

# Kandovan, home of modern-age cave dwellers

By K. E. Eduljee

Tucked away in the northwest corner of Iran is the quaint and mysterious thirteenth century village of Kandovan. Located in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province, Kandovan is 60 km south of the provincial capital Tabriz in Osku County. The 60 km drive to Kandovan south from Tabriz passes through Khosrowshahr and ascends the slopes of the hills at the base of Kuh-e (Mount) Sahand through the Osku Chai valley. Chai or Chay is a Turkic word for river.

The village of Kandovan is also part of the Lake Urmia region, the region where the predecessors of the Persians and the Medes first entered recorded history in a 844 BCE Assyrian inscription, and the region that is central to the start of the second phase of Zoroastrian history.

What makes Kandovan village so unique is that many of its homes have been made in caves located in cone-shaped, naturally formed compressed volcanic ash formations that make the landscape look like a gigantic termite colony. This method of dwelling makes the residents modern-age cave dwellers or troglodytes. (Troglodyte means cave dweller: somebody living in a cave, especially somebody who belonged to a prehistoric cave-dwelling community. Troglodyte also means somebody living in seclusion.)

It is our understanding that the unusual cone formations were formed from volcanic ash and debris spewed during an eruption of Mount Sahand being hardened and shaped by the elements over thousands of years. The formation of volcanic ash cones is local to Kandovan. Elsewhere, the ash blanketed the land. The existence of a high volume of ash and pumice far from Sahand's crater indicates that Mount Sahand erupted with a gigantic explosion in the distant past. Sahand's rock is about a million years old and the last eruption of Mount Sahand is



thought to have occurred within the Holocene epoch that is within the last 11,000 years. Today, Mount Sahand is a dormant volcano consisting of a crater lake encircled by twelve peaks, the tallest of which rises to a height of 3707 m. or 12,162 feet.

## Natural beauty in the Sahand region

While Mount Sahand itself is somewhat stark, the surrounding country abounds in a natural beauty that is today but a shadow of a legendary past.

Nature's gifts in Kandovan extend to the healing properties of its natural spring water. In particular, the waters have traditionally been used to help dissolve kidney and bladder stones. Some of the area's wild plants as also reputed to have healing and vitality-giving properties. The combination of Kandovan's unique natural landscape, beauty, and the manner in which its inhabitants have adapted to the environment, has made Kandovan a popular destination for visitors. About 300,000 people visit the village each year (the resident population is only 670) and a cave hotel with ten rooms (see photographs at the bottom

of this page) was opened in 2007 to accommodate visitors who wish to stay over a night or more. Before the opening of the hotel, visitors to Kandovan were obliged to make a day trip from Tabriz 60 km to the north. It is only a matter of time before the local population begins to rely on tourism as a major source of income, thereby supplanting their traditional pastoral and agricultural way of life.

## Use of caves as human dwellings

As noted previously, in the area of Kandovan, Sahand's volcanic ash and debris was compressed and shaped by natural forces into cone-shaped pillars containing pockets that became caves. The hardened material of the pillars is strong enough to function as walls and floors of a house while permitting a further shaping of the caves. The material is also an efficient insulator and the troglodyte's homes have the reputation of being very energy efficient, remaining cool in summer and warm in winter. The cave homes require minimal supplemental heat during the long cold season, making for comfortable year round habitation.



Most of the cave houses are two to four storeys in height. In a typical four storey house, the ground or first floor is used as an animal shelter, the next two floors are used as living areas, and the top floor is used for storage. There are reports of tunnels connecting towers owned by a person or family.

## Kandovan's age

The present residents say that their village is around 700 years old and was formed by people fleeing from an advancing Mongol army and who used the caves as a refuge and a place of hiding. Even after the Mongol occupation of the country came to an end, many of the refugees decided to continue living in the caves and gradually expanded their cave homes to form permanent multi-storey houses. Another legend states that eight hundred years ago a body of soldiers hid in the caves during a military campaign.

However, there are indications that the present cave dwellers are successors of earlier 1600-3000 years ago cave dwellers which would have made them contemporaneous to the first known presence of Zoroastrians in the region.

## Susa, the birthplace of worshipper figures

Statues of praying figures served to perpetuate worshippers' prayers in the temple. They became widespread in the Sumerian world in the 3rd millennium BC, but first appeared several centuries earlier at Susa, an ancient city in western Iran. The position of the figures, kneeling in their gowns, is characteristic of these statues.

