

Letter to Bruce Chatwin

Dear Bruce,

Your “plea for Afghanistan” made me laugh bitterly between two cups of fair trade organic green tea—a luxury that was unknown in 1973, when I slept under the starry sky of Bamiyan with three dollars in my pocket and Jack Kerouac's “On the Road” in my backpack.

You accuse us hippies of “corrupting” Afghanistan with our Marxist dreams? I wonder which one of us smoked too much. You seem to be confusing the smoke of hashish with the smoke of history. We weren't particularly interested in Marx, especially when we were smoking our chillums on the head of the Buddha, and our political engagement was limited to sticking “Make love not war” stickers on our backpacks. The Afghans' commitment was to survival. Between drought, warlords, and a king who built palaces while the peasants ate weed porridge, Marxism was honestly the least of their problems, and ours too.

In truth, we were just temporary guests, tourists, interested in cheap hashish and \$1 hotels a night, service included, dreamers, followers of cheap wisdom. The Afghans only sold us what we wanted to hear. The villagers called us “God's madmen” (khoda divana), not “comrades.” When we talked about “peace and love,” the Afghans looked at us as if we had come from the moon and then asked us if we had antibiotics for them or their children. So, I gave them an aspirin tablet or a placebo, they thanked me and kissed my hands. We just romanticized their poverty, while they dreamed of having electricity.

The only “*change*” we brought about was the opening of a few *guest houses* for backpackers, which closed in 1979

when the Soviet tanks rolled in. Because while we were playing explorers, the Soviets and Saudis were already counting the shots to figure out who would win the next war in Afghanistan: the Marxists or the Islamists.

We had absolutely no desire to change Afghanistan, and the world didn't care about us in the slightest. After all, we left nothing behind except a few junkies rotting in the Kabul cemetery.

The truth is that Afghanistan didn't need us to go down. It already had a failed state and a corrupt elite that was selling the country piece by piece, while its predatory neighbors took advantage of the opportunity to spread their deadly ideologies.

Besides, you should ask the Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans, and other “progressive countries” that were lured by the same sirens of nationalism, anti-colonialism, and communism how many hippies passed through their countries before their revolutions. [\[1\]](#)

Signed: An old hippie who traded his backpack for a walking stick and his chillum for a pill box.

PS: If you come this way, my door is open to you. We can cry together, but not for too long, because my sleep is sacred.

[\[1\]](#) In 1972, at the height of the “*Hippie Trail*,” about 100,000 Westerners crossed Afghanistan. Only 10% stayed longer than a week (reports from the Afghan Ministry of Tourism, 1973).