In 2002 Rory Stewart walked across war-torn Afghanistan, alone and in winter. In 2004 he served as deputy governor to a province in southern Iraq. Now this modern-day T.E. Lawrence has returned to the Middle East with a heroic charge: Save the Old City of Kabul from destruction and remind a nation of its former glory.

BY PAUL KVINTA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON HUEY

THE THROWBACK:
Stewart stands before one of the 27 buildings his foundation has begun to restore.
Afghanistan, most notably the president himself, Hamid Karzai. We’re strolling the narrow lanes of Kabul’s bustling Old City, past vendors peddling large oval   large oval of naan, past men selling pigeons in cages. A boy buffets by, pushing a wheelbarrow full of goat heads. What seems to disturb the older gentlemen about Stewart’s hat isn’t its material substance, but rather, the fact that he’s wearing something so fine in a blustery January snowfall. Is he some kind of idiot? Stewart, amused by the attention, translates for me the steady stream of concerns. “Take care of your hat,” yells one wide-eyed man. “Congratulations on your hat,” says another, “you’re about to ruin it.” Still another cracks, “Hey, Karzai, it’s snowing!”

We duck into a dark teahouse barely lit by narrow shafts of light streaming in from a couple of high windows punched through the mud wall. The denizens here appear almost biblical with their beards and turbans and heavy wooden blankets, hunkered over steaming glasses of tea. Stewart, by contrast, is sporting a chocolate brown, three-quarter-length fitted tocap, a matching pair of trousers, a white dress shirt, garden shoes, and a smart pair of leather shoes. With his erect posture and courtly manner, the Scot exudes a certain 19th-century colonial panache. But that doesn’t help him with the mounting hat criticism. “They’re going to make me wear a bag on my head.” Whereupon a man plucks the karakuli off Stewart’s head, carefully wraps it in a clear plastic bag, tucks in the edges, and returns it to its perch. Stewart politely thanks all concerned.

The hat was given to him by Pahlawan Aziz, a point of intense intrigue and speculation among the teahouse crowd. Aziz is one of the most influential and powerful men in the Old City, specifically a quar- ster called Murad Khane. He has lived here amid beautiful gardens and fabulous complexes. Stewart even romanticized something I didn’t think possible to romanticize— mud. “On a finer day than this,” he soliloquized in his Tony British accent, “when the sun is shining, these endless mud walls, curving, sagging, puddled, enfolding you, connected organically with the earth from which you are built, make you feel as though you’re in a tunnel of clay. And the contrast between the outside, very stark, forbidding mud wall and the intimate, carved, wooden decoration of these interiors, I find this very exciting.”

This isn’t a museum project, he assures me now as we leave the teahouse, his hat firmly protected against the elements. The residents of Murad Khane want their houses restored, he says. They want plumbing and electricity. They want the garbage removed. Stewart’s crews have already trucked away 2,000 tons of trash and are helping a nation rediscover its identity, the project is not a squabble in a far-flung, war-torn country. But to the extent that officials will back down. He has extensive media contacts around the world and he’s not beyond shaming officials into doing the right thing. “Basically,” he says, “we’re going to make an incredibly attractive area and then say to the city, ‘I dare you. I dare you to knock it down.’”

Given Stewart’s soaring public profile, some might find all this a peculiar use of his significant clout and talents, becoming embroiled in what could be considered a glorified municipal squash in a far-flung, war-torn country. But to the extent that he is helping a nation rediscover its identity, the project is not altogether unheroic.

HE OLD MEN can’t keep their eyes off Rory Stewart’s hat. It’s a karakuli, an envelope-shaped piece of headgear fashioned from the richly soft fleece of aborted lamb fetus. It’s an exquisite and not inexpensive thing to wear and largely reserved for men of stature in southern Iraq and wrote a second critically acclaimed book, The Prince of the Marshes. Both books provide a ground-up perspective that’s been mostly missing from the political debate over Iraq and Afghanistan, and even since their publication, everyone from British politicians to television news programs in the United States has been clamoring for his opinions and analysis.

Stewart, who now heads a nongovernmental organization called the Turquoise Mountain Foundation (TMF), had come into Aziz’s good graces by way of his ongoing efforts to save the Old City from imminent destruction. One could be forgiven for assuming that, in Afghanistan, such a threat might be related to Taliban missiles or suicide bombers. But in counterintuitive fact, the culprit is a real estate boom. Everywhere in Kabul, bulldozers are flattening whole city blocks of traditional Afghan mud architecture to make room for modern glass and concrete buildings, fueled by billions of dollars in aid money and opium profits.

