



Iran seeks Caspian basin's top health tourism hub with largest regional capacity

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri on Tuesday pushed a regional drive to turn the country into the Caspian basin's leading hub for health tourism, telling a gathering of Caspian governors in the northern city of Rasht that Iran now commands "the biggest capacity" for medical travel in the wider region. The minister used the two-day international meeting of the governors of the Caspian littoral provinces in Iran's northern city of Rasht, hosted by the government of President Masoud Pezeshkian, to press an economic pitch that Tehran sees as a fast way to draw foreign currency and anchor closer ties with Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Salehi-Amiri said 1.2 million foreign patients spent roughly \$2 billion in Iran last year and argued that the country's mix of specialist hospitals, low costs and "reliable" medical outcomes gives it an edge. Tehran is now targeting two million medical tourists a year and \$6 billion in health-tourism income by 2030, alongside 15 million general visitors bringing in an additional \$15 billion. "We can draw on our neighbors'

trust," he said, adding that the Caspian's shared heritage offers fertile ground for joint ventures. The minister anchored his pitch in geography. The Caspian, a vast inland sea with 6,500km of coastline, long served as a corridor for trade and culture between northern Iran and the Eurasian steppe. Tehran wants to revive that role. He pressed governors from Russia's southern littoral regions and the Caucasus to "open the door wider", arguing that rising cross-border traffic will "deepen" relations far beyond tourism. Salehi-Amiri said the Pezeshkian administration has already ordered all coastal provinces, from Gilan and Mazandaran on the Caspian to Hormozgan and Bushehr on the Persian Gulf, to draw up fresh maritime-tourism plans. That includes passenger vessels, small cruise links and incentives designed to coax more Russians and Azerbaijanis to the Iranian north. He noted that "serious" strategic talks with Moscow are under way and forecast a visible rise in Russian arrivals in Gilan "soon". He pointed to Iran's tourism footprint, 22,000 accommodation units nationwide and another 2,500 under construction,



Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri speaks at the First Caspian Governor's Forum held in Iran's northern city of Rasht, Gilan on November 18, 2025.
● IRNA

and cast the northern trio of Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan as the "jewels" of domestic travel. Gilan alone hosts 3,648 tourism establishments, including 117 hotels and 190 eco-lodges. The government, he said, plans to nudge Iranians to travel more across the Caspian as well, building a reciprocal flow that can "anchor trust". Iran claims more than 1mn recorded heritage sites, 43,000 of them nationally listed and 29 inscribed on UNESCO's world register. Salehi-Amiri again pitched cultural affinity as a driver, saying that shared manuscripts, artefacts and customs displayed in museums across the region underline a "deep" common memory, a message intended to buttress Iran's push for cross-border tourism corridors. He urged Caspian provinces to join Iran in developing maritime tourism routes and invited them to put capital into 2,700 active Iranian tourism projects, prom-



ising "proper guarantees" and commercially "sound" returns. He also flagged upcoming presidential trips to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, framing them as part of the same diplomatic push. Salehi-Amiri placed Central Asia, the Caucasus and the broader Nowruz cultural sphere at the top of Iran's tourism priorities, followed by the Persian Gulf,

from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, and then large Muslim markets such as Egypt, Indonesia and Malaysia. China, Russia and India come next. He said he had already held talks with tourism ministers from China, India, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Oman, Armenia and Georgia during last week's meeting in Riyadh. Tourism now accounts for about

5% of Iran's GDP and employs 1.6mn people. The country drew 39 million foreign visitors last year and sent about 9 million Iranians abroad, figures the minister described as "acceptable" but improvable if coastal provinces push harder. "Tourism means contact between peoples," he said. "If we build it on trust, this chain will hold."

