

# Sarein battles fluctuating tourism, rapid development

Iranica Desk

Sarein, a city in Ardabil Province long recognized as a major tourist destination, now finds itself caught between seasonal surges in visitors and relentless construction — most of it aimed at seasonal accommodations.

Akbar Mohammadi, a tourism entrepreneur and investor in Sarein, told Mehr News Agency that the city currently hosts over 230 active lodging facilities, including hotels, hotel-apartments, guesthouses, and suites — a capacity far exceeding the city's size and actual demand during peak travel periods. Despite this abundance, many of these units are only occupied during specific times of the year, remaining empty for months at a stretch.

Regarding the city's hydrotherapy complexes, Mohammadi explained that they are the main driver of Sarein's tourism industry. "The city has several active complexes, and many visitors come solely for these facilities. Yet even their popularity is highly seasonal: summers and holidays are extremely busy, while autumn and winter see much lower attendance," he noted.

The tourism expert emphasized the imbalance in visitor flow, "During summer, Nowruz (Iranian New Year) holidays, and special holidays, the city's population multiplies several times over. But in the second half of the year, a large portion of accommodations remain vacant. This severe fluctuation undermines the sustainability of Sarein's tourism development."

He added that despite the city already having more than 230 lodging centers, local tourism authorities and urban planners continue to propose further ex-



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pansion, with new construction projects underway. "A significant part of the current capacity stays empty for most of the year," he stressed.

Mohammadi also raised concerns about pressure to expand the city's boundaries. "There are ongoing discussions about allocating more land for construction. If this process continues without careful study or consideration of actual tourist demand, it could cause serious economic and environmental consequences," he warned.

On the need for a revised development approach, he said, "Tourism growth is not just about building more hotels. Authorities must focus on managing demand, distributing travel throughout the year, developing off-season activities, and improving service quality. Without this shift, Sarein risks facing an oversupply of accommodations and wasted investment." Regarding the potential impact of uncontrolled construction on Sarein's hydrotherapy complexes, Mohammadi explained

that the city sits atop sensitive geothermal structures. "Any deep drilling, unplanned construction, or increased load near the springs could disrupt the balance of underground water pressures. This is a serious concern," he said. "If urban expansion continues without study," he continued, "the springs' discharge may decrease, water courses may shift, or even water quality could be affected. Some springs rely on extremely delicate and stable flows, and even minor disrup-

tions in subterranean layers could damage them."

Mohammadi noted that the risks extend beyond geology. "More construction means more population, wastewater, water consumption, and waste. If infrastructure doesn't develop alongside this growth, the environmental pressure around the spa complexes will increase, lowering the quality of the tourist experience as well."

He added, "For a city like Sarein, the springs are the most valuable asset. If construction takes place without proper geological assessment and respect for the springs' protected zones, it could cause irreparable damage. Today, more than ever, building regulations in sensitive areas must be strictly enforced. Sarein needs development, but it must be a type of development that preserves the sanctity of its springs. If these resources are

harmed, not only will the thermal spa industry suffer, but the city's entire tourism sector will be negatively affected."

Beyond the challenges of fluctuating tourism and rapid development, Sarein and Ardabil Province remain among Iran's most attractive destinations for nature and culture-oriented travel. Sarein's cool summer climate, fresh mountain air, and mild breezes draw thousands of visitors each year, particularly from warmer provinces seeking relief from seasonal heat. Nestled on the slopes of Mount Sabalan, the city benefits from a unique geothermal landscape where thermal springs, mineral-rich waters, and green valleys form the heart of its tourism identity.

Ardabil Province itself offers a remarkably diverse range of natural attractions. Mount Sabalan — the dormant volcanic peak towering over the region — is one of the most iconic natural landmarks in Iran, attracting climbers, hikers, and photographers. The alpine meadows around Sabalan, known for their wildflowers and natural lakes, have become a popular route for eco-tourism and summer trekking. The Shorabil Lake in the provincial capital of Ardabil, with its walking paths and recreational facilities, is another major draw for visitors.

The province's climate plays a significant role in shaping its tourism appeal. Summers are pleasantly cool, springs are lush and green, and winters — though cold and snowy — attract travelers interested in winter landscapes and seasonal festivities. This climatic diversity offers opportunities for year-round tourism if properly managed.

