

Chehel Dokhtarun Cave; window into prehistoric life in Jahrom

Iranica Desk

For travelers interested in history — and willing to do a little walking — Chehel Dokhtarun Cave in Jahrom has much to offer, from pristine natural surroundings to thousands of years of prehistoric rock art. Jahrom is about a two-hour drive from Shiraz. From Jahrom, visitors must travel about 25 kilometers along the Jahrom–Hakan road to reach the Chehel Dokhtarun natural heritage site.

The cave lies in the northern highlands of Par Ahu village in Jolgha Rural District, inside Gorm Mountain and in the middle of the scenic Chehel Dokhtarun gorge. Reaching the cave requires a short walk. The entrance is visible on the southern slope of Gorm Mountain, and the route to it is relatively short and easy. The cave extends about 15 meters into the mountain and covers roughly 200 square meters. Its ceiling is about 12 meters high at the entrance, narrowing to around four meters at the far end.

A sloping cave awaits visitors, its walls bearing engravings and paintings created by people who lived in the region in prehistoric times. The surviving rock art has provided historians with valuable clues about the social life of the people who once inhabited the area.

The steep slope at the entrance would have made access to the cave difficult. To overcome this, people in later periods carved footholds into the rocky surface of the slope, leaving behind traces that visitors can still use today. Reza Norouzi, a cultural heritage expert who has visited Chehel Dokhtarun Cave, said the rocky terrain and steep slope leading to the interior prompted people to carve small steps into the rock, making access to the cave easier.

For visitors interested in an-



cient history, however, the most remarkable feature of Chehel Dokhtarun is its thousands-of-years-old paintings. The images on the walls offer what can be described as an open record of the social life of prehistoric communities in the region.

A series of paintings appears on a relatively smooth section of the cave wall. The images are arranged in separate panels and depict different subjects, rendered in a simple style using ochre pigment.

One of the most significant discoveries made by historians at the site is a collection of prehistoric and ancient images painted with red ochre on the southern wall of the cave. More than 50 individual motifs have been identified. The motifs include abstract, animal, human and plant forms, although abstract geometric designs make up the majority. Many of these geometric figures are repeated across the cave walls.

Although thousands of years of erosion have damaged many of the prehistoric markings, eight motifs share a distinctive design. Each consists of two elongated arms extending in opposite directions, a semicircle — and, more rarely, a quad-



rilateral — at the center, with short lines positioned vertically beneath the arms.

Inside the lower circular section, or immediately below these motifs, numerous dots can be seen. In some cases, one or more animals appear to be depicted as part of a herd. Another notable feature is the placement of these motifs. Such designs have been found in relatively few locations, at least within the broader Fars, and they were painted higher on the wall than many of the other images. In two cases, a sun-like design was also drawn

a short distance below them. With careful observation, visitors can identify around five types of animals depicted on the walls of Chehel Dokhtarun. The most recognizable is the wild goat or ibex, an animal commonly represented in rock art across the Iranian Plateau. In some places, the animals are enclosed within circles of dots, a feature that may have had ritual significance, although historians say further research is needed to establish its meaning. Natural erosion over thousands of years can make the original forms difficult to

interpret. Nevertheless, historians have identified and reconstructed possible images of deer, hornless or single-horned quadrupeds, and herds of animals on the cave walls.

As with some of the earliest known examples of human art, there is speculation that depictions of animal herds may have been connected to hunting practices, perhaps representing hunted animals or symbolic hunting rituals.

The most recent animal-related images also include a human figure riding an animal that may be a horse.

Historians have suggested that depictions of dogs, horses and herds could date to the first millennium BCE and may be associated with the period when humans were domesticating animals. Some of the animals appear symbolically enclosed within circles of dots. Human figures are less common in the cave than the other motifs, with only four identified examples. One depicts a person riding a horse; another shows a human figure leaning with one leg bent; a third depicts figures with their arms and legs spread apart; and the fourth portrays a human figure surrounded by what appears

to be a halo of light, the sun or fire.

Beyond its rock art, the cave also contains several stone basins at its far end, where water from a spring inside the cave is collected. Three small basins were carved one after another into the rock, along with irregular channels that carried water between them, adding to the archaeological and natural value of the site.

