

You can tell a lot about a country's reputation from the sharp intake of breath from friends when you tell them where you're going. That, and the height of the raised eyebrow. On a scale of ten, Iran was 8.4 on the breath and 9.1 on the eyebrow monitor. "Hope you can get a couple of years off work," said one.

Now, there are some places where even an intrepid south London football team would think twice about going: Colombia, Somalia and Iraq come to mind. And no one would say the streets of Tehran are safe. But that's nothing to do with mobs or carjackings; it's just the traffic is so chokingly, monotonously bad. Not anarchic, like in Delhi, or aggressive, like in Athens. Tehranis simply get to where they're going. Slowly.

Will you get harangued by imams or beaten with sticks for wearing shorts? Certainly not. The clerical class keeps a very low profile. We took Foreign Office advice and stuck to long trousers for a couple of days. Then someone pointed out that half the blokes in the streets and bazaars were wearing football shorts or cut-offs, so we tentatively graced the populace with proper, hairy, lily-white English knees. No arrests resulted, despite the strong case for police action on aesthetic grounds alone. Will you be held hostage? Only if you give any indication, however slight, that you're interested in buying a carpet.

"Iranians think of themselves as Europeans: it's that simple," said Geoff over dinner at the British Embassy. Geoffrey Adams is the British Ambassador to Iran. The very thing he needed after a hard day's nuclear brinkmanship, we decided, was a drink with a bunch of English footballers. Besides, half the team went to school with him, and his wife, Mary-Emma, is veteran of an earlier Blackheath tour (spectator rather than player). Being a career diplomat, he knew when his room for manoeuvre was limited, so we found ourselves sitting in chairs once occupied by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin (1943 Tehran conference) discussing the long-ball tactic and Chelsea's chances in Europe.

The embassy sits stolid, calm and Victorian under one of Asia's finest wisterias, the traffic keeping a respectful distance beyond the ample grounds. The dining room is the kind you usually see behind a velvet rope, next to a sign saying "no flash photography". It's said Stalin walked across the threshold, took one look at the fine portrait of Edward VII and threatened to walk out of the entire conference, claiming an imperialist plot. The late king did indeed look a lot like his relative, the last Tsar.

In the salon after dinner, we stood on priceless rugs drinking our last gin and tonics, listening to Suzanne Vega on the Adams' CD player and playing hide-and-seek with their children behind antique vases and tables. Such is modern diplomatic life. Geoff's comment struck me as curious. If the Iranians think they're in Europe and the rest of the world believes they're in Arabia, and the American neo-cons think they're slap bang in the Axis of Evil – where on earth were we?

"WELCOME," said the sign. "WELCOME TO SHEMIRANS MARTYR COMMANDERS FOOTBALL CENTER." 'Welcoming' wasn't the ideal word to describe the portraits of Ayatollahs Khamenei and Khomeini glaring down from the stands. Above the banner, a Revolutionary Guard with an automatic rifle paced the terraces. Higher above him, the Alborz mountains above northern Tehran rose hard and burnished like prison walls in the afternoon glare, their ridges dusted with snow.

There was a smaller banner on the back terrace: "Welcome to England football legend team."

The England football legends stepped gingerly onto the Astroturf (or "artificial grass", as the tour operator described it), feeling hamstrings and calves creaking after an hour in a traffic jam. England football legends were also experiencing a little nerve jangling. We weren't

nervous because of the bored-looking soldier with the gun, nor the Ayatollahs looking at us like referees about to administer a red card for a particularly decadent tackle. It was pure fear: fear that we were about to be exposed as impostors – Westerners who had travelled to Iran pretending to be proper footballers.

The athletic teenagers enjoying a practice game clearly had their suspicions. They cast quizzical looks at the battered deck shoes, baggy T-shirts and shapeless jackets that make up our official touring outfits. England football legends should be kitted out in designer suits. England football legends should have glamorous wives and girlfriends. This didn't look much like England football legends.

The diplomatic history of the United Kingdom and Iran is a long and tangled affair of misunderstandings and broken promises. No serious historian would deny the Iranians have had good reason to suspect the good faith of the British. This time, however, we were entirely innocent of Western skulduggery. We were footballers from a real club: the Racing Club de Blackheath (founded AD 1887). We weren't professional footballers. We hadn't even been very good amateur footballers in our prime, and our prime was two decades ago.