## Wood, thread tell story of Baraghan's puppet acrobat

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In Baraghan, a village in Iran's Alborz Province where thousand-year-old walnut trees cast long shadows over homes and memories, it is more than just a picturesque landscape of orchards. Behind its stone walls and along its quiet alleys flows a story that few may have considered — a story of wood, thread, calloused hands, and the ambitious dreams of humans. This is the story of the Barghan puppet acrobat (Arusak-e Bandbaz), a wooden figure that comes to life with the movement of a small ladder. In Baraghan, simply asking about the puppet acrobat brings smiles to the faces of many elders. Tahmasb Mansourian, nearly 75 years old, recalls: "In our time, toys were scarce. This puppet was enough to make the world beautiful for us. With a piece of wood and a thread, we were entertained and our imaginations soared."

The puppet acrobat is a wooden figure that begins its acrobatic movement along a small ladder once its strings are pulled. Its body is limp yet astonishingly agile, leaping up and down a wooden rope between two tiny columns, as if it has no weight. But this puppet represents more than a child's toy; it embodies the skills, courage, and lives of people raised among



● chn.ir

walnut and mulberry trees, chn.ir wrote.

Baraghan, according to the elders, is a village where trees have long outgrown the people. Towering walnut trees with massive trunks have provided shade and sustenance for generations. These ancient trees offer more than fruit and cover; they quietly shape the skills and memories of the village's inhabitants, each branch telling a story of local life.

During walnut harvest season, village men climbed the tall, straight trees with confident steps. Scaling these trees required not only strength, but also agility, balance, focus, and courage. When children play

with the puppet acrobat, they follow in the footsteps of past generations, practicing these very skills, keeping alive the story of human effort and daring. Elders say the puppet acrobat is a miniature reflection of the men who once climbed the trees. As a child pulls the puppet's strings, it's as if they are experiencing the skill and courage of these men firsthand. This puppet is a miniature narrative of human perseverance and a living expression of the abilities and intelligence of generations who lived in Baraghan. Crafting a puppet acrobat is far from simple. Though the tools seem modest, breathing life into the wood requires patience



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and knowledge passed down through generations.

Upon entering a small workshop, one immediately notices small and large pieces of wood. The scent of freshly cut timber carries the weight of history, as if each piece holds its own story. The craftsman, first draws the puppet's pattern on a thin board, two to three millimeters thick. With a fine saw, like a skilled surgeon, he carefully frees each body part from the wood.

In the past, this work was done with a chisel, meaning each piece was carved rather than cut — a process that could take hours. The pieces are then sanded to ensure no sharp edges

harm a child's hand. Tiny holes are drilled with a hand tool, forming the joints that allow the puppet to move.

Next comes the ladder: two narrow sticks, about 25 centimeters long, connected by a small crosspiece resembling a rung. The puppet's miniature stage is ready. Finally, silk threads, like invisible veins, connect all the components. When the ladder is moved, the puppet begins its acrobatics. The first time it leaps with agility, one cannot help but smile. The wood has truly come to life.

Today, the puppet acrobat is no longer a common companion in Barghan children's hands. While some may grow up with

smartphones and online games, others remain committed to preserving this silent heritage. Iranian culture is multi-ethnic and multi-narrative; every village, every family, completes the national puzzle. Traditional puppets are more than toys — they are storytellers, narrating art, aesthetics, lifestyle, and worldviews.

In Baraghan, the puppet acrobat has long served as an informal teacher of balance, courage, and capability. Every pull of its string trains a child to overcome heights and trust in their own abilities.

Local residents and experts suggest simple yet effective ways to preserve this intangible heritage: teaching adolescents how to make the puppets, producing them in small batches for eco-tourism centers and local markets, holding small festivals, making documentaries, promoting them online and through local media, and establishing permanent exhibits in museums and tourism centers.

Preserving intangible heritage is not about keeping an object — it is about maintaining the mindset, perspective, and skills shaped by generations. The Barghan puppet acrobat offers a miniature view of the village's worldview, demonstrating how life, skill, and creativity flow through the simplest of games.