It was a little past noon on the 23rd of August 2006 when our battered cargo jeep rounded the last hairpin turn on what had been one of the hairiest, most white-knuckled rides in a long career of hairy, white-knuckled journeys, and we caught our first glimpse of a sight I’d been waiting for almost my entire life. An almost electric feeling of elation and relief filled me, and my grin was so wide it hurt. We stared down the narrow river valley, and between the steep cliffs towered the fabled Minaret of Jam. As was ever the case in Afghanistan, the reality of the actual experience exponentially exceeded any fantasy that could possibly be entertained.

I’d first heard of the lost minaret in 1972 when I’d crossed the border from Iran and was staying in Herat, the first major city on the Afghan side of the border, but I was too new and inexperienced in the ways of Afghan culture to attempt it then. During my year’s residence and subsequent stays in Afghanistan in the 1970s I tried several times to organize expeditions, but the Central Route through Afghanistan was the Ultima Thule of adventure travel and the timing was never right. My last attempt had been the year before, but, after negotiating the tricky three-day overland journey on local transport down from Mazar-i-Sharif, I couldn’t find anyone in Herat to share a cargo jeep onwards, and I had to abandon the attempt. The year 2006 was different, though. I had arranged in advance to meet an old friend in Kabul, the guidebook author Paul Clammer, and I was to accompany him as his guide and translator. We were attempting the full-circle route of Northern Afghanistan, starting with the Central Route, and then continuing up the back way from Herat to Mazar. I knew

Ghiyath al-din Minar—The Minaret of Jam

Does the fate threatening the Minaret of Jam mirror the imminent fate of Afghanistan?

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN A. SHUCART

“At a corner between cliffs, the minaret was there, straight and tapering as a candle or a beautifully rolled umbrella, etched from top to bottom with patterns, ribands and bands and medallions, cut in the hard-baked brick whose biscuit colour showed light against the mountain walls.”

of others who had traveled both routes, but I had never heard of anyone attempting to do them back to back on the same trip.

The sun was bright and the air was dry and dusty, though, at 1830 meters, it wasn't oppressively hot. The previous night, Paul and I had slept on the floor of a chaikhana in Chaghcharan. We had been on the road for a week, and this was our third vehicle. Our cargo jeep had left just past dawn, and slowly made its way around one of the longest nomadic camel caravans I had ever encountered. We were out there in the 'Back of Beyond' doing research for the first edition of *Lonely Planet Afghanistan*, and this was about as 'Afghanistan' as it ever gets.
If you could journey anywhere in the world, where would you go? Paris? Rome? Athens? Visit the Taj Mahal under a full moon? The Potala Palace in Lhasa? Hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu? Sail the South Seas to Tahiti? For me, the Holy Grail of adventure travel has always been to take the Central Route through Afghanistan and visit the Minaret of Jam. But today there is a very real danger that, after over 800 years, this fabled landmark will topple and it will no longer be possible for future travellers to fulfill that dream.

So, what is the Minaret of Jam and why is it significant? Was it ever a major tourist destination? Where is the tower and can you still get there? How close is the danger of impending collapse? In 1982 UNESCO nominated the Minaret of Jam as a World Heritage Site, but, in 2002, it was downgraded to UNESCO’s World Heritage in Danger Status. A BBC article published on 28 August 2014 warned that the minaret was in danger.

After working as a street artist/jeweler in San Francisco in the late 1960s, STEPHEN SHUCART left America for Asia in 1972. He traveled overland to Afghanistan, living there for a year while buying Persian turquoise and Afghan lapis lazuli to sell in California. He lived in India, Nepal and Afghanistan during the rest of the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s he was co-owner of Triplegem Lapidary in Kathmandu, Nepal. He moved to Sendai, Japan in 1990, and has been Associate Professor of English, running the CALL lab at Akita Prefectural University in Yurihonjo, Akita since 1999. He has returned to Afghanistan four times since 2002, his most recent trip being during the summer of 2012.
of collapse. The most immediate danger is not manmade, though: a natural catastrophe threatens most. The Minaret of Jam is situated a day’s journey to the east of Herat, and, due to the nature of the narrow Hari-Rud river valley, frequent flooding and years of neglect have undercut its precariously worn base causing the structure to lean 3.47 degrees from vertical. On 18 November 2014 the New York Times reported that UNESCO officials and scientists had made their first visit to the monument since 2006. Using laser instruments for their measurements, the UNESCO scientists determined that it had moved 16-28 mm since that last visit. They claim this to be a critical situation and an increase in the tilt by even a single centimeter could cause huge stability problems. This is especially significant because the base is only 8 meters in diameter.

