

Global recognition of Iranian villages drives smart rural development

Iranica Desk

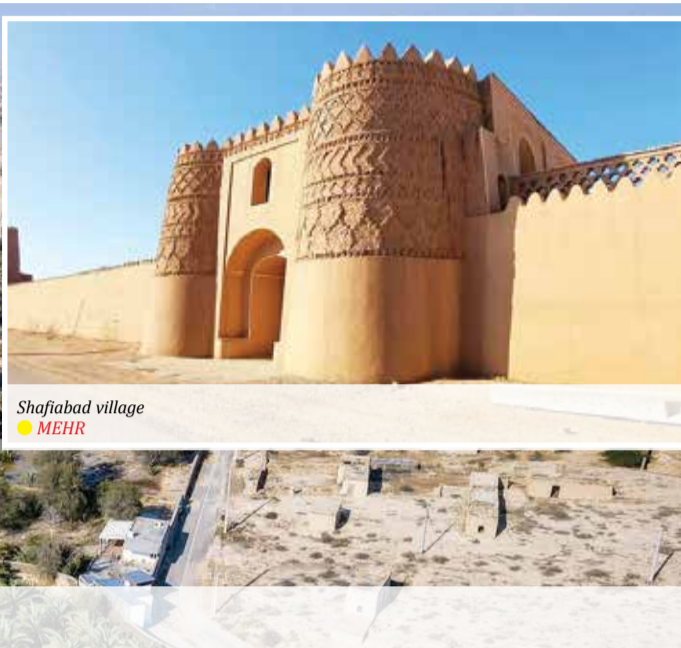
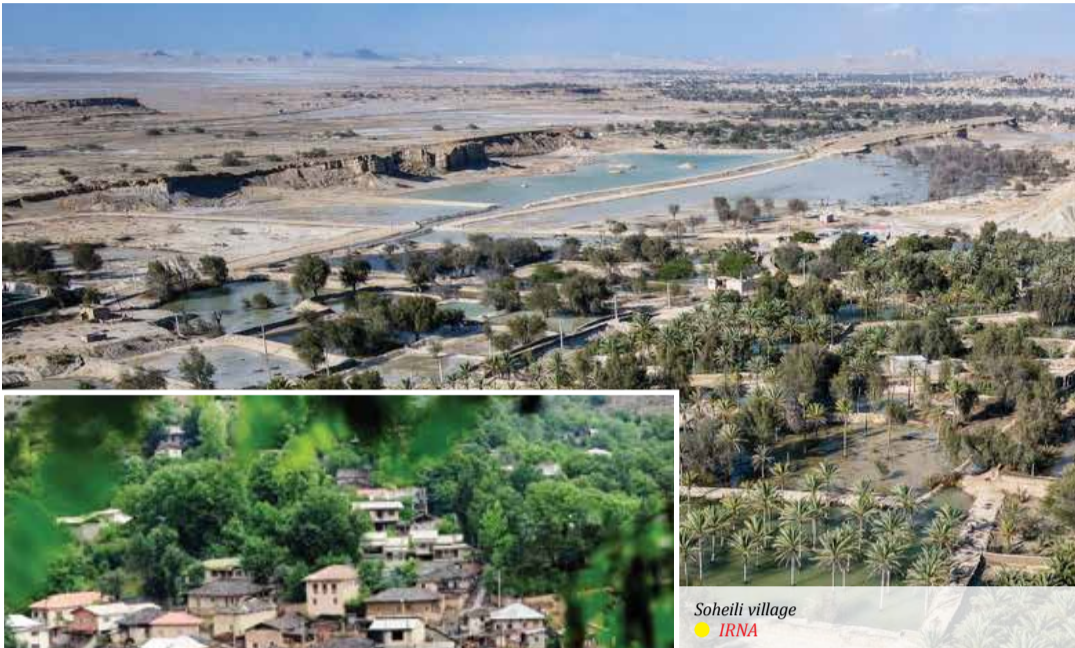
The inscription of the three villages — Soheili on Qeshm Island, Kandolus in Mazandaran Province, and Shafiabad in Kerman Province — on the list of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) is not merely a symbolic honor for Iran; it represents an effective step toward mapping a new path of smart destination development, sustainable growth, and the revival of local identities within the country's tourism system.

Hani Rastegaran, advisor to the Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts for Tourism Affairs, wrote in a note published by IRNA: This event is a clear sign of Iran's hidden capacities in rural and community-based tourism, which can become one of the driving forces of the national economy.

The inclusion of the names of these three Iranian villages on the global list is a historic opportunity to redefine the concept of "development from within the people." These villages, by relying on their cultural, natural, and historical elements, managed to stand out among hundreds of international candidates as successful examples of coexistence between humans and nature.

Soheili, located beside the mangrove forests; Kandolus, with its historic architecture and authentic northern culture; and Shafiabad, situated on the edge of the Lut Desert — together present three distinct faces of Iran's climate, lifestyle, and civilization to the world.

However, the significance of this recognition goes beyond the mere inclusion of names on a list; these villages are now becoming target hubs on Iran's tourism map — destinations



Kandolus village
● MEHR

Soheili village
● IRNA

that can inspire a new direction in tourism policy, visitor distribution, and the development of lesser-known regions.

In today's world, tourism is moving toward more human-centered and responsible experiences. The modern traveler is no longer only seeking historical monuments or shopping centers; they seek to feel the rhythm of local life, taste traditional foods, listen to community stories, and experience the authentic way of life of the people.

