

The bursting of our ‘Kabubble’ fantasies

A small army of Western expats and oddballs arrived in Afghanistan dreaming of creating a new modern state. It has all come to nothing

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

Until Donald Trump dropped the \$16 million, 21,600-pound GBU-43 Mother of all Bombs on rural Afghanistan, there was no indication that the country was even on the President’s radar. Then on April 13, he let IS have it. But IS numbers in Afghanistan had already fallen from 3,000 last year to about 700 this year. It is the 40,000-strong Taliban who are making gains. They announced their spring offensive two weeks later on April 28. They control a third of the country and are secretly backed by Iran, Pakistan and Russia. It’s not so surprising then that the images we have of Afghanistan are images of war. When I arrived for the first time in 2007, I was totally unprepared for what I encountered during a miserably cold winter.

I certainly didn’t fall in love with the country at first sight. As the plane landed, I looked down on a mud-coloured blanket of nothingness. No high-rises, no lights, no colour, a bleakness hanging from the sky. When I went to retrieve my luggage the cases were buried in a pyramid of bags, stacked in a darkened corner. The electricity didn’t work, wires hung from the ceiling. The place was bombed out, prehistoric, freezing and frozen in time, grey and disturbing.

My first night in the field set the scene for some of my most indelible memories. I went to a French restaurant called L’Atmosphere, one of many businesses started by canny foreigners or entrepreneurial expats. As you walked in, a sign read “No Afghans” and another indicated a place to store your gun. L’Atmo had foie gras on the menu, grilled fish, baguettes and red wine, which was a miracle in 2007. The attorney general had gone on a rampage and confiscated alcohol, which was illegal. But the authorities often turned a blind eye when it involved the international community and they were sufficiently bribed. It was a large compound with a bar and a swimming pool where in the summer foreign women would swim in bikinis. Outside, just beyond the bamboo barrier, Afghan women, covered in blue burqas with their tiny pleats and mesh face covers, walked on mud streets unpaved since Soviet days.

Spring arrived. The light changed and had a cut-crystal magic to it. Flowers bloomed everywhere, and there were roses, roses and more roses—and marijuana plants that popped up on roadsides and in people’s gardens alongside almond, apricot and walnut trees. Houses that looked sad and decrepit had an integral beauty if you looked intently and with imagination you could almost see their past glory. As my eyes began to adjust to this new paradigm, I felt I was walking down the grand tree-lined boulevards of the Sixties when Kabul was part of the Hippie Trail.

For old movie fans, compare the so-called “Kabubble” to the 1954 film *Brigadoon*, a city that appeared out of the mists of Scotland once every 100 years and lasted for only 24 hours. While

