



The Carpet Wars: From Kabul to Baghdad: A Ten-Year Journey Along Ancient Trade Routes

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Apart from oil, rugs are the Muslim world's best-known commodity. While rugs are found in most Western homes, the story of religious, political, and tribal strife behind their creation is virtually unknown. In "The Carpet Wars, award-winning journalist Christopher Kremmer chronicles his fascinating ten-year journey along the ancient carpet trade routes that run through the world's most misunderstood and volatile regions -- Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Christopher Kremmer's odyssey through the crescent of Islamic nations began in the early 1990s, when he arrived in Afghanistan to meet the communist-backed president, Mohammed Najibullah. On the outskirts of Kabul, mujahideen rebels were massing while the carpet dealers of the old city continued to ply their timeless trade. Kremmer was in Kabul when the mujahideen turned their guns on one another after ridding the country of the hated communists. He was there when the Taliban came and the army of religious students -- aided by the wealthy Arab radical Osama bin Laden -- emerged from the scorched earth to implement their vision of "a pure Islamic state." Traveling through these territories, Kremmer chronicles Islamic societies as they were convulsed by dictatorship and greed and as refugees sought asylum in the West. He cemented lifelong friendships and met an unforgettable cast of characters, from nomads toiling on portable handlooms to shady merchants and leaders of the syndicates that control the bazaars. In the remote Hindu Kush, he celebrated Eid with the late Afghan guerrilla legend Ahmad Shah Massoud. In Kandahar, he took tea with Taliban leaders and went hunting for Osamabin Laden. He watched as a new generation questioned the power of the mullahs in Iran, while in Iraq the populace chafed under the weight of sanctions and Saddam Hussein's cult of personality. "The Carpet Wars takes readers into a world where even the simplest motif on a rug can be filled with religious, tribal, and political significance, places where life bustles with bargaining and gossip in bazaars and teahouses, while nations crumble, leaders fall, and the final confrontation between freedom and terror looms. An edge-of-the-chair travel memoir, "The Carpet Wars offers a personal, vivid, and revealing look at Islam's human face, wracked by turmoil but sustained by friendship, industry, and humor. It is also a historical snapshot of countries at the center of global confrontation that exploded onto the homefront on September 11, 2001.

The Carpet Wars: From Kabul to Baghdad: A Ten-Year Journey Along Ancient Trade Routes Details

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Author : Christopher Kremmer

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Krissy says

This book, while amazingly long (450 pgs) and more or less directionless, was nonetheless a pleasure to read. I can honestly say that it had no discernible overarching plot line - we jump in at a certain point in the author's life, and jump out about 10 years later - but I'm the kind of person who loves to read about what a culture "feels like" or is like to "be in." This one takes you through Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Iran, with great characters and good stories. I didn't really understand anything he said about carpets (he never gives any technical information about what the "knots" or "guls" mean, at least not enough for a novice to understand) but that didn't at all detract from my enjoyment. His descriptions of Iran solidified my need to visit there soon!

Felicity J says

This book takes you on a carpet ride to the carpet's origins. To strange arcane places with ancient pasts and troubled presents. On the way, you meet interesting people who have much the same life goals you or I have and others who are downright characters. All the while you are wondering at the journey you are on with the author. From the way he writes, you picture him at first as a middle aged man with a well developed beard, but no from the picture in the back of the book, he seems like a young guy. This is a good book for when you need to be shaken from your everyday.

Samantha Ho says

If I could give this gem of a book I happened to pick up at a used-books stall a dozen stars, I would. For someone who has little background on Middle Eastern and West Asian history, The Carpet Wars pretty much blew my mind - on a factual, cultural, and emotional level. The author's recounting of meetings with leaders of the army and Taliban, among others, gives glimpses of systems that the mainstream (Western) media *never* highlights. His personal encounters with locals loaded the book with even greater cultural richness. I found myself falling in love with a country/countries I've never even met through its characters and vivid descriptions of life there. They are put in such passionate words I feel as though one cannot help but respond that way.

I also found myself caring a lot more about carpets than I ever thought I would. Although I do wish pictures of the detailed carpets could've been included and labelled (in colour), it thrilled me to look up various, beautiful variations as well.

Few books have ever been able to capture my attention, excitement and soul as this one. A work of art in its own right.

Sally Edsall says

Christopher Kremmer's book takes you on a journey through the Central Asian countries most frequently in the news today, and provides an incomparable insight. The largest, and first, section, is an account of events in Afghanistan, which he has witnessed first-hand as a foreign correspondent.

This book is no dry history, nor is it merely a travelogue, nor is it merely an extended piece of journalism.

Kremmer comes to know and befriend people of different backgrounds within the region, and it is their stories, as well as the carpet trade and stories of emblematic carpets, through which the narrative is woven. We care about the future of the peoples of the region, because we care about what becomes of Kremmer's friends.

What Christopher has managed to do is to make the internecine politics, the inhumanities, the brutalities, comprehensible, through his humanisation of peoples who might in lesser hands be reduced to the merely 'exotic' or even worse 'unknowable and inhuman'.

