

IRAN: Women are banned from sporting events to prevent mixing

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domes to the tops of the square structures.

Isom stopped and chatted with Iranians underneath domes, in gardens and at other tourist hangouts. She found herself charmed and surprised by their friendly hospitality.

"Given our foreign policy issues, I would have expected more hostility," said Isom, former chair of the Oregon World Affairs Council's board of trustees.

Of course, Isom acknowledged, the visitors stayed in the tourist areas where they didn't run into members of the Revolutionary Guard, Iran's paramilitary fighting force. This week, the Guard intercepted a cargo ship bearing a Marshall Islands flag and

forced it into Iranian waters. Isom noticed sporadic anti-American signs, one that took up the entire side of an office building with the message, "Down with America."

Isom found herself drawn to Iranian women who seemed willing to share their hopes and goals. While in some ways the laws and culture hamper women, they aren't as restricted as Isom had suspected.

"I was fascinated by the women," she said. "Women are very well-educated. They drive cars. They have status and power. They can inherit (though less than men). They can run family businesses. They are very enterprising."

Yet, she said, they have a dress code that requires



Photo by Harriet Isom

A woman prays at the Pink Mosque, the oldest mosque in Shiraz.

covering all but face and hands.

"Iranian women, particularly the younger generation, often interpret this in differing and fashionable ways. Leggings and jeans seem acceptable as long as worn with a long tunic top and a headscarf," Isom said. "A number of women do, however, wear the tent-like black chador that makes them like a shadow."

Female tourists are expected to don the traditional hijab headscarf at all times

except when in their hotel rooms. Their visa photos must also show them in a headscarf.

The separation of men and women in public is a point of consternation for many women. Even at weddings, Isom said, males and females celebrate separately. Women are banned from sporting events to prevent mixing.

During conversations with Iranians, Isom heard concern about nuclear negotiations between the U.S. and Iran.

"People are very anxious for there to be an agreement,"

she said. "Exceptionally proud of their history, culture and modernization, Iranians today want world acceptance, stability and foreign investment."

Isom soaked in sights and sounds with intense curiosity during the 12 days in country. "Iran has been something of a mystery," she said.

She gazed out the bus window at wheat fields that reminded her of home. She navigated colorful bazaars, visited mausoleums and ogled mosques and citadels.

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She toured the Shah of Iran's palace. She wasn't alone. Tourists are more numerous since the election of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani, who says he wants to double foreign tourism.

"He really opened up the country to western tourism," Isom said.

The flow of visitors will likely get larger as they build more infrastructure, Isom said. Her group stayed mostly in hotels "built in the Shah's day."

While Isom felt relaxed and welcomed during her visit, she said she noticed the anti-American signage and remembered *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian and other Americans jailed in Iran.

"It is, after all, Ayatollah's Iran," she said.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.



Photo by Harriet Isom

A group of Iranians picnic near the Garden of Nightingales in Isfahan.

RETIREES: 'The Supreme Court let them know that they can count on a secure retirement'

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have a contractual right to receive the pre-amendment COLA for benefits that they earned before the effective date of the amendments," Chief Justice Thomas Balmer wrote for the court.

Balmer acknowledged that a dollar spent on public pensions is one that cannot go toward other services.

"The Legislature's interest in enhancing those services is entirely appropriate," he wrote.

"The Legislature, however, must pursue those objectives consistently with constitutional requirements, including Oregon's constitutional prohibition against impairing the obligations of contracts."

Five justices joined the decision. Justice Jack Landau recused himself and did not take part.

The court rejected arguments by the state and lawyers for local governments that a more compelling "public purpose" justified breaching the contract.

"The public-purpose defense that respondents ask this court to recognize imposes a high bar to justify the state's impairment of a state contract, like PERS, and the record in this case does not meet that standard," Balmer wrote.

At issue are two changes made by the Legislature in 2013 to the Public Employees Retirement System, which was created in 1945 and now has about 128,000 retirees. The system has 925 government employers and covers about 95 percent of all public employees.

One change affects cost-of-living increases, which first came into effect in 1971, and which were capped at 2 percent annually in 1973.

Starting on July 1, 2014, the 2013 law applies the full 2 percent to the first \$20,000 of a pension, then 1.5 percent to the next \$20,000, 1 percent to the next \$20,000, and .25 percent above \$60,000.

The rate for 2013-14 was a fixed 1.5 percent.

The other change affects the extra payment lawmakers granted to retirees in 1991, after the state taxed public pensions in line with a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. The change denies the extra payment to out-of-state retirees who do not pay Oregon taxes.

The changes were projected to pare the system's future liability by \$5.3 billion over the next few decades. In the current two-year budget cycle, governments are expected to save \$800 million, and in 2015-17, \$1 billion — unless the court

reverses them.

Lawmakers in 2013 allowed for legal challenges to go directly to the Supreme Court, bypassing the circuit court and Court of Appeals.

Public employee unions, and two out-of-state retirees, challenged both changes.

The unions argued that cost-of-living increases — and the formula that determines them — are part of the contract between government employers and workers. The state argues they are not.

There are two related lawsuits; the lead plaintiff is Everice Moro of Portland, a retired school employee who is among 14 named in the main lawsuit.

The out-of-state retirees argued that discontinuance of the extra payments to them violate state and federal constitutional guarantees of equal protection under the law.

Those suits were filed by Michael Reynolds, who retired in 2003 and is living in Seattle, and George Riemer, who retired in 2006 and is living in Arizona. Reynolds is a former solicitor general, the official who represents the state in state and federal appellate courts. Riemer worked for the Oregon State Bar, and is executive director for the Arizona Commission on Judicial Conduct.

Plaintiffs hailed the ruling.

"The state made a good-faith deal with these employees, who devoted so much of their working lives to serving their communities," said Greg Hartman, a Portland lawyer who represented 14 plaintiffs in the main case.

"Today the Supreme Court let them know that they can count on a secure retirement, and will be able to afford groceries, medical bills, car repairs, and other day-to-day living expenses which rise with inflation."

Local government and business associations said the decision will result in higher pension costs under the Public Employees Retirement System.

The Oregon Business Association also decried the decision, and offered a statement by a leading economist, who said millions will go into public pensions rather than education and other services.

"Oregon made a generational mistake in public policy, and the court has essentially ruled that we have to live with it," said John Tapogna, president of ECONorthwest. "That puts Oregon in a challenging economic position for the next couple of decades. Families and businesses can choose Washington, with similar amenities, but without the legacy costs of an ill-devised pension system."

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