Tehran feels like New York City. It is full of life and noise. The traffic is unbelievable: five cars next to each other on three lane roads; roundabouts packed with cars that are an inch apart; and many, many car accidents. Construction is out of hand. There’s lots of culture which Tehranis are very proud of. For instance, envelopes with lines of poetry are sold on the street. We went to a party one night and the apartment was lovely: bright, lots of space, and full of modern Iranian paintings. And it is nice to see a city/country not dominated by the usual fast food and other chains.

The culture is diverse although it is 99% Muslim. The majority is Shia with some Sunnis. Iran is the birthplace of the Zoroastrian religion which had a lot of influence on Judeism and Islam. It has Armenian Christians (who are allowed to have alcohol), Jews (I saw a mirror surrounded by words in Hebrew in a shop window and found out that entire neighborhood was Jewish), Bahais, etc. Shia moslims allow more
pictures of people and, especially in mosques, there are pictures of Khomeini and of the present ‘Leader of the Revolution.’ The art forms feature lots of animals and flowers as well. However, some of the faces in Persepolis were defaced early on. Khomeini had wanted to completely destroy the ruins 20 years ago because they were pre-Islamic, having been built by Darius and Xerxes and partially destroyed by Alexander the Great. Khomeini didn’t possibly because of future tourism.

Iran and Iranians are very modern: the water is drinkable, electricity works, women go to university and have jobs, and nobody asks where your husband is and how many kids you have (as in e.g. Pakistan). Alcohol is strictly forbidden except for non-Muslim citizens, e.g. Armenians but others drink quite a bit at home. Many also have dishes on their roofs that are covered up. People have stopped ‘going out’; instead, they speak of ‘going in.’ Our hotel was the Azadi Grand Hotel [note: it is still operating in 2017]. It had been a Hyatt before the Revolution but became the ‘Freedom (azadi) Hotel’ not open to Iranians. We could get CNN and BBC!

The conference we were part of was called ‘The World Congress on Mulla Sadra’ and half of the sessions were on Mulla Sadra, a 16th Century Iranian philosopher. The other half (more like a third) was on Western philosophy, language, and linguistics. Harry and I both gave papers, chaired sessions, and interacted a lot with Iranian participants. There were people from over 40 countries and we were taken care of very well: buses with police escort to take us to the conference site, which had just been built for the Organization for Islamic Unity Conference, speeches by President Khatami and other dignitaries, trips to museums, Khomeini’s house, and to Persepolis.

The house where Ayatollah Khomeini lived is humble, especially when juxtaposed to the Shah’s palaces. Apparently, the word or symbol for Shah had become banned after the revolution. I found out when I
bought a second-hand book that had a crown on the outside. The shop attendant, on seeing it, crossed it out and was actually reluctant to sell it. There is still a revolutionary/religious police around but we noticed little (obviously).

The political and social situation is very delicate. There is a power struggle between conservatives and people who advocate more liberalization. Having a Congress on Mulla Sadra was a kind of compromise. The president is liberal and wants reform but it can’t occur too fast. We met many Iranians. The female participants of the conference were assigned female translators and these women were mainly students and young professionals. The female participants were invited for a dinner by the Iranian women and there nobody had to wear scarves. Many were hard to recognize in beautiful dresses and long hair. Some said they liked the chador or manteau; others hated it. The ones who liked it said it enables them to walk in the streets without being harrassed and they didn’t want to be sex objects like Western women. I had heard these arguments elsewhere. My own manteau, a black gown that later served for defenses, and head scarf were not very comfortable in the heat. The first couple of days it didn’t bother me very much but walking uphill was hard. By the end of the trip, I was very happy to take it off: once the plane (Iran Air) touched the ground in Amsterdam, the manteas and scarves were gone from most of the passengers.

“There is no crime in Iran” of course. While we were there, they publicly hanged 13 people for drug trafficking in the East of the country. There had been a serial killer too, some months back. I felt safe though: taxi drivers seemed honest and so were people in shops. The official rate and the ‘on the market’ rate of the rial differ substantially. The exchange rate is 8000 rial for 1 dollar so it is hard to keep track of what something costs [note: in 2017 it is 32500 rial to a dollar]. There are prices for Iranians and non-Iranians because the former make so little even with the multiple jobs they have. A (senior) university professor makes $150/month. Books are very cheap and, besides, where can one find Farsi dictionaries etc!

When we visted Perspolis, we also went to Shiraz, the city of the two major poets Saadi (Gulistan) and Hafez (Divan-e-Hafez). It has gorgeous mosques and madrassas with lots of delicate tile and woodwork. As I was taking a picture in Shiraz, juxtaposing the beautiful tile façade with the ‘normal’ city surrounding it, an Iranian man asked ‘why you take picture’? He seemed unhappy and I felt a little guilty. The man turned out to be the Governor General of the province who had stopped in to see us before giving a speech to us, welcoming us to Shiraz.
The trip lasted two weeks and I used eight rolls of film. It would be great to go back and see the changes!