

IRANIAN GOVERNMENT TO INVEST IN TOURISM PROJECTS



Iran's tourism industry is booming, with more foreign travelers visiting the country than ever before. So much so that Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, is hoping to attract 10 million international tourists each year, an increase from 4 million.

The country currently attracts predominantly medical and religious tourists, although this is all expected to change as Iran develops new relationships with foreign nations. **For example, Iran's close ties with China have led to an increase in the number of Chinese visitors.**

Iran's landscape is diverse, attracting thrill-seekers from around the world that enjoy skiing and hiking in the country's Alborz mountains, as well as sun worshippers who frequent beach resorts by the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf.

The Iranian government has announced various infrastructure projects in the coming years which will attract more tourists to Kish, an island in the Persian Gulf. The island currently attracts around a million visitors a year, the vast majority of which are Iranian citizens. With 5000 years of history, tourism is an untapped market, and the government is making strides to take advantage of the increase in foreign travelers.

The Dizin ski resort, located in the Alborz mountain range attracts 2000 people a week over the winter, with professionals and amateurs visiting the ski slopes, which at 3,600 meters up, are the highest in Iran. This is the place where the Iran national skiing and snowboard teams come to train, and the resort features a number of hotels, restaurants and amenities. However, to deal with the growing number of people who are visiting the resort, and like many tourist attractions around the country, Dizin needs more investment.

"The equipment is old," says Bagher Kalhor from the Iranian Ski Federation. "Over the past 37 years it has remained the same and just three new facilities have been added."

Prior to the Iranian revolution, tourists visited the country to see a number of historical attractions, and took advantage of a diverse landscape which hosted a number of sports and activities. The tourism industry declined during the Iran-Iraq War which took place in the 1980s.

Historically, visitors to Iran have been businesspeople and pilgrims, though domestic tourism within the country has always been big business as well. Pilgrimages made to holy Shia sites have always been popular, and tourism revenue has made a significant contribution to Iran's economy.

Now the government plans to build a number of hotels and other construction projects to keep up with the demands of an influx of foreign travelers. Statistics show that the number of international tourists in the country reached 3 million in 2011, and this contributed over \$2 billion to Iran's economy.

Why has there been such a recent increase in tourists to Iran? "I think there are two reasons," says Deputy of Iranian Tourism Organization, Rahmani Movahhed. "The first is the Presidential election

of Hassan Rouhani. The other reason is the safety and stability that Iran enjoys compared to other regional countries. "

"There is a new attitude for cultural visitors to come visit Iran. For example, this holidays over 200 European groups have spent Christmas in Iran. This is a change from the past."

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