AMERICAN/IRANIAN ALPINE EXCHANGE FLAG #186 REPORT

JUNE 2ND – JUNE 24TH, 2011
INTRODUCTION:

Adventure and exploration can be multi-faceted which may include science, history and in some rare cases political importance. The American/Iranian Alpine Exchange was in fact one of those trips that included all three categories. Our primary purpose was to unite two politically opposing countries with our love for wilderness areas, and climbing mountains being the common denominator.

The trip took three years from start to finish and was the brainchild of David Thoenen, The American Alpine Club Southern Appalachian Section Chair. Thoenen lived and worked in Iran in the 1970’s and eventually married an Iranian woman. It was his knowledge and respect for the country that gave him the idea to use climbing as a way to bring the two countries together through a goodwill cross-cultural climbers exchange.

My involvement started in the Summer of 2010 from an American Alpine Club posting. The club was seeking 10 climbers from around the U.S. to represent our nation as ambassadors. I applied and was selected as one of the youngest representatives, and the only Texan.

The other members included the Colorado contingent of Chris Weidner, Jenn Flemming, Mark Wilford, Mary Ann Dornfeld, Jim Donini; David Thoenen, North Carolina; Lydia Pyne, Pennsylvania; Tim Terpstra, Washington; Tom Bowker, Maine; Dr. Marilyn Geninatti, Arizona; Gregory Crouch, California, and Stephen Alvarez, Tennessee. We also had several members drop out due to schedule conflicts, injuries, and sadly we had one member die in an ice climbing accident several months before our departure.

IRANIAN VISIT to U.S:

In September, 2010 ten Iranians were selected to represent their country in the first part of the exchange. The American delegates met the ten Iranians at the Teton Climbers Ranch in Grand Teton National Park. The ten member Iranian crew along with the American climbers climbed various routes in the range including Grand Teton. They also visited Yellowstone National Park. Besides climbing the Iranian delegation came with the intention to learn conservation from our National Park system to take back with them to Iran. Their country has had a difficult time with overuse, including destruction of habitat, and loss of plant and wildlife. We were able to set up several meetings for the Iranian Alpine Club President Abbas Mohammadi
to meet with several National Park leaders. It is the hope of both clubs to build on these meetings in the future.

PRE – TRIP:

The visa process to Iran was slow and took many months requiring a security check. We were told to be careful posting anything on our social network accounts that may bring attention to us, and it was even suggested we “defriend” our Jewish friends from Facebook. Even from the beginning it seemed that there was someone always watching us. The Embassy of Pakistan was our go-between acting on the behalf of Iran. In fact we were told if there is a problem while in Iran we should go to the Swiss Embassy. Our delegation had many e-mails sent back and forth regarding proper etiquette while in Iran.

JUNE 5th, 2011

 Upon our early morning arrival in Tehran we were detained for finger prints. It was a bit unnerving but only a formality and nothing out of the ordinary from what we were told by the locals.
*By early evening, we were hiking up into the foothills of the mountains north of Tehran. Our destination: Darband, a prime bouldering site popular with young Iranian climbers. While our jet-lagged napping resulted in arriving at the site too late in the day to enjoy the company of local boulderers, we were able to get in a couple of hours of climbing before heading back downhill to the first of many traditional Persian dinners.

The following day we split up into two groups. Jim Donini, Mark Wilford, Chris Weidner, Brannond Bargo, Mary Ann Dornfeld, Jennifer Fleming, Greg Crouch, and Stephen Alvarez headed to Alam Kuh. Alam Kuh, the highest peak of the Takht-e Suleyman Massif, is located in the Alborz mountain range in the north of Iran between Tehran and the Caspian sea. At 4,850 meters high, it is the second highest peak in Iran. The steep, 800 meter granite north face provides some of the most difficult mountaineering routes in the country.

Lydia Pyne, Marilyn Geninatti, Tim Terpstra, Tom Bowker, and David Thoenen traveled east to Mount Damavand, at 5,671 the highest peak in Iran and the highest volcano in Asia.

