

Afin village advances toward global recognition

Iranica Desk

South Khorasan Province, spanning the vast eastern reaches of Iran, benefits from rare natural and cultural assets derived from the coexistence of desert landscapes, mountain ranges, and fertile plains. As a result, the province is regarded as one of eastern Iran's most unspoiled and distinctive tourism destinations. Within the province, villages such as Afin — distinguished by traditional architecture, expansive seedless barberry orchards, and striking natural scenery — offer exceptional potential to attract both domestic and international visitors. The value of these assets becomes increasingly pronounced as such villages move toward nomination under the Best Tourism Villages program, IRNA wrote. In January of this year, Iran launched the process of nominating villages for the Best Tourism Villages program, initially reviewing more than 100 candidates nationwide. At the preliminary evaluation stage, 50 villages met the required criteria. Following field inspections and scoring assessments, 12 villages advanced to the final dossier-preparation phase, with the files of eight villages now ready for submission to

the World Tourism Organization. The expanded list of Iran's selected villages under the program is expected to be reviewed during the 2026 vote. Among the shortlisted candidates is the historic and tourism-oriented village of Afin in South Khorasan Province, which — due to its distinctive cultural heritage and natural features — is considered well qualified for inclusion under the Best Tourism Villages program. Afin village, located in Zirkuh, covers an area of 450 hectares and is home to the world's largest seedless barberry orchard, making it one of South Khorasan's most prominent examples of rural and agricultural tourism. The process of nomination for Afin and other villages in South Khorasan is being pursued with an emphasis on revitalizing historic fabric, upgrading infrastructure, and expanding tourism services in accordance with international standards. Measures such as the development of eco-lodges, the launch of information platforms, and the promotion of cultural and natural assets have positioned Afin as a national model for rural tourism development. Afin's cultural identity — reflected in the meaning of its name in ancient Iranian lan-



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guages as “water and life” — underscores the community's long-standing relationship with land and natural resources. This historical and cultural heritage, together with the village's natural landscapes and extensive barberry orchards, provides a solid foundation for introducing Afin as an international tourism destination. Given its existing capacities and the growing importance of the Best Tourism Villages program, Afin in South Khorasan Province is steadily moving toward becoming a successful model of sustainable tourism and agricultural development, with its nomination dossier ex-

pected to be completed in the near future in line with international standards. In recent weeks, alongside the strengthening of national discourse on tourism development in the eastern regions of the country, Afin village has come into sharper focus among national planners. The visit of the advisor to the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Parham Janfeshan, to the province, along with the holding of specialized meetings with tourism stakeholders, members of the Strategic Council for Afin's Best Tourism Villages nomination, and executive managers, indi-

cates that the village's dossier has entered a more serious and expert-driven phase on the path toward recognition. During this visit, Janfeshan emphasized the necessity of an expert-based approach and announced the dispatch of a specialized ministerial team to conduct on-site assessments of Afin's tourism infrastructure. He added that the process of nominating Afin under the Best Tourism Villages program is being pursued through the identification of infrastructural constraints and the formulation of an operational action plan. He further stressed that rural tourism development — even with minimal investment — can contribute to reverse migration trends and population stabilization in rural areas. This initiative can be regarded as an important step toward accurately identifying limitations, prioritizing interventions, and developing a coherent operational plan to complete the nomination dossier — an approach that, according to experts, is essential for moving from the stage of local advocacy to the level of national decision-making. At the same time, the Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of South Khorasan Province addressed the damage

caused by the 1997 earthquake and the stagnation resulting from the COVID-19 period, noting that the current state of tourism in Afin is the result of a gradual restart. In this process, tourism activities were effectively revived from zero, and the village now hosts four active eco-lodges providing accommodation and related services. Seyyed Ahmad Barabadi noted that numerous applicants have expressed readiness to establish tourism facilities in Afin, emphasizing that the presence of new investors seeking to develop tourism infrastructure reflects the formation of a relative level of confidence in the future prospects of this destination. At a broader level, discussions concerning the country's critical tourism conditions, fluctuations in tourist arrival statistics, and the need for effective crisis management demonstrate that Afin's nomination process is unfolding within a context of wider national challenges. Emphasis on targeted marketing strategies, the organization of small-scale events, a focus on domestic tourism, and the use of transportation capacities in neighboring provinces are among the approaches that could also be operationally defined and implemented for Afin.

