

My French Connection

by

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Ah, summer in Chagcharan – I mean ugh, summer in Chagcharan. Like it or not, I along with 2 other Food For Work volunteers were placed in Ghor Province in the early months of 1972. Situated in the heart of Afghanistan, Ghor was only reachable from the east after the spring snow thaw and from the west by one the country's infamous unmarked routes through swollen river gullies and rocky passes. My home during the summer of '72.



Chagcharan, Ghor Afghanistan 1

Rushed through training, Food for Work volunteers were placed in several provinces experiencing unusual drought, low food supply and facing mass starvation.

The goal was to start as many community projects as possible, and pay local villagers in wheat.



Gov. LaLa, General Seraj, Police Chief 1

Chagcharan, Ghor's provincial capital, we soon realized times were desperate. The governor had shipped most able-bodied men out of the province, leaving throngs of distressed women and children.

Compounding the problem, groups of Koochis began to arrive with hopes of relief from starvation. Well this should be interesting.



Koochi Camps 1

On this particular day, Jim Mathewson and Ron Dizon were traveling in some remote part of the province to start a project, which left me holding down the fort in the capital. I returned to our house in late afternoon expecting another fulfilled evening killing flies that invaded the area – and especially our house – at the start of warming weather.

Suddenly a local policeman appeared at the door asking me to quickly come to the police station to meet my friends. My friends? I wouldn't even invite my enemies to Ghor. Obviously intrigued, off I went to investigate.



French World Travelers 1

Huddled in a small room, were 6 French travelers – 2 women and 4 men – who had abruptly arrived in town from the west in two land rovers. Looking rather scared and apprehensive, there seemed to be a sigh of hope upon my arrival. I approached the prettiest of the two women - is she expecting a French kiss? A Parisian handshake?

I decided to remain coy and ask if anyone spoke English; yes, said the pretty mademoiselle.

The group had rented the cars in Iran with the intention of a driving tour to India. When asked if they had any travel authorization papers, the interpreter just smiled (let's call her Cozette). Now does she expect a kiss? No one in the group seemed to realize (or care) the need for transit papers in this part of the world.



What to do, what to do? I told the comandante that indeed they were friends; my cousin from France had come to visit. He released the troupe in my care, and made sure I told them that their land rovers would be confiscated, and they would be put on a lorry the next morning. There wasn't any negotiation; they were lucky to leave as quickly as they came. I suggested we go the only tea house for dinner so I could get to know my new-found relative. I was peppered with questions: why am I here? why can't they get in their cars and return to Iran? What's the nightlife like in Chagcharan (if you know please tell me). After we were brought small dishes of palau, I asked each diner to leave some food on their plate. The owner would collect leftovers, and hand them out to beggars at the rear of the house. A sad comment on the state of things to come.

By early morning they had left. Oh well, I need to kill some flies.