We'd repeated these facts in communiqué after communiqué, by fax and email. But the sins of our imperialist fathers were catching up with us. The opposition team, as they ushered us to our dressing room, still appeared distinctly surprised we had no manager, no physio, no ex-Spice Girl and not even a magic sponge between us – that we weren't, in effect, Chelsea Old Boys.

The dressing room had a carpet and framed pictures of league-winning teams. There was a board and a pen for us to work out our tactics. Someone suggested 11 men along the goal-line. Another traced the word HELP in big letters.

The opposition president brought in a small, sprightly, dapper man in his 60s. "Mr Homayoun Behzadi," he announced in tones that led us to expect we should look impressed. So we did. Any fan of Iranian football (and believe me, there are millions on the internet) would be impressed too. Mr Behzadi was a famous striker – "One of the three best headers of the ball in the world in his day," said our translator. If he expected to see Geoff Hurst, Martin Peters or another recognisable contemporary in our squad, he didn't show it.

We took surreptitious glances at the opposition. Our Iranian tour organisers had said, in an email, "Surely they are as age as your team but not professional, they play eventually."

Before the match, a man in a tracksuit and Nike sandals sang out prayers through a dodgy PA system. The holy words drifted above the hum of the traffic up into the snow-kissed mountains behind the city. The local crowd, not very devoutly, fidgeted.

The stadium filled up. Minutes before kick-off, a gaggle of excited young girls in their usual black headscarves and jeans were hastily ushered into a corner of the stand. This was interesting. Two Iranian stories had been in the news recently: the ongoing stand-off about nuclear technology, and the President's decision to allow women to watch football matches. It was a move that caused consternation among a clerical establishment fearful that the sight of so much male flesh would be corrupting. With that in mind, the girls might have been expected to keep a low profile. Instead, they screamed, cheered and chattered nonstop for two hours, while their brothers and fathers groaned from a safe distance. Our goalkeeper was a special favourite. Will the Cat favours close-fitting sweaters and tracksuit bottoms with ineffective elastic. Neither does much to protect his fine and manly frontage. I don't know if Will's stomach was corrupting as such, but the female spectators spent a lot of the match pointing at it as he tried to keep out the barrage of shots with one hand while deftly holding▶

