

# ROUTE FOR A CAUSE

Exploring Azerbaijan and Iran for friendship's sake. Hormazd Sorabjee drives past perceptions and stereotypes, on a road less travelled.

PHOTOGRAPHY HORMAZD SORABJEE

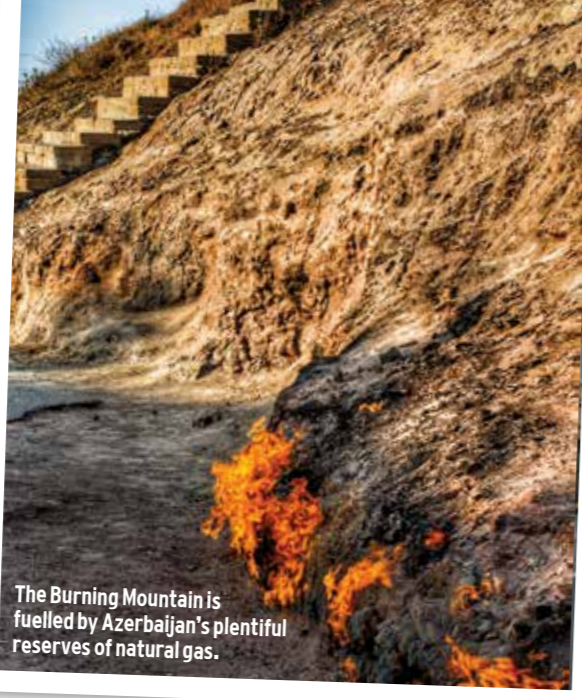


**W**ords of caution from family and friends ranged from ‘Are you sure it’s safe?’ to a milder ‘Be careful’ and the explicit ‘Have you gone mad?’ when I informed them of my plan to drive across Iran. You can’t blame them, really. The perception of Iran is that of a deeply hostile nation in a controversial nuclear pursuit, with a dim view of personal rights. I have to admit, I too had visions of being hauled up for committing a transgression I wasn’t aware of. For anyone who hasn’t been to Iran, it’s this imagery that makes a lasting – and concerning – impression. But it’s an impression that’s rather misplaced.

Iran is the most wrongly characterised country I’ve been to. It’s a warm, welcoming place with a young, trendy population that is more free-spirited and open than I ever imagined. From the moment I was greeted with a ‘Welcome to Iran’ in perfect English by a smiling immigration officer, all the stereotypes and doubts I had harboured about the country were shredded and tossed into the Caspian Sea.

Sure, this is an Islamic state so there are restrictions. Men can’t wear shorts and women have to be conservatively attired, and strictly enforced is the wearing of a *chador* or headscarf, though it can be loosely worn. Most social media sites are blocked and alcohol is completely banned. Stay within these boundaries set by the current government, though, and you’ll be fine.

In a rather unconventional mode of entry, I had driven into Iran from neighbouring Azerbaijan. This went with the similarly unconventional theme of the occasion – the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) Friendship Rally, a once-in-a-lifetime mega road trip of 18



The Burning Mountain is fuelled by Azerbaijan’s plentiful reserves of natural gas.

Mahindra SUVs and 50 people, made possible by the governments of India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, the Kalinga Motor Sports Club (KMSC) and Mahindra.

**A COUNTRY OF CONTRASTS**

The INSTC, India’s counter to China’s grandiose One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, is an old trade route, which India wants to re-establish. The route, which takes three weeks less than regular shipping channels, bypasses China (and Pakistan, of course) via a sea route to Iran, from where a network of roads and railways transport goods as far north as St. Petersburg in Russia. So, what better way than an 11,000km car rally to prove the INSTC’s credentials of fast connectivity?



Our 18-SUV convoy powers through some splendid cityside architecture in Baku.



Baku offers an incredible blend of the eras, perfectly depicted by the old town set against the Flame Tower trio.

The rally started in earnest from Bandar Abbas in Iran, went to St. Petersburg and returned to the Iranian port. The trip included a small detour on the way back, to Chabahar, a strategic port in Iran that India is developing and is technically the start point of the land route on the INSTC.

On the return leg, from Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, to Shiraz in Iran, is where I joined the rally. I hadn’t been to either country before, so that explains why I opted for this 1,800km leg.

Again, I didn’t know much about Azerbaijan, except that it was a former Soviet state with lots of oil and gas, and that it hosts a Formula 1 race to gain First World credibility. It’s a fascinating country of contrasts and contradictions, which



Omnipresent Ladas reveal Azerbaijan’s Soviet past.

is evident the moment you land at Baku’s swanky international airport. Immigration is quick and efficient, although, once past it, you do have to bargain hard with the taxi driver since there’s no metered or set rate.

