

GOOD MORNING AFGHANIS

Once in the grip of the Taliban, Kabul now resembles the last days of Saigon as Western aid workers and mercenaries indulge in drunken gunfights amid a sexual free-for-all. But, as Tom Coghlan reports, the locals are about to end the party

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It's midnight in the Mustafa Hotel. Stetson-wearing American mercenaries wearing combat fatigues and armed to the teeth are downing whisky like there's no tomorrow. Alongside them are glassy-eyed builders in steel-toed boots and dusty overalls and a handful of dishevelled, bloodshot and lecherous United Nations staff drinking large vodkas and Coke. On the wall is a painted mural of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. On a shelf behind the bar is a Russian sniper's rifle.

There are still two bullet holes in the ceiling fired by the notorious renegade and bounty hunter 'Tora Bora' Jack Idema in the days when he held court here with tall tales of his hunt for Osama Bin Laden and invented a cocktail that still carries his name at the bar.

But then the Mustafa has always been a sleazy magnet for shady war-zone hangers-on, big-boned farmboys from the American Midwest with a taste for guns, danger and excitement, and the sort of Walter Mitty characters who whisper darkly of their special-forces background.

In a flash, the boozey hubbub of blurred and boastful conversation falls silent. One of the mercenaries, a former American infantryman working for one of the half-dozen private security companies paid handsomely to protect the Westerners, hisses 'faggot' at a rival before lurching off to the lavatory.

Anyone with enough sobriety and sense inches away, trying their best to melt into the corners. And as the toilet door creaks open again, the room erupts in a hail of bullets. No one can be sure who pulled

their gun first, but both drunkenly empty their pistols in the general direction of the other.

By some miracle, when the smoke clears the only casualties are a few bottles of Scotch and the pool table, which is riddled with splintered bullet holes. The gunmen are dragged away by their respective colleagues and normal service resumes.

This is downtown Kabul, three years into its new era of 'peace and tranquillity' under American control, a city that combines the lawless boomtown gun rule of the Wild West with the apocalyptic, live-for-today hedonism of the last days of Saigon: a party that, with the recent election of a hardline Islamic government, is about to come crashing down about their ears.

There are more than 3,000 Westerners in Afghanistan, mostly young, single adventurers, and almost all are restricted to heavily guarded compounds and a handful of Western-run bars, brothels and restaurants in the capital, Kabul. They work for aid agencies, the UN, charities and security companies in often dangerous and restricted conditions, ostensibly helping to rebuild the country's shattered infrastructure after 20 years of near anarchy under the Taliban and the American invasion of 2001.

There is a pervasive sense that life is short and cheap: more than 1,200 people have been killed by Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents in the south of the country, and attacks with rockets, roadside and suicide bombs are still a regular occurrence in the capital itself.

The Westerners' response to the danger, despite the open disapproval of the local Islamic hardliners, is a nightly end-of-the-world party fuelled by cheap liquor, wild parties, saloon-bar brawling and hundreds of cheap Chinese prostitutes in a dizzying ▶



▶ variety of brothels thinly disguised as Oriental restaurants. In the past year, there has been an explosion in Kabul's sex industry. In a country in which the majority of women cannot leave home without an all-enveloping burka and the company of a male relative, more than 50 establishments have opened their doors with an openness that has appalled many locals.

It is a shady and secretive world, but many of the bordellos are run by Western men, often figures who have worked as contractors in the building, telecoms and security industries. The profits from the prostitution industry are huge, even with pay-offs to police to oil the wheels.

The Ching Ching 'restaurant', which promises 'refreshment, soft drink and music (sic)' stands on a rutted main road that is crowded with burka-clad beggars during the day. When I ring the doorbell, I am met by a pair of suspicious eyes peering through a slit in the steel gates.

Inside, amid gaudy fairy lights and a pumping sound system, there is little sign of food on the menu. Instead, a drunken trio of portly British contractors in their forties paw at a group of Chinese women in tight-fitting tops. 'Let's see yer nipples,' leers a man called Dave, a Beretta pistol tucked into a shoulder holster. As the woman in question twitters unhappily, beating at him with her fists, Dave pulls open her top. 'Like bullets,' he shouts to cheers.

Dave says he was ex-SAS and served in 'pretty much all of the wars' Britain fought between 1970 and 1990. But men claiming to have a special-forces background are ten-a-penny in Kabul.

