

Afghan International Carpet Fair

Behrooz and Halleh Hakimian of HJR were among members of a U.S. delegation that traveled to the first-ever Afghan Intl. Carpet Fair in August. Here's what they found when they got there.



Behrooz Hakimian (left) of HJR and his daughter, Halleh, at the first-ever Afghan Intl. Carpet Fair in Kabul, with Suleman Fatimie, (inside left), CEO Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan, and Rahim Walizada, Nomad Rugs.

Just a week after being asked to attend, Behrooz Hakimian of New Jersey-based HJR and his daughter, Halleh, were on a plane to war-torn Kabul, Afghanistan to experience the first-ever Afghan Intl. Carpet Fair, which was held in the Serena Hotel (formerly the Kabul Hotel) from Aug. 26-28, 2007.

The trade mission was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Commerce under its Iraq & Afghanistan Investment and Reconstruction Task Force. It was organized and supported by a number of organizations, including: EPAA (Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan), Germany-based GTZ, USAID (United States Agency for Intl. Development), ASMED (Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development), and UNDP (United Nations Development Program). The purpose of the trip was to expand and intensify the Afghan rug market.

The Carpet Fair itself took place at the picturesque Serena Hotel, where Afghan manufacturers set up booths in the outdoor courtyard in hopes of attracting attention from U.S. importers for immediate sales and long-term relationships.

In addition to viewing rugs, the U.S. delegation was invited to participate in meetings with the U.S. Department of Commerce, EPAA, USAID and the Afghan rug manufacturers in order to share knowledge and feedback on how to maximize the marketability of the Afghan-made rugs in the United States. As part of the discussions, a number of topics came to light:

- The Afghan manufacturers understandably want direct credit for the product they manufacture and export.
- Wash facilities need to be established in Afghanistan (Currently, much of the rug washing and finishing takes place in neighboring Pakistan.).
- Exporting rugs directly from Afghanistan without having to reroute them through other countries is desirable. The logistical challenges of exporting rugs from the landlocked country came up here, as did pricing; products from Afghanistan incur higher costs by the time they reach their final destination, decreasing the profit margin.
- Finally, the group discussed identifying optimal approaches for marketing, branding, and promoting Afghan carpets.

"This was an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience," said Halleh Hakimian. "We feel that if Afghan producers focus on one-on-one business relationships with the wholesalers, which will require feedback and cultivation of production, there is tremendous potential for Afghanistan to produce and promote world class carpets."

Overall, Hakimian said that the exhibition at the Serena Hotel was professional and well-organized. Guests stayed at the hotel, which offered first-class accommodations, services and a number of quality, diverse dining options.

"It is our hope that future Afghan Trade Missions will host a significantly larger number of American wholesalers," said Behrooz Hakimian, adding that the current venue can support a larger group.

The American importers have high hopes that proper distribution channels will be respected going forward in order to promote healthy, long-term relationships that can lead to ongoing economic success for the manufacturers in the war-

ravaged country, as well as the American carpet industry.

For more information, contact HJR's Behrooz or Halleh Hakimian at: (201) 617-7600; Email: info@hjrrugs.com. For more information on EPAA, visit: www.epaa.org.af/; for GTZ, visit: www.gtz.de/; for USAID, visit: www.usaid.gov/; for ASMED, visit: dai.com/; and for UNDP, visit: undp.org/.

KABUL TODAY

What was it like for an Iranian-American woman to travel into still-warring Afghanistan? Halleh Hakimian recounts her trip.

"It's always inspiring to see what other cultures are producing, and to experience the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of travel.

When we arrived at the Kabul airport, the U.S. Embassy had arranged for the delegates to be escorted to the hotel by an armored vehicle, and provided flak [bulletproof] jackets for everyone. Afghan military and police were on hand at the airport. There were several security check points on the road from the airport, which is reported to be the most dangerous road traveled in Kabul. It was a pretty dramatic way to reach the hotel. Aside from the government officials and U.S. delegates, there were many people traveling freely without this heavy security.

Driving through Kabul, you see a dry, dusty city with no vegetation. Streets are leveled from the war; homes have been reduced to rubble and remain as such, yet you see pockets of new housing emerging, which is encouraging. When we drove through the city streets into the gates of the five-star, luxury, Serena Hotel, we found before our eyes an unexpected oasis in the desert.

Many of the delegates didn't leave the hotel. Because of our Iranian attributes, we were able to blend in, which gave us the opportunity to venture out for lunch, dinner and souvenirs. Restaurants typically were located outside in the gardens of homes, as well as indoors, like bed-and-breakfast-type places. One evening, our hosts took us to a restaurant/lounge that looked rundown and abandoned from the outside. Once there, we were guided through a concrete hallway into a beautiful outdoor garden. Local artwork hung on the corridor walls. Inside, VIP-type expatriates were part of the crowd. Lanterns laced the courtyard trees. French chefs created a Mediterranean cui-

sine and there was an extensive global wine list. A DJ spun Western lounge music. It was almost like being in New York City.

The modest dress code in Kabul for both men and women did not feel

like a mandate, but rather like a cultural norm. I wore jeans and a long-sleeved blouse during the trip and loosely covered my head when we went out. Occasionally I would let the scarf down around my shoulders, which did not seem to offend anyone, and no one told me I had to keep covered. As a Western woman, I did not experience an oppressive environment in Kabul.

When we went souvenir shopping, there were beggar children on the streets speaking to us in well-versed English. They fooled us into thinking that they learned it in school; later we discovered that they had learned it on the streets. These children were inspirational entrepreneurs. Sadly, because of this different world they live in, their talents are not coupled with opportunities for success.

Before traveling to Afghanistan, we had been apprised of the world-renown Afghan hospitality. Yet, our magical experience surpassed our imagination. It is remarkable to witness the energy, determination and spirit of the Afghan people. May it translate to further peace and prosperity for their country."



Halleh Hakimian wearing a bullet-proof jacket issued by the U.S. Embassy upon her arrival in Kabul.