

<http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2009/10/12/2093306.aspx>



Web MSNBC World Blog Search

ABOUT WORLD BLOG

NBC News World Blog aims to provide a dynamic look at world events and trends -- both big and small -- from NBC News correspondents, producers, and bureaus around the world. Online entries -- from text to video -- will explore news events and how they are shaping our world.

Regular contributors include NBC News correspondents, producers and staff based in bureaus across the world and on assignment.

[Click here](#) to read more about the journalists behind NBC News World Blog.

Despite violence, kite flying endures in Kabul

Posted: Monday, October 12, 2009 8:39 AM

Filed Under: [Kabul, Afghanistan](#)

By Adrienne Mong, NBC News Producer

KABUL, Afghanistan – I hadn't planned on writing about kites in Afghanistan; the subject just seemed too obvious after the runaway success of the [novel, "The Kite Runner."](#) But then a Western acquaintance who'd just moved to Kabul told me about an afternoon he spent shopping for colorful kites to decorate the walls of his new home, and it sounded like something I just had to do.

I'm no kite-flyer, but having lived through a couple of summers in Beijing, I've seen the Chinese-made stuff – brilliant, elaborate and intricate – and have grown to appreciate

their design. So off I went to the Jadeh Maywand neighborhood in central Kabul, where kite shops line the sidewalks – dragging along my Afghan colleague, Iqbal Sapand.



Adrienne Mong / NBC News

A boy shops for new kite parts in Kabul.

We had been tasked by our bureau chief, Sohel Uddin, to "buy the biggest kite possible." For weeks now, we'd see from our bureau rooftop kites flying high above our heads almost daily at sunset. Sohel was determined to try his hand.

Faced with a row of narrow, open-faced shop fronts crammed with string, spools, and of course kites, we poked our heads into one owned by Zalgai. The poker-faced 45-year-old, who goes by just one name, had caught our eye simply because he happened to be leaning on his counter. He welcomed us into his shop, beckoning to the raised carpeted area behind his counter, and Iqbal promptly sat down. On cue, a glass of simmering tea followed.

Zalgai's family has owned this shop for 38 years (even through the Taliban years, when kite flying was banned and their business was forced underground). And like his grandfather and father, Zalgai was trained as a kite-maker. But five years ago he stopped producing kites to focus on selling them.

"I can make a lot more money this way," he said. Making kites takes too much time, he added, all that fussing with delicate paper and the bamboo frame. Moreover, the kites he carries in his shop bring him a brisk enough business.

Choosing the right one

Among the ones displayed prominently on the walls of his store, a striking black and white piece that celebrates Eid stood out. It was designed by Noor Agha, said to be Afghanistan's best and most famous kite-maker; he was enlisted as a consultant for the filming of ["The Kite Runner" movie](#) in western China three years ago. Iqbal pointed out the artist's signature in the top right corner of the kite, and in fact many of those in the shop bore his name.



Adrienne Mong / NBC News

A street lined with kite shops in the Afghan capital.

But at \$30, the kite seemed too expensive (and too pretty) for – what I was guessing – would be a bashing on the first go-round by our bureau chief. It also seemed quite high in a city where a family's average monthly wage is between \$70 and \$100.

We asked Zalgai if he had anything that cost a little less.

He went burrowing into a room in the back of his shop, where I could see stacks of kites lying in the darkness. Minutes later, he re-emerged with a handful of options in printed color blocks of red, green, black, white, purple, and red – just as well-made as the fancier designs. They cost \$3 each – a bargain for some Sunday afternoon fun.

The paper is tissue-thin and handmade, according to Zalgai, and comes from India, because Afghans stopped producing it years ago. And the nylon string in favor these days is made in Pakistan. But the wooden spools are still crafted here.

As we mulled over which kite to buy, customers came and went, approaching Zalgai's counter. A handsome little boy with big round eyes stared at us while his father bought string. An elderly man eyed the spools hanging off the ceiling.

"Life here is much better since the Taliban left Kabul eight years ago," Zalgai said as he watched the brisk business. Moreover, the uptick in violence [during the last several months in Kabul](#) hasn't affected his sales, he said. "My business seems more influenced by the seasons."

Flying a kite here, it would seem, is a tradition that endures no matter what – from being banned under the Taliban regime to the current violence.



Adrienne Mong / NBC News

On the left, a design from Afghanistan's best-known kitemaker, Noor Agha.

A short flight

Back at the bureau, Iqbal strung up our new kite and, with Sohel, promptly took it out for its maiden flight as the sun dropped and the wind picked up.

When I stepped out onto the rooftop to watch their progress, the new kite was no longer – its pink corner shredded from a close encounter with a nearby satellite dish – and Iqbal was trying to scotch-tape it back together. Shortly after, the pair returned indoors, breathless with their fingers bleeding from the cutting sharpness of the string.

