

In Yazd, an Eternal Flame Burns Bright

Wahyuni Kamah visits the Persian desert city at the heart of an ancient and intriguing religion

I arrived at the main bus terminal in Yazd, the capital of the eponymous province in Iran, at night, and immediately I had the impression of a city that was wide sprawling. There were no high-rise buildings visible, and the city stretched out flat and low. I couldn't wait until day broke to see and explore the city, located about 630 kilometers southeast of Tehran.

Yazd was the center of Zoroastrianism when the Sasanian Empire (224 to 651 C.E.) ruled Persia, and takes its name from Yazdegerd I, one of the rulers of the dynasty, who reigned from 399 to 421.

Zoroastrianism is an ancient monotheistic religion founded more than 3,500 years ago by Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), and was the predominant faith during the Sasanian era. I wanted to know more about it, so the next morning I hired a taxi to take me to the Towers of Silence, among the last remnants of that time.

Located in the middle of the country and surrounded by deserts — Dasht-e-Kavir to the north and Dasht-e-Lut to the south — Yazd is the driest city in Iran. As we drove to the site, I could see how the desert climate had compelled the inhabitants of this city of just over a million to build their homes in a narrow and compact layout.

Towers of Silence

A 30-minute drive from my hotel took me to the outskirts of Yazd. On an arid hill in the desert I saw two tall structures: the Towers of Silence, or *dakhmeh* in Farsi.

The heat was intense, and it wasn't even noon yet. After paying the entrance fee, which is the same for locals and foreigners, I entered the vast complex of the dakhmeh — funerary structures atop which the Zoroastrians would leave their dead to rot and be picked apart by scavenging birds and their bones bleached by the sun — part of the process of excarnation that typically took up to a year and that formally concluded with the bones being gathered and laid in an ossuary pit at the center of the tower where they gradually disintegrate.

Ruins of brick houses still stand there, once abodes to people from distant villages who would come here to pray as the recently deceased were left on top of the towers. The houses had halls for such prayers, and a fire would stay lit here for three consecutive nights after the so-called open burial.



The Towers of Silence, top, in the desert outside Yazd served as funerary structures for the ancient Zoroastrian faith, which is still practiced in Yazd. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah



Beyond a glass window in the Zoroastrian temple of Yazd is a sacred room where a holy fire has been burning in a bronze vessel for a purported 1,500 years now

I climbed to the top of one of the towers, its perimeter wall standing about six meters tall. There were no steps.

At the top, its funerary function becomes apparent. The tower proper is simply a perimeter wall with a diameter of some 15 meters surrounding a pit. Four concentric rings line the pit: the outermost rings were for the bodies of men, the next for women, and the third ring for children. The pit at the very center was the ossuary.

It was, as per its name, deathly silent at the top, with only the breeze of the desert wind audible.

After the towers, I headed back to the city of Yazd to visit the Zoroastrian fire temple on Kashani Street.

Fire, and water, are agents of purity in Zoroastrianism, and not objects of worship, as is widely believed.

The temple is located in the middle of lush garden of cypress, pine and cedar trees. Out front is a round pool, and the main entrance is adorned by six columns, with the Faravahar, the winged disc that is among the best-known Zoroastrian symbols, above the main gate.

The temple was built in 1934 and belongs to Association of Farsi Zoroastrian of India.

Inside is a large, empty room for the public. On the wall are writings framed in glass carrying Zoroaster's messages. They are written in Farsi, but some have an English translation. There is also an explanation about the Faravahar, a painting of Zoroaster, as well as the Yasna text, the book of Zoroastrian scripture in the Avestan language.

Beyond a glass window is the sacred room where a holy fire has been burning in a bronze vessel for a purported 1,500 years now.

The four elements — fire, water, air and earth — are all sacred in Zoroastrianism, and the temple in Yazd is considered particularly holy because it is the home of the Victorious Fire, or Atash Bahram. There are only nine such eternal flames in

the world today — eight in India and only the one in Iran.

