

IRAN'S TOURISM TO BE REVIVED AS DIPLOMACY PREVAILS



The former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and his aggressive anti-western rhetoric caused a steady, negative impact on Iran's tourism sector. Under the new leadership of Hassan Rouhani and a more pragmatic government that is more open to diplomatic discussions and relations to the western world, tourism becomes relevant once again.

In 2014, The Guardian and The Financial Times included Iran on the list of top touristic destinations and that's due to their sixteenth century buildings that display beautiful architectural designs and mosaic patterns in Isfahan but also due to the Persepolis ruins, which are two and a half millennia old.

While many want to see an increase in visitors, there is still a long way to go before Iran becomes a popular destination for tourists. International sanctions and regulations carry a negative effect towards the sector and Sharia law, which is in place since 1979, after the Islamic revolution, is bound to repel some western travelers.

To be able to share a hotel room, a couple must be married, alcohol is banned while women are compelled to hide both their body and their hair in public. Potential tourists would also have to only make purchases and pay for services with cash since credit cards from Western countries are simply not working.

The head of the UNWTO, Taleb Rifai, acknowledged the fact that Iran has many challenges to overcome in the near future and went on to praise the country's very rich cultural heritage. He also underlined Iran's efforts in regards to their tourism sector, efforts that involve offering visas on arrival for roughly 27 states.

The new constructive approach became even more obvious when looking at short term goals as officials plan to double yearly profits from tourism, from 5 to 10 billion U.S. dollars. The UNWTO released data that shows a 24 percent increase in tourists coming from abroad in 2013, the number reaching almost 5 million. If the trend continued in the following year is yet to be determined.

The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates a yearly 5.7 percent increase through the next decade in regards to the tourism sector's aid to Iran's economy. In 2013, 2.2 percent of the country's GDP came from tourism. **This year, Iran plans to boost their visibility with increased attendance at tourism fairs, including the largest one, the ITB in Berlin.**

The country's cultural heritage attracts more and more international visitors, as reported by Pasargad Tours, an Iranian company responsible for accommodating up to 12 thousand travelers every year. They are overbooked for the next two years. Gebeco, a tour operator from Germany whose main target are students recently tripled their offers to Iran.

The Germania airline company now has flights to Tehran twice a week from Berlin and Dusseldorf and one to Mashhad from Hamburg. Mashhad is not only one of the largest cities in Iran but also a beautiful destination for tourists.

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