

TRAVEL

A journey to
Bam reminds
one of this
ancient Iranian
city's beauty

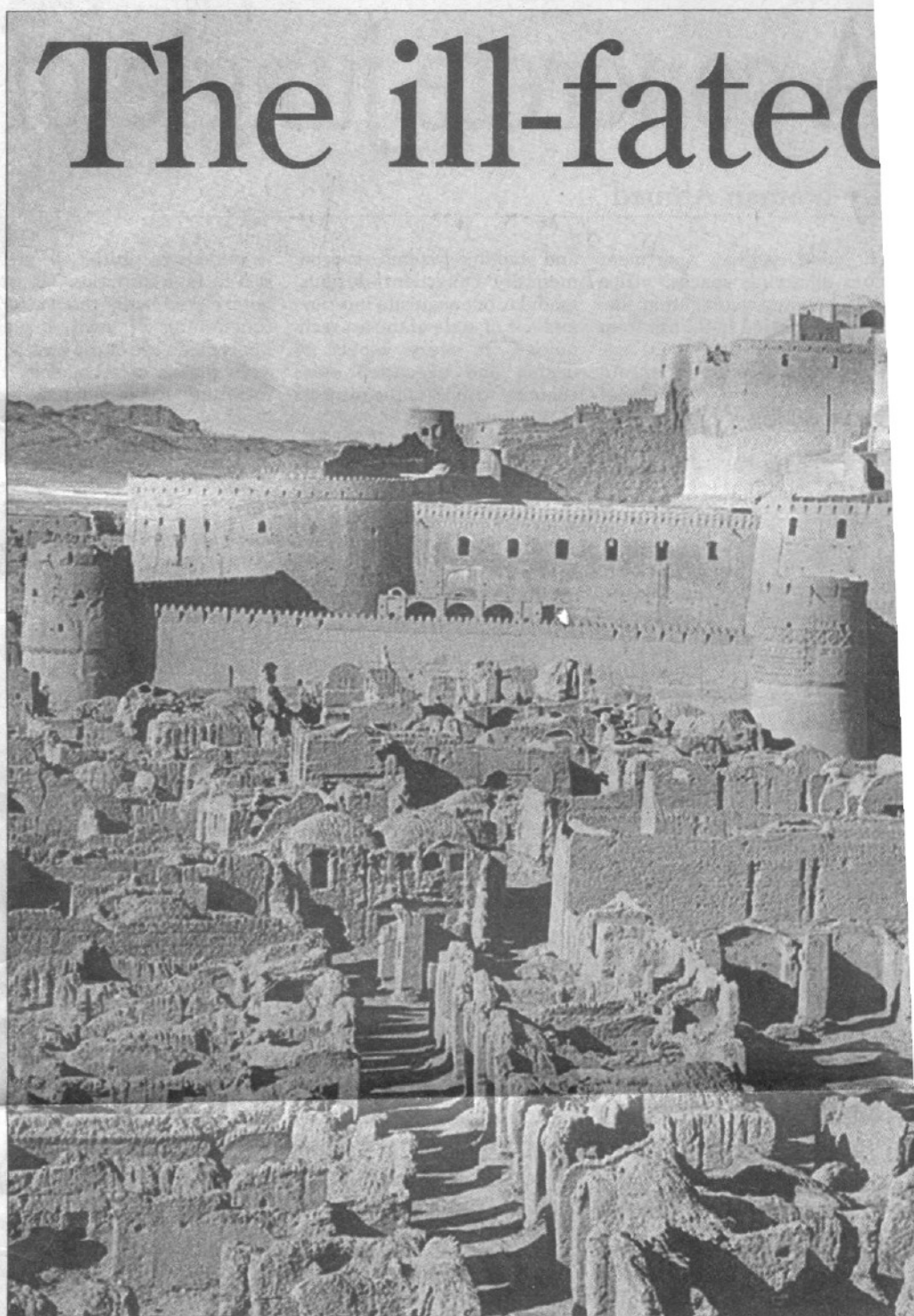
*Cities & Regions
Dawn
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IT was three in the morning as the bus from Yazd dropped us on the highway. From here it was two kilometres towards the centre of Bam. I had met Andre and Tanja, a nice Slovenian couple, in Esfahan and we travelled together to Shiraz, Yazd and now to Bam.

Tired after a hectic day at Yazd, we found a small shelter just by a wall. Here we took out our sleeping bags and slept for a few hours, with our luggage tied to the pole or the shelter.