'Me love you long time,' the Britons shout at the girls, aping lines from Vietnam war films as they stagger out into the night. As Dave climbs into his four-wheel-drive Toyota, he announces that he is a close-protection security driver. He speeds off, career-ing around corners, tyres squealing and flicking his lights aggressively at the oncoming cars.

Across town at Mike's Place, the owner, an Afghan-born Canadian, promises the first-ever strip show in Kabul to a crowd of about a dozen Danes and Britons. But as the Chinese girl is brought forward to perform there is one of the all-too-frequent power cuts that plague the city and the music dies. Disappointment all around.

The best known of the city's brothels, meanwhile, is a sleazy den called Escalades, a dingy, red-lit bar with a pool table and a dozen waif-like Chinese girls. While a



Divided we stand: While local women adhere to strict Islamic dress codes, expat workers (live it up, sunbathing beside the pool at L'Atmosphere (top right) and dancing at the Elbow Room (right)

foreign security companies, whose involvement in war zones around the world has grown exponentially over the past four years, and cultivate their own brand of mystique with names such as 'Texas' Mike and Dave 'The Torturer'. Muscular, bearded men in their thirties and forties, given to wearing wraparound shades and invariably armed to the teeth, they are widely disliked by many in the expat community, who believe their aggressive behaviour sours relations between the Western and Afghan communities.

'These security companies are running riot here,' says Lucy Morgan-Edwards, 37, a British journalist and aid worker who has lived and worked in the country since before the fall of the Taliban. 'They are fuelling the problem with brothels in the city and they

for an ordinary citizen. In its defence, DynCorp pointed out that it has successfully saved the president from several assassination attempts.

And in the Mustafa Hotel the talk is of the old days, when 'Tora Bora' Jack Idema was king of the hill. Today, Idema - a former Green Beret who claimed to be working on a counter-terrorism mission with the American government - languishes in the crumbling Pul-e-Charki prison outside the city, convicted with two accomplices of illegally abducting and torturing Afghans in pursuit of the \$25 million reward offered by the US Government for the capture of Bin Laden.

At his trial last year, Idema, dressed in a homemade US military uniform, Afghan scarf and Ray-Ban glasses, told the court that he had been acting under

fitting tops. 'Let's see yer nipples,' leers a man called Dave, a Beretta pistol tucked into a shoulder holster. As the woman in question twitters unhappily, beating at him with her fists, Dave pulls open her top. 'Like bullets,' he shouts to cheers.

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'Eighty dollars, all night,' he roars, blind drunk. 'No, \$80 one time,' she shouts back. The negotiations drag on until the man is eventually satisfied with the deal and disappears upstairs with his prize.

A 20-year-old Chinese girl called Cheng Yueng, with huge, saucer-like eyes, tells me, 'The money very good, \$2,000 one month.' She denies that any of the girls have been forced to sell their bodies against their will, though rumours abound that people-trafficking goes on in Kabul.

Serving US soldiers in full combat gear have also been seen in the brothels. Last month, three troops carrying M-16 rifles, accompanied by an embarrassed translator, stormed into the Shanghai restaurant, demanding to know where they could 'get some p**y round here'. They were quickly hustled out by the brothel madam and left in a Humvee armoured car.

But the Mustafa Hotel is the preferred dive for the city's most exotic war-zone creatures. They work for

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'These security companies are running riot here,' says Lucy Morgan-Edwards, 37, a British journalist and aid worker who has lived and worked in the country since before the fall of the Taliban. 'They are fuelling the problem with brothels in the city and they are trafficking guns and women. This is adding to the backlash against the Westerners. When the new parliament comes in, they will probably ban alcohol.'

Indeed, since Afghanistan's first parliamentary elections last month, there is a growing sense that the party must soon come to an end. The poll shifted power against the American-installed liberal reformers towards the hardline Islamic conservatives whose bearded faces still stare out from the campaign posters on bomb-damaged walls across the city.

They are already promising to take on the laissez-faire attitude of the government of president Hamid Karzai and take Afghanistan back towards the rigorous brand of Islam that reached its most extreme form under the Taliban. 'The Westerners don't seem to realise what is about to hit them,' one analyst with several decades of Afghan experience told me last week.

DynCorp, which provides the bodyguards for Karzai, enjoys a particularly poor reputation among ordinary Afghans for the aggressive way they police the president. The company was forced to apologise last year after the Afghan Transport Minister was manhandled by DynCorp workers who mistook him

for an ordinary citizen. In its defence, DynCorp pointed out that it has successfully saved the president from several assassination attempts.

