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Thursday, Oct. 02, 2008

## Afghanistan's Very Careful Tour Guides

By Don Duncan / MAZAR-I-SHARIF

The lines between the Afghanistan at war and the Afghanistan at peace alter daily. Cities accessible by road today may only be reached by plane — or not at all — tomorrow. And so follow the boundaries of the nation's tiny tourism industry. The few foreign tourists who come to Afghanistan, estimated to number under a thousand yearly, need plenty of help to pull off their holidays safely. In cities like Kabul, Herat, Faizabad and Mazar-i-Sharif, a small legion of Afghans who spent the last seven years as translators and security aides are spinning their expertise at navigating this shifting landscape into a new business. Now, they are also tour guides.

The young sector is not exactly crowded. Two companies — [Afghan Logistics and Tours](#) and [Great Game Travel](#) — run most of the tours in the country, drawing and redrawing the map — on a daily basis — of where travel is advisable and where it's not. "Sometimes the whole population knows something and the tourist doesn't know," says Andre Mann, the American director of Great Game Travel who arrived in Afghanistan over three years ago. "The local officials, security networks and international organizations we have relationships with all give us a heads-up if they see a shift in tactics by the Taliban or a change in security on a certain road." The company acts accordingly, switching a route to a city, deciding to fly instead of driving or canceling an expedition outright.

Mann says there are two kinds of tourists who venture to Afghanistan. Some come seeking to escape to remote places like the Wakhan Corridor, an elevated, sparsely populated strip of Afghanistan that reaches China between Pakistan and Tajikistan. Others come to witness the nation's raw history of recent conflict. Last March, Blair Kangley, a 56-year-old American, traveled with Afghan Logistics and Tours from Kabul to the [Bamian valley, famous as the site of the once-towering Buddhas, blown up by the Taliban in 2001](#). While tour guide Mubim accompanied Kangley on what was planned to be a two-day tour, he was in continual contact with the head Kabul office, plugged into its own formal and informal information networks ranging from the Afghan army and police to U.S. and NATO intelligence personnel. After word reached Mubim that there was a "block" on what had been the only "safe road" back to Kabul, Kangley found himself hanging out in Bamian for three days more. "We eventually were prepared to take a U.N. flight out," he says. "The locals unblocked the road just in time and we left by car in an exciting all-night jaunt."

Indeed, Afghan Logistics and Tours regards itself more as a logistics company than a tourist outfit; tourism comprises only about 10% of its business. "But we hope to increase our tourism to between 60% and 70%," says Muqim Jamshady, the company's 28-year-old director who steers security intelligence to his team of

driver/guides from his desk in Kabul, littered with over a dozen walkie-talkies and satellite phones. That increase will happen, Jamshady adds, "once Afghanistan gets more peaceful." He doesn't speculate exactly when that moment will arrive.

In the meantime, he and Mann continue to organize tours to sites like Bamian and Qala-i-Jangi, a 19th century fortress some 12 miles (20 km) outside Mazar and one of the sites of final resistance by the Taliban against the Northern Alliance and the U.S.-led forces in 2001. Today, the bullet holes along the walls of the fortress remain unplastered. Shoib Najafizada, Afghan Logistics and Tours' man in Mazar, leads visitors around the rusty remnants of tanks and heavy artillery that lie strewn around. Like other guides, Najafizada offers firsthand accounts of some of the key moments of the country's recent turbulence. He was present at the battle of Qala-i-Jangi, as a translator for the coalition forces, and today he deciphers the untouched graffiti scratched in Persian and Urdu into black scorched walls of the fortress: "Long Live the Taliban," or "In Memory of Mullah Mohammad Jan Akhond," a Pakistani fighter with the Taliban who died in the conflict.

Mann says much of his outfit's business is in visiting these historic sites of battle. But on some recent tours, he says, "It's not unusual for a Black Hawk or an Apache helicopter to fly over. And it is clear that [the conflict] I am describing is still going on." With security as fragile as it is in Afghanistan, there are no real relics there yet. "These battles we describe could be the future as they have been the past."

[\(Watch a video about Kabul's emerging skateboard culture.\)](#)

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