

# Salam!

My name is Daria (which comes from ancient Persia - today's Iran) and I am a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year student of English Philology – Practical Profile at the University of Opole, and an intern at the Erasmus+ Office.

In October, I had my internship at the Office of International and Scientific Cooperation of the University of Mazandaran in Iran, Babolsar, during its most politically unstable time since the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, when Mahsa Amini was arrested by the morality police for wearing an 'improper' hijab, leading to the ongoing series of protests against government caused by Mahsa's death. Fortunately, I returned back home safely and I am happy to tell you about my experience!



## 1 WHY IRAN?

Probably the first question people ask me is 'Why Iran?!'. Let me tell you about the reason for my fascination with this country.

It's not quite what you see in the media and the fact is that there are many political tensions between the **Islamic Republic** of Iran and other countries, but citizens are just like any of us. The reason why I like **Iran** is because Iranians are the kindest, most hospitable, strongest, and most determined people in the entire world and this can be seen in many unthinkable ways that I will mention in this text. Another reason why I love Iran is because it has its spirit, because you always feel at home there, because of its oldest continuous civilization on the planet (Persia), traditional music, dances (Sufi dance), and also the variety of languages with lots of poets (Rumi) describing life in all its manifestations.

Many people told me not to come to Iran. Last week before going to Iran, I wasn't quite sure if I was going or not. 3 days before my flight, I got a message from my coordinator in Iran to cancel my plans due to growing protests. I knew I couldn't abandon everything I'd been working on over the years! Finally, I got another message - 2 days earlier - that I could come. At that moment, I just hoped that everything would go well...

## 2 FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As soon as I left the airport, I was greeted by friends who had been waiting for me for hours before I finally arrived. They gave me flowers, carried my suitcase, and insisted that I stay in Tehran and host me at their home. I had to go to the place where I was supposed to do an internship with one of the employees of the Office, who made a large welcome board with my name and accompanied me on the way. Little did I know that this would be the beginning of true Iranian hospitality.

The first thing that caught my attention was: the number of side supermarkets, really fast and crazy driving that takes some getting used to ☺, people crossing the highways, the smell of cement in the air, and finally the variety of Iranian landscapes in a small land where you will find yourself in a desert-like area, move into the mountain range and you will end up with a fragrant green rice field spread all over the province of Mazandaran with bushes reaching up to 5 meters with the turquoise blue Caspian Sea at the end of the road.

It didn't take long for me to realize how different Iran is from Poland and other so-called "civilized" countries. It is worth knowing that Iranians are very laid back, some people sing their hearts out in public, the rat race is not as visible as in European countries, people are much more family-oriented and try to respect others as much as possible sharing their values and continuing the 'tarooף' tradition ☺ It is common to gather for lunch at workplaces to eat together as a sign of respect and a sign of a collectivist society.



### The first days were the most fascinating, yet the most challenging:

Due to the protests, the government blocked most of the social networks and turned off the internet from 4 pm to 12 am, making it difficult to work in the office. Also, the Iranian currency is one of the worst in the world so it is better to use credit cards. The official currency is the Rial, but people speak and write prices in Toman. To get the Toman amount, take one zero off the Rial (100,000 Rials = 10,000 Tomans). Sounds simple, but it can be confusing. Once I was buying water and I heard the price - 50,000. Ok, Rial or Toman? Do they want to charge me with water for PLN 60 or PLN 6? Fun Fact - People shout out their PIN codes after being asked for them by cashiers. Persian bathrooms: standard Persian showers do not have cubicles, instead there is a separate room for them with shower heads in the middle of the bathroom, where the water flows to the drain placed in the tiles. Persian toilets can give people a headache, but it's only a matter of time before this becomes the new normal. Persian calendar: In Iran, people use the Persian calendar, which means the year is now 1401. Additionally, there is a Persian writing system that made it difficult to check the expiration date on products. If you ask me whether it is safe to walk outside alone then let me tell you that it is completely fine as long as you try to avoid leaving after dawn and learn how to cross the non-stopping cars.



## 3 STEREOTYPES

It is a fact that some **restaurants** are gender segregated, with women sitting in different parts of the room. However, in Tehran cafes, the rule doesn't apply. When it comes to weddings, it is increasingly popular for Iranians to organize them on the outskirts of the cities, out of the morality police's sight, usually guarded by Afghans.

