

Iranica Desk

A ceremony marking the second anniversary of Mehregan Festival's inscription on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list was held at the historic Karaftu Cave in Kurdistan Province on Friday.

Addressing the ceremony, Arash Zarehtan Lahoni, governor of Kurdistan Province, said holding the festival near the historic cave offers an opportunity to showcase Kurdistan Province's cultural and historical heritage and draw greater attention to the site as efforts continue to secure its inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List, according to chn.ir.

Zarehtan Lahoni said the festival was being held in the province for the second consecutive year near the historic cave, adding that the decision to choose the site was intended to raise public awareness of its historical significance and cultural potential.

He noted that efforts were underway to secure UNESCO World Heritage status for Karaftu Cave, stressing that cultural events at historical sites can help familiarize the public with the province's valuable heritage and strengthen Kurdistan's tourism profile. Emphasizing the importance of continuing the festival in the coming years, the governor said the strong public reception demonstrated the province's capacity to host cultural and tourism events. He added that such programs play an important role in promoting Kurdistan's historical and cultural assets.

Mohsen Fat'hi, head of the Iranian Parliament's Tourism Faction,

Mehregan Festival highlights Kurdistan heritage



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also stressed the need to introduce Kurdistan's historical and cultural attractions to national and international audiences.

He said completing the nomination dossier and preparing the necessary documentation for the cave's proposed inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List remained a priority, with efforts continuing to advance the process. Fat'hi recalled that the need to pursue World Heritage status for the cave had been highlight-

ed during last year's Mehregan Festival. He added that appropriate funding had been allocated to advance the nomination and that a team was responsible for preparing and completing the required documentation.

He expressed hope that, in cooperation with the relevant authorities, the dossier would be submitted in the near future for the next stages of the nomination process.

Referring to the cave's signifi-

cance in Kurdistan's historical and cultural identity, Fat'hi said the inscription of the Hawraman Cultural Landscape on UNESCO's World Heritage List had helped raise the international profile of the province. He added that the cave could similarly help promote Kurdistan's heritage and attract more tourists if its nomination succeeds.

Pouya Talebnia, director general of Kurdistan's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Depart-

ment, said Mehregan was an ancient Iranian festival embodying values such as affection, friendship and solidarity.

He described holding the celebration at one of the province's prominent historical sites as an opportunity to promote Kurdistan's cultural heritage and tourism potential simultaneously.

Talebnia noted that Mehregan had been jointly inscribed by Iran and Tajikistan on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

He said commemorating the festival helped pass ancient Iranian traditions on to future generations.

He added that choosing Karaftu Cave as the venue not only honored the festival but also brought the site's historical and cultural significance into focus, helping strengthen cultural tourism and event-based tourism in the province. Talebnia also highlighted the role of local artists and cultural groups in showcasing Kurdistan's arts and traditions alongside the region's historical landmarks.

The ceremony marking the second anniversary of Mehregan's inscription featured a range of cultural and artistic programs, including a performance by a group of 1,000 tanbur musicians, an address by historian and cultural researcher Mohammad Ali Soltani, a display of purebred Kurdish horses, Kurdish music performances, and an exhibition of handicrafts and local products. Located in Divandarreh, Karaftu Cave is one of Kurdistan Province's prominent historical sites. Its rock-cut architecture, carved-out spaces and archaeological significance have given it a distinctive place among Iran's historical landmarks.

Preparations for the cave's proposed inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List are ongoing, with further research and the completion of specialized documentation remaining key steps in the process.

Mehregan, rooted in Zoroastrian traditions, symbolizes the end of the harvest season and the start of autumn to express gratitude to God for granting livelihood.

Eshkevarat's hazelnut orchards offer new opportunities for tourism

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Tourism is no longer limited to visiting historic buildings and natural attractions. Sometimes, a journey winds through orchards and farmland, introducing visitors to the lives, culture and livelihoods of local communities. Known as agritourism, this connection between nature, agricultural production and rural life can offer visitors a distinctive experience while creating opportunities to boost local economies and preserve agricultural heritage.

