

## *Intro*



### *Middle East: a kaleidoscope without light.*

Marcel Proust used to say that true exploration doesn't mean discovering new landscapes as much as having new eyes. On the morning of the May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 I closed for the last time the door of 28 Orient Gardens, Belfast, where I had lived for one year after leaving my native Argentina. I had 27 years on my back, short hair, and no credit card. I paid special attention to my first step, thinking of all the unborn carwheels that would descend from that first act of movement. Rain was coming down in staircases, as it does in each square of the Irish calendar. That afternoon my voyage was christened by a sailboat called *Big Wamp* that would deliver me to Scotland. I was off in search of new eyes.

The challenge: to circumnavigate the globe exclusively by hitch-hiking, borrowing a snail's strategy of carrying all I would need on my back. I wanted to tug on the threads and unravel the misinformation that the mass-media has woven about distant lands. I hoped to create my own narrative tapestry from the voices of the people I would meet along the dusty roads. Though the plan was to vagabond to all the corners of the world, the siren song that beckoned most sweetly came from the problem children of the map: Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

I admit that hitch-hiking across lands so embroidered with conflict might seem absurd, if not altogether suicidal. However, these countries are the greatest victims of media stereotypes, and I thirsted to understand them on my own terms. Hitch-hiking, which suffers from its own bad reputation, would prove to be an ideal mode of transport. Traveling by thumb would afford maximum exposure to the common folk who sweat and toil under these controversial flags yet never (never) make it to the headlines. I was committed to giving some names to these anonymous people. The result of this effort, after spending two years traversing every imaginable scenario, is the book you hold in your hands.

This is not a book about politics, although politics are not absent. Rather, it is a book about the merchant who sells oranges in the Aleppo bazaar, about the old men who beat out rhythms on a chalk-drawn checkerboard in Iraqi Kurdistan, about the good-natured truck driver who clears a space for me in his cab, about the clandestine activists of Tehran, about the foreign aid workers in Afghanistan who confront fear each morning, about the noble teachers in Dowlat Yar who continue with their classes in alongside the rubble of their former schools. It is a glimpse of a censored universe. An attempt to rescue a kaleidoscope from encroaching darkness.

My hope is that this book will convey to you so me of the spices and aromas encountered along the way, and most importantly share the warmth that I received from those who live on the other side of the horizon.

Luang Prabang, Laos. January 1, 2007