

# ***Iran Tourism Stories***





# *Iran Tourism Stories*



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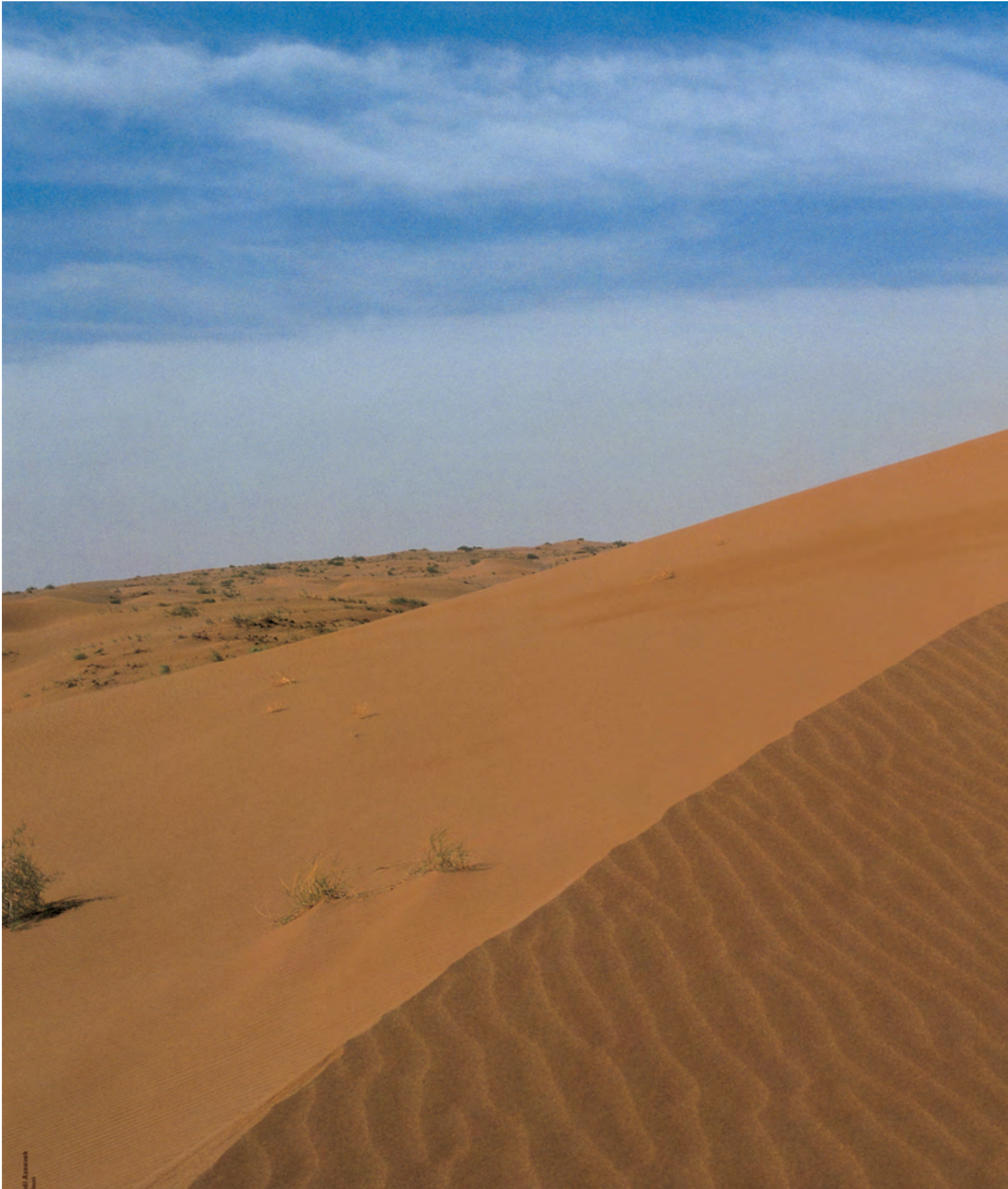
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**UNWTO**

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# *Iran Tourism Stories*









# *About this book*

Iran can justly claim to be one of the world's oldest major civilizations with an unbroken tradition and history of urban settlements dating back to the 7th century BC. Strategically situated between the East and the West and on the historical Silk Road, Iran has seen the fusion of many people of diverse ethnicities giving rise to an unparalleled cultural heritage. In addition, the country is blessed by nature with snow-capped mountains, arid deserts, pristine beaches and luscious oases, existing side by side in a compact area.

The 14 stories in the book offer a kaleidoscope of Iran's history and traditions that have inspired many of the story tellers. For example, the Gilgamesh Magazine is sourced from the epic poem written in Akkadian during the late second millennium BC. The revival of hand-made pottery without the use of the pottery wheel is also a millennium-old Iranian tradition. Eco-tourism projects involving the preservation of the Hawksbill sea turtle in Qeshm Island and the rare Asiatic Cheetahs in Ghaleh Bala Village make fascinating and heart-warming stories. Iran's renowned sense of hospitality is best summed up in a story of culinary traditions where guests are considered

as the "friends of God".

The Tourism Stories Iran book is the latest addition to the World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) Tourism Stories serial publication that was launched in 2013. This book speaks volumes for the spirit of innovation, enterprise and adventure of the authors who have often undertaken their ventures with meagre resources. The common denominator is the desire to share and help one another in all their activities that reflect a bonding of people and communities passed on from generation to generation.

The book is a product of the collaboration between Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (MCTH) and UNWTO. The MCTH has duly recognized the vast potential that tourism holds both in terms of international tourists as well as domestic visitors and has embarked on an ambitious plan of product development, marketing and promotion. The book also illustrates the commitment of the MCTH to improve the life of communities through tourism.





# *Forewords*

The power of tourism as a force of economic and social development has become more evident in both rural and urban destinations and the latest edition of the Tourism Stories tells the tales of the champions of tourism in Iran.

The stories are a first-person account of tourism's transformative power and the opportunities it can generate for people and communities. Iran's rich and varied culture, intangible heritage and natural assets, manifested in art, architecture, handicrafts, music, poetry and gastronomy, serve as the backdrop for the 14 stories. They reveal how collaboration has made communities stronger and laid grounds for the sustainable future of the tourism ventures.

More importantly, these stories demonstrate tourism's ability to positively impact on economies, making societies and

livelihoods more resilient and contributing to sustainable development. We trust that these stories will be an inspiration to the millions of international and domestic tourists travelling to Iran every year.

I express gratitude to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts for putting forward these stories and partnering with UNWTO. This publication underscores tourism's contribution to our common goals fostering sustainable development, in Iran and beyond.

**Zurab Pololikashvili**  
Secretary-General, UNWTO



## **The Untold Stories of Tourism in Iran**

Iran is a rich treasure of cultural and natural heritage, enriched throughout history. This cradle of civilization has continuously manifested its glory and beauty through architecture, arts, literature, customs and traditions, which all in all have made Iran a heaven for cultural and experiential tourists. I believe that Iran as a tourist destination can be explained the best in three words: Hospitality, Diversity, and Authenticity.

Persian hospitality is the most inspiring and memorable experience of most visitors in their journey to Iran. Tourists are also astonished to explore the diverse offerings of this amazing land: ethically, geographically, and historically. Iran, as an attractive tourism destination, is a paradise of authentic experiences as well.

Sustainable tourism is an optimal tool for economic development and social inclusion. There is no boundary to limit tourism growth from reaching the communities and if it is planned and managed appropriately, it will create a win-win situation for all stakeholders including the host communities and the visitors. The Islamic Republic of Iran is planning to enhance and prioritize the role of the tourism industry in the

national economy. Very impactful steps have been taken so far especially in terms of education, infrastructure and information and communication technology. However, a long way is still ahead of us.

This book is a collection of stories of people who could make their dreams come true. While they live in different parts of Iran, from the silver coasts of Caspian Sea to the “Persian” Gulf and from the snow-covered mountains to hot deserts; they all took impactful steps towards positive change and won recognition in their communities through hard work and creativity. As a result of all these efforts by such innovative micro and small enterprises, Iran is becoming a more attractive destination each day. This book, which is a collection of real-life stories and meaningful experiences, is dedicated to the entrepreneurs who are the true leaders of the tourism industry in Iran.

### **Ali Asghar Moonesan**

Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts of Islamic Republic of Iran

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- Ms. Maryam Moghaddam, How Tourism Transformed My Career, From an English Teacher to a Tourism Activist
- Ms. Matin Lashkari & Ms. Shirin Tahanan, Delicious Taste of Persian Cuisine in the Back Streets of Tehran
- Ms. Mina Shirani, Kalpuregan, the Live Museum of Ancient Pottery
- Mr. Mohsen Mehdizadeh, Esfahak, the Restoration of Lost Memories through Tourism
- Mr. Nima Azari & Ms. Afsaneh Ehsani, Ecotourism in Support of Sea Turtles in Qeshm Island of Iran
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# *Hashem Tabatabaiee*

Farahzad: from an Abandoned  
Village at the Heart of the Desert  
to a Tourist Destination





**Farahzad** is a tiny oasis village located in the middle of enchanting sand dunes in Iran's Great Salt Desert. Farahzad has been developed into a tourism destination within the past few years after a local family decided to revive their ancestral house and transform it into a guest house. Currently, several families offer accommodation services in the region, along with safari tours into the heart of Mesr Desert that provide elements of adventure, fun, and self-exploration. Desert trekking is a great way to find true tranquillity and seek internal peace. Many visitors enjoy the intense colours of sunset and sunrise behind the sand dunes. Camel riding is another popular activity deeply appreciated by all visitors, especially foreign tourists. Here is a perfect spot for stargazing where stars shine like diamonds against the background of a velvet black sky. Many tourists find the hard working and diligent life-style of locals to be inspiring and environmentally friendly. The food prepared by local ladies has unforgettable taste and aroma and is dished out with kindness and love.

A visit to Farahzad is intrinsic satisfaction caused by travelling inward and undertaking a time travel through past centuries when caravans along the Silk Road passed through deserts

and the sound of their bells filled the air. Travel to Farahzad if you are ready to start the journey of getting to know yourself. Just be careful not to get lost in the unlimited silence and hospitality which Farahzad has to offer, because that is the only risk of travelling to this wonderful destination.

More information available at: <http://www.mesr.info/en>

I am **Hashem Tabatabaiee**. I was born in a crowded family living in Mesr Village of Isfahan province, at the heart of Iran's Great Salt Desert. This desert has an area of 78000 km<sup>2</sup> and is located in the central part of Iran, with very limited access roads, but numerous fabulous scenic locations. That is why many tourists wish to visit this desert despite all difficulties. Mesr and surrounding villages (including Farahzad) are situated at the foothills of some small mountains between Isfahan and Yazd. Farahzad is located at the border of a wide desert area and surrounded by sand hills. Its habitants gradually migrated to cities in the past 40 to 50 years and left no sign of life behind.

Even Mesr village (3 kilometers away), despite having attractive traditional architecture was abandoned just like the





whole region. The very limited families living in Mesr region were about to emigrate as well. I lived 50 kilometer away, in Jandaq, together with my wife and three sons.

About eight years ago, I took a step that has had deep consequences for my hometown. I decided to restore my father's house and use it as a tourist center. Like many houses in central deserts of Iran, it had a big yard. My investment in the old house was criticized by many people as they could not see any potential for the region to become a tourist destination. Even the bank's expert, who visited the property for evaluating my loan request, was not convinced about the return on investment for my proposed business. I was not disappointed and managed to push the project forward. The house was named "Baarandaz", which means "dock" in Farsi language and refers to the rest area for caravans, where the camels leave their loads and rest after hours of walking through deserts. Baarandaz is located in a pristine environment, away from any population. Its architecture is completely indigenous and unique, and the interior design is inspired by the natural life in the desert.

Fortunately, a former acquaintance accompanied by several tour guides and travel agents, brought the first visitors to Baarandaz. Together with my wife and three sons and daughters-in-law, we warmly welcomed all the guests. We revived the local cuisine and brought our traditional recipes to life in order to provide a unique adventure for the tourists. We used local handicrafts for decorating Baarandaz: simple items that could certainly grab the attention of our guests.

Experiences like listening to live traditional music in the quiet environment of Baarandaz, enjoying marvelous views and great scenic points over sand hills, feeling the true silence, climbing the hills barefoot, and finally watching the darkest sky and brightest stars at night created memorable moments for our guests. The totally authentic rural family atmosphere of Baarandaz, also made them feel at home.

The satisfaction of our guests, attracted more tourists through positive word of mouth and as a result, desert of Mesr and Farahzad became a popular destination throughout the year. The popularity of Baarandaz motivated other members of the





local community to transform their old houses into rural guest houses and together, the region was upgraded into a tourist destination. Recently, non-locals have shown interest to invest in tourism facilities as well.

Today, eight licensed guest houses are operating in the village of Farahzad, which accommodate many tourists each night. Reverse migration, has revitalized the village. As a community, we have learned that we should preserve our heritage and revive our traditions. Local attractive handicrafts are integrated into our daily activities which is well appreciated by our guests and supports local artisans. We strongly respect our shared identity and have found the opportunity to learn about different cultures and respect them. This is the peacemaking power of tourism, which removes all boundaries and brings people from different nationalities under one umbrella, looking at each other face to face, without any fear, and communicating their beliefs and ideas. Our shared experience has increased our confidence and made us proud of our ancestral village. We have learned how to ensure our sustainable livelihoods by preserving our historical values. We have also established

a friendly relationship with Mother Nature, who has blessed us with unforgettable beauty and endless and impressive serenity.

We are glad that the inclusive growth pattern in our region is today considered as a role model for rural sustainable tourism development and hope that diverse tourism products are developed all around Iran based on local tangible and intangible heritage, as well as natural resources. I strongly believe that Iranian hospitality is the most valuable offering of my country and we have done our best in Farahzad to keep this blessing alive in all our services. We welcome and receive our visitors just like our family friends and guests and the feedback we receive from them is just as much heart -warming.

\* Unfortunately, at the final stages of publishing this book, we were saddened to hear the loss of Mr. Hashem Tabatabaiee in a car accident. Our prayers and heartfelt condolences go out to Iranian ecotourism family for this loss. May he rest in peace.



*Mahín  
Shamsikhani,  
Khosro Roosta, and  
Shiva Shamshirí*

The Story of Gileboom





**Gilan Province** of Iran borders the Caspian Sea. Strategically situated on the Teheran-Baku trade route, the region has a long history and a fusion of different cultures. The two dominating ethnic groups are the Gilaks and the Talesh but five Iranian languages are spoken here.

