

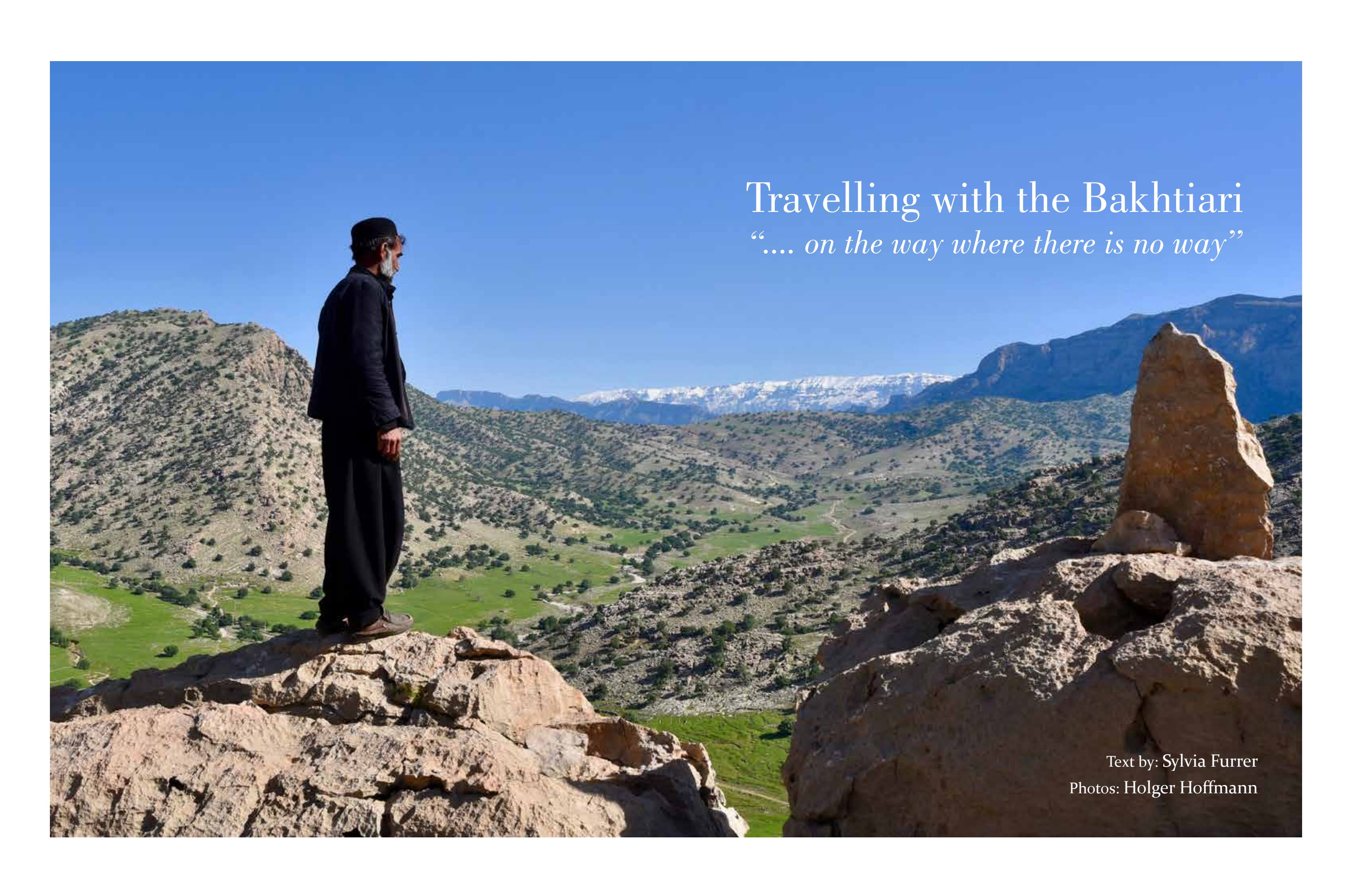
# T IMELESS Travels

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*Travelling with the  
Bakhtairi*

FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART



Travelling with the Bakhtiari  
*“... on the way where there is no way”*

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In 1925, *Grass - A Nation's Battle for Life* was first shown in American cinemas. This silent movie is one of the earliest ethnographic documentaries and was the first film made by the team of Cooper and Schoedsack, who went on to make *King Kong* in 1933 and many other films. In this dramatic black and white documentary, they show how 50,000 Persian Bakhtiari nomads and their flocks crossed the Zagros Mountains in search of grass, i.e. juicy grazing grounds. They crossed several rugged mountain ranges with passes of up to 10,000 ft high, raging rivers and finally the massive Zard Kuh at 14,920 ft the highest peak in the Zagros Mountains.

**ALL THE WORLD'S AFOOT – ON THE MOVE TO GRASS!**

From the 13th century onwards, the Bakhtiari have been migrating each year in April and October between the high plateau pastures of Chahar Mahaal and the 300 km distant plain in northeastern Chuzestan with their flocks of goats, sheep and cattle. Their migration – in Persian “kuč” – is one of the most spectacular forms of pastoralism worldwide. The migration takes 15 to 45 days and must be planned with the utmost care so as to minimize the risk of unexpected snowfall, mountain river floods and lack of grazing. In spite of this, the kuč always demands a high tribute. The nomads often have accidents and lose livestock as they climb snow-covered trails and travel through rocky ravines. They cross raging rivers during the snowmelt with their animals by floating or on rafts of inflated goat skins.

The two cameramen Cooper and Schoedsack and the travel journalist Marguerite Harrison

were the first Westerners to accompany the Bakhtiari on their human and animal-challenging migration. In 1976, more than fifty years later, Anthony Howarth's documentary “People of the Wind” showed a virtually unchanged image of the arduous kuč, only



Previous pages: The Bakhtiari's gaze wanders over the fertile valley bordered by the snow covered Zagros Mountains

Left: A typically dressed Bakhtiari nomad in black and with the woollen keyboard patterned jackets

Above: A nomadic tent, traditionally made of woven wool and protected from wind and sun by a magnificent oak



this time with sound and color. However, the film mentions that there are already roads on which family members and their moving goods can reach the new grazing grounds. Almost 100 years later we follow the footsteps of the filmmakers. Our aim is to get an idea of how the nomadic life of the Bakhtiari has changed since the first film portrait.

Locating the nomads in this huge mountain range is not easy. We first look in Chelgerd. Though it is already late April, the mountains are still covered in snow, which also lies deep in the valleys. The villagers – settled Bakhtiari – tell us that it is still too early for the migration. The Bakhtiari men – young and old – are immediately recognizable by their typical dress: baggy pants, a black hood-shaped felt hat, and often a ‘chokha’, an open-necked, short-sleeved jacket reaching down to the knees, woven in a pattern reminding of piano keys. The women, are dressed less characteristically: the girls and young women are dressed in colorful long skirts

and headscarves, the older ones all in black.

So we drive back to Schar-e Kord. There we meet by occasion Mohammad, the young owner of a car wash. He has studied and speaks English. We tell him about our plans. As chance would have it, he knows Sassan, a hunter who is married to a nomad's daughter and who has many nomads as friends. Mohammad introduces us to Sassan, who immediately calls his friends and asks them where they are located at that moment. Two hours later, after having lunch at his house, we are on our way with Mohammad and Sassan to find the nomads.

The roads wind their way through beautiful valleys with turquoise-blue rivers and over the partly snow-covered passes of the Zagros Mountains. In terms of beauty, they compete with the Alps. Our first destination is the Karun River, which the nomads and their animals still have to cross on rafts made of goat skins. Our companions reveal to us that the crossing would be spectacular.



**THE MIGHTY RIVER KARUN!**

The crossing site is near a small settlement. Not far from the shore, there is a house with a large courtyard, built by a Bakhtiari family. The daily work is carried out as if they still travel with the tent. The women spin the sheep's wool with a hand spindle and the paper thin flatbread is baked in front of the house. Kashk – small dry cheese balls made of goat and sheep milk – are dried on a wooden frame. They are particularly tasty, as they receive a subtle smoky flavor from the nearby fireplace. Asking what type of wood they use, our host points to the opposite hill. It is strewn with magnificent Zagros oaks.

