

## TAKING TO THE VEIL

Iran has only just opened its borders to western tourism. In recent years, as the storm of the Islamic Revolution has gradually subsided, there has been a thawing of hostility towards many of Iran's old infidel enemies. Britain, which was declared public enemy N° 1 during the Revolution – above even the Soviet Union and America – has been relegated to a much more comfortable position near the bottom of the pile, and there is now a full working British embassy in Teheran.

There is a sense amongst Iranians that their country in general and Muslim fundamentalism in particular have been misunderstood by the West, and efforts to encourage tourism from Europe are, in part at least, a well-orchestrated public relations exercise.

Travelling to Iran is more than just a lesson in history. It is an education in manners and Muslim culture: a challenge for Western women in particular, which requires an initial suspension of judgement and a great deal of patience.

In the airports, hotels and restaurants there are unequivocal reminders: "In the name of Allah, respectful women are requested to observe Islamic hijab at all times."

We were issued on arrival with the mandatory Iranian manteau – a sort of outsize raincoat in brown, grey or black, with foam-padded shoulders and gigantic buttons. Beneath this we were to wear long skirts and dresses – jeans at a pinch – with dark tights or socks, irrespective of the fact that the weather that can reach up to 40° in July.

Sunglasses, jewellery, nail varnish and perfume were all consigned to the realms of wistful nostalgia. Because what counts in Iran is conformity, not self-expression.

But oddly enough, the initial reaction of the women in our group was one of relief. Although, admittedly, there were factors at work which made the idea of rebellion about as appealing as an argument with the Ayatollah.

While we were made personally, and often quite touchingly, welcome by the local people themselves, there was still an underlying antipathy towards the West. In Teheran there were entire buildings painted like a send-up of the American flag, with human skulls replacing the stars, and trails of exocet missiles instead of stripes. And in the international hotels, over reception the words: "Down with the USA!" were screwed to the wall in polished brass.

But out on the street everyone woman was dressed as we were. Some had even gone one step further and adopted the traditional *chador*, a sheet of black cloth that drapes the body from head to toe, giving the impression of a giant, flapping jackdaw.

It was unexpectedly liberating to be able to dress without thinking. And by the time my headscarf had become an integral part of my psyche (I even wore it unwittingly one evening while on my own in my hotel room), I began to think what a relief it was to forget the whole question of physical attraction. In Teheran, a woman can walk down the street without a leer or a wolf-whistle, without a sideways glance at yourself in a shop window, without a sneaky appraisal of the competition. Quite suddenly –and quite refreshingly – you are sexless.

The novelty, needless to say, lasted only a couple of days. And by the time we reached the desert, I was growing hot and sweaty under my scarf and I'd laddered five pairs of tights for the sake of rendering respectable the three inches of leg above my ankle. I felt depressed when I saw myself in the mirror every morning looking like a reverent mother superior, and dreamed at night in vivid, bright colours. But more than that, I felt invisible. We are what we wear in the West.

The *chador* proves to be a garment designed by a sadistic genius. With no buttons or fasteners of any kind, it has to be held together under the chin from inside with one hand, carefully covering the hairline, while the other arm is covered in yards of material. In the course of their everyday life, *chador*-wearers have to negotiate buses and shops with only one spare hand to carry their bags and marshal their children – a bit like juggling with their hands tied.

Wearing a *chador* felt like looking at life from inside a letterbox. After two weeks of the hejab, despite the wonders we had seen in Iran, it was time to go back to the hustle and bustle of the West. And for all my inadequacies, I wanted my body back.

I was not prepared, though, for the culture shock awaiting me in reverse. I felt an involuntary twinge of nakedness at the departure gate as the Iranian official studied the bareheaded photo in my passport.

The West, all of a sudden, seemed like Sodom and Gomorrah, and I, a recalcitrant Jezebel.

(Adapted from an article by Isabelle Tree, published in the *Sunday Times* (Travel Supplement), 05.02.1995)

### **Vocabulary**

to thawing

manteau

outsize

foam-padded shoulders

at a pinch

tights (a pair of tight)

send-up, n. (to send s.o. or sthg. ip)

brass

unwittingly (Cfr. wittingly < wit)

to leer

sneaky

to ladder (< ladder, n.)

garment

fastener (< to fasten, Cfr. fast)

to juggle

hustle and bustle

twinge

bareheaded (< bare, Cfr. barefooted)