The five members of the Damavand team were joined on the mountain by sixteen members of the ACI. After a day of lower elevation acclimatization hiking in a splendid alpine environment, a forecast for incoming storm conditions forced the
team to move forward their climbing plan by a day and cancel a planned rest day at Damavand’s Bargah Sevom Hut at 4250 meters. Despite being short changed on acclimatization time, Tim and Marilyn left the hut early on the morning of June 9 and, accompanied by six members of the ACI, summited Damavand at mid day in high winds and low visibility.

On June 12, the Damavand crew moved further east to the province of Semnan. On the first day in Semnan, Lydia and Tom put up a new route on the south facing wall of Sangsar Sol (Remembering Chris, 5.8). The next day the team hiked north of Shahmirzad, exploring the rim of an isolated canyon ringed by miles of beautiful unclimbed rock, a region worthy of a return visit and a host of potential first ascents.

*(written by David Thoenen, member of Damavand group)*

Alam Kuh Group:

The AK group consisted of some of the best climbers in the world having put up first ascents all over the world. With such a strong group acclimating was not an issue.

JUNE 7TH, 2011

We headed to the 12,400 ft. (3,757 meters) Sarchal Shelter. We arrived there by driving from the ski resort village of Shemshak, then the climbers barracks of Roudbarak Resort, and finally hiking over 4,000 feet through the lush vegetation of the Naft Chak valley and massive waterfalls created by the Naft Chal river.
We rested and on the following day, June 8th climbed about 1,000 feet (300 meters) up the Takht e Soleiman Glacier to an unnamed rock wall with many cracks. It had previously been climbed by European climbers. We climbed several routes including a 5.10 crack led by Jim Donini, a 5.11 crack led by Mark Wilford, and finally a 5.8 crack which was a probable first ascent by Greg Crouch. Further to the West by a distance of about 200 meters Chris Weidner and Jenn Flemming put up a new route on the North Patakht Wall. They named the 3 pitch, 130 meter, 5.10c route Café Mohammad.

The next several days were spent acclimating in hopes of putting up a new route on the North wall of Alam Kuh. It didn't take long to realize the weather was most likely not going to cooperate. We were told that the ideal season to climb Alam Kuh was August, so we were a few months too early. The temperatures ranged from a high in the 50’s F to a low in the teens. We had a range of sunny skies, to rain and snow. We spent several days in the shelter eating great Persian food prepared by our Iranian climbing hosts.

I decided that I would spend one of my acclimating days scouting the sub peak of Siah Kouk 14,850 feet (4500 meters). I had done some research before leaving to find that the Alam Kuh region was known for marine fossils due to its past marine environment. I also had done some research into the area being a possible location
of Noah’s Ark. I recruited four Iranian climbers to help in the search for marine fossils. I headed for a dark band of rocks about 300 meters up in what seemed to have the best potential. I began searching several hundred feet up and right away found a great example of what looked like fossilized coral. I waited for the Iranian climbers as I made my way up to the dark band of rock. The dark rock looked to be a type of shale. It fractured easily and was a great place to find fossils. The dark band was located at about 13,400 feet (4,060 meters) and was about 100 meters in length and 20 meters in width. We broke open the shale to find fossilized fern leaves. The leaves varied from about 6 inches in length to about a half inch in length. We are in the process of determining the exact species of fern and coral we recovered. We lastly found a small rock that seemed to have some type of pictograph writing.

It is this exact area that a U.S. group headed by Bob Cornuke, president of the Bible Archaeology Search and Exploration Institute said they found Noah’s Ark. (see National Geographic article). Cornuke suggested the dark band was petrified gopher wood from the Ark. We were able to recover a sample of the rock and will be testing to see if it is a type of petrified wood. It is my opinion that there is not enough evidence to suggest this would be the location of the Biblical ship, or that the rock is a remnant of gopher wood. One interesting piece of information to add to this mystery was pointed out by one of my Iranian climbing partners. Near our shelter he pointed out what seemed to be a symbol of the Star of David about 100 meters wide by 100 meters tall. The symbol was an outline created by shrubbery and was across
the valley on the side of large cliff. We took a few pictures with the Explorers Club Flag, then headed up along the rock ridge to the summit of Siah Kouk. We then descended the mountain to our shelter.
Over the next several days we made our way up the mountain to set ourselves up for the best chance of summiting Alam Kuh. We set up camp at the base of the mountain at an altitude of 14,000 feet. The temperatures were close to single digits which made for an uncomfortable atmosphere.