In Gilan Province, Eshkevarat region is a notable example of this connection. This mountainous region's hazelnut orchards are an integral part of its landscape, economy and culture. The hazelnut trees covering its slopes and valleys are more than a crop to be harvested and sold; they could also become part of a tourism experience. Visitors could stroll through the orchards, learn about cultivation and harvesting methods, sample local products and gain firsthand insight into village life.

Hazelnut tourism in Eshkevarat region represents an underdeveloped opportunity. With proper planning, suitable infrastructure and local community participation, it could bring agriculture and tourism together to support sustainable development.

Mahmoud Hoshyarfard, a faculty member at the Gilan Agricultural Research Center, told ISNA that Gilan's hazelnut crop is closely linked to Eshkevarat's ancient history. The orderly rows of hazelnut trees planted along mountain slopes and in valleys create a distinctive and picturesque landscape, he said.



Hoshyarfard said the region's extensive hazelnut orchards rank among Iran's most beautiful natural landscapes. They are not only a major source of hazelnut production in the country but also have the potential to become an attractive tourist destination.

Hazelnuts, he added, are part of the region's natural and cultural heritage, with their traditions and significance passed down across generations. He believes hazelnuts themselves can serve as a draw for tourists.

As an emerging branch of tourism, hazelnut tourism could create new visitor experiences while also benefiting the domestic hazelnut market, Hoshyarfard said. Such tours could take visitors to hazelnut orchards and processing facilities, offering opportunities to learn more about the history, diversity and distinctive characteristics of hazelnuts grown in Eshkevarat.

He described hazelnut tourism as a viable way to advance sustainable rural development, noting that tourism can serve as a tool for strengthening village economies and supporting long-term development.



The relationship between agritourism and sustainable rural development, he explained, is strengthened when both operate within settings that accommodate different forms of rural and agricultural tourism. Hazelnut orchard tourism can encourage villages to make better use of their human and natural resources and pursue sustainable development more effectively.

As a leading hazelnut-producing province, Gilan could use hazelnut tourism to attract visitors and expand its domestic and international markets, Hoshyarfard said.

He added that hazelnut tourism could introduce local varieties and related products to con-



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could seek to have its hazelnut-growing landscapes in Eshkevarat, and Alamut, in Qazvin Province, included in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) programme.

Such recognition could also draw greater attention from tourists to these landscapes. Although Gilan is a potential destination for hazelnut tourism in northern Iran, tourism policies and planning have so far given the sector little specific attention, he said.

Activities such as guided excursions, orchard visits, tours of hazelnut-drying and processing facilities, and cultural events celebrating hazelnuts should be developed and promoted as part of the tourism offering, he added.

Hazelnut tourism in Eshkevarat, which encompasses areas in Rudsar, Amlash and Siahkal, could help strengthen local livelihoods, Hoshyarfard said. Promoting the region as a destination for community-based hazelnut tourism could provide a new source of support for rural residents.

However, several obstacles

stand in the way of developing the sector. Hoshyarfard identified inadequate infrastructure, the need for workforce training, poor service quality and marketing, insufficient coordination among tourism stakeholders, limited safety and security measures in orchards, a lack of local expertise in hazelnut tourism, and the absence of a comprehensive policy framework.

If the region's potential could be harnessed to develop a combination of high-quality accommodation and agricultural tourism experiences, it could help address youth unemployment while establishing a new model of sustainable development in which nature, agriculture and tourism support one another, he said.

Eshkevarat's key strength — and a potential engine of regional economic growth — lies in the close relationship between agriculture and tourism. This emerging market could also help preserve both the tangible and intangible heritage associated with hazelnut cultivation, while creating jobs and generating economic benefits, Hoshyarfard said.

Through guided hazelnut tours, visitors could explore the heart of Eshkevarat's mountainous landscape, beginning their mornings with walks through private orchards and photographing hazelnut trees in the soft early-morning light. Food tourism enthusiasts could also experience local culture by sampling hazelnuts and related products.

Hoshyarfard expressed hope that greater recognition of Eshkevarat's natural assets would encourage tourism planners to develop this largely untapped sector.