

photographs by
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—
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PASSAGE THROUGH THE ZAGROS

Jahan Mokhtari, far right, leads her daughter Afsaneh, 15, and son Kianoush, 10, to a wild walnut grove.

True to an ancient way of life,
a family in Iran makes a treacherous
seasonal migration across the mountains



“In the darkness we heard hundreds of sheep fleeing across the mountainous scrubland.”

— journal of Emily Garthwaite

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HE ZAGROS MOUNTAINS, IN WESTERN IRAN, stretch for nearly 1,000 miles, from the sands of the Persian Gulf northwest along the modern border with Iraq and Turkey, separating the plains of Mesopotamia from the expanse of the Iranian plateau. Deep gorges and jagged peaks surpassing 14,000 feet buffered ancient empires from one another—Babylon in the Fertile Crescent and, to the east, the great metropolises of ancient Persia. They frustrated more than one invader, including Alexander the Great. But this forbidding

mountain range is also rich in grasslands and rivers fed by winter snows, and for thousands of years tribal groups have migrated through the Zagros with the seasons to pasture their goats and sheep. That grueling, often dangerous feature of nomadic life has evolved, but it has not entirely disappeared. It persists to this day not only for practical reasons but also as a meaningful ritual for people whose history is rooted in the mountains.

Last October, the Mokhtari family, members of the Bakhtiari tribe, prepared to set out from their summer encampment in Iran’s Isfahan Province. They were parents Hossein and Jahan, three of their nine children and several cousins and other relatives. Following timeworn paths through the Zagros, allotted by custom to their tribe and clan, they would travel with around five horses, ten donkeys and mules, and hundreds of goats and sheep. Their destination in Khuzestan Province was some 150 difficult miles away. The journey, known in Farsi and in the local Luri dialect as *kuch*, would take two weeks. The British photographer Emily Garthwaite joined them to document the nomads’ trek.

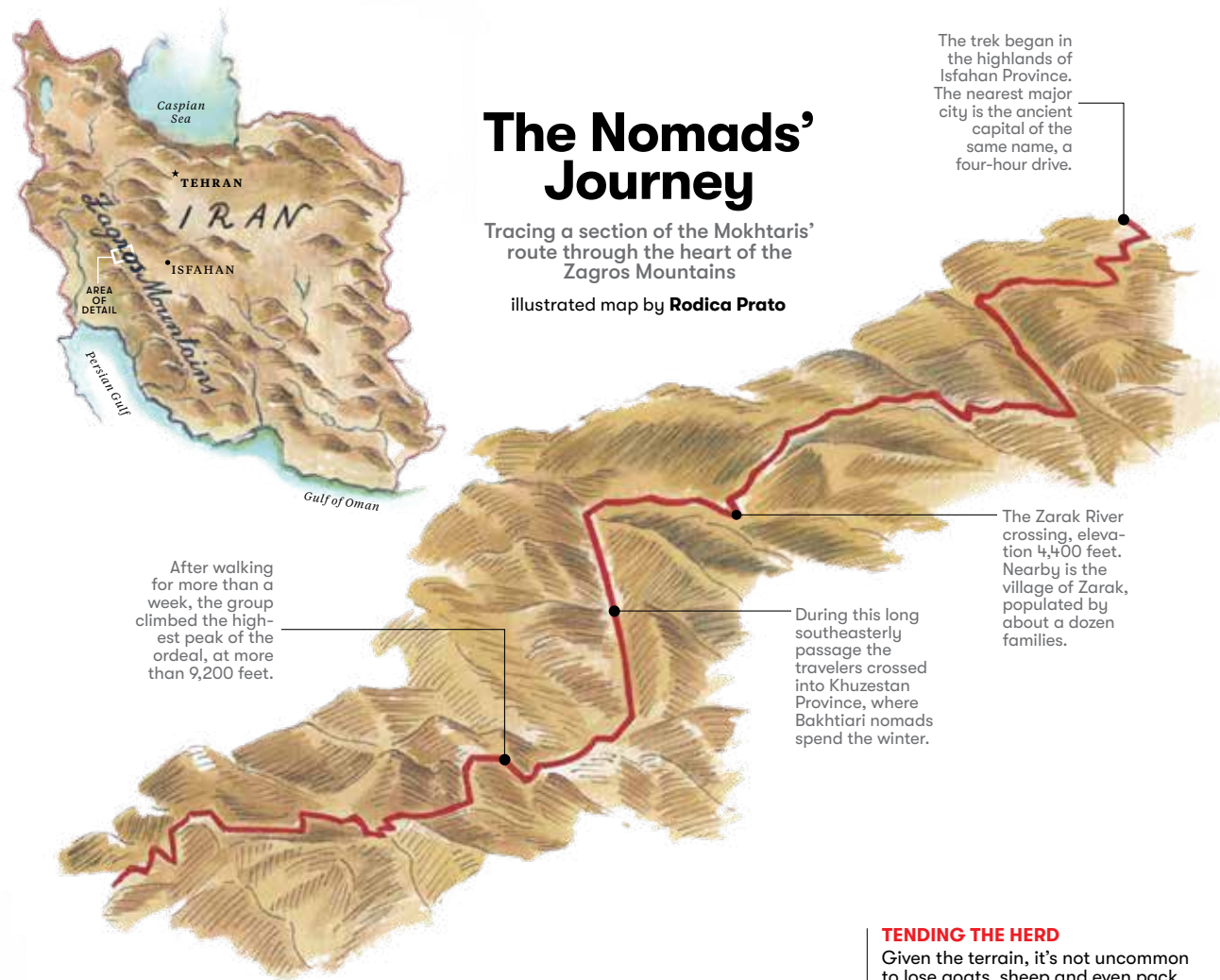
The Mokhtaris carried everything they owned—saddles, pillows, blankets, pots of

