

A Witness to History

Lyse Doucet has written a new book about Afghanistan's turbulent past, seen through the eyes of those who survived it. She shared her hopes for its future with **Fergus Byrne**.

As I read the final chapters of Lyse Doucet's book, *The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan*, I hear the sudden, jolting sound of an explosion in the distance. Loud booms are accompanied by popping sounds. It takes some time for my mind to detach itself from the world I am reading about and realise that what I am hearing is a fireworks display in a small town on the southwest coast of England, not a suicide bomb attack in the centre of Kabul. Marking the end of Bridport's carnival a few miles away, the noise creates an eerie backdrop and an unsettling awakening from an all-consuming story of Afghanistan's tumultuous history. It is a history riddled with bullet holes, bombed-out buildings, and dead bodies, but it is also a story about the resilience and strength of a people who continue to live their lives as their country lurches from one conflict to another.

Lyse Doucet's book captures pivotal moments in Afghanistan's history, such as the Soviet invasion, the Taliban's takeover, the post-2001 reconstruction and a resurgent Taliban. It also recounts personal tragedies, including devastating attacks on the Inter-Continental hotel, and moments of hope, such as the reopening of its facilities and the return of music to its halls.

Cleverly structured around a history of the hotel, the book explores the lives of the hotel's staff and guests, highlighting personal stories of survival, hope, and loss while Afghanistan's turbulent history writes its own chapters.

Just back from the airport after reporting on the Gaza aid trucks stuck at the Egyptian border, she tells me about the 'very turbulent, very bloody history' of Afghanistan that she didn't want people to turn away from. 'Because when you see reporting from countries at war, you see people running away from gunfire, you see them in hospital, you see them crying, you see the loss, you see the tears, you see the sadness.' But you don't see 'the spaces in between. The weddings, the birthdays, and the just getting through the day.'

First checking into the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on Christmas Day in 1988, Lyse recalls the lobby as 'cold, gloomy and a little bit forbidding.' She was there to report on the Soviet withdrawal and had been warned by a Mujahedin commander she met in Pakistan that 'you're certainly going to die there.'

Among the many hotel employees featured in her book, we meet Hazrat, a long-serving housekeeper

and floor supervisor. We are also introduced to the lives of Mohammad Aqa, the restaurant manager, Abida, the first female sous-chef, Malalai, a waitress whose role changes dramatically after the Taliban takeover and Sadeq, the acting front desk manager. They and many others tell their stories against a backdrop of years of conflict.

'With each passing year, the situation in the hotel worsened,' explained Lyse. She describes it as 'high on the hill overlooking the city, the balconies like eyes, watching, bearing witness.' She recalls how the hotel was 'gradually sucked into the war.' Throughout this time, Hazrat, Sadeq, Abida, Mohammad Aqa and all the other staff run the hotel with a staunch professionalism and humour that says more about the people of Afghanistan than any heavily armed invader.

In her book, Lyse describes the hotel as an 'unbreakable constant'. Although she recalls her shock upon arriving in 2001 as the Taliban were retreating, 'Half of the hotel had no ceilings in the rooms, windows were blasted open, toilets were clogged, beds were wrecked, and I think five women stayed in a room. There was plastic on the windows. There was nowhere else to stay.' Despite this, the hotel continued to operate, something Lyse describes as 'very Afghan.'

When it was time to talk to people about their stories for the book, she recalled how Hazrat had the most incredible memory. He remembered how she had been the first woman to use a bicycle in Kabul and joked with her about how she would carry her towel through reception. On one occasion, the local intelligence agent, concerned that Lyse Doucet might be writing something the Taliban could dislike, joined one of her conversations but became so bored that he interjected with his own stories of ghosts on the fifth floor. He believed this was a bigger security threat than Lyse Doucet.

I ask which era in Afghanistan's past forty years might have been the most stable, the best time for a country that has spent so much of the last four decades at war. Lyse tells me that much is being made of the peace that existed during what they call the 'Golden Years,' when it was a Kingdom. Although she says it was a very 'unequal' society, it was peaceful. 'You cannot exaggerate the importance of peace and stability, of people knowing they're not going to be shot in the streets, or a bomb landing in their house.' Which is why many older Afghans look so nostalgically on that time.