**Handshake** – women can't shake hands with men – most men don't follow this rule and in my case, they didn't feel it was wrong to initiate a handshake. Those, who prefer not to shake hands intend only to respect the opposite sex.

**Women in Iran aren't respected** – I've visited several Iranian families and, contrary to popular belief, women are treated with great respect and care both professionally and personally. Moreover, they are perceived as hope for a better future.

**Hijab** – The headscarf is mandatory in Iran, but many women don't follow this strict rule and instead wear it halfway up their heads.

**Singing** – Under Islamic law, women are not allowed to sing in public, but there are still many female Iranian singers. To my surprise, I was offered to perform at a wedding, with the whole choir of guests accompanying me at the end. In addition, I often used to sing with taxi drivers on my way to the office :-).



## 4 WHAT SURPRISED ME THE MOST

**Taxi(Snapp)** – It is the best means of transport. Most taxi drivers don't speak English. Fortunately, there is an app where you can pin your location, pay online in advance, and wait for a taxi to arrive.

**Seeing my name everywhere** – As I was staying by the sea and 'Darya' in Farsi means 'sea', there was a lot of hotels and cafes named Darya Fanoos, Darya café,...

**Level of hospitality** – I was amazed my friend Leyla waited for me to finish my shower and dry out my hair. Not to mention the fact that she and her sister Elnaz were happy to do my makeup. Their mother always took care of my belly, and at her relative's wedding, she would come up to me with a banana

and say 'bokhor' – eat. I believe there was no other choice then 😊

**Picnics** – Iranians are crazy about outdoor picnics. People sitting on Persian-style sheets can be found in the mountains, parks, or secluded places sipping Iranian chai. Once, my attention was drawn to a couple who were lying in the middle of the sidewalk near a busy street with pillows under their heads.



Women and children remove bad energy by using espond smoke to fill cars with

**Wedding** - during the ceremony, the bride and groom enter the room and protect each other from the evil eye – making circles overhead with Espando in hand. Later, people gather to dance around the newlyweds and throw money at them, wishing for wealth



**Splashing water behind a traveler** – family does it as a way for wishing safe travels

**Street bumps** – be careful when driving in Iran – there is a high risk of hitting the top of your head (speaking from my own experience), especially with the fast and chaotic Iranian driving

**Friends** – in Iran everyone is your friend and should be treated with great respect. Strangers often call each other ‘brother’ or ‘sister’

**Gas station** – if your car is gas-powered and you are a passenger, it is better to walk 20 meters away from the car. Safety first 😊

**Sleeping on carpets** – Some people don’t use beds,

instead, they sleep on carpets (nearly as comfortable as beds, but better for the body).

**Darya Kenar** - This is a place where Iranian public rules don't apply. This is due to the fact that it is a guarded private property to which the police are not allowed. Inside, restaurants by the coast, beautiful greenery, quad rides, and lots of families and young people (especially girls) without hijab. There are many Persian songs about this place



## 5 CONCLUSION:

I’d never traveled anywhere alone, nor had I been to a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country, however, my stay in Iran was truly fascinating. As an amateur traveler, I must admit that everyone around me showed great respect and care. I have never felt lonely in Iran. Iranians love guests and do their best to make them feel at home. During my internship, I often forgot I was in the office because the people around me felt like my own family. Moreover – some of them have been to Opole as guests, so we had a lot in common. Surprisingly enough, I felt very comfortable in Iran, despite the rough time it is going through. In Iran, it is easy to forget about your past life, worries and just live your moment. Seeing a different world taught me unconditional respect for the people and gratitude for the comforts of my world. It was a journey of self-discovery. I must admit I have gained a lot of courage, self-trust, and confidence that will hopefully carve a new path in my life. I have got so much more to see and experience in Iran. I truly embraced the feeling of being out of Europe, beyond what I was familiar with, and soon realized how much I wanted to feel what it was like living this way. I still want to come back and see the traditional lifestyle in Iranian villages, green pastures, and a sense of belonging to a completely different culture, which is the purest form of beauty of this world.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t travel too much because of the protests in the country. Nevertheless, I am grateful for all my experiences during this short stay in Iran. My transition to ‘European’ life is still ongoing. I can’t accept the fact that I couldn’t stay longer 😊

If you have any questions, you can contact me via Facebook or Instagram.