PERFECT PITCHES OF PERSIA

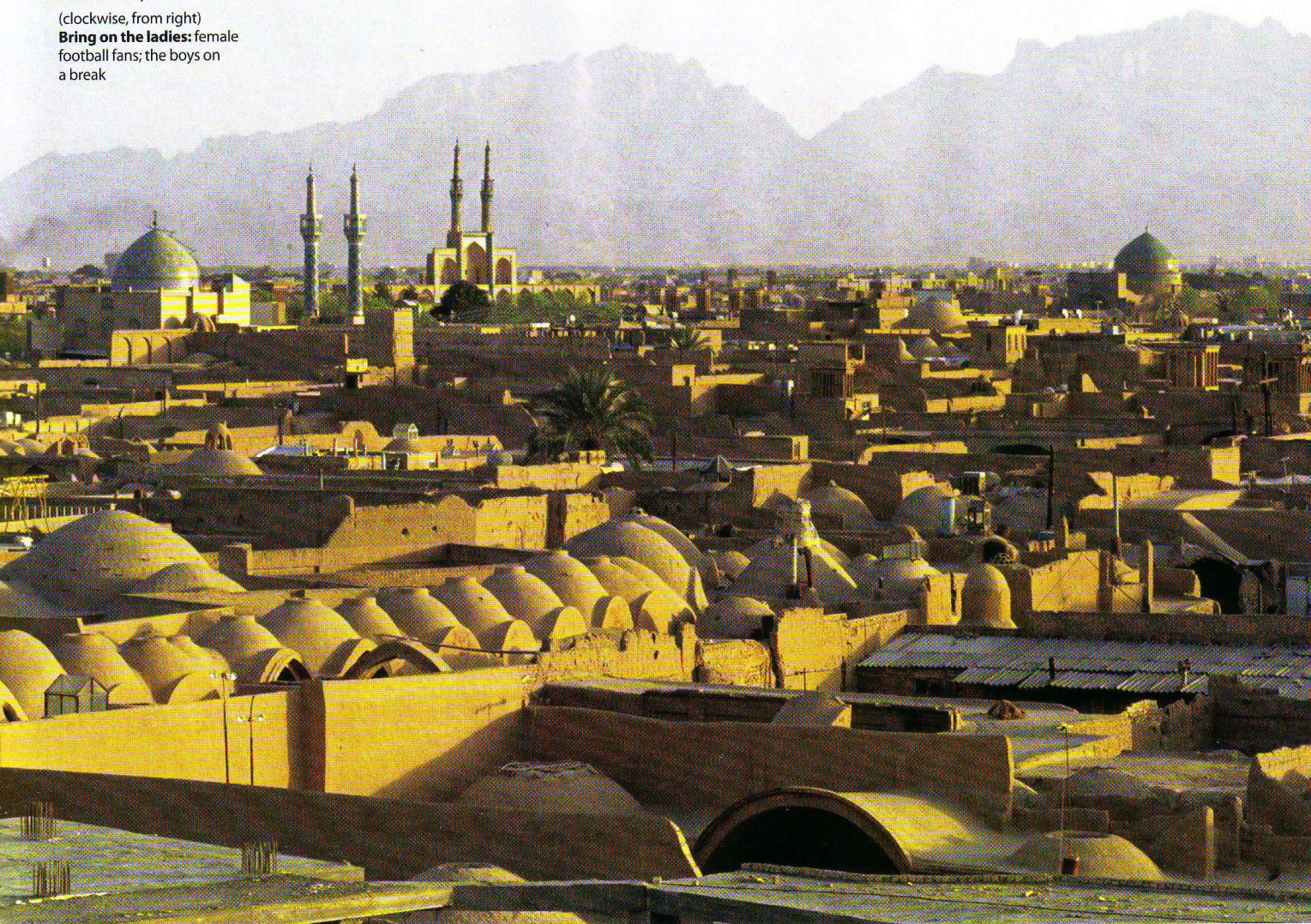
Along with his intrepid but superannuated football team, **Mark Jones** went on tour in Iran and discovered a land of friendly footballers, refined architecture and inquisitive locals



Looking south: view over the Jame'h Mosque in Yazd

(clockwise, from right)

Bring on the ladies: female football fans; the boys on a break



WHEN THE GAME'S UP...

STAY AT...

Tehran:

Kosar Hotel. +98 21 88908371

Shiraz:

Pars International. +98 711 2332255;
www.pars-international-hotel.com

Isfahan:

Alighapo. +98 311 2229584

VISIT...

The Sa'd Abad museum complex in north Tehran. The former Shah's oddly kitsch summer home.

Bagh-e Tarikhi-ye Fin near Kashan – pleasure gardens in the desert Persepolis, which ranks alongside Baalbeck, Petra and Palmyra for its magnificence and eerie calm. The rock tombs of Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab near Shiraz, final resting place of Zoroastrian emperors.

► up the keks with the other. Shortly after we returned to England, it was announced that the ban on female spectators would be reimposed.

We later found out the oppo was full of Iranian ex-internationals. We were eventfully stuffed. I think it was 9-0. And we lost the succeeding two games 6-1 and 10-1. Enough football, then. Let's get to Isfahan.

Wikipedia says of the city: "Isfahan is located on the main north-south and east-west routes crossing Iran. It is situated at 1,590m above sea level. It receives an average of 355mm of rain per year, making it similar to Denver, Colorado in terms of altitude and precipitation."

It's not very like Denver in other ways.

In the town centre, previous ambassadorial words are truly made flesh. It's European – or given that it's been a flourishing centre of arts and culture for 1,000 years, a place, arguably, that Europe got its ideas from. You can imagine a couple of 16th-century tourists from France wandering along the elegant river path, gazing across the wide stone bridges, lingering in the tightly knit parks, saying to each other, "Tell you what – let's do this in Paris." Then they'd wander along Chahar Bagh Abassi street and agree that there's something in this shopping craze, too.

