate mission, before heading deeper out of town, would be finding a local mobile repair shop to get our VPNs and connection fixed.

Protective Escorts & The Grand Negotiation

After walking for a couple of minutes down a nearby street, Sajjad guided us into a small, cluttered cell phone repair shop. Before we stepped inside, he leaned in and gave us a sharp bit of tactical advice: *"Let me do all the talking. You guys just stay quiet."*

It made total sense. Sajjad was playing the role of a protective local host, shielding us from the universal "tourist tax" that shopkeepers everywhere love to slap on foreign travelers. He took Ali's phone,

explained the issue to the tech guy in rapid-fire Farsi, and within a few minutes, the technician reconfigured the settings, revived our sacred VPN, and handed the phone back. We were fully back online and ready for the road.

Walking back to the car, Ali and I exchanged a quick look. Sajjad wasn't just a good driver; he was polite, reliable, respectful, and clearly had our back. He was making the trip remarkably smooth.

"Why look for someone else?" Ali suggested in Urdu. *"Let's just hire him and his car for the rest of the entire journey."*

I agreed completely. As Sajjad turned the key and pulled back onto the main road, we pitched our grand offer from the back seat. We proposed **200 USD** total to keep him and his car for the rest of the tour, adding the ultimate sweetener: *"All your food and accommodation are on us."*

Sajjad's eyes met ours in the rearview mirror with a wide, appreciative grin. It was a tempting deal, but being a thorough guy, he replied politely, *"I'll have to call my boss, clear it with him, and let you guys know."*

About 40 minutes of pleasant driving later, the landscape opened up into a tranquil, beautifully landscaped complex on the outskirts of Nishapur. We had arrived at the tomb of **Hazrat Farid ud-Din Attar (R.A.)**.

The Apothecary of Divine Wisdom

To understand the serene atmosphere of this sanctuary, one must understand the towering literary and spiritual giant resting beneath it. Born Abu Hamid bin Abu Bakr Ibrahim in Nishapur, he took the pen name **Attar**—meaning "the apothecary" or "the perfumer"—inheriting his father's profession as a practicing physician and chemist. The turning point of his life came when a wandering Sufi dervish entered his shop, looked at the worldly wealth surrounding Attar, and quietly asked how he planned to detach from it when his time came to die. Deeply moved, Attar abandoned his business to

travel across Egypt, Syria, Arabia, and India, immersing himself in spiritual pursuit. He emerged as one of the greatest Sufi poets in human history, authoring masterworks like *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*)—an allegory of thirty birds searching for the divine King—and *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* (*Biographies of the Saints*). His poetry was so profound that Jalal-ud-Din Rumi himself famously declared: "*Attar was the spirit, Sanai his two eyes; We come after Sanai and Attar.*"

The Garden of the Birds: Hazrat Farid ud-Din Attar



Stepping out of the car, the bustling noise of the town evaporated completely, replaced by a deep, peaceful stillness. The mausoleum lay nestled inside a lush, shaded garden, framed by thick, leafy trees that dappled the sunlight across the ground.

In the center stood the octagonal tomb, topped with a strikingly elegant, bulbous turquoise dome adorned with geometric mosaic patterns and bold calligraphic script that glistened against the vivid blue sky. Intricate blue-and-yellow tilework encased the lower arched alcoves, surrounding a simple wooden door. Built originally during the Timurid era under the grand vizier Ali-Shir Nava'i, the

shrine honors the master Sufi poet whose work—most famously *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*)—profoundly shaped Islamic mysticism and inspired giants like Jalaluddin Rumi.

As we stood near the entrance of the octagonal tomb, Ali turned to me with a look of deep reverence and quoted Rumi's famous words:

"Attar has traversed the seven cities of love, while we have only turned the corner of a single street."

Then, inspired by the spirit of those words, Ali made a quiet, spontaneous decision. *"If Hazrat Farid roamed seven cities in search of divine love,"* he whispered, *"the least I can do is take seven rounds around his resting place."*

With slow, deliberate steps, Ali began his seven quiet circles around the mausoleum, paying his personal respects to the great master. I watched him move around the turquoise dome, bathed in the soft sunlight filtering through the cypress trees—a small, beautiful moment of devotion bridging centuries of Sufi tradition right there in the gardens of Nishapur.

Before stepping back onto the garden path, we stood facing the blue-tiled shrine and offered our Salam to Hazrat Farid-ud-Din Attar (R.A.). It was a humbling feeling—standing on the very ground of a master whose words had nourished the hearts of seekers, scholars, and poets for over eight centuries. We recited a short Fatiha, carrying the quiet peace of the sanctuary with us as we turned to leave.

Because the tomb was currently undergoing restoration work, the main entrance was locked, keeping us from stepping inside the central chamber. However, peering through a small gap in the heavy main door, we could clearly see into the heart of the sanctuary beneath the blue dome. There rested the grave of Attar, marked by an intricately carved black marble stone inscribed with elegant Persian calligraphy. Even through that narrow wooden

frame, the quiet, introspective solemnity of the inner room radiated outward.

Wandering through the surrounding garden grounds, the history of Nishapur's artistic soul felt layered all around us. Just a short walk through the same garden complex lies another monumental resting place: the tomb of **Kamal-ol-Molk** (Mohammad Ghaffari), the legendary late-19th-century Iranian painter whose modern mausoleum features towering, curved tiled arches that harmonize beautifully with Attar's historic dome.

Standing in that quiet sanctuary, surrounded by centuries of poetry, art, and nature, we took our time paying our respects, taking in the peaceful atmosphere before returning to Sajjad and the car.

The \$250 Deal & The Polymath of Nishapur

We walked back to the car, feeling spiritually refreshed and ready for the next leg. Sajjad was waiting by the sedan with a warm smile. He had just gotten off the phone with his boss to discuss our grand 4-day road trip proposal.

In classic, gracious Iranian fashion, he presented the counter-offer with maximum hospitality: *"I can do \$200 USD, but my boss says \$300 USD would be ideal for the entire route."*

We met right in the middle without missing a beat: **\$250 USD total** for the next four days, with all fuel, tolls, and his personal accommodation and meals fully covered by us. Just like that, the deal was sealed, Sajjad was officially our captain for the rest of the Iranian expedition, and we had our own private driver ready for the Silk Road.

As he started the engine, Sajjad mentioned that another legendary monument was just a short drive away: the tomb of **Omar Khayyam**.

The Poet of Precision: Omar Khayyam

Just a few minutes down the road, we pulled into another quiet, beautifully pine-scented garden complex. Born in Nishapur in 1048 CE, **Omar Khayyam** was a colossal intellectual titan of the Islamic Golden Age. While the Western world knows him primarily for the philosophical, wine-and-love-drenched quatrains of his *Rubaiyat* (immortalized by Edward FitzGerald's translations), in Persia he was first and foremost a brilliant mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher. He reformed the solar calendar to create the Jalali calendar—a system so strikingly accurate that it remains more precise than the Gregorian calendar we use today—and made groundbreaking advances in algebra and geometry.

His modern mausoleum, designed in 1963 by the famed Iranian architect Hooshang Seyhoun, is a masterpiece of modern Islamic architecture. The towering, 22-meter-high open structure features ten soaring concrete arches that intertwine like geometric diamond motifs, covered in blue-and-white tiles inscribed with Khayyam's famous verses. It sits peacefully under a canopy of apricot trees and weeping willows—fulfilling Khayyam's own legendary prophecy that his grave would lie in a spot where trees drop their blossoms twice every spring.

While Ali headed inside to pay his respects and marvel at the soaring geometric arches, I stayed outside near the garden gates to attend to the absolute most critical, non-negotiable item of the entire morning: **a proper smoke.**

I pulled out my pack, lit the same hard cigarette, and watched the quiet park breeze gently rustle the trees, taking a long-awaited moment to just sit back and relax. Shortly after, Ali walked back out to join me. I didn't even have to ask—I knew for a fact that this time around, there were no tears shed, and he definitely hadn't taken seven rounds around the astronomer's grave.

The Silent Sanctuary of Al-Maghribi

About twenty minutes down the road, Sajjad steered the sedan toward our final stop within the boundaries of Nishapur: the tomb of **Hazrat Abu Usman Saeed Bin Salam Al-Maghribi (R.A.)**.

Born in North Africa (the *Maghreb*), Hazrat Abu Usman was one of the early, towering masters of Sufism during the 10th century (4th century AH). After spending decades traveling through Mecca, Baghdad, and the spiritual centers of the Islamic world studying under legendary ascetics, he eventually settled in Nishapur—which was then a vibrant magnet for mystics and scholars. Known for his uncompromising spiritual discipline, profound humility, and deep teachings on *Tawakkul* (absolute reliance on the Divine), he became a beloved spiritual anchor for Khorasan until his passing in 983 CE.



The mausoleum sat quietly amidst a grove of tall pine trees, framed by dark bark trunks against a brilliant blue sky. Built from warm yellow brick, its modest dome was dotted with turquoise diamond accents, set above a soft turquoise archway and a cobalt-blue calligraphy banner. However, when we reached the site, our hearts sank—the heavy main gates surrounding the perimeter were locked shut for the afternoon. Determined not to leave empty-

handed, I stretched my arms as high as I could over the barrier to capture a photo of the quiet, unreachable sanctuary through the trees.

We didn't let the locked door dampen our spirits. Standing just outside the main gate in the quiet shade of the trees, we offered our respectful *Salam* and recited a short *Fatiha*, sending our prayers across the threshold.

With Nishapur's grand trio of poets, polymaths, and saints now honored, we climbed back into Sajjad's sedan, settled into our seats, and pointed our compass west. It was time to leave Nishapur behind and begin the long, open-highway drive toward **Bastam**—the legendary home of the master mystic, Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.).



Album: Nishapur

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=nishapur>

CHAPTER 5

Four Hundred Kilometers of Desert, Card PINs, and the Sultan of Mystics

"The road doesn't just take you places; it strips away the noise until you're left with the sky, the silence, and the stories of the men who walked it before you."

With our quiet *Salam* sent across the locked gates of Hazrat Abu Usman Saeed Bin Salam Al-Maghribi's shrine, our time in Nishapur was officially complete. Ahead of us lay a massive, 400-kilometer stretch of open highway leading west toward **Bastam**—the ancient home of Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.).

Before we could conquer four hundred kilometers of Iranian asphalt, however, we had to address a far more urgent, non-negotiable human priority: **lunch**.

Basement Biryani and the Super-Carbonated Miracle

Since we were still on the outer edges of Nishapur, Sajjad offered to take us to a local spot he knew well. Rather than burning time on a long detour back into the city traffic, he skillfully navigated a maze of tight, winding residential side streets.

Watching him maneuver the car through those narrow alleys was an absolute masterpiece of driving skill. He squeezed through gaps with millimeter precision, reversing and slotting the sedan into a tight parking spot like an absolute veteran. I leaned over to Ali and muttered in Urdu, *"This guy isn't just a driver—he's an expert."*

The restaurant was a charming, subterranean spot nestled in a basement. We walked down the stairs, washed our hands at the entrance sink, and settled into a booth. When we asked for an

English menu, the waiter gave us a blank look—English menus were clearly not a feature here.

Sajjad took full control, speaking to the waiter on our behalf with quiet confidence. A short while later, our table was transformed into a feast: fragrant Persian biryani accompanied by succulent, perfectly seared chicken kebabs, served alongside ice-cold cans of Iranian Coca-Cola.

Now, I've had Coca-Cola in Pakistan, across the UAE, and throughout the Gulf, but whatever recipe they use in Iran is on a completely different planet. The level of fizz was astounding—a intensely crisp, highly carbonated burn that made every single bite of rice taste ten times better. That meal alone earned a permanent spot in our core travel memories.

Emergency Wardrobe & The Bachelor Theory

Refueled and back on the road, Sajjad made a sudden turn near a large roundabout on the edge of town, pulling over to the curb. He turned around, politely apologized, and asked if we could give him a few minutes so he could grab some essential supplies. We happily agreed and decided to step out to stretch our legs.

As Ali and I strolled through the small roadside market, I noticed something quite unusual: **there were virtually no motorcycles anywhere.** Coming from South Asia, where two-wheelers weave through traffic like swarms of bees, the near-total absence of motorbikes was striking.

About fifteen minutes later, Sajjad emerged from a storefront carrying a massive plastic shopping bag overflowing with folded clothes.

The lightbulb went off in my head. *Of course.* We had literally hired him mid-trip while waiting in a hotel lobby, giving him zero prep time. The poor guy had embarked on a four-day, cross-country road trip with only the blue shirt on his back.

Observing this quick emergency shopping run sparked an immediate detective theory in my mind: *This guy cannot possibly be married*. A married man simply cannot pick up two foreign strangers in a hotel lobby, commit to a 4 days journey on five seconds' notice, and buy his entire wardrobe on the fly without receiving a world-ending phone call from home.

I decided to keep this personal theory to myself for the moment, filing it away under questions to ask once Sajjad became more comfortable with us.

Desert Highways, Card PINs, and the Open Quran

Leaving the city behind, the landscape transformed entirely. Gone were the green patches and tree-lined avenues of the towns. As far as the eye could see, the terrain flattened into an endless expanse of arid, rocky desert under a pale blue sky. The air hitting the car windows was dry and crisp, completely devoid of the heavy humidity we were used to back in Pakistan.

To keep us smooth and ticket-free, Sajjad had an app on his dashboard that loudly alerted him to incoming speed cameras along the highway. Whenever the app chirped, he'd casually drop his foot off the gas, cruise past the radar unit with practiced caution, and then pick the speed right back up once the danger passed.

A little while into the drive, Sajjad glanced back at us through the rearview mirror and asked softly: *"Is it fine if I play some Quran recitation on the speakers?"*

"Of course," we replied instantly.

What followed was one of the most serene legs of the trip. As the verses echoed through the car, Sajjad began reciting quietly along with the reciter from memory, his voice perfectly matching the rhythm of the audio. In the seat next to me, Ali—who recognized the chapters being recited—joined in softly, his eyes fixed on the horizon. Meanwhile, I leaned back against the headrest, keeping

my eyes on the passing desert hills, letting the cadence of the Quran settle over the long road.

Every few dozen kilometers, we'd hit a highway toll plaza. Here, Sajjad demonstrated another fascinating local norm. Instead of pulling out paper bills, he'd reach for his local debit card, hand it through the window to the toll booth officer, and without a single second of hesitation, recite his personal four-digit PIN code out loud for the teller to punch in.

I stared at him in utter disbelief. In most parts of the world, shouting your bank PIN out loud to a complete stranger is a guaranteed recipe for financial ruin. But here, it was done casually, rooted in a deep, unspoken layer of societal trust that felt completely alien to foreign travelers.

As the miles melted away, Sajjad opened up more about his life. We finally learned that the "boss" he had called earlier to clear our \$250 deal wasn't some corporate fleet manager—it was his father. He went on to share that he had a 14-year-old sister and that the two of them were the only siblings in the family. It was a close-knit, humble household, and hearing him speak about his family made us respect our young driver even more.