Earlier this year I read 'Unexpected Light: Travels in Afghanistan' by Jason Elliot.

I thoroughly recommend both these books if you desire to reach some understanding of a region of such importance to us all.

Matt Wallace says

Starts slow but develops well. Interweaves travelogue, journalism, history and politics effortlessly. Manages to give a history of carpet weaving which informs the geo political history presented simultaneously and vice versa. Also deeply personal and intimately revealing of the lives of everyday middle easterners prior to 911. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Iraq, Kashmir and Tajikistan all brought to life, at least for me. If you are interested in any of these places, definately worth reading.

Rita says

2002

An easy way to get some background on Afghanistan, Kashmir, Iran. Bits of history interspersed with contemporary situation interspersed with talks and friendships with local carpet sellers.

The book was borrowed from Rosemary.

Learning about carpets and their [symbolic and other] importance in these cultures was a treat in itself.

As another goodreader pointed out, we can conclude that current politics in this region have a long history and there is nothing new under the sun here.

Kremmer is good about enjoying his friendships with the men who sell carpets, while not condoning some of their objectionable traits and customs.

LADAKH was mentioned. Interesting comment on diversity being an advantage to India, and so contrasting to the rigid uniformity desired by Muslim fundamentalists:

304:

"Slow to stir, the Indian Army behemoth was beginning to lumber with the slow but orderly transport of troops, weapons, and hundreds of truckloads of pack mules from the Valley to the Brigade and Division Hdqts in LADAKH. For long stretches the road was flanked by truck lots, tented billets, ammunition dumps, camps for inducted personnel undergoing orientation, and field hospitals, Amid the ringing of bells and lighting of oil lamps, tented Hindu temples served a constant torrent of troops praying on their way in, or giving thanks on their way out. Armed priests dressed in camouflage tied holy strings on the wrists of their fellow soldiers, and blessed their guns by applying red tikka to the barrels. They saw themselves as incarnations of Arjuna at the battle of Kurukshetra, on the eve of which Lord Krishna counselled the reluctant warrior on his moral duty to take up arms against his family's enemies. Unlike their Muslim opponents in the mtns above, the Indian troops belonged to many faiths, and apart from mandirs, the tent cities boasted gurdwaras for Sikhs, chapels for Christians, and temples for Zoroastrians. Yet far from being a weakness, the diversity in the Indian ranks was a strength. There was no point having Maratha and Jats in the same unit if they couldn't speak the same language or drink from the same cup, so units were organised along ethnic, regional, religious and even caste lines, and competed to be the best. Vast and unwieldy, yet committed to its democratic secular Constitution, India squatted like a multicultural elephant, blocking the path to uniformity so fervently desired by Islam's new Saladins.

Adrian says

This book was both a pleasure to read and a life changing inspiration. Released in spring 2002, one may be forgiven for thinking this was no coincidence, and marketed in the wake of 911, however it is no such work. The Carpet Wars chronicles 10 years of the authors travels in Central Asia and his collecting of carpets, and how each carpet tells a story.

This is most definitely not the latest Daily Mail or Daily Express column exposing some shocking practice of Shariah Law, rather it is a heartfelt, human recollection of the lives of people in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Carpet Wars contains no trace of cultural superiority whatsoever, there is no agenda being pushed, the only agenda the author has is to relate to the people on the ground. One gets a feeling for both the trauma afflicted upon the countries chronicled, and a feeling for the way of life in this part of the world.

Particular stand out chapters are Tajikistan, Kashmir and Afghanistan, but the book as a whole is a total gem. The Carpet Wars will both inform you on the life, history and politics of the Middle East and Central Asia, but it will also capture you on emotional level, as you not only hear the stories of the people the author encounters, but you live their lives as well.

I received this for my 21st birthday in May 2002, and it still has pride of place on my bookshelf, however, I liked it so much I bought the Kindle edition as soon as it was released, and this excellent piece of travel writing will now be a travel companion.

Every carpet tells a story. This is a story that demands to be told.

David says

Not bad but so bloody depressing on several levels. I live an easy life in an easy country where people are more concerned about cholesterol than bombs, although that may change. Carpets often made in appalling conditions, in countries where life can be cut short with little warning and who knows where the next meal is coming from. Trading is a funny business with so many middle men selling stories and ideas as much as the

actual tangible items.

Andy Hickman says

“THE CARPET WARS: A JOURNEY ACROSS THE ISLAMIC HEARTLANDS” by Christopher Kremmer

Profound insight into a whole world and epoch that most of the Western culture are oblivious to. May well be the most important definitive historical recording of that place on that time.

The audiobook is read by the author and captures the emotional intensity and humour of his experiences.

“Afghanistan has always been a curious mixture of medieval custom and bold stabs at reform.”

“... piercing eyes of jade wearing a tattered dirt red scarf, a haunting image, a face of a child that seems both traumatised and indignant, her eyes warn and challenge and resent.”

