

Esfahan: The Florence of Iran

Florence of Orient, Persia's masterpiece, the Intrigue of Iran and the half rhymed famous adage "Esfahan Nesf-e Jahan" (Esfahan is half the world) all are to describe the splendor of a city shining along its life-giving river at the heart of Iran.

When you tread into the city it seems as if it has been preparing itself for an impromptu royal visit. It is a city of inspiring architecture, elegant mosques, churches, graceful palaces, beautiful gardens and gorgeous bridges, a city made for the refreshment of humanity as Robert Byron says.

In Esfahan you can hardly find a street without a wide central pedestrian reservation of trees, fountains and flowers. Behind every corner, you stumble upon spectacular remainders of rich past. In its heyday under Safavid dynasty when the city flourished and gave birth to its outstanding Islamic and Iranian architecture, Esfahan was a large city with a population of one million and owned many parks, libraries, public baths, shops and mosques that amazed western visitors, who had not seen anything like that at home.



One of the great works of Shah Abass in that period was "The Pattern of the world" or Naqsh-e Jahan Square which is a real jewel in Isfahan's crown. This majestic collection of buildings fits money, worship and aristocratic pleasures together in deliberate visual harmony.

Somewhere in the west of Imam Square, a beautiful tree-lined boulevard, offers delightful hours of walking under its cool green shades. Chahar Bagh is the main street of Esfahan and traverses Zayandeh Rud through Si-o-se Pol. Zayandeh Rud is crossed by some of the world's most picturesque covered bridges.

Another sight worth spending hours of strolling is the city's four-mile labyrinthine bazaar, with its majestic Qeysarieh Portal in Imam Square. As Iran's artistic and craft centre and Esfahan's world famous fine carpets, handicrafts and textile, Grand Bazaar of Isfahan would be a charming adventure for shopaholics.

Andre Malraux, the famous French author and adventurer says: "Who can claim to have seen the most beautiful city of the world without having seen Esfahan?" therefore, do not hesitate to visit the Florence of Iran whose well-proportioned mosques whose turquoise blue dome and minarets rival the color of the sky.

Landmarks

Ali Qapu Palace

The name Ali Qapu, meaning "Magnificent Gate", was given to this place as it was right at the entrance to the Safavid palaces which stretched from the Maidan Naqsh-e-Jahan to the Chahar Bagh Boulevard. Built at the very end of 16th century, the royal palace was used to entertain noble visitors, and foreign ambassadors.

Ali Qapu is 48 meters high and has got five floors, fronted with a wide terrace whose ceiling is inlaid and supported by wooden columns. It offers a wonderful perspective over the square and the best view of Imam Mosque. The interior of the building is decorated with naturalistic scenes by Reza Abbasi, the renowned Persian miniaturist and painter. On the upper floor the music room is also decorated with plasterwork, representing pots and vessels.

Chehel Sotun (Pavilion of Forty Columns)

This building, now a veritable museum of Persian painting and ceramics, was a pleasure pavilion used for the king's entertainments and receptions. It stands inside a vast royal park, but relatively near the enclosure, and was built by Shah Abbas II around an earlier building erected by Shah Abbas I.

An inscription states that the decoration and frescoes were finished in 1647. Only two large historical frescoes date from the later period of the Zand dynasty. Unfortunately, the Chehel Sotun has been badly damaged since then, especially when the Afghans occupied the town and covered the paintings with a thick coat of whitewash. It is now being extensively restored under the aegis of the Institute Italiano Per il Medio Orient.



The pavilion opens onto the gardens by means of an elegant terrace, only a few steps high and supported by slender, delicate wooden pillars. In reality, there were never more than twenty columns, but they were reflected in the pool in the park, and so the Persians liked to call the building the "pavilion with forty columns" (besides, the number 40 had a symbolic meaning in Persia and expressed respect and admiration).

Hasht Behesht Palace (The Eight Paradise)

Hasht Behesht, a two-story palace, located in the middle of Bagh-e Bolbol, was built about 1669 by Shah Suleiman's commission. It was once surrounded by a vast garden and similar buildings, of which nothing remains except this interesting and beautiful palace. It consists of an almost octagonal base on which four Eivans and four smaller sets of chambers are raised, while the centre is surmounted by a spectacular ceiling.

The domed ceiling of the main reception room is painted in purple on a glittering gold base. Painted tile designs of birds, animals, and hunting scenes, found on the spandrels of the outer blind arches, enliven the facades of Hasht Behesht. The palace owes its fame, apart from its architectural and decorative merits, to the lavish use of marble slabs, stalactite vault decorations, excellent tile works dotted with scenes of animals (birds, beasts of prey, and reptiles) covering the building on the outside.

The Bridge of Allahverdi Khan or Si-o-se Pol (bridge with 33 arches)

The Bridge of Allahverdi Khan crossing the Zayandeh Rud is a continuation of Chahar Bagh, the principal street in Isfahan. Built at the beginning of the 17th century on the order of Shah Abbas, it is named after a famous general who was put in charge of the work. It is also called the Bridge of 33 Arches, or Si-O-Se Pol. It is said that the bridge originally comprised 40 arches however this number gradually reduced to 33. It is the longest bridge in the city and is 45 feet wide and 175 yards long. Although it looks impressive, it does not have the same archaeological or aesthetic interest as the two other bridges farther downstream.

The Bathhouse of Sheikh Bahai (Hamam-e Sheikh Bahai)

The bath of Sheikh Bahai is located in a small street named after him in the southern section of the old bazaar close to the Masjed-e-Jomeh. The bathroom derives its principal fame from the story that it was warmed by a single candle, which was placed in a closed space and never needed renewing.

The candle was rather larger than the ones we use on tables, and the clay pipes which circulated the water became unusable many years ago. According to his own instructions, the candle's fire would be put out once disclosed. This happened during the restoration and repair of the building and no one could make the system work again.



Bazaar-e Bozorg

The Bazaar of Isfahan, the heritage of the Saljuqid and Safavid era is one of the oldest and largest bazaars of the Middle East. It stretches between Imam Sq and the Jameh Mosque several kilometers away.

The bazaar can be entered at dozens of points along its winding route, but the main entrance is via the Qeysarieh Portal at the northern end of Imam Sq. the high gateway is decorated with tiles and, higher up, frescoes by great Reza Abbasi, depicting Shah Abass' war with the Uzbeks.

Like most Iranian bazaars, Bazaar-e Bozorg is loosely divided into several interconnected corridors, each specializing in a particular trade or product, with carpet dealers, goldsmiths, samovar-makers, shoe makers, dyers, all having their own quarters.

You can also find several mosques, tea shops, bathhouses, and even gardens. Small apertures in the vaulted roof let in sufficient light yet kept out the intense heat of summer and retained warmth in winter.

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