Bijar's heritage, handicrafts seen as key tourism assets

Iranica Desk

Bijar is home to around 600 historic sites and nearly 60 historic bathhouses, offering considerable potential for cultural tourism, according to Seyyed Hadi Hosseini, an adviser to Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts and a board member of the Fund for the Development and Restoration of Historic and Cultural Buildings.

Speaking to ISNA following a one-day visit to Bijar, Hosseini stressed the importance of strengthening cooperation among local communities, artists and officials to further develop the city's cultural heritage and tourism potential.

"Cooperation between the people, particularly artists, and officials needs to be strengthened," Hosseini said, adding that greater public participation could create new opportunities in the fields of art, history and cultural heritage.

Hosseini said Bijar's approximately 600 historic sites and 60 traditional bathhouses reflect the area's long history and rich cultural heritage.

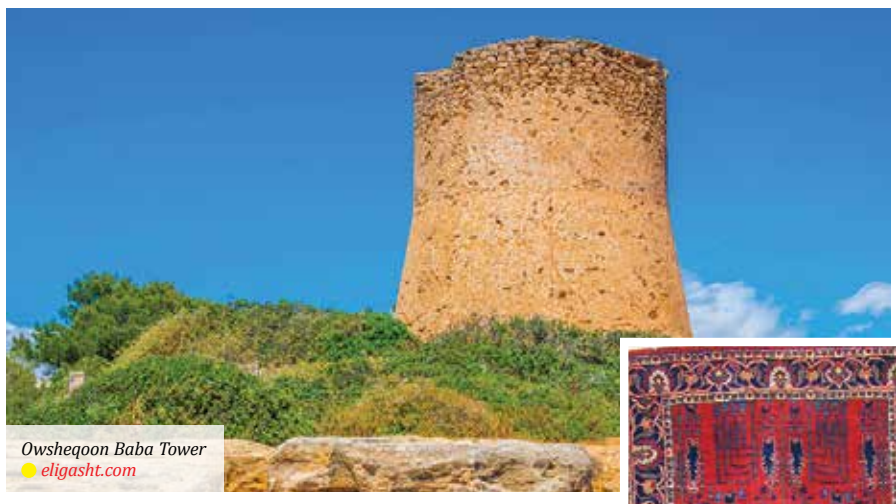
He also emphasized the importance of introducing younger generations to Iran's historical heritage. Educational programs, regular conferences and media initiatives, he said, should be expanded to raise public awareness of the country's cultural and historical resources.

According to Hosseini, broadcasters, news agencies, artists, journalists and cultural organizations can play a greater role in introducing the heritage of Bijar and other historic areas of Iran to the public.

Hosseini identified the city's limited recognition as a tourism destination as one of its key challenges.

He said developing Bijar as a tourism destination could create new opportunities for local economic development, given its historical, cultural and artistic resources.

Hosseini also called on residents of Bijar and Kurdistan Province to invest in tourism-related businesses, including traditional accommodation and hotels. He said the necessary incentives and support could be provided to expand accommodation infrastructure and encourage visitors to stay longer in the city.



Owsheqoon Baba Tower
eligasht.com

The historic bazaar of Bijar was also highlighted as one of the city's important cultural assets.

Hosseini described the bazaar as a historically significant structure that has survived despite damage inflicted on the city over the course of its history, including during Russian attacks on Bijar.

He said one of the objectives of his visit was to examine plans for rehabilitating the historic bazaar. According to Hosseini, efforts will be made in cooperation with the governor, provincial cultural heritage officials and other authorities to address existing problems and restore the remaining sections of the bazaar, particularly its covered areas.

Bijar rug
wikipedia.org

He expressed hope that continued cooperation among local authorities and communities would lead to further progress in the development and rehabilitation of Bijar's historic and tourism assets during future visits.

Hosseini also outlined measures being considered to support local handicraft producers and artists.

One initiative involves providing insurance coverage for master artisans and craftspeople working in carpet weaving and other handicraft fields.

He also announced plans to launch a dedicated platform for handicraft producers. The proposed platform would allow artisans to showcase and sell their products, obtain raw materials directly, and access services such as insurance and financial assistance.

Hosseini said the project is in the final stages of contracting with the implementing organization and expressed hope that it could become operational by the end of the year.

He added that the initiative could help ease some of the economic challenges facing artisans and artists.

At the end of his visit, Hosseini thanked the people of Bijar for their resilience and cooperation.

He said Iran's historical continuity has been closely connected to its deep cultural roots and to the communities that have continued to live in and preserve its historic settlements.

Hosseini concluded that protecting Iran's cultural and historical heritage requires continued cooperation and shared responsibility between local communities and public officials.

Reading Room

New book explores Iran's ancient earthen architecture

Iranica Desk

A new volume exploring Iran's long tradition of earthen architecture and the challenges facing its preservation has been published as the third installment of the On Conservation series.

Titled On Conservation: Soil, Adobe and Earthen Architecture, the book has been compiled by veteran heritage conservation expert Rasoul Vatan-Doust, with the collaboration of Parisa Abdollahi, and published by Dadkin Publishing. The volume brings together contributions from researchers and specialists in architecture and conservation, examining Iran's earthen heritage from historical, technical, cultural, social and environmental perspectives, according to IBNA.

