

War and uncertainty have left their mark on Kabul, but there is hope, writes Peter Feeney

I visited Afghanistan last November, just before the snows. From the air it looked like Mars, a blasted heath you'd think could never support life, let alone the 26 million-odd souls who do live there. There's hardly even soil seemingly, just rocks and dust — and the dust is something else too, as I found on arrival. It's fine, like talcum powder; foreigners call it moon dust. It's on every surface. It gets up your nose and into the pores of your skin, so on the hottest of days your palms are never damp. Cheerfully, a recent UN health analysis found that 25 per cent of it was faecal matter. Ever wondered where donkey dung ended up? Travel tip No 1: don't eat your own spit in the Stan.

Once through the dense security at Kabul airport it was a bit of a hike to clear the car parks, hauled to cars for fear of suicide attacks. This was the first of many such inconveniences, the downside of being a tourist in a country where an insurgency is active. You learn the virtue of patience. With me was Dan Owen, ex New Zealand Defence Force, an old Afghan hand and friend, in a place like this it's comforting to be with someone you trust. Once we met our ride we hit the road.

Words can't describe the white-knuckle horror of being a passenger on a Kabul road, with near misses and gratuitous risks. The country regularly comes last in the annual world corruption index; I'm pretty sure no one here has ever passed a test for a driver's licence either. Imagine Naples and Karachi blended together, but much worse. The city was crowded, dusty, hardly functioning and kick-ass. I loved it immediately.

We stayed with an Afghan friend of Dan's in Karti Parwan. Kabul is ringed by high hills and positioned part way up one, so we were, our views of the city were wonderful. In any other city, you pay for a view, but in Kabul the higher you go the poorer the people. About a million Kabulians live on the steepest slopes, with no electricity or running water, and with open sewers.

Everyone here has suffered terrible loss. There's no health care, no pensions. Most people are blood-poor. They don't have very far to fall to hit rock bottom.

The poverty I expected. It was the wealth of some Afghans I met that was the surprise. Squillions of aid money and military contracts dollars have been percolating through the economy for over a decade. As Dan put it, in a flippant mood, if you were an Afghan who spoke English and weren't the village idiot, now you're a millionaire.

Early on in my stay, Dan and I met Michele, an Australian living in Kabul. As we strolled along the rug and furniture shops of Chicken St, she told us it evoked something of the buzz of the old Kabul that ended with the April 1978 revolution. Photos of Kabul in the 1970s reveal a modern, beautiful, diverse city, in a period Kabulians who are old enough remember as a kind of golden age — Afghan girls in skirts jostling alongside burka-clad women in the souks, a rare time when Pashtun and Tajik (the two main ethnic groups) lived harmoniously and mixed socially. The country was a favoured destination for backpackers doing the hippie trail, down through the old silk route of south and central Asia.

Sadly by 2001, when the Americans invaded, 90 per cent of the buildings were damaged or destroyed. Kabul's experiment in tolerance cut to ribbons by decades of war and Taliban rule. Since then a huge reconstruction has taken place. But the potholed roads, the traffic jams and air pollution, along with the near absence of public space such as parks or clubs where families and youngsters can meet and play, show how much still needs to be done. The population of Kabul is now



Bullish despite years of hardship

more than five million, up from one million in 2001 and three times the number it was designed to handle. There's electricity and a world-class mobile and internet network, there's also no sewage system or articulated water supply.

As we strolled along, Michele cut an alien figure: tall, blonde and pretty, dressed in an eclectic mix of western and Afghan garb — and a woman. These outlandish (for Afghanistan) ways seem to be tolerated — “the men treat me as a third gender” — was how Michele put it. But Afghan women are largely absent from public life and when out commonly wear the full burqa. Michele works for an organisation that is trying to upgrade a legal tradition that allows a man to kill his wife and be punished with only a fine.

Paradoxically, against such unfathomable misogyny, family is big in Afghanistan. Parents lavish affection on their children. The husband's family must pay the dowry here, making daughters valuable commodities. You see girls daily skipping happily to their classes. In Kabul alone there's a million of them. Within the walled compounds people call home, women unveiled themselves — I saw one woman tearing off her headscarf before she'd even got her foot inside the door. Women are in evidence at work-places often too, wearing the headscarf. Domestic abuse is reportedly rampant, yet Dan told me that in the homes he has visited the women appeared to run the home while the men meekly acquiesced. Mothers have high status — their sons dote upon them and when the boys marry and leave home, their mothers will often accompany them.