June 11th, 2011

We split into two summit teams with two different route objectives. The small team of Mark Wilford and Mohammed Bahrevar would climb the German Ridge in harsh winter like conditions and would eventually summit in a 12 hour return trip. The second team consisted of Jim Donini, Brannond Bargo, Greg Crouch, Stephen Alvarez, Mary Ann Dornfeld, and two Iranian climbers. From high camp we climbed a steep 50 degree snow couloir to gain the ridge.
The climb was a beautiful route climbing on exposed ridges, among many 4,000 meter peaks. We continually traversed the ridge as we made our way up and down 4th and 5th class rock. We were able to make good time as we were unroped and well acclimated. We made our way up the final snow face, and then an extremely exposed ridge that had a drop 2,500 feet down the North face of Alam Kuh. When we finally made it to the tiny summit point, too small to stand on we realized in fact that we summited the sub peak of Shakhak 15,840 feet (4,800 meters). Having made it to the needle point summit the only way to reach the actual summit of Alam Kuh (4850 meters) we needed to descend, traverse and then ascend again. We decided it would take at least another 2 hours and in the deteriorating weather it would not be a good idea. We moved quickly down the mountain, packed up our gear at high camp and climbed down to the shelter. The next morning we loaded up the mules and made our way back to Shemshak.

June 13th, 2011

Before returning to Tehran we stopped over to do some climbing at an area named Pol – E – Kab. It was a popular climbing crag for many locals and required about a 10 minute hike up a steep trail on very loose rock. We spent the day with many local climbers that had heard we would be climbing there. We climbed routes rated from 5.8 to a few very difficult 5.12+, and an attempt from Chris Weidner of a 5.13c called Future.

We drove through the Alborz following along rivers and steep cliffs until our reentry into the chaotic city of Tehran. We met up with the Damavand group and spent the next two days exploring the beautiful city of Esfahan. It was a nice way to finish off
the remainder of our exchange. While driving to and from Esfahan we passed a nuclear site near Qom and were told not to take pictures.

June 17th, 2011
Most of the group returned back to the U.S. as this was the official end to the exchange. A handful of us extended our trip to see and do as much as possible. Five of us: Mark, myself, Mary Ann, Greg, and Stephen would climb Damavand along with several Iranian climbers. We left on the 18th to the Northeast of Tehran to the other side of the Alborz which we had not visited yet. In a few short hours we made it to the shelter near Mt. Damavand at 8,000 feet. We didn’t stay long as we decided to drive higher up the mountain to 10,300 feet where there was a shelter next to a mosque. We slept outside in great weather with a bright moon shining overhead.

June 19th, 2011
We moved quickly up to high camp located at about 14,000 feet. We all felt strong due to our acclimating on Alam Kuh. The shelter was large and had bunk beds, and even a store to buy various food items. Our escort provided by the government, Hossein kept a close watch on us, and got very nervous if we tried to go ahead of him. He said that it is due to our security, and had heard of other foreigners injured from extremists in previous years. Due to our groups extensive experience in the mountains, and our very independent nature, it was very frustrating at times to be so restrained in our movement. We had to keep to our itinerary exactly. Our itinerary stated that we would have 7 days to climb Damavand. I knew our fitness, and
acclimatization would allow us to do it much faster than this. The last 3 or 4 days I lobbied Hossein to have a plan b in case this should happen.

