

Travel to the Islamic Republic of Iran

20 July to 7 August 2011



I was awarded a UCL Travel Grant to visit the Islamic Republic of Iran in summer 2011. In this journey I set out to explore a country which remains outside of mainstream tourist destinations, yet offers an impressive cultural and historical heritage to the few travellers that choose Iran as their destination.

The trip started with a two day stopover in Minsk. Having found a cheap flight through Belarus, my travelling companion and I decided to take a look at what Soviet architecture looks like. On July 22nd, we were amongst the very few female passengers on the Minsk-Tehran flight, which was predominantly carrying Belarusian (male) engineers who were going to Iran on work assignments.



Wall mirror detail, traditional house, Kashan

On arrival we spent two days in Tehran, trying to get used to being fully covered (including wearing a headscarf and socks with sandals) in the summer heat. At the end of July the temperatures in Tehran reach 37°C, whilst in the Southern cities they can be as high as 42°C. Leaving the capital, our first stop was Kashan, a small town south of Tehran famous for its traditional houses. The houses and an immaculately restored *hammam* are beautiful examples of Qajar era Persian architecture. From Kashan we moved on to Toudeshk, a small oasis in the desert where one can experience traditional life through a home stay.



Our home in the desert, Toudeshk



Looking down from a heart-shaped hole in the roof at life inside the Bazaar – Iranian women shopping for textiles, Yazd

Our next stop was Yazd, a beautiful desert-city famous for its mud-brick old city, covered walkways, and bazaars. The old town is one of the oldest towns on earth, as it is believed to have been inhabited for over 7,000 years.

Looking at the city from the bazaar rooftop offers amazing views of blue tiled domes and minarets standing against the surrounding desert.

lly, Yazd
een a

nism, a
c religion
ain
Iran until

l by the
uest.
oastrians
tute a
: minority
azd,
nore than
ie local
1. They
stinct

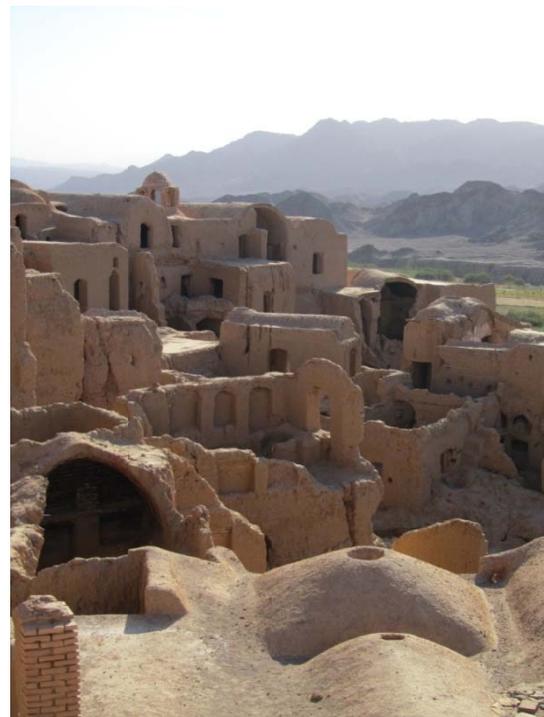


Mirror decoration and martyr shrine, Inside of mosque, Yazd



Jameh mosque, Yazd

From Yazd our trip continued South to Shiraz, one of the biggest cities in Southern Iran with a colourful atmosphere and a bursting bazaar. Shiraz is most famous for its mosques, poets and splendid gardens.



Village of Karanaq

Around Yazd we visited a number of small archaeological sites including the village of Karanaq, which is believed to be almost 1,000 years old. The village is now deserted and offers impressive views over the mountainous surroundings.



Sheikh Lotfallah mosque, Esfahan

The one destination that we could not miss: Esfahan, the 'jewel of ancient Persia' and Iran's main tourist attraction. Naqsh-e Jahan Square, today called Imam Square, with its renowned blue tiled Islamic buildings, is one of the finest examples of Islamic art in the world. The square complex is the second largest space in the world, second only to Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

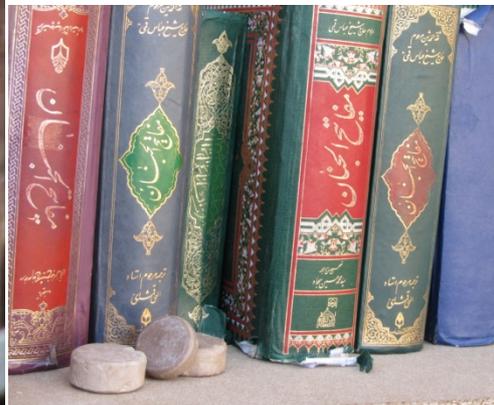


Particular from the Mosque portal



Man praying inside a Mosque

Islam as a religion is an important aspect of life in the Islamic Republic. Such importance is reflected in the countless number of mosques and shrines that can be visited.



Religious texts in a mosque



Iranian women in front of Imam Mosque, Esfahan



The nomads' tent where we slept for the night

A real highlight of our trip was a visit to a family of nomads living in the mountains near Yasuj. The family belongs to a Turkish-speaking nomadic tribe that moves the mountains in summer to escape the burning heat of the desert valley.



'Spared dinner' – luckily we arrived unannounced

It is a tradition in nomadic hospitality culture to slaughter a sheep to feed your guests.



'Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.' Night view up in the mountains

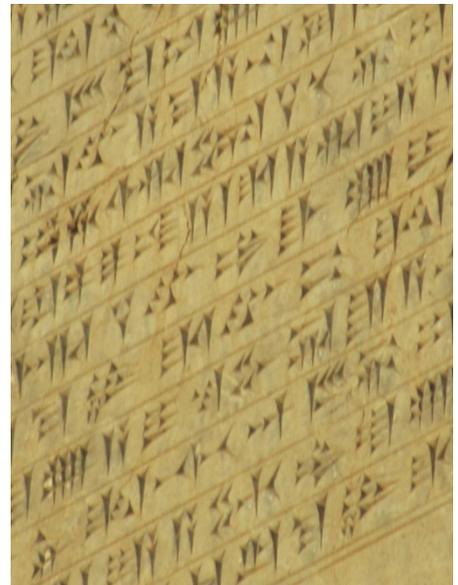


Our host making bread for breakfast

The archaeological must-see of this trip was the ancient city of Persepolis (the city of Persia). The city was the capital of the Achaemenid Empire, built more than 2,500 years ago and destroyed by the army of Alexander the Great in 330 BC. What we see today is the ruins of ancient colossal buildings. The ruins and the broken columns still convey a feeling of how grand the city had once been. Watching the sunset at Persepolis was startling.



Xerxes' Gateway, Persepolis



Cuneiform writing, Persepolis



Internal courtyard of a traditional house, Kashan



Yazd, view from rooftop of the bazaar