Around sunset, the fuel needle dipped toward empty, so Sajjad pulled into a roadside petrol station. While the pump clicked away, he walked over to the attached convenience store to grab a coffee. When he walked back out, I nearly burst out laughing: he was holding the tiniest, most microscopic coffee cup I had ever seen in my life—a cup so small it looked like a toy for a dollhouse.

Who was I to judge his caffeine fixes? But it was another wonderfully unique detail in a day filled with them.

The Oasis of Poplars and the "Ali Reza Question"

Around 8:30 PM, the headlights of our sedan cut through the darkening sky to reveal the entrance of **Bastam**. Stepping out into the cool evening air, the first thing that struck us was the city's

serene, natural landscape. Tucked away at the foot of the Alborz mountain range, Bastam felt less like a dusty highway city and more like an ancient mountain oasis. The streets were lined with dense groves and tall, elegant rows of poplar trees, their leaves rustling softly in the crisp desert breeze.

Historically, Bastam's geography was its greatest gift. Positioned strategically along the northern branch of the Silk Road—the vital arterial route connecting Rayy, Nishapur, and Merv—it grew from a quiet pre-Islamic village into a crucial stopping point for merchants, armies, and pilgrims for over a thousand years. Yet, despite its storied history, Bastam never lost its intimate, small-town soul. It remained built around its lifeblood: fresh alpine water streams, poplar-lined avenues, and the quiet, magnetic presence of its famous mystics.

Once inside the town, our immediate mission was to secure a room for the night. Seeing a couple of locals taking an evening stroll along the quiet street, Sajjad pulled the car over and uttered his signature golden phrase: *"Ali Reza Question."*

That was his code for: *Ali, please stay in the car, look natural, and let me handle the locals.*

It was brilliant tactics. If the locals saw two foreign travelers sitting in the back seat, the price for a night's stay would instantly multiply. Sajjad rolled down his window, engaged in a quick, animated volley of Farsi, and turned back to us with good news. The locals had pointed him toward a traditional travelers' guesthouse just a five-minute walk from the shrine complex—a classic, historic rest-house known locally as a **Karvaan Saraye** (or *Mehmanpazir* in modern Persian).

We drove over to the complex, and Sajjad once again played the master negotiator at the front desk. Within minutes, we had booked two rooms: a single room for Sajjad and a cozy twin-bed room for Ali and me. We agreed to drop our drawstring bags, freshen up in

the restrooms, and meet back down at the reception area in 15 minutes.

Late-Night Gravies and Stale Persian Flatbread

Reassembling in the lobby fifteen minutes later, our stomachs reminded us that we hadn't eaten since our basement biryani in Nishapur. It was time for the next milestone of the day: **dinner**.

Luckily, the guesthouse had its own small dining room on-site. We walked in, settled into a table, and ordered a couple of traditional Persian meat gravies accompanied by fresh tea and flatbread.

When the food arrived, the gravies were rich, warm, and flavorful, but the bread was undeniably tough and dry—a far cry from the pillowy, oven-fresh *Sangak* or *Barbari* flatbreads Iran is famous for. We quickly realized the reality of small-town travel: arriving after 9:00 PM meant we were getting the very last batch of bread left over from the evening shift.

Determined not to let a bit of stale bread ruin our mood, we tore into the meal anyway, scooping up the warm gravy and washing it down with hot tea. We were tired, dusty, and miles away from home, but we were fed, settled, and standing right on the doorstep of the Sultan of Mystics.

By around 10:00 PM, with our late-night meal finished, we decided against a casual stroll and hopped right back into Sajjad's sedan to make the quick drive over to the shrine complex of **Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.)**.

The Sultan of Mystics: Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.)

To stand in Bastam is to stand at the absolute fountainhead of early Sufi metaphysics. Born Abu Yazid Tayfur ibn Isa ibn Surushan in the 8th century (181 AH), Hazrat Bayazid Bastami is universally venerated across the Islamic world as *Sultan al-Arifin* ("The King of Mystics"). Descended from a Zoroastrian family that

embraced Islam, he spent decades in deep ascetic discipline, pioneering the concept of *Fana*—the total annihilation of the individual ego in the presence of the Divine—and *Baqaa*, eternal subsistence in God.

His teachings revolutionized Sufi thought, shifting the spiritual focus from mere fear of judgment to an intoxicating, ecstatic divine love (*Ishq*). So immense was his spiritual stature that later giants like Hazrat Abul Hassan al-Kharaqani (R.A.) considered themselves spiritually nurtured by his legacy, and even Jalal-ud-Din Rumi drew endless inspiration from his sayings. Yet, despite his monumental fame that reached from Persia to Anatolia and South Asia, Bayazid lived with legendary humility, repeatedly refusing worldly honours and choosing to rest under the open sky of his native Bastam.

The Architectural Marvel of the Complex



To our immense relief, even at 10:00 PM, the heavy wooden gates of the historic complex were wide open. Stepping through the entry

archway felt like entering a living museum of Islamic artistic evolution.

The shrine complex is a breathtaking tapestry woven across nearly a thousand years of history, blending Seljuk brickwork with Ilkhanid, Safavid, and Qajar artistry. Passing through an illuminated brick gateway framed with blue geometric tile inlays, we stepped into a space where centuries overlap. Rising behind the ancient walls stands the iconic, conical turquoise-tiled dome, its sharp peak catching the light against the sky. Inside, past exposed brick walls draped in bold calligraphy banners, lies the heart of the sanctuary: a surprisingly simple, stone-paved floor where Bayazid's modest gravestone rests, carved directly with elegant script. Free of flashy adornments, the unpretentious grave reflects the quiet, profound asceticism of the master himself.



Yet, amidst all this royal, monumental grandeur, the actual grave of Hazrat Bayazid Bastami remains astonishingly plain. Located outdoors in the open courtyard without a grand dome or marble roof over it, the simple, flat tombstone rests under the stars—a

striking architectural statement that the Sultan of Mystics needed no earthly canopy.

The quiet courtyard was bathed in soft night lighting, the cool mountain breeze whispering through the ancient brick archways. We spent some time quietly walking around the polished stones, taking a few photos to capture the incredible atmosphere of the complex bathed in midnight shadows.

A Lesson in True Humility and the Midnight Drive to Kharagan

While exploring the quiet complex, we had the distinct honor of meeting Sheikh Valla, the warm and revered custodian (*Khadim*) of the shrine. Learning that we had traveled all the way from Pakistan via Mashhad, he welcomed us with tremendous hospitality, greeting us with a warm handshake and even pulling us into a genuine Persian hug.



Knowing that shrine custodianship in small regional towns is often an uncompensated, full-time labor of devotion, it is standard practice for travelers to offer a small monetary gift (*Hadiya*) to help support the keeper's daily living expenses and shrine upkeep. When we humbly offered him some money, Sheikh Valla politely but firmly refused to accept a single coin.

Moments later, as Ali shook his hand in farewell, Ali naturally leaned down to kiss the custodian's hand out of deep respect. Sheikh Valla immediately snatched his hand back, gently avoiding the gesture. He didn't want any display that might make him seem superior or elevated above anyone else. His noble conduct left a profound, unforgettable impression on both of us—this was a man of genuine purity and unshakeable humility, acting purely out of love for the sanctuary and its guests.

Before we departed, Sheikh Valla mentioned another extraordinary piece of news: the shrine of the great 11th-century master, Hazrat Abul Hassan Kharraqani (R.A.), was located just a short drive away in the nearby village of Qal'eh Now-e Kharraqan. He even noted that he served as the custodian for that sanctuary as well, and kindly explained the exact driving directions to Sajjad.

The Unlettered Master: Hazrat Abul Hassan Kharraqani (R.A.)

Born in 963 CE (352 AH) in the mountain village of Kharraqan near Bastam, **Hazrat Sheikh Abul Hassan Kharraqani (R.A.)** stands as one of the most enigmatic and universally beloved figures in Islamic mysticism. Though completely unlettered—unable to read or write—his spiritual insight was so vast that scholars, kings, and masters traveled thousands of miles across Asia just to sit at his feet. Famously receiving his spiritual transmission (*Owaisi* connection) directly across time from the spirit of Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.), Kharraqani carried forward the tradition of total self-effacement and unvarnished divine love, serving as a pivotal bridge in the early Naqshbandi and Chishti spiritual lineages. Even

the legendary Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni famously visited his humble dwelling, seeking his counsel and blessings before his campaigns.

What truly set Kharaqani apart was his radical, boundless philosophy of universal compassion and human service. Incribed above the entrance of his hospice (*Khanaqah*) was the immortal decree that came to define his entire life:

"Whoever enters this house, give him bread and do not ask of his faith; for whoever deserves a soul from Almighty God surely deserves bread at the table of Abul Hassan."

Long before modern human rights declarations, Kharaqani practiced unconditional love for all creation regardless of creed, ethnicity, or background. His poetry and sayings—filled with intense longing for the Divine—inspired centuries of Persian literature, most notably shaping the spiritual worldview of Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, who devoted several moving passages in the *Masnavi* to Kharaqani's miracles and profound humility.

Excited by the prospect, we hopped back into the sedan and took off down the quiet countryside road. Within fifteen minutes, we arrived at the peaceful site of Kharaqani's shrine. However, given the late hour, the outer gates were securely locked shut for the night.

Undeterred, we stood along the quiet street just outside the perimeter fence, looking in at the illuminated grounds. In the cool midnight air, we recited a short *Fatiha* and offered our respectful *Salam* across the threshold to the legendary master who had famously written on his portal: *"Whoever enters this house, give him bread and do not ask of his faith."*

With our hearts full and our night's journey complete, we climbed back into Sajjad's car and drove back to the *Karvaan Saraye*. We retired to our rooms, completely exhausted but deeply fulfilled, and officially called it a day on one of the most memorable legs of our entire Persian expedition.



Album: Bastam

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=bastam>

CHAPTER 6

Porous Slippers, Salty Oatmeal, the Road to Sufi Abad, the Other Great Ghazali

"Travel is the art of trading comfortable expectations for unforgettable realities—especially when lunch is involved."

The next morning, we woke up refreshed, took a quick shower, and got ready for the next leg of our journey: a drive toward the small town of **Sufi Abad**, en route to Qazvin.

Even in the modest quarters of our *Karvaan Saraye*, my eye naturally picked up on a couple of ingenious domestic details. For starters, the plastic slippers provided outside the restrooms featured tiny drainage pores engineered into the soles, allowing water to pass right through so they would dry almost instantly. Even better, the hand sprayer (*Muslim shower*) was hooked directly into a hot-and-cold mixer tap, letting you dial in the exact water temperature—a luxurious touch of engineering you almost never see in Pakistan, the Gulf, or anywhere else!

We headed down to the guesthouse dining area for a humble, straightforward breakfast. Over tea, Ali remembered a special request from back home. A close friend of his from Mianwali, Muhammad Mansha, holds an immense, deep reverential love for Hazrat Bayazid Bastami (R.A.). In fact, in honor of the great mystic, Mansha even established and runs a community library in Mianwali called the *Shah-e-Bastam Library*. Before we had left Pakistan, Mansha had asked Ali for one specific favor: to bring back a book directly from the official bookshop inside the Bastam shrine complex.

When we had visited the shrine late the night before, the bookshop was locked up tight. Hoping to fulfill Mansha's wish, we finished our breakfast and drove straight back to the shrine complex.

Unfortunately, we were a bit too early; the heavy wooden doors of the bookstore were still shuttered.

However, we ran right back into our gracious host, **Sheikh Valla**. He welcomed us with the same warmth as the night before and walked us over to his own small souvenir shop inside the complex. While the main bookstore remained closed, we browsed his selection, bought a couple of meaningful keepsake items to commemorate our time in Bastam, said our final goodbyes, and hit the open road.

Petroleum Jelly, Microscopic Coffees, and the Plains of Semnan

As Sajjad steered the sedan back onto the main highway, the landscape resumed its vast, unrelenting character. As far as the eye could see, the highway was flanked by wide, arid plains under a pale desert sky, completely stripped of greenery.

After an hour or two of driving, the harsh desert air began taking its toll. Coming from the humid air of Pakistan, the bone-dry Iranian winds had mercilessly chapped our lips until they were cracked and stinging. We had Sajjad pull into a roadside fuel station with a large tuck shop.

Inside, alongside our usual snacks, our absolute top purchase was a simple jar of petroleum jelly. We slathered it on immediately to get some relief. While at the shop, I decided to grab a cup of hot black coffee. But between the stinging burn of my cracked lips and the sudden wave of road fatigue hitting my head, I could barely take two sips before calling it quits. Ali just looked at me and smirked—my coffee luck on this trip was officially running at zero.

The Gateway of Khorasan: Semnan Province

We were now driving deep through **Semnan Province**, an ancient land that has historically served as the majestic geographic bridge between the central Iranian plateau, the lush Caspian forests to the north, and the vast deserts of Khorasan to the east.

Stretching along the southern slopes of the Alborz mountain range, Semnan's history is inextricably bound to the Silk Road. For thousands of years, trade caravans, conquering armies, and wandering Sufi dervishes trudged across these exact stony plains. The province is famous for its extreme climatic contrasts—barren salt deserts giving way to rugged mountain passes—and its fiercely rich cultural legacy, having produced some of the most influential mystics, poets, and scholars in Persian history.

The Great Haleem Tragedy of Khorasan

As the lunch hour approached, a sudden culinary craving struck. I knew that *Haleem* was a famous, traditional dish in Iran, and I was eager to sample the authentic Persian ancestor of our favorite South Asian comfort food. I pitched the idea to the back seat, and we requested Sajjad to hunt down a specialized local spot.

To find a reputable place, Sajjad pulled over on the main thoroughfare of a town along our route, deployed his classic "*Ali Reza Question*" protocol—signaling for us to sit back and remain invisible—and leaned out the window to consult a couple of locals. After a quick back-and-forth in Farsi, he pulled back onto the road with a triumphant nod and drove us straight to a dedicated *Haleem* restaurant.

I was buzzing with anticipation, envisioning a rich, slow-cooked, spicy meat-and-lentil stew bursting with ginger, fried onions, and green chilies, just like back home in Pakistan.

Ali, however, sat in the corner looking suspiciously calm. Having lived in Saudi Arabia for a couple of years, he had encountered Middle Eastern variations of grain stews before. Meanwhile, Sajjad didn't even bother ordering a bowl for himself—he just sat back with a subtle, knowing grin, fully aware of what was about to unfold.

The waiter brought out two steaming bowls. I picked up my spoon, took a healthy bite, and instantly froze.

There were no chilies. There was no fried onion. There was no savory spice mix whatsoever. What sat before me was essentially a thick, heavy, mildly salty wheat porridge topped with melted butter—resembling a savory oatmeal far more than any Haleem I had ever known in my life.

