

Building bridges of culture, tourism between Iran, Japan

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INTERVIEW

Historical documents show that Persian culture has had a significant influence in East Asian countries throughout the past centuries, and many historical and cultural artifacts and tablets are still being discovered in these countries, proving the extent of their longstanding relations with Iran. Japan, a fascinating country in East Asia, and Iran share a long-standing tradition of friendly relations rooted in historical and cultural ties, alongside economic and political interactions. The two countries have had extensive relations dating back to the prosperous Silk Road era, with a number of people frequently traveling between the two countries. In recent years, both sides have managed to familiarize each other with their arts and customs through cultural weeks and the exchange of cultural and artistic delegations. Japanese tourists are keen to travel to Iran, and many of them develop a fondness for this country after their first trip and experience traveling here two or three more times thereafter. They are not only interested in viewing historical sites but also wish to have experiential travels in Iran, such as living with nomads. They are eager to get acquainted with Iranian culture and customs up close, and they also admire the natural beauty of Iran. In recent decades, both short and feature films from Iran have established a strong presence in the international arena. Cinema enthusiasts in Japan, like their counterparts in other countries, have heard the acclaim for some Iranian films and are eager to watch them. The Iranian Film Festival, held every August by the cultural center of the Iranian Embassy in Japan in the Minato Ward of Tokyo, has become a prominent event in Japan. To assess the level of cultural and tourism relations between the two countries, Iran Daily conducted an interview with Saisho Yuta, the political counselor of Embassy of Japan in Iran, which will follow below.



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IRAN DAILY: How have tourism relations between Iran and Japan developed in recent years? Are there any specific trends or changes you have observed during this time?

SAISHO YUTA: As you know, at the beginning of this year, the Iranian government eased its visa policy for Japanese tourists. They decided to exempt the touristic visa for Japanese people. Normally, this had a lot of effect on increasing Japanese tourists to Iran. Because in Iran, there are a lot of touristic assets, a lot of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, so it should have normally increased. But, after April, due to the regional situation, it became very hard for Japanese tourists to come to Iran even though they were interested in visiting. They are very careful and cautious. But if one day, I hope it will not be too far from today, the situation will be much calmer. At that will be the moment to accept a lot of Japanese tourists in Iran.

Are there any specific places or experiences that are popu-

lar among Japanese tourists? For example, are there any specific hot springs or something like this that you believe would be more appealing for Japanese tourists?

Isfahan and Tabriz are very picturesque touristic places for Japanese tourists, and they are very pleased to visit Iran. But as you mentioned, Japanese people are hot spring lovers. Japan is a volcanic and seismic country, similar to Iran, which hosts a lot of very appealing hot spring places in the country. I didn't have a chance to visit yet, but Ardebil, Sarein, and many other cities in Iran have hot springs. Nowadays, it's the time of Instagram and Twitter so, if one day there are many Japanese who know such information and some have already visited such places, information will be shared immediately. At that time, maybe we can have many more Japanese tourists in such hot spring places. In the beginning of 2000, some Japanese researchers studied 18 hot spring places in Iran. They wrote a report and sent it to the Iranian government. JICA,

the Japan International Cooperation Agency, accepts many government officials every year to provide capacity-building cooperation and courses related to governmental issues. One of the courses they gave was tourism courses, and one of its lectures was about hot springs. An Iranian official attended this course. The Iranian Embassy in Tokyo asked this guy to conduct a survey about the development of hot spring tourist destinations near Tehran. It was already almost 20 years ago. I sent an email to him yesterday, and I received his reply. Maybe they are still interested in knowing how the situation has developed since then and how he can contribute again to the Iranian hot spring tourist places.

What about UNESCO World Heritage Sites? Are they interesting for Japanese tourists?

Yes, as far as I know, Iran is the 11th country in terms of the number of World Heritage Sites, and Japan is the 12th. So, the numbers are very close. This summer, Japan and Iran



Saisho Yuta (R) and his colleague Toyoko Morita
● IRAN DAILY/HOSSEIN NAQIZADEH

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Japanese tourists in Iran

succeeded in adding one more UNESCO World Heritage Site, so congratulations to Iran. It was Hegmataneh in Hamedan Province. Japan and Iran are among the countries with the largest number of World Heritage Sites. In Japan, there are many world heritage amateur, including me. The first place I traveled to visit in Iran was the Soltanieh Dome in Zanjan. So, there are many options to visit other than Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, or Shiraz, and there are always a lot of appealing places in Iran in this regard once the situation becomes calmer.

And how important is Iranian food in drawing attention of Japanese tourists? Is there any specific food?

As Japanese food, like *Washoku*, is appealing to foreign tourists, and because of this food appeal, Japan can invite a lot of foreign tourists. It's the same for Iran. To draw a lot of Japanese tourists, the cuisine factor is one of the most important ones. There are many good foods in Iran. Before I came here, my wife was a little bit worried about the sheep meat because sometimes it smells. But in Iran, it's very fresh. So far, she hasn't had any problems, and she also enjoys other foods, as well as vegetables and fruits. Now, it's the season for pomegranates, which are very tasty, and even in Japan, they are somewhat famous. Iranian nuts are number one. There is a lot of food attractiveness in Iran. Once you can share them with Japanese tourists, they will be more and more happy to visit Iran. Another factor is that nowadays, there are many more boutique hotels, very stylish and renovated hotels in Iran. They are much more appealing. I have already found some photos on social networking services (SNS) of very amazing renovated Iranian hotels in some places. They