Earthen architecture is among the oldest forms of construction in Iran and around the world. The use of earthen building materials in Iran dates back more than 10,000 years, according to the book. Over millennia, basic natural resources — soil, water, straw and sunlight — were transformed into durable building materials used for homes, mosques, caravanserais, fortifications and urban walls.

Adobe, generally produced by mixing clay-rich soil with sand and water and, in some cases, straw before being dried in the sun, became particularly well suited to Iran's arid and semi-arid climate. Its availability, relatively low cost, thermal properties and adaptability made it a fundamental material in traditional Iranian architecture.

But the book argues that earthen architecture represents much more than an ancient construction technique. It is also a striking example of the relationship between human communities and their natural environment.

Over centuries, earthen construction evolved in response to local climates, social needs and cultural practices, becoming an integral part of the historical identity of numerous Iranian cities and villages. Yazd, Naien, Kashan, Tabas and Isfahan are among the places where this tradition remains visible. Historic structures such as Bam Citadel, the Jaame Mosques of Naein, Ardestan and Zavareh, as well as traditional houses in Yazd and Kashan, demonstrate the artistic and technical possibilities of earthen materials.

One of the key reasons many earthen buildings have survived for centuries, the book notes, is the continuous maintenance carried out by local communities.

Traditional conservation practices included regularly replastering walls, strengthening supporting structures and applying fresh layers of mud to roofs. Such activities were once part of everyday life rather than exceptional conservation projects. The continued transmission of this local knowledge helped ensure the survival of many earthen structures across generations.

Despite its historical and cultural importance, earthen architecture is increasingly vulnerable to a range of threats.

Natural factors, including moisture, rainfall, earthquakes, wind erosion and temperature fluctuations, can cause significant deterioration. Human factors have also become increasingly important. The decline of traditional building knowledge, the use of industrial materials that may be incompatible with historic structures, rural migration and the depopulation of historic settlements have all contributed to the deterioration of earthen heritage.

The authors therefore stress that conservation cannot be treated solely as a technical matter. Social, cultural and economic considerations must also be taken into account.

Vatan-Doust warns that the threat extends beyond the physical deterioration of historic structures. Younger generations are also becoming increasingly disconnected from the knowledge and values associated with earthen architecture. Greater awareness among conservation professionals, architects and the wider public is therefore considered essential to ensuring the survival of this heritage.

The book does not advocate replacing modern architecture with traditional earthen construction. Instead, it calls for greater interaction between traditional knowledge and contemporary architectural practices.

According to the volume, earthen architecture can continue to play a role in contemporary construction if traditional techniques are combined with modern research and technologies. Such an approach could also provide environmentally compatible solutions at a time when sustainable construction has become an increasingly important concern.

The authors point to several measures that could contribute to the preservation and revival of earthen architecture, including further research, updating conservation and construction techniques, educating younger generations, documenting successful projects, strengthening local economies and promoting cultural tourism.

Iran is not alone in possessing a rich tradition of earthen architecture. Similar forms of construction can be found across Yemen, Morocco, Mali, Egypt, China and Peru, where earthen buildings form an important part of local cultural heritage.

Historic Sana'a in Yemen, the earthen cities of Morocco, the remains of Chan Chan in Peru, traditional settlements along the Nile in Egypt and the Great Mosque of Djenné in Mali are among the examples highlighted in the book.

These international experiences demonstrate that preserving earthen architecture requires more than technical intervention. Community participation, institutional support and the continuation of traditional knowledge are also important components of long-term conservation.

Iran has undertaken a number of initiatives to study and preserve its earthen heritage over the past several decades. Among them are conferences on earthen architecture held in 1972 and 1975, conservation work at the ancient site of Chogha Zanbil, restoration efforts at Bam Citadel and other historic structures in Bam, as well as numerous specialized workshops and conferences. In February 2019, the first international workshop on earthen architecture in the World Heritage City of Yazd, titled "Living Traditions and Urban Development," brought together Iranian and international specialists to examine the relationship between traditional earthen architecture and contemporary urban development.

The book also calls for the development of national guidelines and a locally adapted charter for the conservation, maintenance and restoration of Iran's earthen heritage. While international organizations, including the International Scientific Committee on Earthen Architectural Heritage (ISCEAH) and ICCROM, have undertaken work in this field, the authors argue that Iran requires conservation guidelines adapted to its own historical, climatic and cultural circumstances.

The new volume grew out of papers presented at the First Conference on Earthen Architecture and Urbanism and Its Role in the Sustainable Development of Contemporary Iranian Architecture, held at the National Museum of Iran in October 2024.

The event was organized with the cooperation of several Iranian heritage and museum institutions, including the Cultural Heritage Department of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, the National Museum of Iran and the Iranian National Committee of the International Council of Museums.

At its core, On Conservation: Soil, Adobe and Earthen Architecture presents earthen architecture not simply as a remnant of the past, but as a living component of Iran's cultural identity and a potential source of knowledge for sustainable architecture in the future. Its central message is that preserving this heritage requires a combination of traditional knowledge and contemporary research, community participation and education, alongside attention to the technical, cultural, social and economic dimensions of conservation.