Sassan presents me with a slender oblong acorn and confirms that it is edible. Not only do the animals benefit from the fruit, but people also make black bread from it, a staple food for the population in this area. The trees provide not only wood and food for animals and humans, but also shade for the benefit of lower plants. They also store water, prevent soil erosion and flooding in the area.

At the end of March, there was a flood

disaster in which several people were killed. Experts see the massive decline of the Zagros woods as a major cause. Nearly one million hectares have been lost over the last 10 years, as a result of climate change and drought. Now there is a law to forbidding anymore of the forest to be cut down.

To make the traditional flatbread called Lavash, our hosts already use gas instead of the traditional wood stove. The landlady sits on the floor preparing the dough. From a large bowl she picks off many smaller pieces of dough. With great elegance and help of a wooden stick, she throws them through the air until they are paper-thin. They are then placed on a large metal plate and baked briefly on both sides. Of course, we can taste the freshly made warm bread immediately and we are invited to tea after a beautiful carpet has been laid out for us on the wooden bedframe. There is so much to see and to ask that we almost forget the reason for our visit. When we eventually ask when the nomads will cross the river, we are told: maybe in a week, inshallah. Because of the heavy

Above: The Bakhtairi nomads on their seasonal migration, as they have done for centuries

Right: Tea is taken on a carpet spread out in front of the tent

rainfall, there is still too much snow in the mountains and too much water in the rivers.

Having thanked our hosts for their hospitality, we make us on the way to find the relatives of Sassan's wife. On the way there, we discover tents on a hill. Mohammad and Sassan approach the men and explain our plans to them. They invite us for tea, which we enjoy together on the carpet spread out in front of the tent. Afterwards, the head of the clan leads us to a nearby rocky outcrop. From there our

not waterproof and the roads have been washed away. The government has provided some help by providing tarpaulins, which are now made of plastic to better withstand the weather. Inside, the tents are just furnished with the bare essentials: a fireplace, a worn carpet, crates for clothes, blankets and pillows and the most basic kitchen utensils.

The colorfully dressed daughter-in-law, who is heavily pregnant, cooks tea for us, whilst at the same time helping a 17-year-old girl,



gaze wanders over the green valley, which is bordered by distant snow mountains. Sheep and goats are grazing everywhere. Sassan learns that his relatives are camping over the next hill. The path leads us at first steeply downhill, then steeply up again and finally around the hill. The shepherd boys, having discovered us, approach shyly and accompany us to the family's tent. The donkeys and horses, resting in the shade of the large oak trees, and the breathtaking view of the picturesque, snow-covered peaks make everything look very idyllic. But here, there has also been heavy rainfall last month. Luckily, there have been no victims to report. However, the traditional tents, made of woven wool, are

who has just returned from the watering hole several kilometers away, to unload the two donkeys. Now, all the herds have returned from the pasture. The shepherd dogs are frolicking around the tent, chasing the chickens. The sun has set and we look around for a comfortable place to sleep. Sassan suggests the giant Zagros oak not far from the tents. It is a textbook example of a tree. We spend the night under its branches. Before we turn in, the mother presents us with a sack full of Kashk.

The camp is up and about even before the sun rises. The women and girls milk the sheep and the goats. They cook the milk over an open fire and then pour it into a goat skin hanging on



The Bakhtiari women are respected by all but they have earned this respect through the hard work that they do. Hard work, lack of rights and the knowledge that other Iranian women live an easier life, have turned many nomadic women into advocates of change



Left: The Bakhtiari women are integral to life on the road

Right: Not all family members live the nomadic life. The boy was strongly attracted by the motorcycle of the visiting uncle

a wooden tripod. Sitting cross-legged next to it and swinging the stuffed goatskin back and forth for a long time, the mother, completely dressed in black, attentively sees to events around the camp. She gives the younger ones orders and occasionally straightens her black headscarf. She is a middle-aged woman with a face that has been tanned by the wind and the weather. This makes her look older than she is. It is obvious that she is a very tough woman – a pillar of the family.

