

On the shoulder of giants in southwest Iran – in pictures

Photographer **Sabyl Ghoussoub** always wanted to take pictures of the country, but he wasn't interested in veiled women, clerics or the underground scene in Tehran. The road less traveled led to Dezful

Jobin Bekhrad for Tehran Bureau

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“They drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes. They were not religious at all.” That is how Sabyl Ghoussoub remembers the men of Dezful. Prompted by a suggestion from a friend in Tehran, the French-Lebanese photographer visited the ancient city in southwest Iran earlier this year. For five days, he roamed around with his friend's father-in-law and the latter's own crew of middle-aged comrades, a mixed group of small business owners, laborers, and farmers.

Ghoussoub was never introduced to the men's wives, sisters, or daughters, and aside from being allowed to traverse the city in their company, was largely kept in the dark. “I never knew anything about them – they were mysterious, impenetrable,” he says. One of the aims of his current work is to highlight “the virility that every Middle Eastern man has to confront. Where does it stop?” A long way from his home in Paris, his experience in Dezful reinforced his impression of the region as a “man's, man's, man's world.”

At the same time, his companions, however inscrutable, were genial as well and Ghoussoub began to find their presence reassuring. “Their shoulders carried me throughout my stay,” he says. “They gave me a feeling of safety, and I found this feeling in my pictures.” Strength and mystery – a combination he found a distinctive means to express: “It was clear to me that I had to take pictures of their backs.”

At one level, this approach was intended to emphasize the relationship between the men and their surroundings, which the photographer felt his subjects regarded with a sense of ownership, as if they were looking out onto territory – geographical, social, and political – rightfully theirs. He found a surprising connection to the hip-hop videos he sees back in Europe: “I often compare the men in this series to French rappers, who have this feeling that everything on the streets belongs to them.”

Beyond that, “I had always wanted to take pictures of Iran, but I was never interested in veiled women or mullahs, or the underground scene in Tehran,” he explains. “It was all déjà vu. I wanted to show and express something *new*.” Observing these men – faceless, yet with physiques that richly express their character – by the riverside, in their cars, serving chai and sweets, walking in the bazaar, reclining on tough *motakka* pillows on a lazy afternoon, we encounter a vision of Iran that is both intriguingly new and evocatively out of time.

Joobin Bekhrad is the editor of Reorient Magaine. The Tehran Bureau is an independent media organisation, hosted by the Guardian. Contact us@tehranbureau

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