My brain completely glitched. All my build-up, excitement, and anticipation instantly collapsed into pure, unadulterated shock! Ali burst out laughing at the priceless, traumatized look on my face, while Sajjad just chuckled softly from across the table. Try as I might, I simply couldn't get through more than a couple of spoonfuls. It was officially the most hilarious culinary betrayal of the entire trip.

The Quiet Refuge of Sufi Abad

With our appetites thoroughly confused and our spirits thoroughly entertained, we climbed back into the car to complete the final leg toward **Sufi Abad**.

Sufi Abad is a serene, unassuming little village nestled in the rural countryside of Semnan Province. Surrounded by flat agricultural fields and distant mountain contours, the village feels completely removed from the rush of modern highways. Its very name—*Sufi Abad* ("The Abode of the Sufi")—is a direct tribute to the towering spiritual presence that turned this quiet agricultural hamlet into a major sanctuary of Islamic learning and mysticism during the 14th century.

Our specific destination in the village was the revered shrine complex of **Shaykh Ala ud-Daula Simnani (R.A.)**.

Born in 1261 CE into a noble and wealthy family of Semnan, **Shaykh Rukn ud-Din Ala ud-Daula Simnani** was one of the premier Sufi masters and theologians of the Ilkhanid era. As a young man, he served as a high-ranking courtier and confidant to the Mongol ruler Arghun Khan. However, after experiencing a profound spiritual awakening on a battlefield, he renounced his lavish courtly titles, distributed his immense wealth to the poor, and

devoted his life entirely to asceticism, scholarship, and Sufi metaphysics.



He eventually established his spiritual lodge (*Khanaqah*) right here in Sufi Abad, authoring over ninety influential works on Quranic exegesis and spiritual philosophy. He became particularly famous for formulating profound theories on divine light and spiritual levels, drawing disciples from across Persia, Central Asia, and India, and leaving an indelible mark on the Kubrawiya Sufi order.

As Sajjad turned off the main road and guided the sedan into the quiet lanes of Sufi Abad, the humble brick entrance of the master's sanctuary came into view.

The Detour into Silence

Reaching the shrine meant taking a **22-kilometer detour** off the main highway, cutting deep into the quiet, rural heartland of the province. As the asphalt gave way to countryside lanes, the modern world seemed to recede entirely.

When Sajjad finally pulled the car up to the complex of **Shaykh Ala ud-Daula Simnani (R.A.)**, an overwhelming stillness hung

over the site. There was not a single pilgrim, host, or visitor in sight. The sun-baked brick arches and the historic structure stood completely isolated against the wide desert sky. Just behind the main shrine building sat a small, quiet house that felt like the residence of the local caretaker, though no one emerged to greet us.



Walking up to the quiet sanctuary, the absolute solitude of the place was striking. In its 14th-century heyday, this very ground was a bustling center of spiritual inquiry where scholars and mystics gathered from across Asia. Now, it rested in deep, peaceful solitude. We walked through the grounds, taking in the ancient brickwork, marveling at the sheer history preserved in this remote corner of Iran, and taking a few photos to capture the moment.

Standing before the resting place of the great master, we offered our respectful *Salam* and recited a quiet *Fatiha*. In the complete absence of crowds or noise, that brief, tranquil visit carried a unique, reflective peace—a private moment carved out of a 22-kilometer leap of faith off the highway.

With our homage paid, we walked back to the sedan, climbed into our seats, and settled in for the long haul. Sajjad steered us back toward the main artery, pointing the hood west. It was time to push forward on the long road toward **Qazvin**.

Gold Coins, "Mehriya," and Highway Candor

By now, having shared miles of desert highway and several meals together, the wall of initial formality with Sajjad had completely dissolved. He felt less like a hired driver and more like an old friend on a shared adventure. It was finally time to test my hotel-lobby theory: *the marriage question*.

I turned around from the passenger seat, looked at Sajjad, and asked directly if he was married. Just as I had predicted, he smiled, shook his head, and said no.

Knowing how significant a milestone marriage is in Iran—and how much financial backing it requires—I decided to dig a little deeper into the local customs. I asked him how much the *Haq Mehr* (the mandatory gift given by the groom to the bride at the time of Nikkah) usually costs in Iran.

At first, the Arabic term *Haq Mehr* drew a blank look from him. But as soon as I explained that I meant the mandatory Islamic financial pledge for the bride, his eyes lit up in recognition: "*Aaah! Mehriya!*"

What he said next nearly knocked us out of our seats.

Sajjad casually explained that a typical, respected *Mehriya* in Iran could easily reach the equivalent of **one hundred thousand USD** (often calculated in traditional gold coins, or *Sikkeh*). On top of that staggering figure, a groom would need roughly another **twenty thousand USD** just to cover the wedding functions, hall rentals, and basic setup expenses.

Ali and I exchanged a look of pure, unadulterated shock. Coming from Pakistan, where our own *Mehr* amounts were extremely modest by comparison, I leaned over to Ali and muttered in Urdu,

"Man, if we had to pay that kind of Mehriya, both of us would still be single bachelors to this day!"

Sitting in the back seat, I leaned forward and remarked to Sajjad how nearly impossible it must be for a regular, middle-class working guy to save that kind of money. Sajjad nodded solemnly in full agreement from behind the wheel, going on to share a sobering reality of modern Iranian life: because legal marriage has become so financially out of reach, a growing number of young men and women simply end up living together unmarried—a tragic social byproduct born strictly out of prohibitive financial customs rather than a lack of faith.

His openness and warmth only made us fond of him, and during the drive, we affectionately gave him the title "*Shah Ji*"—a respectful honorific used in Pakistan for descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). We explained to him that *Shah* meant *King*—a word he recognized immediately from its Persian roots—while *Ji* added a touch of warmth and deep respect. He thoroughly enjoyed the gesture, and for the rest of our journey, he was our *Shah Ji*.

Seeing how open and honest the conversation had become, Ali took a remarkably brave step. He decided to ask Sajjad about *Mut'ah* (temporary contractual marriage)—a deeply sensitive, controversial topic often weaponized by Sunni critics to berate Shia practice.

Rather than dodging the question, Sajjad answered with complete, matter-of-fact clarity. He explained the actual legal and social boundaries in Iran, noting: *"You can't just abuse it. By law and custom, you can't enter into such a contract more than once a year."*

Listening to his grounded perspective was eye-opening. It presented a far more regulated, logical reality than the exaggerated, harsh narratives we had so often heard back home. It was one of those profound moments unique to the open road—

where open dialogue strips away centuries of sectarian noise and leaves you with real human understanding.

Arrival in Qazvin & Sajjad's Basement Masterclass

About an hour before sunset, the highway finally gave way to the historic urban sprawl of **Qazvin**. Since our main destination for the evening was the shrine of the great Sufi master Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.), we asked Sajjad to find a hotel nearby.

He delivered spectacularly, securing a place tucked into a quiet, narrow street in the heart of the city—a mere five-minute walk from Ghazali's resting place. The catch, however, was the hotel's underground parking garage. The access ramp was incredibly tight, framed by sharp brick corners that looked nearly impossible to negotiate without scraping the paint. Yet, Sajjad pulled off another absolute masterclass in driving. With calm confidence and millimetric precision, he guided the sedan down the narrow chute and slotted it into the subterranean bay. I couldn't help but marvel once again at his sheer skill behind the wheel.

Once we checked into our rooms and dropped our bags, Sajjad politely mentioned that the long drive from Bastam had caught up with him and he needed to take some rest. We readily agreed—he had been driving for hours on end—and told him to take the evening off.

The Historic Crossroads: Qazvin

Stepping back out into the cool evening air, we found ourselves in a city steeped in imperial prestige. Positioned strategically at the foot of the Alborz mountain range along the historic trade routes connecting the Persian interior with the Caspian coast and Europe, **Qazvin** is one of Iran's ancient cultural capitals. Founded under the Sasanian Empire, it reached its zenith in the 16th century when Shah Tahmasp I named it the capital of the Safavid Empire before the court later moved to Isfahan. The city's rich heritage is etched into its grand bazaars, historic caravanserais, and elegant Islamic

architecture, making it a vital nexus for both royal history and spiritual sanctuary.

The Sanctuary of the Four Prophets (Peyghambariyeh)

Right across the narrow street from our hotel entrance stood a magnificent, glowing complex known as **The Peyghambariyeh Shrine** (or *Chahar-Anbiya*—the Four Prophets).

According to deeply rooted local tradition and historical accounts, this sacred sanctuary marks the collective burial site of four pre-Islamic Judeo-Christian prophets—Salam, Solum, Alqia, and Baqia—who are said to have migrated to Persia from the Levant to announce the coming of Christ. Additionally, the tomb of a revered local Sufi saint, Hazrat Ali ibn Ya'qub, rests alongside them within the same compound, creating a unique interfaith haven of spiritual history.

Evening Prayers beneath the Safavid Dome

Seeing the complex right in front of us, we changed our plans on the fly. Rather than walking straight toward Ahmad Ghazali's shrine, we crossed the street and stepped through the welcoming gates of Peyghambariyeh.

The shrine sits integrated within a beautifully active mosque complex. Its grand courtyard features intricate Safavid-style tilework in brilliant blues and yellows, framing a soaring central dome decorated with elaborate Persian calligraphic bands. As we stepped into the carpeted main sanctuary under the soft glow of chandeliers, the call for the *Maghrib* (sunset) prayer began to echo through the hall.

We joined the congregation for prayer, soaking in the serene, introspective atmosphere of the sacred space. After finishing our prayers, we took a few photos to capture the intricate interior, offered our respectful *Salam* to the noble prophets and saints resting beneath the floor, and stepped back out onto the street—

ready to take the short walk toward the shrine of Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.).

The Apostle of Divine Love: Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)

We walked out of the Peyghambariyeh shrine, made our way down the narrow street, and reached a bustling main avenue. After crossing the traffic, we slipped into another quiet residential alley on the opposite side, guided by the peaceful solitude of the night until we reached the sanctuary of **Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)**.

Born in Ghazal near Tus in the 11th century (454 AH), Hazrat Sheikh Majd ud-Din Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.) was a monumental figure in early Sufi metaphysics and the younger brother of the celebrated theologian Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. While his brother dominated the realms of jurisprudence and formal philosophy, Ahmad Ghazali surrendered completely to the path of mystical love (*Ishq*). He famously succeeded his brother as the head of the prestigious Nizamiyya Academy in Baghdad, only to abandon the prestigious post shortly after to live as a wandering ascetic. Author of the seminal treatise *Sawanih* ("Aphorisms on Love"), he revolutionized Persian Sufi literature by positioning Divine Love as the absolute origin and essence of all existence, leaving a legacy that deeply shaped later giants like Attar, Rumi, and Hafiz before his passing in Qazvin around 1126 CE.

Green Tiles and Locked Doors

The shrine itself sits tucked away in a quiet neighborhood corner, set behind a modest traditional facade framed by vibrant blue and turquoise glazed tiles and intricate floral motifs. At the center of a recessed brick archway stands a double metal door painted bright green, lined with white geometric star-shaped grilles.

Walking up from the quiet alley, we found the green metal doors firmly shut. We knocked gently, hoping someone might be inside, but the quiet street remained still and no one came to open it. We

didn't let the locked entrance diminish the moment. Standing in the cool night air right outside the tiled facade, we took a couple of photos to document the spot, recited a short Fatiha, and offered our respectful Salam across the green iron threshold to the master of Divine Love.



Just a short walk down the same historic quarter of Qazvin, we came upon another sacred sanctuary—the shrine of **Ismail Abu Al-Fazal**. Unlike the first door, this one was welcomingly open. Stepping inside, we were greeted by a stunning display of traditional Persian mirror-work reflecting soft green light off the central *Zarih*. Reading the family tree displayed on the wall, we learned he was a distinguished 11th-century (*5th century AH*) Sayyid and prominent genealogist of Qazvin, descendant from the noble family of the Prophet (PBUH). Standing before his emerald-lit resting place surrounded by intricate blue tilework, we offered our peaceful Salam and prayers, grateful that our late-night quest in Qazvin ended with such an intimate, unexpected blessing.



With our spiritual duties for the day completed, we turned back and retraced our steps through the quiet streets of Qazvin, heading back to our hotel to rest for couple of hours and be ready for dinner.

Late-Night Cravings and the Greenwich Burger Run

After resting in our hotel room for a couple of hours, Ali's phone buzzed with a message from Sajjad: *Did we want to go out for dinner?*

As the old proverb goes, *What does a blind man crave except two eyes?* We had been sitting there secretly hoping for food anyway, so we immediately grabbed our jackets, headed downstairs, and met him in the lobby.

As we walked out to the car, we mentioned to Sajjad that we had walked over to the shrine of Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.) earlier, only to find the heavy doors firmly locked. Curious, Sajjad immediately leaned out to consult a couple of locals nearby. They explained that the shrine wasn't open daily to the public—it only opens its doors once a week on **Thursdays**, and today was only **Tuesday**. It was a comforting piece of news; knowing it was closed

by schedule rather than chance made our quiet street-side *Salam* feel all the more complete.

With that mystery solved, and after several days of navigating unusual culinary surprises—from the tough, late-night flatbread in Bastam to the shocking salty-oatmeal *Haleem* earlier that afternoon—our stomachs were desperately craving something familiar, comforting, and bulletproof. I turned to Sajjad and gave him a clear directive: *"Find us the best burger place in Qazvin."*

True to form, Sajjad pulled over, engaged a couple of locals in conversation, and came back with a top recommendation: a spot called **Greenwich Fast Food**, just ten minutes away.

We drove over and walked inside to find a warm, modern, and beautifully renovated joint with a great vibe. Taking orders at the front counter were two gorgeous young Iranian women. Wanting to make up for our missed lunches and bizarre grain stews, we didn't hold back—we ordered the most expensive, fully loaded burgers on the menu, paired with generous portions of French fries and ice-cold cans of Iranian Coca-Cola.

Lip Fillers and the 100K USD Reality

While we waited for our food to be prepared, I naturally dropped into my favorite pastime: observing the subtle social details of the environment.

The most prominent thing I noticed right away was that one of the girls at the reception counter had very clearly undergone cosmetic lip augmentation (*lip fillers*). Cosmetic procedures—particularly rhinoplasty and lip fillers—are immensely popular among young Iranian women across major cities.

Connecting the dots in my head, I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. *Well, after all, when the going rate for a "Mehriya" is a staggering 100,000 USD, a young lady has every reason to invest in her appearance!*

I glanced over at Ali and almost burst out laughing. Thanks to the brutally dry, sun-baked desert winds of Semnan Province that had chapped and swollen our own lips earlier that day, the two of us were walking around looking like we had just come straight out of a cosmetic surgery clinic ourselves!

Our burgers arrived, hot, juicy, and cooked to absolute perfection—easily one of the most satisfying meals of the entire journey. We devoured every last bite, washed it down with crisp fizz, and hopped back into the car.

