
Prologue

Santana Soul Sacrifice • Lyrics

During my twenty-second lap around the sun, Scott, Dave, and I were standing on the hot and dusty tarmac of the Kabul International Airport.

We scrutinized the ground crew as they loaded freight aboard a Pan Am flight to Frankfurt, Germany, with an ultimate destination of Cleveland, Ohio, USA. We were also attentive to the ongoing commentary of the Afghan Pan Am Ground Agent named Mohammed.

He had been skillfully paying airport workers according to their status from the wad of Afghani currency (known as *afghanis*) that we gave him. Mohammed guided us through the terminal, past immigration and customs, and out into the bright sun of a warm summer day in Afghanistan of 1973.

Mohammed was a scholarly man and excelled in bribes. Like less fortunate street hustlers, he was fluent in English, Farsi, Pashto, and in multiple European languages. I also heard him

converse in Afrikaans. He was sharp and clever—often a person to be wary of. We'd already encountered some textbook examples of that type on the road to Afghanistan. In the coming months, Mohammed proved himself honest and capable, a valuable resource, and a fine human being.

Noor recommended him to us in Kabul. We spent months at Noor's carpet store enjoying tea, hearing tales, and choosing carpets to ship back to the US.

Oriental carpets are beautiful and timeless objects of art. We knew they were very cool, and all things Afghani were popular in the West, due in part to John Lennon and other rockers wearing "Afghan" coats. However, we knew those coats were from Turkey, not Afghanistan. We came to appreciate the origin and beauty of carpets in those months, sipping chai and learning how to identify fakes as Noor schooled us from abject novices to knowledgeable rookies. He also sold us a lot of his carpets.

It required a keen and experienced eye to identify an antique carpet from a just-woven carpet. And countless "antique" carpets jammed the local market. One day, Noor escorted us on a field trip to the northern part of Kabul on a congested and dusty road that was filled with trucks and buses. Through the choking cloud of street dirt and debris, Oriental carpets littered the road. The traffic wore down the nap of the new carpets, dirt provided authenticity, and the shiny new colors dulled. And that, Noor firmly pointed out, was where so many "antique" carpets originated.

Carpets were fun, and we hoped profitable to import to the US. The trip from Amsterdam to Kabul through Frankfurt was a trial run for us because we had a secondary purpose in mind.

For Scott and me, Afghanistan materialized on our radar screen as the source of the unquestionably best hashish known. We were aware of and had indulged in the other top contenders: Kashmir from northern India, Nepal bordering India and China, and Chitral in northern Pakistan. But in our minds, there was no argument—Afghani was the best. And we intended to go there, find it, smoke it, and facilitate making it available to others.

The sun beat down relentlessly and the temperature rose steadily as we stood with Mohammed on the tarmac. We were a strange sight: three long-haired Westerners gawking as the plane taxied to the runway to prepare for takeoff. The engines roared, and the plane lurched forward and began its journey west.

As the wheels retracted into the fuselage and the plane soared skyward, we turned to walk away. Mohammed gestured at us and said, “*Na!*” (No, stop!) Following his lead, we waited until the plane disappeared from sight. Then he smiled, turned, and led us back into the terminal. We exchanged no words, contemplating what just happened. The lesson presented was unmistakable—never trust without verifying.

And thus we received a brief course in International Business 101. A timely tutorial, and valuable for our stated aspiration.



Noor & Helper in Kabul carpet store