June 20th, 2011

I tried to get the group to get an early start so we could have time to summit and return back to town with plenty of time. The Iranians did not like the idea, because they said it would be too cold. I eventually got Mohammed, a guide on the mountain to go with us, saying we needed to have at least one Iranian with us to represent his country. I also wanted to climb as one unit, not two groups from two countries. They all agreed and we left the shelter about 5:15 am. The weather was cold and clear, and the Iranians said it was the nicest weather they had climbed in many years. It seems we were lucky, and made a good choice. There was more snow than usual, and we tried to stay on rock to move more quickly. We all made good time, and myself, Mark Wilford, Mohammed, and Majid(cook) made it in about 4 hours. The summit had very high winds making it extremely cold. We stayed waiting for the others. I explored the summit crater with Mohammed as he had many places to show me in a very large area. He had summited the mountain more than 200 times, and was very knowledgeable.

We left the summit, and stopped a few hundred feet down next to a gushing fumarole blowing out huge plumes of nauseous sulfur.
The descent took less than an hour as we glissaded down the glacier to the high camp shelter. From the shelter we packed up our gear and loaded them onto mules as we made our way to our parked vehicles. We drove into Reyneh and had a celebratory meal.

June 21st, 2011

We stayed the night at a locals house, then in the morning made our way North towards the Caspian Sea. We stopped about 10 minutes outside of Reyneh at the Zoroastrian Karfoli Caves thought to be 3,000 to 7,000 years old. The caves were used both as dwellings, and open burial sites. We were able to free climb into many of the dwellings, getting a good perspective from inside. We climbed as high as 40 feet into one dwelling, then like a maze finding new entry points into new rooms. Eventually we were in a room nearly 6 stories above the ground.
We left the caves and drove to Ali Mastan a small mountain village in the Caspian cloud forest. We met two new Iranian climbers in the small town, and they wanted to take us to a trail they developed. We hiked for about 4 hours through heavy rain, and high winds to an amazing area unlike any in Iran.

We finished up our trip by heading to the Caspian Sea for a nice relaxing swim in the largest saltwater lake in the world.
We left Mahmodabad, the Caspian beach town and headed back to Tehran.

June 24th, 2011

We rested, packed up all the gifts given to us by our gracious Iranian hosts, ate our last Persian meal then drove about an hour and a half to the airport for a 3:30 am flight.

The degree of involvement of the membership of the ACI throughout the exchange was impressive. We want to recognize these individuals and thank them for their companionship on our climbs.

Abbas Sabetian (current ACI president and participant in the Tetons event), Abbas Mohammadi (past ACI president and participant in the Tetons event), Erfan Fekry (ACI secretary), Parvaneh Kazemi (just returned from ascent of Manaslu), Jamal Moeini, Majid Maddah, Ali Asghar Saeedian (participant in the Tetons event), Dariush Taheri (participant in the Tetons event), Rahim Gharadaghi, Babak Doctorzadeh, Abolgharsem Eshaghi, Hossein Joudak, Omid Ehsami, Pouya Barzagar, Moslem Dadashnia, Nima Imani, Maziar Otoukesh, Abdolhamid Avani, Amir Hossein Yousefian, Dalil Safaei, Hasan Yazdani, Latifeh Boghrat, Majid Sabetzadeh (participant in the Tetons event), Mohammad Bahrevar, Mohamad Norouzi, Majid Ahmadi, Hosein Ebadati, Shima Shadman, Saeed Mahmudi, Mahsa Hokamzadeh, Hasan Gerami, and Abas Mohamadi.

Our special thanks goes to Ahmad Barjasteh, an ACI participant in the Tetons event, who was unable to take off the time to climb with us, yet still drove six hours (one way!) to meet with us in Tehran for tea and to present each of our AAC team members with a personal gift.

By all measures the 2010-2011 American Alpine Club / Alpine Club of Iran Climber Exchange was a tremendous success. In September 2010, our Iranian visitors to the Tetons were blown away by the hospitality of the AAC, the friendliness of the
American people, and the awesome beauty of the American mountains. The same may be said of the AAC delegation's reaction to Iran, the Iranians and the Iranian alpine environment. The initiative proved beyond any shadow of doubt that the powerful sense of community that we feel as climbers can not be blocked by political barriers.

The degree of friendship, respect and trust that the participants in the exchange established and will continue to enhance is profound. We, American and Iranian, look to the future of our clubs' relationship with optimism and a keen sense of excitement. It has only just begun.