## The development of sculpture alongside the emergence of towns

During the proto-urban period, major changes took place in the fields of architecture, administration, the organization of power, and also in art. Sculpture developed in the form of stela worked in bas-relief, decorated vases, and statues in the round. Human representation became realistic, with lifelike faces and bodily proportions rendered more or less accurately. The best-known image from this period is that of the priest-king, of which several examples in the round have been found in Mesopotamia.

In Susa original forms of sculpture were developed, with animals depicted in amusing and lively poses. Frogs clamber up the sides of a piglet or prepare to jump; a bear sitting on its haunches tries to

empty the container it holds in its paws; a bustard perched on curled feet looks on with a watchful eye. The only statues of human beings were praying figures. These were highly popular in the 3rd millennium BC, but it was in Susa that they first appeared.

## The praying figures of Susa

The first statuettes of praying figures were found in Susa in two depositories called "Archaic depots." The material of choice was alabaster, a stone that was readily available, easy to work, and more prestigious than limestone, which was also widely used in the late 4th millennium BC. The kneeling position in the garment was peculiar to Elamite worshipper figures, although an example has been found in Tell Agrab, in the Diyala region of Iraq. The figures are depicted with joined hands or bearing a vase as an offering. The small Susa worshippers are always shown with almond-shaped eyes and a hooked nose, the hair held in a band and falling in a rounded shape at the back, and with joined hands supporting very high-set breasts.

## A unique statuette

This statuette is nonetheless exceptional. It is considerably larger than the others, and instead of being

carved in a block, it occupies the space in a new manner: the arms are detached from the body and the fingers are raised to the chin.

The sculptor was seeking to make a realistic portrayal of a particular gesture - almost certainly that of prayer - with the last two fingers intertwined and the thumbs meeting under the chin. There is a certain awkwardness in this new approach: the chin is slightly displaced, jutting forward to the point of pragmatism, and the arms are a little too long. Nevertheless, this praying figure remains the most beautiful of the Susa series: "One of the most striking ancient expressions of prayer," as the leading specialist of Elamite art Pierre Amiet put it. (Source: Louvre Museum)



## Iran's international acclaimed virtuoso

Faramarz Payvar was an Iranian virtuoso of the santur, a 72-stringed hammered dulcimer. He traveled internationally as a cultural ambassador for Persian music, performing in North America, Britain, Europe, various Soviet Republics and Japan.

He also published several books on practical and theoretical aspects of Iranian classical music. These included a series of influential guides on how to play the santur, and a popular manual for the tar, a long-necked lute said to embody the spirit of Iranian music.

Although once perceived as marginal, the santur is now considered an important solo instrument in Persian classical music, largely as a result of his work. Over the course of his career, Payvar revolutionized its playing, led two major ensembles and made numerous recordings. Payvar was renowned for his strict personal discipline and demanded the same of his students as well as members of his ensembles. This meant that their line-ups hardly altered at all, in contrast with the volatile changes that affected other contemporary Persian groups.

He founded his own school of performance for the santur, with a novel emphasis on arpeggiated figures reflecting an openness to "Western" influence. Another innovation that caused controversy among some traditionalists was his use of felt on the hammers used to strike the instrument's strings. This resulted in a softer, less metallic tone that was suggestive of the piano - itself thought to have been



Faramarz Payvar (left) is playing the santur, a 72-stringed hammered dulcimer.

derived from the santur.

During the 1960s and 1970s he recorded a number of albums for French labels. Among his albums still available are two volumes devoted to the works of tar player Darvish Khan.

Born 1932 in Tehran to a wealthy family, both his father and grandfather played santur and violin, and were associated with the great musicians of their eras.

By the age of 17, Payvar had begun formal music study with the maestro Abu'l-Hasan Saba. It took him six years to master the radif - the complete rep-

ertoire of Persian classical music. Following this, he was able to perform alongside his teacher on Iranian National Radio, taking part in a groundbreaking series of programmers.

After doing his military service in 1952, Payvar began working for the Iranian Ministry of Finance, and started teaching at the College for National Music, but in 1955 he moved to the Ministry of Education. By 1959 he had founded the nine-member National Instrumental Orchestra of the Ministry of Arts and Culture.

In 1963 Payvar won a scholarship to study for three years in England, where he met his Irish-American first wife. During this time, he also lectured on and performed Persian classical music in London and Cambridge. After the Islamic Revolution, his first performance as a public concert occurred at Tehran's Rudaki Hall in 1989.

During that period of silence, he continued to teach privately.

Payvar's first marriage had ended (amicably) due to the "complications" that resulted from being married to a foreigner. While visiting his daughter (and only child) from that union in Paris in 1998, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed one side of his body and forced him to give up performing. Although severely disabled, he continued to mentor younger musicians from his home till the end of his life on December 9 in Tehran.