"Well, we got it up pretty high," said Sohel. "But we lost it."

[Main page](#)

Comments

I loved reading *The Kite Runner* and I'm glad Adrienne did this story now. It helps bring some humanity back to my perspective of an area that would otherwise be easily lost to war stories. Thanks!

ALS (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 9:54 AM)

How cool is this, something simple and joyful still exists in a city where death and war are a part of daily existence.

Mike O'Brien, Sacramento CA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 9:57 AM)

I couldn't resist sending this to you, someone who has read *The Kite Runner*. Enjoy.
Mom

Patricia A. Hubley, N. Chelmsford MA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:11 AM)

Given what you know about kite flying in Kabul, you'll enjoy this article.

Leah Burrows, N. Attleboro, MA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:13 AM)

I thought this was very interesting how all countries seem to have parallels. No matter how bad it gets over there, they still fly kites. And no matter how bad it gets here, we still get hundreds of thousands paying to attend football games on weekends. Must be a 'survival' mode thing. Recommend reading both *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*--though both have fictional characters, I learned a lot about a part of the world most of us in the U.S. know little about.

Sandra, Montgomery, Alabama (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:19 AM)

if we could take a lesson from this an enjoy simple things in life. and fly a kite for peace

louis laureyssens Deland Florida (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:19 AM)

Great story. It's nice to hear one of Kabul's life pleasures still continues despite the harsh life they've had to endure for so long.

Elcie Chan, San Diego, CA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:34 AM)

Dear Adrienne Mong,

Thanks for the nice article. It was a unique and not the regular war related. In every day articles, Afghanistan is tagged with post war life and never of rehab or regular life activities in there. Please come up with more of this kind.

Praveen, Stillwater, Oklahoma (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:40 AM)

Thanks. I've read Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The stories' study in cultural characteristics is mind-expanding. Hosseini's stories and this piece have lessons for all westerners.

V. Ford (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:52 AM)

I did not read the book but I watched the movie; I was so happy to see the simple things of life that can bring so much joy. We have always had wars through the centuries, but nowadays because the world through technology has become so small, we cannot remove ourselves from what happens elsewhere. God, I miss the good old days of kiteflying, hopscotching and all that simple good fun stuff. I love modernism but ask myself, was the progress worth it?

Val Spence (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:54 AM)

I only hope Adrienne can continue adding to this story, and describe a match with the kites, while perhaps investigating the cultural strata involved with kite flying, and Kabul in general. It was such an important theme in the book, and incredible.

[Dan McGinley](#) (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:55 AM)

I loved reading the Kite Runner, I was totally amazed at the strenght of the people in that part of the world, and surprised to find out flying kites could give them so much pleasure. I guess just the tought of a kite being free to soar up in the sky without boundaries

Ingrid (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 10:56 AM)

I only hope Adrienne can continue adding to this story, and describe a match with the kites, while perhaps investigating the cultural strata involved with kite flying, and Kabul in general. It was such an important theme in the book, and incredible.

[Dan McGinley](#) (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:00 AM)

Grew up in India flying kites and been in the USA for 20+ years and that is one of things I always missed the most! From chasing kites, getting cuts from the string, and if there's no kite competition going on, it is so peaceful to fly the kite and having it super high.
Amazing!

Vivek, NJ (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:00 AM)

I'm glad, i visited several times Afghanistan, between 1974 and 1976, and I have to say, it was a wonderful, safe and pleasant place, with always friendly people with a rich history in art and culture, just a great place to visit... Then came the Russians... and so on... It seems to me, that those people, (like most people, in most places...) just don't like when their country is occupied, (or whatever you want to call it..) by foreigners !!! It seems pretty simple ... How long would we tolerate the Canadian Army, controlling over Maine and New Hampshire, or the Mexicans sending their National guards in Texas or New-Mexico, because they believe it's in our best interests !!! Not... We would make sure to let them know, that: "we are not amused"...

luc piazza (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:01 AM)

I went to India in 04 and every night we would go to the top of the houses and watch the kites being flown and the kite fights they would have. You would see two kites intertwined and then someones kite would fly off into the sky and the winners would cheer at the top of thier lungs.... was a lot of fun.

Big Momma (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:05 AM)

I agree with the post that recommends 'The Kite Runner' & "A Thousand Splendid Suns" and I add another recommendation of 'Kabul Beauty School'. Maybe if all of us could see

that the people in the countries just want to live their lives and raise their families.
Wonderful article--Thank You!

CAL, Kansas City, MO. (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:11 AM)

I just read your policy about reviewing comments, and having to be approved before being posted, so much for freedom of expression !!! Pleasers only welcomed...

luc piazza (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:12 AM)

I think Louis Laureyssens has a great idea. A day should be set where everyone in the USA could go out and fly a kite for peace. It would be a simple, but symbolic message. It should be a date in late Spring or early Summer when the weather is best for everyone. How do we get this started?