> The Mokhtari family supplemented their diet of bread, milk, ghee and nuts and fruits with vegetables from abandoned gardens. Here, Kianoush in a mountainside pumpkin patch left by another nomadic family.



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^ Dusk on the Zarak River. Bakhtiari territory encompasses some of the most extreme topography in the Zagros, where some mountain ridges drop precipitously 6,500 feet or more to the valley bottom.



The Nomads' Journey

Tracing a section of the Mokhtaris' route through the heart of the Zagros Mountains

illustrated map by **Rodica Prato**

The trek began in the highlands of Isfahan Province. The nearest major city is the ancient capital of the same name, a four-hour drive.

After walking for more than a week, the group climbed the highest peak of the ordeal, at more than 9,200 feet.

During this long southeasterly passage the travelers crossed into Khuzestan Province, where Bakhtiari nomads spend the winter.

The Zarak River crossing, elevation 4,400 feet. Nearby is the village of Zarak, populated by about a dozen families.

herbs and spices, tin pans, flour, ghee, milk and small metal bowls. There were spoons, ladles, bags of onions and potatoes, two containers of salt. They also carried two kettles, three changes of clothing each, shoes, and soap, a razor and a plastic mirror. "Hossein shaves every Friday during kuch, but only if there is time and access to water," Garthwaite wrote in her journal. They also lugged large plastic water bottles, wrapped in hand-stitched coverings, four flashlights, extra batteries and prayer beads; like most people in Iran, the Bakhtiaris are Shia Muslims, though their religious practices are not always in line with the strict theology of the country's ruling clerics.

TENDING THE HERD

Given the terrain, it's not uncommon to lose goats, sheep and even pack animals to loose rock, drowning and other accidents. At right, Moussa Mokhtari brings the animals across the Zarak River. Beneath that, Alboorz leads sheep through a mountain pass. This page: Abolfazl carries a pregnant sheep across the river.



The family woke early and were often walking by dawn. They covered roughly 10 or 12 miles a day, climbing thousands of feet in elevation only to descend and climb thousands of feet again as they made their way along Bakhtiari land toward their winter camp. Some days they went without fresh water. Others, they found no pasture for the animals, and the men had to take the flocks back into the mountains overnight to graze. They forded knee-deep rivers, carrying the less steady animals across on their shoulders. One day, a giant rock tore off a cliff face and tumbled down the side. The boulder narrowly missed 10-year-old Kiannoush and his mule, but it crushed a sheep, and later a couple of the older men returned on horseback to butcher the animal.

Apart from that unexpected mutton, the family ate acorn-flour bread, baked in the evenings over a fire by Jahan, refined goat ghee, and whatever they foraged: "blackberries, wild pistachio,



MAP SOURCE: EMILY GARTHWAITE



◀ Abolfazl, summing a ridge, surveys his goats. The famously sure-footed animals often climb straight over the rocky terrain, while the sheep take winding paths through the mountains. ■

“Our firewood is oak,
and the bread is
always covered with a
worn fabric cloth.”

—journal of Emily Garthwaite



SETTING UP CAMP

Clockwise from top: A plate of wild honey on a hand-woven Bakhtiari rug. Jahan stacking the evening’s acorn bread, which she bakes in a large round pan coated with the ash from oak wood, to prevent it from burning. Hossein, his hands stained black from walnut husks, drinks chai. Kianoush and his cousin Alboorz cook sheep ribs. A string of green acorns, which are a staple of the Bakhtiari diet. They’re not only turned into bread but, powdered, are added to milk to ease digestion. Acorns serve as decorations and charms, too.



salty sour sumac seeds, walnuts, and pumpkins and cucumbers from vegetable plots left behind by nomad families,” Garthwaite noted. “There’s also *zalzalak* (thumbnail-size apple-like fruits), figs, wild grapes, mint, pomegranate and wild pear trees.” A meal might consist of bread, wild honey, tahini and black tea, or mutton and hard lentils, or wild garlic with dried pomegranate seeds and crystals of salt.

