Barnett on Business Travel: Traveling to Kabul? Take your patience but leave credit cards at home

by Chris_Barnett

KABUL, Afghanistan - Mark McCord of Cleveland, Tenn., has a gift for understatement. He claims he doesn't feel unsafe working or traveling in and out of this chaotic capital city of 3 million people that's not served by U.S. airlines or hotels and is a political hot spot.

McCord, who works and lives in a guarded compound in the center of Kabul, is forbidden to hail a cab and he'd never get behind the wheel of a car on clogged streets where traffic lanes and laws are not observed and suicide bombings are an occasional fact of life.

A former director of the Colorado Springs, Colo., and Lawton, Okla., chambers of commerce, McCord is no soldier of fortune. He has the ominous-sounding title of "chief of party" for the Center for International Private Enterprise, a U.S.-funded non-profit that's promoting carpets woven by 37,000 Afghan women who are members of the Afghan Women's Business Federation. It gives them access to health care, education, inspected working conditions and protection from child labor exploitation.

Despite the turmoil and risks in this part of the world, McCord says entrepreneurs and companies are descending on Kabul, sensing new business opportunities. I asked him for a reality check on what he faces moving in and out of the country.

"Even though it's pretty common knowledge there are some suicide bombings here, Kabul doesn't feel unsafe to me," he says, quickly adding he's focusing on the private sector and advising government ministries on rebuilding or developing businesses, not on political or foreign relations.

It's easy to obtain and renew a visa through Afghanistan's embassy in Washington, D.C. But a new $180 visa is needed for every visit; multientry visas, the choice of business travelers, are tough but not impossible to get, he says.

With no direct air service to Kabul from the U.S., McCord flies Delta's 777 business-class service from Atlanta to Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"It's not a difficult flight, there are lots of immigration officers at terminal one in Dubai but (customs) queues are long."

He arrives at 10 p.m. and goes straight to the 224-room, four-star Sheraton Deira, 15 minutes from the

airport.

"Service is impeccable, bathrooms are large and modern, there's wireless Internet access and they know your name immediately, whether it's your first or 20th visit."

During summer, when temperatures are up to 120 degrees, room rates are $120 to $150 nightly.

McCord usually only gets four hours of sleep and is back at the airport at 4:30 a.m. for the 8 a.m. Kam Air flight to Kabul.

"It's absurdly early but long lines form quickly with traders carrying big boxes, jostling for position. Sometimes their boxes are so heavy, they'll unpack and repack them in line. It can be chaotic, so I try to be first in line to reduce my stress level."

Sometimes McCord will overnight in Dubai and take a rest day instead of running on a few hours of sleep.

Kabul-based, privately owned Kam Air is a favorite of expats and business travelers. The airline seats all non-Afghans near each other for the two-and-a-half-hour flight to Kabul International Airport on an Airbus A-330.

"It's thoughtful because I usually meet people I know and have a chance to talk with them," says McCord. The economy-class breakfast is a chicken kabob, yogurt, rice and flat bread.

Landing in Kabul is a culture shock, reports McCord.

"You need plenty of patience. Flights are late, many land at one time overwhelming (airport staff), and you wait and wait. More chaos. It's teeming with people but there are no fights."

McCord does not take cabs from the airport; he arranges for a car and driver that runs $45 to $50 a day and includes a 10 percent tip.

Probably the biggest jolt is that Afghanistan is a cash society. Credit cards are not accepted in Kabul or elsewhere in the country. U.S. dollars must be converted into the local currency, afs, (exchange rate is 50 afs to the dollar). The Afghanistan International Bank has numerous branches.

According to McCord, the Kabul Serena is the city's reigning five-star hotel. The Internet access and the ATM machines work, but there's no alcohol. A room is around $180. The Safi Landmark Hotel Suites in the Shahr-e Naw district is popular. Rates are about $125 a night, yet despite the centralized location, foreigners are discouraged from walking around unescorted.

Where to eat in Kabul? McCord recommends L'atmosphere for inexpensive international cuisine - quiche, sandwiches and, yes, cocktails - at $12 to $15 a meal without a drink. Red Hot Sizzlin' is the city's best steakhouse and a favorite of expats and locals. A 15 oz. rib-eye, appetizer and a mixed drink total about $38.

McCord has some business travel tips in Kabul: Be on time for meetings with Afghans, but don't expect them to be prompt.

"Don't be put off when they take cell phone calls or if people walk in and out of your meeting."

It's proper for a man to extend his hand to another man to shake it as greeting, but unacceptable to extend it to a woman. The European tradition of embracing and kissing a woman on both cheeks is a major faux pas.

World cell phones work in Kabul, very little English is spoken and foreign women should keep their heads covered and dress conservatively - long sleeves, long skirts, slacks.

It should also be said that Kabul is probably not a good place to get into a heated political rant in any language.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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