Iran bets on reading revival as ministers target piracy, digital habits

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Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi on Tuesday urged Iran's publishing sector to seize the momentum of this year's National Book Week and build a new reading culture that keeps pace with rapid social and technological shifts. Speaking to representatives from across the industry in central Tehran, he said the market needs determined efforts to "stir demand" and reclaim readers who have drifted towards fast digital content, IRNA reported. Iran's National Book Week, held nationwide from November 15 to 23, has taken on added weight this year as the government tries to reverse two decades of sliding non-academic reading. The long-term decline remains stark, yet senior officials insist the transition to digital literacy has created a new opening for Iranian publishers, educational institutions

and audiobook platforms. They make it clear that changing media habits should be treated not as a threat, but as an opportunity to reposition the industry. Salehi cited national surveys showing that the share of people reading non-textbook material has halved since 2003. But he also pointed to daily consumption of roughly 70 minutes of essays, commentary and scientific media on digital platforms, proof, he argued, that Iranians still crave knowledge, only in different formats. He pressed the industry to align with these habits rather than resist them, saying old assumptions about readers have become "a costly mistake". He told guilds that the ministry will lean into demand-building policies. Civil-service training, he said, can incorporate curated reading lists, while schools and kindergartens must prepare for structural changes that will alter how printed, audio and digital books appear in

the curriculum. Piracy remains a major concern, but the ministry now frames it as an area where decisive enforcement could finally steady the market. Salehi said the government intends to pursue illicit reprints and digital theft "from the root" and revive earlier campaigns that sharply reduced illegal copies. A new similarity-tracking platform will fast-track action against the unauthorized scraping of published texts. Several mid-sized publishers say these measures, if fully implemented, could restore enough confidence for them to commission more ambitious titles in philosophy, social sciences and contemporary history. President Masoud Pezeshkian reinforced the cultural message in a post on X, calling reading the nation's route to "staying alive" and remaining in the "caravan of civilization". His intervention has been welcomed by university presses that want stronger ties with the

administration to rebuild reading communities on campus. Qader Ashena, Salehi's senior adviser and secretary of the Public Culture Council, echoed the optimism during a student book festival in Tehran. He described the printed book as a "civilizational anchor" despite the rise of artificial intelligence and argued that university life must restore reading as a daily habit. He praised Iran's decades of academic cultural institutions, from student theater festivals to early opinion-polling centers, and said their revival can help push books back into the mainstream. Audiobook studios in Tehran report brisk growth, driven by long commuter hours and young listeners seeking structured content. Publishers say these platforms, combined with tighter anti-piracy measures and targeted incentives, could help bridge the gap between Iran's literary heritage and its modern digital consumption patterns.

Hosseini clinches Rabat best actress prize

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Iranian actress Fereshteh Hosseini seized the Best Actress Award at the 30th Rabat International Auteur Film Festival in the Moroccan capital, taking the prize for her lead role in 'Dwelling Among the Gods,' a Serbia-Croatia-Italy co-production directed by Vuk Ršumović. Hosseini had already picked up top acting honors for the same performance in Pula in coastal Croatia, Otranto near Rome, Euro Balkan in Italy and the Hong Kong Lights festival. The film, a character-driven drama, has built steady momentum across Europe's



arthouse circuit, IRNA reported. This year's Rabat festival, which ran from November 7-15, screened two Iranian titles in competition with 'The Last Act' by Tehran-based director Peyman Shahbod and 'Without Permission

(2025)' by Iran-UK filmmaker Hassan Nazer. Iranian producer Elham Nobakht served on the main competition jury, underscoring Tehran's growing footprint in North Africa's increasingly outward-looking cinema scene.

Iranian short 'Oscar' takes top prize at Jakarta's Madani festival

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Iranian director Ali Asghari seized the best short-film award at the 8th Madani International Film Festival in Jakarta after his drama 'Oscar' outperformed a crowded field of independent entries from across Asia. The Jakarta-based event, one of Southeast Asia's more established showcases for socially minded independent cinema, drew films with strong human-centered themes from several continents, Mehr News Agency reported.

The festival aims to foster "cultural dialogue" and keep a lifeline open for emerging filmmakers who struggle to find screening platforms. Asghari wrote and directed 'Oscar,' produced by Mehdi Ghaemmagham. The film tracks a character who insists, with a mix of desperation and bravado, "I must act in this film because it will save my life." The cast includes Amir Karbalaieizadeh, Parisa Alizadeh, Saba Khorasani, Reza Sakhaeifard, Neda Hosseini, Mohammad Nouhian, Amirhossein Ghelich and Hossein Abbaspour.