Gilan is the historical hub of sericulture of Iran having a tradition dating back to the 15th century CE which led to it becoming one of the wealthiest provinces of Iran. Gilan Province has a rich tangible and intangible culture and a variety of handicrafts particularly those associated with earthenware and ceramics.

Gilan Province has a humid sub-tropical climate with very heavy rainfall and consequently its capital Rasht has acquired the sobriquet as the “City of Silver Rains”. However, the coastline is cooler and attracts many international and domestic tourists. The humidity also gave rise to a number of wetlands of which the most famous is Ramsar where the “Ramsar Convention on Wetlands” of international importance was signed in 1971.

Gilan Province also produces a variety of fruits and vegetable and along with the seafood has a strong culinary tradition reputed throughout Iran.

Gilan is a haven for ecotourism as testified by the following two stories.

Gileboom in Ghasem Abad village is 20 kilometers away from Ramsar. It is located near the Caspian Sea and only 20 minutes away from the Hyrcanian forest which is a habitat

of many bird species just as the Caspian Sea is home to a diverse range of fish species.

The architecture and design of dwellings in the region is a mix of tradition and modernity. A typical scene would include a small cottage (called Kolbe that usually can accommodate 4 guests), made of mud and wood with mat covered porches, located amidst a seasonal stream that passes through the yard. A green field located near Gileboom is transformed into an arena for sports events such as football, and traditional Gilak-style wrestling (known as Gile-Mardi wrestling) and ceremonies, mainly weddings.

Gileboom gives the local community an opportunity to showcase and sell their hand-made products and crafts. The food cooked in Gileboom is authentic Gilaki cuisine prepared by the local women, served in hand-made clay and china dishes and spread on a tablecloth along with traditional side-dishes and beverages. Gileboom is trying to move towards sustainable development of the region and exchanging national and international experiences.

The north of Iran presents to the world many spectacular sites where nature can be appreciated and enjoyed in its pristine state. Wherever there are such natural wonders, you will spot nature lovers and what is nature lovers’ favorite choice of accommodation? Yes! Eco-lodges! Gileboom Guesthouse in Gilan Province is one such wonderful little eco-lodge.

More information available at: <http://gileboom.info/>





All of us, **Mahin Shamsikhani** (from Arak), **Khosro Roosta** (from Karaj), and **Shiva Shamshiri** (from Shahr-e-Rey) are graduates from Amirkabir University of Technology. We were members of a mountaineering club of the university. Getting to know the indigenous cultures has always been our biggest passion, and so we took every chance to travel around Iran together during holidays.

On one of our trips to Sistan and Baluchestan Province in southeast of Iran, we were looking for a woman named Mahtab Norouzi who was a world famous needleworker. During the Pahlavi era, she had done an extraordinary needlework design on a dress for the last Queen of Iran. We finally located her in a village and were shocked by the extent of her poverty. It was then and there that we made a decision which became a turning point in our lives and careers. We decided to start a new chapter in our lives and give local artisans like her the recognition they deserve.

After a short time, we resigned from our jobs and bought an old house in Ghasem-Abad village in the eastern part of Gilan Province. We spent four months to renovate the house and decorate it according to the indigenous architecture.

This house was named Gileboom, which is a portmanteau of 'Gilak' and 'Galesh' –the people native to the northern provinces of Iran— and 'Boom', Persian for 'habitat'.

Gileboom is designed to preserve and promote the local culture of eastern Gilan.

We have close interaction with the local people, showcasing and selling their handicrafts in Gileboom and organizing tours to the local handicraft workshops. Whenever we guide tourists through nature, we try to plan the hiking trails so that they cross the local workshops.

Ecotourism and sustainable development are two key factors for us and to achieve this goal we benchmark and rely on indigenous knowledge. Preventing the entry of unrecoverable materials into the areas of eco-lodges in Gileboom is one of our prime concerns. In Gileboom, we have recycled 70% of dry waste, and all wet waste is recycled and converted to worm compost. All guests and travel agencies are kindly requested to avoid using disposable plastic containers or plastic bags as much as possible. We replaced the plastic bottles for milk and yogurt drink with metal containers. We used empty bottles for sealing and silencing in the corners of gables.

Rainwater harvesting is an ancient technique enjoying a revival in popularity due to the inherent quality of rainwater as opposed to the consumption of treated water. In Gileboom we use two 6000-liter tanks and one 500-liter tank for harvesting rainwater from the gable roof.





The rich cultural heritage of the region has a huge potential for attracting tourists and providing unique experiences for them. For example, Ghasemabadi indigenous dance and folk music which is very well recognized nationally, is also popular among international tourists. Therefore, we make sure that our guests find the opportunity to enjoy these local offerings.

We celebrate all local and national ceremonies at Gileboom including Yalda Night and Chaharshanbe Suri. We also take advantage of real-life occasions like wedding ceremonies and encourage our guests to attend and participate in local weddings. All in all, such cultural activities increase travelers' engagement and create memorable experiences for them.

In order to enhance visitors' experience, we have defined different activities that deeply reflect the local lifestyle. For example, visitors have the option to visit the local tea factory and learn the story behind this significant component of Iranian diet. They can also visit local workshops producing felt and handmade textiles which allow them to better understand common designs and motifs. The participants get a first-hand experience of using pottery wheels to make hand-made clay bowls, jugs, and vases using local techniques. They are also familiarized with the process of preparing the clay, drying and firing the pots in the kiln. Fruit picking is another popular activity among our guests.

Some of our challenges relate to social and economic impacts of population growth, low awareness about sustainable development and climate change (especially of interest for children), deforestation, overgrazing, inappropriate waste management, unsuitable regulations for rural municipalities, and increased water and soil pollution.

In order to address these challenges, we have raised public awareness through activities like organizing training workshops, promoting practices of sustainable development and generating and disseminating educational content, which is relevant for locals and visitors.

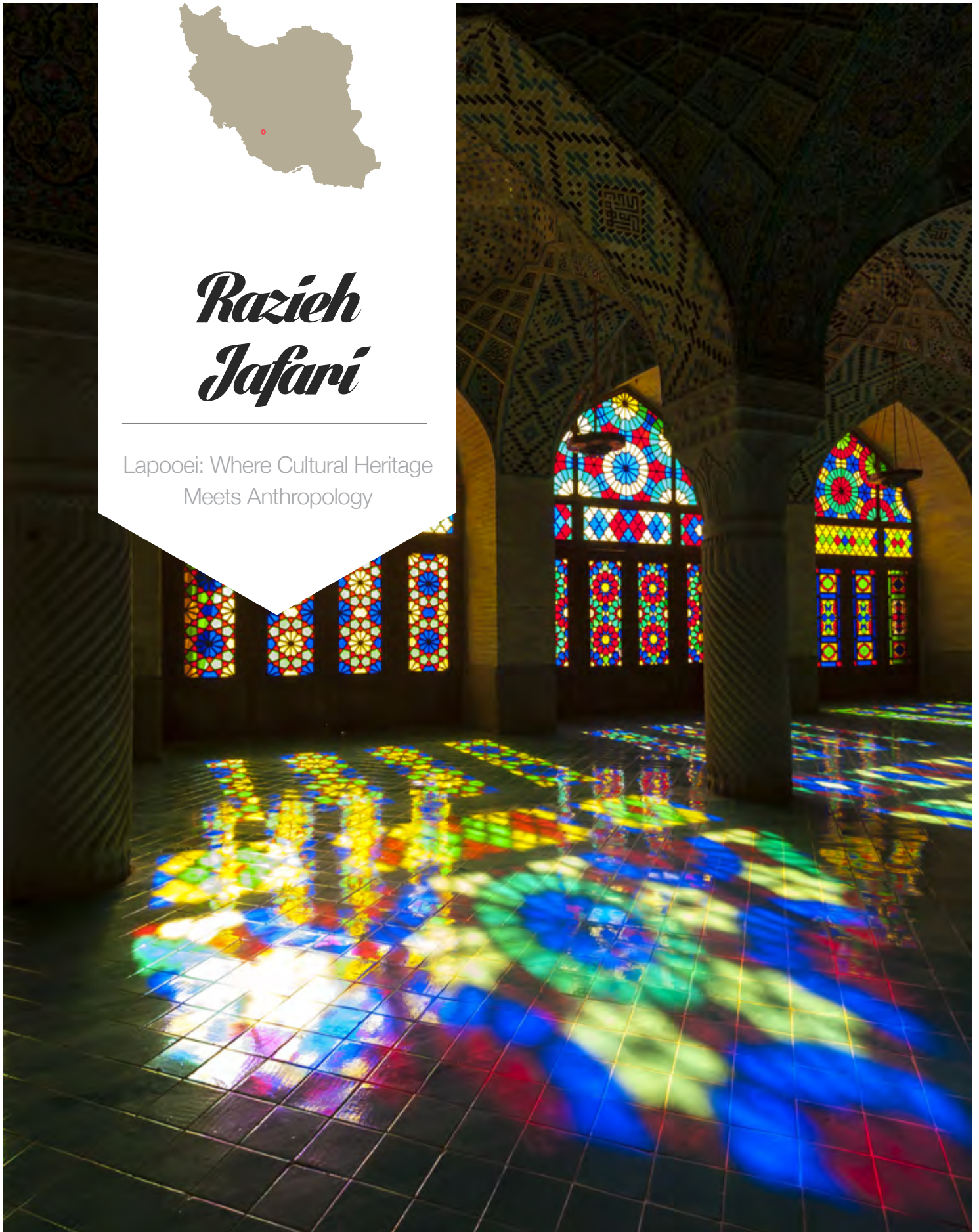
We have also been successful in changing the mindset of locals regarding the value of preserving their authentic art and culture. We are very proud that local woven fabrics – which were not in fashion until a few years ago – now appear on different outlets and are considered as a value again.

Our main goal is to turn the village of Ghasem Abad into an eco-village and turn Gileboom into an eco-lodge. We welcome our guests' comments and suggestions and do our best to implement them.



# *Razieh Jafari*

Lapooei: Where Cultural Heritage  
Meets Anthropology





**Fars Province** in the southwest of Iran is the original homeland of the Persian people who were present here from about the 10th century BC. The region reached its apogee under the Achaemenid dynasty that founded the largest empire of the world at the time. Recognized as the cultural capital of Iran it boasts of the palace complex of Persepolis and the Pasargadae archaeological sites including the tomb of Cyrus that are major tourist attractions. Other heritage remains of the Sasanian Empire such as the city of GOR, Ardeshir Palace, and Bishapur also offer a wealth of cultural tourist attractions. Shiraz, the capital of Fars Province, is a garden city renowned for its cultural and religious wealth. The tomb of the renowned Iranian poet Hafez, a son of Shiraz, along with the memorial hall dedicated to him are frequented both by domestic as well as international visitors.

Fars Province due to its geographical position dominated by the Zagros Mountains, offers a variety of contrasting climatic and topographical features where diverse fauna and flora have led to the establishment of many natural parks such as Bamou, Bakhtegan and Tang-e-Tizab. Contact with Indigenous groups such as the Qashqai nomads provides possibilities of experiential tourism to add to the thrill of hiking and trekking in the mountains.

Agriculture is of importance in Fars as the area is rich in cereals, fruits and vegetables that contribute and supplement the gastronomical traditions of the region thus adding another element to the attraction of the region. The following stories shed more light on the region.

Lapooei town is located in Zarghan of Fars Province. It has a rich history of a civilization that flourished over five thousand five hundred years ago. Lapooei is in close proximity to Shiraz and other historic and beautiful places like the Hafez Tomb, Tomb of Saadi, Gates of Quran and Persepolis.

Lapooei House is composed of two parts: a house with 6 rooms, and an anthropology museum which has many old and historical furniture and tools, as well as archaeological artefacts such as various types of pottery that add value to the museum representing the culture and antiquity of the town.

Lapooei guest house established in April 2015 is located in the village amidst beautiful natural surroundings. This eco-lodge focuses on food tourism, rural tourism and ecotourism. The lodge has a rustic architecture built on two floors with two entrances (staircase) and sixteen chambers. The lodge provides guests with unique culinary experiences based on Lapooei's history and culture. Day visitors are welcome to visit the complex and have lunch or dinner in a group (more than seven people). Some of the rooms have been decorated as a museum and others as guest rooms. The complex serves a variety of local cuisine and offers other facilities such as the Internet, parking, kitchen amenities, laundry and tour guide services to visit nearby places of interest. English and Farsi-speaking personnel add to the comfort and welfare of foreign and domestic tourists. Let us hear its magnificent story from its founder, Mrs. Jafari.

More information available at: [https://www.instagram.com/mehmankade\\_museum/](https://www.instagram.com/mehmankade_museum/)





I am **Razieh Jafari**, born in 1978, in Lapooei historic town, which is located 50 km south of Shiraz. I have always had unconditional passion for learning and understanding the world and what inspired me the most is the philosophy behind traditions, folk art and cultural heritage. Despite the fact that I only had the chance to attend primary school, reading books was my favorite hobby. I got married when I was very young. Fortunately, my husband, Bahador, was as eager as I was to learn and educate himself although his literacy was limited. Specifically, he was very interested in history and ancient lifestyles.

Following our shared interests, my husband and I built a passion for investigating local folk culture from a historic and anthropological point of view. In spite of all the financial and social limitations, we both shared a thirst for conducting research on 6000 years of history, customs and traditions in the region, and intended to write a book on this topic. We also enjoyed collecting and preserving old tools and objects that belonged to our ancestors.

Fars province experienced an extensive drought in the beginning of the third millennium. This resulted in the subsidence of the underground water level, leading to

excessive unemployment and migration of the population. This situation made a number of young people and local leaders, especially my husband and I, to find solutions to this crisis. We established a rural cooperative company and took several steps to protect the watershed. We created 172 hectares of almond and olive orchards, established an infiltration soil belt to enhance the storage of groundwater aquifers. In order to raise public awareness and promote the protection of the environment, we published a periodical. From 2004 to 2010 our activities and success gained national recognition.

As we continued to preserve the natural heritage of Lapooei area, we took the initiative to preserve the region's cultural heritage and inscribe its historical sites and buildings on national heritage lists. Lapooei historic town was designated as a national historic town as well. In 2007, we published "Lapooei, the Star of Fars", which included the results of all our research and studies, followed by the second volume published in 2012.

In 2015, we decided to establish Lapooei Anthropology Museum and display all the tools and items that we had collected in two decades. We purchased the biggest old house of the region, which dated to more than a century,





renovated it and transformed it into a museum and guest house. The interior design is inspired by local intangible heritage. The menu of the eatery also offers traditional food and beverage. Each of the rooms and spaces creates a unique and memorable experience by sharing a folk story with visitors. We took advantage of traditional and unique foods and drinks rooted in the historic culture of the 6,000-year-old Lapooei, to brand our services.