The Bakhtiari women are respected by all but they have earned this respect through the hard work that they do. Hard work, lack of rights and the knowledge that other Iranian women live an easier life, have turned many nomadic women into advocates of change. However, we find that the discrepancy between the religious regulations imposed by the state on actual daily life is not as obvious amongst the nomads as it

is in the urban environment. There, violations of the laws, maintained by the mullahs, are part of Iranian daily life. Despite many hardships, nomadic women still enjoy more freedom than their counterparts.

During the morning, it is very relaxed in and around the nomad's tent. One of the old men, in his decorative keyboard patterned jacket, is sitting on the carpet comfortably and smoking his handmade earthen pipe with the relish that befits this unique four-inch, four edged smoking utensil. The other men and children are admiring a motorcycle belonging to an uncle visiting the family. The nomads are fond of new technologies, whether it be cars or mobiles. Thus, the hard way of life is being made a little easier and maybe will not be abandoned. What has dumbfounded us again and again is the lack of appreciation shown to these people by the urban Iranians. They



Left, top: Nowadays, those who can afford load their flocks and belongings onto a truck to overcome the 200 miles within two days

Left, bottom: The more traditional route

Below: Nomadic Bakhitari in traditional dress

Today, they migrate in smaller groups of two to 20 families. The migration routes, on the other hand – apart from the new roads – have changed little as there are only five or at the most seven pass routes in the Zagros Mountains



perceive the nomads as being people who have remained in an earlier stage of civilization. At first, we do not encounter much understanding when we ask whether the nomads or the so-called civilized city dwellers are more responsible for the global environmental destruction. However, Mohammad's farewell statement gives us a glimmer of hope in such a way that we may at least have stimulated them into reflecting on their position.

After a relaxing night with goat bells accompanying our dreams, we say goodbye to Sassan's relatives. As soon as we return to the main road, several livestock trucks, packed with bleating goats and sheep, pass us. Those, who can afford to load their flocks and belongings onto a truck to overcome the 200 miles to the new grazing grounds within two days, do so. Others rent a lorry to transport their family, tent and all their other belongings; meanwhile, the animals are wrangled over the mountains by two shepherds.

All those who can't afford it, have no other choice than to do it the traditional way twice a

year. However, the shepherds do not cross the snowy passes barefoot anymore, as they did 100 years ago. The government has simplified migration in recent years by building roads and bridges, improving the route and providing food for the animals on the move. Thus, the nomads can move their herds for longer distances on paved roads – just as Swiss farmers do on the transhumance "Alpfahrt". In this way, formerly difficult conditions over the passes, can be avoided, and the kuč partly loses the drama impressively shown in the two movies.

Crossing two more passes, we only occasionally meet flocks of sheep and goats at first, but then the number starts to increase and we even encounter donkeys packed with household appliances. The men and women are on foot to keep the animals together. The small children are either carried by the women on their backs or they are packed into bags on both sides of a donkey, where they sleep. They use the same method to transport newborn sheep and goats.





We stop and Sassan and Mohammad ask the nomads about where from and where to. Apparently, Sassan knows one of the families and distributes oranges and candy to the children and women. Their big bright eyes show us that the snack is very much appreciated. The nomads will continue their march until sunset and will then spend the night close to the creek. The next morning, they will leave the road behind and move uphill to the next pass. For days they journey over rugged hills, camping in the valleys – until one morning before them roars a deep and treacherous torrent.

The Bakhtiari do not unite in groups of up to 50,000 people anymore as they did in earlier times. Today, they migrate in smaller groups of 2 to 20 families. The migration routes, on the other hand – apart from the new roads – have changed little as there are only five or at the most seven pass routes in the Zagros Mountains. As a result, the campsites have also

almost remained the same.

We accompany two of the families through an ever-narrowing dark gorge. As we want to find a suitable camp for ourselves, we go to say goodnight to them. To our surprise they ask us to spend the night with them at their campsite. A most welcome opportunity for us to learn more about them. On the other hand, the reason for their request irritates us: they feel safer in our presence, as animals are often stolen at night, especially if they stay close to the road.