The architecture, too, is an intriguing mix of old and new, European and Asian. There are still eyesores from the Soviet bloc era, but the new buildings have a classical West European style and are stunning works of architecture. Take a stroll down the narrow streets of the old town and you’ll think you’ve gone back in time, to a medieval Asian village. That is, until you look up to see Baku’s most spectacular →



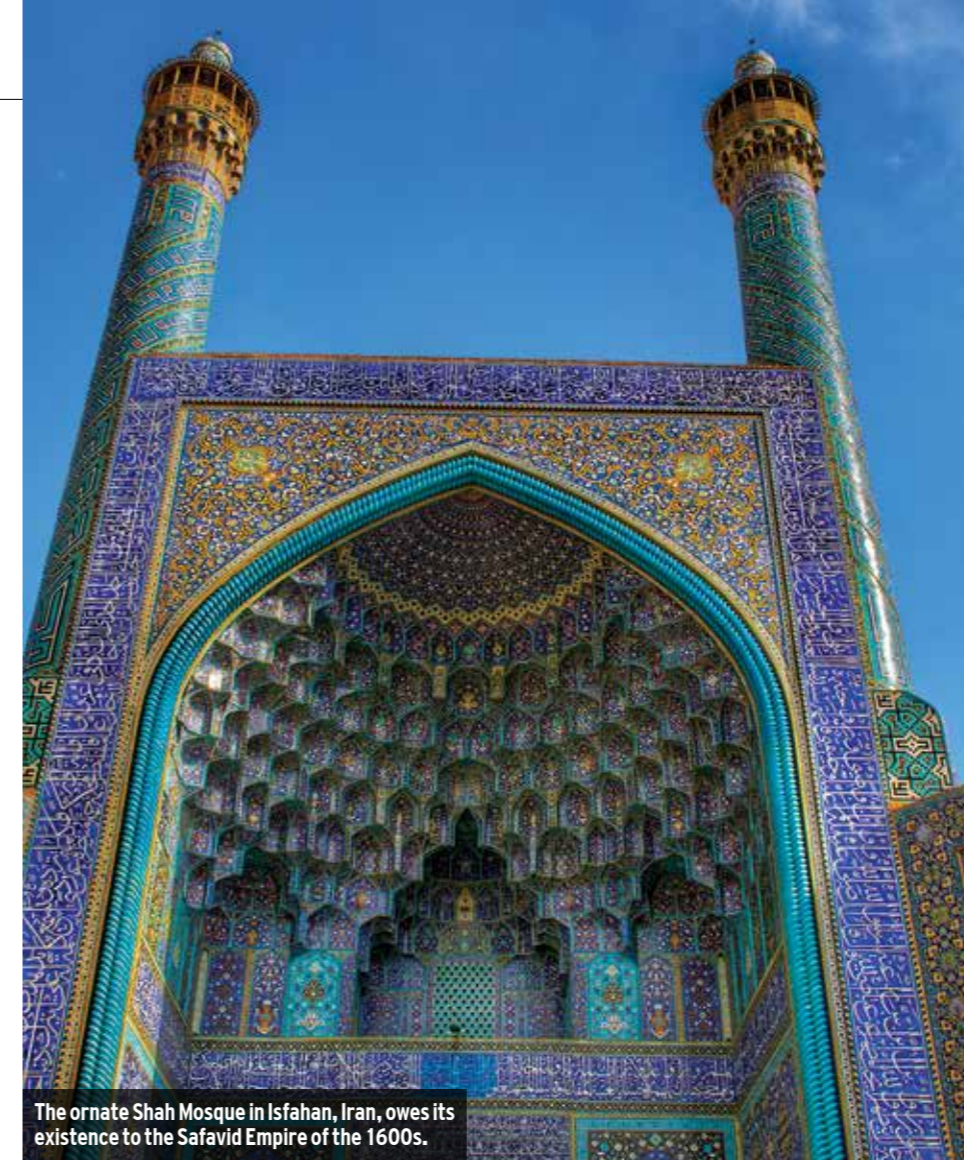
One among Azerbaijan’s 1,000 imported London taxis.



A Mercedes-Benz W124 E-class’ boxy lines help display a rug seller’s wares.



The Scorpio looks purposeful against the resplendent architecture of the Golestan Palace in Iran.