The intricately-etched spire was erected by the Ghurid ruler Sultan Ghiyath al-Din sometime between the years 1165 and 1195 CE, depending on how the foundation inscription is read, with 1173/4 CE being the most likely date of construction. At the time it was built the 65-meter tower was the tallest minaret in the world. Today, only the 73 meter Qutb Minar in Delhi, begun in 1202 CE and not finished until 1368, stands taller. Though there are taller victory towers elsewhere in India, most notably the 100-meter Fatah Burj in the Punjab, the architectural wonder piercing the sky in this remote Afghan valley was quite certainly constructed as a minaret.

The Ghurid Dynasty lasted from the mid-12th century CE to the early 13th century. The dates are not exact, as Ghur was ever a loose conglomeration of hill tribes. Nancy Hatch Dupree, in her 1977 book An Historical Guide to Afghanistan, recounts an early legend of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (785-809) deciding a dispute between two rival Ghurid clans over paramountcy. What is certain is the fact that Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni invaded Ghur in 1009 and converted them to Islam. The year
1148 CE is the most accepted date for the beginning of the dynasty, with the destruction of the summer capital of Firuzkoh by the Mongol army under Genghis Khan's son Ögödei in 1222 generally considered to mark the end point. At its peak, the Ghurids ruled an area stretching from the now Iranian city of Nishapur in the West to the Bay of Bengal in the East.

How did this amazing architectural monument come to be built in such a lonely spot? For many years the exact location of Firuzkuh, which means Turquoise Mountain, the lost summer capital/fortress of the Ghurids was unknown, and early speculations cast the Minaret of Jam as but a victory tower constructed to commemorate the destruction of Ghazni. However, recent archaeological excavations have uncovered the foundation and courtyard of a mosque next to the minaret and thorough inspection of the holes dug by tomb raiders nearby has proven conclusively that the site was once part of a thriving city stretching along the narrow valley and up the hills on both sides. Why would the Mongols leave a lone tower standing after such complete destruction of the city? One can only speculate, but there is precedence. When Genghis Khan destroyed Bukhara in 1220 he spared the 48 meter Kalyon Minaret, so perhaps his son wanted to emulate his illustrious father.

Though the local inhabitants of those harsh hills obviously knew of the minaret’s existence, it was, from an historical perspective, lost from view for 660 years, until 1886, when rumors of the mythical ruins reached the ears of Major T.H. Holdich when he was in Herat working for the Afghan Boundary Commission. Major Holdich heard that the site had “…one or more minars half as high again as those of the Masalla at Herat.” (Geographical Results of the Afghan Boundary Commission—1887), but he never visited it and its precise location was never ascertained. In 1943 the minaret was spotted from the air and the find was reported to the governor of Herat. The rediscovery was mentioned in an Afghan journal the following year, but it wasn’t until the Belgian archaeologist Andre Marieq visited the site for a few hours in 1957 and returned to Kabul with photographs that the world finally took notice.

Over the next ten years it was visited by only a handful of intrepid archeologists, but the late 1960s saw the rise of another type of voyager, Dharma Bums, as Afghanistan became part of the Pilgrim Trail of young seekers making their way to the holy sites of India. Yet, even at the peak of overland travel to India and Nepal, the Central Route through Afghanistan was always the trail less traveled. There is no paved road to this day, and back then the only way to reach the Minaret was via private vehicle, on foot or by horseback. The forty-year reign of King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973) came to an end in 1973. That coup by the King’s cousin and ex-Prime Minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan, started the inexorable slide towards communism that ended with Soviet paratroopers storming the palace in December of 1979 and the installation of Babrak Karmal as the first of several Soviet puppet rulers. The 1980s and 1990s were a time of great violence, war and privation. The Afghan Mujahideen fought off the Soviets, but the Saudi and American intelligence services, with their own motives and agendas, backed rapacious warlords and precipitated a civil war that led directly to the rise of the Taliban. After 9/11 the Northern Alliance retook control of Afghanistan and the Karzai government was installed.
In early 2002 the British adventurer/diplomat Rory Stewart made the first recorded visit to the Minaret of Jam in over twenty years. Fluent in Afghan Dari, Stewart walked in mid-winter from Herat to Kabul, a journey recounted in his book *The Places In Between*. The photographer Luke Powell (see KJ 81) visited the minaret in 2003 and certainly a few more hardy adventurers must have undertaken the journey by the time we rolled up in 2006. Afghanistan then fell deeper into chaos over the next few years, with all overland visits becoming impossible by 2010. The UNESCO scientists needed a helicopter and hundreds of Afghan army soldiers to visit in November 2014, and it is doubtful that the situation will improve anytime in the near future.

