



*Ayatollah Khomeini and current spiritual leader Khamenei are respected figures by most - but not all - Iranians.*



*Old but stylish woman from Sirince, Turkey.*

# Stuck In The Middle...

The Middle East is a mind-blowing adventure through history, exquisite tastes and surreal landscapes but mostly an encounter with real life characters.

Words by Akis Temperidis Photos by Vula Netu and Akis Temperidis



Geology in Cappadocia, Turkey is surreal. The minaret-like rocks around Goreme are volcanic deposits and are used as houses, depots and monasteries for centuries.





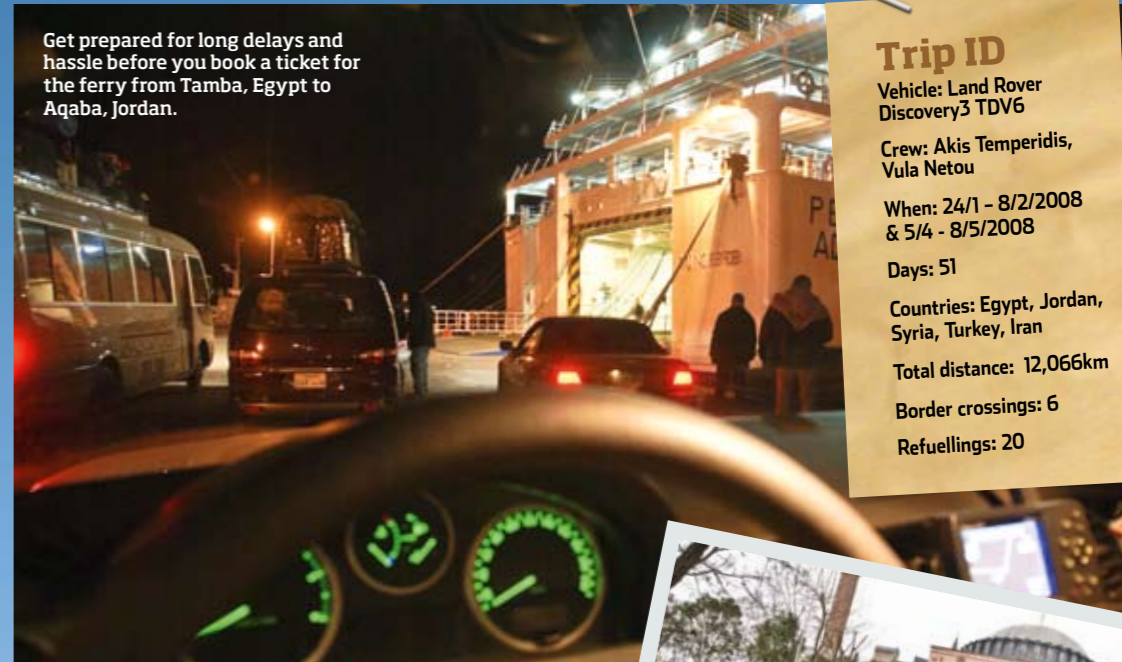
Iconic figures at Apadana hall, Persepolis, 70 km north of Shiraz.



Young students visiting Persepolis, Iran.



Hard work at Grand Bazaar of Esfahan, the most historic city of Iran. This is the perfect place to bargain for a Persian carpet.



Get prepared for long delays and hassle before you book a ticket for the ferry from Tamba, Egypt to Aqaba, Jordan.

**Trip ID**

Vehicle: Land Rover Discovery3 TDV6

Crew: Akis Temperidis, Vula Netou

When: 24/1 - 8/2/2008 & 5/4 - 8/5/2008

Days: 51

Countries: Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran

Total distance: 12,066km

Border crossings: 6

Refuellings: 20



In front of the famous Ayia Sofia basilica, Istanbul. It was like getting back to our roots here.

**T**his time we were completely lost. There aren't GPS maps for Iran, so our Garmin screen looked blank. We knew we were driving high on the Albortz Mountains but had no clue which direction to follow. We had left Masouleh, a scenic mountain village of red coloured houses near the Caspian sea and were heading to Qazvin off road. We were driving on slippery mud and were obliged to use the hill decent control system for keeping our 3.5-ton Discovery on the road. It was supposed to get dark soon and Vula was uneasy. "Don't bother", I told her, "we will camp somewhere on the roadside". She never liked the idea.