The first woman poet to compose in both Arabic and Persian: After being attacked and her wrists slit, leaving her to bleed to death, Afghani women R?bi'a Balkh? (????? ?????) wrote her last love poem (910 A.D.) in blood on the wall as she died:

I am captured by your love
trying to escape is not possible
love is an ocean without boundaries
a wise person would not want to swim in it
if you want love until the end
you must accept what is not accepted
welcome hardship with joy
eat poison but call it honey
..

“Planters vie with planners to outnumber buildings with trees. Attracting nightingales, blackbirds and orioles is considered as important as attracting people. Maples line the canals, reaching towards each other with branches linked. Beneath them, people meander, stroll and promenade...” (p378)

Michael Flanagan says

What an absolute gem of a book. The author takes us to one of the world's most troubled areas and tells us a story in two parts. The first is the history of the area and the second is of the people who live there now, and where does the carpet come into you may ask. That is what ties it together so nicely. This is one of those rare books I was sad to finish, I wanted it to keep going.

Travis Kendall says

This is a very well researched and well written journey through the Islamic world in the dozen or so years prior to 9/11. Through telling the stories of his own quite amazing adventures, Kremmer does a wonderful of weaving (forgive the choice of word) the politics, war, religion, and history along with with incredible stories of the local people into an extremely compelling narrative. Some of this book is a little bit dated and some of the stories (where Bin Laden came from etc.) you probably have heard many times on CNN but should not take away from what is a very powerful work. Kremmer is that rare breed of adventurer who inspires people to see and experience the world. Don't be surprised if this book makes you want to grab a backpack and go explore the world.

Maddy says

Pretty rambling, unfocused and doesn't talk much about carpets after all. Want to know what a warp vs a weave is? Learn about different patterns and what they mean? Not sure why you knot carpets and what that means? Interested in child labour issues? This book will not help you. Want some insight into the politics of the middle east, 1990-2000, and the effect on everyday carpet sellers? This book delivers!

Very readable, a good intro to why Afghanistan is a mess (and a sadly optimistic ending, in 2001 - if you only knew, dude from 13 years ago!), made me want to visit Esfahan, Iran.

Milele says

This is a really enjoyable book to read while filling in many holes in my knowledge of the recent political history of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran etc. I was surprised at how effectively it straddled the line between vignette and longer story. As vignettes, I could read a chapter before bed and happily stop. As an arc, I felt that the later chapters not only followed up on political events of earlier chapters, but also reflected the author's greater experience, exhaustion and fatalism.

Daren says

This is a great book - It covers a lot of ground, and it does so slowly. This is not a high octane read, or a read that I would undertake as a primary read. It is a drop in, read a chapter, drop out type of book, and it appeals so much that I have read it twice - something I can seldom justify.

Chris Kremmer is an Australian journalist, and over a ten year period, he spend time based in, and travelling around Central Asia. This book chronicles his love of Carpets, and throws in the culture, the politics, tribalism, religion, and the people of Central Asia.

He does well in getting the mix right – the right amount of history, personal anecdote and carpet buying to keep the interest. It certainly steps outside the mainstream media in its content, and approaches Islam with balance.

It is pre-911, taking place 1990-2000, so it avoids the reactionary journalism, but hits on some main

characters in the politics and wars of Afghanistan – Ahmad Shah Massoud, Abdul Rashid Dostrum, Taliban Leaders, and a hunt for Osama Bin Laden.

Well worth seeking out.

Kiwiflora says

This is not the first book I have read about this deeply troubled area of the world. It would appear the conflict of the last fifty years or so is nothing new, we just know more about it now, and the impact on the rest of the world is more profound. The first book I read was in the 12 months or so after 9/11 when places we had never heard of were in the daily news all the time. In *An Unexpected Light* Briton Jason Elliot recounts his time in Afghanistan in the early 1980s disguised as a fighter for the anti Soviet mujaheddin resistance movement. Scary enough. English foreign correspondent Christina Lamb details her involvement in most of the world's conflicts of the last 25 years in *Small Wars Permitting*, one of her favourite countries being Afghanistan.

Australian journalist Christopher Kremmer uses his passion for Oriental carpets as his device to take him from country to country and regions within the Middle East prior to 9/11. Afghanistan features heavily of course, but the chapters on Iran and Kashmir are particularly interesting. He also travels to Iraq, Pakistan, and the various -kistan countries north of Iraq/Afghanistan and west of China. Plenty of history, right back to Alexander the Great, plenty of war and horror, both past and present, and the sheer indestructability of the peoples who live in these areas of the world. They have seen it all before, it seems there is no longer horror, but simply inevitability that things never change.

My only criticism of the book is that I would have liked an introductory chapter on oriental carpets that summarised all the information distributed through the book into some logical organised form. I wish too the photos of the carpets were in colour! I became so interested in all this that I went to the local public library and looked at books there.

This is a book to expand and open the mind about an area much maligned by the West. We can learn from Mr Kremmer's travels and observations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq prior to 2001.
