

[charlotteobserver.com](https://www.charlotteobserver.com)

Intriguing Iran

7–9 minutes

For most Americans, visiting Iran doesn't make it onto their vacation radar. Yet for me and my wife, Harriet, experiencing the wonders of ancient Persia has topped our bucket list for quite some time.

What surprised us most during our recent 25-day journey there was how wonderfully welcoming the Iranian people were and the universally warm reception we received everywhere we went. American tourists are a rarity in Iran, and when discovered by locals, we were the subject of much curiosity and delight.

We planned for our contrarian journey after thoughtful research and consultation with Iranian friends and feedback from those just returned. Despite a State Department travel advisory cautioning U.S. citizens to carefully consider the risks of travel here, we decided to go.

We were drawn to Iran by the opportunity to experience more than 2,500 years of Persian tradition, architecture and culture. We wanted to visit several UNESCO World Heritage sites, such as Persepolis and Esfahan's Friday Mosque. Calling us was the vast influence the Persian culture and civilization has imparted to contemporary Iran, the Middle East and beyond.

Curiosity for Americans

We weren't quite prepared for the positive attention we garnered from Iranians eager to meet Americans.

One morning at a park in Shiraz, Harriet was approached by an older gentleman. Her blond hair and aqua-colored tunic gave her away as a foreigner.

"Where is your home?" he asked, painstakingly summoning up all his English language skills. When Harriet responded, "America," the man's face beamed. He explained his son was in Ohio, teaching at a university in Cleveland, and his daughter was studying at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"Welcome here, welcome to Iran," he said in a refrain we heard often.

Often we were the first Americans people had ever met. Iranians stopped on the streets daily, curious about our impressions of Iran.

University students mobbed us in Esfahan at Imam Khomeini Square when they heard us speaking English. Anxious to try their language skills on native speakers, several young women giggled nervously as they asked us about our country and our home city.

While Charlotte didn't quite register, they acknowledged my geography lesson that it was halfway between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. Picture postcards I brought were a big hit and always gained a "beautiful city" response when I showed off Charlotte's skyline.

Selfies with the strange Americans were frequently requested, and we eagerly obliged.

Ancient and modern

During our trip we logged more than 3,000 miles traveling by bus with a small group of Americans and a national guide. Harriet and I added several days on our own in Tehran – Iran’s capital – before joining the group.

Our itinerary included several remote Caspian Sea villages; Masouleh, an ancient hillside town that has had continuous occupation for more than 1,000 years; Firuzabad; Yazd; Kerman; and the cultural capital of Iran, Esfahan.

With more than 12 million inhabitants, Tehran is the center of contemporary life in Iran. The city, smoggy and resting atop an inverted dish that abuts the Alborz Mountains, is a series of somewhat unconnected districts and neighborhoods, lacking an urban core, distinctive character or defining personality.

Traffic is ferocious at all hours of the day; crossing the street was the biggest safety danger we faced in Iran.

What Tehran lacks in charm is more than made up for in cultural touchstones and historic significance.

Gulestan Palace and the Sa’ad Abad complex dazzled us with intricate tile mosaics, vast and colorful throne rooms and imposing receiving halls. Tehran’s magnificent bazaar is a maze of exotic chatter, fine Persian carpets, cardamom- and cinnamon-perfumed air and some of the finest people-watching anywhere.

Touring the city

Our city tour included visits to the former shah’s palace, the National Museum, the iconic Azadi Freedom Tower, Laleh Park, the Jameh Mosque and the world-famous Iranian crown jewels.

Beyond Tehran, Persepolis awed us with remarkably preserved

archeological sights and mountainside reliefs revealing the stories of Darius, Xerxes and other pre-Islam Zoroastrian rulers of centuries ago.

Yazd, unfamiliar to me before our visit, became a favorite: I was enthralled by the stunning Dowlat Abad, a classic walled Persian garden rimmed with pomegranate and persimmon trees, and by the hilltop Towers of Silence – ancient traditional Zoroastrian sanctuaries for the dead.

The tiny village of Masouleh near the Caspian region introduced us to a variety of textile handicrafts and treats such as koloocheh, an Iranian pastry-like cookie with a spicy/sugary filling of walnuts and butter.

Esfahan overwhelmed us with its beauty and charm. The magnificent Imam Khomeini Square, one of the largest in the world, is where we marveled at the famed Ali-Qapu Palace and the towering Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque. Dozens of horse-drawn carriages roamed the square, with sleigh bells announcing their presence. We traveled across bridges built centuries ago and easily imagined what life must have been like in ancient times.

Carnivore's paradise

Dining in Iran is a carnivore's paradise. Just don't look for pork – all things pig are forbidden under Islamic law. Kebobs (chicken, lamb and beef) are popular and almost always served with saffron rice. Stews are delicious, with lamb shank a popular choice for braising. Grilled tomatoes and sour, pickled onions and garlic accompany many dishes, as does a ubiquitous yogurt and shallot sauce that most use for dipping with freshly baked flatbread.

Ice cream is a real treat in Iran, with the most popular kind flavored

with saffron, rosewater, honey and pistachios.

Touring in Iran is not without challenges. The infrastructure is just beginning to develop, and in many areas it is practically nonexistent. Gleaming hotel lobbies belie shabby guest rooms with small, well-worn beds. Plumbing is often problematic. Service is frequently indifferent. Internet connections are hit-or-miss. Outside the hotel, toilets are of the squat variety, without paper and often unclean.

Rules for women

Women need to be aware that Islamic law decrees that headscarves be worn at all times in public. Long sleeves and ankle-covering pants or dresses are also a must; no skin beyond the face and hands must show. Many holy sites we visited had separate entrances for men and women. In addition to headscarves, women were required to wear chadors, long overgarments covering their entire body.

Certainly inconvenient and different from Western culture, these requirements are necessary as part of the price paid for a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

With all the wonderful and historic sites we visited, it was the people that left the greatest impact upon us.

Ahmad – our bus driver – is as skilled as they come, daily navigating treacherous, winding mountain roads while spending his nights sleeping in a cramped special compartment on the bus. Yet he was always smiling, helpful and very proud of the opportunity to share his homeland with us.

The group insisted he come to our farewell dinner, where we gave

him a standing ovation and special recognition. Tearing up, Ahmad said simply that he loved Americans and thanked us for visiting, asking us to be ambassadors for Iran upon our return home.

This story was originally published December 5, 2014, 12:00 AM.