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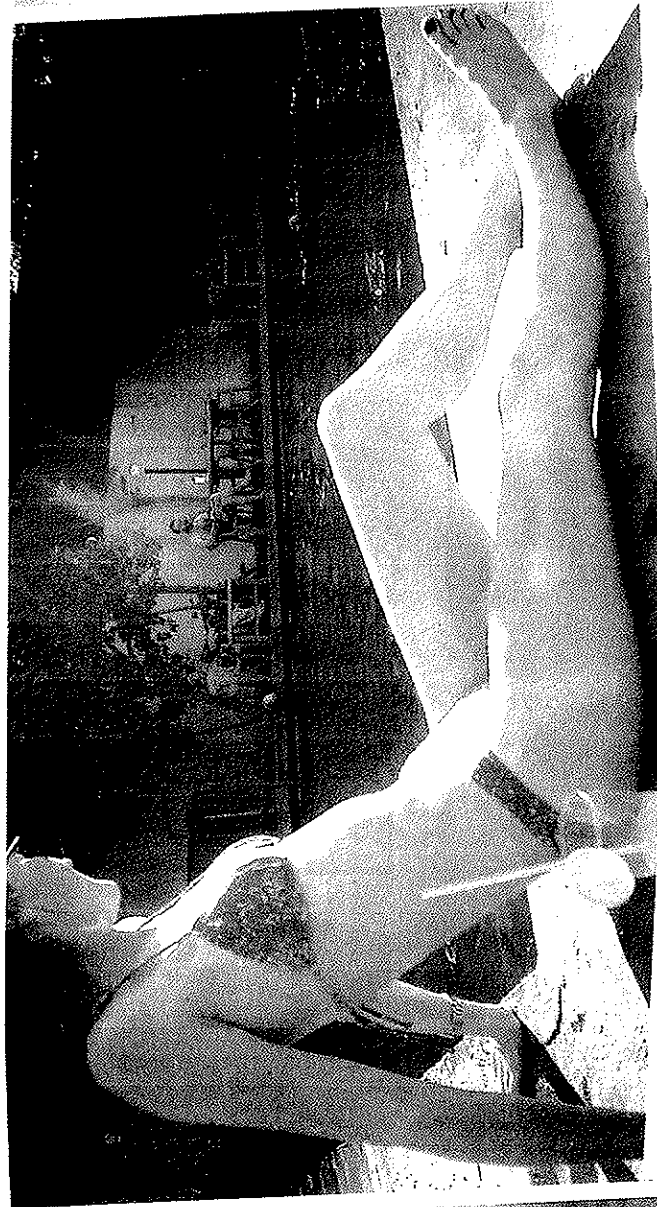
At his trial last year, Idema, dressed in a homemade US military uniform, Afghan scarf and Ray-Ban glasses, told the court that he had been acting under the authority of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. As he was led away after being sentenced to ten years (later halved on appeal), he denounced what he called 'Taliban justice' and snarled, 'I'll kill the next f****g Afghan who touches me.'

While Idema's involvement in Kabul life is now limited to the macho and bizarre ramblings he posts from prison on his website www.superpatriots.us, the party continues - for now. Wild drinking and promiscuity is even rife among the UN staff in Kabul, most of whom have never been outside the city.

'We live isolated lives and we can't integrate into the local culture as we would in other stations because Kabul is so conservative,' said one female UN worker. 'Our lives are so transitory and can be dangerous. The prevailing atmosphere is to live each day like it is your last. We are promiscuous and we drink a hell of a lot. It's boredom and loneliness, really. It is very difficult for people outside to understand our lives here.'

The UN designates Kabul a non-family mission station, so few of the expats in the city are aged over 40. Surprisingly, given the huge opium and heroin industry in Afghanistan, most Westerners seem to prefer to stick





have good security, but I don't get involved in politics,' says owner Alex Shah. 'We just want to do this for foreign people who are used to this sort of thing. We don't let Afghans in or Pakistanis, just people who are used to alcohol. I don't want to get into trouble with the Afghan government.'

It is a prescient sentiment. Judge Maulawi Sidiqullah tells me, 'The constitution of this country says that nothing contrary to the laws of Islam is permitted. The new parliament will have to verify the behaviour of the foreigners. If Westerners are doing things contrary to Afghan society and introducing negative influences they must be punished.'