Stewart and I had spent the morning slogging through the mud, tea in hand. Later that afternoon, we entered the courtyard of the Old City, specifically a quarter called Murad Khane on the eastern bank of the Kabul River. Initially I had a hard time appreciating exactly what it is that’s worth saving. Murad Khane is a warren of boxy, flat-topped, one- and two-story mud buildings laced with winding passageways so packed with decades of uncollected garbage that street levels had risen seven feet in some areas, forcing residents to contort themselves to enter their front doors. There was no plumbing, no sewage system. Residents relieved themselves in the open. Loitering men smoked hashish.

But where I saw an impoverished slum, Stewart envisioned a grand Islamic city. “The glory is on the inside,” he assured me, as we entered the courtyard of a 19th-century home and climbed a flight of deteriorating mud steps to an empty second story room. Although badly in need of repair, the room hinted at a former splendor that completely captured Stewart’s imagination. The intricately carved cedar doorway, the arched plaster niches in the wall, the stained glass above the windows, all of it reflected an elaborate fusion of influences, he explained, everything from Mogul to Persian to Arab to European. Since the 1790s, Mirza Khane had been a prosperous trading area, a critical crossroads on the Silk Route. Grand merchants and high officials lived here amid beautiful gardens and fabulous complexes. Stewart even romanticized something I didn’t think possible to romanticize—mud. “On a finer day than this,” he soliloquized in his Tony British accent, “when the sun is shining, these endless mud walls, curving, sagging, puddled, enfolding you, connected organically with the earth from which you are built, make you feel as though you’re in a tunnel of clay. And the contrast between the outside, very stark, forbidding mud wall and the intimate, carved, wooden decoration of these interiors, I find this very exciting.”

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It’s a risky strategy. Officially, the city master plan has Mirz Khane slated for destruction. Bulldozers could show up any day. Stewart, with Aziz’s counsel, is gambling that if they work fast enough and show the city what Mirza Khane can be again, officials will back down. He has extensive media contacts around the world and he’s not beyond shaming officials into doing the right thing. “Basically,” he says, “we’re going to make an incredibly attractive area and then say to the city, ‘I dare you. I dare you to knock it down.’”

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STEWART BOUNDS OFF ahead of us, invigorated by the dramatic scenery and apparently unable to moderate his pace. He’s a slight, wiry man, a bit bowlegged, but he has little trouble with the knee-deep January snow. His Turquoise Mountain...
Where I saw an impoverished slum, Stewart envisioned a grand Islamic city, where merchants and high officials once lived amid beautiful gardens and fabulous complexes.
staff and I can’t keep up. We’re hiking the length of Kabul’s Old City wall, which starts at the colossal Bala Hissar fortress and snakes for a mile and a half atop the barren ridgeline of Sher-i-Darwaza, a lofty 1,300 feet above the city. Time and conflict have sculpted this ancient barrier into a hideous monument, leaving it Swiss-cheesed in some places, pulverized in others, and littered everywhere with shell casings. More impressive than the wall is the sweeping view of Kabul below. And more impressive than ever is that Stewart perched atop the ruins of an old watchtower, flanked by the soaring peaks of the Hindu Kush and delivering—when we finally catch up to him—a history lesson off the top of his head.

“That’s the ridge beyond which Aristotle called ‘the end of the world,’” he begins, gesturing toward the mountains in the distance. “We know that his student, Alexander, came here, although this site had been inhabited for at least 2,500 years, since before Alexander arrived. The people here were an Indo-European people, a Vedic people. The Kabul area at that time would have been on the eastern edge of the Persian Empire. The Bala Hissar is possibly as old as 1000 B.C.E.; it hasn’t been properly excavated. It was refurbished by the emperor Babur in the 16th century, and then later partially destroyed by the British in 1879 in response to the massacre of British troops there. The wall we’re standing on is a Hepthalite construction from the early centuries of this era. But it was used, of course, right up through the civil war period, perhaps a fifth-century foundation with an upper part built in 1996 to withstand the Taliban.”

He discusses where Ahmad Shah Massoud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and other warlords positioned themselves during the 1990s battle for Kabul. He points out which road the Taliban marched up. He could go on all day.

When we finally climb down from the watchtower to resume our hike, Stewart takes note of the cloudless blue sky and the gentle breeze. “On a good day,” he says, “I had weather like this for my walk.”