Early evening has more than a touch of the Champs Élysées: not the posh bit towards Concorde, perhaps; but the stretch where the lights are bright and the people form an incessantly excited throng around shops, cinemas, food stalls and anywhere selling ice cream, an Iranian obsession. I worked all this out later. Isfahan was something of a blur to begin with. That's because everything is a blur when you're in an Iranian taxi, apart from the wing mirrors, curbs, road signs and motorcyclists that swerve into alarming and sudden focus as your driver belatedly and reluctantly slams on the brakes.

Then you see Imam Square.

This really isn't Europe or Asia. The great squares of the world have a separate, magnetic quality: they're of a city and a parallel mini-state within it. Literally so in the case of St Peter's, figuratively with Piazza



San Marco in Venice, the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, Red Square in Moscow. The people cross the open space and wander the arcades in a time bubble. The very sound of squares is different, a hubbub of negotiation where religion and commerce meet.

Imam Square, properly known as Naghsh-e Jahan, is the second largest in the world (after Tiananmen) and the architectural match of any. Shah Abbas the Great lived at the time of Shakespeare and his builders worked with something like Shakespeare's madly prolific genius during his 42 years on earth, when Isfahan became the capital of the Safavid dynasty. The minarets of the Sheikh Lutfullah and the Imam mosques gaze respectfully at one another across the northeast of the square; opposite, the pavilions of the Ali Qapu palace pay obeisance. As with all great Islamic architecture, God is in the detail, in the seven colours of the mosaic tiles in the Imam and the characteristic gold and ethereal blue inlaid work of the smaller mosque. In the palace reception rooms, there's a rare sight in Islamic art: faded representations of living things.

The best advice is to chuck away your map and guidebook and get yourself adopted by a local. We were milling around on the fringes of the bazaar when we were accosted by a well-spoken young man who offered to help. He took us on a disorienting journey through the back alleys, past mounds of spices, sweetmeat stalls and dusty yards, then led us down some dark steps. Inside was light – or rather, lights: about 200 of them, globes, baubles, lamps, chandeliers, in a room seating 30 people at a squash. If the owner of the Azadegan tea house ever decides to declutter his life, the refuse collectors of Isfahan will go on strike. His restaurant makes Aladdin's cave look minimalist. We ate oily soup and dips, talked sensible politics with our engineer friend, then accompanied him to his dad's shop.

Yes, he wanted to sell us stuff. Nothing wrong with that. Times are hard: Isfahan is hardly packed with paying visitors. So you don't adopt a miserly backpacker suspiciousness: you go with the flow and get out the greenbacks. The craftsmanship of the bazaar is wonderful. The engineer's

dad sat in a shady courtyard wearing an old tracksuit top, calmly marking his mountain of fabrics with vegetable dyes and an ornate wooden stamp. Opposite, and all around the square, there were displays of beautiful enamel tableware in that same ethereal blue. Isfahan is one of the world's great browsing souks, with none of the hassle you'll encounter elsewhere.

With a backpack full of jugs and tablecloths, I escaped into the square only to be picked up again, this time by two female university students called Mobina and Poppy. We did a deal. I'd let them interrogate me about Western mores, especially regarding boys and girls, if they helped me buy a ridiculously over-the-top clock at a decent price. Thus we spent a happy hour wandering the square, chatting and haggling. "So, in your country how long must you know a girl before you can marry?" "Well, a lady at work has just got married and she's been with her partner for 26 years." "We don't believe you." "That one's got a peacock on it – how much does he want?" "We don't have boyfriends. Iranian boys don't tell you the truth." "English boys are very honest. Especially footballers." "The man wants ten US dollars. How can people have children if they are divorced?" I said my goodbyes to Mobina and Poppy and said I'd hope we meet again. I meant this quite sincerely, as I was about to get into an Iranian taxi. The driver had the beatific, if slightly manic, smile of a man who cheats death and mayhem a dozen times a day. The bazaar dissolved in a puff of diesel smoke, the minarets accelerated backwards in the sky, people and chickens fled before us and I sat back in the seat and relaxed. You're always safe in Iran. ■

High Life travelled to Iran on tour with the Racing Club de Blackheath. The tour was organised by Gashstours (+98 711 2301900; www.irangashtour.com). If you want unreliable but well-meaning information on the Racing Club tours, visit www.rcdeb.com. If you'd like them to visit your country to play, please ensure players are a) old and b) mediocre.

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways franchise partner British Mediterranean Airways flies five times a week to Tehran. Visit ba.com