Sajjad drove us back to the hotel through the quiet, lit streets of night-time Qazvin. Back in our room, we drifted off to sleep, well-fed and rested. Ahead of us lay the next morning's journey north toward the lush Caspian provinces and the town of **Sowme'eh Sara**.



Album: Sufi Abad

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=sufi-abad>

CHAPTER 7

Lush Mountains, Local KitKats, and the Sanctuary of the Mother

"The road into Gilan changes not just the color of the earth, but the pace of the heart—where dry desert dust gives way to rain, and grand monuments yield to quiet village devotion."

We woke up early in Qazvin, stepped out onto our narrow hotel street, and enjoyed a light, refreshing breakfast of fresh fruit bought from a local street vendor. As we wiped our hands and checked our wallets, we realized a pressing logistical emergency: **we were completely out of Iranian Tomans.**

We immediately brought the issue up with Sajjad. Without missing a beat, he offered a seamless solution: *"Give me your Saudi Riyals. I'll withdraw equivalent local cash for you from my account."*

It sounded like a solid plan, so we handed over a stack of Riyals. Sajjad expertly navigated a web of narrow, ancient city alleys until he found his bank's local branch. However, once inside, he hit a minor snag: the total cash amount we needed wasn't readily sitting in his checking balance.

Demonstrating his usual resourcefulness, Sajjad pulled out his phone and called his father—the legendary "boss" back home. Within minutes, his father wire-transferred the required funds straight into Sajjad's account.

Before heading back into the bank to collect the cash, Sajjad parked the sedan along the curb, turned around, and gave us strict, protective instructions: *"Stay inside the car. Do not step outside, and do not talk to anyone until I get back."* We sat like obedient schoolboys in the back seat for about ten minutes until Sajjad emerged with a triumphant grin, carrying a thick, massive brick of Iranian banknotes—the equivalent of a few hundred Saudi Riyals.

With our pockets heavily stuffed with currency and our logistical crisis solved, we pointed the sedan north and officially hit the road toward our next destination: **Sowme'eh Sara**, roughly 250 kilometers away.

Raindrops, Green Peaks, and "Imitation KitKats"

As we left Qazvin behind and pushed toward Gilan Province, the geography underwent a dramatic, breathtaking transformation. The dry, sun-baked, rocky brown mountains of the central plateau slowly receded, replaced by rolling, forest-capped green hills and mist-shrouded valleys.

Midway through the drive, we pulled into a large highway service station for fuel, restrooms, and a quick snack run. Walking through the aisles of the convenience store, I noticed something hilarious about Iranian consumer branding. Row after row of snacks featured packaging designs that were identical carbon copies of world-famous brands—KitKat, Mars, Bounty, and Lay's chips. The logos, color schemes, and fonts looked completely indistinguishable from the originals at first glance, but the names were distinct local Persian brands. I bought a few to test them out, and to my surprise, they tasted almost identical to the originals!

As Sajjad finished filling up the fuel tank, a cool, gentle drizzle began to fall from the overcast sky. The fresh smell of wet earth filled the car, and the light rain made the winding mountain road look like a painting. It was an incredible shift in mood from the brutal desert winds of Semnan, turning our highway journey into an absolute pleasure.

The Little Guide of Sowme'eh Sara

Navigating through rural country lanes surrounded by lush greenery, we finally rolled into the outskirts of **Sowme'eh Sara** to seek out our primary destination: the sanctuary of **Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah (R.A.)**, the revered mother of the paramount

Sufi master Hazrat Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A., famously known as *Ghaus-e-Azam*).

When Sajjad pulled the sedan up to the sanctuary grounds, we were met with a familiar sight—the outer entrance gate was locked shut.

As we stood near the car wondering how to proceed, we spotted a young local girl—no more than three or four years old—pedaling around the quiet lane on a little bicycle fitted with training wheels. Sajjad leaned down and asked her in gentle Farsi if she knew where the caretaker (*Khadim*) of the shrine lived.

What happened next was utterly adorable. Recognizing the importance of her mission, the little girl immediately abandoned her bicycle on the side of the lane—deciding that running on foot was much faster than training wheels! She sprinted ahead down a narrow alley, signaling for us to follow her straight to a modest house sitting right behind the complex.

Watching our microscopic guide lead the way with such determination, Ali couldn't help but smile and call out in heartfelt Urdu praise: "*O Shehzadi!*" (*O Princess!*).

Sajjad knocked firmly on the metal door and explained to the voice inside that travelers had journeyed all the way from Pakistan to pay their respects, asking if the sanctuary could be opened. Though I couldn't see the occupant through the doorway, a key turned in the lock moments later. The caretaker—a dignified, elderly Iranian lady in her late 60s wearing a traditional light colored chador—stepped out, greeted us with quiet respect, and walked over to unlock the main doors of the shrine for us.

Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah (R.A.): Mother of the Ghaus

To understand the profound spiritual weight of this humble village sanctuary, one must understand the noble matriarch resting within it. **Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah bint Abdullah al-Sawma'i**

(R.A.) was a woman of extraordinary piety, ascetism, and spiritual lineage. Descended directly from the household of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through Hasani Hasani Sayyid lines, she belonged to a family famed across Persia for their profound devotion and saintliness.

Sufi biographical traditions record that long before the birth of her legendary son, Sayyida Fatimah was renowned in her own right for her intense nocturnal prayers, miracles (*Karamat*), and saintly character. It is written that when she gave birth to Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.) in 1077 CE (470 AH), the infant famously refused to nurse during the daylight hours of Ramadan, displaying an innate spiritual discipline from his very first day. Her maternal guidance, deep ascetic training, and noble lineage provided the spiritual bedrock upon which the supreme master of the Qadiriyya order was raised.

The Sanctuary of Quiet Grace

Stepping through the dark, iron-latticed gate tucked along a quiet alley wall, we entered a peaceful, unpretentious sanctuary compound.



Unlike the grand imperial monuments of Mashhad, this shrine radiates a humble, pristine serenity. Large wooden-framed windows with traditional geometric lattice grilles illuminate the clean interior, casting soft daylight across vibrant turquoise prayer carpets.



At the center of the room stands the polished silver-and-gold *Zarih*, decorated with golden arched grilles, green fabric garlands, and floral crests along its peak. Resting in quiet reverence, the sacred tomb offers a deeply intimate atmosphere, inviting visitors into a space of quiet reflection and prayer.

In the complete absence of noise or crowds, standing before the resting place of the mother who gave the world the *Ghaus-e-Azam* invoked a unique, deeply moving atmosphere of maternal grace and spiritual stillness. We offered our prayers, taking in a moment of quiet reflection that felt entirely removed from the rush of the modern world.

An Interview by the Carpet: The Living Lineage of Caretakers

Inside the quiet sanctuary, we sat down on the soft carpeted floor while the elderly lady caretaker settled in front of us with quiet dignity. The room instantly transformed into a makeshift interview study: Ali naturally stepped into the role of the lead interviewer, Sajjad served as our faithful, attentive translator, and I pulled out my notepad to document every detail.

The information she shared revealed a extraordinary, half-century-long family legacy of maternal devotion to this shrine:

- **The Grandmother:** The long chain of stewardship began with her grandmother, **Syeda Fatimah Bihari Nijad**, who served as the dedicated caretaker (*Khadima*) of the sanctuary for 50 years.
- **The Mother:** The mantle was then passed to her mother, **Syeda Najma Bihari Nijad**, who also served as caretaker for 50 years. It was her mother who originally constructed the simple structure over the grave to provide shelter and shade for visiting pilgrims.
- **The Daughter:** The elderly lady sitting before us introduced herself as **Aqdas Umeedwar**. She had been carrying on her family's noble tradition, serving as the sole caretaker of the shrine for the past 14 years.

She went on to explain the recent history of the sanctuary's restoration. The shrine receives very little assistance from government funds and relies almost entirely on self-maintenance and private acts of faith.

She shared a touching story of a local woman who had been diagnosed with cancer. After praying for intercession and being cured of her illness, she and her husband expressed their deep gratitude by personally constructing the shrine's restroom facilities in 2013.

Later, in 2022, a devoted follower (*Mureed*) of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.) named **Samaan Murree** undertook a major renovation of the sanctuary. Investing roughly \$9,000 of his own funds, he replaced the old doors and windows, overhauled the structure, and restored the peaceful sanctuary to the beautiful state we were witnessing today.

Listening to Aqdas Umeedwar speak—a third-generation guardian preserving the sanctuary through pure love and sacrifice—made our visit feel like a rare privilege, bridging decades of silent, unsung devotion.

The Dream, the Lost Grave, and the Vanished Threshold

As we continued our quiet interview on the carpeted floor, Aqdas Umeedwar shared another extraordinary layer of her family's spiritual lineage.

She revealed that decades ago, her grandmother had a vivid, luminous vision in a dream. In the dream, **Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah (R.A.)** appeared to her and said clearly: *"My resting place lies within your garden."* At that time, her grandmother was the private owner of the land. Moved by the profound sanctity of the revelation, she immediately dedicated the entire property as a sacred endowment (*Waqf*) for public pilgrimage. Though her grandmother now rests peacefully in the main public cemetery of Sowme'eh Sara, her legacy lives on through every traveler who steps into this peaceful sanctuary.

Intrigued by the family history of the area, we decided to ask about another paramount figure: the resting place of **Hazrat Syed Abdullah As-Somaei Az-Zahid (R.A.)**, the noble maternal grandfather of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.).

Hazrat Syed Abdullah As-Somaei Az-Zahid (R.A.) stands out as one of the most prominent and revered religious figures in the history of Gilan. Renowned for his deep asceticism (*Zuhd*),

spiritual mastery, and rigorous devotion, he was a pillar of guidance whose pious reputation resonated far beyond his home region. Local traditions describe his family as possessing immense social respect, spiritual authority, and standing across the territory. They were not merely spiritual leaders, but deeply honored figures to whom rulers, scholars, and common folk alike turned for counsel and blessings, cementing a legacy of noble influence that shaped the regional heritage for generations.

A heavy, solemn shadow crossed Aqdas Umeedwar's face as she spoke. With a heavy heart, she told us that his historical grave had unfortunately been eradicated over time and that she had never seen the grave herself during her lifetime. However, she recalled that her grandmother told her that about twenty years ago, a group of devout pilgrims had traveled all the way from India seeking the sacred site. They had brought with them an old, handwritten map detailing the exact location of the noble grandfather's grave, using other graves and trees as their primary reference point to locate where the sanctuary once stood.

Initially, the spot was marked by a prominent, solitary tree that served as a living sanctuary for visiting pilgrims, who would tie colorful threads to its branches as a *mannat*—a silent prayer, wish, or token of devotion left behind. Sadly, in later years, the local municipality cut the tree down during road expansion and civic works. Erasing both the natural marker and the sacred threads woven around its bark, they left behind only the bare, grassy curb we were about to see.

When Ali eagerly asked if she could show us where the site once stood, she explained that her husband was currently out, but as soon as he returned home, she could accompany us to the location. Deeply grateful for her time and warmth, we handed her a modest cash gift (*Hadiya*) for her blessings and shrine upkeep, promising to return right after having our lunch.

The Mystery of the Missing Home Ovens

We headed to a small, local eatery nearby to grab a bite. To our surprise and delight, the table was set with steaming, pillowy, freshly baked flatbread straight out of the fire!

After days of chewing through dry, late-night leftovers, I had to ask Sajjad how this place managed to serve such incredible bread. Sajjad laughed and unlocked a major cultural secret for us: *"In Iran, families almost never bake bread at home. Every single neighborhood relies on dedicated street bakeries with specialized traditional ovens (Tandoor). You buy your bread fresh from the neighborhood baker right before your meal. Some families even buy for all day or couple of days."*

The mystery of the stale restaurant bread was instantly solved! If you don't catch the bread right when the local Tandoor fires up, you get whatever is left over. I leaned over to Ali and whispered in Urdu: *"Man, housewives over here have it so much easier than back home in Pakistan—no rolling pins, no heated kitchens, just a quick two-minute walk to the local baker!"*

The Faloodah Tragedy: Round Two

With our appetites satisfied, I suddenly remembered another famous Iranian treat. I insisted to Sajjad that we had to try authentic Iranian **Falooda**—picturing the rich, indulgent South Asian version made with thick rabri milk, dense scoops of kulfi ice cream, basil seeds, and crushed ice.

Sajjad hesitated, giving us a wary, hesitant look. Having witnessed our complete mental breakdown over the salty-oatmeal *Haleem* in Semnan, he knew another culinary collision course was looming. But after our persistent nagging, he gave in and drove us to a popular local dessert shop.

When the waiter brought our order to the table, my heart sank once again.

There was no ice cream. There was no thick milk. There was no kulfi anywhere in sight. What sat before us on the bright yellow table were three flower-shaped bowls served on a floral tray, each piled high with semi-frozen, thread-like starch noodles soaked in cold rosewater and drizzled with a sweet, vibrant pink syrup—authentic *Faloodeh Shirazi*. Across the tray, Sajjad sat absorbed in his smartphone, tracing the route to our next destination on his map. On his hand, the prominent ring with its large yellow stone caught the light as he scrolled—the same ring he showed us before taking us to his friend shop to help us buy some stones and rings, completely oblivious to the frozen, tangy-sweet delicacy waiting right in front of us.



My brain completely glitched for the second time on this trip. Before I could say a word, Ali looked at Sajjad in utter disbelief and asked, "*Where is the ice cream bar?*"

Sajjad just smiled calmly and said, "*This is our Faloodeh.*"

Just like the Haleem tragedy of Khorasan, Ali and I sat there staring at the bowl, completely unable to finish more than a couple of bites! Our grand Pakistani dessert dreams had collapsed into another hilarious, unforgettable lesson in cultural differences. We

couldn't even be mad—we just burst out laughing at how brilliantly our expectations had been subverted once again.

The Roadside Curb and the Vanished Threshold

After finishing our lunch, we drove straight back to the shrine of Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah (R.A.). By the time we pulled up, Aqdas Umeedwar's husband had returned home. They stepped out to greet us, climbed into their own car, and signaled for Sajjad to follow them through the quiet, winding countryside lanes of Sowme'eh Sara.



After a short drive, their car pulled over along a quiet stretch of road. We stepped out of the sedan, looking around for an ancient sanctuary or a gated perimeter—but there was none.

What sat before us was simply a grassy roadside curb. Resting among the weeds was a plain, unmarked concrete block, placed there by locals merely as a quiet reference marker for where the historical resting place of Hazrat Syed Abdullah As-Somaei Az-Zahid (R.A.) once stood. Standing a little distance away, watchful of any passing traffic, the caretaker, Aqdas Umeedwar, kept his voice low. He quietly cautioned us that the local authorities

frowned upon people visiting the site, adding a sharp edge of tension to an otherwise silent, forgotten roadside.