The whole renovation and design process was based on native knowledge and skills. We believe that we should hire locals and support local businesses and artisans. The stories and customs of Lapooei attract and satisfy our guests, both domestic and foreign. This has increased the confidence of the community members and grabbed their attention to reclaim their cultural belongings, preserve their heritage more carefully, and raise the awareness of the next generation. Fortunately, our mission, efforts and achievements were well noticed and we were designated as tourism entrepreneurs, at provincial and national levels several times.

Despite the fact that Lapooei is situated in a strategic location between Shiraz and Persepolis, which are both top classic destinations for all cultural tourists travelling to Iran, our main

challenge is to get a fair share of the market. In order to prolong the stay of visitors and also compete with numerous other products and attractions around us, we have diversified our offerings and concentrated on sustainability and guest experiences.

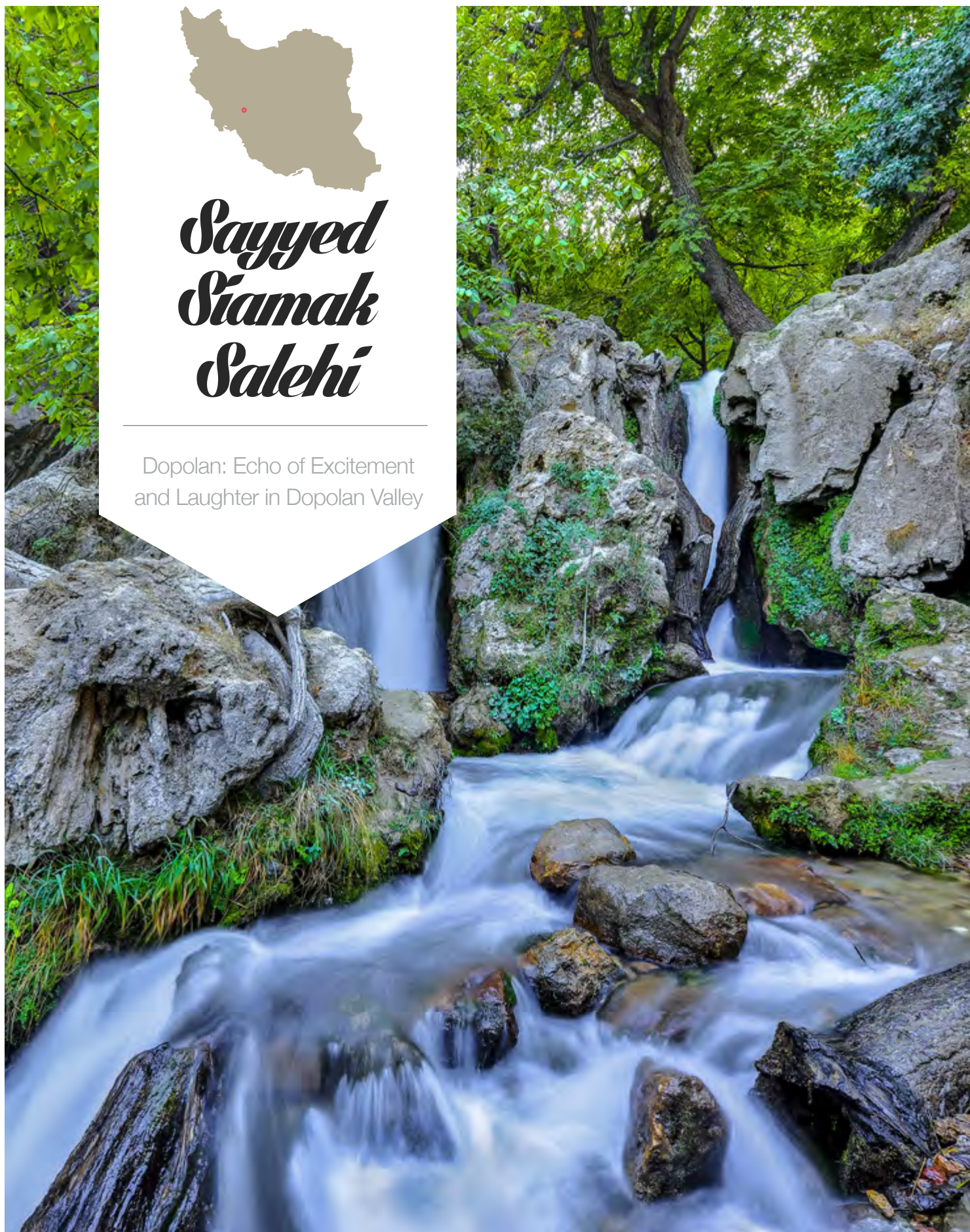
Looking back and reviewing our two decades of effort, we are proud that we spent our lives to understand, preserve and promote the natural and cultural heritage of our community, and to strengthen our community's sense of identity. We hope that our services support further development of tourism industry in Iran.





# *Sayyed Siamak Salehi*

Dopolan: Echo of Excitement  
and Laughter in Dopolan Valley





**Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province**, located in southwestern part of Iran, is an area of mountainous territory, home to the Bakhtiari tribe. Its capital, Shahr-e-Kord, is known as the roof of Iran due to its high altitude of 2,066 meters above sea level. The province receives a relatively good amount of annual rainfall as a result of its mountainous nature and location in the direction of the Mediterranean winds. The most important mountain in this area, Zard-Kouh Bakhtiari is in the heart of the Central Zagros Mountains from which originate the great Karun and Zayanderud rivers.

The existence of 20 other permanent rivers and numerous springs with high quality water, lends vitality and wellbeing to the province. Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, in addition to its natural beauty encompassing glorious waterfalls, beautiful lakes, wetlands, national parks and preserved areas, is very rich in cultural heritage as well which has made this province a paradise of eco-tourism. The Inverted Tulip, a very rare plant species only found in Iran, also grows in some parts of this province.

Bakhtiari dance and music, their myths and stories, their handicrafts including magnificent carpets and kilims and their very special cuisine are just a few elements that will captivate you once you travel to this land of hospitality. The smell of traditional bread baked on wood fire, fresh milk boiled in special wares, traditional cheese and butter cured in lambskin and fresh locally produced eggs is only part of the scenario repeated every day in the tents of Bakhtiari nomads.

More information available at: [https://instagram.com/gardeshgari\\_dopolan?igshid=pftmiejl518f](https://instagram.com/gardeshgari_dopolan?igshid=pftmiejl518f)

I am **Sayyed Siamak Salehi**. I was born in 1989 and I am originally from Dopolan village in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province of Iran. My village is located between the tributaries of two major rivers of Iran: Zayanderud and Karun. The former is the largest river of Iran and the latter is Iran's only navigable river. Ever since my childhood, I was fascinated by the wonders of nature I encountered on a simple walk in the surrounding area. Vertical rock cliffs covered with oak and cedar trees, deep valleys and wild springs were just a few samples of the dramatic landscape I experienced every day.

A few years ago, when a new suspension bridge was constructed over the Karun River, I kept thinking about the huge potential this bridge offers for adventure seekers. It took me a while to put my ideas together and decide to create Iran's largest natural platform for Bungee Jumping with a height of 55 meter over the magnificent Karun. In order to create a good business plan, I benefited from technical consultants and national experts and was supported by Karun Adventurous Sports Club as well. The next phase was to construct the designed platform and pass the required tests for receiving the licenses. I clearly remember when the first person jumped from the platform. I was filled with anxiety, followed by strong delight and happiness when I heard the echo of joyful shouts in Dopolan valley.

In order to diversify our product and satisfy a wider range of visitors, we also planned for complementary adventure sports and activities to be offered to our customers including rafting and boating in the roaring waters, rock climbing, diving, and camping.





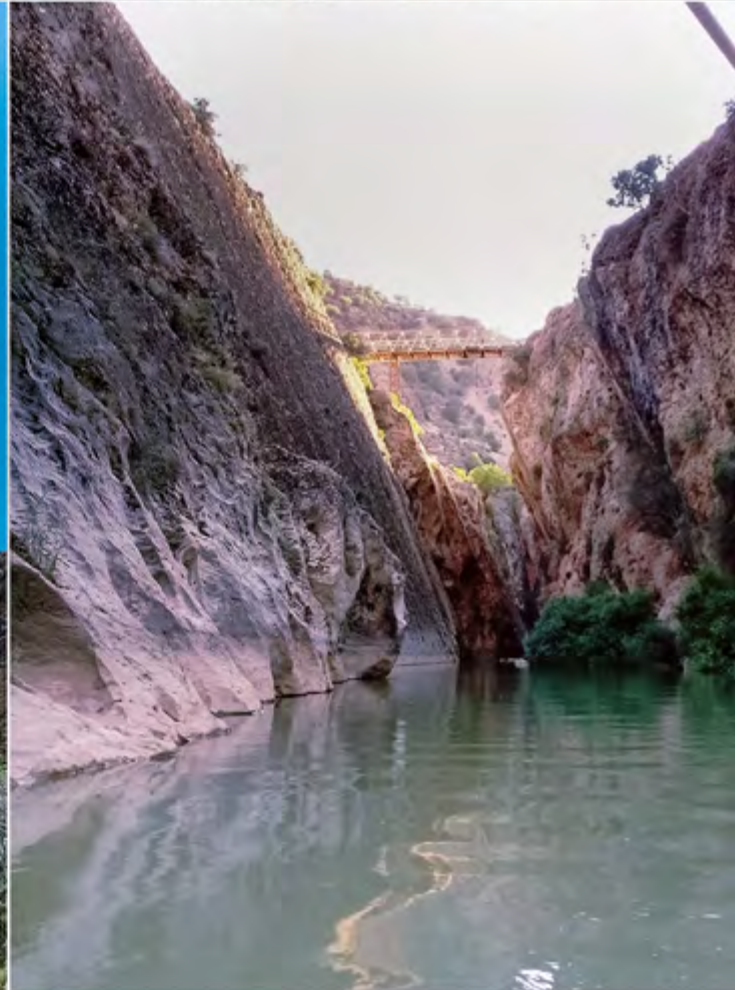
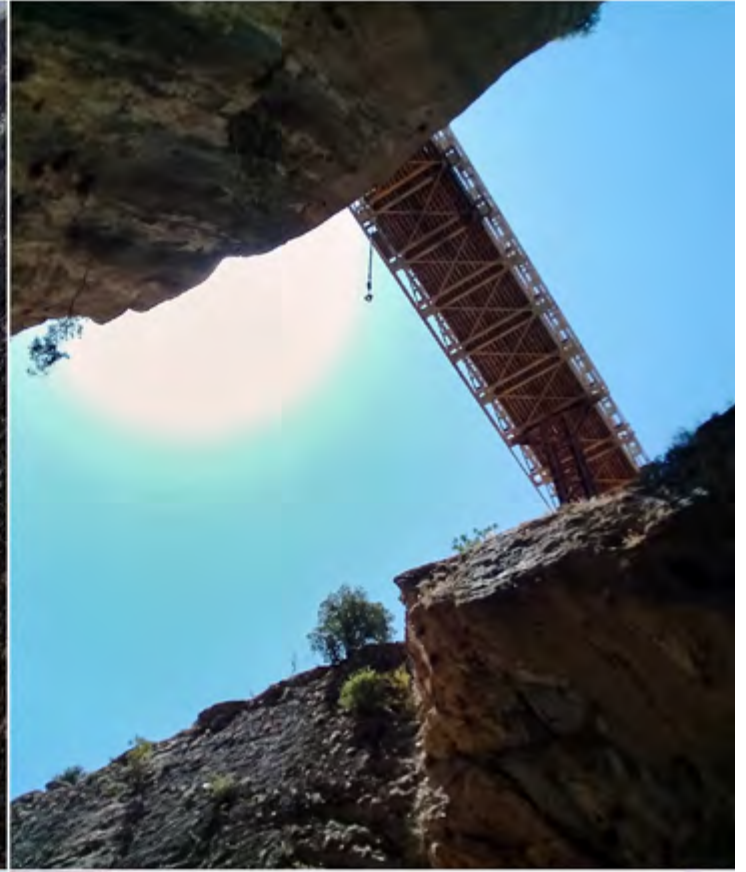
Dopolan Banjee Jumping offers the very unique and exciting experience of jumping from a natural platform over a wild river. The most surprising part is the echo of shouts down in the valley reflecting the thrill experienced by jumpers. Our rafting product is also very attractive for the visitors as not many rivers in Iran are appropriate for rafting. The wild nature of the region, its pristine landscape and the rich cultural aspects it offers are very attractive for tourists. We also do our best to create opportunities for exposing visitors to various social events of the local community. For example, we identified one of our traditional games to be a unique activity for engaging tourists and therefore, we have been holding a festival dedicated to this game every spring in recent years. The countless attractions of this village can contribute to the development and sustainability of tourism. With the development of tourism, the youth in the village can find local jobs and are not forced to emigrate.

Today, I am proud that my small business has 15 part-time employees and indirectly supports other businesses that provide service to tourists such as two local restaurants offering guests a taste of our traditional food. These are significant openings in a village like Dopolan, where most of the youth would generally migrate to cities for income.

Our province is poor in terms of tourism infrastructure and we still have a long way to develop the tourism industry. However, I believe that we should each contribute to this process of progress to our maximum extent. I am proud that I could transform a natural blessing of this province into a popular tourism attraction and thereby provide the opportunity of experiencing safe adventure for domestic and international visitors. There are still many other prospects for development of this market.

Any sign of joy and satisfaction in our customers makes me confident that my business will keep growing and flourishing. My dream is to employ more people and together for us to enhance the local economy. I am hoping that more ventures will be developed in my village, offering various tourism products and services. I have faith that the echo of laughter and excitement will reflect in the valley for years to come.









# *Amir Miri*

Aghamir Cottage: Travel to the  
World of Stars in the Ancient  
Pasargadae





**Fars Province** of Iran is one of the oldest centers of civilization, which flourished during the Achaemenid and Sassanid dynasties. After the destruction of Pasargadae Town, the Persian nobles settled in the Kamin region and founded new towns such as Saadat Shahr.

The rich cultural attractions of this ancient territory are further magnified by natural assets especially the scenic sky at night that has given rise to the description of Saadat Shahr as “The First Astro-tourism and Ecotourism Town in Iran and in the World”.

Aghamir Cottage, which is more than one hundred years old, has a simple and minimal design, giving it a beautiful and relaxing atmosphere. Experiencing local music performances and local and organic foods, amidst traditional architecture adds to the psychological and mental well-being of guests.