In 2002, when Stewart walked from Herat, in western Afghanistan, to Kabul, in the east, he did so mostly by himself and in the dead of winter. He was retracing the footsteps of Babur, a descendant of Genghis Khan and the founder of the great Mongol Empire, who at age 22 made the same journey in the winter of 1504. Carrying no food and very little gear, and weating not much more than a salwar kameez (a knee-length, loose-fitting shirt) and a heavy coat, Stewart navigated the treacherous peaks, frozen rivers, and deep snow of the Hindu Kush. The United States had invaded Afghanistan only three months before, so the country was still more or less a war zone and completely lawless. Employing wits, charm, passable Dari, and a deep knowledge of Central Asian history and culture, Stewart leveraged the Afghan sense of honor and hospitality to negotiate his way past warlords, Taliban thugs, baffled villagers, and assorted ruffians. The journey lasted 36 days and no doubt rates as one of the more foolish endeavors of all time.

Stewart powers ahead of us, loping up the ridge like a mountain goat, pausing only once to shout back instructions for us to stay on the north side of the wall. The south side is mined. At one point Aaron Huey, a photographer with us, hangs back by himself to shoot some pictures. Out of nowhere, three young men approach him. Loaded down with camera gear and unnerved by the strangers, Huey calls out for assistance. Stewart comes trotting back and immediately engages the men in Dari. Reaching for each of their hands, he says to the first, “Salaam aleikum—Peace be with you,” to the second, “Jor bashi—May your body prosper,” and to the third, “Manda na bashi—May you not be tired.” The men look at Stewart and then at each other, perplexed. Slowly, they respond in Dari, “Prosperity to you,” and “My body is strong. Is your body strong?” and “Long life to you.” They aren’t sure what to make of Stewart. He’s much too pale to be Afghan. They begin rifling questions at him.

“Where are you from?”

“Are you a Muslim?”

“Why do you speak such good Dari?”

“Thank you,” Stewart says graciously, “but I’m afraid I don’t speak good Dari. I am from Scotland, and I am Christian, not Muslim.”

The three are still trying to digest this last remark when Stewart adds, “I am a follower of Jesus, whom the Koran considers a great prophet. May God’s blessings be upon you.” The men nod. “And to you too,” they respond. Having disarmed them, Stewart takes his leave with Huey in tow.

We amble down the western slope of Sher-i-Darwaza and...
end our hike overlooking Babur’s Garden, a 27-acre expanse on the Kabul River that the emperor personally designed for the city he most loved. “It has a pleasant climate,” Babur wrote of Kabul in his journals. “If the world has another so pleasant, it is not known.” Although ruthless in combat, Babur loved poetry, wine, music, and flowers, and he created great Mogul gardens across his empire to celebrate these pleasures. He lies in a tomb in the garden we’re gazing at now. Stewart ended his big walk in that garden, which was only appropriate. Babur is a hero of his.

WHEN I ASK FELIX MARTIN, an executive with the World Bank and a lifelong friend of Stewart’s, about the motivation behind his pal’s unconventional, thematically grand, and invariably risky pursuits, he says, “Rory’s role models aren’t from this century. He’s out of kilter with the modern world.” That observation is somewhat misleading. On one level Stewart is thoroughly modern, to the point of being overwhelmed. I spend time driving around Kabul with him, and the guy couldn’t be more tapped in. Riding shotgun, he’s juggling a cell phone, a BlackBerry, and a laptop, and when he’s not taking calls, checking email, or pointing out to me all the bombed-out landmarks of significance—typically with an in-depth sociohistorical explanation—he’s banging away on a 7,000-word article for the New Yorker. “I need to stop doing three jobs at once,” he says, sighing. By that he means his foundation work, his full-time writing load, and the analysis on Afghanistan and Iraq he provides for British and U.S. politicians. Last week, during four days in London, when he wasn’t meeting with senior politicians or the defense minister, he gave interviews to the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and three newspapers. He had seven fund-raising meetings for TMF and recorded an audiobook of The Prince of the Marshes. Meanwhile the London Review of Books wants a 5,000-word piece on “theories of occupation and development.” Penguin wants him to write the preface to its re-release of Sir Wilfred Thesiger’s 1959 classic travel account Arabian Sands. He’s slated to write the introduction for Afghanistan’s entry in an international calligraphy exhibit in Bahrain, in February. In March he’ll write eight op-ed articles as a guest columnist for the New York Times, while simultaneously visiting six Middle Eastern countries with Prince Charles—the titular head of TMF—to raise money. The list goes on.

