

Abadan A to Z: Excerpts from Encyclopaedia Abadanica (a fictitious work)

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The story of modern Abadan cannot be understood without looking at the ways in which the oil industry and international interests have defined its social, cultural and economic life. This expert guide introduces some of the key features of the city past and present.

A

Abadan Island: Prior to the twentieth century, Abadan Island was home to a number of small villages centred on fishing, date palm cultivation and small-scale trade with nearby Basra (then in the Ottoman Empire, now in Iraq) and the Persian Gulf ports. The inhabitants were largely Arabic-speaking Iranians of the Banu Ka'b tribe who shared the island with smaller communities of Persian-speakers.

Alfi Square: Originally named after the Iraqi-Jewish Alfi family that ran a very popular convenience store on the square. In the oil city heyday, Alfi Store provided Abadan with a wide range of imported goods, books and international



A boy in Shatit village near Abadan, 1975



Abadan Refinery



A swimming pool in Abadan, belonging to the Oil Company



Soldiers guarding the Oil Refinery during the Second World War

newspapers. The square also contained a famous café or ‘milk bar’ that served milkshakes and iced coffees while patrons listened to international pop hits on the jukebox. Today, the Alfi family runs a successful business in the US and the square in Abadan is now officially called Meydân-e Farhang.

Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC): Founded in 1909 after oil was struck at Masjed Soleyman, some 260km north of Abadan. Operating under a 1901 concession originally sold by the Iranian state to the Australian millionaire William Knox D’Arcy, the company established itself in the Khuzestan Province after 1908 where it undertook extensive logistical, infrastructural and urban development. In 1935, as part of a renegotiated agreement with the Iranian state, the company changed its name to Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Following the 1951 nationalisation of Iranian oil, the company left Iran and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) took over expropriated assets. In 1954, the AIOC became part of British Petroleum (BP).

Arvand Rud: Also known as Shatt-al-Arab this river (approximately 200km long) is formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates and makes up some of the border between Iraq and Iran near Abadan.

B

Braim: Originally the name of a pre-modern village that was incorporated into modern-day Abadan in the 1910s and turned into a suburb for the mostly white and European so-called ‘Senior Staff’ of the oil company. [1] While the so-called ‘Native Town’ mainly consisted of overcrowded, unsanitary shanties, Braim boasted new bungalows and row houses with all modern amenities. See also: Colonialism; Gardening; Swimming Pools; Tea Parties.

Brazil: Abadanis tend to associate their city and its culture with Brazil. There is a popular saying, *Âbâdân berâzile!* (‘Abadan is your Brazil’). The team colours of the Abadan FC team are the same as those of the Brazilian national flag but it is not certain whether the Brazilian connection in the popular imagination arises from this fact or vice versa.

C

Churchill, Winston: A key lobbyist for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, Winston Churchill was instrumental in making the British government a major shareholder on the eve of the First World War. When the British navy under Churchill’s command switched from coal to oil during the war, its commodity value within the global economy grew exponentially. This, in turn, made Abadan a strategic asset



Somewhere by Arvand Rud (Arvand River)

in British policy. See also: Imperialism; Petro-Capitalism.

Cinema Rex: One of Iran’s biggest cinemas in the 1970s. During a sold-out screening on 19th August 1978, unknown perpetrators started a fire that left at least 400 civilians dead, making it one of the worst cases of terrorism prior to the 9/11 attacks against the United States of America in 2001. Public authorities blamed Islamist insurgents but popular opinion in Iran at the time presumed that government agents were



Abadan Museum

involved. As such, the Cinema Rex fire in Abadan became a historical turning point, further galvanising the movement that half a year later would overthrow the Shah and pave the way for the return of Ayatollah Khomeini. See also: Islamic Revolution.

'Colonel Bogey': A British military march composed in 1914. This tune was reportedly played on the last ship carrying evacuated British staff out of Abadan during the 1951 international crisis over Iran's decision to nationalise Iranian oil. [2]

D

Date palms: Abadan Island used to be one of Iran's largest date palm regions. Common varieties include the *khâarak* (unripe), *rotob* (ripe) and *diri* (dried) dates. Abadan date cultivation suffered during the twentieth-century, owing to numerous challenges including land clearings in connection with the establishment of the oil industry, bombardment during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and subsequent neglect, high salinity levels and industrial pollution. Dates and palm trees, however, continue to figure prominently in Abadani culture and colloquialisms.

F

Feydus: In the Abadani dialect, slang for the giant horn or whistle at the Abadan Refinery that signalled the beginning and end of work shifts. The word may be related to the English term 'fagottist' denoting the player of a woodwind instrument, more commonly known as a bassoon – possibly due to the shape of the horns. [3]

G

George the Greek: Giorgios (last name unknown) was Abadan's first photographer. Fluent in Persian and with a reputation for professionalism, George ran a popular shop simply known as *Zhorzh-e yunâni* ('George

the Greek') from circa 1940s to the late 1970s. The oil company and middle-class Abadanis alike hired George to document ceremonies, weddings and other occasions. George was also known to play the role of Santa Claus during Christmas parties in Abadan. The iconic atelier building in Sunshine Circle (now Falake-ye Toutiya) was saved from demolition in 2017 when local activists prompted authorities to protect it as a heritage site. See also: Greek Community.

