

# Afghan cave dwellers brace against a shifting landscape

November 19 2016, by Lynne O'donnell

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In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, Marzia, 30, in blue, talks to her neighbor near her cave in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Marzia and her husband Qadeer thought themselves lucky when they moved into a 1,700-year-old Buddhist cave hand-carved into the side of a mountain in Afghanistan's central highlands—it was clean and dry, warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and there was plenty of work on the local farms. (AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

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moved into a 1,700-year-old Buddhist cave hand-carved into the side of a mountain in Afghanistan's central highlands—it was clean and dry, warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and there was plenty of work on the local farms. But now, even this bare-bones way of life is threatened.

The family, along with another 242 cave-dwelling households dotted around the capital of Bamiyan province, also called Bamiyan, could be forced to move soon. They are what's left of around 10,000 families who have been relocated over the past decade as part of the local government's program to protect the unique man-made grottoes that it hopes will transform Bamiyan into a global tourist destination once Afghanistan's war with the insurgent Taliban, now in its 16th year, is finally over.

The couple moved here from neighboring Maidan-Wardak province because they believed it was a stepping stone to a better future.

"We had no money and my husband couldn't get a job," Marzia said as she breastfed her baby. "We left because we were poor."

But 12 years later they are still living in the cave, along with their five children aged from 10 months to 8 years, including 6-year-old Freshta who hasn't been the same since a land mine exploded close by her four years ago. Her mental development stopped and she spends most of her time lolling on the thin mat that covers the cave's floor.



In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, an Afghan girl, Shepha Qah, 8, sits in the sun, listening during an interview with the Associated Press in their cave, in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

Any original features, such as the brightly-colored geometric murals that were painted by the monks who created these caves, are long gone. They've been destroyed by time, the elements and the wear-and-tear of hundreds of years of habitation—including the fires that residents build for cooking and heat.

"Life here is difficult," Marzia, 30, said. Water must be fetched from a nearby stream, and a 9-volt battery charges a solar panel that provides light after dark. Cooking is done on a stove fuelled by a gas bottle. They

have installed a door and a step up into the one room that all seven members of the family share. Smaller caves outside are used for storage.

On the rural outskirts of the city, amid the rutted fields where the province's main potato crop is grown, the cave-dwellers do what they can with their meagre resources, determined that the next generation will have a better life. As Shiite Muslims of the Hazara minority they have suffered historic persecution, but they have also benefitted from immense largesse from international charities and governments.



In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, Afghan schoolgirls and boys listen to their teacher in their cave classroom, in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

Amid an intensifying Taliban-led insurgency, Bamiyan is a haven of peace, as the Shiite Hazaras have successfully kept the war off their territory since the end of the Sunni Taliban's regime—under which they were persecuted and much of the province's Buddhist heritage destroyed. A proliferation in recent years of all-covering burqas and hijabs among the local women attests to a growing concern about the war as it spreads elsewhere in the country.

Freshta Ahmadi runs a school for 25 children aged 4 to 9 years old, who gather in the living room of her family's three-room cave home six days a week to learn reading, writing and math. Freshta is 18, in her last year of secondary school and hopes one day to become a doctor. She has been running the cave school since 2012 with money donated by Parsa, an Afghan charity.

"These children are from poor families, their fathers are itinerant workers, farmers, or refugees from other poorer areas," she said. Their circumstances don't dampen ambition, however—the children, mostly girls, stand in turn at the whiteboard, complete a few exercises in front of their classmates, then reiterate their plans for a future as doctors, police officers or engineers.





In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, Shepha Qah, 8, and her brother stands at the entry of their cave in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

Bamiyan is probably best known as the site of two massive Buddhas, one 55 meters (180 feet) tall, the other 38 meters (124 feet) tall, that were carved into the cliff face above the modern city between the 4th and 6th Centuries and which were destroyed by the Taliban at the urging of al-Qaida in early 2001, in a defiant show of extremist power and hubris ahead of the attacks on the United States on September 11 that year.

Their memory lingers now in gaping niches where the magnificent statues stood as part of an extensive monastic center that included up to 12,000 caves used by monks as devotional getaways. It formed an

elaborate network of monasteries, assembly halls, residencies and large sanctuaries that were decorated with frescos and statues, many produced with techniques unique to this part of the world, according to archaeologist Rasool Shojaei, who previously worked on their restoration with the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNESCO has classified the "cultural landscape and archaeological remains of the Bamiyan Valley" as a [world heritage site](#) representing Buddhist and Islamic religious and artistic developments from the 1st to 13th Centuries.



In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, Marzia, 30, talks during an interview with the Associated Press in her cave in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

The provincial government is working with UNESCO to restore the valley's eight significant sites, including the Ghulghulah fortress, believed to be Bamiyan's original staging post on the old Silk Road that linked China to India. The fortress was razed by Genghis Khan's hoards in the early 13th Century and never regained its glory.

Determined to develop on its own terms, the province hosts around a dozen international events a year, said Kabir Dadras, head of the local office of the Ministry of Information and Culture, including a marathon, a skiing competition and a variety of cultural festivals. "Bamiyan is very popular with Indians, Japanese and Koreans because of the Buddhist heritage," he said.

As part of those plans, he said, all the people still living in the grottoes, and assessed as sufficiently poverty-stricken to qualify for the government's land re-distribution program, will be moved to new townships on the outskirts of the city by 2018, he said.





In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, an Afghan girl, Shepha Qah, 8, listens during an interview with the Associated Press in their cave in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

For Marzia, it's been a lot of talk and no action. "I've spoken with the governor and a lot of officials have been here to see us," she said. "They

keep promising that they will give us a flat, but we've no idea when, or even if, it will happen."

Meanwhile, her 8-year-old daughter Shepha Qah, who studies at the Parsa cave school, harbors hopes of becoming a doctor. "I have belief in my daughter's ambitions, that's why we left Maidan-Wardak, so that our children could go to school and have a better life," said Marzia.



In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, an Afghan girl, Shepha Qah, 8, and her brother stand by the door of their cave in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)



In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, an Afghan mother, Marzia, 30, stands at the entrance of her cave after an interview with the Associated Press in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)





In this Monday, Nov. 7, 2016 photo, a general view of cave homes in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The cave-dwelling families of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province struggle to get by on the bare minimum. But even this bare-bones way of life is now under threat as the government relocates residents to pave the way for transforming the man-made grottoes into a global tourist destination.(AP Photos/Massoud Hossaini)

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