

Khaf taps historical, cultural attractions to boost tourism

Iranica Desk

Domestic tourist arrivals in Khaf, Khorasan Razavi Province, have increased by around 20 to 25 percent with the onset of autumn, according to the head of the Khaf's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department.

Mahmoud Ba'aghdeh said efforts are underway to extend visitors' stays and boost the local tourism economy through cultural events and complementary activities. He told ISNA that Khaf's historical sites, traditional architecture, cultural heritage and tourism attractions provide significant potential for attracting visitors. He said foreign tourist arrivals in the town have remained very limited since the beginning of the current Iranian year (March 21, 2026), with most visitors coming from within Iran.

Ba'aghdeh added that tourism bookings had continued since the start of autumn and that domestic tourist numbers had grown compared with the same period last year.

Commenting on tourism infrastructure and its impact on visitors' length of stay, Ba'aghdeh said many of Khaf's historical monuments are located near police stations, healthcare facilities and other essential services.

He added that mobile phone and Internet coverage is adequate in many of these areas and that visitors generally have few complaints about the available infrastructure.

However, he noted that service facilities and roadside sanitation amenities have yet to be fully established along some



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tourist routes. Addressing these shortcomings could further improve the visitor experience, although facilities around many historical sites are already adequate, he said.

According to Ba'aghdeh, tourists stay in Khaf for an average of at least two nights. The department is seeking to extend these visits by offering a wider range of cultural and tourism activities, allowing visitors to experience more than just the county's historical landmarks. Ba'aghdeh said visitors to Khaf are often introduced to local music performances staged at historical sites or in traditional eco-lodges.

Visits to handicraft workshops are also planned, giving tourists the opportunity to learn about traditional crafts, meet local artisans and watch production techniques firsthand. Visitors can also explore handicraft shops to discover locally made products.

He said supplementary tourism activities are tailored to the season and local conditions. During



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the saffron harvest, for example, visitors may be taken to saffron fields, while wheat fields can be included in itineraries during the wheat harvest. Where circumstances permit, tourists may also be introduced to traditional methods of baking local bread. In some cases, tourist visits have coincided with traditional local games, and efforts have been made to take visitors to watch these activities, he added. "The aim is to ensure that tourism is not limited to visiting a

historical monument," Ba'aghdeh said, emphasizing the importance of introducing visitors to the region's culture, customs and way of life.

Ba'aghdeh said several cultural and tourism events are being planned for Khaf, including Khaf Cultural Week and a festival featuring local music and traditional games.

Preparations for Cultural Week are underway, with the event expected to take place in Aban, the eighth month of the Iranian

calendar, which generally falls in October and November.

The annual local music festival, usually held in winter, is another key event on the department's agenda, he said.

A festival celebrating Iran's ethnic groups is also planned for before Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which begins in March. If conditions allow, officials will seek to hold the event in Khaf. Such events could play an important role in showcasing the county's indigenous culture, local music, customs and tourism potential, Ba'aghdeh said.

Addressing the development of rural tourism, Ba'aghdeh said four villages have been designated as tourism target villages in Khaf. The department plans to work with district authorities to improve tourism services and accommodation in these villages, he said. He specifically pointed to initiatives in Niababad village, where work has begun to organize routes traditionally used by local residents. Officials hope that continued efforts will improve conditions for tourists

visiting and staying in designated tourism villages.

Ba'aghdeh said there are currently no plans to increase the number of designated villages. Instead, the priority is to strengthen the existing four destinations and ensure they are better equipped to accommodate visitors. Decisions on adding further villages could be considered once the current sites have been organized and developed, he added.

Ba'aghdeh also highlighted Khaf's growing presence on organized tour itineraries.

He said that as tour operators develop routes from Tehran to more distant destinations, certain cities along the way increasingly become tourism stops. Khaf has gradually established its position on these routes, he added.

Several organized tours have visited the town in recent weeks, reflecting growing interest in its tourism potential.

Beyond its historical monuments, Khaf offers a range of cultural attractions, including traditional regional music, local clothing, traditional cuisine, indigenous customs and handicrafts, Ba'aghdeh said.

He added that expanding eco-lodges, organizing cultural and local music festivals, supporting handicraft artisans and improving infrastructure could help extend tourists' stays, stimulate local businesses and create employment opportunities.

Making strategic use of these resources, alongside the active participation of local communities and investors, will be essential to the sustainable development of tourism in Khaf County, he said.

Mina'i pottery preserves lost tradition of Persian art

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Mina'i pottery, one of the most delicate and sophisticated ceramic techniques developed in Iran during the Seljuk period, transformed pottery into a medium for depicting literary tales, hunting scenes, musical gatherings and human figures. Today, these works in major museums around the world testify to the technical skill and artistic imagination of Iranian potters in the medieval period.