One of the biggest ironies of all is that UNESCO’s latest attempt to preserve the Minaret may have planted the seeds of its ultimate destruction. As part of an NGO aid project to improve the lives of the local tribes, the nearly nonexistent road to the minaret was being widened and improved and a bridge was planned. UNESCO put a stop to this project as the vibrations from heavy equipment threatened the monument. In response, the local tribesmen threatened to blow up the Minaret themselves if it stood in the way of infrastructure projects to better connect them to the modern world.

The fabulous Minaret of Jam, the most iconic symbol of Afghanistan now that the twin Buddhas of Bamiyan have been destroyed, is caught in a Scylla and Charybdis/ Catch-22 mash-up. To preserve it from natural destruction UNESCO needs to immediately strengthen the base and perhaps attach thick metal wires to prevent further tilting, yet anti-government forces have isolated the valley even more. Aid projects could open the area to post-war tourism possibilities, but the projects themselves threaten to topple it. If the delicate nature of the Minaret blocks the aid projects, then the local tribes might blow it up, in an eerie echo of the Taliban’s destruction of the Buddhas.

The fate of the Minaret of Jam could be seen as a funhouse mirror reflecting the fate of Afghanistan. The whole country is teetering on the edge of a razor sharp Khyber knife.”
reflecting the fate of Afghanistan. The whole country is teetering on the edge of a razor sharp Khyber knife. Officially the war is over and the US/NATO forces have ended their mission.

A new government has taken over in Kabul. China, India, Iran, and Pakistan are all vying for influence and economic advantage. As ever, Afghanistan remains at the crossroads of history. The question now is whether the country can balance its traditional way of life against the invasion of the modern age? Or will it succumb to the shifting ground of forces outside its control? In my opinion, if the Minaret falls, so does the old Afghanistan; if it survives, then there is hope that Afghanistan itself can survive the aftermath of three decades of war and rejoin the 21st Century with its millennium old history intact.

There is a line written in Kufic script on the minaret’s uppermost band, it is a quote from the Koran 61:13-14.

اونمآ نيذلا اهيأ اي نينمؤملا رشبو بيرق حتفو هللا نم رصن

“Victory from Allah and an imminent conquest; and give good tidings to the believers. O you who have believed.”

I believe in Afghanistan, it’s the buzkashi scrum of Afghans and foreigners looting the national heritage that I worry about.
Minaret at Jam
Jam, Ghor Province, Afghanistan, October 2003,
Nikon F100, Nikkor 35mm PC lens, Fuji
Provia RDP III

This is the only major, intact structure from the mysterious Ghorid Empire, the people who brought down the Ghaznavids and who were in turn destroyed by the Mongols. There are few ruins in the area and little evidence of a mosque for which this may have been a minaret. It is a mystery, as nations that did not do a great deal of building with stone or brick tend to be. If it was built to be a minaret, it is the second tallest minaret in the world. The tallest minaret is the Qutub Minar in Delhi, started in 1199, and it was patterned after this erection.

In all the photographs that I had seen of this before, one could never tell at what angle the minaret leans, because it was not possible to determine the horizon. With the diagonals of the mountains it was impossible to tell if the image was level and if the improbable tilt of the tower was real. With Perspective Control lens I could shift the lens to correct for the parallax distortions, and, by anchoring the view at the bottom with the visibly-level river, we can see just how much it tilts.

Photograph and text by Luke Powell