

Nowruz symbolizes fertility and rejuvenation



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The Persian New Year, Nowruz, has been observed for over 3,000 years as the victory of light over darkness. For the Northern Hemisphere, March 21 is the first day of spring. But for 300 million people around the world, it's the beginning of a new year, too. Nowruz—which means “new day”—is a holiday marking the arrival of spring and the first day of the year in Iran, whose solar calendar begins with the vernal equinox, the National Geographic reported. Nowruz has been celebrated in Iran for more than 3,000 years. Its roots are as a feast day in Zoroastrianism, a religion practiced in ancient Persia that viewed

the arrival of spring as a victory over darkness. It spread across the globe through the diaspora of Persian people throughout history.

What is Nowruz?

Traditionally celebrated on the vernal equinox, many begin preparations for Nowruz weeks in advance. In the leadup to the holiday, people perform various rituals and fill vessels in their home with water, which is associated with health, in an attempt to banish bad luck. On the night before the last Wednesday of the year, many celebrate Charshanbe Suri, a night in which they jump over fire or go to doors banging spoons to scare away

bad luck. People also visit cemeteries and bring offerings for the dead, whom some believe visit before the spring rite begins. The spring festival's focus is fertility and new life, so it's appropriate that many revelers celebrate with seeds and eggs. Households set up tables covered with seven symbolic items they call haft-seen. Haft means “seven” and “seen” is the letter “s” in Farsi, and all of the items start with this letter. These include seed sprouts (usually wheat, oats and other seeds, which symbolize rebirth), *senjed* (also known as silverberry or Persian olive, which is thought to spark love), garlic (protection), apple (fertility), sumac

(love), vinegar, and *samanu*, a pudding made of sprouted wheat (affluence). The table usually includes a Holy Qur'an, eggs, a mirror, and collection of Hafez's poetry. Although Nowruz is an ancient tradition, the haft-seen table tradition isn't. As A. Shapur Shahbazi notes in Encyclopedia Iranica, it only came into effect in the last century.

Who celebrates Nowruz?

Nowruz has proven resilient in the modern era. It is also an official holiday in Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia's Bayan-Ölgii Province, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uz-

bekistan, and it's widely celebrated in places like Turkey, India and other places with Persian enclaves. In 2009, UNESCO, the cultural arm of the United Nations, listed the holiday on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, noting that it “promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighborliness.” March 21 is officially recognized as the International Nowruz Day, though the holiday itself is celebrated between March 19 and 22, depending on calendars and vernal equinox calculations.



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Isfahan in ancient times

The center of Fars Province is connected by several roads with the large towns of northern Persia. In the Middle Ages, the road from Shiraz to Isfahan did not pass through Istakhr, as it does now; the shorter route through the town of Mayin was considered the main road. This road joined, it would seem, the present-day one near the town of Yazdikhvast, situated on a cliff in the middle of a valley; this town, despite its ancient name, is not mentioned in the tenth-century itineraries. It is the fourteenth-century itinerary by Hamd Allah Mustawfi Qazwini that mentions the chief towns along this route, Qumish and Yazdikhvast; the route from Yazdikhvast to Shiraz through Mayin was called the “summer route” (*rah-e tabestani*) and the present-day detour the “winter route” (*rah-e zemestani*). In Sassanid times, there was here the town of Jay. Its founding was attributed to Alexander of Macedonia, and the name of

this town is frequently encountered even on the coins of the Arab period. The town of Jay of the Sassanid Period was built on the model of all Sassanid towns with four gates. In the 10th century, the old town was known by the name of Shahrestan and was inferior to Yahudiyya in size and population. The distance between Shahrestan and Yahudiyya was two miles, that is, about four versts. There was near Shahrestan a large bridge across the Zayandeh Rud. Shahrestan is mentioned still by Chardin as a large town east of Isfahan with many ruins of ancient buildings. Shahrestan was built by Alexander the Great and renewed under the Sassanids. From among the Arab geographers, the most detailed description of Jay, or Shahrestan, is given by Ibn Rusta, himself a native of this town. According to the historian of Isfahan, the Friday Mosque was built by the Arabs of the Banu Tamim tribe, and it was enlarged



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under the caliph Muqtadir in the tenth century; a library whose catalog alone consisted of three volumes later belonged to it. This Friday Mosque is still shown today; although it has retained its name, “Friday Mosque” after the construction of the mosque of Shah ‘Abbas I it lost its religious primacy, and as a result of the numerous re-

constructions to which it was subjected it presents no architectural interest. The plain in which Isfahan lies is surrounded by mountains on all sides (except on the southeast, where it is contiguous with the steppe). It is remarkable for its warm climate and plentiful water supply. Every variety of crop can grow here except the pome-

granate, but even this points to the beneficial aspects of its climatic conditions, since pomegranate trees grow only in localities with an unhealthy climate. The soil needs abundant fertilizing, for which pigeon manure is collected from special towers, and, in addition, town refuse is used. The fields are irrigated from

the small river of the Zayandeh Rud and its canals. There is also well water. The river flows out of the Zard Kuh Mountain and to the southeast of Isfahan it disappears in salt marshes; local inhabitants have retained to this day the belief that it surfaces again in Kerman and flows into the sea. Despite the glorification of the Zayandeh Rud by the poets of Isfahan, its water was at the end of the tenth century, so polluted with the refuse of the town that people stopped using it for drinking. In the tenth century, Isfahan was, after Ray, the most important town between Arab Iraq and Khorasan; some of the Buyid rulers chose it as their capital. After the Buyid Dynasty, several Seljuk sultans lived in Isfahan. Thanks to its favorable position, the town could rapidly recover not only from the Mongol invasion but also from the more terrible devastation by Timur in 1387.

The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter entitled, 'Isfahan, Kashan, and Qum' from a book entitled, 'An Historical Geography of Iran', edited by "Charles Issawi and Bernard Lewis", published by Princeton University Press Princeton, New Jersey.