At night, the family laid down a sheet of plastic and several blankets and slept together under the stars, even as the temperature dropped into the low 40s. A young goat named Soor, an orphan reared as a pet, curled up near them. From her tent, Garthwaite could sometimes hear the livestock. “The bells hung around the necks of the sheep and goats ring through the night, and once in sync, they could be mistaken for the sound of rushing water.” Other nights they heard distant gunfire—a wedding celebration, a bear sighting, a warning to other traveling families that a thief was out prowling for animals to steal.

One morning, the group realized that a sheep had gone blind, and Abolfazl Mokhtari, a nephew, often carried it to keep it from falling behind the group. A few days later, they set out without counting the livestock,





A Bakhtiari graveyard along the migration route. A link to tradition enables tribal groups to “retain what it is that gives them their uniqueness,” says anthropologist Lois Beck.

only to realize later that six sheep had been stolen by a thief in the night—a devastating blow.

Occasionally, the group passed through a Bakhtiari village, where they were greeted on ceremonial rugs laid beneath a giant oak tree and served tea with sugar. Because families walking kutch graze their livestock on land belonging to the villages they pass through, they frequently offer to exchange an animal with their hosts as a symbol of their gratitude, for example a young goat for another of the same age and size. In one village, the Mokhtaris’ hosts instead suggested trading a mature ram for Hossein’s white horse—a beloved companion to Kianoush, who stood clinging to the animal, wiping away tears, while his father negotiated the exchange.

In another, an older woman named Soraya said she preferred the mountains to the city despite the physical hardships. “Cities are easier, but this life makes me happy. Your body gets fit. You live longer here.” A 15-year-old named Marzieh had a different perspective. “I think young people like cities and old people like villages. I want to move to the city because I think life will be better there. You can sleep easy in a city because there is work. Some people love Bakhtiari life, but not me.” As roads, farms, industry and new towns carve up the mountains, there is little doubt younger generations are increasingly drawn to the opportunities of modern life. But Marzieh’s grandfather, Seyed, who was said to be more than 100 years old, was confident in the longevity of the nomadic life. “If there is good grass and good rain, we will be here forever.”

Meysam Emami, a Tehran-based guide who has worked with Bakhtiari people for nearly two decades, says he has seen attitudes change. Teenagers used to enjoy the months they spent up in the mountains, in the summer, “where they lived in their black tents and ran free.” Now, he says, many younger people seem to prefer their winter quarters, in cities, villages or encampments where families are building permanent lodgings. ““We have roads, we have TV, we have schools,” they say. “We can be chic!””

On the 13th day of their trek the Mokhtari group reached a paved road. They had covered more than 125 miles, and were still two days from their winter camp. The road was clogged with Bakhtiari farmers driving across the mountains in trucks loaded with animals. Garthwaite said goodbye to the Mokhtaris and hitched a ride, but not before promising that she would return.

“I notice a man from the village examining Hossein’s gun and studded cartridge belt.”

— journal of Emily Garthwaite



ANGLES OF REPOSE

Clockwise from top: Mehri Mokhtari, Hossein’s sister-in-law, with her son Pourang. Hossein using a mirror to shave his mustache, a Friday ritual. Afsaneh, who, in addition to milking the goats, this year began to help prepare the dough in the mornings that would be baked at night. Abolfazl, after learning that several sheep were stolen in the night.