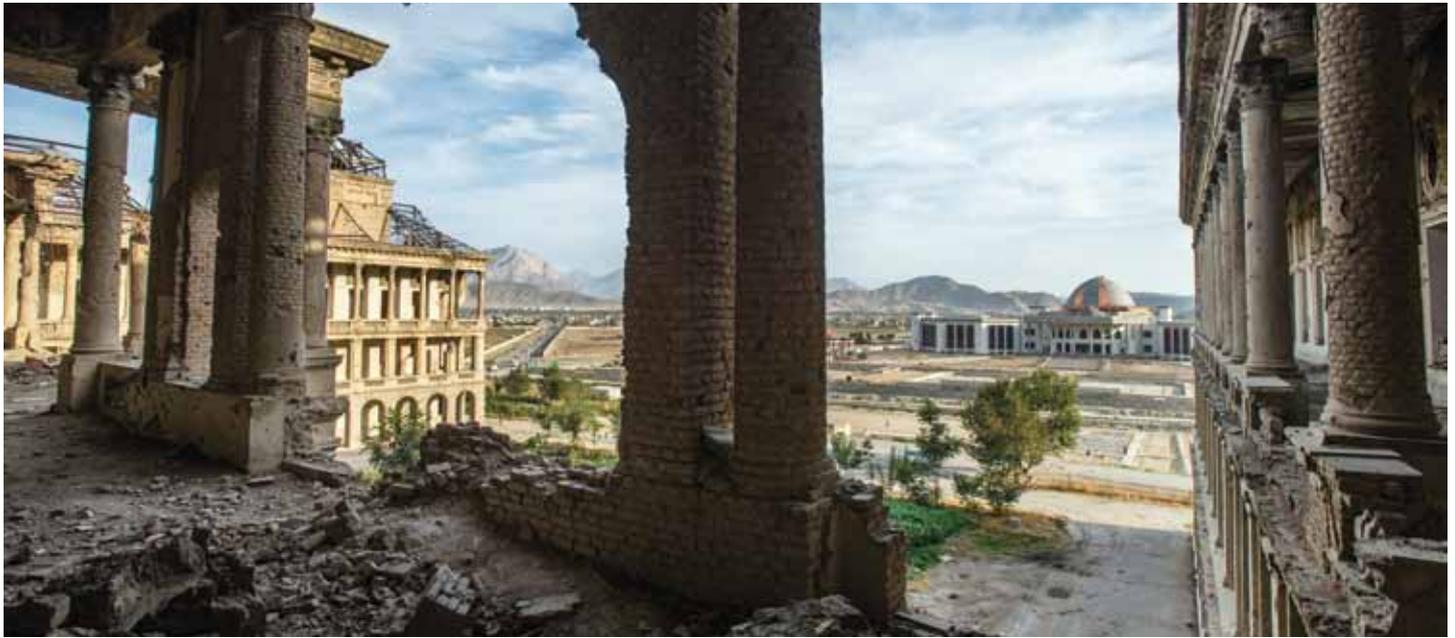
Kabul has been at the intersection of the Silk Road for thousands of years, the Kabubble appeared only in 2002 and consisted of, mostly, foreigners. It was a fascinating intersection of people, ideas and possibilities and was why I wrote my book *Dispatches from the Kabul Café*, a series of stories of how we lived then.

By the time I arrived, the Afghans had experienced 30 years of war: the decade-long Soviet occupation; the subsequent civil war; the Taliban takeover. After 9/11 came Nato and with it the influx of expats, armies from 28 countries, contractors, all of whom created a new world of restaurants and cafés. With donor donations the museum was rebuilt, with entrepreneurial spirit a skate park gave young Afghans a place to have fun, an art café was established, and a nightclub lasted very briefly. It was suggested that a new capital would be built alongside the old one. This 13-year-long mission moment brought together an astonishing assortment of people—men and women at the top of their game in a place that was the focus of the world and where history was being made.

There were generals, diplomats, journalists, aid workers, artists, mercenaries, chancers, princes, toffs, spies, medics, lunatics, expats and circus-trainers. People who wanted to reinvent themselves, people who wanted to find themselves, and people who wanted to make the world a better place. I was one of them and we all had one common thing: Afghanistan. There was a sense of hope as well as an exhilarating sense of purpose and clarity.

People stayed and established new lives. It was a new Afghanistan and the epicentre was Kabul. As a journalist, it was an extraordinary experience. Everything was intriguing, intellectually challenging and mesmerising, a (war) journalist’s fantasy—the people, the parties, the stories, the news, the new world, the dilemmas, the conflicts. And the dreadful excitement of living on the edge of someone else’s war.

Falling in love with Afghanistan wasn’t unique to me; the country had cast its spell over many of my colleagues and contemporaries as well as legions of travellers over the centuries. The charm is difficult to unravel and explain. The country gets a hold of you, gets under your skin and into your psyche, and much like an addiction, you just want more. It is the most visually sumptuous country I know. Everything was either beautiful, unique, awe-inspiring or amusing—the mountains ringing the capital, the light, the quirky things that I loved, like the shop that sold grass or the shiny silver fish tacked on to boards for sale. You could buy peacocks on the street corner; wonderful garish fake flower shops lined Flower Street. The green valleys in Bamiyan, where the Buddhas used to stand, the magical turquoise Lake Band-e-Amir and the rushing rivers were some of the most



Hopes of progress: The new National Assembly building is visible from the ruins of Darul Aman Palace, Kabul, which is currently being restored

incredible sites I have seen. The people and the hospitality are unique in the Muslim world. Afghans are tribal, family is all important, things Europe left behind in the Middle Ages.

