

Eshtehard rock-cut complex moves toward national registration

Iranica Desk

Hidden among the arid landscapes south of the Alborz Mountains, a little-known complex of rock-cut structures in Eshtehard is being considered for national heritage registration following years of archaeological research and documentation by provincial cultural heritage authorities.

The Eshtehard rock-cut complex, first identified in 2013, consists of a series of man-made chambers carved directly into rock formations rather than constructed with conventional building materials. Officials say the site represents a distinctive example of Iran's historic rock-cut architecture and reflects how past communities adapted to the region's natural environment, according to chn.ir.

Farzan Ahmadnejad, head of the Restoration and Conservation of Historic Buildings and Sites Department at Alborz Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, said field studies began shortly after the site's discovery to assess its historical, architectural and archaeological significance.

Located between the villages of Sehatabad and Qeshlaq-e Dayler, the complex was made possible by the area's unique geological conditions. The composition of the hills, soil and rock enabled ancient inhabitants to excavate living spaces directly into the landscape.

Ahmadnejad described rock-



cut architecture as one of Iran's lesser-known but historically significant architectural traditions. Rather than constructing buildings above ground, people transformed natural rock formations into habitable spaces, illustrating a close relationship between humans and their environment.

Researchers have identified approximately 13 to 14 independent rock-cut structures across the site. Some contain a single room, while others feature two or three chambers.

According to Ahmadnejad, the layout suggests careful consideration of environmental conditions. Most entrances face south or east, with none opening toward the north or west, indicating that builders likely took into account sunlight, prevailing winds and the local climate.

Some chambers also contain openings in their ceilings designed to admit natural light, suggesting they were intended for regular human

occupation rather than temporary shelter.

The original function of the structures remains uncertain. Archaeologists are investigating whether they served as permanent residences, temporary shelters, waystations for travelers, or fulfilled different roles over time.

"Based on the architectural layout and the diversity of the spaces, it is possible that the complex served multiple purposes during different historical periods," Ahmadnejad said. "However, more extensive archaeological surveys and excavations will be necessary to determine their exact function."

Surface archaeological evidence has further increased the site's significance. Pottery fragments discovered around the rock-cut structures indicate repeated human activity across different historical periods.

Most of the recovered ceramics date to the Islamic



era, particularly the Ilkhanid and Safavid periods, although several Parthian-era pottery fragments have also been identified, suggesting that the area was occupied or used over an extended period.

Officials say these findings point to significant research potential, with future excavations expected to reveal additional information about the site's history.

Iran is home to several notable examples of rock-cut architecture, including the historic village of Meymand in Kerman Province. However, Ahmadnejad said the Eshtehard complex differs in both construction and setting.

While Meymand developed as a rock-hewn settlement, Eshtehard's chambers were carved into individual rock masses within a desert environment near the southern

foothills of the Alborz Mountains. This combination of architecture and landscape gives the site distinctive cultural and tourism value, he said.

Meanwhile, the site's registration dossier has been submitted to Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts after completing the required technical assessments.

Shahbaz Mahmoudi, deputy head of Alborz Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, said experts from the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism conducted an independent evaluation and confirmed the site's historical and research significance.

According to Mahmoudi, the complex meets the requirements for national heritage registration.

Preliminary surveys have covered approximately five hectares, although officials estimate that the full archae-

ological zone extends across roughly 40 hectares. They believe additional rock-cut structures may remain undiscovered within the broader area.

Mahmoudi said rock-cut sites provide valuable insights into the lifestyles, architectural practices and environmental adaptation strategies of past societies, making the Eshtehard complex an important cultural resource.

Following the completion of legal procedures, responsibility for the site's restoration and development has been transferred to a private investor working within a cultural heritage framework.

Officials emphasized that the project's primary objective is to preserve the site's historical authenticity while introducing visitors to one of Iran's significant examples of rock-cut architecture.

Authorities say national registration would mark the beginning of a new phase of conservation, archaeological research and public interpretation, potentially establishing the Eshtehard rock-cut complex as an important cultural tourism destination in Alborz Province.

For researchers, the site's significance extends beyond its age. The carved chambers stand as evidence of how earlier communities adapted to challenging environmental conditions by working with, rather than against, the natural landscape — offering a rare glimpse into a form of architecture shaped by both necessity and ingenuity.

