

Strategies for revitalizing Iran's tourism sector to overcome challenges

Iranica Desk

Iran, a land of astonishing cultural, historical, and natural diversity, has the potential to become an unparalleled tourism gem of the world. The time has now come for this hidden treasure to shine and attract global attention, unlocking significant economic and cultural opportunities for the country.

The tourism industry is one of the most lucrative sectors worldwide and plays a crucial role in driving economic growth, development, and employment. For this reason, many countries have recently invested heavily in developing infrastructure, improving conditions, and enhancing facilities to attract foreign visitors.

Challenges

Although Iran recognizes its immense potential and capacity, it appears that the necessary conditions to attract foreign tourists have not yet been fully established, and more fundamental measures are needed.

Considering this issue and the importance of exploring solutions for industry development, IRNA conducted an interview with Mahdiah Shahrabi Farahani, Ph.D. in Tourism and head of the Soft Technology and Cultural Industries Park Department for International Cooperation.

Referring to the reasons behind the declining interest of foreign tourists in Iran, she said, "There was a period when the influx of foreign tourists experienced a significant surge and growth, during which private sectors and industry stakeholders undertook many activities, and the government also implemented relatively good initiatives."

She noted that perhaps the most crucial reason is the lack of tourism as a strategic priority and a major national goal for Iran. The tourism industry has yet to be considered a concern or priority at the national level.

Impact of COVID-19

Other reasons have also been identified in recent years. One major factor is that, following the COVID-19 outbreak, countries worldwide faced a sharp decline in tourist arrivals, forcing nations to focus on revitalizing their tourism sectors to

recover the industry.

Iran, too, suffered greatly across various sectors — including tourism — after COVID-19. Many professionals in the tourism sector left the industry, and numerous tourism businesses that had laid off staff adapted by operating with reduced manpower, which consequently affected service quality.

Key tourist demographics and segments

"Another significant reason is that a large portion of inbound tourists come from neighboring countries. Iran fits this pattern well, as it is a destination for cultural, historical, religious, and natural tourism, covering almost all main types of tourism. Among tourists from neighboring countries, religious travelers constitute a large demographic, with very high numbers. There are also cultural-historical tourists, some of whom are Europeans, and others from neighboring nations. Understanding these tourist segments can help us develop targeted strategies."

"When the world shifted towards viewing tourism as a science, we did not adopt this perspective. We entered the tourism field very late and lacked a scientific approach and expert insight. Meanwhile, we are among the top ten countries in terms of tourism resources and are one of the oldest civilizations globally. However, in terms of physical infrastructure and media coverage, our performance has been quite weak."

She noted that, "Perhaps the most significant area where we still have weaknesses is the media. Many destinations worldwide may have just one main attraction or site, but they do countless activities to promote and develop it. Unfortunately, we have not performed as well as we should in this domain."

Role of media and social networks

A large part of Iran's activities as a tourist destination depends on the government. However, in recent years, the situation has slightly improved due to the growing activity of social media platforms, which are among the primary sources tourists consult."

She added, "Another factor is regional and domestic developments, along with external media activities, which have contributed to a decline in our country's tourism market. We have done little in this area. Social media networks, which are widely used in our consumer society, are industries that heavily rely on media. From a sociological perspective, we haven't utilized these platforms effectively, even though they are crucial tools for advertising and promotion in the tourism industry."

Many tourist destinations continue to benefit positively from media presence despite facing numerous challenges and tourist dissatisfaction. Media can play a decisive role in shaping either a negative or positive image of a tourism destination.

"Neglecting the tourism sector has many repercussions. One consequence is that other countries' destinations are replacing us. For example, in certain cultural fields — such as crafts, arts, ceremonies, and festivals — other nations are competing against us and effectively taking our place. This is very problematic because gradually restoring our true position will take a long time. In such a situation, many jobs are lost. Meanwhile, the tourism industry could even replace sectors like oil. We see that in countries lacking oil resources but with a strong tourism sector, they perform well economically."

She added, "Therefore, we are slowly losing our position in tourism as well. Countries that lack as much historical richness as ours are taking our place. In this scenario, we will also lose many other assets that have grown and developed thanks to tourism — such as handicrafts, the clothing industry, jewelry, arts, calligraphy, miniature painting, the carpet industry, and food industries. Even the revival and preservation of cultural heritage and artifacts — elements that could have been promoted through tourism — are at risk of disappearing."

Targeted strategies

Shahrabi Farahani stated, "Foreign tourists coming to Iran come from various groups and

sectors. One segment is religious tourists, who represent a very large and significant market. Another includes Chinese tourists, along with travelers from neighboring countries, and European tourists who view Iran as a cultural and historical destination. Strategies must be tailored to each of these groups."

She also emphasized that for certain events — such as Nowruz celebrations, ancient festivals, religious ceremonies, or Yalda Night — organized programs could attract international tourists eager to experience these traditions.

"Before COVID-19, many successful events were organized in certain tourism destinations, and we hope to see them continue. The private sector has been particularly effective in this area. Currently, these events rank among the most important programs, generating substantial economic benefits in some countries and even elevating these destinations to highly visited tourist spots."

"Considering that in ancient Iran we had traditional and religious festivals, we can organize events centered on national themes and, through international organizations and collaborations, even develop joint programs. This can serve as a gateway to attract more tourists to Iran. Planning for complementary destinations is also very beneficial."

Another aspect of expanding domestic tourism involves introducing lesser-known destinations to broaden potential markets. Each of these initiatives requires careful, separate planning at different times, in accordance with sustainable tourism principles.

She continued, "These long-term plans are effective. Unfortunately, many times we start an event and then abandon it due to reasons like management changes or other issues. But if these events are sustained and continuous, they can significantly boost tourism. Ultimately, tourism must become a major priority for us. If tourism is recognized as a cultural and national pride, we will undoubtedly succeed in this field and be able to establish and promote Iran's rightful position in the world, as it truly deserves."



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