Iran, One American's Naive Perspective
By Doug Biesecker

Never in my life did I think I would visit the country which had such a vivid, negative impression on me in my teenage years. Now I've been there twice and would recommend to any American that they try to visit Iran as well.

About two years ago, Alan Hale invited me to join a group that was planning to view the solar eclipse in Iran. I immediately jumped at the chance. I think because I knew about the desire to improve relations between the US and Iran, but also because I wanted to find out what it was really like. After all, I had read the newspaper accounts about the newly elected, reform minded president and I knew about the exchange of wrestlers between the two countries.

So, what can I say about Iran after two visits there? The fact that I went back for a second visit pretty much tells it all, but I'll elaborate.

I've been to smaller towns and I've been to big cities. No matter where I was, the reception from folks on the streets was always welcoming. Of course, I stick out with my blue eyes and brown hair. I can't walk more than 30 feet before someone says "hello" and asks me where I'm from. When I say America, the questions come fast, "Do you like Iran?, What do you think of Iranians?" My answer is always, yes, Iran is wonderful and the people here treat me better than anywhere else. Iranians are always sure to point out that they like Americans. They just don't like our government. Well, plenty of Americans don't like our government either. In Iran, I feel safe everywhere, whether walking alone or in a group. Many Iranians just enjoy the chance to practice their English.

But meeting nice people isn't enough incentive to visit a country twice. No, in Iran, what you will see are places large and small with buildings which will amaze you and which are stunningly beautiful. It would be impossible to name them all. Let me summarize a few. First of course, is Persepolis, but that's too obvious. The Ali Sadr caves, where I got to pedal a boat through the caves are wondrous. In Khorramabad, the 3000-4000 year old artifacts on display at Falak-ol-Aflak are incredible. In Esfahan, the Armenian Vank Cathedral is the most beautiful church I've ever seen. And it is testament to the acceptance that Iranians have for other cultures and religions. Outside of Esfahan, at the Shaking Minarets, I was able to stand inside a minaret as it was being shaken. In Shiraz, the Bogh'e-ye Shah-e

Cheragh Shi'ite Muslim Mosque was unbelievable. To enter such a holy place was amazing. Even more amazing was the guard inviting the women in our group over to the men's side. Even I was a little apprehensive about the reaction that might cause. But, once again, there was no reason for concern.

I visited Iran for 12 days in August, 1999, and for 8 days in July, 2000. I didn't notice any dramatic changes between my two visits. Except for the drought, that is. I do believe that many people, men and women alike, were dressing less conservatively now. Iranians want change. The older people and the young alike. Many of the younger people don't feel it's happening fast enough. The older people do see it happening and are confident of the future. The children of Iran are impatient, however. They are getting a good education and now they want a chance to use it. The population boom in Iran is incomprehensible. The children at the leading edge of the boom are now ready to enter the workforce. Most of the students think there is no place for them in the workplace. Maybe if US-Iran relations are improved, US companies will invest in Iran and create jobs for a ready and able work force.

In my mind, the images of the hostage crisis at the US Embassy have been replaced by images of a country with friendly, beautiful people. The history is compelling and the tourist sites are unparalled. Most importantly, every Iranian I meet is concerned about my opinion of their country. Rest assured, I've got the greatest respect for the Iranian people. When you visit, be sure to try the Khoresh-e Bademjan, and you'll discover that stew can taste good.