When Dan and I visited an Afghan home for

dinner, the women were cleared out well ahead. But sitting in the greeting room, drinking tea and chewing nuts with the men of the house, we could hear high-pitched shrieks of merriment coming from inside the house. The men shrug and smile. It was all very odd, as if Martians shared the house but we were all too shy to talk about it. Then out of the kitchen door came the children one by one to check out the visitors. A four-year-old girl sat on my knee playing with my mobile phone. We waited for the wife; she never appeared.

The MFAT website travel advisory has more red flags for Afghanistan than you'd see in a day in San Fermis watching the running of the bulls. And rightly so. Parts of the country can be very harmful for the health of anyone with a first-world passport. Yet I was surprised to discover there are plenty of people, such as Michele, who have lived happily in Kabul for years with no security and no mishap.



An Afghan boy sells balloons on the side of the road; children buy food from a street vendor (below) and youngsters keep warm by a fire.



Turkey Afghanistan Uzbekistan Kabul Islamabad Pakistan

Checklist
KABUL

GETTING THERE: It's not hard to get a 30-day tourist visa for Afghanistan from their embassy in Dubai. Bring the correct amount for your visa — US\$50 — they don't always do change. Fly Dubai to Kabul. The price for the three and a half hour flight is about US\$200 one-way. For an extra you can sit up the front and buy a little legroom.

ACCOMMODATION: Apart from security issues, major hotels are also pricey. Guest houses are reasonably secure and charge from \$100 a night. Kabulians on Facebook is a kind of rental agency.

and talked to a liquor store owner on Hollywood Boulevard who told him he saw a shoot-out at least once a week. In Kabul, Sam is yet to witness one act of violence. He thinks Kabul is statistically probably a safer place to live than LA.

So there are two security worlds in Kabul, with differing lifestyles based on people's reasons for being there and consequent risk assessments. At the other extreme, to people like Sam, Marnie and Michele are the foreign troops or logistical workers, paraded and held up in concrete-walled compounds. For many of them the Stan is a hostile and incomprehensible place. We stayed at a massive fuel depot in Kandahar province that suffered a major Taliban attack each year; it felt like a large classrophobic bunker in Normandy awaiting an invasion.

The first night of my stay in Kabul there was a rocket attack. I didn't hear anything but the next morning headlines worldwide screamed: “At least one dead from Taliban rocket”. Considering there are five million people in Kabul, I figured those weren't such bad odds.

Such attacks aren't fun, of course. Anywhere in Afghanistan can go from calm and uneventful to violently nuts at any time. But if you're not an obvious target stationed at a base or an embassy it all comes down to the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Mind you, if the Taliban don't get you, the crazy drivers might. Not to mention the dogs. They travel in packs and on the night. There are 100 deaths from rabies in Kabul every year — and that's just the reported ones.

In Kabul, Dan and myself travelled everywhere in an armoured car with a driver and one or more bodyguards, depending on the destination.

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Driving in Kabul is a white-knuckle ride.
Pictures / Getty Images, AP



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Strolling down a street with two armed guards in tow to buy a rug acted as a deterrent but it can also attract attention. The other way to go is low profile: find a driver you trust and cruise around in a plain car. Either way you really need some kind of patronage — an Afghan who holds some sway who can bail you out should you get randomly picked on by the Afghan secret police at the airport. Dan's take, based on being around war zones for more than 25 years, is that Kabul is a place that anyone can visit — but with appropriate precautions. Cautious to a fault, even Dan's had his share of hair-raising adventures in Kabul, including flying out of town at 3am on a chartered freight plane, hotly pursued by death threats.