As the snow and ice melted after that first harsh winter, so did my heart. Not only did I fall in love with Afghanistan but I fell in love in Afghanistan. It's an occupational hazard that comes with the territory and is known as "the locationship". One of the expressions that sums up the syndrome is, the odds are good but the goods are odd. The ratio of men to women was about 14 to one in that warzone. Parallel lives and loves developed in parallel universes, ones suspended in time, ones that had sell-by-dates when men and women, whose contacts had ended, returned to their real lives. That moment offered people the opportunity to explore other dimensions of themselves, sometimes ones they were happy to forget. These liaisons were a large part of what made the Kabubble the Kabubble.

In my book, I write about Paul, who trained as a sniper in the army and left to make money as a mercenary. Of course, he didn't fit into normal life. He lived off the grid when he wasn't in Afghanistan. If we had met in London, we would never have hooked up. I am not quite sure how he won me over, however briefly, but Afghanistan was, without question, a powerful connection. We met in the queue for the plane to Dubai and he started to talk to me. I saw him again at the luggage carousel, where we chatted for a moment and exchanged numbers before heading to our different destinations. I went back to London and for the next 18 months he would call every time he passed through and I would say I was busy. One November evening, I agreed to meet him. In retrospect, it was all a bit mystifying. We went to the States on a strange road trip that started in Las Vegas and went via Colorado, Texas and the Grand Canyon before it ended back in Las Vegas, along with the relationship.

Nothing contrasted the two cultures in Afghanistan more than relationships, and nothing could turn you into a feminist faster once there. It's a confrontation with frontline feminism where theory hits reality. At first, I was all gung-ho about the fabulous projects and new laws that the foreign community was implementing. I wanted to help fix Afghanistan just as much as others did, to help create a more modern state and do away with some of the injustices, especially towards women—forced marriage, women being given away to settle debts, an epidemic of domestic violence, women who have no rights and no place to go to escape.

Graham Greene captured the end of a louche era in *The Quiet American*, about colonial Indochina. The Kabubble evoked that

same languid atmosphere, despite the war that ebbed and flowed outside the capital's shrinking boundaries. The bubble eventually had to burst. That became more and more apparent as the years rolled on. When President Obama announced the US drawdown in 2014, the good times were put on notice. When American troops pulled out and the Nato-led Isaf mission ceased its combat operations the narco-economy, already on its knees, collapsed.

Over the previous decade security had deteriorated and the war against the Taliban had revived. Then it intensified. Its leaders were holed up in Pakistan and hard to locate. The theatre of war changed entirely as Syria's brutal civil conflict topped the news agenda and Afghanistan was relegated to the inside pages. Afghanistan had to fight off the political agendas of its neighbours, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China, all backing their own factions and actors.

Food insecurity affects huge swathes of the population. Most people are illiterate, ultra-conservative, and live in small closed societies where women belong to men and are bought with dowries. We can't imagine such a thing. Cultures take a long time to change and our timelines were wrong. We needed decades, not three-year instalments, and we needed the commitment to stay the course. We needed experts who understood the complexities of the culture and not bureaucrats without field experience whose policies ticked boxes. There was no coordination. Projects were duplicated and triplicated. Nothing was backed up by security, and lack of security meant it became, for example, more difficult to keep girls in school past the age of ten.

When the war kicked off in Iraq, we took our eye off the ball and that led to the resurgence of the Taliban. As the security situation worsened so did every aspect of nation-building. Providing social amenities in the midst of civil war was impossible. One of the biggest failures was not to build an indigenous economy which could sustain the largely rural population.

Patronage, corruption, the weak rule of law, poor governance, the ongoing divisions between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, and infighting between the warlords in parliament also continue to dim the flickering hopes of progress. While thousands of refugees flee the country, Iran, Pakistan and many European countries are deporting illegal Afghan migrants back to where they started.

Initial dreams and hopes evaporated in the chaos of blunders and ill-conceived plans. Hope springs eternal but is also the road to hell, which seems the direction America's longest war is heading. **S**