Gillespie, Dizzy: American jazz trumpeter, composer and singer (1917-1993). During a 1956 US state-sponsored tour of the Middle East – partly aimed at repairing America's reputation after the US-sponsored coup against the popular Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953 – Gillespie played several concerts in Abadan, including one in the famous Cinema Taj attended by Princess Shams Pahlavi, elder sister of Mohammad-Reza Shah of Iran. See also: Jazz Scene; US-Abadan Relations.

Ghaliyeh mâhi: A sour, spicy, herb-based fish stew found in different variations across the Persian Gulf. It is served with rice and there is also a version based on shrimp. Close to the Persian Gulf and surrounded by the rivers Arvand Rud and Bahmanshir, seafood plays a crucial role in Abadani cuisine.



Abadan Technical School, established in 1939



Reza Shah Pahlavi visiting the Oil Refinery



A modern supermarket in 1960s Abadan



Boys playing near Arvand River



A nomadic woman from Arvand River



A traditional wedding in Abadan



A nomadic Arab-Iranian woman

H
Hotel Parsian: Or Persian Hotel, home to one of Iran's most famous nightclubs, known for its cabaret performances, in the 1960s and 70s. During the Iran-Iraq War, the hotel was transformed into an ad hoc command centre for the Revolutionary Guard of the Islamic Revolution. Around 1993 it was rebuilt and expanded as a hotel.

I
Indian Line(s): A neighbourhood in Abadan, also known as Sikh Line and locally as *Sikleyn*. Originally, this was one of several encampments for the Indian migrant labour force contracted by the oil company. [4] The Indian population of Abadan grew from 158 in 1910 to 4,890 in 1925. Following strikes and riots in 1922 and 1924, thousands of Sikh workers

were dismissed by the company and expelled from Abadan. However, in the late 1920s the Indian Lines (later Sikh Line) neighbourhood developed into a township as modern row houses replaced primitive barracks. In the 1940s, higher-ranking Indians were housed in the Bowardeh (aka Bawarda) neighbourhood. Although many Indians repatriated to India and Pakistan after the nationalisation of the oil industry in 1951, hundreds stayed on until the 1978-79 Islamic Revolution. See also: Coolie Lines, Indenture.

K
Kofaysheh: One of Abadan's working-class neighbourhoods. Although locals insist that the name of this area derives from the English term 'coffee shop' and refers to the cafes in the area, Kofaysheh

is in fact an older local name (as testified by several other villages in Khuzestan bearing the same name). Today, the official name of this neighbourhood is Golestan.

M
Mackenzie, Mohammad-Ali: Worked as a general cleaner in the so-called Cat Cracker (catalytic cracker) at the Abadan Oil Refinery. According to a notice in *Abadan Today*, 8th October 1958, Mr Mackenzie 'was engaged by the Company in 1911' and recalled that 'he was paid four annas a day (equivalent to one rial) and for that he worked nine hours daily'.

Masjed-e Ranguni-hâ: The 'Rangooni' or 'Burmese Mosque' was built around 1921 for and by Indian migrant labourers who

had previously worked in the oil industry of Burma (now Myanmar). While the base structure is made up of scrap metal and disused oil pipelines, the mosque's exterior appears as a fine example of Indian Islamic architecture. Both the façade and interior are decorated with beautifully ornate floral-patterned plasterworks. In 1999, the mosque was recognised as a National Historic Site by the Iranian state.

N
Nostalgia: Researchers have pointed out that there is a strong sense of nostalgia for Abadan's past that links Abadanis of different ages, both among the diaspora and in Abadan today. [5] This nostalgia is expressed in everyday conversations, in the publication of memoirs and works



A palm grove in Abadan



Alfi Square in Abadan

by amateur historians, and particularly in online communities and on social media where Abadanis congregate and exchange pictures, memories and information pertaining to, above all, the pre-revolution days. Nostalgic Abadanis cite the city's history of peaceful co-existence between numerous ethnic groups, nationalities and faiths; the sense of cosmopolitanism and material progress in a modern urban society; the order and discipline underpinning infrastructure, public services and transport; and the connectedness of Abadan to the world through airline connections, the

screening of foreign films, the sale of international newspapers and so on. Such nostalgia, of course, tends to downplay the less savoury sides of the past – however, it is evidently a strong communal and emotional factor binding together Abadanis across borders.

P

Palang: Iranian Navy man-of-war sunk at a pier in Abadan during the August 1941 surprise attack on Iran by the British Royal Navy. Iran was invaded and occupied by

British, Commonwealth and Soviet forces during the Second World War as the Reza Shah Pahlavi was considered pro-German. Iran served as an important supply line for the Allied forces on the Eastern Front, making Abadan and nearby Khorramshahr key strategic entry points.

Pakora: One of several Indian snacks that play a prominent role in Abadani cuisine, making the city's food culture distinct within Iran. See also: Indian Community.

