

Mesr village on track to join UN Best Tourism Villages list

Iranica Desk

The historic village of Mesr in Khur and Biabanak, Isfahan Province, nestled among the golden dunes of Iran's Central Desert, is on track to join the Best Tourism Villages list of UN Tourism in 2026. The village is one of Iran's eight finalists for the title and has in recent years become one of the country's best-known destinations for desert and astronomical tourism, thanks to its combination of natural attractions, adobe architecture, cultural heritage and strong local community participation in tourism. Mesr is located about 45 kilometers east of Jandaq and 60 kilometers north of Khur, along the route connecting Damghan with Na'in and Isfahan. Together with the nearby settlements of Amirabad and Farahzad, the village forms a roughly six-kilometer-long chain of settlements in the heart of the desert. Its geographical location, vast desert landscapes and access to sand dunes have made Mesr a popular destination for Iranian and international nature lovers and desert travelers.

One of the area's major natural attractions is the Mesr sand sea, a vast expanse of sand dunes that offers visitors opportunities to walk across the sands and enjoy expansive desert views. About five kilometers from the village, extensive green reed beds form a striking contrast with the surrounding arid landscape and are considered one of the area's notable natural features. Tamarisk and saxaul trees



have also been planted in the region to stabilize shifting sands and combat wind erosion, forming part of the vegetation adapted to the harsh desert environment.

The history of Mesr dates back about 120 years. The settlement was initially known by names such as Kalateh Yousef and Mazraeh Yousef and was established by a man named Yousef, a livestock herder and landowner. He built a manor house west of the present-day village and gradually laid the foundations for a settlement that later became known as Mesr.

As the region's traditional qanats dried up and their water supplies declined, Yousef turned to deep wells to secure water for the settlement and used some of the first English-made diesel engines for the task. Because of the great depth of the wells, the village was for a time known as Chah-Deraz, meaning "long well." Yousef, however, disliked the name and proposed that the village be called Mesr, or Egypt. According to local accounts, the name had a symbolic connection to his own name and the story of Jo-



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seph and the land of Egypt, and the proposal was accepted by the residents. One of the most interesting aspects of Mesr's history is the foresight of its founder in planning the village. When the settlement was still small, Yousef ordered the construction of a wide street at least 500 meters long and a boulevard about 50 meters wide. According to local accounts, he predicted that the village would eventually become a busy and well-known destination. The large number of domestic and international visitors arriving today can

be seen as the fulfillment of that prediction. Part of the Iranian film *So Far, So Close* was also filmed in the village's historic fabric. Mesr's desert environment, combined with its silence and clear night skies, provides opportunities for a variety of tourism activities. Desert excursions, camel riding, safaris and controlled motorbike rides are among the experiences available to visitors. The area's tranquility and distance from urban pollution have also made Mesr an appealing destination for experiential tourism and those seek-

ing relaxation and contact with nature.

Astronomical tourism is another major attraction of the village. Its dark skies, lack of light pollution and favorable atmospheric conditions have made Mesr a destination of interest for astronomers and night-sky photographers. In recent years, specialized meetings and programs focusing on astronomical tourism have also been held in the area. Alongside its natural attractions, handicrafts and intangible cultural heritage play an important role in Mesr's cultural identity.



migration from the area. Tourism accommodations, camps and handicraft workshops operate under official licenses and regulations, forming part of efforts to organize and develop tourism in the desert destination.

Environmental sustainability is another important component of Mesr's submission for evaluation by UN Tourism. To reduce plastic use and support the local economy, environmentally friendly packaging has been designed for handicrafts, local products and livestock-derived goods. A women's association has also been established to help empower women, promote household products and increase their participation in the tourism value chain.

The launch of an official bilingual website in Persian and English is another initiative aimed at introducing Mesr's natural attractions, cultural heritage and licensed accommodations to domestic and international visitors.

The combination of desert landscapes, traditional architecture, handicrafts, astronomical tourism, ecotourism accommodations and extensive local participation has distinguished Mesr among Iran's rural tourism destinations. If the village is included in the Best Tourism Villages List in 2026, the recognition could draw further attention to the potential of sustainable tourism in Iran's desert regions — areas that continue to preserve not only distinctive natural attractions but also valuable cultural heritage and traditional ways of life.

Semnan's historic core gains national heritage status

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The historic areas of the Nasar and Esfanjan neighborhoods in Semnan have been officially added to Iran's National Heritage List after completing the required legal procedures, opening a new chapter in efforts to preserve and reinterpret the city's historical identity. The registration was formally notified by Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, to Semnan Governor-General Mohammad-Javad Kolivand.

According to IRNA, Nasar and Esfanjan are located in the central part of Semnan's historic fabric, around which several of the city's most prominent historic monuments and elements have developed. These include the Jaame Mosque, its approximately 1,000-year-old minaret, Imam Mosque, also known as the Soltani Mosque, and the historic bazaar of Semnan. Covering approximately 55 hectares, the registered area encompasses part of the historic core of Semnan. Its inclusion on the National Heritage List provides a legal framework for



Bazaar of Semnan
● karnaval.ir

protecting its historical and cultural values, safeguarding its valuable urban fabric, and planning for its proper restoration and revitalization.

Nasar and Esfanjan historic area contains a collection of valuable historical and cultural monuments and elements, with the surviving remains dating from various periods, including the Ghaznavid and Seljuk eras through the contemporary period.

The registration as an important step toward preserving the city's historical identity for fu-

ture generations.

The heritage registration is also considered an important measure for protecting Semnan's historic legacy and strengthening its potential for cultural tourism. However, safeguarding the area will require the participation of local residents.

The shrine of Hazrat Yahya ibn Musa (PBUH) is also located in central Semnan, in the Esfanjan neighborhood. Its location within the old urban fabric and near Imam Mosque and Jaame Mosque gives the area particular historical and cultural significance.



Jaame Mosque of Semnan
● archilearn.net

The presence of such monuments alongside historic and religious routes highlights Esfanjan's role in Semnan's historical urban structure and its connection with some of the most important elements defining the city's historic identity. The registration of the 55-hectare Nasar and Esfanjan area on Iran's National Heritage List not only strengthens the recognized historical status of the two neighborhoods but also makes it possible to apply conservation regulations and develop more coordinated plans for

protecting the historic fabric.

The measure could pave the way for the gradual restoration of historic buildings and passageways, improvement of the area's physical environment and greater use of Semnan's cultural tourism potential. Realizing this potential, however, will require coordination among the responsible authorities and active participation by residents of the historic area.

Semnan's historic fabric, with its collection of old neighborhoods, bazaar, mosques, Tekyehs, historic houses and other

architectural and cultural elements, is regarded as one of the city's most important historical and tourism assets. The registration of Nasar and Esfanjan marks another step toward protecting this valuable heritage.

Semnan's historical importance also stems from its position between the major regions of Rey, Qumis and Tabaristan. During the early Islamic centuries, the city gradually developed from a relatively small settlement into an important regional center, particularly from the 10th century onward. Its location along routes connecting central Iran with the Caspian provinces and Khorasan helped sustain its economic and administrative importance through successive dynasties.

Historical accounts also record periods of destruction and rebuilding, including the Mongol invasion in the early 13th century, after which Semnan gradually recovered and regained its regional prominence. This long history of continuity and change forms an important backdrop to understanding the historic neighborhoods that survive in the city today.