

IRAN HIT BY THE LACK OF TOURISTS FROM EUROPE



During the last few years, Iran has gone from being a fashionable destination to a "strongly discouraged country" for tourists from Europe. This is a test for tourism professionals, who try to attract tourists from Europe, China or neighboring countries while waiting for better days.

The seduction operation had started well: between 2014 and 2019, European tourists were flocking to Esfahan, Shiraz or Persepolis, the jewels of ancient Persia. **Overly optimistic, the Iranian authorities were aiming for 20 million visitors per year by 2025**, compared to eight million in 2019. However, the disappointments quickly accumulated.

Fatal Blow to Tourism

"The setback began after the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018," says Farzaneh Mohammadi of Iranian Railways. Then there were the November 2019 protests against the government and the January 2020 crash of the Ukrainian plane, shot down after take-off from Tehran by missiles from Iranian forces.

"Efforts were then made to restore the situation, but recent events have dealt a fatal blow to tourism," laments Farzaneh Mohammadi, referring to the protest movement that spread across the country after the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish girl, in mid-September.

Atmosphere of Iranophobia

The strong media coverage of the protests abroad "has contributed to creating an atmosphere of Iranophobia," said Maryam Jalali, the deputy minister of tourism.

In such a context, "we will probably not have any tourists from Europe this spring", the best season to visit the country, underlines Farzaneh Mohammadi. "When the foreign media keeps repeating that there is unrest in the country, it discourages travelers," emphasized Mohammadi.

Experts hope that the nuclear talks, which are currently at a standstill, will soon be relaunched to "find a favorable environment" for tourism. In the meantime, several countries, such as Germany and France, advise their citizens against visiting Iran. "Any visitor is exposed to a high risk of arrest, arbitrary detention and unfair trial", warns Paris, while six French citizens, some of whom were traveling as tourists, are being held in the country's prisons.

The president of the Hoteliers' Association, Jamshid Hamzhezadeh, recently sounded the alarm about hotel occupancy rates, which are now below 20 per cent and have prompted two-thirds of hotels to reduce the number of employees. The absence of Western travelers with high purchasing power will also continue to weigh on the already sluggish business of carpet and other handicraft sellers in bazaars and major tourist sites.

This is the case in the historic city of Yazd, located on the Spice and Silk Road, where "nearly 80% of the guides have lost their jobs since the pandemic" of Covid-19, laments Davoud Dehghani, the

president of the local tourist guides association with about 200 members.

He remembers the happy days: "When Yazd was listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2017, the number of tourists exploded by more than 500%," and the city found its place on the itineraries of tour operators, between Shiraz and Isfahan. "Fortunately," Davoud Dehghani adds, there are still "a small number of foreign tourists" from "Russia, China, Turkey or other countries" that are not on the outs with the Islamic Republic.

More Visitors from Neighboring Countries

For Deputy Minister Maryam Jalali, the priority now is to attract more visitors from neighboring countries, "who share a common culture and religion". **Many of them are Shiite pilgrims from Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait or Pakistan who travel, often in groups, to the holy cities of Mashhad (north-east) and Qom (north).**

Iran also wants to develop medical tourism by relying on its efficient health infrastructure, its lower fees and its expertise in cosmetic surgery, which is increasingly popular in the Middle East.

Date: 2023-02-20

Article link: <https://www.tourism-review.com/iran-tries-to-attract-tourists-from-europe-news12947>