Tom Kolessar, Lutz, Florida (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:17 AM)

This article brings back happy memories of my friends beckoning me, an American woman, to their roof top to see the hundreds of kites being flown at sunset, during my visit to beautiful Lahore, Pakistan. It was such a breathtaking scene that I took many photos to remember the occasion. It now pains me to hear of the violence the region is experiencing. I have not read the Kite Runner or A Thousand Splendid Suns, but I will certainly try to find both books.

Judith Gil, San Diego, CA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:26 AM)

When you state, "all comments must be approved", I wonder by whom, the KGB, or the Gestapo ??? What a joke and an insult to journalism... Pathetic you are, dare printing this one !!! (wishful thinking.....)

still Luc.... (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:29 AM)

This story reminds me of one of my favorite songs:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeO63Trs5wk>

R. Weaver, Dallas, TX (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:35 AM)

The kites fly when patrols leave the base as a warning signal. There is nothing cute about it.

Dyde (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:38 AM)

I thought that Kite flying had become a thing of the past there or just the competitions due to the sharpness of the string... I have an article in my addition of the Kite Runner that speaks of a child being decapitated by the glass string that they use to fly the kites

geddy,Trenton ,Maine (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:38 AM)

Had no idea but what a great idea! we could put cams on the kites and do some spying?

farris (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:42 AM)

Bravo! A human interest story on Afghanistan telling of the joy of flying a kite and not pain and poverty. I too have read 'The Kite Runner' and 'A Thousand Splended Suns' and am a better person for it. Everyone should try to get back to enjoying simple pleasures, for some world citizens daily life is anything but a simple pleasure.....

Bette Giran, Pittsburgh, PA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:43 AM)

My first thoughts, after reading this, had to do with a feeling of deep concern. The final words, "We got it up pretty high, but we lost it," sent a chill down my spine. I hope we can somehow keep the Taliban virus from coming back and destroying this culture. I hope we will never have to say, "We lifted them pretty high, but we lost them."

Stacy, Phoenix, AZ (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:45 AM)

This brings back memories while growing up. We would spend all day flying kites. More kids and adults need to get back to the simple life. What a relaxing day flying a kite.

Mike VanBuren Lancaster, Ohio (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:46 AM)

I've had a kite for years. It's a semi replica of the wright bros first airplane. Even though I am 51 years old I get it out every now and then, open a bottle of wine and eat cheese with crackers with the love of my life.

It's quiet, doesn't polute and is one of the roses we always hear about that we should stop and smell.

Lou Colville, wa (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:48 AM)

I like the sentence

"We got it up pretty high, but we lost it"

PRASAT OUNOK, Chiangmai, Thailand. (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:49 AM)

Maybe we could learn something from these guys. They are still capable of enjoying something as simple and pure as flying a kite. We can't be bothered to go outdoors for the most part.

John Orange County (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:58 AM)

Just a wonderful story!

Makes me think of old days with my brother...

Andrea Castro (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 11:58 AM)

This is definitely a nice story to see a different slice of life, not only in another part of the world but a region that has been so negatively affected by continued strife and warfare. I was "shocked" when I read that the Taliban banned kite flying? Really? Just goes to show the inadequate mentality of these individuals that want to control other people's lives.

Shaw, Phoenix, AZ (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 12:00 PM)

well it reminds me of my flying kite when i was back in pakistan.....

Fahim Ahmad, Sharjah, UAE (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 12:13 PM)

But Deferrment Dick said that they all wanted to kill us?

El Decidero (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 12:17 PM)

What a delightful story even though the kite was lost, it puts a warm and human face on Afghanistan and makes one wish for a peaceful solution to their problems.

N Phleider Indianapolis, In. (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 12:29 PM)

I enjoyed reading this article. It brings back memories of my early childhood in the Philippines back in the 40s when we made and flew kites out of bamboo sticks, newspaper and rice glue, and string made of abaca fiber. It also reminded me of my assignment with the Asia Foundation in Kabul during the peaceful early 60s when I taught rural development to government trainees, experienced Ramadan, got acquainted with the people and even nomads, watched the buskashi game played on horseback with a headless goat serving as the ball, listened to radio coming from Russia and China, and picnicked in beautiful meadows and natural gardens. I hope Afghanistan can get back to those peaceful years.

Sal Parco, Erie, PA (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 12:43 PM)

Shaw Phoenix Az

I guess I was shocked when the Taliban banned kite flying. And then the question, "Why?" Never will be able to understand even if some one explained.

Stevie SLC Utah (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 1:21 PM)

We, family of 4, watched the kites and all enjoyed trying them out--not in contest except with each other. The time frame then was 1961-to about 66. Ann G.Cline

Mrs George V. Cline (Ann) (Sent Monday, October 12, 2009 1:22 PM)