Iran's globally recognized villages shine precisely at this point: in Soheili, travelers experience both the beauty of nature and the maritime culture of southern Iran as they wander among the floating mangrove forests and the heights of Qeshm Is-

land. In Kandolus, walking through cobblestone alleys, breathing in the scent of damp wood, and hearing the murmur of springs evoke the authenticity and natural harmony of the North. And in Shafiabad, the boundless silence and star-filled desert sky tell a different story of peace and beauty.

These three examples can serve as models for designing new destinations in Iran — destinations built upon climatic diversity, local identity, and community capacity, each offering a unique story to share with the world's travelers.

From a policy-making perspective, the global recognition of these villages offers an opportunity to integrate sustainable tourism into the fabric of people's daily lives through the de-

velopment of comprehensive rural development programs. At this stage, the key role of Tourism Department of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts is to foster synergy among government agencies, local councils, and the private sector to provide the necessary infrastructure — from access roads and accommodations to marketing and branding.

Along this path, empowering local communities is the most essential principle. The people of Soheili, Kandolus, and Shafiabad villages are not merely hosts to tourists but creators of the travel experience itself. Training in hospitality skills, standardizing eco-lodge services, strengthening handicraft industries, and supporting women and youth in these villages are vital links in the tourism value chain of these regions.

Global reflection

The inclusion of these villages on the global list also carries

a form of informal cultural diplomacy. This action presents a new image of Iran to the world — an Iran that, beyond its major cities and well-known landmarks, holds civilization, ethics, and beauty within its villages.

Foreign tourists visiting these regions engage not only with nature but also with the Iranian people and their authentic way of life. Such encounters serve as the most effective language for introducing the real Iran to the global stage — a language that requires no translation, as it emerges naturally from the hospitality and sincerity of its people.

The Tourism Department plans for the coming years are based on the concept of targeting new tourism destinations. As model hubs, these globally recognized villages can pave the way for designing similar destinations in other provinces.

This experience has shown that if the natural and cultural heritage of each region is man-

aged with a scientific and community-centered approach, it can achieve global recognition.

Targeting within this framework means rediscovering Iran — from the eastern deserts to the northern coasts, from the mountainous villages of Kurdistan to the southern palm groves.

The global inscription of these three Iranian villages sends a clear message about the future of the country's tourism: Iran has the capacity to join the global network of rural tourism, offering authentic narratives and diverse faces of its land.

Along this path, smart policymaking, scientific planning, and active participation of local communities are decisive factors.

May Soheili, Kandolus, and Shafiabad mark the beginning of a new era — an era in which Iran's villages become not only the origin of life but also the destination of travelers' global dreams.

Urban planners value cemeteries, encourage community engagement

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Over the past century, particularly between the 1930s and 1990s, many historic cemeteries across Iran were removed from city maps under the pretext of urban development or labeled as "incompatible land use."

In urban planning schemes, cemeteries were often classified alongside markets and slaughterhouses, gradually being excluded from the list of recognized cultural and spiritual spaces. However, over the past two decades, the perspective of Tehran's urban managers toward historic cemeteries has gradually shifted toward preservation and cultural recognition, according to Mehr News Agency.

The national registration of historic cemeteries, including Zahir-od-Dowleh, Ibn Babawayh, and the Doulab Armenian Cemetery, reflects this transformative change — a redirection from previously destructive approaches toward value-oriented preservation and urban revitalization.

Tehran Urban Research and Planning Center has recent-



Ibn Babawayh Cemetery
● tehranpicture.ir



Zahir-od-Dowleh Cemetery
● IRNA



Doulab Armenian Cemetery
● wikipedia.org

ly introduced a new strategic approach for the value-based preservation of historic cemeteries.

According to the findings of the center, historic cemeteries are, in essence, a form of cultural landscape: spaces with a history of more than 50 years that possess internal structural organization, spatial coherence, and a profound connection with their surrounding environment.

These cemeteries are not merely the final resting places of prominent religious, literary, cultural, scientific, and artistic figures. Due to their unique physical and landscape characteristics, they also play a crucial role in collective memory and

the urban identity of Tehran. Threat assessments conducted across ten domains indicate that historic cemeteries face more than 70 types of damage, spanning ten major areas — from physical and spatial deterioration to management,

social, and environmental threats. These factors place the sustainable life of these historic spaces at serious risk, leading to gradual destruction — ranging from the demolition or homogenization of graves to non-expert interventions in the design of

green spaces and tomb architecture.

In developing this strategic plan, researchers at the Tehran Urban Research and Planning Center drew on international experiences, UNESCO documentation, and guidelines from the Getty Conservation Institute to establish a comprehensive theoretical framework for the preservation of historic cemeteries. Within this framework, cemeteries are recognized as potential sites for cultural and heritage tourism — spaces that, in addition to being physically protected, can foster a sense of belonging and respect for the past among citizens.

The research emphasizes that the most appropriate approach

for historic cemeteries involves preserving their existing condition, providing continuous care, and ensuring structural stabilization. Reconstruction or aesthetic homogenization should only be undertaken under very specific conditions and based on meticulous documentation.

The final summary of the study presents a vision document for the preservation of these sites, alongside key strategies and guidelines for protecting historic cemeteries in Tehran.

Ultimately, the research underscores that historic cemeteries should not fall victim to uncontrolled urban development, but must instead be recognized and respected as living cultural spaces and guardians of the city's collective memory.

According to the researchers, no action should lead to the loss of the historical, cultural, or spiritual values of these cemeteries, as each tombstone represents a unique narrative and preserves a part of Iran's rich and layered history. By safeguarding these sites, Tehran not only protects its past but also fosters a deeper cultural awareness and appreciation among future generations.