Noting that women are initiators of sustainable development and protectors of culture, the founders of Aghamir Cottage believe that a mother can bring up a generation who value culture and also protect the ecosystem. Therefore, their strategy is to empower women to protect the Earth. They

have launched and contributed to several initiatives such as the Iranian Garden of Human Rights, Green Carpet, Fund and Fund for Sustainable Development of Nomads, and the Carnival of the Environment.

A stay in Aghamir Cottage, gives one the opportunity to participate in nomadic tours aimed at preserving the environment and promoting the involvement of tourists in protecting biodiversity, as well as supporting indigenous tribal culture. Visiting the tribes by tourists has led to restoring and reviving traditional ceremonies such as shearing and weddings of local people.

More information available at: <http://aghamir.ir/>

My name is **Amir**, nicknamed as Aghamir. I was born in 1973 in a family house, which is now transformed into a destination for eco-tourists in Iran. I was the last child of an 11-member family including seven sisters and one brother. From an early age, music and astronomy were my main passions. Art activities in theater and music, along with hiking experiences during my adolescence led me to organizing student tours from 1997 to 2001. In 2004, I started my travels around Iran





with my car. In 2006, inspired by the magic of travel, I decided to pursue a career in the tourism industry. I had several ideas on how to start a business in tourism and after two years, I decided to develop a product based on astro-tourism.

I restored our family house which is more than a century old and called it Aghamir Cottage. It is located close to Pasargadae and Persepolis (UNESCO World Heritage Site), two incredible gems of ancient Persia. Very soon, I earned a national reputation for my star observation tours, which introduced “Astro Tourism” as a new tourism product in Iran.

After gaining more experience, I tried to include deeper aspects of our local culture into our products and services. Based on my research on the history of the region, I could identify numerous aspects of indigenous and nomadic life-styles of locals and revived those elements by integrating them into the experience of our guests. My goal was to evoke and integrate memories of life in Achaemenid era (three millenniums ago) into the experience of tourists visiting our ancient land.

Considering the richness of culinary traditions and the quality of local food products, I, along with some partners decided to create a food tourism product and established an eatery called “Bamdad”, which is situated at a walking distance to Cyrus’s Tomb, and provides memorable, delicious, nature-based, and organic food items. Local handicrafts are also

offered in Bamdad eatery. A group of local women make handicrafts with environmental protection themes or collect native herbs and plants used for making herbal teas. Tourists are willing to buy such products and now several jobs have been created for locals. Also, Bamdad House is a business run exclusively by women.

I also organized nomadic tours with the goal of preserving the environment, raising the awareness of tourists and engaging them in the protection of biodiversity. I aimed to revitalize the values of indigenous and tribal life-styles. Our guests found the chance to live in local black tents and participate in traditional ceremonies such as lamb shearing and weddings. This is how we perpetuated endangered customs and supported the local economy.

I also launched another initiative, called “Bear Campaign” which resulted in designating 166 thousand hectares of pastures in the region as a no-hunting zone of the Bear Mountain. Our slogan was “we are the voice of brown bears of Pasargadae” and we used nomadic handicrafts to promote the message of this campaign internationally.

After three decades of continuous activity in the sphere of tourism, culture and history, I am currently working on several projects in the city of Pasargadae to transform it into a tourism hub. These projects include the Iranian Garden of Human





Rights, Green Carpet, Fund for Sustainable Development of Nomads, Carnival of the Environment, Aseyed Juice and Syrup House, Bon-e Kuh astro-tourism village and Dstafarid Handicrafts Marketplace. All these projects focus on sustainable development based on indigenous culture and values and environmental protection and they are linked together with the theme of “empowering women to protect the Earth”.

Later, when I grew up, I learned that foreign tourists travelling to Pasargadae viewed Iran as the cradle of civilization and home of civilized people but what we were showing them was totally different from their expectation. I believe one of the main weaknesses of tourism industry in Iran is that children are not taught how to interact with tourists.

Because of my success in designing and delivering authentic and creative tourism products, and high quality accommodation services, I found the chance to contribute to the development of Iran’s Eco-Tourism Accommodation Standards in 2012. My active participation in various festivals and conferences led to several national awards. We were fortunate to be recognized and received several awards, including the first prize in the ecotourism sector in 2012 Nomadic Festival and the prize for Iran’s top residence in 2016. However, the most rewarding aspect of my career is the true satisfaction of my guests and their sincere gratitude. Today, I feel proud that observation

tours are carried across Iran and the agents and technical guides in this area hold tours under the same brand and several jobs have been created.

The economic model I believe in is culture-based development. Although all our culture-oriented efforts have proved to be economically viable, profit-making was not our top priority. Our main objective is sustainable tourism, the concept of visiting a place as a tourist and trying to make a contribution that has a positive impact on the environment, society and economy.



# *Nima Azari & Afshaneh Ehsani*

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Ecotourism in Support of Sea  
Turtles in Qeshm Island





**Qeshm Island** is Iran's largest island which is located in the Strait of Hormoz a few kilometers away from Bandar Abbas city. Its residential history dates back to Paleolithic Period and fishing and dhow (local boats) construction have been the traditional profession of locals for a long time. Qeshm is designated as a UNESCO Global Geopark as the only Middle Eastern member of UNESCO International Geoparks Network. Stars Valley, Chah-Kooh Gorge, and Naz Islands are only three of the very popular geosites of Qeshm Island. Turtles Nesting Beach is another famous geosite which is very attractive for nature adventurers. Hengam Island with its dolphins and silver beach and Hara (Mangrove) Forest with its wonderful birdlife are in the list of many tourists as well. Currently, eight water sports and diving clubs, together with five air sports complexes provide a wide range of adventurous activities to visitors. The Portuguese Castle is a destination for anyone interested in the history of the island.

Travel to Qeshm Island and enjoy from a wide range of natural and cultural attractions. Several ceremonies and traditional rituals are held in this island throughout the year. Recently, the tasty local cuisine has become eye-catching, characterized by fresh and spicy seafood dishes. Accommodation services in the island are diverse ranging from local guest houses to 5 star and boutique hotels.

Qeshm is a Free Trade Zone and therefore, tourists can enter the island without a visa for maximum stay of one month (extendable) for those holding valid passports.

More information available at: [www.tourism.qeshm.ir/en/](http://www.tourism.qeshm.ir/en/)

I am **Nima Azari**. I was born in Tehran, as the only child of an Azeri family. Ever since my teenage years, I have been interested in geography, exploring the map of the world, and traveling. In university, I studied architecture majoring in landscape architecture. The latter led me to the fields of botany and environmental science which revitalized my interest in geography and traveling. In those years, ecotourism was quite new in Iran and I found this subject to be a combination of both of my interests: traveling and environment.

I attended the first course for tour leaders in Iran and became a tour guide. I designed and held several nature tours throughout Iran and then became the teacher of geography in training courses for tour guides in different institutes and organizations. In 2003, together with my wife, herself an activist in ecotourism, we established Avaye Tabiat Paydar Educational Institute. Our goal has always been education and offering consulting services, especially working with local communities in villages and natural environments. Our vision in



ecotourism is more human driven. We believe that ecotourism is a way to reconcile humans with nature, because most destructions and threats to nature are caused by humans. Both people and local communities should know about these threats and become protectors of nature themselves. This is not possible unless they become familiar with the values of natural environment. As a result, my activities and the operations of our institute concerning ecotourism are based on local communities. Currently, I have dedicated my life to conducting tourism courses, educational workshops in villages and consulting projects in ecotourism.

In 2005, after organizing numerous tours in Qeshm Island and understanding its ecotourism development potentials, we collaborated with UNDP/GEF/SGP on developing ecotourism in Shibderaz village. This was a sub-project of the hawksbill sea turtle conservation project (led by well-known Iranian environmentalist, Mr. Bijan Darreshoori).

Hawksbill sea turtle is a critically endangered species for which several conservation projects are being implemented all over the world. Shibderaz village has the highest density of egg laying sea turtles on the island. The project aimed to protect the turtles

and their hatchlings so that they can safely return to the sea. The reason for this initiative was that the turtles' eggs were consumed by the locals and predatory animals as food. When the project became known to the public, tourists began visiting the area in large numbers to see the turtles and their egg laying during the night. But then, another threat emerged: the damage done by the presence of people to the turtles' habitat. Consequently, from 2006 I started my activities as the manager of ecotourism project related to hawksbill sea turtles in Shibderaz. Our objective was to develop and manage tourism by the participation of local communities. We set some standards and behavioral codes for the turtle site both for tourists and local communities to minimize the damages. All the steps of the work were done by the participation of locals and they were responsible for planning, management, execution and monitoring of all the aspects of the project, while we acted as facilitators.

Another goal of the project was to mitigate the damages done by tourists and strengthening ecotourism by organizing training programs on tourist services, tour guiding, establishing local guesthouses, etc. Locals found motivation to turn to ecotourism as a source of income instead of taking the





turtles' eggs. The locals dedicated a part of their income for conservation of sea turtles. In 2007, my wife, Afsaneh Ehsani, implemented a handicraft project to create employment for women, increase their participation in social activities, and preserve the local and traditional handicrafts (needlework).

As a result of all those activities, Shibderaz, as an ecotourism destination, together with its sea turtles and local handicrafts became well-known. Documentaries were made about them and were broadcast on television. Several articles were written on the subject and presented in global conferences. This project was rewarded as one of the best works about environment in Iran as well.

The most important challenge of the project in its early phase was lack of belief in ecotourism as a sustainable option for livelihood. The locals traditionally consumed turtle eggs and change in mindset was required to shift the economy towards ecotourism and handicrafts. The cultural situation of women on the island also limited their participation in social matters. Through perseverance and continuous training, locals became eager to participate and gradually these challenges faded away, which led to the relative success of the project.

Currently, the locals of Shibderaz are actively attracting tourists and participate in conservation of sea turtles without our presence. Ecotourism in Shibderaz and its local handicrafts are well-known and have turned into a model for other villages and regions both on the island and throughout Iran. Numerous local communities in other parts of the country have used Shibderaz model and have visited the area.

As an ecotourism activist, I have learned a lot and gained many experiences through implementing Shibderaz ecotourism and handicrafts for the village and the conservation of sea turtles on Qeshm Island. I have learned that education is two-sided and both us and the local communities as the real owners of natural resources of their area have many things to share. Besides, participatory decisions last longer and are more effective.

I hope that I will continue my activities on merging work, travel, tourism and environmentalism and witness the growth and improvement of tourism in Iran so that the rich natural and cultural heritage of my country is preserved for future generations.

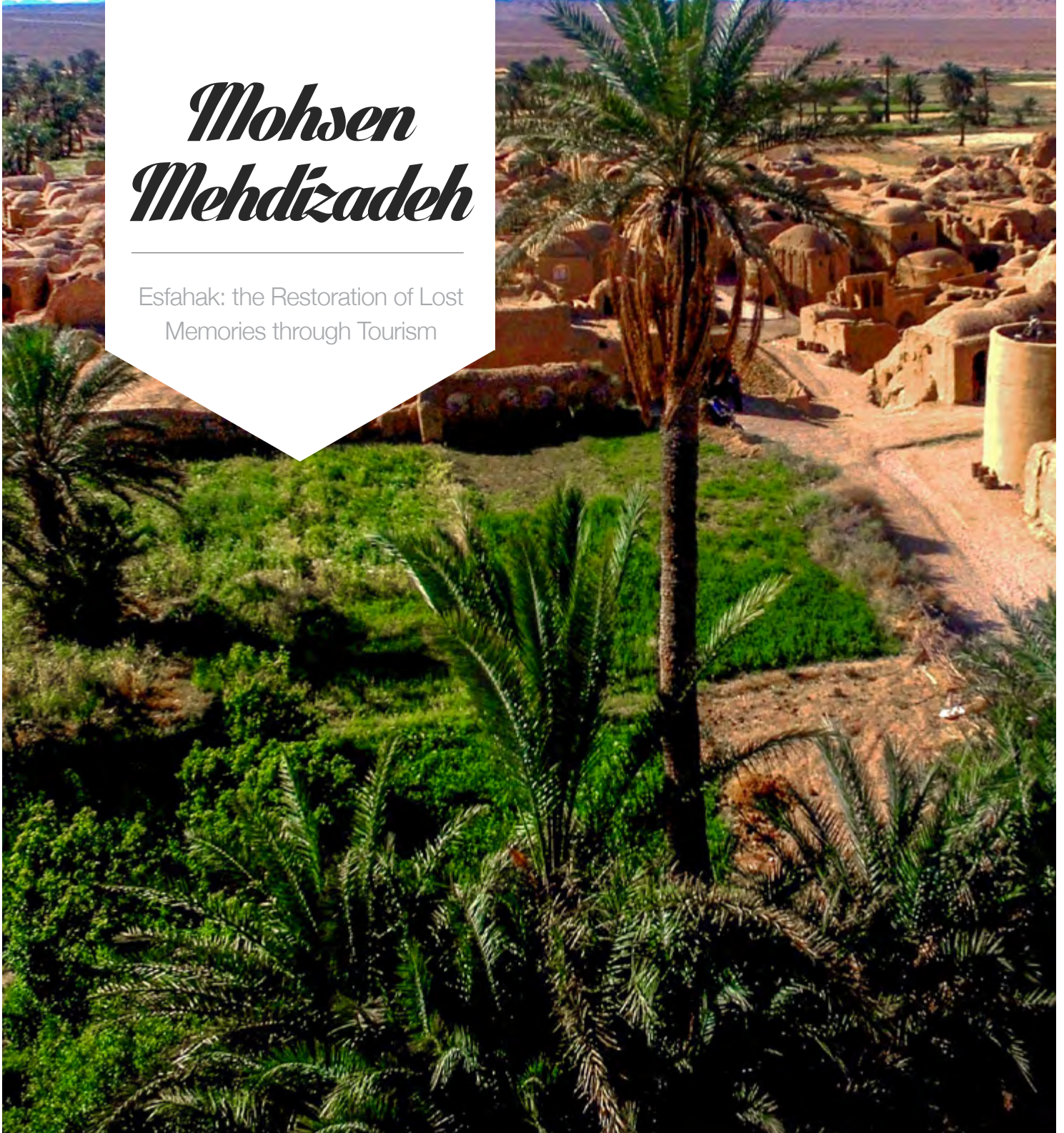






# *Mohsen Mehdizadeh*

Esfahak: the Restoration of Lost  
Memories through Tourism





The Tabas major earthquake in September 1978 impacted 85 villages, one of them being **Esfahak**. Almost all the adobe houses in this beautiful village were destroyed by this earthquake which made locals abandon the old village and create a new residential district in the past four decades. However, the destroyed adobe buildings, surrounded by palm trees, reminded the locals of the sweet memories of the past. Thanks to the constant support of the local community and their joint action with academic partners and volunteer groups, Esfahak village is gradually regaining its glory of the past. The destroyed buildings are being restored one after the other and the locals are closely feeling how tourism development can upgrade their economy and support the preservation of their traditions.