In the morning we left our bag-packs at the nearby bus station and looked for a public bus towards the city centre. After waiting for a few minutes we decided to walk down to the city, as we didn't want to pay the cab-fare. However, a guy with a pick-up was kind enough to give us a lift till Meidan-e-Imam Khomeini. It was a modest town centre bustling with people, and it was pretty easy to spot many tourists in the crowd. Our immediate destination was the bazaar.

A very regular place to shop, the bazaar had less tourist markets than the ones we had seen in Esfahan and Shiraz. It was a very normal one selling stuff for everyday use of people. After mailing a few post cards, I made way to the famous Arg-e-Bam, through the small streets of the ancient city.



ARG-E-BAM: Before the deadly earthquake of December 26, Bam's famed palace used to

By Waqas Bin Najib

turn he called us and pointed towards the other street, he tried to tell us the way in Persian, which I understood partially. But he was obviously not satisfied with it. He called a younger man from a distance and instructed him

unable to move for some time. It was certainly a grand finale to my trip through Iran.

Slowly we started moving towards the seemingly front of that castle. I was glad we didn't take the normal route; other-

entrance. I was just walking open mouthed and seeing and trying to absorb the whole thing, and at the entrance of the citadel, a voice called from somewhere above and said, "When you get tired of roaming around, come to me for a cup of tea". I smiled as this was

for everyday use of people. After mailing a few post cards, I made way to the famous Arg-i-Bam, through the small streets of the ancient city.

We didn't know much about the city except some things which we read in the travel guide. The ancient city of Bam, was mud bricked with date palms standing tall and proud over the walls. The orange fruit trees were also there with their green fruit hanging from the branches. Clean and small streets were great to walk through. I believe that to get a real feeling of a city one must get lost in its streets. And in doing so, we came across a couple of old men. I quite sure they were over eighty, they seemed to be headed back home after buying some yogurt, which they were carrying in plastic bags. They were walking at a very easy pace and talking like too real old pals.

After seeing us they just knew where we were headed. Without even asking, one of them thought of guiding us through the maze of streets his responsibility. He just kept on walking with us as long as we were on the right track. When we were about to take a wrong

Persian, which I understood partially. But he was obviously not satisfied with it. He called a younger man from a distance, and instructed him to guide us till the end. I tried to tell him that it is enough, we know the way now. But he insisted that we must take the guidance lest we get lost.

The younger guy led us through those beautiful streets and after a couple of turns I told him that we know the way now and he may leave us. He made it sure by describing the way once again and left. The helping hand of the people of Bam, was really making the whole atmosphere superb.

After a while we took a small street with a desert plain and a vast green area ahead of it. As soon as the view opened behind the walls, it was just awesome. A huge mud coloured castle, with a hill in-between and a tall proud palace standing over it. A date garden was visible from the right corner of the castle and spread till our right. From the left corner a brown and white desert laid in the background. The beauty of the scene was breathtaking. I just stood there gazing at this unexpected meeting with Arg-e-Bam. I was

towards the seemingly front of that castle. I was glad we didn't take the normal route; otherwise we would have missed this great encounter. A steep road lead us to the entrance gate which had an octagonal form. Just at the entrance there was a ticket booth which took us out of the trance.

It was the only place in Iran where my international student identity card was honoured. Tanja and Andre didn't have it, and they didn't want to pay full money to get in. We had a long discussion with the guy at the counter, but he didn't give in and I had to enter alone, and after getting inside and seeing the whole ancient mud city in front of me, I knew that even paying the full was worth getting in. Around six square kilometres, enclosed with a high wall of around seven metres. It was some experience roaming around the place. Ruins of bazaar square, *Zurkhane* (gymnasium), *Masjed-e-Jame*, school and houses. You could never get tired of it.

It took me an hour to reach the entrance of the main citadel complex. I didn't meet a soul all this time after the

ing around, come to me for a noticed that it
cup of tea". I smiled as this was above the gate



THE DEVASTATION: Bam in ruins

Bam



l to draw thousands of tourists every year

g quite dramatic.

In the whole country I hadn't come across many people speaking English. And suddenly at the most unexpected place a voice calls and invites for tea. I entered the gate and noticed that it was a tea-house above the gate of the citadel.

