

Iranica Desk

Sistan is a captivating land rich with myths and stories from the *Shahnameh*, a realm filled with unknowns and hidden treasures. Ancient and historical sites, along with impressive castles—from the fabled Castle of Rostam to Sam Castle—highlight the continuity of life in this region, stretching back from prehistoric times to the early Islamic centuries. These sites not only serve as a testament to the area's rich history but also invite tourists from around the world to discover the wonders of this ancient city.

The region's ancient, historic, and robust castles serve as a clear reflection of the long-standing habitation that spans thousands of years and highlight Sistan's rich culture and its significance as one of the great centers of civilization in world history. The castles remain largely pristine and untouched, still holding many wonders and secrets just waiting to be uncovered, IRNA wrote.

Located in the northern part of Sistan and Baluchestan, Sistan is often regarded as the cradle of art, science, literature, and magnificent architecture. This region comprises a flat and enclosed area formed by the alluvial deposits of the ancient and current Helmand River Delta. Its untouched and pristine areas have earned it the reputation of being a hidden treasure, a land of unknowns, bestowing a unique heritage upon the world.

Sistan is essentially a treasure trove filled with everything considered essential for an important land, concealing numerous historical and natural sites within its borders. With its considerable capacity and potential for attracting tourists, the region is poised for growth. However, much of this potential remains hidden from the general public, as the attractions within Sistan do not enjoy the same level of recognition as other domestic travel destinations.

To unlock the full potential of Sistan's tourist and historical attractions, it is crucial to broadly introduce the area through mass media, influential bloggers, and dedicated tourism websites. Creating ongoing interaction and coordination with managers of domestic and international tours is an approach that should be pursued continuously. By taking these steps, new job opportunities can be generated for the residents of the region. Moreover, it is essential to identify the historical tourism capacities and capabilities to create an active and vibrant life for both citizens and visitors. If this is not achieved, these areas risk becoming abandoned spaces threatened in terms of their identity and structural integrity.

If there aren't enough facilities to draw tourists to the historical contexts, these sites may quickly decline and lose their historical identity. However, by harnessing existing opportunities and employing modern tools and strategies, we can better introduce and showcase our culture, civilization, and history. Such efforts are paramount in preventing the historical identity of this region from deteriorating.

Sistan; a land of myths and hidden treasures



Rostam Castle

One of the most famous historical remnants from the Islamic period in the Sistan region of Sistan and Baluchestan is Rostam Castle, named after the legendary hero of Iranian mythology, Rostam Dastan. This magnificent castle is situated approximately 70 kilometers from the main road that connects Zabol to Zahedan, specifically 70 kilometers southwest of Zabol. It lies just off the main road, after the Burnt City, accessible by traversing a few hundred meters.

Archaeological experts believe that its peak of glory and prosperity occurred during the Sassanid dynasty. In this vicinity, the remains of an ancient city can be found, showcasing impressive brickwork, mul-

multiple buildings, an entrance gate, a watchtower, and 15 defensive towers.

The central building of Rostam Castle features several important architectural elements, including a spacious courtyard, northern and southern verandas, numerous rooms arranged around the courtyard, a governor's residence, and a three-story security building integrated into the complex.

Some of the castle's rooms are adorned with intricately patterned latticed windows, skillfully crafted by placing bricks side by side. The castle's walls and fortifications are constructed to align with the natural landscape, extending in an irregular polygonal shape from east to west. The design of the castle

was deliberate, ensuring that the northern side effectively served as a windbreak against the notorious 120-day winds of Sistan. Notably, the eastern section of the castle, opposite the central building, features a large circular ice storage facility that rises approximately five meters above ground level.

In proximity to the central citadel, known as *shahneshin*, a stable can be found, behind which lies a long building featuring rows of feed troughs along its sides. Surrounding the castle is a moat measuring five to seven meters in width, with varying dimensions in certain areas. The accumulated soil has caused the depth of the moat to appear less significant over time.

