



This book starts “back to front” – the Persian way around.

Extract from:

Helena Henneken
they would rock
59 Days in Iran

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No, it isn't. No shuttle driver to be seen anywhere. Instead, many people waiting for other passengers. Some of them cast a look in my direction and call brightly "Welcome to Iran!". I look around curiously – wondering who they are greeting so warmly. But there is no one there. Only me. And then I take another look into their friendly faces and understand: This hospitality is all for me. A perfect stranger who has just stepped foot into their country as a guest.

Next to me, the extended family of the young woman I've met on the plane are tearfully hugging one another and celebrating the long-awaited reunion with intense happiness. However, the reunion celebration is immediately interrupted when they realise that my hotel shuttle hasn't turned up. "Which hotel?" They ring up there straight away, complain and announce my arrival. They then take a careful look at the taxi drivers waiting in front of the door until they eventually find one they can trust and who they consider good enough for a guest in their country. "He will now drive you to your hotel. But you are certainly not to pay him. The hotel has to do that. And they know it very well. If you have any questions or any problems arise, please ring us at any time. Take good care of yourself. And, by the way: It's great that you're here! Welcome to Iran!"

"WELCOME
TO IRAN!"

7 hours later

Thousands of impressions rain down on me at the airport in Istanbul. A melange of truly different cultures, people, language, clothing. A good place to tune, at least mentally, into my "costume" for the following weeks: Hijab – the dress code for women in Iran. Long, loose tops. Arms and legs covered at all times. Headscarf.

However, at my departure gate to Shiraz of all places, there is no sign of any of that. Not a single headscarf in sight. Instead, women dressed in modern clothing, alongside men dressed in the same modern way. Talking – totally unaffected by any notion of gender separation – "completely normally" with one another. So this is how one flies to Iran.

Shiraz Airport

Just before we land, the women in the plane undergo a transformation process. Headscarves are tied loosely around hair; manteaus (French for coat) are put on over "Western" clothing. I watch the Iranian women very carefully and copy what they do.

To be honest, I am feeling a little unsure and excited now. Does my new outfit meet the Iranian regulations? Can I pass through immigration control dressed in this way?

The young woman I've met on the plane – a German-Iranian about to meet her father for the first time since his return to Iran four years ago – is almost as excited as me. She already knows the border controls and nods to me reassuringly. "You look fine!"

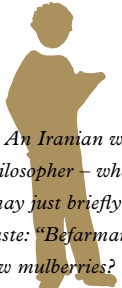
And so I step into the country. Smile. Present my passport and visa. Use my newly acquired knowledge of Farsi. "Salam!" A critical look, a question asked by a customs officer – and the entry stamp is in my passport. Nothing more, that's it. I'm in Iran.

The baggage is ready for collection. I leave the security area with a feeling of great expectation. It's 3 o'clock in the morning and I wonder if everything will continue to run so smoothly. Will the hotel shuttle I ordered in the middle of the night really be ready and waiting for me on the other side?



★
Mo

An Iranian from Hamburg, regularly in the country on business – who gives me details of various people I can contact, who offers, as if this is the most natural thing in the world, to keep a copy of my passport for emergencies and also wants to help me with financial problems: “As a tourist, you have to take your entire travel budget with you in cash because you won’t be able to get cash anywhere in the country otherwise ... So please get in touch with me immediately if there’s a problem. Although I’m pretty sure you won’t really be needing all of these emergency numbers.”



★
Majid

An Iranian who has been living in Germany for the past 35 years, a Persian teacher and philosopher – who turns our language classes into culture lessons: “Bebachschid – excuse me – if I may just briefly tell you something ...” Who always has something else delicious with him for us to taste: “Befarmaid – here you are, this is for all of you and please take the rest home! And do you know mulberries? Go on and try them! There were three trees in Hamburg. Only the sparrows and I knew about them. Unfortunately they have since been cut down. We used to have two enormous mulberry trees in our garden in Kerman. Actually, everything was huge there, you can’t possibly imagine it, about as big as Hamburg Eppendorf. I’m the 11th child, my close family consists of 30 members, the larger circle of 50.” He invites me to Persian concerts and films in Hamburg as well as to lectures on family law in Iran held at the University of Hamburg. He considers it his duty to give me two hours of free extra tuition two days before my departure, so that I can learn a few extra necessary idioms and just quickly the Persian script. And, just one day before departure, he gives me the telephone number of a “nice gentleman” in Shiraz, the place I am heading for, whom he has met there the previous year. “Does this nice gentleman also speak English?” “Yes, probably. He once told me that he wanted to emigrate.”

If everyone in Iran turns out to be just nearly as helpful and friendly as all of these people I have encountered, then my journey cannot fail to be anything but a very remarkable experience.



★
Resa

An Iranian from Hamburg, regularly in Iran on business – who patiently answers my questions for two whole hours and helps to ease my initial fear: “Whatever the media reports about Iran may be true but will not affect you in the country itself. The country is beautiful, the people inquisitive and helpful. As far as I see it, it is one of safest places to visit in the Middle East. Of course you must keep to certain rules – but if you do that, then you will have a fascinating time.”