I was feeling home in Iran. Right from the start, this country proved to be extremely friendly to us despite the hostile reputation of its Islamic government to the west. I was calm despite being lost in the mountains. After a while we arrived to a small village. It was a no through road. Two young women approached us. I tried to explain to them we needed a campsite but they didn't understand. One of them invited us to her house and we accepted. We discovered the real meaning of hospitality for the rest of the night. The young lady was staying with her old parents; poor but genuine people. They offered chicken, fries and naan (Iranian flat bread) for dinner. The father smoked opium right after. His wife assisted him to burn the paste held on a skewer. By night we slept in the daughter's room. We used many woollen blankets as it was freezing outside but this was the warmest feeling we had during our trip. The girl's name was Hamide Natzaft from Dastandar. We will never forget her family.

**Salam alekum!**

Salam Alekum; "Peace be with you". Wa alekum es salam; "And upon you be peace". These are the words you learn from the moment you enter the Arabic world. Given we got there coming from Africa, Egypt seemed to be a part of the developed world for us. I remember the day we arrived in Aswan, after a 17-hour ferry trip through Lake Nasser. Everything was so different compared to Wadi Halfa, the dusty, remote town of Sudan in the Nubian desert. Egyptian roads are tarred, buildings are modern, people live in



Simple but hearty dinner is the ultimate culinary experience when offered by genuine people, Iran.



**“ This country proved to be extremely friendly to us despite the hostile reputation. ”**

Off-road driving is limited but rewarding in Cappadocia, Turkey



Driving on the remote Alborz Mountains was the perfect way to discover real Iran.



Hijab, the dress code for Muslim women, is a state law in Iran.



You are mostly welcome in Iran.



Don't miss a balloon flight over Cappadocia "fairy chimneys".



Fesh-fesh, the powder gravel of the Nubian desert proved to be the nemesis for the electric handbrake of our Discovery.

### Driving tips

If you plan to drive in the Middle East get ready for the worst. Drivers are notorious in most countries and bureaucracy frustrating. Fuel is bloody cheap though and you can easily find a good mechanic anywhere.

**EGYPT:** Carnet de Passage obligatory. Entering the country, you may spend a whole day getting through customs procedures. You need to insure the car to get issued a local plate for about \$AU220. Drivers are reckless, defy traffic lights, rarely use lights by night and have badly kept cars. They are always alert though. Traffic is hell in the big cities and most traffic lights don't work. Fuel is bloody cheap (diesel: \$AU0.20/litre) but of bad quality. "Solar" is the name for diesel at the pumps.

**JORDAN:** Entering the country is straightforward with a Carnet but you need to buy local insurance. Drivers are much better but traffic is still chaos in Amman. Diesel costs about \$AU0.5/litre. Stations are frequent.

**SYRIA:** Carnet de Passage obligatory - no check for insurance. Traffic conditions similar to Egypt but drivers are a little bit better. Entering the country you will be asked, "benzin or diesel?" If you drive a diesel you will get charged \$US100 per week of driving, as the fuel is subsidised. The price of diesel is the same as Egypt. Often you have to be in a line to refuel but locals always give priority to any foreign car.

**TURKEY:** Carnet de Passage optional. You need Green Card insurance. Custom procedures are straightforward. Expect a quick luggage check. Drivers and roads are getting better year by year but still safety is an issue. Istanbul has high tech traffic lights with a timer. You can cross Turkey practically by highway from Syria to Greece but travel is costly; Turkey has the most expensive fuel in the world - at times exceeding \$AU3.50/litre!

**IRAN:** Carnet obligatory and Green Card (European) is valid here. Roads are wide and decently maintained but drivers are aggressive and restless at times. They respect traffic lights but not all the other rules. Fuel is incredibly cheap; you could buy seven litres of petrol or 40 litres of diesel for \$AU1. Petrol stations are state business and exclusive to petrol or diesel. Border stations don't refuel outgoing cars with foreign plates. Normally you need coupons to buy fuel but locals will help you get through this.