The main products of Esfahak are high quality dates, golden saffron, and aromatic mint. The sweetness of Esfahak dates and the pleasant aroma of the mint and saffron produced in the region create unforgettable moments of joy and delight

in visitors. Its dark sky, filled with brilliant stars also offers great memories to take back as valuable souvenirs from this magnificent village.

Travel to Esfahak to breathe the authenticity of a historic village with hidden stories. Communicate with locals to better understand how it feels like to start a new life after an earthquake and revive the old memories after decades. The motivation of Esfahak residents for revitalizing their abandoned old village and their fruitful effort is very inspiring for visitors.

More information available at: [https://www.instagram.com/esfahk\\_tourism/?igshid=wql57whyd6s9](https://www.instagram.com/esfahk_tourism/?igshid=wql57whyd6s9)

I am **Mohsen Mehdizadeh**, born in 1985 and I would like to share the story of my village, Esfahak, with you. I believe that childhood memories and stories are always with us. However, their level of impact depends on how influential the narrator has been to bring the story to life. The story of Esfahak is a story





that has been well narrated in my opinion. The story relates to the generation before the earthquake (my parents) that has been passed to us as the post-earthquake generation.

Although my generation benefits from higher standard of life compared to our parents, we believe that they experienced a much more fascinating lifestyle. This regret of the past inspired me to create a connection bridge.

The major earthquake, which hit Esfahak village 40 years ago and destroyed all the buildings, made locals abandon their homes and build a new life in a neighboring land. The old village was more destroyed throughout all these years of separation and some locals, neglected their ties to past memories and even used their land for agriculture.

Esfahak village was designated as a tourism destination in 2007 but no action was taken in this direction and locals were not aware of the value of preserving the historic district. There was only one way to reverse this destructive process: to restore the village and help it recover. I had to convince locals that we should preserve our heritage for the next generations. I did my best to revive the old memories and prevent them from destroying the ruins. I decided to restore the structure of a family tomb, in order to prove that the old village can be given a second chance for life. The strategic

location of this tomb was the starting point for Esfahak's new story.

After convincing the stakeholders, I did five years of research and field work to prepare the maps and documents required for registering Esfahak's historic district at Iran's list of national monuments, which I did in 2013.

Restoration of Esfahak attracted some visitors to the old village. We organized a temporary visitor center during the New Year holiday. In 2014, I was fortunate to meet Dr. Parsi and narrate the story of Esfahak to him while he was visiting the village. He is one of the best architects of the country and promised to technically support the restoration project. He organized field trips and study trips for his students and together, they developed restoration plans.

Restoration of buildings required financial investment by the owners. Initially, it was not easy to convince locals to finance such projects. However, as tourists started visiting the village and admiring their valuable heritage, the livelihood returned to Esfahak after 37 years and brought old memories with it. Residents could recognize the potential of redeveloping the village through tourism. We moved forward building after building and could smell the blossoms of hope growing in the village.





The restoration of Esfahak's public bathhouse was a turning point which took six months to be completed. Many people supported this project because of their emotional attachment to their hometown. The next project was the restoration of the mosque of the village by Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization. Several private houses and the old school were next in the list. We prepared a comfortable space to accommodate student groups visiting our village.

In 2017, the Soil Architecture Institute of Esfahak Village was established with the aim of promoting relevant knowledge and expertise, based on numerous indigenous experiences. This center soon became the heart of our work in Esfahak. As the flow of tourists to the village increased, we thought about ways to provide them a better understanding about local culture. After discussing the idea with the villagers, we identified handicrafts as an important cultural element that could also generate revenue for rural families. We designated a space for selling these products to tourists. This action was very well received by women.

Apart from all the difficulties that we faced, convincing locals to support the village restoration project was a priority. We all shared concerns about the negative impact of tourism development in the village as well. Our local culture, which

had remained intact for several decades, was slowly changing. We mitigated these impacts by organizing public discussion meetings for locals and sharing this concern with our guests as well.

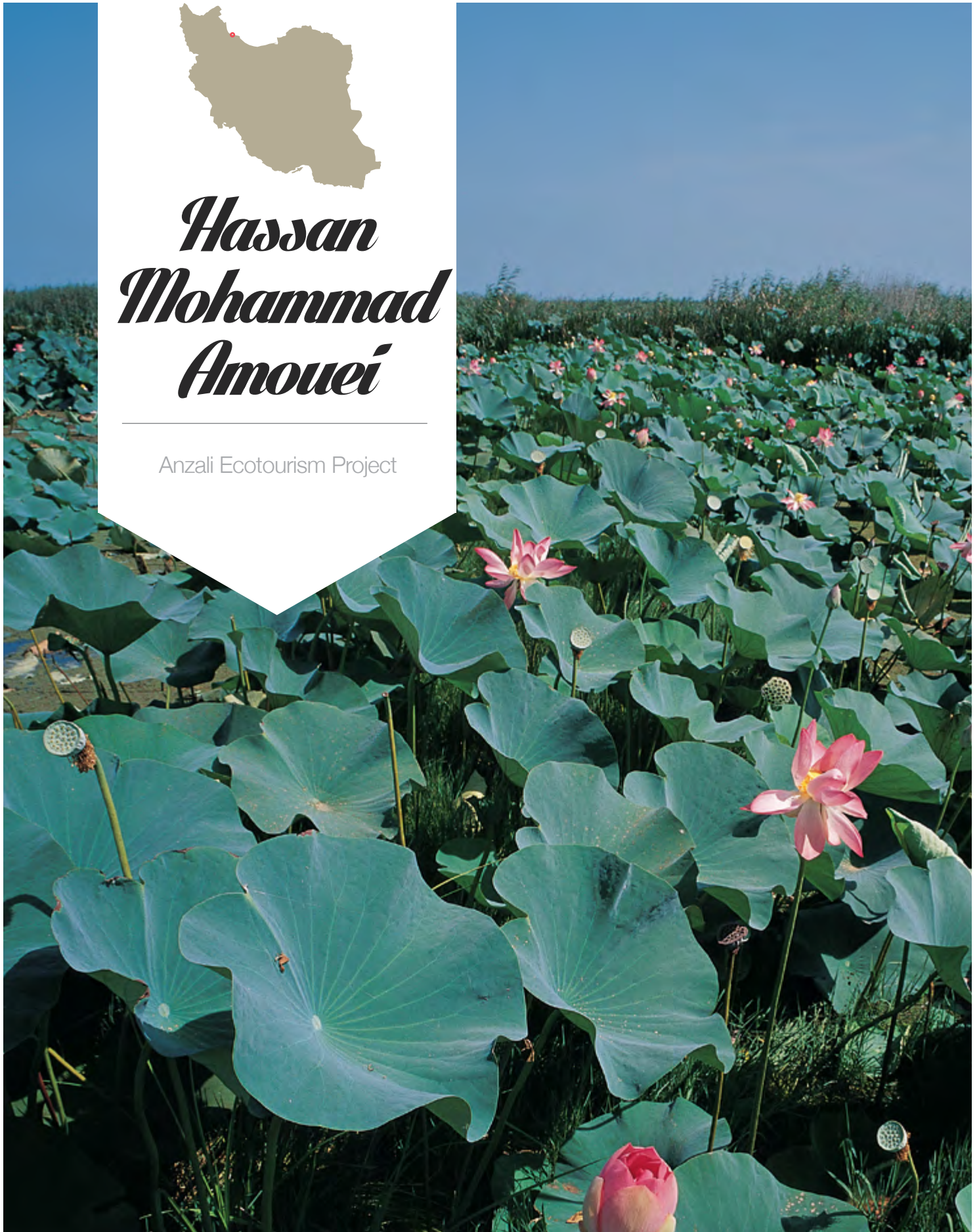
As a result of all the efforts made by Esfahak residents, I believe that it has turned into a unique destination in Iran, in which public and private stakeholders have worked hand in hand to revive a community and bring the life back to a historic site. Many direct and indirect jobs have been created to serve tourists (accommodation, food, souvenirs, public bathhouse, etc.) and offer memorable experiences for them. The key to our success was teamwork and respecting and following our shared passion about our heritage. I hope that the next generations continue this endeavor and make Esfahak and its memories last forever.





# *Hassan Mohammad Amouei*

Anzali Ecotourism Project





Anzali lagoon is located in **Gilan Province**. Having great weather and being the greenest province in Iran, Gilan attracts a huge number of tourists every year. Anzali lagoon, which has been registered in Ramsar International Convention in 1971, is considered as an important tourist attraction and destination for birdwatchers.

This natural freshwater lagoon, which is recognized as an important bird habitat in the world, hosts about one hundred species of birds like swans, herons, ducks, etc. A variety of species of fish like the Caspian White Fish, Anchovy, and the Common Carp live and spawn in this lagoon as well. Water lilies that grow in summer are another attractive feature of Anzali lagoon. In addition to water lilies, there are some canebrakes in Anzali lagoon that offer a memorable boat riding experience.

The landscape is exquisite and demands a full tour of the place, so sail away. The journey will take you through marshes, open grassland, dense reed beds and meadows. Keep an eye out for the variety of flora and fauna on your way.

Bird-watchers will not be disappointed; the place is home to a large number of migratory birds. Just imagine 78 species

of birds all in one big wetland: herons, egrets, western marsh harriers, purple swamp hens, pygmy cormorant, white-tailed eagle, ducks, geese, swans and coots; the list goes on and on, so what are you waiting for? Grab your binnacles and a life jacket, and enjoy the ride; tell the boatman to go slow so you don't miss a thing!

More information available at: <https://anzaliwetland.com/>

I am **Hassan Mohammad Amouei Sadeh Del**. I was born in an ordinary family, in the beautiful city of Rasht, a city with dreamy nights and silver rains, located near Caspian Sea in north of Iran. My father was a simple factory worker and my mother was a housekeeper. Our subsistence life taught me that in order to achieve my goals, I should be hardworking and ambitious.

I searched for my dream job for several years and fortunately my diligence lead me to my current job as an Ecotourism assistant of Anzali Wetland Ecosystem Management Project which is being implemented by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Tourism is not only a source of income but also of personal enrichment as it has offered me a job full of pleasure, learning, growth, and sharing.



I earned my Bachelor's degree in Biology and Master's degree in Botany. I became the Executive and Marketing Director at a foreign language department of an educational tourism institute in which I could discover my interest in tourism industry and earn relevant degrees.

Two years later, the institute signed a contract with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to perform Anzali Wetland Project. According to the contract, a team of six experts were recruited for their expertise in the natural and cultural potentials of Anzali Wetland countryside and reported them in the format of interpretive stories. I entered the team as a member with the least experience, but my passion for research and study made me successful in communicating with local people in the villages on the margin of Anzali lagoon.

At the end of this phase of the project, Mr. Masanori Shintani, JICA's Ecotourism Expert, suggested me to work as an expert assistant for the Anzali Wetland Project in JICA. This was my first step into a new world which completely changed my life. At the beginning, Jiresar Bagherkhaleh village was selected

for community –based tourism development. Although I had prior knowledge about ecotourism, the real experience of working with locals with all associated complexities was a wholly different story. We faced many challenges on the way of empowering local community including expectation of short-term achievements, lack of teamwork skills, lack of mutual trust, and lack of cooperation among different stakeholders. Illegal hunting of migratory birds was also a serious challenge to be resolved. Hunting is part of the culture of the indigenous people of the region, and locals were financially dependent on this source of income. Three years after the start of the project, there are still problems in this village, and a lot of migratory birds of Anzali wetland are being hunted in this village annually. We hope to plan some bird-watching activities and ask for help of the activists in this field to decrease hunting in the region by creating alternative sources of income.

Ecotourism has completely changed my life. I've learned a lot. I have always dreamed of helping people and improving their lives and I am glad to have the chance to become a small part of the Anzali Wetland Ecological Management Project





and contribute to protecting the environment and improving livelihoods.

Now that we have one year to the end of the project, 17 direct jobs and 31 indirect jobs have been created and are benefiting from the project. I am very happy being part of this positive change. I have found several good friends among the locals. I've learned by heart that everything depends on local people and we can never protect our environment without the involvement of the local community.

While people, managers, and even some experts are looking for the results, I believe that the process of reaching to the goal is much more important. I think my main duty is to facilitate the way to attain sustainable solutions with active participation of the local community, rather than directly guiding them and that is why the job is very enjoyable for me. I've learned to never provide personal solutions, but to find the best answers together. And I've learned to consider the message I want to convey before choosing the activities, and I always have plans A, B and C to choose the best depending on the situation.

In my formative years I used to get confused and I did not know how to plan or control conflictual situations, because things used to change very quickly; but gradually, I learned more and I still am in the process of learning, a process that will last until the end of my life. I want to learn more and I hope that I will have the chance to work in Ecotourism projects for international organizations.

The world of unknowns is vast and many people in the world need help. My biggest wish is to be able to have great impacts on improving people's lives, not just one village, but a lot of people of any nationality, color and race.