The ornate Shah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, owes its existence to the Safavid Empire of the 1600s.



Ramesh Mahapatra, head of KMSC, the man behind the rally.

Strolling through the streets of this innocuous town so far removed from home, I couldn't believe my ears when I heard a Bollywood number being belted out of an old W210 E-class. Hindi movies are hugely popular in this part of the world and so are Bollywood stars. Surprisingly, the love for Bollywood is just as strong in conservative Iran, which we were to enter the next day.

**IRONY, AND MORE, IN IRAN**

Land border crossings are a test of patience. Border officials not only have to check passports, but also car documents and affiliated permits. That said, the Azeri officials at the Astara border cleared us – that's 50 people and 18 cars – in a little over two hours, which wasn't too bad, and we were finally on our way to Iran.

A few hundred metres of no man's land and a stream spanned by a small bridge is all that separates Azerbaijan and Iran. Before we reach the checkpoint, we are asked to keep our passports handy and the women in our group are reminded to wear their headscarves. Entering Iran →



The INSTC Friendship Rally gets flagged off in Baku.

← sight – the full-glass trio of Flame Towers layered with an LED display to resemble flames. The cars in Azerbaijan tell their own story. Never have I seen a greater concentration of Mercedes anywhere. Mercs are hugely popular among image-conscious Azeris, although very few can afford the new Mercs thanks to the punitive import duties on cars. Hence, the majority of Mercedes in Azerbaijan are over 20 years old, and popular models are the E-class of W124, W210 and W211 vintage and the W202 and W203 C-class. Most are pretty beat up, but for their owners, the star on the hood is all that matters. Soviet-era legacy still lingers in Azerbaijan, so it was hardly surprising to know that the

most common cars on the roads are Ladas. The ubiquitous 'Zhiguli' – essentially a Russian-made Lada made from the 1960s to the early 1990s – seemed to once be the 'people's car' here. Today, Azerbaijan's oil-rich economy has been growing and along with it, new car sales. In 2017, Hyundai overtook Lada to become the top carmaker and its Korean sibling Kia, too, is quite popular here. The price of a litre of diesel is 0.60 Manat, which in our money is Rs 24, while petrol is a corresponding Rs 36. You won't wince filling up your tank here; but, quite honestly, for a country that has a surplus of oil and gas, I expected prices to be a bit cheaper. It's this surplus of natural gas oozing out of the ground – some of which burns perpetually – that gives Azerbaijan its name, which means 'Land of Fire.' An incredible phenomenon is the Yanar Dag, or Burning Mountain, where you can see a porous layer of sandstone spectacularly spit out flames. It's no wonder, then, that Azerbaijan also has an ancient fire temple built by the Zoroastrians who arrived here from India. The Ateshgah has an eternal fire that was fed by natural gas until oil exploration cut the supply. The fire still burns today but is lit by piped gas. Sightseeing over, it was time to get down to business – behind the wheel, that is. Our convoy of 18 Mahindras lined up at the magnificent Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center in Baku was a

sight to behold. It's a truly stunning piece of architecture with its waved roofs and flowing structure. With this iconic building as the backdrop, there couldn't be a grander venue for a flag-off. Credit for this goes to the jovial Ramesh Mahapatra, head of KMSC and the leader of the rally who pulled out all the stops and ensured that this event received VIP treatment. Our convoy of Mahindras thundered down the streets of Baku, which included a section of the F1 circuit, led by a police escort all the way to the border. The first stop was Lankaran, a sleepy town on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The 280km drive hugged the coast of the Caspian Sea for the most part and was one of the prettiest roads of the trip.



American muscle cars in Iran? It can happen!



The Saipa Saba, an '80s Kia Pride, is a common sight.



The '60s Hillman Hunter-based Paykan, dubbed as the HM Ambassador of Iran, became its national car.



Tehran's traffic jams feature lots of Peugeot 405 cabs. The last Shah, unsurprisingly, had a fleet of bulletproof 600 Pullmans; the 300 SL roadster was for wife, Farah Diba.



The staggering scale of Persepolis showcases the majestic Achaemenid empire that thrived 2,500 years ago.



Exquisite engravings in Persepolis are captivating.

← was a bit of an anti-climax, in the sense that it was easy and entirely hassle-free. No doubt, Ramesh and team had prepped the border offices for our arrival, but I didn't expect 18 cars – all packed to the roof with luggage – to be let through without even a cursory examination. In fact, what delayed us was an argument between the Iranian motorsport federation officials and the touring body over who would escort us out!

