

Tourism and Political Change

15

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Iran or Persia: What's in a Name? The Decline and Fall of a Tourism Industry

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 Published by Goodfellow Publishers Limited, Woodeaton, Oxford, OX3 9TJ
<http://www.goodfellowpublishers.com>

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

15 Iran or Persia: What's in a Name? The Decline and Fall of a Tourism Industry

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Introduction

Iran is a combination of Persia and Islam, it is a complicated, often confused, if not diametrically opposed mix of two ideologies, but also, from a tourism perspective, unrivalled in the cultural attributes that it can offer to the more intrepid traveller. Historically, modern Iran has its roots in ancient Persia and therefore it is unsurprising that the contemporary nation attempts to trace its cultural heritage back for at least 5,000 years. Hegel considered the ancient Persians to be the first historic people:

In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around...The principle of development begins with the history of Persia; this constitutes therefore the beginning of history .

(Hegel, 1857: 147)

However, Hegel's historicism is questionable on two grounds. First, that Persia was identifiable. As Garthwaite has commented,

'Persia' is not easily located with any geographic specificity, nor can its people, the Persians, be easily categorized. In the end Persia and the Persians are as much metaphysical notions as a place or a people .

(Garthwaite, 2007: 1)

Indeed, despite the long antecedence of civilisation in the area, until the late sixth century BC, there are no known historical materials that are written by Persians identifying themselves as Persian. Second, Hegel's historicism is questionable because modern Iran is not one people in terms of customs, but a multinational and multicultural Asian state, comprising groups that on the one hand are Iranian in an ethno-linguistic sense (Persian – Tajik, Kurdish, Balochi), and on the other, of other people who are not, notably Turkish (Azerbaijani, Turkmen, Qashqai) or Arabic. As Curatola and Scarcia (2004: 11) have commented, 'Numerous ethnic groups now inhabit Iran, within the framework of a morphologically unequal territory, in an original, somewhat culturally cohesive mosaic'. The contribution of Persian culture has been fundamental for the development of Iranian civilisation, but it has also had an impact far wider than the area inhabited by ethnic Iranians or the present political boundaries of Iran. The mosaic of contemporary Iran has also felt the impact of conflicts in neighbouring states with the consequence

that, over the past 20 years, the country has hosted the largest refugee population in the world, primarily rooted in the influx of over 2.6 million Afghans following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and 1.2 million Iraqis who left Iraq during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War and the 1990–91 Gulf War. The impact of these incomers, both temporary and long-term, has been felt in economic and also cultural terms.

Iran became the officially universal title for the country in 1935 when the Shah decreed that it was to be used in all international correspondence and official documents. In the English-speaking West, Iran had been traditionally known as Persia. Indeed, the name Persia commonly conjures up quite different images to the name Iran. Under the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran was seen as the playground of the European rich, famed for a liberal ideology, an excellent climate and wonderful natural resources (Pahlavi, 1980). Travel and tourism to Iran is not just a 20th century concept, there are early 17th Century accounts of intrepid travellers. Sir Anthony Sherley, for example, was received by the Shah, Abbas the Great, who made him a Mirza, or prince, and granted certain trading and other rights to all Christian merchants (Sherley, 1613). John Cartwright recorded details about the buildings of Esfahan and Persepolis and wrote extensively about the nature of the Persian peoples (Cartwright, 1611). By the 19th century, Iran was still seen as an exotic destination for the adventurer and explorer, as the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* attests. There are a number of papers presenting travellers accounts including: Biddulph (1891); Gibbons (1841); Goldsmid (1890).

Iran is incredibly rich in cultural and heritage resources and has in total eight listed World Heritage sites, and an additional 49 on the UNESCO tentative list (UNESCO, 2009). Of the eight listed sites, four are ancient historical sites: Bisotun, Pasargadae, Persepolis and Tchogha Zanbil (Table 15.1). The other listed sites are either historical towns or religious sites. The profile of the tentative list is very different. Of the 49 sites, 15 are historic towns, nine are historical landscapes and eight are natural landscapes. In addition, built heritage is further emphasised with six religious sites, one historical village, one garden, two bazaars and two military sites. Only four of the 49 are ancient historical sites and one is a prehistoric site. The emphasis of the tentative list is clearly towards more recent historical sites than the existing World Heritage list for Iran. There is a clear emphasis on the Islamic Period in the tentative list, with great attention to the cultural evolution of Iran as an artisan production and trading nation. Such sites include Yazd, the Ghaznavi-Seljukian Axis, Uramanat, Masouleh and Siraf.

This inventory reflects both ancient and more modern facets of Iran's cultural heritage but provides the basis for cultural tourism visitation experiences that, potentially, can be set alongside 'leading brand' destinations such as Egypt, Greece, India, Italy and Turkey in terms of both their historical importance and their visual splendour. That modern Iran does not enjoy such status in tourism terms is the consequence of a number of factors but none stands out as strongly as the political consequences of the country's recent history, a theme which forms the backbone of our discussions in this chapter.

The remainder of this chapter is in three sections based on key historical and political phases in the evolution of modern Iran: the Shahanshah and the Ayatollah, President Khatami and the Dialogue of Civilisations, and President Ahmadinejad and the rise of the neo-conservatives. Our purpose is demonstrate the relationship between the dramatically changing political tableaux of the country over the past 40 years, the challenges

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