Seeing the noble maternal grandfather of the *Ghaus-e-Azam*—a direct descendant of the Holy Prophet ﷺ—reduced to an unmarked concrete block on a public curb hit us like a physical blow. Standing by the side of the road, Ali completely broke down, tears streaming down his face.

Wiping his eyes, Ali turned urgently to the caretaker and her husband, his voice trembling with emotion: *"I will fund the rebuilding of this entire shrine myself. Whatever it takes, whatever the process is, just tell me how much money is needed and we will start immediately!"*

The husband listened with deep empathy, but shook his head with a heavy, realistic sadness. He explained that in Iran, constructing or restoring a religious monument on public land can only be authorized through official government channels—and to receive permission, one must submit rigorous, historical documentation proving beyond doubt that the saint was buried on that specific patch of earth. Without bureaucratic approval, no stone could be laid.

Realizing there was nothing more we could do in that moment, a heavy, suffocating silence settled over us. We stood by the curb for a few final, quiet moments, reciting a sorrowful *Fatiha* into the passing wind, crushed by the helpless reality of historical erasure.

A Final Farewell at the Grand Cemetery

Hoping to gently transition us out of our grief, Aqdas Umeedwar offered to take us to the main public cemetery of Sowme'eh Sara. We followed their car to a vast, sprawling graveyard shaded by tall, leafy trees and rows of ancient stones.

She guided us through the quiet pathways to the burial place of her mother—Syeda Najma Bihari Nijad—the noble woman who had dedicated fifty years of her life to sheltering the mother of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.). Resting close by in the same sacred grounds was also the grave of Yadalla Umeedwar's brother, tying their family's personal legacy even deeper into the soil of the sanctuary. We stood by her grave, reciting prayers for the incredible lineage of women and devoted guardians who had quietly guarded the shrine for over a century without seeking wealth or fame.



With our journey in Sowme'eh Sara coming to an end, we drove back to the main shrine compound one last time. Deeply moved by the caretaker couple's warmth, guidance, and generous spirit, Ali asked through Sajjad if there was any maintenance work that urgently needed to be done for the sanctuary. She mentioned that the washrooms required repairs and the windows needed fixing. Hearing this, Ali handed them an additional cash gift (*Hadiya*), ensuring they had the support needed to restore the space before we bade our final farewells.

We embraced, thanked them from the bottom of our hearts for their time and kindness, climbed back into Sajjad's sedan, and pointed the hood toward our next destination—carrying with us a day filled with laughter over Persian desserts, quiet spiritual sanctuaries, and a heartbreak that would stay with us for the rest of our lives.

Caspian Dreams and the Great Water-Buffalo Myth

With the sun dipping low toward the horizon and our next major spiritual destination—the shrine of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih al-Hasani (R.A.)—scheduled for the following morning, Sajjad pitched a brilliant plan.

"Instead of staying in a standard town hotel tonight," he suggested with a grin, "let's drive toward Rezvanshahr and stay at a seaside resort right on the Caspian."

Ali and I were instantly sold. Historically known as *Rezvandeh*, Rezvanshahr sits at a fascinating crossroads in Talesh country—where the lush, green slopes of the Alborz Mountains drop dramatically toward the Caspian shore, blending the distinct culture of the Taleshi people with old Caspian trade routes. The thought of falling asleep to the sound of waves in this coastal enclave after days of desert highways and emotional village visits was incredible. Sajjad mentioned he knew a great spot along the coast, put his foot on the gas, and steered us toward the sea.

As we drove through the lush, emerald countryside of Rezvanshahr, another lifelong geographical myth was instantly shattered right before our eyes. Grazing peacefully in a green roadside field was a massive water buffalo.

Growing up in Pakistan, we had been told our entire lives that water buffaloes were exclusive to South Asia and Egypt—specifically Pakistan, India, and the Nile Delta. Yet, there it stood in the heart of northern Iran, casually munching on Persian grass! I pointed out the window and nudged Ali: *"Add that to the list of things textbook geography lied to us about!"*

The Caspian Cabins and the Master Suite

As we drew closer to the coast, the landscape turned dramatically scenic. We pulled over along the way to snap a few photos of a clear forest stream cascading over gentle stone ledges beneath a dense canopy of trees. By the time we hit the coastal highway,

heavy, dramatic storm clouds hung low over the Caspian Sea. Sajjad pulled up to the resort grounds right along the water's edge, where churned, foamy brown waves were crashing against the dark sand. We stepped out onto the shore to capture the atmospheric grey coastline, but as we walked up to the resort complex itself, we were met with a minor disappointment: the entire facility was closed for major seasonal renovations.



Undeterred, Sajjad pulled over, engaged a couple of local coast-road residents, and got directions to an alternative eco-resort nearby.

When we arrived, Sajjad deployed his trusty protocol—*"Stay in the car, don't say a word, let me handle the talking"*—and walked up to the reception desk. A few minutes later, he walked back out with a massive key in hand and a triumphant smile.

The place was a charming, rustic resort made up of wooden cabins, owned and operated by a incredibly warm, humble young married couple. Demonstrating a level of trust and hospitality that took us completely by surprise, they didn't even ask to inspect or hold our passports! Instead, they handed us the key to their

absolute best accommodation: a massive, two-room suite built entirely of fragrant timber.

The layout of the resort was beautiful. On one side stood an open-air kitchen built with heavy wooden slabs, where the smell of charcoal and woodsmoke drifted into the sea breeze. On the other side was a cozy outdoor seating area fitted with wooden partitions, offering complete privacy for families and groups traveling together.

The Fresh Catch Hospitality

While we settled our bags into the wooden suite, Sajjad spoke with the young resort owner, mentioning that his guests had traveled all the way from Pakistan on a pilgrimage to the local Sufi sanctuaries.

Hearing that he had foreign pilgrims under his roof, the young host's face lit up with genuine Persian warmth (*Ta'arof*). He immediately insisted on personally preparing a feast for us.

"I am going to BBQ the famous local Caspian fish for you myself tonight," he promised warmly, grabbing his jacket keys. *"Sit back, relax, and give me a few minutes—I am heading out to the market right now to buy it fresh off the boats for you!"*

Before settling onto the porch, Ali and I couldn't resist the draw of the coastline sitting just a few yards away. We kicked off our shoes, walked down to the damp sand, and stepped into the cool, dark waters of the Caspian Sea. Soaking our travel-weary feet in the gentle surf for a few quiet minutes, the exhaustion of the road seemed to wash right off us.

We walked back up to the resort, leaned against the wooden porch railing, and listened to the distant crash of the Caspian waves, waiting for what promised to be the best meal of the entire expedition.

True to his word, the young owner returned shortly after with a basket of fresh, locally caught Caspian whitefish (*Kutum*). He set

up the open-air wooden kitchen, stoking the charcoal embers until they glowed red hot. With practiced ease, he seasoned the fish simply with salt, local herbs, and a squeeze of fresh bitter orange, placing them over the grill.

Ali and I pulled up wooden stools and sat next to him in quiet fascination, watching the smoke curl into the night air while Sajjad did all the talking in fluent, animated Farsi. When the platter was served in our secluded seating area, the fish was grilled to absolute perfection—flaky, tender, and infused with rich woodsmoke. It was hands-down the most authentic, mouth-watering meal we had tasted in Iran.

Lightning, Shisha, and the Caspian Symphony

Having devoured every last morsel, we strolled back out to the porch—framed by its wooden roof overhang and white concrete walls—to take in the cool midnight air. Sitting cross-legged on the patterned Persian carpet, a camera flash caught a moment of unmistakable authenticity.



Resting on my hand as I held the Sheesha hose was the exact black-silver ring set with six diamond-cut yellow sapphires—the

priceless gift Ali had given me a decade ago that had driven the Mashhad jeweler so wild he offered his entire display case in exchange. Right beside me, Ali's hand clearly displayed his bold, deep red ruby ring, the very one the shopkeeper had admired right after trying to trade for mine. A few moments later, Sajjad reappeared, his eyes lit up with unbridled, boyhood excitement. He leaned in and whispered the golden news: despite the late hour, the resort could prepare authentic, flavored Sheesha for us to enjoy right there under the night sky.

Without a second thought, we ordered three pipes—one for each of us—and settled into the deep wooden chairs on the porch to wait.

Then, as if summoned by a director's cue, the atmosphere dramatically shifted.

The wind whipped across the coast, bringing with it a sudden, heavy downpour. Electric silver flashes of lightning split the pitch-black sky, illuminating the sheer majesty of the storm for fractions of a second. The deep, thunderous roar of the invisible Caspian waves crashing onto the shore fused with the drumbeat of heavy rain hammering against the wooden roof above our heads.

Because it was a mid-week night, there was not another soul at the resort. The entire coast felt as if it belonged exclusively to us three travelers.

We sat there together on the rain-swept porch, surrounded by the aromatic, fragrant clouds of sweet tobacco, mesmerized by the elemental drama unfolding in the dark before us. We couldn't see the vast sea stretching into the blackness, but its booming voice was deafening—a primal, raw symphony of wind, water, and gurgling of shisha. In that fleeting, magical pocket of time, far from home and wrapped in the warmth of true brotherhood, it was easily one of the most enchanting, unforgettable nights of our lives.

As the storm began to ease into a steady, rhythmic drizzle around the middle of the night, we finally put down the pipes, retired to our

cozy suite, and called it a day—sleeping peacefully to the lullaby of the Caspian rain.



Album: Someh Sara

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=someh-sara>

CHAPTER 8

Caspian Dawn, Mountain Roads, and the Greenwich Sequel

"The road back from Gilan was drawn in steep mountain climbs and long highway turns—but nothing on the map proved harder to navigate than a missed phone call home."

The rain had finally let up by the early hours of the morning, leaving behind a crisp, cool air that swept across the coast. Before checking out of our rustic wooden cabin resort and bidding farewell to our gracious hosts, Ali and I decided to take one final walk down to the Caspian shore.

As we stepped off the wooden porch, I suddenly realized I had left my phone sitting on the nightstand inside our suite. I turned to Ali and said, *"Go ahead down to the water, I'll grab my phone and meet you there in a minute."*



(That's Ali and I took this picture without him knowing)

I ran back to the room, snatched my phone, and walked out toward the beach. As I cleared the tree line, the breathtaking scene before me brought me to a complete halt.

The morning light was breaking softly through heavy, dramatic grey storm clouds left over from the night's downpour. The dawn waves were rolling onto the dark, rain-soaked sand with a serene, majestic rhythm. Standing completely alone right at the water's edge was Ali, staring out into the vast horizon, entirely oblivious to my presence. The composition was perfect—a quiet, contemplative soul framed against the moody, atmospheric grandeur of the Caspian Sea. Without saying a word or disturbing his solitude, I lifted my phone and captured what easily became the absolute best, most soul-stirring photograph of our entire expedition.

We spent a few more quiet moments taking in the misty coastal air, kicked the sand from our shoes, and walked back up to the parking area. After packing our bags into the trunk, we settled back into the sedan to begin the next leg of our journey: driving up into the mountain highlands to visit the sanctuary of **Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.)**—the noble father of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A., famously known as *Ghaus-e-Azam*).

Sajjad's "Half-and-Half" Verdict and the Pir Sohawa Debate

Although the shrine was roughly 60 kilometers away, the route took us straight into the rugged Alborz mountain range. The road was narrow, heavily unpaved in several stretches, and riddled with potholed switchbacks, sharp blind turns, and steep inclines that demanded Sajjad's absolute focus behind the wheel.

As the sedan labored up the steep gradient, Sajjad glanced into the rearview mirror with a playful grin, breaking the heavy silence of the climb: *"Ali, tell me... are you Shia or Sunni?"*

Ali didn't hesitate for a second. He smiled back and replied with smooth, ecumenical charm: *"I am half Shia and half Sunni!"*

Sajjad threw his head back and chuckled in complete delight. *"Ah! That is the absolute best combination!"* he declared, nodding in full approval. He looked back at Ali and added, *"You are a true Sufi lover."* We all burst out laughing, and Ali readily embraced the title.

Capitalizing on the warm, jovial mood in the car, Ali decided to share a major personal detail with Sajjad: back home in Pakistan, he was the author of over twenty published books. He went on to explain that he was currently researching and writing a comprehensive biographical work on the life of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.), and that this entire expedition across Iran was undertaken specifically to walk the lands where the supreme master had spent the formative first eighteen years of his life. Sajjad listened with newfound awe and respect, suddenly realizing that his two Pakistani passengers were on a deeply serious historical and spiritual quest.

As the car climbed higher through dense forest canopy and mist-shrouded drops, I looked out the window at the lush, green slopes and remarked, *"You know, this whole area really reminds me of Islamabad!"*

Ali immediately scoffed from the back seat, shaking his head in disagreement. But I pressed him: *"Think about the winding climb up toward Pir Sohawa in the Margalla Hills—the thick trees, the sharp mountain curves, the damp, cool air."* Ali paused, took a closer look at the passing green ridges, and finally conceded—the highland terrain shared that exact, majestic forest feel.

En route to the sanctuary, the winding mountain track ran alongside a clear, bubbling stream cutting through the rocky valley floor. Seeing the crystal-clear water rushing over smooth river pebbles under a canopy of towering green trees, we couldn't resist pulling over for a quick spontaneous break.

We stepped out into the crisp highland air, stretching our legs and soaking in the refreshing cool breeze. Streams of morning sunlight pierced through the thick forest canopy above, reflecting off the rushing water.



We walked down to the stony bank, listening to the soothing rush of the stream and taking a few photos together against the backdrop of dense green mountain woods—a perfect, rejuvenating pitstop that made the arduous mountain drive feel like an absolute pleasure.

The Sanctuary of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.)

After a challenging hour and a half of mountain driving, we finally arrived at the sanctuary of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.). Nestled in the quiet, green countryside of Gilan Province, the sanctuary rests in the small, remote village of Biachal—located roughly 70 kilometers from the bustling provincial capital of Rasht. Surrounded by rolling hills, dense forests, and humid coastal air, Biachal feels like a place untouched by time, preserving an

atmosphere of deep seclusion and sacred calm far removed from modern highways.

Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.), famously known by the honorific *Jangi Dost* ("Lover of Divine Struggle"), was a noble Sayyid descended directly from Hazrat Imam Hassan (R.A.). Renowned across Gilan for his immaculate asceticism, deep piety, and spiritual nobility, he was married to Sayyida Umm-ul-Khayr Fatimah (R.A.). Together, they raised the child who would become the paramount master of the Qadiriyya order. Nestled high in the quiet mountain hills, his sanctuary stands as a profound testament to the spiritual heritage of the Prophet's household in northern Persia.



(On the right side, grave covered with green cloth)

The shrine structure was modest yet deeply striking against the natural landscape. Tucked right at the base of a dense, forest-clad mountain peak under a moody, overcast sky, the building featured a dark stone-brick facade framed by arched white window borders. What immediately drew the eye was its vibrant, bright yellow bulbous dome rising from the center, flanked by two matching

slender yellow minarets anchored at the corners of the flat roof. A green metal perimeter fence lined with gold-tipped spearheads encircled the modest courtyard, where lush green trees and foliage enveloped the sanctuary in tranquility.