Ostad village blends natural beauty with centuries of history

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Nestled in the foothills of the Shah Jahan Mountains, the model tourism village of Ostad, located 22 kilometers from the city of Faruj in North Khorasan Province, has emerged as one of the region's most captivating destinations, offering visitors a remarkable combination of pristine landscapes, historical monuments, and cultural heritage.

Each year, the picturesque village welcomes large numbers of tourists and pilgrims en route to the holy shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. Surrounded by lush greenery, flowing springs, rugged mountains, and ancient landmarks, Ostad is often described as a vast natural canvas where verdant scenery contrasts strikingly with the surrounding arid landscape, according to ISNA.

The village lies on the slopes of the Shah Jahan mountain range, home to the Sarigol National Park, a protected area renowned for its rich biodiversity. Thanks to abundant water resources and dense vegetation, the park provides habitat for numerous wildlife species,

including wild sheep, ibex, wolves, leopards, foxes, jackals, gazelles, wild boars, Pallas's cats, hares, quail, and golden eagles.

One of the area's most distinctive natural attractions is the Barf-Chal (Snow Hollow), situated on the northwestern side of the mountain peak. Because it receives limited sunlight, snow often remains there until late August and, in some years, has persisted until the following winter. Nearby, the scenic Estarkhi Waterfall, cascading through a picturesque valley overlooking Estarkhi village, draws nature enthusiasts and hikers throughout the year.

The fertile slopes surrounding Shah Jahan Mountain also support extensive agriculture and livestock farming. Seasonal rainfall and abundant mountain water have made both dryland and irrigated farming highly productive. Villages are known for flourishing orchards producing grapes, pears, cherries, sour cherries, apricots, peaches, and apples, while almond groves extend across the southern slopes.

Among Ostad's most significant historical landmarks is its Safavid-era bathhouse,



an underground structure built with stone and Sarooj mortar. The bathhouse features an entrance corridor, an octagonal changing hall, a heated bathing chamber, and water reservoirs beneath a series of domed roofs fitted with skylights. Registered as a national heritage site in March 2009, the structure is regarded as an outstanding example of Safavid architecture.

However, despite its protected status, local residents say the structure has suffered gradual deterioration and has yet to receive comprehensive restoration.

Historians also attribute exceptional historical importance to Ostad village. Some scholars believe the village may be the site of



Asaak, one of the capitals of the Parthian Empire, noting that the settlement was formerly known as Asaak and Astu. Additional archaeological remains—including ancient fortifications, pre-Islamic religious structures, traditional stone mills, and the historic bathhouse — underscore the area's long



and distinguished past.

The village's Jaame Mosque, believed to date back to the Timurid period and constructed around the same time as Mashhad's renowned Goharshad Mosque, remains one of Faruj's most significant religious monuments. Although repeated renovations have obscured

its exact construction date, the mosque retains its original rectangular prayer hall, supported by massive square columns connected by pointed arches.

Traditional houses in Ostad are carefully designed to maximize sunlight, while the sounds of flowing streams and the bells of grazing sheep create a tranquil rural atmosphere each morning.

Residents of the village are Persian-speaking and are traditionally believed to be descendants of ancient Iranian peoples. Ostad is also home to a shrine locally known as an Imamzadeh. Architectural experts suggest that the building's design closely resembles ancient Mithraic temples, leading some researchers

to believe it was originally a pre-Islamic place of worship that later evolved into a mausoleum and, after the advent of Islam, came to be known as an Imamzadeh.

Agriculture and animal husbandry remain the backbone of the local economy. Wheat, barley, sugar beet, and grapes are among the village's principal agricultural products. Ostad is also known for its traditional handicrafts, including hand-knitted socks, woven bath mitts, kilims, carpets, pictorial carpets, and handwoven textiles known as Chador Shab.

Visitors can also sample a wide range of local specialties and souvenirs, including walnuts, almonds, raisins, dried apricots, dried sour cherries, Ghareh-Ghorut, dried whey, mixed nuts, cherries, yogurt, clarified butter, and the region's renowned Shah Jahan mountain honey.

Combining spectacular scenery, rich biodiversity, centuries-old architecture, and enduring rural traditions, Ostad village stands out as one of North Khorasan Province's most valuable cultural and ecotourism destinations.