

# Darak village gains global spotlight with UN tourism nomination

## Iranica Desk

In the southernmost region of Iran, where the endless waters of the Sea of Oman meet golden desert sands, lies a village that is increasingly drawing attention: Darak village. Located in Zarabad, in the southern part of Sistan and Baluchestan Province, it has been nominated as one of Iran's candidates for UN Tourism's Best Tourism Villages 2026 program. If successful, this recognition would represent not only a tourism milestone but also a new narrative for the lesser-known face of Baluchestan.

For years, Darak has been regarded as a legendary destination among experienced travelers and nature enthusiasts — a place where desert and sea converge and palm trees rise just steps away from ocean waves. Many first-time visitors find it hard to believe such a landscape exists in Iran, where shifting sand dunes reach directly to the shoreline and sunsets create a striking fusion of land and water, according to chn.ir.

The village now stands at a turning point. Inclusion in the global tourism villages list is far more than a ceremonial title; it could reshape development in southern Sistan and Baluchestan, boost tourism investment, and redefine how the region is perceived both nationally and internationally.

Tourism experts say Darak has all the essential elements required to become a world-class destination, from its untouched natural environment and authentic Baluchi culture to its traditional lifestyle, handicrafts, local music, and the warm hospitality of its people, where simplicity and sincerity remain deeply rooted.

Widely known as the "meeting point of desert and sea," the village is often described in almost



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symbolic terms, yet a short walk along its shoreline confirms the reality of this unique geography. Few places on Earth offer such a rare combination, where moving dunes extend toward the waters of the Oman Sea and lush palm groves grow nearby. This distinctive landscape has made the village one of the most visited nature tourism destinations in southern Iran in recent years. Travelers from across the country often remark that the village feels unlike anywhere else in Iran.

As experiential tourism gains momentum globally, destinations like Darak have attracted growing attention — places where visitors do not merely take photographs but engage directly with nature, culture, and local ways of life. For photographers, Darak has become an almost dreamlike setting, where sunrise and sunset produce extraordinary color palettes. The rhythm of waves reaching the shore and wind patterns shaping desert sands create scenes that resemble postcards more than real landscapes.

For many years, rural areas in southern Sistan and Baluchestan Province, despite their rich natural and cultural assets, remained on the margins of development. Limited infrastructure, distance from major urban centers, and



security-related perceptions contributed to their underrepresentation in tourism. That situation is now beginning to change. Darak's nomination reflects formal recognition of the region's vast potential — a potential that has long been preserved by local communities and is now gaining visibility. According to the criteria of UN Tourism, villages must demonstrate not only natural attractions but also strong performance in cultural preservation, sustainable development, community involvement, and environmental protection to qualify for the list.

In Darak, these characteristics are clearly evident. Local architecture, livelihoods, traditional Baluchi clothing, cuisine, and

hospitality form a living cultural identity that, unlike many tourist destinations in the country, has not been eroded by excessive commercialization.

What sets Darak apart is not only its extraordinary landscape but also its people. Residents have increasingly come to understand that environmental protection and cultural heritage are among their most important assets for the future.

Tree-planting initiatives along the village and coastal areas have been carried out with direct participation from local residents, who have taken responsibility for maintaining and irrigating the saplings — an example of strong community commitment to preserving green spaces.

This local engagement is considered one of the key strengths of Darak's nomination dossier. In many tourism projects, development follows a top-down model where local communities remain passive observers; in Darak, they are active participants in the process.

Visitors frequently highlight the warm hospitality of the Baluchi people — from unsolicited servings of tea to genuine smiles offered without expectation. This form of hospitality is regarded as an irreplaceable asset that no infrastructure project can replicate. Alongside environmental conservation, strengthening the local economy is a central pillar of preparations for international registration. Plans include establishing a handicraft and local products market aimed at showcasing regional culture while increasing income opportunities for residents.

According to the head of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department of Zarabad, a market for local handicrafts and products will be established in the nominated tourism village of Darak.

Anvar Singleh noted that, given Darak's selection as one of Iran's candidate villages for the 2026 World Tourism Villages list, the

development of necessary infrastructure has been placed on the agenda.

He added that the town benefits from valuable handicraft production and unique tropical and indigenous fruits, which are in high demand among visitors and tourists to the region.

The Darak market is intended to be more than a commercial space; it is envisioned as a showcase of Baluchestan's cultural identity. From traditional Baluchi needlework to tropical fruits and local cuisine, it will form part of the overall visitor experience.