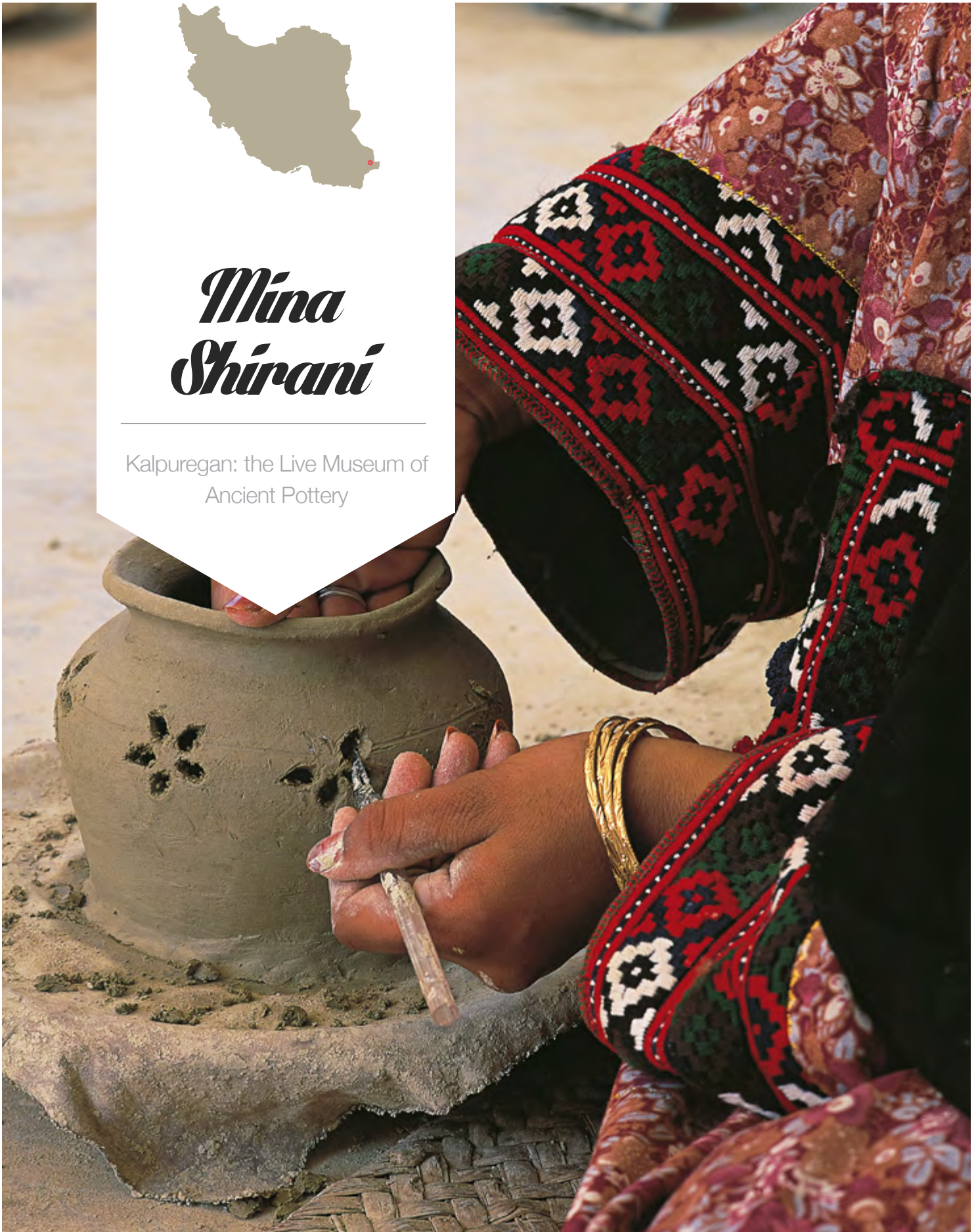






# *Mina Shirani*

Kalpuregan: the Live Museum of  
Ancient Pottery





**Sistan and Baluchestan Province** is the second largest administrative province of Iran, located in southeast of the country. The major ethnicity of the population in this province is the Baloch, followed by Persian Sistanis. The world-renowned ancient civilization of Shahr-i-Sokhta that ushered in the urban era, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is found here. Archaeologists also discovered the world's earliest known prosthetic eye in an ancient grave in the area. This land is also the birthplace of Rostam who is the most celebrated legendary hero in the Epic of Shahnameh in Iranian mythology. Historic mosques and castles also dot the landscape. The pristine beaches of Chabahar are an attraction to all visitors of this significant free zone port, situated south of Sistan and Baluchestan.

The cuisine of the province is very diverse and rich featured by different types of seafood at the southern coastline to nomadic recipes of stews with special seasonings prepared on wood fire, in the interior.

The local traditions and customs characterized by Baluchi needlework, jewelry making and coin sewing are among the most popular handicrafts of this region.

Kalpurgan village located 390 km south of Zahedan is the capital of the province. The main attraction of this destination is its unique and ancient tradition of pottery production with almost 7,000 years of history with an overwhelming majority of female artisans. Saravan County, in which Kalpurgan village is located, has numerous historic sites. The very special attraction is its huge collection of stone paintings and rock arts from the Stone Age. That is why this county is called the stone art gallery of Iran.

More information available at: <https://www.instagram.com/souchen.studio/>



I am **Mina Shirani**. I am a resident of Sistan and Baluchestan Province and I work in the field of empowering women through the fabrication of handicrafts which are sold to tourists. My husband originates from this province which brought me to live here since 2010. Despite obvious progress in recent years, it is still one of the least developed regions, due to reasons like suffering from severe water shortage. However, the art and culture of this province was so rich and fascinating that I got very interested to learn more about this province and its hardworking people. Through my research I realized that in one of the remote villages of Sistan and Baluchestan women are producing pottery in a completely traditional manner without using tools like potter's wheel. More importantly, this is done only by women, and this art has been passed down for generations from thousands years ago. The name of this village is Kalpouregan which is located in the border of Iran and Pakistan.

I enthusiastically traveled to Kalpouregan and got inspired by the valuable heritage that the ladies in this village had modestly carried forward for centuries. In fact, there was a huge potential that had not been sufficiently recognized. I dedicated my master's thesis to the Kalpouregan pottery style which required me to live with locals for several months. After a while I was accepted as a member of the community and I soon won the trust of the women of the village.

It was not long before I became familiar with the problems of these women in a conservative and male-dominated society. I became a channel of communication with the world outside that village. Together, we exported the products of the village to other regions in order to support the livelihood of the households. We did promotional activities like sending out products as gifts and introducing the women to groups interested in such type of pottery. We attracted various tourists to Kalpouregan and introduced the village to them. We also sent pottery products to different parts of the world along with the content introducing the product and providing information about Kalpouregan.

Today, Kalpouregan has visitors and customers from all over the world, and women in the village have improved their position in a patriarchal society and their art and pottery is gradually becoming a global brand. I have established a handicraft research and innovation company which provides constant support to the women of the province and

encourages them to produce high quality handicrafts based on the cultural heritage and traditional designs of the region. I have so far consulted more than 180 women through my company and exported their products to global markets.

Through all these activities, I managed to change my own life as well as those of my family and the women of this province. I have dedicated my life to ensuring that with the constant support and guidance of international organizations women in the province will see a day when they will travel with their products to international exhibitions that will enable them to come out of their poverty and socio-economic deprivation.

I hope that more tourists visit Sistan and Baluchestan Province and Kalpouregan village. The uniqueness and authenticity of Kalpouregan is a true value for making this region a tourist destination. On the other hand, tourists can promote this region with word of mouth and through social media which will expand the market for local pottery products. This is how tourism and handicraft industries can mutually support each other and benefit local communities.

Apart from me, there are several other groups and individuals who have been assisting these rural women and the big achievement was announced in 2017 when Kalpouregan was designated as the World's Village of Pottery by the World Craft Council (WCC).

This story is not only about me, Mina Shirani, but about all ladies of Kalpouregan who have jointly preserved their valuable culture and improved their lives through perseverance and resilience. This story is also about all responsible tourists who visit unknown and underdeveloped destinations like Kalpouregan, support their local economy and convey their message to the outside world.









# *Shahab Cheraghí*

Ghaleh Bala Village: How  
Tourism Protected Asiatic  
Cheetahs





**Ghaleh Bala** is an outstanding oasis village with a unique landscape, composed of stepped clay houses with balconies, constructed on the hillside of a short mountain located in the middle of the desert. This village which is the gateway to Touran National Park can be considered as one of the most-visited desert villages of Iran. Each corner of this village has a beauty to astonish the visitors. Besides the eye-catching natural surroundings, its rich culture has numerous aspects to be explored by travelers. The endless beauty and silence of this village, satisfies all nature lovers. Iranian Ground Jay and Asiatic cheetahs are two endemic species of the region, around which the major branding for the area has been developed. Several environmental NGOs have worked hand in hand for several years, in order to develop a sustainable tourism product. However, the warm hospitality of the rural people is still the main offering. Local farm and garden products including pomegranate, walnut, apricot, yellow fig and grape have a quality of their own. Daily bread baking at several houses fills the village with the smell of the best quality locally raised wheat. The artistic soul of rural women is wholeheartedly reflected

in the handicrafts they produce, especially in the high quality hand-woven products they make out of locally sourced silk.

Travel to Ghaleh Bala, if you are eager to embrace all the values of responsible tourism and ready to breath in its endless beauty.

More information available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khar\\_Turan\\_National\\_Park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khar_Turan_National_Park)

I am **Shahab Cheraghi**, born in 1979 in Tehran, Iran. My profession is planning and operating Eco tours and teaching tour leading courses. A few years ago I started to participate in a project by UNDP, called Conservation of Asiatic Cheetah (CACP), which intended to protect the endangered species of Asiatic cheetahs in Touran (UNESCO) biosphere. This National Park, which is located in Semnan province, is the second largest reserve in Iran (1,400,000 hectares) and the home to one of the largest populations of the critically endangered Asiatic cheetah.







While we started our activities with the purpose of training local settlers and students, after working on the project, we found out that the problem was not hunting or any direct attack to the animal at all, but it was the matter of overgrazing which contributed to vegetation loss and drought. As a result, cheetahs suffered from food deficiency due to a shortage of natural prey. We identified the other major threat to be sheepdogs killing cheetah cubs. Searching for a practical way for an eco-friendly life style, we found ecotourism to be a sustainable, attractive and viable solution.

Ghaleh Bala village, as the gateway to Touran Park, was identified as the most strategic point of intervention as its residents owned the largest number of cots inside Touran National Park. We designed and delivered a long-term multi-dimensional training program for Ghaleh Bala residents to prepare the rural community to host tourists. The project included training local tour leaders, teaching behavioral codes to residents on how to appropriately interact with tourists and mitigate the negative impacts of tourists' flow to the village.

We also received the support of Iran's Housing Foundation and the provincial government of Semnan for preserving and reviving the traditional clay and straw architecture of the village. Local access roads were stone-paved as well. As a result, the visual identity of the village was enhanced and the

locals became more proud of their shared heritage. Local handicrafts also had the potential to create added values and generate income especially for women. We encouraged the youth to learn handicraft skills from their grandmothers.

In order to introduce Ghaleh Bala as a tourism destination, we held the first tourism festival in the village named after the Iranian Ground Jay (an endemic bird of Iran inhabiting Touran region). This was a successful attempt for designing and introducing a wildlife tourism product to travel agencies and the target market for nature-based products.

The main challenge that we faced was introducing the new ideas to the local community and convincing them about the feasibility of shifting their source of income towards tourism. Unfortunately, after two years of presence and continuous communication with the community, holding numerous workshops and classes, and engaging them, the desired goal was not still achieved. Therefore, a friend of mine restored one of the old houses in the village and we started to lead groups of tourists to Ghaleh Bala to visit Touran National Park. The result was a real surprise. Local people were astonished to see how tourism could be a source of income by attracting strangers to the area and having them spend money for accommodation, food and sightseeing. Not only were domestic tourists eager to visit this village, but we also received numerous foreign





tourists, who enjoyed having an authentic experience of daily rural life while visiting an incredible Natural Park.

Soon after, Ghaleh Bala became well-known so that now it is recognized as one of the most significant rural tourist attractions of Semnan Province. Today, more than fifteen houses in this small village have been turned into rural guesthouses. They offer local foods and beverages, sell their farm products and handicrafts, arrange and organize safari tours, and hold individual and group tours to visit Touran National Park. Locals are now very sensitive to the wildlife's safety and quality of life. When water is scarce, they even walk for hours and carry water containers to ensure water availability for wildlife. They are also very proud of their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The creation of several jobs has limited migration to nearby cities.

The Annual Ground Jay Tourism Festival has been continuously held in the past 7 years. The main achievement of this ten-year project was the fact that almost 80% of the cots are currently dislocated from Touran National Park and generally, the number of livestock has been reduced to one third. Today, Ghaleh Bala is a destination for anyone seeking the balance between nature and human beings. It is the true example of community-based tourism development with active engagement of the rural community, as well as civil society and public sector.

This collective and successful experience was a true example of teamwork, with several stakeholders actively involved for the sake of our environment, and future generations. It definitely had a positive impact on all the participants, including me. Our shared success in helping to protect the environment totally changed my vision and career path. I started to organize and operate ecotourism tours and to train tour leaders, because I recognized it as a way to play a more effective and helpful role for protecting Mother Nature.

I seek to be effective in a flourishing tourism industry and train the leaders who not only believe in and act according to the principles of environmental protection, but also try to raise the awareness of travelers about the importance of respecting the social and environmental values while travelling. Responsible eco-tourism has a huge potential for developing rural areas and reconnecting the world's urban population with our old heritage.



# *Maryam Moghaddam*

How Tourism Transformed My  
Career: Story from Hamedan





**Hamedan Province** within which Hamedan city is located is very advanced in the production of handicrafts like ceramic wares and leather products. Lalejin city, designated as the World's City of Ceramics by the World Crafts Council, is only 25 km away from Hamedan. Eighty percent of Lalejin's population is potters, which makes this city a paradise for artists and ceramic lovers.

Hamedan Province is a rich agricultural area producing 9% of farm products and 22% of animal husbandry products of Iran, which in turn have blessed it with a diverse and rich cuisine.

Hamedan city, located 360 kilometers southwest of Tehran is one of the oldest Iranian cities. This ancient city, dating back to the 6th century BCE, considered as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the world used to be the capital of Achaemenid Dynasty with Parthian and Sassanid rulers also developing it further.

Travel to Hamedan to learn about the life of the great Islamic scholar, Avicenna. Get inspired by famous poets like Babateher who lived in this beautiful city and pay a visit to their memorials. The Tomb of Esther and Mordechai, highly respected by the Jews, is located in this city as well. This well-protected holy place is remarkable as a sign of peace and friendship among the Abrahamic religions in Iran. Make

sure to visit Ganj--naameh Inscription and enjoy the pleasant spring and summer weather in this city. Do not forget to visit Alisadr Cave, the largest water cave of the world. You can visit this unique natural miracle, which is 11 km long by boat.

I am **Maryam Moghaddam**, born in 1975 in Hamedan city, the capital of Persian civilization. When I graduated from university in English translation major, I never imagined that my career would be in an area far away from literature. In 2007, I was both managing and teaching in an English language institute when at a rainy December night, an advertisement on the wall caught my attention. It was a call for admission of applicants to a tour leadership program. The next morning, I found myself completing application forms and responding to interview questions in English. When the interviewer asked me how much I knew my city, it just reminded me of the short novel I had previously written for my adolescent language students at the language institute. Not understanding how the time was passing, I kept talking passionately with a surprising energy that I was not aware where it originated from. When I reached to the end of story, the smiling face of my interviewer invited me with a confident smile and said "If I could, I would recruit you as an English speaking tourist guide right now". This phrase was motivating enough to depict my future in a way that I could not imagine before.





