

Kabul Trip: September 2011

The current research project that has just been started in Muheza (more “what causes fever ?” question) is also being run by the London School in Afghanistan, only there the women sorting out is a molecular scientist and so not used to the blood culture scene. Hence I was invited to do some teaching and some advising We reckoned it would be interesting work wise, fascinating culture wise and a tad scary security wise – and that indeed is what it has proved to be

My first stop was Dubai: A strange place - huge concrete buildings everywhere, big expensive cars (a 4x4 stretched limo!), Filipinos, Indians, Africans, Europeans, sometimes difficult to spot the Dubaian! I got my Afghan visa without incident but my flight to Kabul was delayed as Rabbani – peace envoy to the Taliban was killed ... so the flight was postponed to Saturday - however this also meant that Amy - the woman I was going to work with, who was flying from Bahrain to Kabul ended up in Dubai as well. On the last night we went out to a “historic” area - essentially the original Dubai - though not old really - the Sultans' palace (not current) was from 1890. It gave quite a picture of the speed of development in Dubai - it really kicked off in any significant way in the 1950's - the photos from 51 showed essentially a fishing (and pearling) village - its gone from that to the huge concrete jungle that it is today in just 60 years.

Then on Saturday we flew with perfect visibility the whole way – all desert apart from the Gulf itself. The mountains around Kabul looked spectacular as we circled it finally coming in from the north east side. The airport was bigger and busier than I expected, with lots of military and UN planes, but also plenty of civilian airliners. The airport itself was very old fashioned looking, the immigration officials hidden in big wooden booths. The man that stamped me in hardly even looked at me. Amy found a porter, a tiny, wiry man who very efficiently took our bag tickets, found the bags and we walked out to the car park through about three security gates. We went through one car park where 2 Americans in fatigues and flack jackets leaned against a new Toyota Land-cruiser (bullet proofed I was told) then on to the prols car park. The office driver, a cheery young man in jeans and a T-Shirt drove us out onto the main road past some nervous looking Afghan soldiers and an armoured personnel carrier.

Kabul felt similar in some ways to Dar a mixture of the modern and the “traditional”, too big, too busy. The boys in Kabul really do fly kites. The compound where I stayed is in town. It is small and rather undistinguished of typical local design: a central house has the kitchen and reception rooms, the bedrooms are around the edge of the compound (it doesn't rain that much in Kabul!). The following day I was driven around a very dusty city full of ex-German Toyota Corrolla's. Progress was often slow, a Donkey pulling a cart with 2 boys, ~10 and 12 was in the line, keeping up and stopping only when his nose was inches from the preceding car.

At the office I met the two lab guys who will be running that side of the study - they are both clever, engaged men who already know quite a lot of microbiology. I became worried that I was not going to be able to teach them

Food:

Green Tea
Naan bread
Kebabs – esp fat
tailed sheep
Huge Melons
Pomegranate

Faces:

Mediterranean,
Oriental. Russian,
Indian
Few women in full
burqua



People:

Old ladies waiting in
a queue squatting
down
Men greeting with a
hug, between the
sexes a slightly
embarrassed hand
on heart

much. We went on to two labs - the first, the National Public Health Lab, was in a bit of a state. The microbiology lab has a brand new entry control system and video monitoring of the lab, American money for biosecurity! But I was asked by the director to investigate why they had not got any positive blood cultures in the last year, perhaps I have a role. The next place we went to was the Central Veterinary Lab. They had managed to attract money and it was an impressive place, a positive and engaged director making the difference I suspect.

Driving around Kabul didn't feel particularly unsafe, although there were men toting big guns all over the place. There were wonderful displays of fresh fruit and vegetables, huge melons, water melons, piles of grapes, apples, quince, pomegranates, bananas and oranges. Bakeries on every street selling piles of fresh made naan bread. I did not starve in Kabul!

I taught blood culture to a group doing a course in "Advanced Molecular Diagnostics" - though blood culture doesn't feel very "advanced" to me - it is not "new" technology and much the same could have been done 30+ years ago. However 18 people listened very attentively. It was a new experience for me to keep a group like that interested and learning for three days. The second week was easier - just the 6 study staff and a lot more focussed as the study is due to start soon.

Everyone is very kind to me. Guests are important, and must be treated well. I, for example, am not allowed to help tidy up after a lab practical - as guest and teacher that is not my job. I get told to sit down or go and get a cup of tea (chai). Tea here is green and drunk in copious quantities. Coffee, though not unheard of, is rare (worse luck). Lunch is the main meal, meat cooked in pressure cookers and served with "Kabuli Pilau" - rice, carrots and sultanas, or kebabs with naan and salad. I came home with (not on) a (small) silk carpet, some (out of date) Russian caviar, and bags of dried apricots, sultanas and mulberries .

The form to sign into CPHL had me confused for a moment. Then I worked out the problem - it is filled out from right to left, even though the headings are in English - Dari is written right to left. English signs are everywhere, though not everyone speaks it. It appears to be a sort of status thing "I am educated and can speak, read English". I have had some interesting conversations with a couple of the participants about Afghanistan and its geopolitical position. They blame their neighbours Pakistan and Russia in particular, as well the "western powers" - the US, UK etc for Afghanistans instability. No-one I spoke to wanted the Taliban back, but they all also wanted the Americans out. Everone was worried about the future, but most were hopeful. I spoke to one of the doctors about marriage. He has had 2 wives, but serially, and now has nine children. He said that marriage was expensive: before the father will agree to marry his daughter the groom should have a house already, and ideally a job, he will agree to give the brides' family cash and items such as a washing machine. Then there is the betrothal ceremony and the wedding itself to both of which one invites 800 or more people. "If you are poor you may never get to marry!"

The BBC is doing a special on Afghanistan. I particularly recommend the video interviews with 6 different Afghans - some of them really struck a chord with what I experienced. I only went to one small part of a large and very diverse country, I would love to see more.



Sayings:
"The security situation"
"Inshallah" - if God wishes

Things:
Kites in the sky
Horrible dusty air
Mud houses
scattered up steep slopes