“ We were obliged to use the hill decent control system for keeping our Discovery on the road. ”

apartments, markets are lively and fragrant and fast food restaurants are plenty. Driving along the Nile route needs to be done in a convoy - a safety measure taken by the government after a bloody terrorist attack in Luxor. If you want to go from Aswan to Cairo you need to be at the outskirts of the town at 8am or 2pm, stay in line with hundreds of tour buses and then follow the police patrol through the traffic, at 120-130km/h! This is a crazy concept. The convoy is a perfect target for any bomb loaded fanatic but this is Egypt, a country of crazy rules. Of crazy people too! At every step somebody approaches you on the road with a different proposal; to show you his art shop, take you for a ride in a felucca (the classic sail boat on the Nile) or invite you to taste "for free" the best chawarma (doner kebab) in town. The 'avoid tourist places' rule is not valid in Egypt. Everything is about tourists here and how can you skip sites like Luxor, Giza or Abu Simbel? But don't get frustrated. Street vendors are real characters. They do this for a living but it is like a theatre of life and you, as a visitor, are starring as well. Just play your role calmly, take nothing personally and you will have fun. Egyptians like women and they will often ask for yours, offering camels and goats. This is their favourite game with foreigners.

Egypt is built along the Nile. Far from the river that supported ancient Egyptian civilisation in a way that changed human history, this is a desert country. You feel the contrast when you escape traffic locked Cairo and drive through the

Suez Canal. In one hour you get from the craziness of 16 million souls to the remoteness of the Sinai desert.

Sinai is a holy land and has been a battlefield during the six days war. It offers majestic beaches and world class diving. It is famous for St Catherine orthodox monastery and the bombings at Sharm El Seikh resort. We spent one night among the monks instead of staying at a resort before leaving the country. We had to get through the complicated customs procedures and clear our car first. Nobody spoke English at the port of Tamba and there were no guidelines. Given our no bribing policy we spent half a day getting the exit stamp on our Carnet de Passage. At the end I was so pissed off that I yelled angrily to a poor police officer; "I will never, never come to your country again!" He laughed understandably. I didn't mean it actually...

#### Land of hospitality

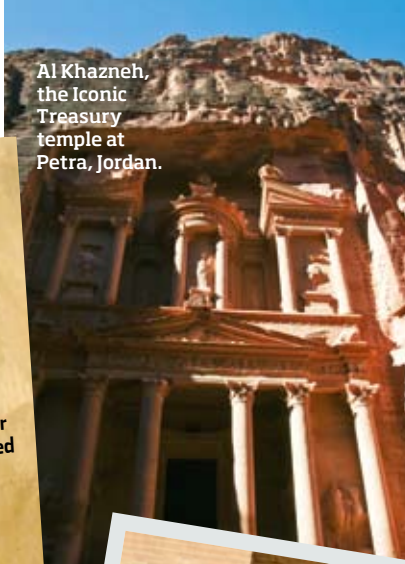
Many people are afraid of the Middle East. They consider it a hostile environment because of the explosive politics and frequent conflicts in the area. Travelling here is not only about the excellent cuisine, the breathtaking landscapes, the vibrant markets and the historic monuments, it is mostly about people. Don't believe stereotypes about the behaviour of Muslims. We spent nearly two months in the region and we never had a negative reaction from locals. We can only recall open-hearted people. Like the Bedouin family at Wadi



Meeting the ultimate 4x4 at Wadi Rum, Jordan.



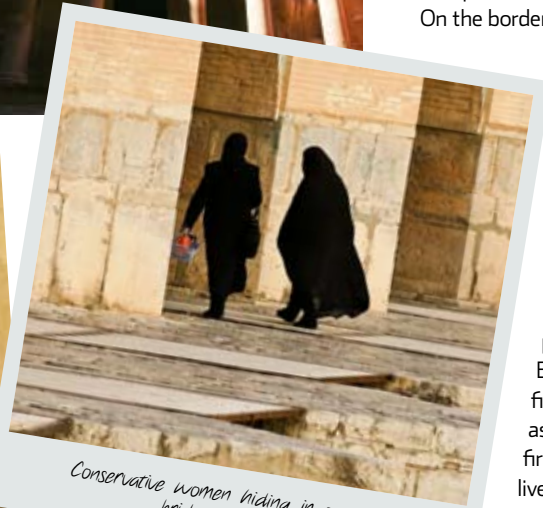
Al Khazneh, the Iconic Treasury temple at Petra, Jordan.