He further stated that, through cooperation between the provincial cultural heritage organization and other stakeholders, and with the active participation of local artisans and residents, a dedicated market for handicrafts, tropical fruits, and food products specific to the village and Zarabad will be established.

For many years, the dominant portrayal of Sistan and Baluchestan in the media was incomplete and often unfair, focusing mainly on deprivation and marginalization rather than its vast cultural and tourism potential. Darak now offers a new narrative — showing that southeastern Iran is not only a land of intense sunlight but can also be a global destination for nature-based, cultural, and adventure tourism.

Tourism experts believe that if infrastructure is properly developed, Darak could become one of Iran's leading tourism brands, attracting not only domestic visitors but also international travelers. Global experience shows that inclusion in such tourism village lists can significantly transform local economies, provided that development remains aligned with environmental protection and meaningful community participation.

## Belqeys Citadel bridges legend, history in North Khorasan

## Iranica Desk

The ancient Belqeys Citadel, located near the city of Esfarayen on the edge of the vast plains of North Khorasan Province in northeastern Iran, is considered one of the country's most significant yet lesser-known historical landmarks.

The massive mud-brick complex is not merely an archaeological monument, but the remains of an ancient city that once played a major social, economic, and defensive role in the region. Despite centuries of natural erosion and the passage of time, the citadel remains one of North Khorasan Province's most important historical attractions, with strong potential to draw tourists interested in history, architecture, and cultural travel, according to IRNA.

Archaeological studies indicate that the origins of the site date back to early historical periods, particularly the Sassanid era, before undergoing further expansion during the Islamic period. Researchers say this continuity demonstrates that the citadel preserved its strategic function for centuries while adapting to the needs of



successive periods.

Historians believe the complex was once part of a larger urban settlement that occupied a key position along eastern Iran's historic trade and communication routes.

The citadel is considered one of the largest mud-brick structures in Iran. Its thick defensive walls, watchtowers, and vast internal layout suggest that it was far more than a military fortress; it functioned as a fully functioning urban settlement. Some towers rise more than 10 meters high, reflecting the sophisticated engineering skills of Iranian architects and their ability to utilize local materials suited to the region's dry and semi-arid climate. Archaeological investigations

have uncovered residential quarters, storage facilities, passageways, and public spaces within the site. Experts say the complex urban structure indicates that residents lived their daily lives entirely within the fortified city, making Belqeys Citadel not only a defensive stronghold but also a highly organized historical settlement. Local legends have linked the site's name, "Belqeys," to the Queen of Sheba, although historians note that the connection is largely mythical. Nevertheless, the story has added to the cultural and tourism appeal of the landmark.

Recent excavations have revealed previously undiscovered sections of the citadel and provided valuable insight into



● IRNA



its structure, functions, and various phases of occupation and reconstruction. Findings suggest that the site remained important across multiple historical periods.

Visitors can access the citadel through Esfarayen in North Khorasan Province. Travelers from Bojnord, the provincial capital, must drive approximately 60 to 70 kilometers southwest to reach the city.

From Esfarayen, the site is accessible via a clearly marked road and can be reached within 10 to 15 minutes by car.

For travelers arriving from outside the province, Bojnord Airport is the nearest airport, while overland routes from Mashhad and Sabzevar also provide convenient access through northeastern Iran's main highways.

Tourism officials recommend visiting the site during spring and early autumn, when temperatures are milder and conditions are more suitable for outdoor exploration. During the summer, visitors are advised to tour the site early in the morning or near sunset to avoid midday heat, while winter travelers are encouraged to

bring appropriate cold-weather gear.

The site is generally open during daylight hours, allowing visitors to fully appreciate the scale and structure of the ancient fortress.

Entering the Belqeys Citadel offers what many travelers describe as a journey back in time. Its towering mud-brick walls, partially ruined watchtowers, and expansive inner spaces provide a vivid glimpse into Iran's ancient past.

Cultural heritage experts say the historical complex remains one of northeastern Iran's most valuable destinations for history enthusiasts, photographers, and cultural tourists alike.

Despite enduring significant natural damage over the centuries, the citadel continues to stand as a symbol of the ancient civilization of North Khorasan Province and one of Iran's most important mud-brick heritage sites.

Experts emphasize that broader recognition, proper preservation efforts, and increased promotion of the site could play a major role both in safeguarding Iran's cultural heritage and boosting regional tourism development.