

Non-military diary

Written by AG

Monday, 09 July 2007 09:00



Impressions from Afghanistan by Anna Galyga.

I have never expected to go on a trip to such an exotic country like Afghanistan...Feelings of curiosity, fear, doubt and excitement created an unbelievable mixture in my heart. And in less than no time I was ready with necessary vaccination, shopping and packing, and I found myself travelling across Germany to catch a plane to Termez, Uzbekistan.

Day 1

A 6 – hour flight made me tired but I looked outside the bus windows with curiosity while driving to the camp in Termez. We were supposed to spend a night there and the next morning to cross the border and breathe the Afghan air. 'Welcome to Termez' - the sign announced but when I saw tents and the camp itself I didn't feel like being welcomed at all. The air was hot and sticky, whereas the inside of the tents was cool and unpleasant. Eyes of those who already were in the camp closely watched all newcomers. I did not want to go to sleep at all, partly because I felt it was still early according to the European time zone, partly because I felt insecure. But finally I laid down thinking about what the next day may bring.

Day 2

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I was woken up by the cold and birds singing above my head. I had to hurry up in order to pack all my stuff and have breakfast (my stomach was a bit surprised being filled at 3 am...). A bus took us to the airport and then I saw a military plane from close up for the first time in my life. Even though I knew all passengers sit broadside to the direction of flight I didn't feel much comfortable. Earplugs made me numb and there were no windows to see what's going on outside. The flight was short and then we jumped out of the plane in Mazar-e-Sharif. Heat and wind reached us at once. I felt a bit dizzy looking around – space, some flying machines and buildings in distance and the mountains above us. The view was simply beautiful. Is that Afghanistan? I couldn't believe my eyes when we were travelling across the town in an armoured personnel carrier. I felt a kind of slow down of the pace when looking at Afghan people – smiling children being dirty from ice cream waving to us, women in blue burkas walking slowly along the road, men selling melons. Their small shops looked as if they were going to crumble down in a second and all these elaborately arranged sticks and pieces of material would simply be lifted by wind. But somehow they managed to survive.

Day 3

When we were leaving Mazar-e-Sharif, we hoped that Kabul would be similar. We enjoyed the last evening and walking across the camp in the complete dark hearing only the loud chirping of crickets and the sound made by stones on which we were walking (only later I heard that they protected from spiders and other friendly animals to approach...). We had a busy morning visiting different places in the camp and before long, with a help of a flying "ancient" friend, we found ourselves in the middle of Kabul. If not a heavy flack jacket I was wearing and a helmet covering half of my world I would thought that Kabul is an ordinary Asiatic city...A few hours later I was walking along the ISAF Headquarters, trying to find a shelter from the sun under the trees in the Milano Palace.

Day 4

It was a busy day full of meetings. We managed to visit all important places in the camp and find out where my colleagues from Szczecin work. It was nice to see surprise on their faces when they saw us. It turned out that the camp is really small and it doesn't take much time to walk around it. As strange as it seems, on the area of about 350 m long and 250 m there up to 1800 people gathered...This must be a nice lesson of compromise and tolerance.

Day 5

The first time when fear paralyzed me completely was while listening to the procedures all convoys follow in case of any trouble. Fast British talk seemed to be both unreal and scary. I will never forget his "we will crack on the mission"...What am I doing here? With a helmet on my head and a flack jacket restricting movements, nobody could see me shaking. A moment later we hit a traffic jam as soon as we left the gates of the ISAF HQ. Our smart drivers changed the route at once keeping in mind that a convoy mustn't stop...for safety reasons...Hopefully, all what I went through inside my head while passing this Afghan world, was rewarded by Turkish hospitality and traditional food of our hosts. Common lunch was served under the sky with a wind breaking through the tableware. Drops of rain were falling gently on food before it was

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covered with napkins. In distance we could hear an alarm and some sounds of firing guns. Somebody told us that an exercise had started. But what I will remember most is the salty taste of Ayran, a Turkish drink made of yoghurt and water, and unbelievably sweet Baklava...

Day 6

Even though I was not keen on flying, when I saw huge airscrews of Blackhawk I could feel shivers down my spine. I felt like a bug with these funny protective headphones put on, but I forgot about it as soon as the flying monster gained height and I could see the land and its beauty, small clay and stone houses, green fields, trees and gentle slopes of hills and low mountains arranged in colourful mosaics. However, this day brought also flying with a small plane together with the pilots in the cockpit, which was even more incredible. All small lights, indicators and meters slightly uncovered the mystery of flying for me... I could see incredible mountains, both bare and covered by green flora, various shades of sand, carved riverbeds which sometimes get filled with rainwater flowing down along the slopes to water the fields. There were paths on the mountain passes and houses in the forbidding wilds. There were herds of sheep and goats, but also camels running away as soon as they heard the sound of our plane flying no more than 30 meters about the ground. Now I understand why people always wanted to fly.

Day 7

After the yesterday's plane trip, a day spent in the camp seemed to be a bit "ordinary". Even though the schedule was not overloaded we could feel the pressure of time to complete all interviews and pay all put off visits. We knew that the next day, which was Friday, is treated like a day off in the Muslim world and that all those who manage to complete the tasks on Thursday would be unavailable. That day I also became a happy holder of a star sapphire, which is considered to be the stone of wisdom capable of making anybody healthy and happy... As the day was coming to an end, we were sitting and relaxing in the garden of the Milano Palace making the tradition of Afghan's Thursdays come true.

Day 8

Friday is the market day. Everybody whom we met in the camp asked me whether we would go there. How could we refuse? Beforehand we received a lot of instructions concerning bargaining, thus armed with assertiveness and strong will I set off on hunting. I felt a bit confused when I saw all those stalls full of jewellery, souvenirs from Afghanistan, spiders and scorpions frozen to the spot, silk and cashmere shawls, boxes, lamps, jugs, coffee sets and hundreds of other things. Walking along the stalls, feeling this original smell and talking to the Afghans touting their goods belong to my strongest impressions of Afghanistan. I don't think it is possible anywhere in Europe to experience this specific game between a seller and a customer while setting the price with the climax reached when the client actually leaves the stall and the seller runs after him or her to present the final offer...

Day 9

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The way back was a kind of déjà vu during which we were following almost the same route: Mazar-e-Shafir, Kunduz as a kind of variety, Termez and finally Cologne. The heat was incredible and we felt we were lucky that the weather was merciful for us. When I left the plane in Germany a wave of humidity reached me. I wasn't aware how dry the air in Afghanistan actually was. I was happy to step on the European ground, when I finally got to Szczecin I was happy to be safe and sound at home. But most of all I was happy that I was there - I was in Afghanistan.