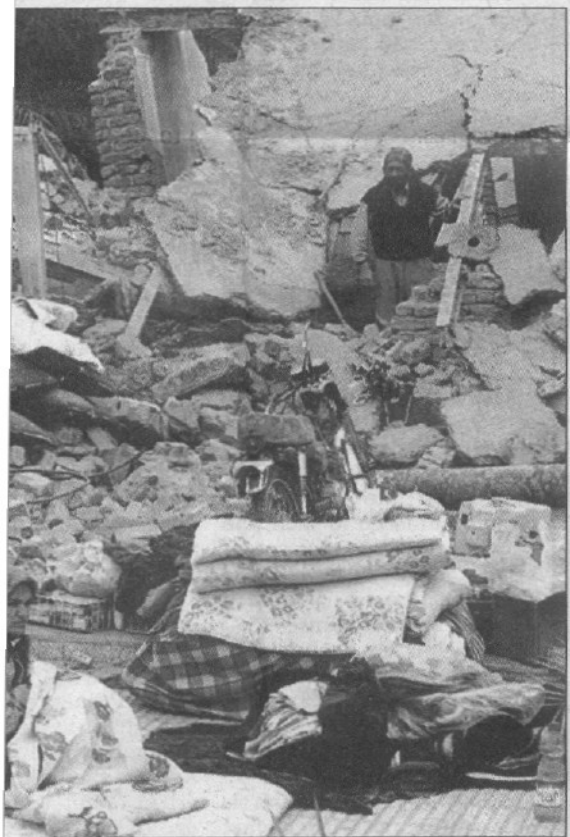
Being in the company of literates and thinkers, I caught some colour from them as I sipped a great cup of tea.

I decided to take a round of the palace and come back to rest at the tea house. I kept on the steep road entering the main complex, passing through *caravanserai*, stables and bar-

her sitting by the small window, smoking a cigarette and reading. I ordered some tea, and subsequently a pot of tea with some large cookies were served by a silent younger woman who was so docile that she seemed more like a slave than a worker! The sugar crystals had saffron in them, and

They came straight to the tea house and we had another cup of tea before leaving. It was two hours to our bus. We took the last round along the main wall of Arg, said it farewell with a desire to be back again. As soon as we came out of it, we got another lift to the town centre. We were hurrying back to bus station and I saw a

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I smiled as this was above the gate of the citadel.



ASTATION: Bam in ruins

the steep road entering the main complex, passing through *caravanserais*, stables and barracks. A steep U-turning road leads to the main palace compound. The palace was in pretty good shape. Some walls were freshly touched and didn't seem to be that old. The main rooms overlooked the whole mud city, and were quite high on the hill.

The top of the complex had a big tower and a terrace on both sides. One terrace over looked the oasis of Bam, the other terrace opened a view of the desert. It was great with warm desert winds gushing in a spectacular view of the oasis. From this height, the demarcation of the desert and oasis was clearly visible. The hills of the desert and the plains both were in sight. I climbed the tower and had a perfect 360 degree view of the whole area.

I hurried back downwards to the tea house; it was time to sit somewhere and try to absorb everything I experienced. I climbed up the stairs of the tea house and a graceful lady was sitting there reading a thick volume of some Persian book. A few dictionaries were lying on the table. It was great to see

she seemed more like a lady than a worker! The sugar crystals had saffron in them, and the date filled cookies were simply amazing.

I took my things and went to the table of the lady. She was Effat Fazlah, from Behzadi family, a rich family of Bam. She made the cookies herself and later I came to know that it is quite a famous speciality of her tea house. I saw some French magazine cuttings hanging on the walls about her cookies and tea house. It was a great couple of hours sitting there, first half of which I spent taking Effat's interview and trying to extract recipes of different Iranian dishes and bakery out of her. The rest I spent sitting by the window of the teahouse with a cup of tea overlooking the ruins of the ancient *Arge-Bam*, the whole city and the oasis in the back drop. The central mosque of the city was visible behind the green garden area of the city. Smog was hovering over the city but I didn't mind it much and was just taken away in trance.

By that time Andre and Tanja had also entered and they knew where to find me.

we got another lift to the town centre. We were hurrying back to bus station and I saw a guy getting out of his car with fresh bread in his hands. I asked him where he bought the bread from. He told me to take the bread. I tried to tell him that I didn't mean this, but he was insistent that I have to take it, he will get more. Still seeing me reluctant he pushed the bread in my hands and turned back and walked away.

This was Bam, the city that got devastated with earthquake on December 26, 2003. The beautiful small laid-back oasis town with its hospitable and nice people and a great citadel met a disaster and got razed. The city lost many of its souls, serene atmosphere and the feeling of tranquillity. Bam was one of the cities where I promised myself to be back again, and the news of this earthquake shook me off. The pictures of all the people I met there are in front of my eyes. The real loss is not the devastation of the buildings, but the death of thousands that will leave generations of Bam in mourning. ■