



# When in Iran

*By Tara Yazdan Panah*

After over four years of being away from my family in Iran, I finally had the opportunity to once again visit my homeland in May 2021. Vaccinated and feeling comfortable enough to travel, I boarded an Emirates flight to Tehran as soon as the semester ended. After landing in Imam Khomeini Airport, we first went to Qom, my family's hometown. Located around two hours away from Tehran, Qom is known as the birthplace of the Iranian Revolution. While we were there, we stayed with my 91-year-old grandma who, mashallah, still had the energy to prepare ab-goosht, a classic dish of lamb, beans, and potatoes cooked in a tomato broth. My heart had ached for her and I was incredibly grateful for our reunion.

While family was my primary reason for visiting Iran, nostalgia and exploration were no small part of the trip. I missed the tight-knit community that made every interaction—no matter how mundane—feel special. In the mornings, my mom and I would walk together to the local produce shop, bakery, and convenience store to buy fresh ingredients for our meals. These simple transactions felt more personal to me in Iran than in the United States. The same people have served the same community for decades, and you know exactly where your food comes from and the stories of the peo-

ple who are selling it to you. At the end of every transaction, a shopkeeper will say "Ghabel nadare," which means "Be my guest." The custom is to decline the offer of free merchandise, however, and instead insist on a fair price for the shopkeeper.

Since the last time I visited Qom, many new attractions had popped up. One restaurant, the Yazdanpanah Historical House, was particularly special to me. During the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, it was the home of one of my ancestors, captured by our shared name. Since then, it has been renovated and preserved as a historical traditional restaurant. At the restaurant, my mom and I shared a piece of joojeh (chicken) kabob, saffron rice, a plate of fresh herbs, and marinated olives.

A few days later, I traveled to Tehran with my mother and grandmother to visit other family members and of course, do some sightseeing. With Covid-19 case rates still high in Iran, many attractions and sites were closed, but we still made the most of our time. We went out to restaurants and cafés, including Café Naderi, Iran's oldest café that was popular among some of Iran's most famous 20th century artists and writers, such as Sadeq Hedayat and Jamal al Ahmad. We visited the Tabriz Bazaar, Tehran's largest bazaar that boasts





an array of merchandise such as rugs, copper pots, spices, and fruit. There, I bought chesm-o-nazars (evil eyes) for my friends back home.

We then took a trip up to Darband, a place I have many fond memories of from my childhood. Darband is a neighborhood carved into Tehran's mountains, where many locals love to hike, get fresh air, play backgammon, smoke hookah, and eat kabobs.

On our last day, we visited the historical home of Dr. Hesabi, one of Iran's most famous engineers and architects. The home has now been transformed to an open-air art museum displaying small-scale replicas of famous Iranian landmarks and a restaurant that serves Iranian and European foods.

Beyond seeing my family and visiting the country's sights, I missed the friendliness of Iranians—striking up conversations with random strangers, talking about our struggles and national politics, and exchanging numbers in the hope that we would one day see each other again. Within a few minutes of meeting, we cried with a glassware shopkeeper who told us about his children that were kicked out of university

for participating in the 2009 protests; he looked at me and told me that my generation was his only hope for change. We had another memorable exchange with a Kurdish man in line at the bank, who described to us his hope for a free Kurdistan, and later, unprompted, offered us a free washing machine from his appliance store, which we politely declined.

After three weeks, our trip came to an end, but I longed to stay. I tearfully said goodbye to my family and flew back to San Diego. On the bright side, I know that Iran will always be waiting for me. I would recommend that any lover of history, beautiful architecture, and delicious cuisine visit Iran at least once in their lives. Many Americans do not realize that visiting Iran is an option; while the Visa process may take longer than a trip to Europe, the wait is undoubtedly worth it.

Visiting Iran is an opportunity to change your perspective on the country; contrary to popular belief, Iranians welcome American visitors with open arms, and traveling through the country is incredibly safe. I am counting down the days until I can visit Iran once more.