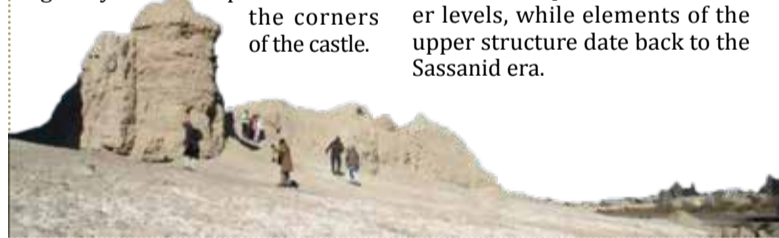
Given the climatic conditions, geo-

graphical status, and strategic location of the area, architects and builders were tasked with creating a robust fortress suitable for both military and residential functions. They utilized the most appropriate building material available: raw brick, although traces of plaster can also be observed in some rooms.

The entrance gate and the fifteen defensive towers that encircle the castle were designed to mitigate natural adversities. Arrow slits within the walls and towers, as well as the battlements, demonstrate the castle's defensive capabilities. Archaeological investigations in the area have also uncovered several silver coins belonging to Porandokht, a Sassanid queen.

Sam Castle

Sam Castle is shaped like an irregular trapezoid and features two gates—northern and southern—each complemented by a watchtower. Constructed during the Parthian era using raw brick, this complex includes more than thirty-six towers, with eight of them being significantly larger than the remaining twenty-eight smaller towers, which are strategically placed around the corners of the castle.



Named after Rostam's ancestor, the castle succumbed to destruction following a change in the course of the Helmand River, which led to flooding and water pressure that compromised its structure. The castle showcases a two-layered construction, with a central wall covered in mud on both sides.

Archaeological excavations have revealed Greek inscriptions from the Parthian period on the lower levels, while elements of the upper structure date back to the Sassanid era.



Khajeh Mountain

When discussing ancient mountains in Iran, Alborz is typically at the forefront; however, Khajeh Mountain also deserves recognition as a distinct geological feature. This mountain stands as one of the most significant tourist destinations in the Sistan region, located just a short distance from Zabol. It is home to invaluable historical artifacts that lie hidden from tourists, enhancing its allure. Additionally, the various beliefs and narratives surrounding Khajeh Mountain further elevate its importance.

Khajeh Mountain is a basaltic lava formation with a trapezoidal shape. In the past, when Hamun Lake was abundant, Khajeh Mountain appeared as an island rising above its waters. The mountain stands as the only natural feature in the Sistan, with an approximate height of 609 meters above sea level (around 100 meters above the surrounding area). It hosts remarkable archaeological sites from the Parthian dynasty. Although many portions of this earthen structure have suffered damage from natural and human factors, the architectural style of the fortress remains discernible.

Named after the tomb of Khajeh Mahdi, a Shia Muslim, whose

shrine is situated atop the mountain, Khajeh Mountain, along with Hamun Lake, is sacred to the followers of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam. This area has been extensively studied by researchers, all of whom recognize the Parthian and Sassanid architectural elements present. The most significant and largest archaeological remains of Khajeh Mountain are found on its southeastern slope. This area features three defensive walls, a main gate, side corridors, a central courtyard, and a fire temple, collectively known as Kafarun Castle. Above Kafarun Castle, the Kak Kahzad Complex is perched at the highest point. Mythology identifies Kak Kahzad as a demon-infested ruler who was defeated by Rostam Dastan, and this site is believed to be the location of a royal palace.

Architectural decorations in some sections of Kafarun resemble Greek styles, featuring Doric columns with spiral volutes. Other decorative elements, including small floral patterns resembling lotus blossoms, are influenced by Achaemenid art, with some similarities to Mesopotamian art as well. Evidence of regular stone staircases connecting Kafarun Castle to Kak Kahzad can still be observed.

Qalehno Village

Qalehno (literally meaning New Castle) is the only village in Sistan that has preserved its traditional fabric and indigenous architecture. The houses in this village are constructed with domed roofs and mud-brick walls, designed to mitigate the intense heat and the harsh, 120-day winds characteristic of the area.

Located along the Zabol-Zahak road, Qalehno's history spans

160 years, as documented by the travelogues of English travelers. During the Qajar era, villages in Sistan maintained a defensive and fortified structure. The village derives its name from a nearby earlier settlement, Qaleh Kohneh (Old Castle), which was established in the form of a fortress.

Built on a natural hill, Qalehno features houses arranged in a terraced manner, enhancing its unique architectural charm.

