

Ten facts you may not know about Afghanistan

For a decade and more, one country has dominated the news headlines - Afghanistan. Mention this country and what comes to mind? Probably Taliban and terrorism, burkas and beards. But Afghanistan is much more. Beyond the headlines of war, there is another country where ancient traditions endure and a new country is emerging, says Lyse Doucet.

1. Afghans celebrate their new year, Nawroz, on 21 March, the first day of spring. Thousands travel to the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif to welcome in Nawroz, a pre-Islamic festival. Local strong men raise a great Janda, an Islamic banner, to herald the beginning of spring and the start of the new year. If it is lifted in one smooth motion, it is seen as a good omen for the months to come. (You have to hold on to something when you live in a country that has already survived more than 30 years of war.)

2. Afghanistan would like its national game, buzkashi, or goat-grabbing, to be an Olympic sport. Regarded as the world's wildest game, it involves riders on horseback competing to grab a goat carcass, and gallop clear of the others to drop it in a chalked circle. It has been played on Afghanistan's northern steppe for centuries. The game used to be the sport of rich rival warlords but is now also financed by Afghan mobile phone companies and private airlines. But it is still not a sport for the faint-hearted, and women should not apply.

3. Mobile phone coverage is expected to reach 90% of the country this year, even though the percentage of Afghans with access to electricity is still one of the lowest in the world. Mobile phones are transforming Afghan lives and culture. Even Taliban have fancy smartphones with e-mail and skype. They are status symbols, too - if you have cash or contacts you can get a memorable number including, for example, one that has the letters of your name. (Mine has my lucky number from when I used to play basketball.)

4. Poetry is a cherished part of Afghan culture. Afghans have told their stories in verse for more than 1,000 years. Thursday night is "poetry night" in the western city of Herat - men, women and children gather to share ancient and modern verse, listen to traditional Herati music, and enjoy sweet tea and pastries long into the night.

5. Alexander the Great was the first to build Herat's ancient citadel when he captured the city in 330BC. The only woman to capture the heart of the Macedonian empire builder was the beautiful Roxanne, from the northern Afghan province of Balkh. She bore him his only son before Alexander died at the young age of 33.

6. Arnold Schwarzenegger is the poster boy for legions of young Afghan men. Photographs of a muscled Arnold in his prime hang from the walls of hundreds of body building centres across the country. Some Afghans say the action-star-turned US governor looks like an Afghan.

7. Afghan cuisine is more sophisticated than kebabs and rice. This landlocked country has been at the crossroads of major civilisations for centuries and that is reflected in what is on the menu. Sample its delicate ashak, a ravioli stuffed with leeks, and topped with minced meat and yogurt, or Mantu pasta filled with lamb and onions. And new influences are still emerging as Afghanistan opens its doors to the world. If you yearn for something lighter, former Japanese journalist-turned chef Hiromi (now known as Mursal which means Rose in Persian) fell in love with the country, married an Afghan and is training Afghans to make mouth-watering sushi.

8. Kandahar airfield in southern Afghanistan is said to be the busiest single runway airstrip in the world. No wonder it is also the place **Nato** has its first complete air traffic capability in a non-Nato country. Last year's arrival of more than 30,000 extra US troops, along with more civilian personnel, added to constant landings on a base also used by non-US militaries. Of course, lots of journalists and dignitaries also fly in to one of Afghanistan's most volatile cities, the most decisive battle in this war. Afghans have long said whoever controls Kandahar, controls Afghanistan.

9. The world's first oil paintings were drawn not in Renaissance Europe but in the caves of Bamiyan, in the central highlands of Afghanistan around 650BC. Bamiyan boasted a flourishing Buddhist civilisation from the 2nd Century up to the Islamic invasion of the 9th Century. This is where **the world's two largest standing Buddhas once stood, until the Taliban destroyed them in 2001**. A newly opened tourism company is trying to attract tourists back to beautiful Bamiyan. Last year, they had a grand total of two (along with Afghans and foreigners who live in the country). But the people of Bamiyan remain hopeful.

10. Oh, and please remember, Afghani is the currency, not the people. They are called Afghans. And they have a country that, for all of its hardship and heartache, they are still proud to call home.

Lyse Doucet presents [Afghanistan: The Unknown Country](#) on BBC Two, Wednesday 6 July at 2100 BST

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