On a deeper level, however, his friend Martin is right. The people from whom Stewart draws inspiration spring from the dusty shelves of history, men such as Alexander, Babur, Lord Byron, and T.E. Lawrence. These figures not only achieved monumental things, but they did so according to a moral code Stewart finds...
Rory Stewart

irresistible, one that includes generosity, bravery, honor, greatness of soul, and magnificence in gesture. Stewart has written quite a bit about heroes, and he maintains that past societies not only tolerated the violence, adversity, and godlike yearning of these men, but they viewed those qualities as necessary for heroism itself. For 2,500 years the notion of the superhuman hero shaped art, literature, and rhetoric and provided a model of how to live. But by the mid-20th century the social context had changed. Western society, with its industrialization, democracy, and new attitudes toward masculinity, stopped returning the camels, all treasure accounted for. Miffed, the king, now infuriated, sends his finest warrior to kill Samak. En route, the warrior meets Samak on the road but doesn’t recognize him. Samak invites him to dinner, and, like others before him, the warrior is overwhelmed with admiration and respect for the stranger. Finally the warrior confesses his plans to Samak. “I can help you,” Samak says. “First, I’ll show you a secret path to take once you’ve killed Samak, ensuring your safe escape.” The warrior thanks him profusely. “Now,” Samak says, “bring me a basin.” The warrior complies. The kaka places his head over the basin and says, “I am Samak. Now you can kill me.” Whereupon the warrior breaks down and embraces Samak, and the two go hand-in-hand to confront the king.

Nostalgia for dead tyrants and the longing for heroes are unhealthy and they can result in the deification of a Saddam as easily as a Havel or Mandela. But we shouldn’t feel ourselves into thinking we have lost nothing. The desire to be godlike and do the impossible is gone and we will see this loss in music, in novels, in painting, in architecture and the way we shape our lives. September 11th has produced only miniature heroes because our culture has freed itself from many of the old, dangerous, elitist fantasies of heroism. … But in so doing we have not only tamed and diminished heroes. We have risked taming and diminishing ourselves.

In the car Stewart tells me about a mysterious Afghan hero figure called a kaka. He learned the term from his adviser Pahlawan Aziz, the Murad Khane power broker. As Stewart understands it, a kaka is a cross between a knight and Robin Hood, a man who protects the poor, stands up to the powerful, understands it, a kaka is a cross between a knight and Robin Hood, a man who protects the poor, stands up to the powerful, and has no interest in material riches. Kakas derive their strength from Islam, and they embody the highest values in society. Stewart seems gripped by the notion. He’s even writing an article about it. Why, he wants to know, that most people only know kakas from the past? Is Afghan society willing to recognize them today? Whether it is or not, Aziz certainly seems to be dropping hints that he might be a kaka. “I am a man of no corruption,” he says. “I have just told you earlier,” he says. “I have just told you earlier,” he says. “I have just told me easier,” he says. “I have just served you my horse for dinner.” The king, now infuriated, sends his finest warrior to kill Samak. En route, the warrior meets Samak on the road but doesn’t recognize him. Samak invites him to dinner, and, like others before him, the warrior is overwhelmed with admiration and respect for the stranger. Finally the warrior confesses his plans to Samak. “I can help you,” Samak says. “First, I’ll show you a secret path to take once you’ve killed Samak, ensuring your safe escape.” The warrior thanks him profusely. “Now,” Samak says, “bring me a basin.” The warrior complies. The kaka places his head over the basin and says, “I am Samak. Now you can kill me.” Whereupon the warrior breaks down and embraces Samak, and the two go hand-in-hand to confront the king.

Rory Stewart’s interest in hero figures stems back to a childhood that’s absurdly precocious and doesn’t seem quite real. His entire life has the feel of an Edwardian adventure novel. His father, Brian Stewart, one of a long line of self-sufficient Scottish Highlanders, fought on the beaches of Normandy before becoming deeply involved in counterinsurgency operations against guerrillas fighting the British colonial government of what is now Malaysia. He worked as a diplomat and learned seven Asian languages and dialects. Rory’s mother, Sally, an economist and academic, once crossed the Hindu Kush herself, seven Asian languages and dialects. Rory’s mother, Sally, an economist and academic, once crossed the Hindu Kush herself, driving a jeep from London to Malaysia for a teaching position at the University of Malaya. Rory grew up partly in Malaysia after being born in Hong Kong in 1973. When he and his father weren’t ambling into the rain forest to build makeshift rafts and float down jungle streams, they were traveling with Sally to Dayak villages in Borneo to visit friends and stay in longhouses.

