



Iran sees tourism as strategic gateway to peace, growth: *Minister*



Arts & Culture Desk

Iran is opening its doors wider to international tourism investors, positioning the sector as a strategic engine for long-term development. At a high-level panel during the UAE's Annual Investment Meeting, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tour-

ism, and Handicrafts Reza Salehi Amiri outlined the country's vast and diverse offerings, from UNESCO-listed heritage sites to health tourism and ecotourism, and emphasized Iran's readiness for broad regional and international collaboration, IRNA reported.

"Tourism is not just an economic sector," Salehi Amiri said. "It's a strategic tool for sustainable growth, regional dialogue, and improving the country's global image." He called for a new model of investment focused on smart, civilization-based, and future-oriented approaches.

With 28 World Heritage sites and thousands of nationally recognized historical and natural landmarks, Iran offers one of the most diverse tourism landscapes in the region.

The minister described the nation as a "gateway to cultural diversity," noting strong potential in sectors such as wellness tourism, digital experiences, and heritage restoration.

He stressed that investment opportunities extend far beyond hotel construction. Iran is prioritizing areas like transport infrastructure, rural and community-based tourism, digital innovation, human resource training, and international cultural events.

"We're not only seeking capital," he said, "we're inviting vision."

Iran is actively simplifying foreign investment procedures. Incentives include tax breaks, streamlined permits, and access to strategic land. The minister highlighted public-private partnership models and the integration of successful international practices.

The strategic importance of tourism is embedded in Iran's national development agenda. Balanced destination growth, a focus on underdeveloped regions, sustainability metrics, and advanced technology integration are core elements of this vision.

Addressing the misrepresentation of Iran in Western media, Salehi Amiri

said, "We've been victims of biased narratives. Through cultural diplomacy and tourism, we aim to showcase Iran's true identity — a land of peace, heritage, and hospitality."

He added, "Travelers are the new ambassadors of peace."

Iran has seen a 40% increase in inbound tourism in 2023 and early 2024, despite ongoing sanctions. According to Salehi Amiri, this growth reflects "the enduring global appeal of Iran's history and culture."

On the sidelines of the conference, the Iranian minister met with Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi, the UAE's Minister of Culture.

The two discussed expanding cultural collaboration through joint exhibitions, cultural nights, and artisan showcases. "Cultural ties are a foundation for stronger political and economic engagement," Salehi Amiri noted. The Emirati side welcomed the proposals, calling shared heritage a

"valuable asset."

The minister also emphasized Iran's strategic partnership with China, calling it a cornerstone of the country's eastward tourism policy.

In another news report, in an interview with Phoenix TV, he described the Silk Road as a "symbol of civilizational dialogue," and highlighted joint cultural and media projects under a 25-year cooperation framework with Beijing.

Iran has partnered with Central Asian nations and China in reviving Silk Road routes, with Semnan joining the International Alliance of Silk Road Tourism Cities. Plans include collaborative infrastructure development, virtual tourism tools, and content co-production with Chinese broadcasters like CCTV.

"We're entering a new phase of cultural cooperation," Salehi Amiri said. "The Silk Road is not just a trade route. It's a cultural bridge uniting ancient civilizations with a shared future."

From Picasso crowds to policy gaps

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art faces crossroads

By Saeideh Ehsani Rad
Staff writer

INTERVIEW

A recent exhibition of works by Pablo Picasso, which opened in Tehran in late March, has emerged as the most prominent visual arts event of the Persian New Year holidays. Crowds lined up outside the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) once again, reflecting a rare level of public engagement. The event drew broad attention from local media, art critics, and researchers alike. The exhibition titled 'Picasso in Tehran' stood out not only for its content but also for its curatorial method—featuring multimedia elements and a narrative-based, research-driven approach. These elements distinguished it from previous shows at the museum and signaled a broader revival in public interest.

In light of the exhibition's success, Persian-language newspaper Iran conducted an exclusive interview with Reza Dabirinejad, the newly appointed head of the museum. A seasoned museum professional and former director of the Malek Museum, Dabirinejad is the first museum specialist to lead the TMOCA. His appointment follows years of managerial instability and criticism surrounding the institution. The full text of the interview follows:

How would you define the museum's role within Iran's cultural landscape?