The results were announced one week later and I registered for the program with a high grade. It did not take me long to decide to leave my job in the language institute and change my career path towards tourism after I realized that my ideal job is to be a tourist guide. My performance during the course was remarkable and everyone was convinced that I understood the young tourism industry very well.

I spent all my evenings to do research about the history, geography and sociology of Hamedan city. The more I studied, the more I believed that Hamedan is a unique travel destination for lovers of culture and nature. I realized that it is my responsibility to educate myself about Hamedan and its valuable tourism offerings in order to be able to engage and satisfy the tourists visiting this historic city. Besides, it was important to enhance the locals' perception of tourism industry and train and empower them to provide high quality professional services to visitors. The awareness and sensitivity of public stakeholders had to be raised also. I arranged several interviews and led discussions that aimed to address the shortcomings and enhance the satisfaction of tourists.

I successfully received the tour guide permit from the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handcraft and Tourism Organization, which marked the beginning of my life as a tour leader. At those times, there were not so many tourist guides in Hamedan. In order to gain hands-on experience, I dedicated my whole time during the New Year holidays to be a volunteer guide at Ecbatana Historical Museum for three years in a row. I put all my passion and energy into explaining about a 3500 years old skeleton, which was discovered from Kourijan village of Hamedan province. I did extensive research to be able to perfectly respond to all visitors' questions.

Gradually, I became an active and well-known tour guide for both foreigners visiting Hamedan as well as domestic tours of Hamedan citizens. My performance was recognized and I received many awards. It was early in 2011 that the editor-in-chief of Hamedanpayam Newspaper invited me for collaboration as a travel and tourism journalist promoting Hamedan as a tourist destination. All my past experiences, along with my writing skills brought me success as a journalist as well which led to allocating a whole page to tourism in that





newspaper. Publishing 3000 words of content about tourism in a provincial newspaper required lots of effort. I welcomed this challenge and put all my energy into it.

Meanwhile, I was also active in the formation of Hamedan's Tourism Guides Guild Assembly. In general, I can say that my main objectives were to raise awareness about the tourism potentials of Hamedan province, to introduce its tangible and intangible heritage to its residents, and to make them responsible for their decisions. I promoted creativity in designing tourism products. In order to deepen my understanding of tourism industry, I decided to pursue a Master's degree in Tourism Management and Planning in 2013. It was a difficult decision considering all my responsibilities as a mother, professional tour guide, and journalist to find time for my studies, but my huge motivation to be a part of sustainable tourism development in Hamedan pushed me forward leading to my graduation in 2015.

Today, at the age of 43, and as the mother of a son, I am honored that I have successfully guided more than 360 tours

and published more than 6800 tourism related articles in various newspapers and magazines. More importantly, I have created interest in many Iranians to visit Hamedan and enjoy its rich tourism offerings. Despite all these achievements, I still believe that I have only discovered a few of the abundant attractions that are hidden in Hamedan. Therefore, I still account myself responsible to discover my city's unknown heritage and make them known to others. This ancient civilization has kept many untold stories in its heart, which should be shared by my generation, as well as the generations to come.



**G**

No. 6

# *Arash Nooraghayi*

Gilgamesh Magazine: Promoting  
Tourism, Engraved on Stone

# **GILGAMESH**

Heritage & Tourism Magazine

**Becoming Iran**  
Light, Passion Painter

**Vibrant Garden  
of Patterns**  
The Mesmerizing Beauty  
of Persian Art

***Red Gold Online***  
A Delicate Spice Gives Weight  
to Global Markets

**Traces of  
Feminine Identity**  
Elamite Women in Relief



The culture and history of Persian civilization is a major source of attraction for many tourists visiting Iran. However, great effort should be made in order to interpret the rich tangible and intangible assets of this ancient civilization and transfer it to future generations. **Gilgamesh Heritage and Tourism Magazine** is a periodic publication that aims to address this need through generating and disseminating original content in both Persian and English languages.

Gilgamesh is a Magazine model not only in terms of novelty and quality of the content it provides, but also for creation of a sustainable institution that values teamwork, innovation and professionalism. The team of experts, editors and journalists cooperating with Gilgamesh has continuously extended since the establishment and we are very proud to have formed such a collaborative and supportive community of professionals in fields of tourism and heritage. That is why we have been able to bridge the gap in the industry and recent discoveries, and provide state-of-the-art insight.

Gilgamesh Magazine has also been successful in creating trust and receiving continuous volunteer support. Besides, Gilgamesh team is very active in areas of social responsibility. Because of all these reasons, Gilgamesh has gradually

become a reference for all tourism stakeholders and a leader for developing and promoting tourism industry in Iran.

More information available at: <http://gilgameshmag.com/en/>

I am **Arash Nooraghayi**, born in 1974 in Tehran. After quitting graduate school and my career in computer engineering, I participated in a tour guide training program which became the beginning of my life-long career. After several years of working as a professional tour leader, I realized that most of Iran's attractions had remained unknown to public nationally and internationally and there existed no framework to appropriately and continuously introduce these hidden gems.

Aiming to raise tourism industry standards, I came to the conclusion that the industry is in urgent need of original contents to be created and promoted around its offerings and destinations. Civilizations and cultural heritage with thousands years of history had to find the opportunity to be properly interpreted and communicated with interested visitors and tourists.

In 2012, I came up with the idea of publishing a periodical which bridges tourism and cultural heritage and eventually becomes



a valid platform for relevant experts and stakeholders to share their knowledge, expertise and experience. As the target audience for such a periodical included both domestic and international tourists, it was decided to provide the content suitable for each group in Persian and English languages respectively.

It took almost three years to build the team and framework required to support the technical aspects and make this idea a reality which I launched in 2015. I picked the title and slogan of the periodical very thoughtfully based on the content we intended to provide. It was named Gilgamesh referring to the hero of an ancient Mesopotamian epic. Gilgamesh Epic is believed to be one of the oldest epics in the world dating back to more than 4000 years.

Gilgamesh was the historical king of the Sumerian city-state of Uruk and considered as one of the first travelers in history; he traveled to gain consciousness and search for perfection. The story of his unique life experience has distinguished it from

other epics. The magazine contains twelve sections, which are defined to be relevant to the twelve stages of Gilgamesh's journey to find the magical immortality herb. The context and framework of both Gilgamesh Epic and magazine is based on natural and cultural heritage both tangible and intangible. The close interaction between symbols of culture and nature in the epic which takes place throughout the hero's journey, resembles two dimensions of the triple bottom line (TBL).

The magazine's slogan is "from the backwoods to well-travelled roads". While backwoods is a symbol of tradition and untapped paths, well-travelled roads represent modernism and high-traffic routes. This slogan reflects Gilgamesh Magazine's mission to cover a broad range of topics in the fields of tourism, travel and culture from the simplest and least significant to the most complex and most significant.

This magazine provides a national and global perspective on tourism attractions, arts and tangible and intangible heritage. It also sheds light on cultural and historic influences,





customs, various nations and their traditions, architecture and handicrafts. Its long-term aim is to promote sustainability mindset and take a fresh look at the mutual relationship between tourism industry and sustainable development. Gilgamesh also contributes to raising environmental awareness. We are committed to environmental responsibility and have integrated environmental parameters into all the organizational activities. We tried to practically apply large-scale environmental concepts in the daily tasks and procedures at our small office. Gilgamesh is printed on stone paper to tackle deforestation. This decision was economically risky. However, we were committed to implementing an environmental compliance plan from the very beginning. We also joined the “Save Water Save Energy” campaign and supported it through social media. We also took the initiative to distribute the magazine by bicycle in some cities. It was well recognized by our customers such that many magazine subscribers in Yazd and Kashan cities currently receive Gilgamesh through such a green distribution channel.

We have successfully published eight issues in Farsi and five issues in English so far. Our audience including travel industry insiders, academicians, travel and culture enthusiasts and professionals is satisfied with the quality and the diversity of our content. Despite all challenges and resource limitations, we have successfully positioned Gilgamesh Magazine as a reliable brand providing high quality, authentic, and attractive material. Due to its international reputation and demand, it is now available on Amazon website globally.

Although Gilgamesh, even as a demigod with superhuman strength, was condemned to death in the Epic, the ancient clay tablets preserved his story and endowed it with eternal life. As the Gilgamesh family, we aim to engrave a new version of his story on stone, bring it to life, and make it last forever.







# *Matin Lashkari & Shirin Tahanan*

Delicious Taste of Persian Cuisine  
in the Back Streets of Tehran





**Food tourism** to which Iran is no exception is a multi-dimensional concept and includes a wide range of services and products, from farmers' markets and culinary tours to simple food stalls, food sharing platforms, high-end restaurants and food museum. The connection between experiential tourism and food is becoming stronger each day. Much more attention is paid to the source of food items consumed by travelers and that is why farm to table and organic restaurants are gaining extreme popularity both globally as well as in Iran.

Information and communication technology has facilitated the transfer of knowledge and experience among individuals. Numerous platforms have been designed for connecting food lovers together, many of them looking for authentic meals served by local families and individuals at their homes.

Persian cuisine is the reflection of a rich and fascinating food culture with unbelievable diversity and extreme popularity. It is an intangible heritage, which has been very well preserved by hearts of Iranians and is considered as a manifestation of their genuine hospitality.

Travel to Iran to experience the true sense of hospitality by sitting around the table of Iranians, anywhere in this country. Traditionally a guest is considered as "the friend of God" and Iranians will amaze you by the different meals they prepare for you. In Iran, strangers will very often invite you for a family meal. You should not miss this opportunity as this is the door to one of the most memorable experiences of your life because of their authentic hospitality and exclusive home-made dishes mostly prepared by mothers of the family, all around Iran.

More information available at: <http://persianfoodtours.com/>

I am **Matin Lashkari**. I am 28 years old and just recently got married. I was born in Tehran and raised in several countries. I studied graphic design at University of Tehran and University of Lisbon. Later, I returned to Iran and worked as a graphic designer for a few companies before I decided to resign and start my own business.

I had a lifelong passion for writing, photography and travelling and I had been blogging about my travel experiences for





a few years. I was eager to turn my passion into a career opportunity. Given my language and communication skills, I enrolled in a tour guide training program to become a professional tour guide and open the eyes of foreign tourists to my home country. My year-long experience of extensive travel in Iran and communicating with foreign tourists as a tour guide, made me realize how difficult it was to find decent Iranian food in restaurants. I was disappointed to find that many tourists were leaving Iran without gaining a true sense of Persian gastronomy and this was the moment when I decided to pursue a career, which addresses this issue.

Inspired by the popularity of culinary tours being offered all across Europe, I decided to create a platform for offering such an experience in Iran, which was later named as Persian Food Tours.

To start the work I needed a partner – someone who knew cooking and was able to teach it in English. That's when I contacted Shirin Tahanan, who had been running cooking classes in Tehran for a few years. Shirin is 33 years old, married and mother of 2 children. She used to live in England for

several years. She earned a Bachelor of Fine Art from the UK and a Master's degree in painting from the Sureh University of Tehran. Photography and cooking were her favorite hobbies, which made her establish a boutique culinary school and gain success through eye-catching communication on social media. What makes Shirin's kitchen stand out, besides her knowledge and skills, is the warmth and intimate atmosphere which she has created and her passion to engage her students as much as possible.

Both of us shared the same opinion about the necessity of familiarizing foreign tourists with the basics of Persian cuisine. As a team, it took us almost three months to develop the idea, design the product, and prepare the business plan. We take our customers to a local bazar for a guided culinary walking tour through which they get to know the main ingredients of our cuisine; from seasonings and spices to herbs and herbal extracts, fresh vegetables and dairy products. They also learn about special cooking utensils and tools that are traditionally used in Iranians' kitchens. We then go to the kitchen to cook together the menu we have designed based on the season. It includes an appetizer, an entrée and a dessert.





Given our limited financial resources, the main challenge was reaching our clients in the most efficient way that wouldn't cost too much. We used social media and my old travel weblog as our main sources to start off our work. Our first guests arrived in April 2016. It was an amazing moment when the smile of our first guests was mixed with the essence of saffron and rosewater. Together, we shared our stories and experiences and enjoyed every moment of cooking.

We did our best to keep our standards high and made sure that everything was top quality, which resulted in extremely happy and satisfied customers. They left fabulous comments for Persian Food Tours and rated us as a 5 star service on Trip Advisor. Persian Food Tours was later selected by Lonely Planet as one of Tehran's top 7 activities and also recommended by a few other guide books.

In the past two years, our business has grown organically and we have been able to organize more than 50 food tours serving more than 400 clients. This means we could share stories of Persian cuisine and gastronomy with all these customers and enhance their travel experience. Recently, we

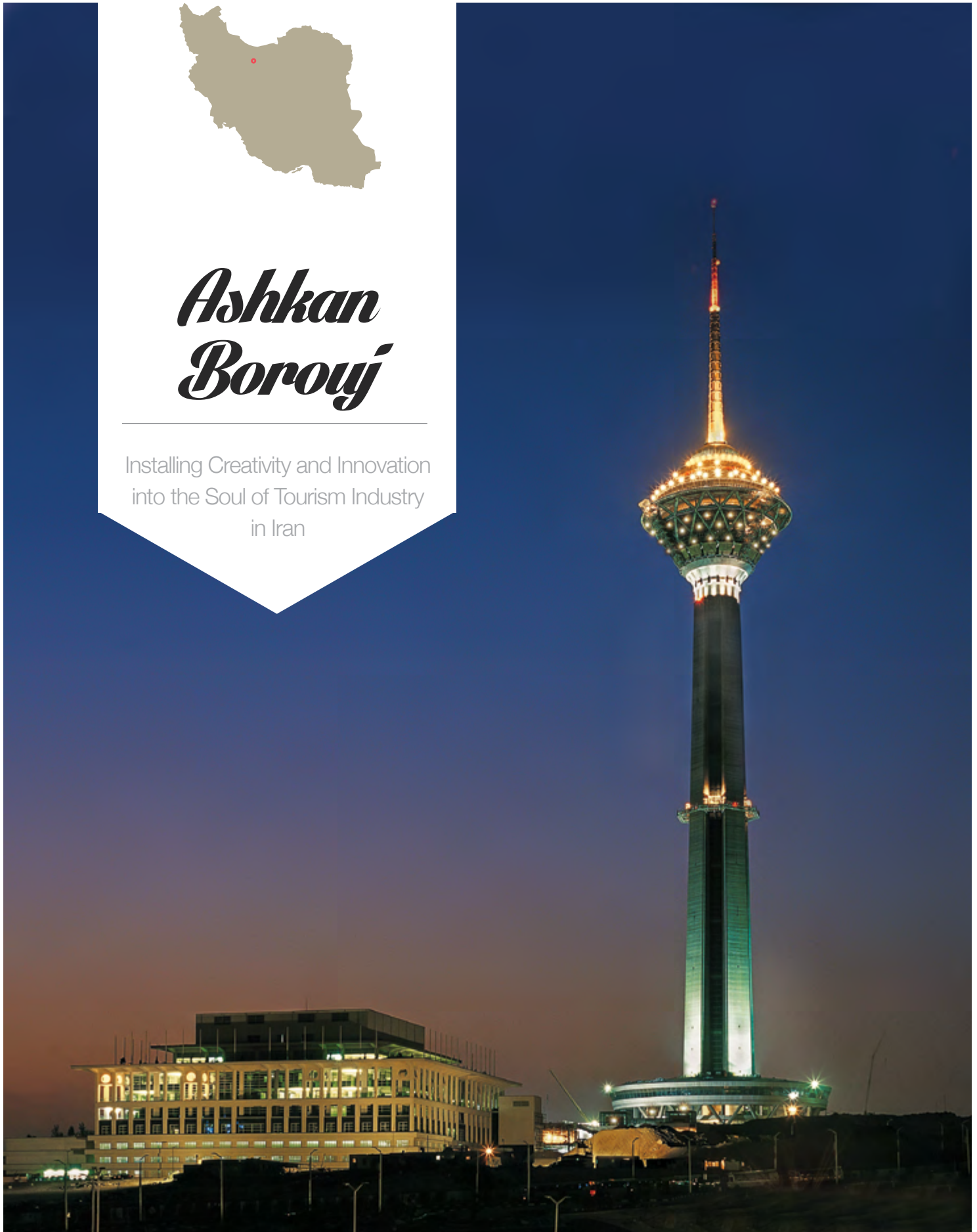
successfully opened our second branch in Isfahan city and we are actively working to open the third one in Shiraz city.