‘In the Soviet era,’ she says, ‘Kabul was left largely intact. The palaces, the roads, there was no damage to the city. But when the Mujahideen came, 50,000 people died in the city. All of the old palaces were completely gutted. This country was in ruins.’

She recalls the ‘indescribable sense of joy and hope’ in 2001 when the Taliban were defeated. This was their best chance in a generation, many generations, at peace. ‘It’s still hard to believe that two decades later, it all came crashing down, and the Taliban came back. There were some 40 Western armies there, who couldn’t defeat the Taliban. It’s astonishing. And now the darkness. We live in a world where girls can’t go to school past grade six, where women are shut out of many jobs. How can this be in 2025? It’s terribly sad.’

The arrival of the Taliban in Kabul on 15th August 2021 was a shock to most. Such a shock that many ask if the international engagement where people lost lives, loved ones, or were injured for life was all for nothing. Lyse doesn’t think so. She talks about the soldiers, diplomats, aid workers and teachers who attempted to help the Afghan people, explaining that they created the kind of atmosphere in Kabul that allowed the ‘most connected, the most educated generation in Afghan history to emerge’. They enabled a generation to dream bigger than ever before, ‘and that was only possible because there was international engagement.’ Opportunities were provided; ‘scholarships, education, new ways of thinking about the world.’

All of this might make it even more depressing that there is now a repressive regime back in control. However, Lyse believes that if there is anything to be learned from the last forty years, it is that nothing stays the same in Afghanistan. She cites the views of Taliban members that do not align with the more repressive edicts from the ultra-conservative higher echelons of the movement. ‘Even founding members of the Taliban say to me that 95% of the Taliban disagree with these edicts.’ However, she says, ‘they cannot challenge the Emir’s edicts because they have signed an oath and note of loyalty.’ Their primary concern is that they don’t want to go back to the Civil War of the 1990s. ‘The unity of the Taliban matters more than anything else.’

But an unequal and unsettled peace is not the only concern. With Russia recognising the Taliban and other countries now moving in to establish business deals, Lyse is worried about the long-term future for generations who will grow up without the same freedoms enjoyed elsewhere in the world. It has now been four years, and she fears that if it continues for another four or five years, many girls will be forced into marriage as they cannot get an education, while the young boys ‘grow up, not seeing girls going out, not seeing girls educated’ and ‘a new society is going



Lyse Doucet inside the Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul

to be shaped. She cites those who believe this will have consequences for the rest of the world be it jihad or something else. ‘While we focus on the lack of a curriculum for girls, there is also a new curriculum for boys, which is also very dangerous going forward.’ However, suggesting some are secretly trying to get an education, she says, ‘I don’t want to say that there’s no light in the dark, but there’s a lot of dark.’

While many voices are silenced inside Afghanistan, some still speak for the oppressed. Lyse Doucet is among them. We also speak with emotion about another voice, that of Shaharзад Akbar, an Afghan human rights activist, whom Lyse featured in her podcast *A Wish for Afghanistan*. During the interview, both Lyse and Shaharзад shed tears over the nation’s pain. Recalling this with me, the memory stirs emotion, and I can’t help but share those tears. Lyse recounts the day the Taliban returned to Kabul. She was on an Emirates plane circling the airport that eventually turned back as the Taliban entered the city. While at the same time Shaharзад was on a plane out. They texted each other while in the air and Shaharзад told her it was the worst day of her life. ‘It was overwhelming,’ says Lyse. ‘That was the day I really understood that when you leave a country, it is as if you are coming out of your shell. It is like you’re literally stripping everything off.’ Everything they held dear was gone. ‘The streets, with their memories, what they’d achieved, their dreams. Almost everything and everyone they held dear. They were going into a plane and leaving it all behind.’

While the Inter-Continental Hotel might symbolise Afghanistan itself—scarred but unbroken, enduring through decades of turmoil and standing as a testament to the country’s rich history, its struggles, and its unyielding hope for a brighter future—Lyse Doucet and *The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People’s History of Afghanistan* offer an insight that goes well beyond the history books.

Lyse Doucet will be at Bridport Literary Festival talking with Lindsey Hilsom on November 7th at 2pm. Tickets are available from Bridport Tourist Information Centre, either in person or on the phone – 01308 424901.