Teymareh acknowledged as major rock art site

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Teymareh, located in Isfahan Province, is one of the largest rock art sites in the world, featuring an unparalleled collection of petroglyphs. With its exceptional cultural value, the region has the potential to become a unique open-air museum for international visitors and a significant source of tourism revenue. Majid Rasouli, a tourism guide, historian, and researcher of Teymareh's rock carvings, spoke about the tourism potential of the area. Rasouli, who also manages an eco-lodge in Gharqab village in Golpayegan, said that food tourism is one of Golpayegan's most important attractions, with many travelers visiting the city specifically to taste its famous kebab, according to chn.ir. “However,” he added, “the stron-

gest feedback we receive from our guests relates to visits to Gharqab village and the rock carvings of Teymareh.” According to Rasouli, these visits are usually organized as one-day hiking and cycling tours, during which he personally accompanies tourists. The eco-lodge's proximity to attractions in Khansar and Khomein also allows visitors to experience a wider range of the region's natural and historical sites. Referring to the calm and pleasant atmosphere of Gharqab, Rasouli noted that the lodge operates in a peaceful rural setting and strives to provide the best possible services. “Fortunately, all the feedback we have received so far has been positive,” he said. He described the offering of traditional food and the experience of rural life as the most important aspects of the lodge's activities. Guests often take part in

cooking and daily tasks, giving them firsthand exposure to the rhythms of village life. Commenting on the country's economic conditions, Rasouli said that rising inflation and recent events over the past year have almost entirely halted the arrival of foreign tourists. Most current visitors, he explained, belong to the middle and upper-middle economic classes and are interested in nature and history. He added that government support could significantly reduce the heavy costs of water, electricity, and gas, and that providing low-interest loans would lead to meaningful improvements in the sector. One of the region's most serious tourism challenges, according to Rasouli, is the shortage of staff. He noted that the Jaame Mosque of Golpayegan and the city's historic minaret are often closed due to a lack of per-

sonnel, leaving tourists locked out. “This issue delivers a major blow to the city's tourism,” he said, stressing that keeping historical sites open is one of the most basic requirements of tourism and essential for visitor trust and satisfaction. Highlighting the global importance of Teymareh's rock carvings, Rasouli reiterated that Teymareh represents one of the world's largest rock art sites, with unique and irreplaceable motifs. “This region can become a distinctive open-air museum for international tourists and generate substantial foreign revenue,” he said. He also pointed to the absence of formal conservation programs as a major concern. “There is no official protection plan, and I personally monitor the rock carvings on a regular basis,” he explained. While local communities have been



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supportive for years, Rasouli emphasized that greater promotion, public awareness, and institutional support are still urgently needed. Finally, he warned of threats

such as mining activities, natural erosion, and the lack of visitor awareness, noting that these factors could cause serious damage to this invaluable cultural heritage.

Sang-e Sefid village showcasing natural beauty, tourism potential

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Sang-e Sefid, a picturesque village in Chardavol, Ilam Province, is attracting growing attention as a tourist destination thanks to its lush valleys, flowing rivers, and towering mountains. The village offers a unique combination of serenity and natural beauty, drawing both nature enthusiasts and cultural travelers alike. Situated at the entrance of Qir Canyon, Sang-e Sefid lies within a diverse landscape of foothills, plains, and mountains. Its northern boundary is framed by the Khorrameh and Vardalan mountains, while to the south it connects to the main road from Ilam to the Seymreh Bridge. Agricultural lands stretch to the east,



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and the Chenareh River flows along its western edge, adding to the village's scenic charm.

At an elevation of approximately 980 meters above sea level, the village features gentle

slopes running from the northeast toward the southwest, channeling surface waters into the Chenareh River. Nearby, Mansouri Canyon offers visitors additional opportunities for exploration, hiking, and enjoying the striking natural scenery. Speaking to ISNA, Omid Esmaeili, a technical expert at the Ilam Provincial Governorate, described Sang-e Sefid as one of Chardavol's most beautiful and unspoiled areas. He emphasized that the village's clear rivers, abundant vegetation, and unique natural features make it an ideal destination for those interested in historical sites and natural landscapes. “The Chenareh River flowing through the village provides an

excellent setting for relaxation and recreation,” Esmaeili said. “Its banks are lined with local trees and plants, enhancing the area's beauty and freshness.” He also highlighted Khorrameh Mountain southwest of the village, a popular spot for hiking thanks to its diverse flora and breathtaking vistas. Mansouri Canyon, with its high rock walls, pristine nature, and pleasant climate, continues to attract numerous visitors. Farzad Sharifi, Director General of Ilam Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, added that the gorge is notable for its natural rock formations, flowing streams, and native vegetation, creating a distinctive and visually striking landscape. He fur-

ther noted that Sang-e Sefid's fertile soils and abundant water resources sustain local agriculture, while livestock farming remains a key contributor to the community's economy. Sharifi also pointed out that spring and summer are the best times to visit Sang-e Sefid and Mansouri Canyon, when moderate temperatures and verdant scenery provide an ideal experience for tourists. “With its combination of pristine nature, clear rivers, and high mountains, this area stands out as one of Ilam Province's unique attractions,” he said. “Protecting this natural heritage while promoting sustainable tourism can significantly contribute to both the economic and cultural development of the region.”