Having arrived at the campsite, the pack animals are unloaded first. Before they start the cooking, the small animals must be caught and locked in a small, existing stable made of stones. I assist them with great pleasure by running after the animals, grabbing them by one leg and bringing them into safety. Then the goats are milked. For dinner they have Kalejoush, consisting of Kaskh soaked in water and mixed with butter, dried onions and other spices, served with flatbread. Sassan and

Mohammad take over the night watch until 2 o'clock in the morning. The temperature falls just below freezing. Nevertheless, for just one night the nomads don't set up their tents. They are protected only by their blankets and the men by their traditional felt cape. The children nestle close to their mothers and siblings. Soon the fire is down, but the moon shines on the camp in the starry night. Only a few goat bells and the glittering water of the creek can be heard, otherwise everything remains calm.

Long before the first rays of sunlight touch the creek, movement comes to the camp. For breakfast the Bakhtiari have Kaskh with yoghurt and hot tea. With a few well-rehearsed handles, the donkeys are packed again. Everything has to be taken with them: carpets, blankets, clothes, as well as cookware and food. While the men leave the camp early with the slower sheep, the women stay behind to clean up the camp to then set off with the donkeys and the slightly faster goats to an agreed

meeting place where the family gets together again. Now the rays of the sun come over the ridge and dip the trees and coats of the animals in brilliant light. The flock moves on, first along the creek where the sun glistens, and then up along the steep, rugged reddish rocks. We stay back at the campsite and watch the cloud of dust disappearing into the distance.

Knowing where the nomadic family will go, Sassan suggests that we approach them from the other side of the pass. This means driving around the mountain and waiting for their arrival. It takes some time to clear our camp and when we arrive at the top, we don't see anybody. We walk to meet them, but meet a different family. We realize we have completely underestimated the pace of our family. They have already passed this place. Unfortunately, we are unable to follow them any further, as only they know where they are going ...

... on the way where there is no way. TT

**The Bakhtiari**

The roughly 600,000-strong Bakhtiari tribe lives in southwestern Iran in an area of about 75,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the central Zagros Mountains, a mountain range that stretches over 1,500 kilometers from the Iraqi border to the Strait of Hormuz, as high as the Alps and the breadth of Switzerland. Although only about a third of these people are nomads, nomadism does embody the cultural ideals of the Bakhtiari. At the same time, the Bakhtiari exemplify how the settled and the nomadic populations are symbiotically interwoven, economically, socially, and politically, although those that lead a settled life rather tend to assimilate into Iranian culture.

The Bakhtiari speak a Persian dialect called Lori and are Shia Muslims. At the time of the Shahs, the tribe formed a confederation with Shah-appointed Khans. Reza Shah however, who wanted to modernize Iran at any cost in the 1930s, disempowered them, had some of them executed and forced the Bakhtiari to settle down.

Deeply rooted traditions and patriarchy, have long prevented change in the Bakhtiaris' culture. During the first years of the Islamic Republic, however, their living conditions seem to have changed more than in the half century of the Pahlavi regime. The government's decades of efforts to settle them, a well-developed road network, better education, and better communication through mobile phones and internet, have all contributed to this transformation. Progress has also brought fences and dams that block their old migration routes. The future will show how dear the Islamic Republic and Iranian society hold the nomads and their centuries old, nature conserving culture. The fact that the number of nomads in Iran has remained stable in recent years, and that president Hassan Rohani has called them a role model in the protection of the environment, gives hope.



Sylvia Furrer, a Swiss lawyer/economist, and Holger Hoffmann, a psychiatrist, have traveled together on more than 75 trips and visited over 60 countries outside Europe. Having published over 200 academic papers, in 2012 they decided to publish travel reports to share their impressions with a broader community of travelers. Holger's photos have been finalists in many photography competitions and in 2018 he won the Concours Photographes Voyageurs competition, and in 2019 was the winner of KLM's Holland Herald Photo Competition.

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