★
Hanieh

Daughter of Iranian emigrants who occasionally visits family in Iran – who gives me a detailed account of her experiences as a woman in Iran and immediately contacts her relatives back home. “She wants to stay in a hotel? Rubbish! She can come and stay with us!” – and who says after our conversation: “I’m so relieved that we have had the chance to talk at last!”



★
Hartmut

A German whose travel agency arranges a visa reference number for Iran for me and by coincidence has also written a travel guide for Iran, who patiently answers all my questions and gives me a very special culture tip during the last week before my departure: “You are flying first to Shiraz? I have just had lunch with a director who made a documentary film about an American basket ball player in Shiraz. The film celebrates its premiere in Hamburg this week and on Friday the director is going to be there with his Iranian wife. Perhaps that will put you in the right mood!”



★
Aziz

An olive trader from the weekly market in Hamburg Eimsbüttel – who I mistook for a Greek until just recently, but who turns out to be an Iranian two weeks before my departure, and who immediately wants to give me the phone numbers of acquaintances in the north and south of the country.



★
Holger

A German who spent 5 days on a university exchange in Iran 5 years ago and can now still talk with the greatest enthusiasm non-stop for 1.5 hours about his travel experiences.

because I want to know more, because somehow something keeps on telling me that this country could be completely different.

Whatever this “some...” is, I’m curious to see whether I will actually find it. Whether I will really make use of my 30-day visa or will admit after 5 days that what I’m doing is complete naive nonsense and it would be the best move to continue with my journey on into Turkey. I really don’t know. But the journey is about to begin. “And, are you excited?” – No. I wouldn’t actually define the feeling as excitement. Neither do I feel tense. But I have a sense of expectation. Expectation about everything this country has in store for me. And most certainly: a feeling of curiosity.

The previous weeks

I have to admit that I have prepared for the journey more thoroughly than ever before: two books of information, two travel guides, six weeks of classes in Farsi, various Iranian films for evening entertainment ... and the fact that I booked the first hotel months in advance. Gathered information and knowledge to reduce the fear of the unknown, to calm my nerves.

And suddenly I met Iranian ambassadors everywhere in Germany: Iranians living in exile, half-Iranians, people who love to travel to Iran, Iran fans ... a surprising number. All of whom took a surprising amount of time to talk to me. Told me of their experiences in Iran. Made contacts for me. Were concerned. Offered help. And nourished my curiosity and anticipation.



Istanbul Airport: 7 hours until the flight leaves for Iran

“Iran?!?” Large eyes are watching me. “Business?”

“No, pleasure. Travelling.”

“Ah, a trip?”

“No. Backpacking.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“You, as a woman?!?”

“Yes.”

“That’s brave ...!”

Typical conversation experienced over the last few months. Always the same questions. Always the same feeling of having to explain – even sometimes justify – myself. And of encountering huge misunderstandings. Of course there were the others, those who said “Iran? How exciting! Have a great time! And let us know how you get on!” But they were most certainly in the minority. And none of them wanted to come with me either.

“By the way, Helena is getting married to an Iraqi.”

“I’m travelling to Iran, not Iraq.”

“It doesn’t really matter, you can marry an Iraqi there, too.”

“Sure. But I can also do that in Hamburg.”

“Wherever you like. When you get back,
we will celebrate your resurrection!”