Persian Food Tours' main mission is to introduce Persian recipes and culinary culture to the world and we're doing that one client at a time. We are honored to create a distinct and unforgettable experience for international tourists by providing a perspective on Iranian culture and life style through the lenses of Iranian culinary culture and food and beverage customs.



# *Ashkan Borouj*

Installing Creativity and Innovation  
into the Soul of Tourism Industry  
in Iran





The **tourism industry** has become one of the most prosperous and far-reaching economic sectors in the current century. While technological advancements over recent decades have upgraded the tourism ecosystem, small and medium enterprises, which are the major economic entities in this industry, should be adequately encouraged and supported to benefit from technology and retain their competitiveness. Given the structure of the labor force in the tourism industry, the importance of developing tourism human resources with right skills that can deliver high quality human-based services, empowering this sector's employees in this industry with adaptive technological skills should be considered in the formulation of any tourism development plan.

According to both the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), technological advancements will further enhance competition for youth employment across different sectors. Therefore, tourism policy makers and managers in public and private sectors should adopt efficient strategies for encouraging and supporting the youth to thrive in this industry.

The tourism industry in Iran, thanks to the opportunities created by such technological advancements, is experiencing a gradual reform led by the young generation. The number of startups and innovative SMEs active in this segment of the industry is rapidly growing and bringing hope to all stakeholders. The role of pioneers in leading this revival is very crucial and valuable. The story of one of these pioneers, Ashkan Borouj, is shared with you here:

More information available at: <http://tourismadviser.com/>

I am **Ashkan Borouj** with a Master in Tourism Marketing Management and having almost 15 years of experience in the



tourism industry of Iran. My career profile includes tour leading, educating and training, and mentoring and consulting for tourism startups in the hospitality and ecotourism businesses. My main mission is to enhance Iran's travel and tourism enterprises and familiarize the industry professionals with the new trends of tourism and hospitality management through my startup called "Iranian Tourism Academy".

I believe that expert and skilled human resources are the foundation of tourism development everywhere in the world. Therefore, training, awareness raising and empowering indigenous communities and tourism stakeholders have been my major goals so far.

My journey began by personal childhood trips and continued in high school with a small group of fellow students. During college, I took guardianship for student group tours for nature and cultural trips. As soon as I got familiar with the tour guiding specialized courses, I enrolled in the programs and successfully received the required licenses. In 2006, I officially entered the tourism industry as a tourist guide in the domestic market. It was followed by my collaboration with tourism associations and travel companies as a researcher. I also wrote articles and generated specialized content in Iranian media. Since 2008, I have been very active as a tourism journalist, news writer and photographer. Simultaneously, I organized domestic tours and acted as a guide for outgoing tours.

I pursued a Master's degree in Tourism Marketing Management at Allameh Tabatabaiee University which enabled me to raise my academic knowledge in the tourism and hospitality management sector.

The work experience, academic knowledge, the connection with national and international travel and tourism networks, and keeping up with current activities, have been the main keys to my success in the process of my growth in the tourism industry.

In 2009, I started my national projects and took the first steps in the tourism industry of Iran. The first project was the 1000 tourism routes of Iran, and the other one was Iran's calendar of tourism events and festivals. To fulfil these projects, I visited numerous villages and nomadic tribes in Iran and educated myself about the concepts of ecolodge, local guesthouse, and indigenous tourism. More than 7000 km of driving in the central desert of Iran and one and a half years of serious research in the

fields and library, made me an expert in a subject that had no scientific and practical background in Iran and introduced these types of residences and their regulatory framework based on examples in different countries to the public. As a result of all these efforts, the homestays and ecolodges were officially approved as a new category of tourism accommodation in Iran tourism industry in 2013. The most difficult days of my life were when, even the existence of many of these lodges in Iran which were offering top tourist experiences, were threatened by public authorities due to their lack of formal and legal status. The growing number of this kind of accommodation throughout the country, the ignorance and unfamiliarity of the responsible authorities and stakeholders, the lack of any regulation, and many other factors were impeding the healthy development of these types of accommodation in Iran.

My first attempt to resolve this issue was the empowerment of indigenous communities, directors, and managers of local lodges so that we could create the right foundation.

In 2013, I went to Spain to receive a Diploma in Tourism and Hospitality Management, from UIB University of Mallorca. During this period, I became acquainted with the subject of digital tourism (e-tourism) and startups. After returning to Iran, besides the issue of sustainable local lodges, I put my entire focus on introducing and promoting information and communications technology (ICT) applications in tourism and the tourism entrepreneurship.

In the beginning, I was extremely disappointed because the professionals working traditionally in the tourism industry of Iran were not prepared to accept these new subjects and some of them even denied the benefits and advantages of the modern trends.

Again, I realized that the first steps in this way were training all the players of the tourism industry. Ultimately, I found the solution; we had to work together with the activists in the field of information and communication technology and





strengthen our presence in startup societies. Simultaneously, Iranian tourism and hospitality networks slowly prepared themselves for a new revolution in this field. We held the first Iran Tourism Startup Weekend in June 2013, which was full of ideas and motivational speeches. After this, several startup weekends happened in many other provinces, where I served as a consultant, speaker, mentor and member of judging committee, to inject this fresh blood of the Iranian tourism industry to the Iranian tourism system. Since last year, I have been delivering online workshops and tutorials for students, activists, and e-tourists as a mentor, a consultant, and tutor of tourism entrepreneurship and, in particular, a developer of tourism startups in Iran. The outcomes include collective awareness and the dissemination of the wisdom of tourism throughout the country, and in particular, the inspiration of those who are interested in tourism in indigenous villages and communities, and their full presence in cyberspace and a gradual shift in the trends of domestic tourism.

To date, I have published more than 100 articles in print media as a tourism journalist for national news agencies, have been invited to more than 20 programs in National Iranian Radio & Television, delivered 80 workshops and motivational lectures in 20 provinces of the country and I am still trying to promote the concepts of sustainable tourism development and the applications of ICT in tourism to all stakeholders in this industry.

In my opinion, the main challenges and priorities of tourism development in Iran are strengthening the role of private sector and enhancing its partnership with the public sector, empowering indigenous and local communities to be actively engaged in tourism development, and installing creativity into tourism industry in general.



# Photo Credits

(Courtesy of MCTH)

## Cover page and Contents

Ruins of the Tachara, Persepolis, Fars province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh

Maranjab Desert, Kashan Isfahan province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh

## Double paged pic

- The National Garden Gate, Tehran, Photo by Naser Mizbani

## Hashem Tabatabaiee

- Camel riding caravan, Farahzad Village, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Farahzad village, Hashem Tabatabaiee(left) welcoming guests to Farahzad, Photo owned by Hashem Tabatabaiee
- Barandaz ecolodge, Traditional Yard Design, Photo owned by Hashem Tabatabaiee
- Barandaz ecolodge, Traditional Interior Design, Photo owned by Hashem Tabatabaiee

## Khosro Roosta

- Gilaki lady, Photo by Homayoun Amir Yeganeh
- Gileboom ecolodge, Photo owned by Khosro Roosta
- Fruit picking ceremony, Gileboom Ecolodge, Photo owned by Khosro Roosta
- Gileboom ecolodge hosts: Khosro Roosta(left), Mahin Shamsikhani(center), and Shiva Shamshiri(right), Photo owned by Khosro Roosta

## Razieh Jafari

- Nasirilmolk (Pink) Mosque, Shiraz, Fars province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Lapooei ecolodge, Razieh Jafari is telling a story to a group of visitors, Photo owned by Razieh Jafari
- Lapooei ecolodge yard, Photo owned by Razieh Jafari
- Lapooei Museum, Razieh Jafari is explaining about the museum artefacts, Photo owned by Razieh Jafari

## Siamak Salehi

- Atashgah waterfall, Chahar Mahal Bakhtiari province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Siamak Salehi, Dopolan village, Photo owned by Siamak Salehi
- Dopolan Village, Chahar Mahal Bakhtiari province, Visitors enjoying Kayaking, Photos by Siamak Salehi, Collage by Ali Abbasian
- Dopolan Bridge Bungee Jumping, Photos by Siamak Salehi, Collage by Ali Abbasian

## Aghamir

- Pristine night sky in Fars province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Amir Miri (Aghamir) in Bamdad Restaurant (bottom right), Photo owned by Aghamir
- Cycling tour held for Aghamir guests, Photo owned by Aghamir
- Ghashghaei Nomads of the Fars province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh



### **Nima Azari**

- Beauty of sunset in Persian Gulf, Qeshm Island, Hormozgan province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Nima Azari with Shibderaz Village group of youth trainees (the man with a backpack) Photo owned by Nima Azari
- Hormozgan, Qeshm, Traditional needle work by a local woman photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Hawksbill sea turtle, Shibderaz Village, Qeshm Island, Photo owned by Nima Azari

### **Mohsen Mehdizadeh**

- Esfahak village, Tabas, South Khorasan, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Mohsen Mehdizadeh(third from right) in Esfahak village with Restoration team of Dr. Parsi, Photo owned by Mohsen Mehdizadeh
- Life is back to a restored house in Esfahak village, Photo owned by Mohsen Mehdizadeh
- Restoration of a vault in Esfahak village, Photo owned by Mohsen Mehdizadeh

### **H. Mohammad Amouei**

- Water Lilies, Anzali Lagoon, Gilan province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh
- Bird watching tour for visitors of Anzali Lagoon, Photo owned by Hassan Mohammad Amouei
- Holding a workshop for local ladies with Hassan Mohammad Amouei, Photo owned by Hassan Mohammad Amouei

- Gilan Province, Colorful boats in Bandar Anzali Deck photo by Homayoun Amir Yeganeh

### **Mina Shirani**

- Kalpuregan handicrafts, Photo by Benyamin Khodadadi
- Shirani Mina Shirani working with Kalpuregan women to increase the quality of local handicrafts, Photo owned by Mina Shirani
- Mina Shirani is evaluating a handicraft, Photo owned by Mina

### **Shahab Cheraghi**

- Asiatic cheetah reflected in the handicrafts of Ghaleh Bala Village, Photo owned by Shahab Cheraghi
- Semnan, Touran National Park, Ghaleh Bala Village, Asiatic cheetah, Photo by Seyed Babak Musavi
- Shahab Cheraghi (sitting in far left) with his team in Ghaleh Bala Village with a group of locals, Photo owned by Shahab Cheraghi
- Amazing rural landscape of Ghaleh Bala village, Photo owned by Shahab Cheraghi

### **Maryam Moghaddam**

- Graduation Ceremony at the Mausoleum of Avicenna, Hamedan City, Photo by Pourya Pakizeh
- Laljin Handicrafts & Pottery, Hamedan Province, Photo by Pourya Pakizeh
- Alisadr Cave, one of the largest subterranean water complexes in the world since its formation millions of years ago, Hamedan province, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznaveh

- Maryam Moghaddam(Left) participating as a journalist in a press conference, Photo owned by Maryam Moghaddam

#### **Arash Nooraghayi**

- Cover of the 6th issue of Gilgamesh magazine, Photo owned by Gilgamesh magazine
- Arash Nooraghayi making a Speech in Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts & Tourism Organization(MCTH), Photo owned by Arash Nooraghayi
- Gilgamesh Family in its Publication House, Photo owned by Gilgamesh magazine
- The bicycle used for delivering Gilgamesh to its Subscribers, Photo owned by Gilgamesh magazine

#### **Matin Lashkari**

- Restaurants in Nature Bridge, which is a modern landmark of Tehran (opened in 2014), Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznavah
- Persian Food Tour, Photo owned by Matin Lashkari
- Culinary walking tour of Tajrish traditional Bazaar held by Persian Food Tour, Photo owned by Matin Lashkari
- Delicious ending ceremony by eating what the guests have cooked, Photo owned by Matin Lashkari

#### **Ashkan Borouj**

- Milad Communication Tower, the World's sixth-tallest tower located in Tehran, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznavah

- Ashkan Borouj Teaching Gastronomy Tourism, Photo owned by Ashkan Borouj

- Ashkan Borouj in Iran Tourism Academy, Photo owned by Ashkan Borouj

- Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts & Tourism Organization's Booth in ELECOMP, which is the greatest commercial event in Iran's market of electronics and computer products and services, Tehran, Photo by Saeid Mahmoudi Aznavah



# Further Information

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11. Maryam Moghaddam  
Not available
12. Arash Nooraghayi  
<http://gilgameshmag.com/en/>
13. Matin Lashkari  
<http://persianfoodtours.com/>
14. Ashkan Borouj  
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وزارت میراث فرهنگی، گردشگری و صنایع دستی