It was 1pm by the time we hit the road again. Tehran, our stop that day, was 500km away, which meant our drive would stretch long into the night. What delayed us further was a stop for lunch and an impromptu meeting with a group of sportscar owners who turned up in Mustangs and Camaros! Not something you expect from people in a country that's supposed to be anti-America. That's another theory debunked, then.

I'm sharing an XUV500 with Venky Muthiah and Shailendra Bhensali and take the driver's seat for the night drive. Passing Rasht, I can see the outlines of mountains in the night sky; we are surely missing some spectacular scenery in the dark. The XUV500 settles into a steady cruise in sixth gear and I rarely need to downshift thanks to the torquey mHawk engine. Venky's USB still plays 'Hotel California' for the umpteenth time, but I'm not complaining. There's something relaxing about listening to The Eagles on a long, tiring drive.

It's 1am now, and we are still a good 100km from Tehran and motorway traffic is surprisingly high. I am told that most people travel by car, as it is the easiest and cheapest way to get around. It is, therefore, no surprise that Iran is a pretty big car market, and approximately under a million cars are sold here annually. That is, however, a big fall after the peak of over one and a half million units in 2011. Clearly, the economic sanctions have hit the economy hard.

Sanctions, along with Trump's nuclear deal pullout, have decimated the value of the local currency too. At the official rate of 41,000 Rials

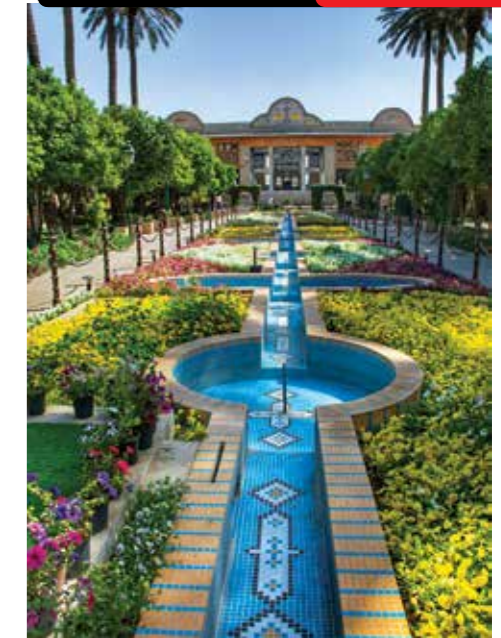
to the dollar, all it takes is 25 dollars for you to become a millionaire here! That's a lot of zeroes to deal with, and, confusingly, there are many places that list prices in Toman, the earlier currency, which is 10 Rial. You have to learn to count carefully especially since you can only use cash here; foreign credit cards don't work.

The next morning we get our full taste of bumper-to-bumper Tehran traffic, which is chaotic and a free-for-all, with scant regard for rules – pretty much like in India. Driving to the Golestan Palace from our hotel, we have to contend with taxi drivers cutting us left and right, four-up riders with no helmets on bikes darting between our convoy, and, on one occasion, a Peugeot driver chopping across four lanes to take an exit he almost missed.

Driving in Tehran also gives you a feel of the car market, which seems stuck in time. There's a strong history of local production by state-owned carmakers like Iran Khodro, which has a market share of over 40 percent, but the main models produced are ancient, like the popular Saipa Saba, which is essentially a late 1980s Kia Pride. The old Peugeot 405, still manufactured by Pars Khodro, is one of the most popular cars, especially amongst cabbies, and I must say that even after nearly 30 years, this handsome



▲ Dry fruits are available in plentiful everywhere you go in Iran.



▼ The Pink Mosque's stunning winter prayer hall features stained glass in prominence.