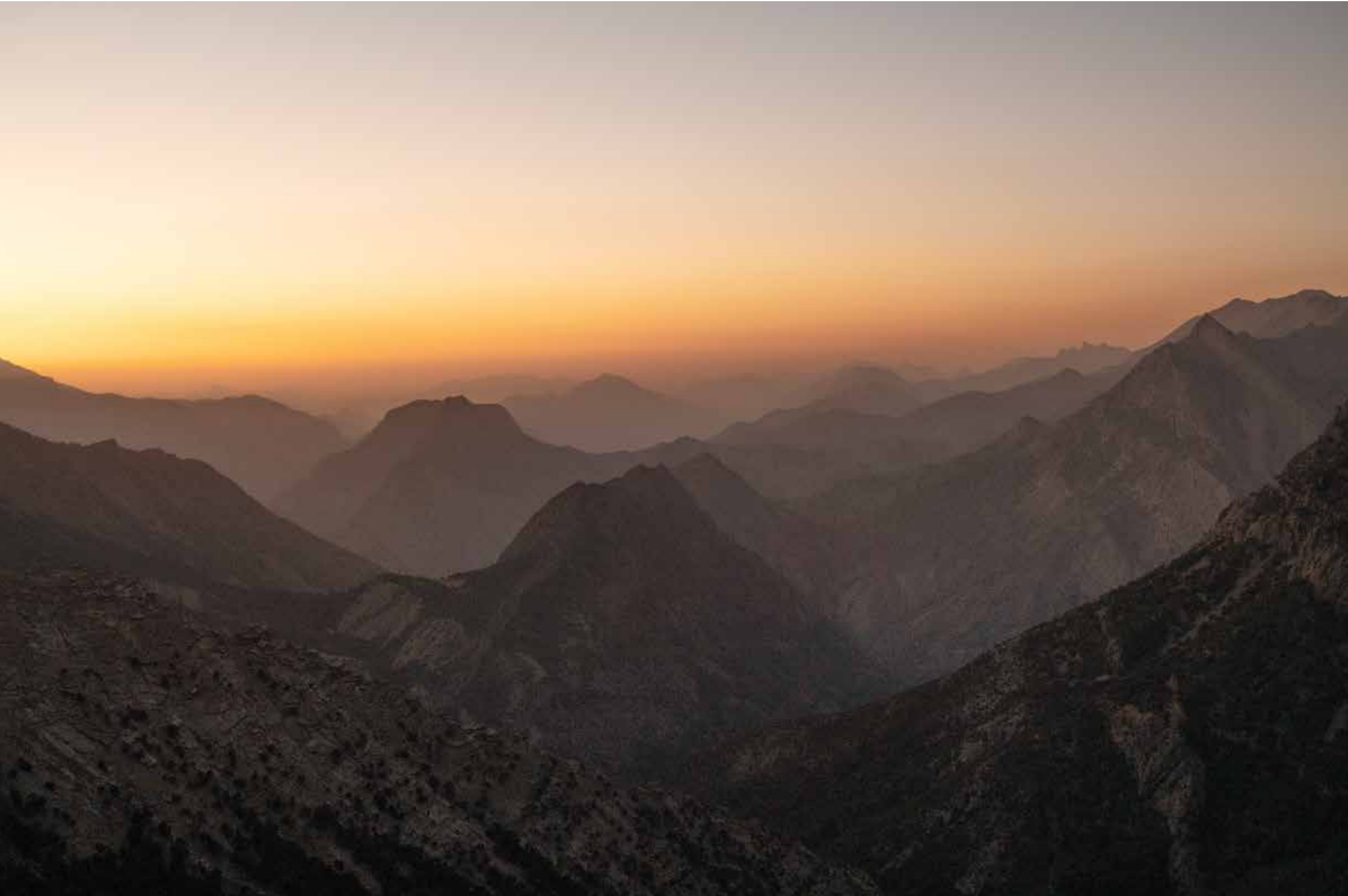


“Two golden eagles circle
our camp before disappearing
behind the mountainside.”

— journal of Emily Garthwaite

✓ For the Bakhtiari, the severity of the Zagros is an asset, says Beck, the anthropologist. “You pretty much have a mechanism to keep other people out.”

Kianoush, seen sleeping, could be as cheeky as any 10-year-old. “I will be the boss of the tribe,” he joked, “because I like to give orders.”



“Some people have this feeling that families who do this have superhuman abilities—that they’re designed for it, that they find it easier than we would,” Garthwaite said. “But they find it incredibly difficult. It’s challenging for everyone, mentally and physically. But the family also viewed this as a time to reconnect exactly with who they were.”

Many of Iran’s tribal minorities are now settled at least part of the year in villages or cities, and wealthier nomadic families send as much as possible to their encampment by hired truck or car, including their animals. Those who can afford it often prefer to make the drive themselves—on newer roads, it rarely takes longer than a day. But for many families, the migration itself remains a vital expression of their identity. “Most nomads and former nomads in Iran are deeply attached to their traditional territories,” says Lois Beck, an anthropologist at Washington University in St. Louis and an expert on Iran’s nomadic tribes. “Each of these groups has an intense sense of solidarity, and they are aware that they are a minority in Iran, and are often marginalized and repressed. And so they’re interested in keeping who they are and passing what they are to the next generation, and the seasonal migration is part of that. If you asked a Bakhtiari at random, what’s the most important thing about his culture? He would probably say: ‘Migration.’”

For Hossein and Jahan, the nomadic life was the only one they’d known, but they did not expect all of their children to choose it—already three were enrolled in schools in the city. Hossein hoped that some of his sons would find work in the city. When young Kianoush was asked whether he prefers a traditional lifestyle, he didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” he said, “because I can’t find a job in the city. I’m only 10.” ♦

BYLINES

Photojournalist **Emily Garthwaite**, who splits her time between London and Iraqi Kurdistan, focuses on humanitarian and environmental stories. **Arik Gabbai** is a senior editor at Smithsonian.