Rory’s parents steeped him in the classics early on. At six he recited “Horatius,” an epic poem by Thomas Macaulay about the one-eyed Roman hero who single-handedly turned back the invading Etruscans at the Pora Sublucus. Stewart had memorized the entire poem, all 560 lines, a feat that hinged at Holmesian mental capacities. Never intimidated by adults, he chatted up his parents’ friends and charmed them with poetry. “He was a very grown-up little boy, in a very intellectual family,” says his half sister, Annie, 20 years his elder. “It was a life of museums, embassies, lectures,
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universities. From the age of five his life has been one big intellectual conversation with adults. He didn’t just talk. He listened.

During father-son boxing and fencing lessons, pint-size Rory soaked up Brian’s toughness and the old-fashioned values of self-discipline, fortitude, and hard work. And while the family is not landed gentry (they do own a 90-acre estate in the Scottish Highlands, named “Broich,” with gardens, forests, cattle, and a Georgian country house that Rory describes as “not small,” even though he pokes fun at his standing with the old George Orwell joke, “We’re decidedly lower-upper-middle class”)

On Eton, Stewart’s skills at schmoozing and ingratiating himself to the heaviest hitters in any given room came into clear focus. Once when Anderson invited the school’s top students to dine at Eton’s Gaveston Society, where friends describe him as relentlessly serious and relentlessly social all at once. “He was a leading member of the Piers Gaveston Society,” says Martin, referring to the notorious social club known for secret parties and a skimpy dress code. At the Gaveston, Stewart spent a gap year after Eton in officer training with the Black Watch, the storied Scottish Army regiment in which his father and grandfather had served. He then enrolled at Oxford, where friends describe him as relentlessly serious and relentlessly social all at once. “He was a leading member of the Piers

A scholar in Kabul’s National Museum attempts to rebuild a statue destroyed by the Taliban.

“Is this a war?” a Pakistani agent asked Stewart. “It’s a war because there are wolves, and this is a war. You will die.”

Gaveston Society,” says Martin, referring to the notorious social club known for secret parties and a skimpy dress code. At the same time he revelled in the cerebral atmosphere of Balliol College, Oxford’s most intellectually rigorous school.

People also began to notice in him a certain across-the-board fearlessness, based largely in curiosity. One time, after a late-night incident with a champagne bottle, Stewart’s friends rushed him to the emergency room for eight stitches in his badly gashed hand. “Afterward he told us that he requested no anesthesia, for historical purposes,” says his friend Andrew Greenstock. “He said he wanted to see what it felt like. The nurse tells him, ‘Oh, so we want it that way do we, Rambo?’ And then he described for us what it felt like, the needle and thread going through the skin and muscle.”

After Oxford, Stewart was one of 25 selected for the British Foreign Office from a pool of more than 15,000 applicants. The agency fast-tracked him, meaning he bypassed typical entry-level administrative duties and started immediately on policy work. Following a two-year stint in London working on Japanese economics, he took a posting in Jakarta in July 1997, on the eve of the Asian economic crisis. Stewart was one of the few people who predicted the rupee would fall as far as it did, a situation that ended the rupiah would fall as far as it did, a situation that ended

In short time Stewart knew all the power players in Jakarta, which helped both professionally and socially. “He was my brother’s wingman,” says Indonesian journalist Dino Djajal. “My brother was quite a peacock.” Dino Djial, now the spokesman for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, juggled a glamorous life full of models, soap opera stars, and film types, and Stewart fit right in with his BMW convertible of models, soap opera stars, and film types, and Stewart fit right in with his BMW convertible

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Wakana, but he was as lost as we were." When they reached the river, they asked at a military post about hiring a canoe. The soldier demanded $400. Stewart immediately went to them. "I know your commanding officer," he said, "and I know he will be severely disappointed in you." He sat there until the soldiers dropped their price. "We were in the middle of nowhere, we had no leverage," says Greenstock. "But Rory has that kind of judgment."

