

IRAN OPENS TO THE ARRIVAL OF TOURISM



Iran is a country without fast food restaurants and large hotel chains; it has a spectacular cultural and architectural heritage, exquisite gastronomy, magnificent natural places, as well as an agreeable and extremely hospitable people. However, it receives hardly four million tourists per year, a scarce figure the government of Hasan Rohani is trying to increase.

The impressive plaza and mosque of Isfahan, the maze-like bazaar of Tabriz, the Zoroaster temples of Tajt and Soleiman, the enchanting deserted city of Yazd, Alborz mountain skiing, or the impressive ruins of Persepolis are, today, marvelous exemptions from the ills that accompany the growth of tourism.

In Iran, a traveler can take pictures without 20 other people wearing backpacks, hats, and sunglasses in front of them. A traveler can eat truly local dishes or walk around calmly without being accosted on streets where almost everyone will smile at them and say, "Hello."

"This year, there were 4.6 million entries in the first 10 months of the year," explained the sub-director of the Organization for Cultural, Artesanal, and Touristic Heritage of Iran, Morteza Rahmani Mohaved, who clarified that the statistic includes all foreign entries.

Some months ago, many tourists entered Iran with an expedited visa. The tourists, he affirms, come to be 65% of this amount, and, of them, around half come from neighboring Iraq and come to go to the doctor or to visit the Imam Reza sanctuary in Mashad, a sacred place for Shiites.

Rohani wants to change this situation and bets on tourism, not only for contributing to the economic recuperation this isolated country is yelling for, sanctioned, with rates of inflation of 40% and a fifth of the population actively unemployed; but also as a fundamental tool for public diplomacy. "Tourism can help to create relationships and interaction between nations and bring cultural proximity and mutual understanding," he said at a conference in September where he pointed out "the brilliant past of civilizations, hospitality, rich cultural heritage, good weather and beautiful nature" of his country to tempt potential visitors.

Ways to motivate tourists have started by relaxing visa policies, and a few months ago, travelers who entered the country with an expedited visa were many. According to the Iranian agency ISNA, Teheran is trying to provide a visa to nationals from all over the world except for 10 countries, among which will include the United Kingdom and the United States.

The system still isn't 100%, and a traveler without a visa can find himself, very kindly, kicked out of the airport without much of an explanation regarding their rejection. According to Tourism, arrivals have increased around 20% since Rohani arrived in August to the Presidency.

"Traveler security is far greater than what countries like Egypt or Jordan have." The Worldwide Tourism Organization confirmed this month that in the last half a year 'it is easier' to travel to Iran. "Paying more attention to the development of tourism is among the main policies of this government," says Rahmani.

Its prime markets are "China, countries of Western Asia, and the neighboring states," and areas where major growth is foreseen are cultural, historical, nature, and medicinal tourism. According to

Worldwide Advice on Travel and Tourism, Iran will experience a 7.4% increase in tourism this year and will increase its investments in hotel and restaurant infrastructures by 7.6 %.

This year, the contribution of trips and tourism to the Iranian GDP was 6.1% of the total, around two billion dollars, and the sector generated 5.3% of employment, around 1.2 million people. The Islamic Republic has fixed their goal at 20 million tourists by 2025.

The head of Tourism highlights that, in addition to its beauty and 16 declared world heritage sites, another Iran attraction that is not valued sufficiently outside is “the security of the traveler, which is highly superior to the other countries of the region that receive many tourists, like Egypt or Jordan.” Rahmani discards the reluctance that the most conservative sectors have toward the arrival of foreigners, above all Westerners, and assures that: “We are prepared to receive them. We are not worried about having relationships with the outside. Iran, as much now as before the arrival of Islam, has always had a history full of relationships with other people.”

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