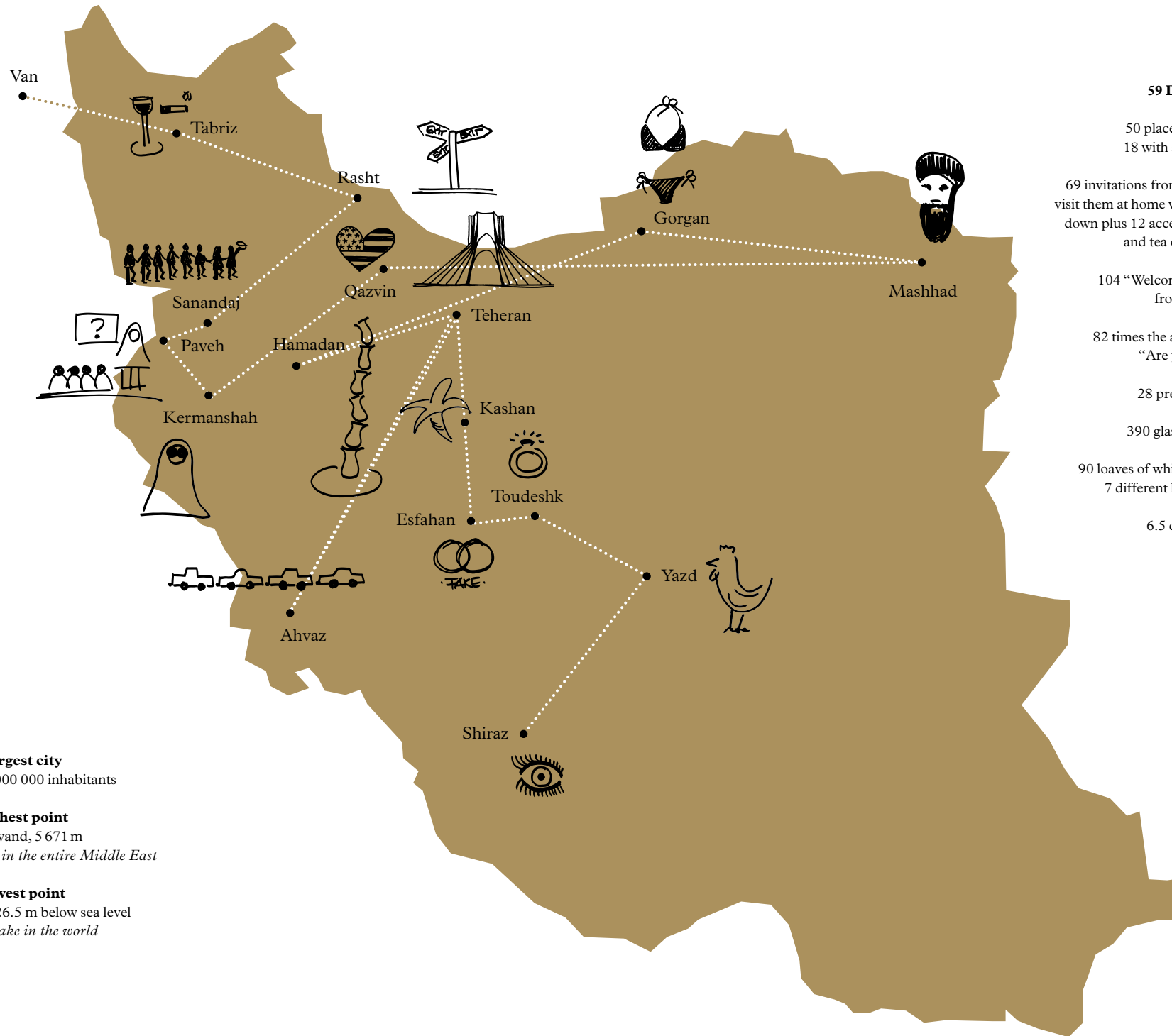
The small difference between “n” and “q”. Hardly anyone knows about it where we live. Myself included. Iran? Somehow it becomes blurred with its neighbouring countries, seems threatening: Atomic conflict, dispute with Israel, totalitarian regime, crazy president, fundamentalists, on the “axis of evil”, terrorists ... A part of a political conflict which repeatedly causes the world to hold its breath.

But beyond the political stage, I hardly know anything about Iran – about the life there, the country, the people. Perhaps that is precisely the reason I have chosen to go there: Because snippets of reports recited by other travellers and Iranians living in Germany have awakened my curiosity,

"HELENA IS
GETTING
MARRIED
TO AN
IRAQI."

فرودگاه شیراز فرودگاه استانبول
Istanbul Airport – Shiraz Airport

Day 0



59 Days in Iran

★
50 places visited in total,
18 with an overnight stay

★
69 invitations from strangers, of which 36 to
visit them at home were accepted and 21 turned
down plus 12 accepted invitations for dinner
and tea outside the home

★
104 "Welcome to Iran!" greetings
from strangers

★
82 times the answer to the question
"Are you married?"

★
28 presents received

★
390 glasses of tea drunk

★
90 loaves of white bread eaten including
7 different kinds of white bread

★
6.5 chicken eaten

Largest city

Tehran, 15 000 000 inhabitants

Highest point

Damavand, 5 671 m

Highest mountain in the entire Middle East

Lowest point

Caspian Sea, 26.5 m below sea level

Largest lake in the world

FOR

<i>Ali</i>	<i>Fatemeh</i>
<i>Alireza</i>	<i>Sanaz</i>
<i>Reza</i>	<i>Sara</i>
<i>Mohammad</i>	<i>Zarah</i>
<i>Amir</i>	<i>Maryam</i>
<i>Mehdi</i>	<i>Niloufar</i>
<i>Hamed</i>	<i>Saba</i>
<i>Hossein</i>	<i>Azadeh</i>
<i>Nima</i>	<i>Tara</i>
<i>Aziz</i>	<i>Bitā*</i>

... and many more.

In short: For all Iranians who have inspired me to write this book. Whom I met during my two month trip through their country – in the spring of 2013, when Ahmadinejad was still president.

Who invited me into their lives. Who have shared their stories and thoughts with me. Who, with what they say and do, sometimes even deliberately go against prevailing laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran – risking trouble with governmental authorities.

Whose names I have changed in this book for that reason.

*For the key protagonists of my journey –
for the key protagonists of this book!*

** Personal Top 10 of the most popular first names which have come up in 59 days in Iran*



they would rock

59 Days in Iran

Helena Henneken



PUBLISHER