Before entering the sanctuary, Ali noticed a few graves scattered in the open yard outside and walked over to read their names. To his surprise, the stones bore no inscriptions, except for one central grave that was reverently covered with a green cloth. We stepped through the entrance into the quiet, carpeted sanctuary to offer our respectful Salam and recite Fatiha. Sitting near the doorway was the shrine's caretaker, a dignified government employee in his late 60s with a warm, weathered face. Ali asked him about the identities of those buried in the courtyard, but the old man gently shook his head, explaining that their names had been lost to the passage of time.



(From left right: Ali, Sajjad, Usman)

The mystery was finally solved later when Ali cross-referenced handwritten notes passed down from his great-grandfather. The grave covered in green cloth was indeed that of Hazrat Syed

Abdullah al-Jilli (R.A.)—the father of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.) and grandfather of Hazrat Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.). The nearby unmarked graves belonged to the sisters of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih (R.A.), making them the noble paternal aunts of Ghouse-e-Azam. It became clear that this quiet courtyard was actually a sacred family graveyard, preserving the resting places of several generations of this blessed household.

Hazrat Syed Abdullah al-Jilli (R.A.) holds a sacred place in Islamic history as a devout scholar and saint whose life exemplified profound spiritual purity. Discovering that his resting place—and those of his family—lay right there in that unassuming courtyard transformed our visit into a unforgettable connection with the sacred lineage of Baghdad's greatest mystic.

Before we departed, the caretaker pointed toward a small, traditional unglazed clay pot sitting inside the sanctuary filled with coarse rock salt. He insisted that we take a pinch of salt as *Tabaruk* (a blessed spiritual souvenir)—tasting a pinch of salt being a traditional custom honored in sanctuaries across the Islamic world. Seeing how deeply we revered the site, the caretaker kindly urged us to take some home for our families and friends back in Pakistan. He brought out a small plastic bag, and we packed a couple of tablespoons of the blessed salt to take with us.

Before we said our goodbyes, Ali offered a modest cash gift (*Hadiya*) to the caretaker for his hospitality and shrine upkeep. We exchanged a warm handshake of farewell, took a few keepsake photographs of the vibrant yellow dome against the green peaks, and returned to the car.

As we drove away through the narrow village lanes, I noticed a surprising detail on the modest homes tucked along the hillside: almost every house in this remote, mountainous corner of Biachal had a modern natural gas meter installed on its outer wall. It was

a fascinating contrast—a quiet, centuries-old sanctuary preserving sacred history, seamlessly connected to modern municipal utilities deep in the mountains of Gilan.

A Chance Turn: The Shrine of Hazrat Sheykh Kamaloddin Ziyaei Naqshbandi

Leaving the sanctuary of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.) behind, we set out on the narrow road toward Poshtir. As we drove, Ali's eyes caught a wooden sign pointing toward a Naqshbandi shrine along a side road to our right.

"Stop, stop, stop!" Ali called out.

By the time Sajjad could safely react, our car had already coasted past the junction. The road was far too narrow to pull a quick U-turn, so Ali and I stepped out and began walking back along the roadside while Sajjad maneuvered the car around. Once he picked us back up, we turned down the side route and spent the next ten minutes navigating the rural lanes, stopping to ask a couple of local residents for directions before finally arriving at the tranquil grounds of the shrine of **Hazrat Sheykh Kamaloddin Ziyaei Naqshbandi (R.A.)**.

The site serves as a quiet center of Naqshbandi heritage in Gilan, surrounded by manicured greenery and open family graves. Resting in the courtyard is a modern black granite headstone bearing the portrait of his son and descendant, **Sheykh Syed Jamaladdin Naqshbandi** (1312–1401 SH / 1933–2022 AD), whose grave lies alongside his father's.

In front of the resting place lies an extraordinary, glass-enclosed black marble slab detailing the complete spiritual lineage (*Shajarah*) of the Naqshbandi order. Carved into the stone is the continuous chain of transmission stretching all the way from the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), Sayyiduna Abu Bakr As-Siddiq (R.A.), and Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (K.W.), down through major spiritual pillars like Abul Hassan Kharraqani, Baha'ud-Din Naqshband,

Ahmad Sirhindi (Mujaddid Alf Thani), and Shah Ghulam Ali Dehlavi, culminating directly in the lineages of Sheykh Kamaloddin and Sheykh Jamaladdin Naqshbandi. Standing over the stone slab, tracing the engraved names of the great masters we had read about throughout our lives, what began as a missed turn felt like a guided detour into a living repository of Sufi history.

Theological History and International Matchmaking

Our next historical stop was **Poshtir**—the rural district intimately connected with the birth and early childhood of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.).

As Sajjad navigated the winding road down from the mountains, a high-level historical discussion broke out between him and Ali in the front seats. They wrestled with complex Islamic history, debating pivotal early schisms, movements, and key historical figures. The word that kept echoing repeatedly through the car was "*Khawarij*" (the early historical breakaway sect).

Not being versed in the intricate historical names they were trading back and forth, I recognized it as deep theological history. Knowing I had little to contribute, I simply sat back, enjoyed the intellectual rhythm of their back-and-forth, and lost myself in the mesmerizing mountain views rolling past my window.

Eventually, the high-minded historical debate ran its course, and the conversation naturally drifted back to Sajjad's favorite topic: *marriage*.

Ali leaned forward and offered Sajjad a piece of strategic international advice: "*Listen Sajjad, if Iranian 'Mehriya' is going to cost you a hundred thousand dollars, why don't you find a bride from Iraq, Jordan, or Lebanon instead? You'll save a fortune!*"

Sajjad laughed, acknowledging that while it made total financial sense, the cultural reality was far more complicated: "*Technically it's possible, Ali, but my family and our local society would never*

easily accept an foreign bride." Ali and I nodded in silent understanding—cultural conservatism regarding marriage within one's own community was a dilemma we were all too familiar with back home in Pakistan.

A Brief Threshold in Poshtir

Following roadside signs pointing through rural agricultural lanes, we passed a historical boundary indicating the land where the father of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.) had once resided. On our way into the area, we had spotted a prominent signboard pointing toward the historical lands of "*Jangi Dost*". We made a mental note to pull over and take a photo beside the board on our way back.

By the time we officially rolled into **Poshtir**, dusk had settled over the quiet rural district. Because we had a massive distance to cover before nightfall, our time here was going to be brief. Sajjad pulled the sedan up right in front of **Masjid Jame Poshtir** (مسجد جامع پشتر)—the central congregational mosque of the village.



The mosque presented a warm, welcoming presence against the dark evening sky. Its exterior was finished in warm tan tiles, illuminated by bright overhead lights that highlighted arched upper

windows and intricate wooden entryways. Positioned prominently above the central entrance was a vibrant, blue-tiled calligraphic tilework panel bearing the name *Masjid Jame Poshtir* framed by Quranic verses and an artistic rendering of Al-Masjid an-Nabawi in Madinah. Next to the doorway hung a blue signboard for the local cultural center (*Kanoon Farhangi va Honari*), signaling the mosque's role as a heart of community life in the village.

We stepped out into the cool evening air. Ali walked up the short marble steps and through the warm wooden doors of the mosque to pay his respects, offer a short prayer, and soak in the atmosphere of the land so intimately tied to the origin of the *Ghaus-e-Azam*. I remained outside in the courtyard, capturing a few photographs of the illuminated facade. Within ten to fifteen minutes, Ali emerged, and we climbed back into the car, ready to begin the long drive toward Tehran.

As we drove out of Poshtir, we kept our eyes peeled for the "Jangi Dost" direction board to get our photo. However, Sajjad ended up taking a different connecting bypass road to get us onto the main highway faster. By the time we realized we were on a completely different leg of the route, the board was far behind us in the dark, and we never saw it again—a minor missed photo opportunity left behind in the quiet countryside of Gilan.

The Highway Sweet Stop: *Kooki*, *Koloocheh*, and Etymological Epiphanies

On the drive back toward Qazvin, Sajjad suddenly pulled over along a lively stretch of the highway. He knew a famous local bakery shop that prepared the absolute best traditional *Kooki* (local baked bread of the size of cookie made from wheat flour, honey, and nuts) and hot *Koloocheh* in the region.

Sajjad walked up to the counter, bought a few freshly baked packs for his family back home, and generously gifted one pack to us as a treat for the road.

As we opened the box and took our first bites—enjoying the rich, warm combination of baked wheat, honey, and crushed nuts—the names on the bright yellow shop sign (*Koloocheh* and *Kooki*) triggered an outstanding linguistic and historical epiphany for Ali.

Ali turned to me, his eyes lit up with excitement: *"Look at those words! This explains so much about our own history back home."*



He pointed out two remarkable linguistic connections:

1. **The Origin of 'Kaki':** In South Asia, the legendary 13th-century Sufi saint **Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (R.A.)**—who originally hailed from Osh (historically part of Greater Persia/Central Asia)—is famously associated with small baked bread rolls (*Kak*). Ali realized that the root term isn't *Kak*, but the Persian *Kok* or *Kooki* (small baked breads).
2. **The Evolution of 'Kulcha':** In Pakistan and Northern India, the popular baked flatbread is universally called *Kulcha*. But looking at the bold red Farsi text on the sign, the original, proper Persian word is actually ***Koloocheh*** (کلوچه)—a traditional stuffed Persian pastry bread that

traveled down the Silk Road across centuries, eventually morphing into the South Asian *Kulcha* we know today!

Munching on the warm *Kooki* while unearthing centuries of shared linguistic heritage between Persia and South Asia made the highway drive back to Qazvin feel even richer—a sweet bridge between history, language, and the open road.

The Greenwich Sequel: Bargaining for Burgers

As the kilometers began to pile up on the highway, Sajjad checked the GPS and let out a heavy sigh: *"Guys, this is a very long travel. If we push all the way to Tehran tonight, we'll be driving straight through the dark all night long."*

Ali immediately chimed in with a brilliant alternative: *"Why exhaust yourself? Let's just spend one more night in Qazvin!"*

At first, Sajjad hesitated. Qazvin required a slight detour off the direct freeway to Tehran, and he was conscious of adding extra driving hours to an already brutal schedule. But Ali knew Sajjad's primary weakness—by this point in the trip, it was an established fact that Sajjad was just as big a foodie as the two of us.

Ali leaned in with a mischievous smile: *"Come on Sajjad! Who knows when you'll ever be back in Qazvin again? Let's go back to Greenwich and have those incredible burgers one more time!"*

Sajjad broke into a wide, defeated laugh. The temptation of a world-class burger completely shattered his reluctance. *"Alright, Qazvin it is!"* he agreed, swinging the sedan onto the Qazvin exit ramp.

While still on the road, Sajjad pulled out his phone and called the exact same hotel where we had stayed two nights prior. Lady Luck was on our side—the hotel manager recognized him, took the booking over the phone, and reserved our exact same rooms for us!

We pulled into Qazvin, and Sajjad executed another flawless maneuver down the impossibly tight underground garage ramp. We dropped our heavy bags in our familiar rooms, splashed some water on our faces, and within thirty minutes, we were back in the car heading straight for **Greenwich Fast Food**.

The Missed Call and Domestic Diplomacy

We walked into the cozy, renovated burger joint like returning regulars. We placed our orders—fully loaded burgers, double fries, and ice-cold cokes—and sat down at a table, happily anticipating a repeat of our previous feast.

While we were waiting for the food to be served, Ali's phone rang. It was his wife calling from Pakistan. But instead of a casual check-in, she delivered a tense update: my wife had been frantically trying to reach me for hours, couldn't get through, and was now cross-examining Ali's family to figure out where on earth I was!

Because we had been on the road all day across spotty mountain zones, my strict daily ritual of calling my wife at the exact same hour had gotten completely derailed. To make matters infinitely worse, I had deliberately kept my trip to Iran a secret from her before leaving Pakistan—knowing how people back home panic about regional security, and how their anxiety can completely throw a wrench into travel plans.

Realizing I was in deep trouble, I quickly fired up my phone's VPN, stepped away from the table, and dialed her back.

What followed was one of the most intense, stressful, one-minute phone conversations of my life. I was hit with a barrage of panic, anger, and rapid-fire interrogation through the earpiece. I managed to calm her down just enough to assure her I was completely safe, hung up, and walked back to the table with my head spinning and my appetite entirely ruined.

Ali and Sajjad looked up at my shell-shocked face. Frustrated that a simple missed call had completely ruined the joy of our long-

awaited burger night, I sat down, sighed heavily, and blurted out a classic Punjabi idiom of utter exasperation:

"The entire feast has been sacrificed at the altar of domestic diplomacy!"

Ali nearly choked on his drink, bursting into a fit of unstoppable laughter at my sheer misery. It became an instant running joke—one that Ali still uses to tease me to this day whenever travel plans get derailed by domestic reality.

Despite the marital storm brewing across the border, our **sizzling, freshly grilled burgers** arrived. We devoured the incredible meal, drove back to our familiar hotel, and fell into bed—getting our rest to prepare for the next day's long highway stretch toward the capital city of **Tehran**.



Album: Biachal & Poshtir

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=biachal>

CHAPTER 9

Rooftop Rescues, Police Alarms, Tehran Books, & The Dubai Landing

"Some sanctuaries grant entry through their front gates, others reveal themselves from a neighbor's roof, but all of them remind the traveler that the journey is about who stands by your side when the unexpected happens."

Thursday morning arrived in Qazvin with a sharp, crisp autumn air. As we packed our bags and checked out of our familiar hotel rooms, Ali's face lit up with sudden recollection: *"Today is Thursday!"*

The local shopkeepers on our very first night had told Sajjad that the locked shrine of **Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)** opened its doors only once a week—on Thursdays. It felt like a stroke of pure divine timing. We had unexpectedly ended up spending a second night in Qazvin all because of a late-night craving for Greenwich burgers, and now the calendar had lined up perfectly.

After enjoying another humble street-side breakfast, we asked Sajjad if we could make one brief final detour to the shrine before leaving for Tehran. Sajjad readily agreed, navigating the car out of our hotel lane onto the main avenue. Finding a parking spot along the busy morning road, he motioned toward the alley: *"You guys walk over and visit. I'll wait by the car."*

The Unyielding Door of Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)

Under the full light of day, the entrance to the shrine looked strikingly different from our late-night encounter. The brick archway stood out clearly, and the heavy metal doors—painted in a vibrant, parrot-green shade with intricate geometric star lattice-work—glistened under the morning sun. Above the arch, beautiful blue tilework framed Quranic inscriptions.

However, as we approached the threshold, our hearts sank once again: the heavy parrot-green doors were firmly closed.



We stepped up to the entrance and knocked gently. Moments passed in complete silence. We knocked again, louder this time. Standing close to the wooden frame, we could clearly hear movement and shuffling footsteps inside the courtyard—someone was definitely in there, but nobody came to unlock the latch.