According to ISNA, one of the finest examples of this art is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The bowl, made in Iran in the late 12th to early 13th century, depicts a scene from the story of Bahram Gur and Azadeh. In the scene, Bahram Gur, a renowned hero of Persian epic literature, is shown hunting alongside Azadeh, a harp player. The story appears in Persian literature, including the Shahnameh (Book of Kings). The bowl is made of stonepaste and decorated with polychrome overglaze painting and gilding.

The depiction of such a narrative on a ceramic vessel shows that Mina'i potters did more than decorate functional objects; they transformed their surfaces into a kind of storytelling canvas. In its descriptions of this group of works, the Metropolitan Museum also notes that many Mina'i motifs are associated with Persian literary and poetic themes, including stories from the Shahnameh. These ceramics therefore provide valuable insights into Iran's visual traditions during the Seljuk period.

What distinguishes these vessels from many other ceramics of the same period, however, is not just their subject matter but also their complex production technique. The modern term Mina'i derives from the Persian word mina, meaning enamel, and refers to a method of ceramic painting in which different colors were applied over an initial glaze and fixed through a second firing. The technique is also known in art-historical sources as haft-rang, meaning "seven colors."

The bodies of these vessels were generally made from a fine ceramic material known as stonepaste or fritware, composed of crushed quartz, glass frit and a small amount of clay. This mixture produced a hard, light-colored body. Once the vessel had been formed, it was coated with a pale, opaque glaze, and some colors were applied during the first firing. Additional paintings and colors that could not withstand higher temperatures were then applied over the fired glaze, and the vessel was returned to the kiln at a lower temperature. Gilding could also be included in the decoration.

These multiple firings made the process particularly risky. A vessel that had already been fired had to withstand another round of heating at a temperature high enough to fix the new colors without damaging the existing glaze and decoration. The Metropolitan Museum identifies this multi-stage process as one of the reasons Mina'i pottery was labor-intensive and luxurious to produce.

Kashan is more closely associated with this art than any other city. Research sources identify Kashan as one of the most important centers for producing fine ceramics in Iran during the 12th and 13th centuries, and many Mina'i works have been attributed to the city in art-historical studies. However, recent research emphasizes that archaeological evidence is insufficient to attribute all Mina'i vessels to a single workshop or even definitively to Kashan.

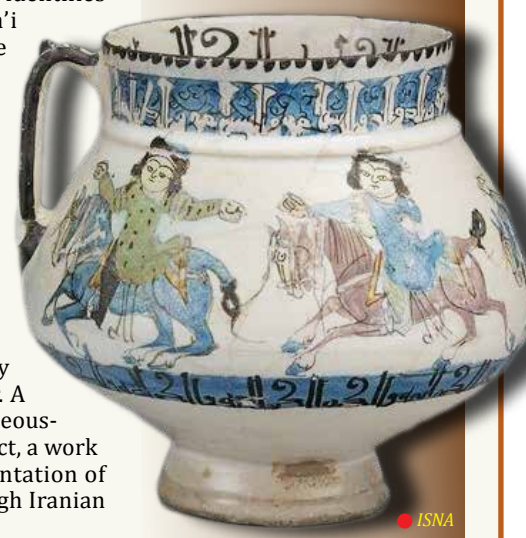
The technique emerged at a time when Iranian potters were exploring ways to expand the range of colors and increase the visual complexity of ceramics. The result was a group of vessels whose compositions and subjects sometimes resembled illustrations in illuminated manuscripts. Faces, horsemen, hunting scenes, musical performances, courtly gatherings and literary characters were brought together on the limited surface of a bowl or plate, turning each vessel into a miniature reflection of the culture and life of its time.

Among these narratives, the Shahnameh held a special place. Bahram Gur and Azadeh, Fereydun, Bijan and Manijeh, along with other literary and epic characters, appear on a number of Mina'i vessels. This gives the objects significance beyond the history of ceramics, as they also provide researchers with visual evidence of how Persian literature was represented in the visual arts before the Mongol period.

The Metropolitan Museum houses

more than a single example of this art. Its collection includes a notable group of Iranian Mina'i vessels, among them a bowl depicting Bahram Gur and Azadeh, bowls featuring horsemen and human gatherings, and a vessel decorated with abstract motifs. The collection also includes a Mina'i ewer depicting a procession of horsemen, accompanied by inscriptions in Kufic script. Another example of this art can be seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA): a large ewer attributed to Iran, specifically Kashan, and dated to the late 12th to early 13th century. The museum identifies it as an example of Mina'i pottery and highlights the complex and costly process of refiring required to fix the colors.

What is displayed today in museums around the world is therefore more than a collection of decorative vessels. Iranian Mina'i ceramics bear witness to a period of technical experimentation in which glaze, color, gold and literary storytelling came together. A small vessel could simultaneously serve as a functional object, a work of art and a visual representation of a story passed down through Iranian culture for centuries.



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