

Beauty and diversity of Helen Protected Area

Iranica Desk

Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province shines like a jewel atop Iran's natural landscape, captivating nature enthusiasts from all walks of life. The winding mountain roads of this province lead to stunning sights that leave every viewer in awe. Among the many wonders of the province is an area known to locals as Helen.

The Helen Protected Area spans approximately 40,000 hectares and encompasses a diverse array of valleys, plains, elevations, villages, rivers, dense vegetation, and wildlife. This area is also home to nomadic tribes that maintain the spirit of life across this vast plain. The Helen Plain, famously referred to as "the Bride of Iran," is one of the most beautiful at-

tractions in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari and stands out as one of the best and most pristine areas for relaxation and nature tourism in Iran, IRNA wrote. In 1998, the Supreme Council of the Department of Environment made a decision to conserve 10% of the country's forest, leading to the selection of the Helen area for protection. Since 2001, it has

been practically managed by the provincial Department of Environmental Protection, with signage marking its boundaries. The Helen Protected Area is the second largest in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, following Sabzkouh, and is notable for being the only protected forest area in the province, with 30,000 hectares predominantly covered by western oak forests.



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Water sources and geography

In addition to the Karun River, which stretches about 65 kilometers, the area is fed by the Armand River and several springs. Helen encompasses around 31 villages within and around its borders, with the nomadic tribes being some of the most significant residents of this vast plain and protected area.

The Helen Protected Area covers approximately 40,200 hectares, with 30 hectares designated as forest and the remainder as pastureland. The landscape is entirely mountainous, featuring Mount Bazmani as its highest point at 3,225 meters, while the lowest point is located at the edge of the beautiful Armand River, at an elevation of 1,168 meters above sea level.

Legacy of Helen Jeffreys Bakhtiar

The Helen Protected Area is named after Helen Jeffreys Bakhtiar, an American nurse who married an Iranian Bakhtiari doctor. She arrived in Iran in 1931 and, along with her husband, migrated with the Bakhtiari tribe, dedicating herself to treating the local people. This coincided with the geographic mapping of that part of Iran and the Zagros Mountains, leading to the naming of a mountain in the area in her honor. Over time, the name came to refer to the entire vast plain where the mountain is located. Although she later separated from her Iranian husband, her love for Iran remained unwavering. Eventually, she was laid to rest in the city of Tus, near the tomb of the renowned Persian poet, Abolqasem Ferdowsi.

A seasonal paradise

The Helen Protected Area experiences a semi-humid climate, characterized by hot and dry summers and cold winters, making spring the best season to visit. The region's natural beauty is especially breathtaking in May, attracting many nature enthusiasts who set up camp to enjoy its stunning scenery. However, for those who can withstand the cold of winter and have the proper equipment and experience, winter also offers a unique beauty. One of the most beautiful aspects of the winter landscape is observed between the Berenjegan and Ma'dan villages, where the slope gradually increases, leading to heavy snowfall and beautiful avalanches cascading

into the river.

The region's climatic characteristics, along with its river ecosystems, dense forests, and diverse wildlife, create ideal conditions for attracting various species, particularly birds. As you embark on your journey through the dreamy plain of Helen, you'll encounter a variety of plants and pasture species. The vast and captivating flower fields are a defining feature of spring in this area, adorning the landscape. As you ascend in elevation, forests begin to appear, existing up to an altitude of 2,000 meters. At higher elevations, resilient species like wild bushes replace the expansive western oak forests.



Adventure and ecotourism opportunities

Helen Protected Area, with its breathtaking landscapes, the presence of nomadic tribes, and its unique geographical features — including the Love Valley (Darreh-Ye Eshq) Waterfall, abundant springs like Ab-e Sefid and Ab-e Gelur, forests, and pastures — offers an excellent array of conditions for attracting tourists. The region experiences two distinct climates: semi-cold winters and mild summers, complemented by snow-fed rivers.

For adventure seekers, Helen is one of the most attractive areas in Iran for rafting and water recreation. Since the construction of the Karun 4 Dam, ecotourism in this region has flourished, allowing for enjoyable water sports such as rafting. The establishment of the Helen camp has made it possible for tourists to stay in professional tents available in the area.

One of the best recreational activities in this stunning region is shuttle rafting, an exhilarating water sport that offers an unforgettable experience. Riding the rapids and gliding through the pristine waters of Helen will undoubtedly provide you with one of your most memorable adventures.

In recent years, a 15-kilometer trail has been designed between Gandomkar and Jowzestan villages, offering a unique hiking experience for enthusiasts. This trail passes through oak forests and crosses wooden and wire bridges, stone steps, and well-trodden paths. Along the way, you'll encounter natural waterfalls, rushing rivers, and beautiful wildlife. For photography enthusiasts, the protected Helen Protected Area serves as an exceptional backdrop for capturing stunning images.

Practical tips for visiting

For those wishing to stay in the Helen Plain, camping is the most common option. If you plan to sleep in nature, be sure to follow the guidelines and pack essential equipment, including a sleeping bag, blanket, personal items, power bank, suitable swimwear, and extra clothes. Additionally, bring sunscreen, warm clothing, summer clothes, appropriate shoes or sandals, nature exploration gear, and

a folding chair to enhance your outdoor experience. Prior planning will ensure that your visit to this picturesque region is both enjoyable and memorable.

Nestled in the heart of Iran lies Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, a small yet enchanting paradise that beckons travelers with its untouched and awe-inspiring natural treasures. Endowed with a pristine and beautiful nature,

this province serves as the cradle for three mighty rivers: Karun, Dez, and Zayandeh Rud. The harmonious convergence of these magnificent rivers, along with numerous springs and abundant waterfalls, have sculpted a captivating tapestry of natural landscapes that leave every viewer spellbound. The region's climate and geographical features have transformed it into an idyllic haven for

nomadic communities, particularly in the west.

Nomadic groups thrive off the pursuit of fertile pastures, as their economy revolves around husbandry. Conversely, the eastern fringes of the province are predominantly inhabited by farmers. As for the plant cover, this area boasts a diverse range of landscapes, including lush forests and verdant lawns.