The first basin was carved about 1.4 meters from the spring, on the downward slope inside the cave. It has an irregular shape, a circumference of about 335 centimeters and a depth of 18 centimeters.

The second basin is about half a meter from the first. It is approximately 25 centimeters deep and measures about 90 by 90 centimeters. The third basin lies more than 2.5 meters farther away.

Norouzi described his experience inside the historic natural cave, explaining that dripping water from the ceiling had led to the creation of three connected basins in the rocky floor. The basins vary in size and shape: the first is irregular, while the other two were carved in regular, square forms.

The basins represent a combination of human intervention and natural processes. Because the final basin lies on a slope, two of its walls were reinforced with stone and mortar. Water overflowing from each basin was directed through a narrow channel into the next one.

The primary archaeological significance of Chehel Dokhtarun Cave lies in its ancient rock art, which has survived on the cave walls for thousands of years. Natural erosion, however, is among the threats endangering these fragile images, making their preservation and further study increasingly important.

Ancient fortresses preserve Sistan and Baluchestan's historic legacy

Ancient castles and fortified strongholds scattered across the vast province of Sistan and Baluchestan are more than mud-and-brick structures; they are silent guardians of history and enduring witnesses to a civilization with deep roots. Having withstood the passage of centuries, these imposing structures have preserved a tangible link between generations past and future. The architectural remains of the fortresses point to sophisticated knowledge of defensive architecture, resource management and systems of governance, reflecting the historical importance of the region across different periods. Many of these historic sites remain relatively untouched, unexplored and little known. Their structures are believed to hold important clues to

the region's past, awaiting further archaeological and historical research, according to IRNA.

Castles and fortifications are scattered throughout the province, from the mountains of Nikshahr to the Hamun area and the plains around Iranshahr. Among the notable sites are Dezak Castle in Saravan, Seh Kohe Castle in Hamun, Bampur Castle in Bampur and Naseri Castle in Iranshahr.

Other historic fortifications include Qasr-e Qand Castle, Espakeh Castle in Nikshahr, Sardar Mohammad Khan Naroui Castle in the village of Qaleh Now in Sistan, Paskuh Castle in Sib and Suran, and Kuhkan Castle in Hiduj, Iranshahr. The sites are considered important elements of the region's historical and cultural heritage and have the potential to contribute to



Naderi Castle
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heritage tourism and the preservation of local cultural traditions. Conservation and restoration efforts are also seen as important to ensuring that the structures remain accessible to future generations. Morad Ghadari, head of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department of Iranshahr,

described Naderi Castle as one of the prominent historical monuments in southeastern Iran. He said the fortress reflects an important part of the history and political developments of Baluchestan during the Qajar period and the years that followed.

According to Ghadari, con-

struction of the fortress began in 1848 following a proposal by Farmanfarma and the approval of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar. The project was intended to transfer the center of government in Baluchestan from Bampur to Pahreh, the historical name associated with present-day Iranshahr.

Construction took seven years and was completed in 1855 by Hossein Memar-Bashi Kermani, he said. Ghadari said the castle covers approximately 35,000 square meters and originally included nine watchtowers, a defensive wall more than six meters high and about five meters wide, nearly 150 rooms and four separate courtyards.

He also outlined some of the political developments associated with the fortress. Toward the end of the Qajar period, the castle was captured by local residents of Iranshahr and handed over to Bahram Khan Barakzahi for administration, according to Ghadari. A subsequent period of development took place under Amir Dost Mohammad Khan Barakzahi, Bahram Khan's nephew, when the fortress became a center of government in Baluch-

estan, he added.

Ghadari said the castle was taken from local rulers in 1928, during military campaigns led by Amanollah Jahanbani, a commander under Reza Shah, following a series of clashes.

Ghadari said Naseri Castle was added to Iran's National Heritage List in 1996.

He described the site as an important part of Iranshahr's cultural heritage, saying its surviving walls and structures reflect aspects of the city's history and the cultural development of its people.

Iranshahr covers an area of approximately 16,000 square kilometers and has a population of more than 250,000. The county has 102 villages with more than 20 households, 98 villages with Islamic councils and 83 villages with village administrations.