"I'M NOT GOOD AT" explaining why I walked across Afghanistan," Stewart writes in the opening line of "Plains in Between," and for the next 296 pages he didn't make much of an effort to do so. Noodling over it now, he says that the idea for a marathon walk first came to him five months after joining the Foreign Office, when he was visiting Scotland and decided to walk from his hometown to the next town over. "I remember thinking, This is the most amazing thing in the world! I'm doing a lot of stuff I don't really continue doing this? Why am I stuck in my life? I'm doing a lot of stuff I don't really mean to pay any of the Maoist levies. Greenstock says, "He had been ill. He was in a rut. There were long miles of mountains to cross, and he was pretty knackered when I met him." Stewart had logged 5,000 total miles, and despite tapping his inner Zen, the daily hammering and isolation had taken their toll. Self-doubt crept in. Why the hell was he doing this? His tendency to look ahead to the next week or beyond didn't help. By Nepal he was deeply depressed. Then he ran into a 31-year-old Australian woman who called herself a Buddhist. "Look, Rory," she told him, "you've got to stop thinking about your destination. If you don't start being present, if you don't start thinking about every second that you're in it, you're done for." Cheesy, yet sage. The message reached him. He was much cheerier for the rest of Nepal.

The timing was great for an attitude adjustment. As it happened, the United States had just invaded Afghanistan and overthrown the Taliban. Stewart had a gap to make up.

"IN HIS BOOK," when Stewart pitches his plan to an unsmililing agent of the Afghan security service in Herat, the man states matter-of-factly, "You are the first tourist in Afghanistan. It is midwinter—there are three meters of snow on the high passes. There are wolves, and this is a war. You will die." Stewart isn't altogether frank when he explains to the agent that he wants to retrace Babur's winter journey of 1504 from Herat east to Kabul through the rugged heart of the Hindu Kush. His real reason for choosing this route, initially, is because the Flatten, easier route down through Kandahar is still controlled by the Taliban. He wants to go in January because he doesn't feel like waiting around five months for the snow to clear. But when he does get around to reading

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about Babur’s journey in The Baburnama, the collected writings from his travels, Stew-
art is smitten. In Places he writes: He tells this adventure story with impre-
sive modesty. . . . He focuses on the people he meets and uses portraits of individuals to suggest a whole society. . . . At times it seems the only thing missing from the story is himself. He never explains what drives him to live this extraordinary life and take these kinds of risks. He does not describe his emotions, and as a result he can seem distant and the episodes of his life, repeti-
tive. Confronted by dead bodies or people defining their status, these knuckleheads deal with a dinner host by boosting the standing of his shabbily dressed charge with the order in which men greet each other and the episodes of his life, repeti-
tive. Confronted by dead bodies or people trying to full him, he writes in increas-
ingly deplorable and impersonal prose. But this restraint only emphasizes the extraordinary nature of his experiences. It’s a testament to Stewart’s respect for Babur that this passage could also describe The Places in Between pretty much exactly. Stewart uses stripped-down prose to recount interactions with everyone from goatherds and jihads to warlords and artifact smugg-
gers. He reveals virtually no interior land-
scapes. Given the surreal nature of where he is and what he’s doing, this has the effect of heightening the book’s profound sense of tragedy, terror, and even comedy. For the first third of the journey, officials force Stewart to walk with the Moe, Larry, and Curly of the Afghan Army. In a society where the seating arrangement at dinner and the order in which men greet each other are the most important things, how can you not appreciate the people Stewart paints an empathetic picture of a society with radically different values than his. There’s a lot to despise, such as the easy violence and the treatment of women. But Stewart keeps his judgments in check and somehow comes off seeming comfortable in it all. “I wanted this book to be a thing of elegance,” he says, “something that may not sell many copies, but that someone 300 years from now could dust off and say, This is what it was like to walk across Afghanistan in the winter of 2002.” Babur had left such a legacy. After the trip Stewart went home to Scot-
land. He didn’t need to walk anymore. MORE THAN ANYTHING, Stewart’s journey made him appreciate the on-the-
ground complexity of post-conflict soci-
eties, particularly ones shaped by ancient traditions and values. He’d just completed the ultimate reconnaissance mission, hoof-
ing 6,000 miles across Asia, sleeping in 500 village homes, and talking to thousands of people. Still, there was so much he didn’t know about the countries he had visited. How could development agencies from the West, with their “democracy workshops” and “capacity building” and “sustainable development,” parachute into a place like Afghanistan for a limited period of time and begin to understand it, much less change it? “Colonial administrations may have been racist and exploitative,” he writes in Places, “but they did at least work seriously at the business of understanding the people they were governing.” A colonial officer, he says, learned the local language, spent an entire career in one place, and answered to both a strict over-
seer back home and a potentially mutinous population in country. Things got done. Today’s post-conflict experts, he writes: “have got the prestige without the effort or stigma of imperialism. Their implicit denial of the difference between cultures is the new mass brand of inter-
national intervention. Their policies fail but no one notices. There are no credible monitoring bodies and there is no one to take formal responsibility. Individual officials are never in any one place and rarely in any one organization long enough to be adequately assessed. . . . In fact their very unsuccess benefits them. By avoiding any serious action or judg-
ment they, unlike their colonial prede-
cessors, are able to escape accusations of racism, exploitation and oppression.” This blunting assessment aside, Stewart still believed that Western interventions held some merits—most of the Afghans he’d met were grateful the Taliban were gone—so much so that in September 2013 he took a job with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq. He served as deputy governor of two southern Iraqi provinces, first Amara then Nasiriyah, and was charged with the unenviable task of creating functioning
province governments in a matter of months. “He had zeal, and a 19th-century style,” says Sir Hilary Synnott, the regional coordinator of southern Iraq and Stewart’s boss. “He’d wear those tailored suits and cuff links when everyone else was dressing down. The Iraqis loved it, it felt they showed them respect.” In order to understand the local power structures, Stewart learned the genealogies of 21 tribes in his two provinces. “No one else had any idea of that level of understanding,” says Charlotte Morris, who worked alongside Stewart. “He got all this from reading books and talking to sheikhs and other people. As things got worse, people made excuses not to go out to talk to people. Rory never did that.”