Disappointed, we walked back to where Sajjad was waiting by the sedan and broke the news: *"It's locked, and even though someone is inside, no one is answering."*

Hearing this, Sajjad's usual cool, friendly demeanor instantly vanished. A flush of righteous irritation crossed his face. This was our third attempt to visit the great master, and after driving all the way from the Caspian coast, he was not going to accept being turned away at the door on the one day the shrine was scheduled to be open.

"Follow me, the door will open today" Sajjad muttered, marching straight back down the alley toward the shrine.

He stepped right up to the green doors and began pounding on them with loud, authoritative thuds that echoed down the quiet alley. Listening closely to his rapid Farsi outburst, I caught key words booming through the air: **"Mashhad!"... "Musannif!"... "Pakistan!"... "Lehaz!"**

Even without speaking Farsi, his message was crystal clear. Sajjad was forcefully declaring his credentials as a Musavi Sayyid hailing from the holy city of Mashhad, demanding courtesy and respect (*Lehaz*) for his honored foreign guests—distinguished authors (*Musannif*) who had traveled all the way from Pakistan to pay their respects. He was essentially telling the unseen caretaker behind the wall: *"Have you no courtesy to open the door for traveling scholars who have journeyed thousands of miles?"*

We stood back in awe as Sajjad hammered away on the door for several minutes. Yet, despite his booming voice and persistent knocking, the unseen occupant behind the heavy green doors did not budge an inch. Not a bolt turned; not a latch lifted. The shrine remained utterly silent, guarding its quiet solitude against the outside world.

Realizing that force of will could not unlock a door meant to stay shut, Sajjad finally lowered his fist, let out a frustrated sigh, and turned back to us, acknowledging the subtle mystery of travel: some sanctuaries welcome you with open arms, while others teach you patience from the outside.

The View from the Rooftop: Beyond the Locked Gates

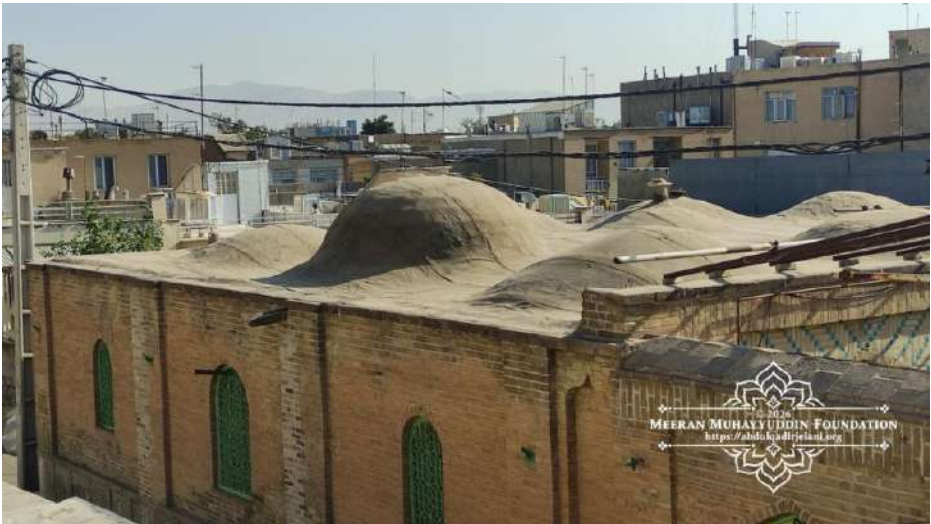
Sajjad's loud, persistent hammering on the heavy green doors naturally echoed straight across the narrow street. Moments later, a front door opened on the opposite side of the lane, where local residential homes stood. A very decent, kindly local gentleman in his 60s—dressed comfortably in his undershirt and trousers—stepped out to see what all the commotion was about.

Sajjad walked over and rapidly explained our situation in Farsi: how we had journeyed thousands of miles from Pakistan, tried three separate times to visit the sanctuary, and were now stranded outside on a Thursday morning despite hearing someone clearly moving around inside.

The elderly neighbor offered a empathetic, knowing smile and shook his head gently. He explained to Sajjad that the caretaker behind those doors was notoriously reclusive—confirming that he almost *never* opens the entrance to anyone, regardless of the day or who comes knocking.

Realizing the front doors were a lost cause, Ali had a flash of inspiration. He asked Sajjad to translate a polite request to the neighbor: *"Could you possibly take us up to your rooftop so we can at least look over the wall and see the sanctuary from above?"*

The gentleman didn't hesitate for a second. Demonstrating true Persian warmth, he invited us straight into his home and guided us up the stairs to his roof.



Stepping out onto his rooftop, the secret interior of the sanctuary was suddenly laid bare before our eyes. Looking down into the

complex, we could see a peaceful inner courtyard lined with elegant brick archways trimmed in blue geometric tilework, covered overhead by a simple metal scaffolding frame.

Turning slightly, the full architectural layout of the sanctuary roof revealed itself: a series of low, traditional earthen-clay domes rising gracefully above thick brick walls punctuated by green-gridded arched windows. The neighbor pointed directly toward the central, prominent clay dome and explained that the resting place of **Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)** lay directly beneath it.

Standing on that quiet rooftop under the morning sun, taking in the elevated view of the master's resting place, a profound sense of gratitude washed over us. The wooden doors below had remained locked, yet through the kindness of a stranger in his undershirt, we were granted a vantage point few visitors ever get to see—a quiet, secret view over the walls of Qazvin that made our third attempt feel bit more fulfilled.

The Breakthrough, the Secret Courtyard, and the Police Twist

As we stood on the rooftop taking in the view, the elderly neighbor offered a fresh breath of hope: *"Let's go back down. I will try knocking on the door with you."*

It was a brilliant gesture. Just as the old saying goes—*two minds are better than one*—it turned out two knocking hands were far more persuasive than one! The neighbor and Sajjad stepped up to the parrot-green entrance together, pounding on the heavy metal panels in tandem.

Sure enough, after a few moments of relentless double-knocking, the heavy iron latch finally scraped open.

Standing in the doorway was the shrine's caretaker—an frail, elderly gentleman in his late 70s. Sajjad and the neighbor immediately stepped forward, speaking in gentle, reassuring Farsi to explain our purpose: that we were peaceful travelers and

authors from Pakistan accompanied by a Musavi Sayyid from Mashhad, seeking only to pay our respects. Seeing his neighbor standing alongside us, the old man's defensive posture melted away, and he stepped aside to let us in.

Stepping inside, we found ourselves in a peaceful, secluded courtyard shaded by sprawling grape vines and fig leaves hanging from an overhead trellis.

The layout was intriguing: a short flight of stone steps led up to an elevated brick porch with green metal railings, while another set of stairs led down into a subterranean basement area where the tomb of **Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)** rested behind locked doors.

The caretaker explained that the lower tomb chamber was locked shut, and the keys were not in his possession. When the neighbor gently asked him why he had refused to open the main gates for so long, the old caretaker let out a sad, trembling sigh: *"Some time ago, dangerous burglars broke in here, attacked me, and hurt me badly. Ever since that day, I am terrified whenever anyone pounds on the door."*



Hearing his story, our frustration instantly turned into profound empathy.

In a customary gesture of respect, Ali pulled out a stack of currency to offer as a gift (*Hadiya*) for the caretaker and shrine upkeep. But before he could hand the notes over, the neighbor intervened with a hilarious, fiercely protective gesture. He reached out, grabbed the stack of bills right out of Ali's hand with a stern, frustrated look, counted through the notes, returned half the money back to Ali, and handed only the remaining half to the caretaker—ensuring his neighbor didn't overcharge or take advantage of foreign pilgrims!

We slipped off our shoes and stepped into the ground-floor mosque adjoined to the courtyard. The interior was serene and beautifully kept—featuring whitewashed brick arches trimmed in turquoise tiles, plush red Persian carpets covering the floor, bookstands filled with religious texts, and warm sunlight filtering through the windows. We offered our prayers, soaked in the quiet sanctity of the hall, and took a few keepsake photos. The entire visit took no more than ten minutes.



As I stepped off the carpeted porch back toward the courtyard to retrieve my shoes, an utterly unexpected, heart-stopping twist occurred.

Standing right inside the gateway was the local Iranian police.

It turned out that while Sajjad had been frantically pounding on the front doors earlier, the traumatized old caretaker—convinced that the burglars had returned to attack him—had secretly dialed the emergency police line, reporting that intruders were breaking in and his life was in imminent danger!

I happened to be the very first person to walk out into the courtyard, coming face-to-face with the police squad. The senior officer stepped forward—a tall, handsome, impeccably dressed man wearing a sharp green uniform, dark green trousers, and dark sunglasses.

Looking straight at me, he offered a polite *"Assalam-o-Alaikum"* in a crisp Persian accent, followed by a rapid question in Farsi.

I stood there frozen. *"English?"* I asked nervously. He gave a firm, negative shake of his head.

In those five terrifying seconds, my brain raced at a million miles an hour. *What if we get arrested? What if this counts as trespassing? Our international flights back to Dubai are tomorrow, and our Iranian visas expire at midnight! If we get thrown into a Qazvin holding cell today, our entire life plan collapses!*

Panicking internally, I didn't try to explain or argue. I just lifted my head and yelled out one single word at the top of my lungs:

"SAJJAADDDD!"

I didn't say another word—in my heart, I was silently screaming: *Brother, come out here and save my life right now!*

Hearing my frantic shout, Sajjad and the neighbor came rushing out of the mosque hall. Sajjad immediately engaged the senior officer, explaining the entire misunderstanding in rapid, persuasive

Farsi while the neighbor chimed in to verify our story. They handed over their national ID cards and explained that we were visiting authors and pilgrims from Pakistan who had simply been trying to pay their respects.

The officer examined the IDs, listened to the neighbor's explanation, and his tense posture visibly relaxed. Realizing it was all a harmless misunderstanding caused by a frightened caretaker, he smiled, turned back toward me, and said in surprisingly clear English:

"Say thank you and Salam to your countrymen on our behalf."

He then pulled out his radio, called the central police dispatch, and officially reported that it was a false alarm with zero threat.

We let out a massive, collective sigh of relief, thanked the handsome officer, shook hands with our wonderful neighbor, and walked back out through the parrot-green doors to Sajjad's car—our hearts still thumping from the adrenaline surge, but ready at last to hit the highway for our final drive to **Tehran**.

The Century-Old Footsteps and the Coke Studio Jam

As Sajjad pulled the sedan back onto the main highway toward Tehran, my heart finally settled back to a normal rhythm. The sheer adrenaline of nearly being hauled off by Qazvin's finest began to fade, replaced by a sudden wave of lighthearted regret. I looked out the side window and muttered to Ali: *"You know... now that the panic is over, I really should have asked that smart policeman for a selfie!"* Ali burst out laughing, shaking his head at how quickly my mood had shifted from sheer terror to photo-op regrets.

As the open highway stretched out before us, Ali decided to reveal the true, profound reason behind our relentless quest to visit the shrine of **Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.)**.

"Do you know why I was so stubborn about coming back here three times?" Ali asked softly.

I looked back at him, curious. He explained that over a century ago, his great-grandfather had undertaken a spiritual journey across Persia and had visited this exact same sanctuary of Hazrat Ahmad Ghazali (R.A.) in Qazvin. For Ali, standing before those parrot-green doors wasn't just a casual pilgrimage—it was an ancestral pilgrimage, tracing the exact spiritual footsteps his forefather had walked more than a hundred years prior. Suddenly, our three visits, Sajjad's door-pounding, the neighbor's rooftop rescue, and even the police intervention all made absolute, beautiful sense. It was as if history itself had insisted on bringing us there.

Settling in for the long highway drive to the capital, Sajjad offered a generous gesture to break the monotony of the road: *"Hey, why don't you connect your phone to the car's Bluetooth? You can play whatever music you like."*

I gladly accepted, pairing my phone with the dashboard multimedia system. I started off by playing a few of my favorite Indian classics, filling the car with familiar, soulful melodies.

After a while, wanting to mix things up, I queued up some upbeat English tracks, which had Sajjad nodding his head along to the rhythm. But then I had a flash of inspiration. Back home in Pakistan, I had fallen in love with a few Persian fusion tracks featured on *Coke Studio*. Wanting to make the drive truly interactive, I selected one of those famous songs and turned up the volume.

I leaned forward toward the front seat: *"Sajjad, do you recognize this? Can you understand the Farsi in this song?"*

Sajjad listened intently to the vocals coming through the speakers, a surprised smile spreading across his face. *"Yes, I can understand it completely!"* he replied, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He went on to explain that the dialect being sung in the track was classical Dari-Persian, closely aligned with how Persian is natively spoken and understood right here in Iran.

Watching the sun-dappled Iranian countryside roll past the window while listening to Pakistani-produced Persian music through a Mashhadi driver's car speakers was the ultimate cultural crossover—a perfect, harmonious soundtrack for our final highway stretch into Tehran.

Tehran, Candy Stores for Authors, and the Nose-Tape Mystery

After three hours of continuous highway driving, the peaceful, misty mountain landscapes of Gilan yielded to a sprawling, roaring metropolis. We had finally entered **Tehran**.

The contrast was immediate. Tehran looked like a vibrant, hyper-developed, modern version of Karachi—a sprawling urban maze pulsing with relentless traffic and endless energy. It was also the first place in Iran where we saw mass swarms of motorbikes darting between cars—specifically models that looked identical to the iconic Honda CG 125s we see everywhere back home in Pakistan. Iranian riders, however, had modified them with custom front-facing frame extensions covered in heavy waterproof canvas, creating a built-in shade and rain shield over the handlebars.

As Sajjad navigated the heavy urban traffic, I looked out the window and noticed a peculiar trend among young women walking along the sidewalks. Many of them had a small white patch taped neatly across the bridge of their nose. At first, my brain tried to make sense of it through familiar sports imagery: *"I thought it was some kind of specialized sunblock—the kind cricketers smear across their noses during long matches!"*

Shortly after, we passed a major city thoroughfare and felt an unexpected surge of patriotic pride: a prominent street sign bearing the name of **Mohammad Ali Jinnah**, the founding father of Pakistan—a lovely symbol of historic brotherhood between the two nations.



Our primary destination in Tehran was **Mowla Publishing** (انتشارات مولی)—a legendary bookstore and publishing house famed across the Islamic world for its authoritative, rare printings on Sufism and the life and teachings of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.).

When Sajjad parked the sedan and we stepped through the doors of Mowla Publishing, Ali's face transformed into pure, unadulterated boyhood joy. For a dedicated author and scholar, walking into that shop was like a kid walking into a giant candy store or toy paradise! He immediately began listing rare titles and obscure historical manuscripts he had spent years searching for. To our absolute astonishment, the staff pulled every single book off the shelves. Ali ended up purchasing a staggering **thirty volumes** on the spot, beaming with happiness and whispering in utter delight: *"I wish I could buy this entire store!"*

Sajjad, fulfilling his duty as our fiercely protective guide, immediately stepped in to negotiate a solid bulk discount with the manager. We settled the bill, but carrying thirty heavy hardcovers through Tehran on foot was out of the question. Sajjad asked the shopkeepers to hold our stack at the counter while we grabbed lunch nearby.

