

Unleashing Iran's tourism capacities: The Raisi effect

Massive income from tourism

Statistics reveal a compelling story: foreign tourists injected \$6.2 billion into Iran's economy in 2022, marking a substantial 73.5% jump from 2021, when international visitors spent \$2.5 billion. Combined over two years, that's a hefty sum of \$8.7 billion. On top of that, we need to factor in the spending of Iran's domestic tourists, who shelled out 225 thousand billion tomans (over \$7.5 billion) in 2021 and then upped their game in 2022, splashing

out over 316 thousand billion tomans (over \$8.1 billion), reflecting a 40.1% year-on-year increase. Ebrahim Raisi, the late president, consistently underscored the importance of harnessing all of Iran's diverse capacities to the fullest and set an ambitious target of attracting 15 million foreign tourists annually. Within the tourism sector, this goal stood as one of the most pivotal axes emphasized by the president and his government.

Share of incoming tourists to Middle East

A 2022 World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) report shed light on Iran's burgeoning appeal to foreign tourists. In 2022, international visitor arrivals surged, with 4.1 million trips recorded — a remarkable 315% uptick compared to the previous year, effectively quadrupling the number. However, Iran's share of the global tourism pie remains modest, capturing only 0.4% of all foreign tourist trips in 2022.

The 315% surge in foreign tourist arrivals in 2022 marked a dramatic rebound from the previous years' declines: an 83% drop in 2020 due to the widespread impact of the coronavirus pandemic, followed by a 30% dip in 2021. Meanwhile, the Middle East as a whole welcomed 66 million foreign tourists in 2022, reflecting a robust 163% growth year-on-year. Iran's share of this regional tourism pie stood at an estimated 6%.

Ecotourism permits, national works

In September 2023, Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts issued a comprehensive statistical and comparative report at an exhibition, detailing its accomplishments over the previous two years. Among its notable achievements, the ministry highlighted the expansion of the country's hospitality infrastructure with the addition of 313 hotels (excluding those in free zones) and the issuance of permits for 849 ecotourism accommodations. Furthermore, an im-

pressive array of cultural treasures has been recognized: 427 movable cultural properties, 595 immovable cultural properties, 302 tangible works, and 476 intangible works — amounting to a total of 1,800 entries — have been inscribed on the list of national treasures. In the Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended March 20, 2022), Iran's national programme to safeguard the traditional art of calligraphy gained international recognition with its inscription on UNE-



The late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi (front-L) visits the Ashuradeh Island and Khazini Canal in the Caspian Sea on December 21, 2023, while reviewing plans to dredge and revive the Gorgan Bay on a boat.
● IRNA

SCO's list of Good Safeguarding Practices. Then, in a remarkable leap forward, four joint international cases — celebrating Yalda (Shab-e Chelleh), the art of crafting and playing the oud instrument, sericulture and traditional production of silk for weaving, and Turkmen-style needlework art — were approved at the UNESCO meeting in Rabat, Morocco, in 2022. This propelled Iran to sixth place globally on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Additionally, in line with the 10-year plan, two global files showcasing Iran's tangible cultural heritage — the cultural landscape of Masouleh and Hegmataneh, and the historical center of Hamedan — have been meticulously compiled and submitted. Field evaluations for one of the world's most extensive serial registration files, titled "54 Iranian Caravanserais," have been completed. Seven cases of intangible cultural heritage, including Iftar and its associ-

ated social and cultural beliefs, the art of gilding, the tradition of pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Imam Reza (PBUH), and the Sadeh Celebration, the Mehregan festival, the art of crafting and playing the Robab, and the traditional production of Rosewater along with its related social and cultural beliefs, have been forwarded to UNESCO for the years 2023 and 2024. These submissions are currently under review as part of UNESCO's cultural inscription process.

Foreign investment in tourism

On April 27, 2024, Ali-Asghar Shalbafian, Iran's deputy tourism minister, highlighted the surge in foreign investment in the tourism sector. He noted that since president Raisi took office, foreign investment in tourism had multiplied eighteenfold, reaching a substantial \$256 million by the close of the calendar year 1402 (ended

March 19, 2024). This was accompanied by the presentation of 600 investment packages by over 2,000 businessmen from 80 countries at the Iran Expo 2024 event. He deemed the exhibition's timing crucial in light of previous events, underscoring its significance as the standout feature of the next expo. He elaborated, "The very

fact that this exhibition is taking place sends a clear message about the prevailing security in our country. This visual testament can be leveraged by businessmen and merchants to convey this reality to the world, effectively dispelling any doubts that may have arisen due to recent developments."

Revival of Gorgan Bay after 25 years

Gorgan Bay, also known as the Gulf of Gorgan, and its environs earned international recognition in 1975 as a wetland of significance by the Ramsar Convention. In 1976, UNESCO further acknowledged its ecological importance by classifying it as a natural biosphere reserve. However, between 2017 and 2021, a confluence of factors, including a drop in the Caspian Sea water level, sediment buildup, rampant

marine plant growth, canal closures, decreased rainfall, and heightened evaporation rates, resulted in the desiccation of 35% of this once-lush bay. Following the previous government's swift and effective interventions to resuscitate Gorgan Bay, the esteemed American scientific publication Science took note. A paper reported that just four weeks after the Ashuradeh Canal opening in 2023, a

massive 1.5 billion cubic meters of water surged from the Caspian Sea into Gorgan Bay, elevating the water level by a full 40 cm. This timely influx of water resuscitated some 400 meters of coastal areas along the Caspian Sea that had previously dried up, restoring 3,000 hectares of the bay. Additionally, water salinity levels dropped from 48 units per thousand to 27 units per thousand.



Heavy machinery work to open the Ashuradeh Canal in 2023, allowing water to flow from the Caspian Sea into the drying Gorgan Bay.
● BORNA