

Karaftu Cave could gain global recognition, boost tourism

Iranica Desk

Located in Divandarreh, Karaftu Cave is among the best-known attractions in Kurdistan Province, offering significant historical and natural value as well as considerable potential for tourism development. In recent years, efforts to protect the cave and its surroundings and pursue its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List have received increasing attention. Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List could help ensure better protection of Karaftu Cave while boosting tourism in the region. At the same time, alongside efforts to complete the global registration process, greater attention to tourism infrastructure and access routes to the cave is essential to fully capitalize on the site's potential. Against this backdrop, a group of cultural heritage advocates has launched a campaign calling for the cave to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a public demand. Jalal Safiari, one of the organizers of the campaign, told ISNA that the campaign was launched based on experiences from previous efforts related to drinking water in Sanandaj and opposition to construction projects within the Karaftu Cave's protected area. He said these experiences showed that protecting natural



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ply preventing destruction and that efforts must also be made to raise the status of such sites. According to Safiari, the group concluded that the global inscription of Karaftu could provide a way to ensure the site's permanent and scientific protection and transform it from a local attraction into a site of global significance. Referring to the collection of public signatures for the campaign, Safiari said the initiative seeks to demonstrate public demand to senior provincial officials and encourage them to pursue the issue more seriously. The greater the public participation, he added, the stronger the backing for the demand would be. Safiari also discussed the potential impact of global inscription



the designation should not be viewed merely as a title. Instead, it could help improve conservation practices, visitor management and the wider introduction of Karaftu to tourists.

Karaftu could move beyond being a local tourism destination and attract foreign visitors, researchers and those interested in natural and historical heritage. In such circumstances, tourism

be managed in line with the expected increase in visitors to ensure that tourism does not harm the site's preservation. The development of tourism at Karaftu could also create opportunities for local communities, ranging from jobs in tour guiding and tourism services to greater activity at accommodation facilities, handicraft businesses and local product markets. Safiari said that if tourism at Karaftu is developed properly, local residents could gain a greater share of the economic activities generated by visitors. He also pointed to the region's infrastructure, saying an increase in tourist numbers would not be possible without adequate infrastructure. Access routes, recreational facilities

and communications services should be developed in line with the site's tourism potential, he added. Referring to the condition of roads in the area, Safiari said the access routes to Karaftu require serious attention and that roads must not be allowed to become "killing grounds." He added that road safety should be addressed alongside tourism development so that increased traffic generated by visitors does not pose a threat to people's lives. The campaign organizer also believes that increased tourism at Karaftu could benefit areas beyond Divandarreh, with neighboring provinces and cities, including West Azarbaijan, East Azarbaijan, Zanjan, Bijar and Takab, also benefiting from a rise in tourist arrivals. Alongside the global inscription, the protection of Karaftu and its surroundings and the provision of appropriate infrastructure are issues that could play a decisive role in the site's tourism future. Safiari stressed the need for a development-oriented approach to Karaftu, saying the cave is more than a geological phenomenon and, with proper planning, could become an important tourism and economic asset for the province. The global inscription of Karaftu could ultimately serve as a starting point for greater attention to the site. Making full use of this potential, however, would require a range of simultaneous measures, from protecting and managing the site's surroundings to improving road safety, developing tourism services and creating opportunities for local communities to participate in the tourism economy.

Hashjin promotes diverse attractions for tourism development

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Hashjin, a city in Khalkhal, has a variety of attractions to draw tourists, thanks to its pleasant climate and spectacular mountainous landscape. Located among the provinces of Gilan, Ardabil, Zanjan and East Azarbaijan, the city has also seen tourism projects implemented and others underway with private-sector investment. Hashjin is the center of Khorsh-e Rostam District in Khalkhal, in southern Ardabil Province. The city has a history of settlement dating back more than 6,000 years. It was established as a district in 1944 and remained part of East Azarbaijan Province until 1993, when it was incorporated into Ardabil Province. According to inscriptions, Sargon, king of Assyria, encountered a food-storage center called "Panizish" during his military campaign into the land of Urartu. He then moved his army toward the southern borders of Urartu in an attempt to capture it. Hashjin, located at an elevation of 650 meters along the banks of the rushing Qezel Ozan River and near Mount Aqdagh, which rises to 3,322 meters and is designated as a protected and no-hunting area, presents a remarkable panorama of natural, wildlife and mountainous attractions. Flower-covered slopes and summer highlands filled with fragrant thyme, pristine natural landscapes and refreshing springs, as well as the beautiful