The Culinary Finale and the \$100,000 Nose

For our final lunch in Iran, we decided to check off the last famous Iranian traditional dishes left on our culinary bucket list: **Ghormeh Sabzi** (a deep, fragrant herb and kidney-bean stew) and **Fesenjan** (tender chicken bathed in a rich, tangy walnut-pomegranate sauce)—all accompanied, of course, by ice-cold cans of Coca-Cola.

While we enjoyed the incredible meal, I finally brought up the white nose patches with Sajjad: *"Sajjad, what is with all the white tape on the noses of young girls around the city?"*

Sajjad laughed and unlocked the cultural secret for us: *"That isn't sunblock! Tehran is the nose-job capital of the world. Those are surgical bandages after rhinoplasty. A smaller, reshaped nose is a major status symbol here."*

The pieces instantly clicked together in my head! I looked over at Ali and nudged him: *"Well, now it all makes sense! If a local groom has to shell out a hundred thousand dollars for a Mehriya, no wonder everyone is investing in top-tier cosmetic perfection before getting married!"* We all shared a deep laugh over the hilarious economic connection.

Saffron, Silk Road Tobacco, and Double Trouble

After lunch, we returned to Mowla Publishing, collected our heavy box of thirty books, and set off to accomplish our last errand: buying world-class Iranian saffron to bring home. Sajjad drove us toward a bustling wholesale bazaar district, expertly maneuvering into a multi-story parking garage.

As we walked through the crowded market streets, Ali and I discussed the sheer weight of our literary haul, agreeing that we desperately needed to buy a heavy-duty duffel bag just to check the books onto our flight. Amid the noise and crowds of the wholesale market, we bought a sturdy bag, but in the chaos, we

completely forgot to buy the traditional cloaks (*Abayas*) we had planned to get for our wives back home!

While walking along the sidewalk, my eyes caught a crumpled, discarded tobacco packet lying near the curb. Back in Pakistan, these specific Iranian tobacco pouches are prized imported items; seeing one lying on a street in Tehran validated another small piece of random cultural trivia I had always known.

Suddenly, a dull, throbbing pain began building behind my eyes. The days of non-stop travel, heat, and shifting schedules had finally caught up to me—a massive, pounding **migraine** hit me like a brick wall.

We climbed back into the sedan to drive toward our final destination: an international airport hotel located right on the premises of Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport.

As Sajjad drove, Ali looked over at my pale face and asked what was wrong. I groaned, *"It's a severe migraine."*

Now, Ali is an exceptionally sensitive soul—so much so that if his travel companion gets sick, his own body sympathetically responds in kind! Sure enough, by the time we pulled up to the airport hotel an hour later, I was suffering from a pounding migraine, and Ali had developed a burning fever—true brothers and partners in absolutely everything, right down to our physical ailments!

The Currency Confusion and Jason Statham's Rules

The hotel was a grand, five-star luxury property. I limped into the air-conditioned lobby alone to inquire about a room for the night. The polished receptionist behind the desk greeted me politely and asked how I would be paying. I replied that I would be paying in local Iranian Tomans.



She quoted a figure with so many zeroes attached to it that my migraine-addled brain completely glitched—I couldn't convert the massive astronomical number into AED, SAR, or USD to save my life. Panicking that we were about to be charged a fortune, I walked back out to the car with a long face: *"Guys, it is insanely expensive, we can't stay here!"*

Sajjad chuckled, stepped out of the sedan, and walked into the lobby to investigate. A few minutes later, he strolled back out with a triumphant, beaming smile. It turned out the receptionist had quoted standard Toman figures, which, when properly converted to foreign currency, turned out to be remarkably economical! Sajjad had seamlessly handled the reservation, clearing our path to a restful night.

We unloaded our heavy luggage from the trunk. The moment had finally arrived—the emotional, bittersweet farewell to our host, driver, translator, and dear brother, Sajjad.

We pulled him into a tight, warm bear hug, profoundly grateful for the thousands of mountain and desert kilometers he had safely navigated us through. We settled his final bill, and I handed him a

extra cash, asking him to buy a sweet gift for his (and our) little sister back home in Mashhad.

Then, as two die-hard automobile enthusiasts, I remembered an iconic line spoken by Jason Statham in the movie *The Transporter*: "*Respect a man's car, and the man will respect you.*" I handed Sajjad an extra cash specifically earmarked to give his faithful sedan a full, deep-clean wash and detailing when he returned home. Finally, we kept just enough local cash to cover our dinner and morning breakfast before our international flight back to Dubai.

With heavy hearts and fond goodbyes, we watched Sajjad's sedan pull away into the Tehran evening.

The Final Curtain: Pizza, The Long Call, Rest, Reflection and the Morning Shuttle

Ali and I checked into our spacious room, collapsed onto our comfortable beds, and took a few hours of quiet, dark rest to let the migraine medication and fever reducers do their work.

As night fell over the airport complex, we felt human again. We headed downstairs to the quiet hotel dining room, ordered a piping-hot, deliciously cheesy pizza, and enjoyed our final meal on Iranian soil—reflecting on the incredible whirlwind of the past week.

Once we finished eating, I stepped outside into the cool night air in front of the hotel entrance. My head was still tender from the migraine, but there was one last piece of crucial business to handle before leaving Iran: I pulled out my phone and made the long, necessary, and very difficult call to my wife.

It wasn't an easy conversation—there was plenty of tension, explanation, and damage control required after the missed check-ins and the secrecy surrounding my trip—but it was an absolute necessity to clear the air before boarding my flight home. With that heavy emotional weight finally addressed and out of the way, I headed back up to the room, where Ali and I called it a night.



From the sacred halls of Mashhad to the late-night flatbread of Bastam; from the salty-oatmeal *Haleem* shock in Semnan to the closed doors and secret rooftop views of Qazvin; from the rain-swept Caspian coast and *Sheesha* storms to the mountain streams, yellow-domed sanctuaries, and local *Koloocheh* epiphanies—we had set out as two authors seeking history, and were returning home as transformed men with a lifetime of unforgettable stories.

The next morning, we woke up feeling much better, got fully dressed, packed our belongings, and checked out at the reception. It was then that we discovered a wonderful convenience: the five-star hotel offered a free complimentary shuttle service running every thirty minutes directly to the airport terminal!

We hauled our luggage out to the curb and boarded the hotel mini-bus. As we hoisted the heavy duffel bag containing Ali's thirty newly purchased hardcover books, the sheer, crushing weight of the literary collection proved too much for the bag—the main carrying handle snapped right off in our hands! We couldn't help but laugh; it was a fitting final testament to Ali's unstoppable book-buying spree at Mowla Publishing.

Farewell Persia, Hello Dubai

Arriving at Imam Khomeini International Airport, we navigated the check-in counters and walked up to the Iranian immigration line. To our relief, the process was astonishingly smooth. There were no unexpected questions, no delays, and not even a physical stamp placed in our passports—just a warm, handsome Iranian immigration officer handing back our documents with a broad, genuine smile and a polite farewell.

With our immigration clearance complete, we sat down in the departure lounge for a simple, humble breakfast of fresh sandwiches and hot cups of tea, reflecting quietly on the extraordinary week that was now drawing to a close.

Arriving at Imam Khomeini International Airport, we arrived hand baggage security checkpoint. Ali had packed the plastic bag containing the few tablespoons of *Tabaruk* rock salt—given to us by the caretaker at the yellow-domed mountain shrine of Hazrat Syed Abu Salih Musa al-Hasani (R.A.)—right inside my carry-on hand bag.

Sure enough, as the bag passed through the X-ray scanner, the dense white powder/crystals inside the plastic pouch flagged an immediate alert on the monitor. The security officer motioned for me to step aside and opened my handbag for a manual inspection.

He pulled out the clear plastic bag, looked at me with a suspicious, questioning gaze, and asked what it was in Farsi.

Trying to keep it simple, I said in English: "*It's salt!*"

He stared back at me with a completely blank expression. He didn't speak English.

Brainstorming rapidly, I remembered that Urdu shares plenty of roots with Farsi. I pointed at the bag and said clearly: "***Namak!***"

To my utter surprise, *Namak* didn't click for him either! We were stuck in a classic airport mime routine over a mystery bag of white crystals.

The officer untied the plastic knot, brought the bag up close to his nose, and took a deep, cautious sniff. A sudden look of recognition washed over his face. He looked up at me, nodded understandingly, and uttered a single word:

"Tabaruk?"

My face lit up instantly. *"YES! Yes, Tabaruk!"* I cheered, relieved that the mystery was solved.

However, airport security rules are unyielding—even for sacred souvenirs. With a firm but polite shake of his head, the officer pointed toward the disposal bin. Regulations did not allow loose, unsealed powders or salts in carry-on luggage, and he confiscated the bag right then and there.

As we walked away toward the immigration counters, I looked over at Ali and smiled: *"Well, we couldn't take the salt home in our bags... but considering we tasted a pinch back at the shrine, those blessings are already running through our blood!"*

Soon, our flight was called, and we boarded the aircraft bound for Dubai.

As the plane touched down and began taxiing along the tarmac at Dubai Airport's Terminal 2, Ali pulled out his phone, switched off airplane mode, and dialed his friend Usman, who was coming to pick us up.

Ali greeted him over the speaker: *"Usman, we've just landed! What's for lunch today?"*

Having eaten saffron-scented rice with virtually every single lunch and dinner across Persia for seven straight days, I leaned over toward Ali's phone and shouted in exasperation: *"Usman, if there is rice on the menu today, I am going to lose my mind!"*

There was a brief pause on the line before Usman's voice chimed back with a hilarious, straight-faced clarification: *"Don't worry, it's not Biryani... it's Fried Rice!"*

Ali and I burst into uncontrollable laughter right there in our seats as the plane came to a complete stop.

Stepping out into Terminal 2, we met Usman waiting for us at the arrivals area. He packed our heavy luggage—broken book bag and all—into his car and drove us straight to his apartment. We sat down together, dug into our lunch, and officially brought our wild, beautiful, soul-stirring Iranian expedition to its perfect close.



Album: Qazvin, Tehran and Full

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=qazvin>

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=tehran>

<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest/?album=full>

EPILOGUE

Two Thousand Kilometers and an Unoccupied Shoulder

We covered over 2,000 kilometers by car during our time in Iran, navigating remote mountain highways, rural village districts, and sprawling urban centers at all hours of the day and night. Through all those late-night drives and detours into the unknown, not once did a single thought of insecurity cross my mind. Back home in Pakistan, wandering freely into unfamiliar territories—especially after dark—often requires a heavy dose of caution. Here, the open road felt universally safe.

The physical landscape of the country was just as surprising as its social security. The infrastructure, highways, and civic networks were pristine, far surpassing the road systems we are used to at home. Despite decades of crippling international sanctions, the sheer volume of cars vastly outnumbering motorcycles painted a clear picture of local resilience. Interestingly, I hardly saw any Japanese cars on the road; instead, the streets were dominated by classic European models—particularly French designs like Peugeots and Renaults—lovingly maintained and essentially frozen in the aesthetic of the 1990s. Yet, renting our dedicated car for that massive cross-country trek cost us a mere 250 USD, making it the most economical international tour of my life.

The greatest revelation of the journey, however, was the people. The Iranians we encountered were, without a doubt, the most gracious, honest, and exemplary Muslims I have ever met in any country. They effortlessly shattered the rigid stereotypes so often broadcast to the outside world. Across the country, men universally dressed in standard pants and shirts. Among the women, traditional heavy cloaks and *chadors* were surprisingly uncommon; in fact, I saw far more women and girls walking confidently without them than wearing them. Across all those

cities, shrine courtyards, and highway stops, I did not spot a single beggar.

Above all, the **hospitality** we experienced was nothing short of legendary. From the generous caretakers in remote mountain shrines who shared sacred salt for our families back home, to the kindly neighbor in his undershirt who welcomed total strangers into his house and led us to his roof just so we could view a locked sanctuary—at every single turn, we were treated not as foreign tourists, but as honored, beloved guests. The warmth of the Persian heart turned every unfamiliar corner into a place of comfort.

It breaks my heart to see how the geopolitical shadows of war and conflict have since fallen upon the region and touched this beautiful land. Looking back on our peaceful journey, I pray with all my heart that the resilient, deeply hospitable people of Iran emerge from these turbulent times and return to the peace, warmth, and prosperity we witnessed—or an even better version of it.

Now, I must offer one final, sincere apology to the readers of traditional travel memoirs.

If you picked up this book expecting a cinematic romance—the classic travelogue trope where the author strikes up a deeply profound conversation with a gorgeous local girl, who eventually rests her head and falls asleep on his shoulder as the sun sets over the horizon—I am deeply sorry to disappoint you. We were just two middle-aged Pakistani men, chasing ancient shrines, hunting for rare books, arguing over rice, surviving Qazvin police scares, and nursing our synchronized ailments.

My shoulder remained entirely unoccupied, and I wouldn't trade a single mile of it for anything else.



About the Authors

Usman Aslam is an observer, wanderer, and first-time travel writer. Driven by a love for open roads and unscripted cultural encounters.

Ali Raza is a researcher and writer specializing in Islamic spiritual history and Sufi heritage. He is currently working on a comprehensive biography of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A.) and few other books in parallel. He has published more than 20 books.

Both the reside in Pakistan with their families.

For feedback, readers can find contact details at:



<https://usman-space.github.io/WhereDervishesRest>



Right to Left: Ali and Usman (suburbs of Islamabad)

Author's Note: A Digital Pilgrim's Toolkit

As a career IT professional, bringing *Where Dervishes Rest* to life was as much a modern technical project as it was a spiritual journey. Crafting a book that spans centuries of Sufi history, intricate architectural details, and real-time travel logistics across Iran required leveraging modern digital tools alongside traditional research.

- **Historical Research & Geography (Google Gemini):** Used to cross-reference historical dates, genealogical charts (*Sadat* lineages), and geographical distances across Khorasan and Qazvin.
- **Visual Enhancement & Asset Creation (ChatGPT):** Assisted in image correction, watermark designs, and formatting photo layouts.
- **High-Resolution Photo Archiving (Google Photos):** Hosts the original, uncompressed photo gallery captured during our journey.
- **Interactive Navigation:** QRCode Monkey. Created the dynamic QR codes embedded throughout this book.
- **Watermarking:** Optimole
- **Digital Companion:** Github Pages

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حیات ذوقِ سفر کے سوا کچھ اور نہیں

*"Beyond every station lies yet another station of yours,
Life is nothing but the zest for the journey."*

— Allama Iqbal

