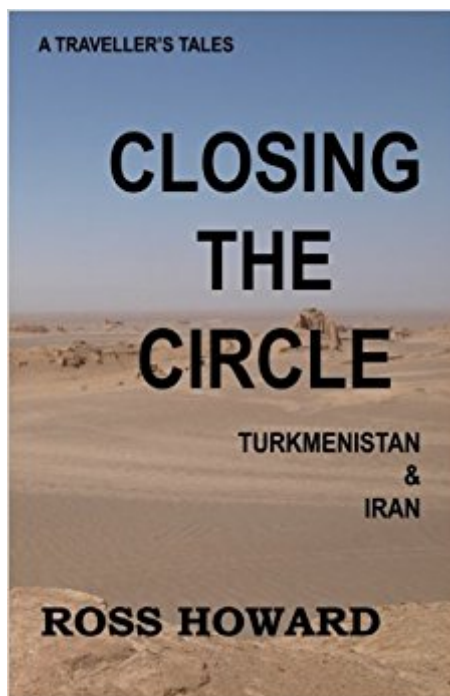


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A Traveller's Tales, Closing The Circle, Turkmenistan & Iran



Synopsis

This is a journey through one of two remaining Stalinist nations in the world: Turkmenistan. The other is North Korea. Both countries compete for the lowest international ranking in terms of human rights for their people. Turkmenistan is a tribal nation that fell into the grip of the Soviet Union in the 1920's and following collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991, joined other Soviet satellites in securing independence. It was a time when committed senior communists quickly converted to capitalism and competed in a mad scramble for power. Today, it is a country moulded by the idiosyncratic views of its first President-for-Life who established a Personality Cult to consolidate his power and an iron fist to maintain that power. He was a President who issued a range of bizarre edicts including naming months of the year after his family, closing all the hospitals outside of the capital, banning gold teeth and expecting children to spend more time in the fields rather than at school. His successor seems no less enamoured with the governance model established by his predecessor and the attendance at rallies devoted to eulogising the President are virtually compulsory. The capital, Ashgabat, appears in the Guinness Book of Records as the most 'marbled city in the world' and the country is populated with numerous golden statues and tributes to the President, past and present. One presidential statue of gold rotated so that it continuously faced the sun. The marble and the monuments are funded by large reserves of oil and gas. The Karakum Desert occupies 80 per cent of the country and population centres are clustered around the limited sources of water which are under constant threat. We visit ancient sites and visit the several oases fed by rivers originating in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Our journey takes us along the Amu Darya, the principal river in Central Asia and the source of the Karakum Canal, the longest, navigable canal in the world, providing precious water to numerous locations throughout the country. Crossing the border to Iran, we enter one of the world's few religious theocratic regimes where the Supreme Leader speaks directly to God and to question his message is a form of blasphemy, which can attract the penalty of death. But it is also a country where the people are amongst the most hospitable to travellers and they do not necessarily accept the wisdom of the clerics as a guide to their future or as a measure of their past. We visit a number of religious sites and learn more about Zoroastrianism, the religion that preceded Christianity by 500 years and Islam by over a thousand years. We learn about the martyrs, those who died during the Iran-Iraq War to defend the clerics and sustain their power who, in turn, were able to organise ready access to Paradise for their supreme sacrifice. We visit a number of locations in the east of the country including the Kalutes and the hottest place on earth with temperatures of over 70 degrees centigrade. We experience the qanats, the unique and ancient model for moving water underground for vast distances allowing desert villages to flourish

and caravanseries to operate in support of ancient travellers. We move to the north and the Caspian Coast and visit the Castles of the Assassins and experience the differences between the southern deserts and the fertile lands and unique settlements along the coast. This is a journey of contrasts. Contrasts in geography and the interaction between the people and those who govern them. Contrasts between what those who govern believe and what those who are governed believe.

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Customer Reviews

Ross Howard is a traveller to remote and diverse locations ranging from the hottest place on earth in the Lut Desert of Iran to the coldest home of the blizzard in Antarctica. He enjoys and writes of the differences, while acknowledging that the great leveller is always how the people interact with their environments, how they survive and how the will ultimately prevail, despite the autocratic and dictatorial regimes that exploit the people for the regime's personal gain. The writings consider the people, the land and the history of the locations. He is interested in the interaction between those wielding power and the people and the scope for the people to make free choices regarding their future.

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