## TRAVEL BLOGS

### On foot and home by magic carpet

From Skiwoman's profile

Just before the bus an elderly man interrupted, "Excuse me" he said, "Can I ask you a question?" Of course I replied. "Where are you from?" Now there was an original question. Man Irland-e hastam. "Ah. Ear-land" That's what it sounded like. We both know he was saying Ireland, but work with me. It's more charming I think this way.

"Thank you for coming to my country." Wow. When was the last time you were in a foreign country and were thanked just for coming?

"I hope you have a very good visit." With that he smiled and just wandered on his way.

It was time for a visit to the Orthodox Church in Vank district. Ornatly decorated in the church, there was an historical display of the massacre by Turkish forces in the early part of the twentieth century. I didn't take notes so I can't remember the details, which is not to display any disinterest.

The day just got better as we headed off to a pigeon house. Oh yes. This brick structure is designed to house pigeons that can come and go as they please but more importantly their droppings drop (as droppings are of a nature to do) to the floor where the matter is collected for fertilizer. Those



Jameh Mosque in Isfahan

not overly offended by the whiff can ascend the stairs for a wonderful view around town. A quirk of Iranian culture and yes, it was worth a visit.

My pal Greta coerced me into buying some pomegranate paste she can find in the small convenience store adjacent to the pigeon house. In case you're wondering the paste is used in cooking fesenjan (you also need ground walnuts, onions, chicken/lamb - oh, and some lovely naan bread). Anyhow I digress.

It was time for tea and so we entered the bazaar, as Moshen calls it, and into one of the myriad tea houses. Much "salaam", "sob bekhyr" and "hello" as we entered from the curious locals who apart from supping their chai were puffing on their bubble pipes.

There really are times when the simple things in life give the most pleasure. This basic and eclectic tea shop was charming, authentic and in no way aimed at the tourist trade.

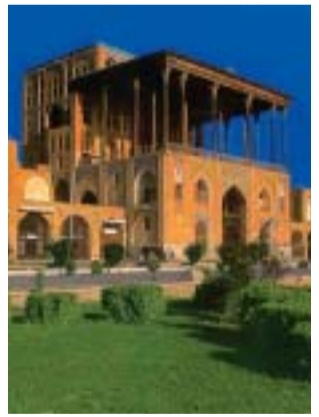
Following the Jameh Mosque (Friday mosque) we were back in the bazaar where David and Moshen bought a lamb biryani takeaway each. Freshly baked naan bread with lamb mince and liver, sprinkled with lime juice. Oh but it was good. And it seemed to please the locals no end that a bunch of Westerners were tucking in with such glee to their local dish. Did I mention it was just delicious?

It was finally time to go head to head with the bazaar traders. Greta was in buying mood. A wonderful piece of lapis was soon in her possession. These bazaar traders are no local hacks.

A final visit to the carpet shop resulted in a purchase or three, although not by me. Our little group wasn't so little when the taxis we hailed pulled up. All but one of us fitted into the cab. David volunteered to walk back to the hotel himself. Well I couldn't be having that. So the taxis left for Ali Qapu and David and I headed back through Isfahan to the hotel. It was a good job David already walked this route the previous day as I had no notion of where we were headed or how long it would take.

The walk was a pleasure. The streets were full of people casting a curious eye at two Westerners casually walking their streets. The occasional 'hello' was cast our way. Then it was dice with death time as we crossed the street, jay-walking style! David and I had "touched the darkness" but our walk had been so much more of an adventure than the taxi ride would ever have delivered. Man I love this city.

The Paddy Wagon braked sharply. Then reversed. Mohammed No.2 got off the bus and made off along the stony ground. He was after our next passenger...a goat. It could well have been a sheep.



Ali Qapu Palace

You see in the Middle East the sheep and goats are fairly similar. And so we merrily sailed onwards, past several flocks of sheep/goats without stopping to enquire if these herdsman owned said sheep/goat. Then again perhaps each of these herdsman would give an automatic 'yes' whether or not they in fact owned the animal. After all, I'm sure the "don't look a gift horse in the mouth" adage applies equally well in the Middle East as it does here!

The goat joined us at our tea stop in a small mountain village near the middle of nowhere. I was intrigued by the water supply which came straight from either springs or the snow on the mountains through a clever channel system. When we arrived the sluice gates (small pieces of metal held in place with stones) was set up in a fashion to feed water to 'our' side of the street. As we supped our chai the water supply man changed plates over and shoveled the stones into their place so as to feed the ice cold fresh water to the other side of town.