I was fortunate to meet many expats and locals in Afghanistan: politicians, workers, soldiers, businessmen and aid workers. There was the inspirational Tony Woods, a Kiwi installing sustainable energy projects — high-tech wind, solar and hydro — that locals in remote villages were building, maintaining and protecting from attack. We travelled to Bagram Airfield (BAF) to meet Kiwi soldiers about to embark on their final tour in Bamiyan (Dan was able to prove he still had his mojo in a press-up competition). One night saw us stood up at a rendezvous in the International Club (US\$9 (\$11.50) a Heineken. Ouch). We ended up chatting to some British ex-Army chaps and South African miners. Their boss popped over for a brew and he turned out to be an ex-CO of the British SAS regiment, Richard Williams. His insights were formidable and have informed much of the opinions expressed here.

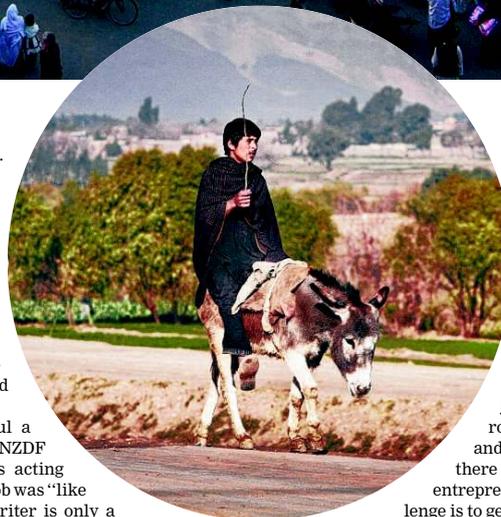
It was all endlessly interesting. Over the 10 days of our stay, Dan and I heard how the Americans had cocked up just about everything, about the billions of aid money spent and how much of it had ended up improving the lives of

ordinary Afghans (not much). And always, of course, the corruption. At the InterContinental, over possibly the worst flat white I've ever encountered, Chris Carter, ex-Labour MP, now loving his job with the UN in Kabul, shared an Afghan saying: "Under the Taliban there was security and no food, under Kharzi there's food and no security."

At the ISAF HQ in Kabul a tired-looking Paul Curry, an NZDF Colonel just posted there as acting chief of staff, told us his new job was "like reading a book where the writer is only a quarter page ahead and you keep catching up". Then there was the Pashtun Afghan Army officer who told me with a steely glint in his eye: "They can rent us but they can never own us."

The question on everyone's mind is what's going to happen at the end of next year when the foreign troops start to pull out, and with them the aid money, currently 90 per cent of the country's GDP. Will the great bogey-men from the south, the Taliban, make their play? Corrupt politicians and officials have been busy buying boltholes in Dubai and nervous Hazari interpreters and their families have arranged safe haven in New Zealand (one in 10 Afghans are Hazari, making them the third-largest ethnic group in the country). One Afghan I met already had his family living in a second home in nearby India — the two countries share a long history. Trivia quiz fact No 1: a surprising number of Pashtun Afghans (admired for their pale skin) have made their mark as Bollywood actors.

After my visit, and although I'm probably the only one, I felt there were grounds for optimism.



"The city was crowded, dusty, hardly-functioning and kick-ass. I loved it immediately."

This is no country for old men. Three quarters of the country's population is under 30, and the average age is 16 — people who were just 5 years old when the Americans invaded their country. All they have known is the foreign intervention. They have no truck with the Taliban.

People here — like anyone — just want to get on. At bustling roadside businesses, workshops and street markets without number, there was ample evidence of entrepreneurial acumen. The big challenge is to get the economy moving, to ensure people have work. Pledges actually have been made by the west to continue a lot of the aid and development, for example in mining, is going ahead. Elections next year are likely to be unfair, the Afghan army is learning on the job, corruption remains a real problem — things are going to be messy but it's only with practice that the Afghans will get better at governing their own country again. The Taliban launch occasional rockets or suicide attacks into the city to remind us of their desire to be a voice in the post-2014 Afghanistan. But they pointedly avoid the easy targets that would cause real damage — they've never hit the cellphone network, or tried to shoot down the civilian jetliners flying all over the country. That would be an own goal. The Taliban need votes, too.

But perhaps, just to be on the safe side, visit soon. Things may well get worse before they get better. And sadly, if Afghanistan's recent history is anything to go by, they may just get worse. I really hope they don't. It's a fascinating place, and its people deserve better.