



Letters from Afghanistan

Friday, 24th September, 2004

Dear All,

Thank you very much to those of you who have sent emails – it is great to hear from you! I have tried to reply to as many as I could, but it is not always possible to reply to all, so I'm sorry if I haven't replied to you. Some of you have said you feel you shouldn't write about your lives in Australia as it is so boring compared to life here, but a) I do enjoy hearing about what you are up to, and b) it can often be boring here too! There are not a lot of things to do, especially because of the restriction in movement owing to the security situation and difficulty getting around; I don't know many people and it is hard to meet them because of the lack of things to do and the difficulty getting around; etc. There are many fascinating aspects of life here, but it can also be boring!

One of the fascinating aspects was a wedding I went to a couple of weeks ago with another Australian volunteer. She had been invited to the wedding of the daughter of one of her work colleagues, and he had invited her to bring a friend. That was very thoughtful of him, as she didn't know anyone among the women at the wedding, and the men and women celebrate separately! She was only invited a couple of days before, as is the custom here. It was held in a wedding hall at a hotel – a very large room with partition down the middle and the men in one end and the women and children in the other end, with a very loud band playing in the middle so that both ends could hear. When we arrived it was in full swing, and the bride and groom were sitting on throne-like chairs on a stage in the women's end of the hall, looking very serious. In fact the official party looked very serious throughout the night, particularly when they were having their photos taken later in the evening. We were also taken up to have our photos taken with them, and had to remember to also look serious!



Most of the women were very dressed up and some changed their clothes several times during the evening! It is one of the few opportunities for them to dress up!

There was quite a bit of dancing at our end of the hall, particularly by the younger women and some of the children, and I believe there was also dancing at the men's end of the hall but of course didn't see it! We were also dragged up to dance, which was fun.

I think some ceremonies had been held in private earlier. Later in the evening after the meal had been served, (the bride, groom and close family had their meal in a private room), there were some more ceremonies in the women's end of the hall, including the bride and groom walking in through an arch with a copy of the Holy Qur'an held over their heads. They then sat on the "thrones" again, and a shawl was placed over their heads, a Holy Qur'an opened in front of them under the shawl, and a mirror held under the shawl for them to look into. Traditionally they are supposed to see each other for the first time in the mirror. But in this case the bride and groom had seen each other at least earlier that evening, though I'm not sure if it was before that, as it was an arranged marriage – as most of them are.

It was a very interesting and enjoyable evening, and the other guests (at least the women!) were very friendly, although only a few spoke much English. The music was too loud for much of a conversation anyway!

There must be a wedding hall near the house, as quite often we hear the music – sometimes very loud! And they are on any night of the week.

The wedding cars are elaborately decorated with ribbons and artificial flowers, and one night last week I saw a guy sitting right out of the window of a car with a video camera filming the wedding car driving behind – and holding up all the traffic in the process!

After an unseasonably hot (and even humid!) week last week the weather has changed this week and particularly at night is quite cool. There was a thunderstorm and even a little bit of rain a few days ago, which brought in the change. Some people claimed to have seen snow on the peaks



around Kabul that afternoon – but that must have been before the dust/mud storm because after that you couldn't see much at all!

Around Kabul you see stacks of firewood being transported, sometimes by men dragging carts piled high with wood and prepared for winter. In some places you see whole streets of firewood yards, with great stacks of wood of different sizes. It is alarming to think where it comes from! But the only heating sources are wood and sawdust (there are special heaters which use the sawdust), and there is not a lot of electricity during the winter (it is already becoming less frequent) so you can't use anything else. Apparently the house (and office) and all your clothes smell of smoke all the time. Not particularly something to look forward to!

A brief update on the students from our classes killed which I mentioned last time – a total of 9 people were killed, including the madrassa teacher (not our teacher). Three of those killed were our students, and 12 of our students and the teacher were also injured, several of them quite seriously. It is still unclear what happened and why, but one theory is that the madrassa teacher was teaching his students to make explosives and it blew up! Regardless of the reason, needless to say our class is no longer held in the madrassa!

I have visited some more classes around Kabul, which has been very interesting, and inspiring to see the enthusiasm of the students. Also good to see some other areas of Kabul and to get out of the office!

How is the election campaign going over there? At least I am spared most of it here, as I don't listen to the local radio as I don't under-



reasonably ripe. Apparently a lot of the fruit and vegetables come from Pakistan, and also things like eggs and chicken (some of which also comes from Iran). A lot of the manufactured food (packets, tins, etc) also comes from Pakistan, and some from United Arab Emirates and Iran, and the more “exotic” items which are available in some places from further afield. Most other manufactured goods, eg electrical goods, pots and pans, etc, come from China. There doesn't seem

to be any kind of industry or “value-adding” in Afghanistan at all, and I have been told that even when there is agricultural production beyond subsistence there is often no or limited means to get it to the market. So there is a long way to go for this country!

Most of the sheep you see wandering around Kabul are “fat-tailed” sheep – they have 2 huge lumps of fat hanging off their rump, which looks quite weird, especially when you see their carcasses hanging up at the butcher stalls! I have read that these lumps of fat have the same function as a camel's hump.

We have to leave by the end of next week for at least 2 weeks over the (Afghan!) election period. AVI are paying for a flight to Islamabad in Pakistan but is up to us what we do during this time. I will go to the mountains in northern Pakistan and plan to do some hiking! I am really looking forward to spending some time in the mountains and in some greenery, and doing some hiking! I will also visit another Australian volunteer in Gilgit, in the mountains. Could be starting to be a bit cold though! I won't have very regular email access while I'm there, so if you write and I don't reply don't worry!

By the way, for those of you who contributed to it, this laptop has been great! I use it at work as there are not enough computers, and I use it at home to write letters like this to email from work, to listen to music and occasionally watch DVD's (you can get lots of pirate DVD's here, but they are not always good quality). Thanks very much! The camera is great too, and one of these days I'll get around to sending some photos!

Love to all,
Pam



stand it, and we don't have TV (which would be the same problem, anyway). All I have seen of it are posters around town of a couple of the main candidates.

Some people have asked about food and fruit and vegetables. We can get fresh fruit and vegetables at the bazaar around the corner, though the variety is less than it was when we arrived, and will no doubt continue to decrease during the winter. Common vegetables are tomatoes, eggplant, okra, a kind of large chive/small leek, onions, garlic, radishes, cucumber (less so now), sometimes carrots, and now some cabbage. When we arrived there were lots of apricots and peaches, but they have finished now. Other fruits are watermelons, another delicious melon the size of a watermelon but more like a honey dew melon (except nicer!), grapes, bananas and apples. The fruit often doesn't look that fabulous, but is usually delicious, I think at least partly as it is picked