Despite this, and despite some successes—he helped broker a critical jobs program in Nasiriyah—Stewart’s effort, like that of the entire CPA, was ultimately doomed to failure. He was unable to protect them. Both were killed.

The experience left Stewart feeling decidedly pessimistic about what foreigners could achieve in such places. He concluded that the U.S. and Britain should pull their troops out of Iraq. When he was later asked to lecture on the Shiite political parties in southern Iraq, during a fellowship at Harvard, he reeled off, without notes, the three main parties, the subgroups of those, the years they were all founded, the years that the ayatollahs heading those groups were assassinated, the names of those ayatollahs, and the names of the current leaders of each group. He explained that the differences between the groups were difficult to ascertain, that they all believed in sharia—law based on a strict interpretation of the Koran—they all had armed militias, they all got 85 to 90 percent of the vote in southern Iraq, and yet they considered themselves clearly distinct from each other. At this point Stewart says his students rebelled. “But Rory,” one of them said, “this picture is too complicated.” “Well, I’m afraid that’s the reality,” Stewart responded. “The reality is that this situation is unbelievably complicated, because I’ve just talked about three political parties. There were 54 political parties in my province, and I can continue talking about the other 51.” “But you’re paralyzing us,” someone complained. “I want to paralyze you,” Stewart said. “I want you to understand why you cannot go into this country with your six easy points about how to build a democratic society.”

**IT SHOULD COME AS no surprise that**

in Kabul, Stewart lives and works in a 19th-century royal fort that in the 1920s was given as a bride price to the family of a wealthy merchant (the other fort he’d considered, one on a hill with vineyards, was recently bulldozed by developers). He has restored it faithfully, the mud walls smooth and clean, the door frames intricately carved, the entrance and main office fronted by elaborate, decorative wooden screens. The calligraphy classrooms, woodworking shop, and pottery studio of the

Turquoise Mountain Foundation school are here, along with a suite of offices for the architects and engineers working on the Old City restoration. The Afghan craftsmen, many with turbans and deeply lined faces, go by the honorific, or “ustad,” and each day 50 students file through these gates to reconnect with a cultural heritage upended and broken by 30 years of war.

You don’t have to look beyond the ustads or any of Stewart’s 150 local employees to understand the war’s impact. Mohammad Sahlbad, a miniature painter, was beaten by Taliban thugs with batons for depicting humans in his work. They shredded his paintings before his eyes. Ustad Aizuddin, a potter, awoke one morning to crossfire between rival warlords and found his neighbor’s leg on his front doorstep. Later, Taliban troops barged into his home and demanded to know which of his many brothers was conspiring against them. Each brother insisted it was himself. The Taliban, unable to discern the truth, simply selected a brother at random and executed him on the spot. Manan Hamdard, a translator for TMF, was eating lunch with his family one day when the Northern Alliance dropped a bomb on his house.