Petroleum University of Technology: Founded in 1939 as Abadan Technical School or Institute, providing training for

students in preparation for work at the oil refinery. From 1956, it expanded its educational profile and became Abadan Technical College; in 1962, it became Abadan Institute of Technology (AIT), offering BS degrees in engineering, economy, administration and accounting. Following the Iran-Iraq War, a Petroleum University of Technology was established and in 1992 its Abadan branch opened in the original buildings of the Technical School. This landmark complex, as well as the surrounding Bawardah (aka Bovardeh) township, were designed by architect and planner JM Wilson. Wilson

drew inspiration from colonial urban planning in New Delhi as well as from the 'Garden Suburb' of Hampstead. The institute's iconic clock tower is sometimes referred to locally as 'Big Ben'.

R

Râm-seyd: In Abadani dialect, slang for unlawful driving. Derived from the English 'wrong side'.

Razi High School: Founded in 1937, located in the Sikh Line (formerly Indian Lines) neighbourhood. This prestigious school was, from the 1940s onwards, a centre of political activism among Abadani youth. Alumni include celebrated filmmakers Amir Naderi and Nasser Taghvai, literati such as Najaf Daryabandari and Safdar Taqizadeh as well as numerous other important figures in the political, cultural and scientific life of Iran.

Ray-Ban: Eyewear developed in the 1930s in response to a need in the US Air Force for anti-glare sunglasses that could 'ban rays' from the pilots' vision. By 1937, the Ray-Ban Aviator model went on sale to the public and quickly became a popular fashion item. Ray-Ban sunglasses may have arrived as early as the 1940s in Abadan where its functionality and distinctly American look fitted local needs and fashions. By the

1970s, their omnipresence had made Ray-Ban an Abadani trademark in popular Iranian discourse. Today, there are still innumerable jokes about Abadanis' excessive love of the sunglasses – indeed, Ray-Bans are known as an 'Abadani Passport', synonymous with Abadani-ness. See also: Boilersuit (Clothing); Clarks (Shoe Brand).

S

Strike, 1929: One of the earliest examples of large-scale industrial action in Iran. The 1929 demonstrations and strike at the Abadan Refinery saw labourers united in demands for higher wages, shorter working hours and better living conditions. Although the company partially answered some of the demands, it also used the occasion for a full-scale violent crackdown on labour organisers. During this strike, the demand for nationalisation was heard for the first time in Iran. See also: Labour Movements; Socialism.

T

Tah-Lenji-hâ: The name of Abadan's most famous bazaar. Derived from *lenj*, the traditional hand-built boats of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, the name literally translates as 'bottom-of-the-boat' and refers to the amount of goods that sailors are allowed to import

tax-free into Iran. The bustling Tah-Lenji-hâ Bazaar is known for its hundreds of stalls selling clothes, cosmetics, perfume and household goods, as well as for the singing and colourful sloganeering of its many pedlars. Recently, authorities have tried to boost business in the bazaar further through incentives connected to the so-called Arvand Free Trade Zone just outside of Abadan. See also: The Kuwaitis' Bazaar; Smuggling; Trade.

Tank Farm: In technical vernacular, the area in which oil is stored. As iconic features of Abadan's industrial landscape, these circular structures were subject to numerous bombardments during the Iran-Iraq War. Recently, the Tank Farm areas have been incorporated into Abadan Municipality for redevelopment, including a planned housing district called Upatan. On the outskirts of the Tank Farm is a historic cemetery for Abadan's Armenian community.

Z

Zolfaqari: Plain east of Abadan. Scene of one of the early battles in the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. During this battle, today known officially as 'The Zolfaqâriyeh Epic', local self-organised volunteer militias fought off the Iraqi enemy who had planned to surround and attack Abadan. At least 400 Iranians were martyred during this defence, with hundreds of other fighters wounded. ■

Notes:

1 See: Mark Crinson, 'Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,' *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997), pp. 341–59; Kaveh Ehsani, 'Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman,' *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003), pp. 361–99.

2 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (NY: Simon & Shuster, 1997).

3 Ahmad Ka'bi-Fallahiyyeh *Vazhegân-e engelsi dar guyesh-e mardom-e Abbadan* [British Words in the Dialect of People from Abadan], (Tehran: Andishe-ye Farda, 2014).

4 See: Rasmus Christian Elling, 'On Lines and Fences: Labour, Community and Violence in an Oil City' in U Freitag, N Fuccaro, C Ghrawi and N Lafi (eds): *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation-State*, (NY: Berghahn, 2015); Touraj Atabaki, 'Far from Home, But at Home: Indian Migrant Workers in the Iranian Oil Industry', *Studies in History*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2015), pp. 85-114.

5 See: Rasmus Christian Elling, 'Abadan: Oil City Dreams and the Nostalgia for Past Futures in Iran', Parts 1-3, *Abadan:Retold* (www.abadan.wiki) (2016); Shireen Walton, 'Abadan's Digital Afterlife: Past Images and Present Pasts in Abadani Virtual Communities', *Abadan:Retold* (2016).