

# Meymand, Iran's ancient troglodyte village



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In addition to the pristine nature, awe-inspiring architecture, and ancient history that Iran has to offer, visitors can't seem to get enough of its quaint villages. One such place is Meymand in Kerman Province, Iran's troglodyte village carved deep in the heart of the mountains, 2,240 meters above sea level.

Although artifacts and inscriptions found around the village date back some 12,000 years, and are indicative of life here at that time, the village itself is said to have been continuously inhabited for 2,000-3,000 years.

## Culinary delights

While meat is more common these days, locals claim that the ancient inhabitants of the region were raw vegan. And that

makes sense considering one of the traditional dishes of Meymand is *ghaatoogh-e beneh*, a raw vegan, cold soup prepared with *beneh* (wild pistachios).

## Religion and language

Prior to the advent of Islam, Meymand was a Zoroastrian settlement, and before that it is believed that the people worshipped the sun. In fact, Teer-e Khorin, a peak that receives the first rays of the sun at dawn, remains an important site for locals today.

While locals speak Persian, you'll notice that their speech retains elements of Middle Persian, or Pahlavi.

## Architecture

Approximately 400 *kichehs* (alleys)

have been dug out to reach enough depth to dig out rooms. Inside each alley, there's a terrace leading to 1-7 rooms, some with higher ceilings that serve as living quarters and others that serve as stables or storage. Currently, of these 2,500 rooms, about 80% are uninhabited.

Much like Kandovan (another rocky village in the northwest East Azerbaijan Province, which is about 700 years old), the rooms in Meymand have been chiseled by hand out of volcanic rock. Thanks to the open stone fireplaces in the verandas, the smoke from the fires coated the ceilings and walls, creating a thick black soot which not only prevented the rock from crumbling, it also deterred mosquitos and other insects.

In the past, people got their water from qanats, ancient underground aqueducts, but now neighbors share a source of running water just outside their *kicheh*.

Can you imagine living in a place with only 40 residents? Or even fewer because only about half of that number lives here year-round.

## Seasonal migration and harvesting

Sustainability is important for locals which is why they live alongside nature and migrate three times a year, spending approximately four months in each location. They spend the winter months dwelling in the caves in Meymand, the center of the cultural

landscape. In the spring, they migrate to the south in a plain area suited for animal husbandry. This is also where they harvest wild almonds. In the warm summer months and the beginning of autumn, they move once again to the gardens in the north, where they harvest wild pistachios, pears, grapes, walnuts, and wild olives, among other things.

## Ancient art

North of Meymand, you can find ancient graffiti, petroglyphs and pictographs, the oldest of which is said to be 4,500 years old. In fact, UNESCO states that this pictograph, the only one of its kind in Iran, appears to be a birth scene.

## Evolution of Persian art from the 16th to 18th century

Scholars of the Persian miniature are inclined to believe that the last quarter of the 16th century was not only a time when old traditions were followed but when a new style was formed which found its expression in the works of the Isfahan school.

Unfortunately, other branches of Persian art of the 16th century, above all applied arts such as ceramics, carpets and textiles, although they are represented by hundreds of examples in the world's museums, have not yet been sufficiently researched to enable one to confirm or deny the idea that a new phase in the history of art was formed in the second half of the 16th century. Perhaps the lack of thorough research on these materials, and especially on the evolution of their ornamentation, is a factor here.

But it is possible to assume that the changes in art during the second half of the 16th century were not as great as during the second half of the 14th century and therefore they are not reflected in all art forms (for example, it is entirely unclear whether there were any sort of changes in architecture). In other words, we can now consider the second half of the 16th century to be a time of transi-

tion to a new phase, although this latter is not as clearly distinguishable as its predecessors. It is therefore difficult to speak of a canon style during this phase. We now see a renewal of interest in representations of the human form, which is probably most clearly visible in textiles, although one may suppose that such fabrics do not represent a large proportion of the entire range of textile production. In 17th-century ceramics the strong influence of Chinese art can again be observed, but now aroused by the interest of Europeans in Chinese porcelain. Other art forms do not seem to experience any new Chinese influences.

During this phase active contacts with European art begin – first of all in painting. Traces of European influence can already be observed in the mid-17th century. First and foremost, this influence involves the court miniature, but it then spreads to other branches of art where it is reflected to varying degrees. Here it is important to stress the fact that interest in European art initially arose in court circles, although there were various channels through which the influence was transmitted. Apparently, the appearance of this new

factor in 17th-century Persian art did not yet signify the emergence of a separate phase, nor even the onset of a transitional period – which became noticeable only from the end of the 17th century. An analysis of metalwork serves to support this argument.

Although there are few precisely dated pieces from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a chronological series can be reconstructed. Changes are noticeable which could be explained by a decline in the quality of pieces, linked to their increased mass-production. For example, on copper and bronze (brass) items, the surface of the background to the design is not entirely hatched. Although hatching was obligatory during the 17th century; we now see in places only the engraved design against a plain background.

The omission of the hatching increases during the first half of the 18th century and around the middle of the century a complete break with tradition takes place, for in the second half of the century the background of Iranian copper and bronze (brass) objects is tooled with punches and the hatching disappears completely.



A ceramic plate from 18 century