He says that under Islamic Sharia law, the penalties for prostitution are clear: 'If either person is married, the penalty is that they be stoned to death. If they are unmarried then the punishment is 80 lashes in public.'

Ironically, Sidiqullah, an arch conservative with a huge flowing beard, was one of those abducted by Idema and his gang of bounty hunters last year. The judge alleged that Idema and his cohorts hung him by his ankles from the ceiling and tortured him with scalding water, demanding to know the whereabouts of Bin Laden. There seems little doubt that he has a personal interest in closing down the Western fleshpots.

But the judge's views are not unique. 'Ninety-nine per cent of Afghans oppose this sort of behaviour,' says engineer Ahmed Shah Ahmadzai. 'I don't see any other



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to drink and sex. 'The interesting people here are too busy drinking too much and trying to get laid to bother with drugs,' adds a male UN worker. 'The rest just sit in their hotel rooms and watch satellite TV.'

Parties in heavily guarded compounds occur several nights a week. At one event last month, held on the roof of the Mustafa Hotel, aid workers danced to Robbie Williams as Taliban rebels fired half a dozen rockets into the city. Each explosion was greeted with cheers and dancing. More recently, Afghan security guards looked on bemused as several hundred Westerners danced through the night wearing nothing but togas.

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In August, a freelance photographer thought it would spice up his house party to let off a stun grenade. The resultant explosion blew out all the windows in his house and left his guests crawling around on the floor. Fortunately, the windows had been fitted with blast film, which prevented serious shrapnel injuries. As the Western guests left the house, an angry crowd of local Afghans gathered and beat on the windows of their UN-marked, four-wheel-drive vehicles.

The few Western-run restaurants in the city are oases where expat workers behave as they would in Europe or America. The government forbids locals from visiting anywhere that has been licensed to serve alcohol to Westerners. Supermarkets operated by Western companies - which are piled high with cut-price beer and spirits, as well as luxury foodstuffs - are also off-limits to the local population.

L'Atmosphere, a French-owned restaurant where decent claret costs £15 a bottle, incorporates a large garden and swimming pool behind high walls. Western women sit by the pool in bikinis, sipping cocktails to the music of Serge Gainsbourg, while Afghan men peer through holes in the wall. With typical French élan, the restaurant brings in regular supplies of foie gras and French cheese, some say through the diplomatic bag. But it's not all fun under

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the Kabul sun. There was an attempted armed kidnap outside the front door of the restaurant a few months ago. Indeed, four UN workers have been kidnapped in Kabul over the past year. All were released after ransoms were allegedly paid for them.

At the Elbow Room, a British-run restaurant and bar, there is a weekly greasy-spoon brunch to remind the Brits of home; at night, a wilder atmosphere prevails. Patrons are invited to leave their side arms in the armoury outside.

The newest addition to the social scene is Kabul's first nightclub, Coco Cabana, in the exclusive Wazir Akbar Khan district. It is a monument to vulgarity built by the Afghan-American son of a Las Vegas croupier. The club is, in the opinion of most of the Western community, just waiting to be suicide-bombed. Blast barriers and barbed wire surround the entrance. 'We

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But the judge's views are not unique. 'Ninety-nine per cent of Afghans oppose this sort of behaviour,' says engineer Ahmed Shah Ahmadzai, leader of Hezb-e Iqtidar-e Islam, a hardline party. 'These people shouldn't make Kabul into a new Bangkok. The time will come when the people will react very strongly. The good will of the Afghan people is dropping day by day. We need the help of the West, not their sicknesses.'

Afghan officials say they are worried that Western influences and excesses are affecting Afghan society. 'Alcohol addiction is increasing among Kabul students,' says Abdul Jabar Sabit, a legal adviser to the Interior Ministry. 'Our concern is not that Westerners use alcohol, but that Afghans are starting to copy them.'

The tension between the reformers and the conservatives has already boiled over into violence. In May, Afghan TV presenter Shaima Rezaee was murdered at her home in Kabul, allegedly by a member of her own family. She had fronted a controversial show that mimicked MTV's style, and became an icon for the country's youth. Her brother was arrested after Rezaee, 24, was found shot in the head, but has yet to be charged.

Meanwhile, Kabul's hedonistic Westerners know the carnival is coming to an end. But at the Mustafa Hotel that's all the more reason to line up the whiskies while they still can. ■