He and his wife survived. Their six-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter did not.

Many other artists and craftsmen fled to Pakistan, along with Afghanistan’s intellectual exodus, leaving the country with a gaping cultural void. That void is made all the more poignant with a visit to the National Museum. Bombarded and looted, the museum lost 70 percent of its collection, and much of the remaining 30 percent remains in pitiable condition. In the “restoration room,” I watch men in white coats sift through what looks like piles of gravel in an attempt to glue together ancient stone statues smashed by the Taliban. Humpty Dumpty would stand a better chance.

This is the situation Stewart found when he returned to Afghanistan at the end of 2005. He’s working with, TMF can at the very least provide a few jobs and raise a community’s standard of living. At most it can help a broken nation reconnect with its cultural heritage. It’s tough to say if this approach will work. Stewart now appears to be doing what he has been critical of—running a Western development agency in a post-conflict society. He insists, however, that TMF is different than most. His foundation doesn’t do “needs assessments,” it’s not trying to serve the poorest community in Afghanistan, and it’s not conducting gender or civil society workshops. His plan involves risk. He can’t guarantee to donors—TMF’s budget is $3 million this year—that Murad Khane won’t be leveled. But he knows it will be leveled if he doesn’t do anything. He knows traditional arts and crafts will disappear if those skills and an appreciation for them aren’t passed on to a new generation. He thinks that if he works on an intimate level, over a period of years, almost as a missionary would do, if he trusts the locals he’s working with, TMF can at the very least provide a few jobs and raise a community’s standard of living. At most it can help a broken nation reconnect with its cultural heritage.
RORY STEWART

Khane, attitudes there are far from uniform. For every person I meet like Jan Mohamed, a teacher—“They should keep these buildings, from our grandparents”—I meet someone like Barat Khwajazada, a blacksmith—“The giving of gifts in Afghanistan is also a grand gesture of sorts, loaded with meaning and import. Stewart wears his karakuli when we finally go to visit Pahlawan Aziz, the big man of Murad Khane. Aziz has just returned from the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and he invites us over for tea. We sit on Persian carpets and pillows, before an impressive spread of nuts, fruits, sweets, and small porcelain cups of holy water, all items brought back from Mecca. As is the custom, various men drop in all morning to pay their respects to the returning hajji, men wearing karakulis, men of stature.

Pahlavan means “wrestler” in Dari, and Aziz, 65, looks the part. He’s short, thick, and tough-looking, with a large, bulbous nose, tiny eyes, and a mostly bald head. There’s a grand tradition of wrestling in Afghanistan, a sport connected to royal courts and country gentlemen. In his youth, Aziz led a band of wrestlers from Murad Khane that squared off with other bands in the Old City. In the 1960s he became Afghanistan’s national champion after he defeated a rival band leader in the national stadium before thousands of people, a match refereed by the Russian world champion. More important, I have no idea if Aziz is a kakas. More important, I have no idea if Afghan- ghani, after decades of turmoil, even ac- cepts the notion of classical heroes any- more. The West certainly doesn’t. But as I sit during tea and listen to the conversation, it’s hard not to think I’m in the presence of a man who at least aspires to heroic virtues. Two men, in fact.

At one point, Stewart asks Aziz for advice on what seems a minor issue. He explains that TMF has a firm rule against nepotism, but recently a cleaning woman asked Stewart to hire her husband. He’s a skilled worker, but he’s blind and can’t get work elsewhere. “On the one hand I have the rule of the office,” Stewart says. “On the other hand I have an obligation towards a poor person who is handicapped. What is Hajji’s advice? What would he do in this situation?” Aziz mulls this over. He takes off his karakuli, scratches his head, puts it back on. “I think if someone does something for his fellow human beings, he will be respected all over the world and throughout history,” he says, finally. “Let me give you an example. The mayor might want to implement his master plan, he might want to come and destroy my house. He has his plan, his rules, but what about his fellow human being? If there aren’t any political motives behind the works that we do for a poor man, if there’s not something dirty in our minds behind the works that you do for somebody, I think it is better to help the poor person instead of respecting your rule.” Stewart nods.

“The reason I like you very much,” Aziz continues, “is because you have a very, very deep human feeling. You are always respecting the poor people, helping the poor people.” Stewart doesn’t dwell on the compli- ment. He takes a sip of tea and pleasantly turns the conversation to politics.