forests around the villages of Now Deh, Ak-Suu and Chenarlaq, are among the colorful pages of Hashjin's scenic album. The city has numerous remarkable tourist attractions. The first is the Qezel Ozan River, which flows for 90 kilometers through Hashjin. The river lies near the borders of Zanjan, East Azarbaijan and Ardabil provinces, and fishing and boating festivals are held there every year. Qezel Ozan means "flowing gold." The name consists of two elements, "Qezel" and "Ozan." The river is somewhat reddish in color, which is believed to be why it became known as Qezel Ozan. Surrounded by beautiful scenery, the river can be included in the travel itineraries of tourists visiting the area. The Pir Taqi Bridge is another tourist attraction in the city, drawing thousands of visitors from across the country every year. Tourism development, according to experts, can play a greater role in strengthening the local tourism economy and improving the livelihoods of residents.



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The suspension bridge is located near Pir Taqi village, 10 kilometers from Hashjin. It is 70 meters long and one meter wide and spans the ever-flowing Qezel Ozan River. Agriculture is also thriving in Hashjin, with extensive farmland and orchards. Some of the earliest seasonal fruits in Ardabil Province are harvested from villages and orchards along the Qezel Ozan River, including Nomehil and Mazraeh. These products include mulberries, pomegran-

ates, figs and apricots. The Pomegranate Festival is held annually in Nomehil Village in Hashjin and has gradually developed into a national event, attracting enthusiasts and visitors from different parts of the country. Yahya Najarqabel, deputy tourism chief of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization of Ardabil Province, said the festival is usually held in the fall, particularly in November.

He said the Nomehil Pomegranate Festival is held every year, with the sale of handicrafts and rural products alongside orchard produce, including pomegranates, among the main programs of the cultural and social event. He added that various cultural and artistic programs are also held during the festival and along the Qezel Ozan River, with one of its objectives being to create a sense of social vitality and excitement among tourists and, particularly, local residents. He continued that the tourism village of Nomehil is one of Ardabil Province's designated tourism areas. Holding the pomegranate festival there can help introduce the tourism potential of Khorsh Rostam District in Khalkhal. A winter festival is also held in Hashjin, highlighting the area's attractions during the cold season. Known as "Welcoming Spring," the event showcases the winter tourism potential of the region. According him, the event is held in cooperation with the Culture

and Islamic Guidance Department, the municipality, the district administration and public libraries. Various programs, including Nowruz recitations, traditional music and local rituals, are held during the festival. Yaser Ranaei, director of public relations at Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization of Ardabil Province, said Hashjin is among the province's successful cities in achieving the objectives of the winter festival. Aqdagh Mountain, designated as a protected and no-hunting area and a habitat for wildlife, is located within the Hashjin area. Covering more than 93,000 hectares, it boasts rich flora and fauna and contains a remarkable range of natural attractions that captivate visitors. Seven springs and rivers flow on the slopes of Aqdagh. The largest, Aq Bolagh Spring, has a flow rate of 500 liters of water. Numerous waterfalls are found throughout the Hashjin and are popular destinations for nature lovers and tourists. Hashjin's waterfalls attract many visitors during the summer. The most famous and scenic waterfall in the area is Nodeh Waterfall. The city's tourism attractions have, in themselves, helped turn Hashjin into a tourism hub in Ardabil Province. Visitors to the pleasant-climate city can not only enjoy its tourist attractions but also visit local handicraft outlets and purchase products such as Jajim (a traditional Iranian floor covering), hats, knitted socks and gloves, as well as fresh fruit from its picturesque orchards.