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Tehran is a buzzing city with vibrant people who are proud of their heritage, and rightly so.  
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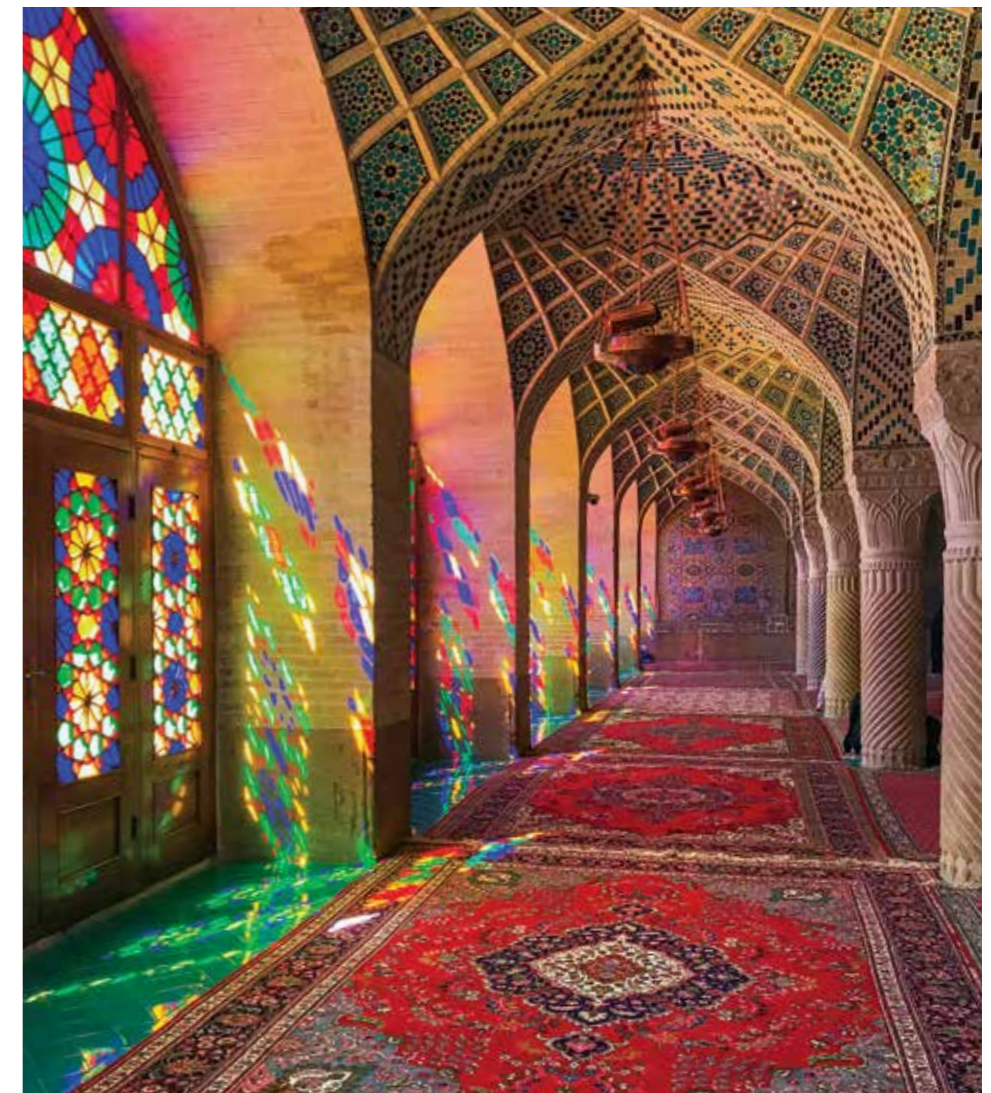
Pininfarina design still looks good. Chinese carmakers like Chery and Brilliance, not quite affected by the economic sanctions imposed by the west, are gaining in popularity too and account for 15 percent of production.

Tehran also opened our eyes to the culture of Iran. This is a buzzing city with vibrant people who are proud of their heritage and rightly so. And when you see the palaces and monuments, which are stunningly beautiful (just like Iranian women), you understand why Iran is more evolved as a society.

A bonus for me was the last Shah of Iran's car collection, preserved in the Saadabad Palace Complex. His fleet of Rolls-Royce Phantoms (IV and Vs), and bulletproof Mercedes 600 Pullmans still look like new, but what caught my eye was the pastel yellow Mercedes 300SL Roadster of Farah Diba – clearly a woman of taste.

**CHEAP THRILLS**

It's a long 450km drive to Isfahan and the landscape, as we cut through the central desert, turns stark and bleak. The highways are largely wide, smooth and arrow- straight, but the surface can get a bit patchy and uneven. I'm pleasantly surprised at how well signposted the roads are, and that too in English, which reduces the →



Pasargad	210km
Naqsh e Rostam	270km
Persepolis	280km



A lavish meal spread at Iran's dhaba equivalent.

← worry of getting lost. And even if you do, Google Maps works perfectly well here.

It wasn't so easy for travellers thousands of years ago, who used the same route as us. We pass the ruins of several caravanserais along the highway, which were at one time, the watering holes for ancient caravans that moved at a glacial pace of 40km a day. That's a distance we will cover in around 20min in our Scorpions, cruising at the official speed limit of 110kph.

