

Iran might surprise you in some ways!

I took my first trip to Iran in 2009. I was running a cooking school out of my Clerkenwell apartment and regularly went on trips abroad, shadowing women in their kitchens as they prepared family meals. But with sanctions and the lack of tourism in Iran it was impossible to arrange anything beforehand.

A Persian woman sitting next to me in the Iranian embassy while I waited for my visa waved her hand at me airily and said: "Oh, just go to the bazaar and look a bit lost. Someone will take you home with them."

On my first day in the country a rather grumpy young man struck up a conversation, scribbled down his address and invited me to his family home the next day. Thus began a routine where each morning I went to their apartment on the outskirts of Yazd and spent three or four hours cooking elaborate Persian meals with his mother.

Iranians breakfast like champions

Forget granola or avocado smash on toast. Try camel-milk clotted cream with honeycomb, or sheep head and foot soup. Better still ask someone to point you to the nearest sangak bakery, where your bread will be baked on a mountain of fire-hot pebbles and then impaled on a wall of nails to cool.

Persians are romantics

Contrary to what CNN would have you believe, Iranians read the words of their national poets Hafez and Ferdowsi. Young couples stroll arm in arm in parks full of orange blossom, eating spoonfuls of faludeh (a kind of pomegranate and rosewater slush) and reading their favorite passages to each other.

Behavior is guided by an endearing social tenet called 'tarof'

It is an ancient ritual of grace and deference that as an outsider you can only begin to understand. Watch two Iranian men spend 10 minutes arguing over who is the least worthy of passing first through a doorway.

Observe a shopkeeper insisting sev-



Tabiat bridge in Tehran, Iran (Photo: Unknown)

eral times to a customer that an item is free before finally accepting payment. Much of tarof is a kind of word-play charade, however tourists beware: if you let your gaze linger too long on someone's food or even clothing, don't be surprised to find them insisting on giving it to you. Politely refuse three times to let your giver off the hook.

There are no resorts, no chain hotels, and little to no hassle

There are plenty of opportunities to go off the beaten track and stay in old desert caravanserai or trek from village to village in the mountains. While Airbnb continues to be blocked in Iran, couch surfing is a wonderful way to meet Iranians and there is a blossoming home-stay market with Iranians opening up their ancestral houses to tourists.

As a foreign visitor to Iran you will be treated like a guest instead of an economic opportunity.

Persians have a magical way with rice

Iranian rice is soaked and bathed like a princess, and steamed in a pool of melted butter for an hour over the gentlest of heat. It is so impossibly light and fluffy it could fill the quilts and pillows of Buckingham Palace, and best of all is the tah-dig: a crisp, buttery, golden crust of rice left to scorch on the bottom of the pan. Beg, borrow or steal an invite to an Iranian home-cooked meal and taste it for yourself.

Iran is actually brilliant for solo female travelers

Iranians will both be in awe of your courage and pity you that you have no husband and apparently no friends either.

Either way, as a lone female in Iran you

get the best of both worlds. You can ride in women-only subway carriages and go to all-female parties where you can toss your coat and headscarf into the pile at the door and let your hair down, but you'll also be accepted as an honorary man and be permitted to smoke pipes, eat offal and spit bones on to the floor with truck drivers in places that Iranian women wouldn't dare set foot.

Iran is dizzyingly modern

Compared to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Iran is very modern. Literacy is at 97%, women outnumber men in university enrolment, and internet and social media use in Iran remains high. Iranians as a whole are far more educated and informed about the west than we are about them. If you think of Iran as a medieval backwater, prepare for a shock.

(Source: The Guardian)

NEWS

"Iran in Tehran" to celebrate national cultural diversity

TEHRANTIMES Tourism Desk TEHRAN — Different Iranian communities come together at a cultural festival entitled "Iran in Tehran".

The festival which started on Thursday at Tehran's Javanmardan Park will run for two weeks.

Participants in over 60 stands and nomadic tents will welcome the festivalgoers during the event.

Various Iranian communities and nomadic tribes including Kurds, Lurs, Baluchs, Qashqai, Kormanji, Turkmen, Azeri, Gilak, Khorasani and some tribes from southern Iran will attend the event.

Some traditional music performances and rituals will be held each night and the participants will offer handicrafts, souvenirs and traditional cuisines during the event.

The Iranian nomads will also hold an exhibition entitled "Iranian Life" on the sidelines of the festival.

During the exhibition, the nomadic lifestyle and family terms will be introduced to the visitors.

The Tehran Municipality's Beautification Organization and Kuch-e Qashqai Company sponsor the event.

The Javanmardan Park can be found on Dehkadeh Olympic Blvd., off Hemmat Highway.

Who are Iranian Qashqai?

The Qashqais, a semi-nomadic people in southwestern Iran (Fars Province), form the second largest Turkic group in the country, after the Azerbaijanis. Numbering anywhere between one and two million, they are well organized, politically motivated, and active.

Their nomadic route, from the highlands north of Shiraz (yaylaq or summer quarters) to the lowlands north of the Persian Gulf (kishlaq or winter quarters) is about 300 miles in length.

The heyday of Qashqai prominence on the Iranian scene was during the 19th and the early years of the 20th centuries. In 1918, for instance, the Qashqais defeated the British-led South Persia Rifles. In the 1930's, Reza Shah closed the pass that connects the summer and winter quarters of the tribe, many died of hunger and many were forced to temporarily settle near the pass.

After Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, the Qashqais resumed their traditional nomadic migrations. The last Qashqai revolt in the early 1960's was suppressed with great force. Since that time, the Qashqai lands have been relatively peaceful.

(Source: angelfire.com)

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