The fire in Yazd is said to come from the flames of the Pars Karyan fire temple in Lorestan, another province in Iran. It was taken to Aqda in Yazd province and kept alive for 700 years. Later it was taken to Ardakan, also in Yazd province, and kept aflame there for 300 years. Finally the fire was transported to the city of Yazd in 1473, where it was first kept at the house of a high-ranking priest before being moved to the temple.

Only priests may enter the sacred room to tend to the flame, which is kept ablaze with dry wood such as almond or apricot several times a day.

There were not many visitors when I went to the temple, but it's said to get very crowded during Nowruz, the Persian New Year, when the practising Zoroastrians of Yazd also offer their prayers. Nowruz, which falls this Friday, marks the beginning of spring.

Despite its Zoroastrian roots, Nowruz today is a secular holiday, particularly in Iran and regions that formerly fell under Persian influence and culture, including parts of Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and some Kurdish areas, and is celebrated by people of different ethnicities and faiths.

Parents Brace for Yet Another Ice Storm From Frozen Sequel

Dazed parents wander the aisles of the Disney store in Paris in a manic search for the right Elsa dress or Anna doll, the endlessly repeated refrain of "Let It Go" ringing in their ears. Are they ready for another installment of "Frozen fever"?

"I bloody well hate them all," says one man, staring at the 60 euro (\$70) price tag on a shiny turquoise dress.

He was one of many grimly determined parents making a dash through the Champs-Élysées branch of the Disney store in Paris on Friday, looking for more merchandise to sate the bottomless hunger of their charges back home.

The prospect of a Frozen sequel, officially announced a day earlier by Disney, does not fill them all with instant delight.

"More songs, more marketing? Yes, we're certainly worried," said Sylka Pax from Belgium, who has an 8-year-old girl.

"It drives us a little crazy but it has some advantages," she added on reflection.

"We took part in a quiz the other day and I immediately recognized the Frozen song in the music section."

The parenting world has yet to recover from the sensory and financial assault launched by Disney in late 2013, when Frozen burst out of nowhere to become the single most important thing in the lives of millions of children.

That has meant several hours of Christmas Day lost to the construction of a Frozen castle — whose broken pieces then become hidden booby traps around the house.

It has meant many mornings of struggle to convince a daughter she should wear her school uniform rather than an Anna dress.

And it has meant hearing the song "Let It Go" more times than is medically advisable.

"We've got a 5-year-old who sings it at the top of her lungs all day — Let it gooooo!" says Disney store shopper Carol Austin-Groome, from Britain. "And



she does not have a good singing voice."

London's Little Rascals children's entertainment company says the will to organize Frozen parties has slowly melted away in the past year.

"It's diminished recently, not really among the kids, but among the parents," says founder Andrew Bloomer, adding that Frozen parties still account for around a quarter of his business.

He fears for the sanity of some customers if the sequel triggers another wave of "Frozen fever."

"They saw a light at the end of the tunnel and now it's gone," he said.

In another aisle at the Disney store, Yusuf Sogul is desperately looking for an

The prospect of a 'Frozen' sequel has parents panicked about another wave of commercialism targeted at their kids. EPA Photo/Claudio Onorati

Elsa doll before he catches his flight back to Istanbul.

"My daughter is 7 years old. She has phoned us twice today and I have many messages on Whatsapp telling me to get it, but they only have the big one — it won't fit in my luggage," he says, slightly panicked.

At the London branch of the store, some parents put a more positive spin on the Disney cash cow, which has become the fifth-highest-grossing film of all time.

"It's the only movie she has watched all the way through," said Anna, from Gothenburg in Sweden, buying a Frozen bag for her 7-year-old daughter.

"Normally she has ants in her pants but with Frozen she sits and watches it. So it's a good thing. And I love the music."

While some fathers may be dreading the coming ice storm of a Frozen sequel, they also know they will have their revenge when an even more powerful force hits the screens.

"I couldn't care less," said London-based father Graeme Harrison. "Because the boys and I have now got Star Wars Episodes XII AND XIII movies to look forward to."