The TMOCA holds one of the most significant collections of modern art in Iran and the world. It's not just art museum, it is a national institution. Because of its central role, it sets the standard for other art museums across the country, whether state-run, private, or semi-private.

The museum is in a unique position to lead on policy, draft museum regulations, and shape curatorial practices nationwide. It can provide templates for operational guidelines that other

institutions can adopt. In that sense, it functions as a hub within the broader museum network.

How do you assess the museum's condition since assuming leadership?

The museum is housed in one of Iran's most important architectural landmarks. Its structure, design, and collection give it a strong foundation. Over the years, various directors have worked hard to improve it, and many valuable exhibitions and cultural events have taken place here.

That said, the museum has experienced highs and lows. Internal administrative and financial issues, along with external social factors, have hindered progress. Museums, by nature, are sensitive to their social surroundings. They need to be responsive and proactive—through events, research, and education.

Over the last 50 years, museum practices worldwide have evolved. Standards have changed, and new systems have been developed. Unfortunately, the TMOCA has not kept pace with those developments in key areas like curatorial methods, museology, educational programming, research, conservation, and documentation.

Despite its national and international status, the museum still functions like a typical administrative office. It hasn't lived up to its full potential.

As director of the museum, what are your main plans for improvement?

One key initiative is to raise the museum's institutional standing. We plan to establish a policy and advisory council to bring in expertise from professional art sectors.

Another priority is strengthening specialized functions—such as conservation, preservation, and museum governance. By doing so, the TMOCA can act as a central and supportive hub for other museums across the country.

What is your biggest concern about the museum?

The biggest concern is the accumulation of unmet needs. If the museum aims to reach proper standards, we need substantial budgetary support to make up for years of delay.

Focusing only on exhibitions and ignoring the structural aspects—like documentation, preservation, and long-term service—would be a serious mistake. That imbalance could lead to irreversible losses over time.

To modernize operations, we need national-level funding. Administrative-level budgets are no longer sufficient.

We must recognize the museum's value and secure backing from policymakers and budget authorities. Only then can we launch urgent efforts to address deficiencies in infrastructure and conservation. We are also supporting a number of projects in provincial museums. Some are progressing well, but others need a push.

The main concern in regional museums is the lack of coherent content planning.

Globally, the role of museums has shifted. Art museums are no longer just repositories. They act as cultural and artistic meeting points. This perspective should shape how we redefine provincial branches of the museum. A unified content strategy and activity framework will help us reflect contemporary relevance.

Do you have plans to reorganize or expand the collection?

Reorganizing the collection is essential. We are working toward a comprehensive, scientific system for documentation. Improving the storage and exhibition environment is also part of this process.

Expanding the collection is another key responsibility. Even if financial conditions are not ideal, collection development must continue.

We will define a clear, principled acquisition policy that reflects both the mu-



seum's identity and broader cultural developments.



Reza Dabirinejad

What has been the public response to the Picasso exhibition?

The exhibition showcased works by Picasso that had not been previously displayed as a complete set. After expert consultation and planning, we launched the show late March, coinciding with Nowruz.

We focused on research and education. The exhibition offered substantial information, comparable to leading global shows. We used various formats—timelines, graphics, documentary films, motion design—to enhance communication.

We also produced themed materials and created interactive features. The exhibit had a curated narrative and a scenario that linked Picasso's position in global art history to Iranian artistic experiences.

As expected, the response was strong. Attendance before and during Nowruz exceeded expectations.

Daily visitors doubled compared to the museum's usual numbers. Nearly 50,000 people visited during the holiday period.

Most attendees were young and unfamiliar with past exhibitions. They had formal art education and were introduced to artists through social media. They found major names in



the museum's collection compelling and came out in large numbers.

Many visitors were travelers from other cities. The Night at the Museum program also drew attention.

Audience behavior stood out. They engaged deeply with exhibit texts, respected quiet spaces, and watched the media presentations attentively. The self-regulated, orderly visits—even forming lines—were remarkable.

It shows that museums can shape their audiences. It's important for us, because every museum needs loyal and engaged visitors.

The Picasso show also received international coverage. Diplomats attended the opening, and foreign media reported on public interest.

The exhibition projected a positive image of cultural awareness in Iran. That makes our job more important: we need to respond to this growing interest and maintain the momentum.