## Muslim code

You will have a warm welcome and full respect by locals given that you respect some basic rules

- Respect people's time of prayer. Sunni Muslims pray five times a day. Any business you have with a local will be interrupted at the time of prayer.
- Never use your left hand to touch your food or somebody else. Left hand is used for your personal hygiene only.
- Men don't shake hands with women, especially in Iran.
- Iranians are mostly Shia Muslim and don't pray five times a day.
- Couples often will be asked if you are married and have children. It's better to declare so even if not, to avoid possible harassment by young men.
- Foreign women should cover their hair and curves by law in Iran
- Everywhere in the Middle East, exposed flesh is to be avoided and modest dress code will be appreciated. Keep handy a light, colourful veil. Men shouldn't enter a mosque with short pants.
- Always take off your shoes before entering a mosque or other religious site.
- In Iran "Taarof" - a code of cordiality - is the essence of everyday life. You may get invited for dinner, you may be offered goods for free but most of the time this is just a cordial gesture. So, don't accept a proposal if the local doesn't insist two or three times. After that, you know the proposal is real.
- Be prepared for slow service and harsher manners by locals during Ramadan (month of Muslim fast).
- Don't hide your religion. Christians are welcome everywhere.



Conservative women hiding in one of the bridges of Esfahan.

Rum who offered us breakfast in the desert. Or the Syrian biker who escorted us through the hectic traffic of Damascus and found us a cheap hotel, after he offered us hot konafah (a delicious fried dessert with ricotta cheese) on the road. Another Syrian, of Armenian origins, in Aleppo left his company and spent half a day just to find a local workshop where they could clean our diesel filter. In Turkey, we were welcomed enthusiastically, especially when they realised we were 'Yunani' - Greeks. We were offered free kebabs or coffee more than once and one night, the mayor of Ulalar in Anatolia, arranged for us to camp safely in the municipal garage. We realised that we were positively discriminated despite the chronic political issues between Turkey and Greece.

On the border of Iran a police officer enthusiastically helped us clear our car through customs. They just checked if we carried alcohol, but we didn't. Vula was already wearing her red scarf and looked pretty in it and respectful to the Hijab dress code. Hijab is enforced by the Iranian constitution that is written according to the sharia - the Islamic law. Iranians are shia Muslims but are not Arabs, so don't consider calling them so. They will be offended. Generally they are noble people with values of life lost in the west. Everybody wants to be your friend there. Our first friend was a teacher who helped us refuel as we didn't have the essential coupons. Our first night in Tabriz - where we camped in a lively municipal park - we made more friends; students who were taking pictures of us from their cell phones and were curious to know more about the world. For the next three weeks we



Waking up in the wild - this is the best part of our trip.



## The World Off Road Pt 3

Our brand new BF Goodrich A/T were a match for the muddy roads of northern Iran.



*Bedouin beauty!*

had more invitations than in any other country. Thanks to the genuine hospitality of the locals and the ridiculous price of diesel, our trip through Iran was the cheapest overall. We spent \$AU70 per week! We were sleeping anywhere as this is one of the safest countries. One night, in Qazvin, our fancy Land Rover was parked in a little park next to a central avenue. A police officer stopped for a check at 2am. He was apologetic for waking me up and when I asked him if he considered our campsite safe he told me; "sleep good, very safe. Iran safe, no terrorist!"

The gentle policeman was not the only one who wanted to fix the bad reputation of this country. Every Iranian wanted to know what we thought about it. It is a pity because these people practically can't travel, so they feel isolated. For conservative Iranians, the Mullah regime doesn't feel

oppressive. They have a decent life, good principles, safety and good education for men and women. Young people, though, are those who feel they can't breathe. We met some courageous students in Yazd who were pretty outspoken. This is the generation that protested during the last elections. They were speaking for freedom of speech, love and travel – the basic values they miss. We felt guilty after meeting some bright young Iranians. We can travel, write and speak freely. We dance, drink and choose our partners with no restrictions. They have only the national sport of Iran, which is picnic, by day or by night.

Heading to the border of Pakistan we felt we would miss this region – formerly called Mesopotamia - which is considered more a battlefield than the cradle of civilisation that it is. We stayed one night in Bam – a town that was devastated by an earthquake in 2004 – and proceeded to Zahedan, through the notorious Sistan – Balochistan region. We were escorted by gentle police officers all the way to the border that was closed after 3pm. We should stay one more night in "no man's land" on the frontier between Middle East and Central Asia. We camped next to a blue mosque. God willing, we should enter Pakistan tomorrow and hopefully survive it. Inshallah, as the people of this region say. 🇵🇰

*Next month...  
It's time for the ultimate cultural shock as  
the couple cross Pakistan and enter India.*



Living in a family is easy in Iran. This is the most hospitable country in the world by far!