Speeding is risky in Tehran, and on several occasions, we came across traffic police who had their radar guns aimed at us. With the road accident rate shooting up in Iran, the police are cracking down on errant drivers and one from our team was pulled for talking on

his mobile while driving. Except that he was not the driver but the

Fuel prices double at regular market rates - still just Rs 9.5 a litre!



“ Caravanserai ruins line the highway as we cruise past at 110kph - ancient caravans did the same route at 40km a day. ”



Iran's highways are lined with helpful signposts in English, but Google Maps works just as well.

passenger. The right-hand-drive Mahindras had confused the cops!

After a typically long lunch, I've moved into the Scorpio with the evergreen Ejji Umamahesh who keeps me entertained and alert with some fascinating stories of his road trips across the world. I've always had a soft spot for the Scorpio, despite some of its flaws. But that punchy mid-range, high seating position and fantastic view all round gives a special sense of power. It's an effortless cruiser and the well-weighted steering, uncorrupted by drive shafts in the front, feels nicer than the XUV500's. The only issue is the relatively small 60-litre fuel tank, which calls for frequent refuelling.

This brings me to the painfully cheap fuel prices in Iran. Using the government quota of 150 litres a day, you pay 300 Toman (3,000 Rials) - which at the official exchange rate works out to Rs 4.7 a litre! That's free! We paid the regular market rates, which is double, but I'm not complaining. Even at 600 Toman (6,000 Rials), that's a ridiculous Rs 9.5 per litre! A bottle of mineral water costs the equivalent of Rs 15, by the way.

We arrive in Isfahan well in time for a wander around in the Naqsh-e Jahan Square. The Imam mosque is another spectacular piece of architecture, but what I enjoyed most was soaking in the convivial atmosphere in this massive square where families and friends come to hang out.

Isfahan is also the place to buy a carpet, and after some intense haggling, I walked away with a beautiful silk rug.

The day ended with a delicious meal at the highly rated Shahrzad restaurant with Venky and Shailender. After the small lunch we had and a long drive, the three of us were ravenous and worked up a bill of 1.25 million Rials. That's just Rs 1,300, in case you were worried.

The food in Iran is simple but really tasty, although the vegetarians in our group did have a hard time. Lamb and chicken kebabs, along with rice, salads, yogurt and the famous Iranian bread is pretty much the standard fare. Fish is rarely eaten and pork is banned. The food tends to get monotonous, though, and by the end of the trip I was 'kebabled out' and craving for some spicy curry.

### PAST, PRESENT AND PERSIA

Our group unanimously agrees to skip lunch the next day and with good reason. It's the day we are visiting the magnificent ruins of Persepolis and everyone wants to get as much time as possible at one of the greatest archaeological

wonders of the world. The sense of excitement is palpable and for me, Persepolis has long been on my bucket list because this is the place my forefathers could have come from.

Driving to Persepolis, you can see in the distance the 20m-high columns looming into view, which gives you a sense of the incredible scale of the ancient city. Once dubbed the 'wealthiest city under the sun', Persepolis was a majestic showcase of the Achaemenid Empire that thrived 2,500 years ago. Walking through

the ruins I was captivated by the engravings and reliefs that have been carved with exquisite detail.

I thought nothing could better Persepolis for me - for its sheer history and significance, it definitely tops my list. But what stole my heart was Shiraz, my last stop in Iran.

Shiraz has a vibe unlike any other Iranian city. It's young, more liberal and has beautiful gardens. Monuments like the fabulous Pink Mosque have so much colour to offer, and even simple things like a water fountain are a work of art.

It's in Shiraz that I drove what can be dubbed as the HM Ambassador of Iran. The Paykan (meaning 'Arrow' - would you believe!) was made by Iran Khodro from 1967 to 2005 and became the country's national car. Based on a 1960s Hillman Hunter, it got modified along the way and there was even a pick-up version of it. There are lot of Paykans around but almost all of them are falling apart. The car I drove had 4,54,000km on the clock and was awful to drive. The wheezy 1.6 petrol engine whined like a spoiled child and the gearshift felt like a piece of granite in a pot of glue. The suspension wasn't too bad, and, I have to say, I would still rate the Amby as the worse car to drive.

Those 10 days in Iran have changed my perceptions of the country forever. It's a beautiful place with beautiful people and the only thing dangerous about it is, well, the driving! **AI**



You know you're in Iran when dinner for three totals up to over a million Rials! That translates to Rs 1,300, by the way.