THE DOOR TO HELL

Welcome to the Door to Hell. Otherwise known as the *Darvaza Gas Crater* in the Kara Kum Desert of Turkmenistan.

Possessing one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas, when Turkmenistan was part of the Soviet Union in 1971, Soviet engineers discovered a massive gas pocket in the Kara Kum. The drilling rig collapsed into a huge cavern 230 feet wide, releasing gas into the air. The engineers ignited it, expecting the gas to burn off in a matter of days.

The gas in the crater is still burning to this day, 48 years later – as you can see. I took the picture above earlier this month.

It's a memorable experience, driving for hours across an empty desert wasteland after crossing the border from Uzbekistan, and suddenly there it is.

It's not quite the same mind blow during the day…

So you camp overnight to be mesmerized by the undying flames lighting up the Stygian blackness…

It's an experience you'll never forget.

The next morning you continue across the Kara Kum – it means "Black Sands" – Desert to the foothills of the Kopet Dagh mountains bordering Iran, and one of the strangest capital cities on the planet, Ashgabat.

Before you reach the city, you must stop at a car wash to have your conveyance sparkling clean. Upon reaching a checkpoint at the city's entrance, a policeman will give you a ticket with a heavy fine if your car isn't clean enough. The city streets are sparkling, constantly swept free of any litter or debris. The city's many gardens are manicured immaculately, water fountains are everywhere – this in a desert.

Okay, this may be over-the-top eccentric but in a nice way. What's not so nice is Turkmenistan being the most bizarre personality cult dictatorship this side of North Korea.

It's still pretty much the same place as when I was first here in October 2008 and wrote *Obamabashi* in response.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated at the end of 1991, all 15 "republics" comprising the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) declared independence. With exceptions like the Baltics

(Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), what happened is the local Communist elite (*nomenklatura*) kept on ruling each now-independent part of the former USSR, holding Potemkin elections to claim legitimacy.

Turkmenistan's head Soviet Commissar in 1991 was Saparmurat Niyazov, who proclaimed he was now-independent Turkmenistan's President-For-Life and would henceforth be named *"Turkmenbashi"* – Father of Turkmen.

You can read about him and his personality cult – together with a nutshell history of the country – in *Obamabashi*.

Now here I am again in Ashgabat 11 years later, and sure enough, there is the gigantic Arch of Neutrality with the 30-foot tall real gold statue of Turkmenbashi atop.

Only now, at least, the statue doesn't rotate to face the sun from rising to setting every day.

There's still the Golden Boy monument -- a gigantic bronze statue of a bull with a globe of the Earth resting on its horns. Suspended on top of the globe is a little boy sitting like a Buddha covered in bright gold leaf. The bull is the earthquake that shook the earth – well, at least Ashgabat, destroying the city in 1948. The little boy is of course, Turkmenbashi, and the whole thing is to celebrate his miraculous survival of the earthquake.

The absolute jaw-dropping best is the enormous Turkmenbashi Mosque. Pictures can only hint at the *size* of it.

But here's what will cause an ear-to-ear grin across your face. See the entrance arch in front? On the other side, there's an inscription.

The outrage this caused among the Saudis and Moslems around the world was apoplectic – so much that Turkmenbashi quickly announced that his mosque was not a *real* mosque where Islamic devotion to Allah was practiced. It was, he declared, only a *spiritual* mosque, just a place where 20,000 or so Turkmen could come to meditate and pray only to Turkmenbashi, not Allah.

The guy got away with this, his mosque wasn't blown up, it and its sacrilegious arch still stands. What does it say?

The *Ruhnama* is Niyazov's sacred autobiography, regarding which he claimed to personally make a deal with Allah for anyone who read his book three times will go straight to heaven upon death – guaranteed!

Thus *Ruhnama mukaddes kitapdyr – gurhan allanyn kitaby* means in Turkmen: *The Ruhnama is the holiest book – the Koran is the book of Allah*. I.e., Turkmenbashi's book is holier than the Koran. How that for heretical chutzpah?

Niyazov –aka Turkmenbashi – is described in Wikipedia as "one of the world's most totalitarian, despotic, and repressive dictators" until his death in 2006. His successor seems determined to carry on that heritage.

He has this ridiculous name that no one can remember – Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. He calls himself *Arkadag* ("Protector"), but everyone in the country calls him "The Dentist" – as that's what he used to be before becoming Niyazov's chief sycophant.

Now The Dentist is focused on building his own personality cult. *Human Rights Watch*'s current World Report 2019 on Turkmenistan states:

> *"Turkmenistan is one of the world's most isolated and oppressively governed countries. All aspects of public life are controlled by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and his associates.*
>
> *All forms of religious and political expression not approved by the government are brutally punished. Access to information is strictly controlled, and no independent monitoring groups are allowed. Dozens of victims of enforced disappearance allegedly are in Turkmen prisons."*

What's happened is that the entire country of Turkmenistan has become a Door to Hell for its people. It's such a tragedy, for the Turkmen people are gracious and friendly – your heart goes out to them. We were always treated courteously by everyone here.

My wish for them is for their country to be a land of freedom, and no longer be The Door to Hell. After all, I'm looking forward to being here again.