

# SUITCASE

TRAVEL + FASHION

## PASSPORT TO PERSIA: TRAVELLING IN IRAN

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My journey to Tehran is long and convoluted. I fly from London Gatwick to the bright lights of Istanbul's Sabiha Gökçen airport, complete with its Starbucks outlets and designer stores. The departure lounge for Tehran is filled with babbling Iranian families, expats going home for a spell and huddles of quiet businessmen. The flight attendant looks up in disbelief as he checks my passport – they don't get many British passengers on the Istanbul-Tehran leg.

I sit next to a quiet young Iranian man on the plane, a computer technician coming back from his new home in Sydney to visit family. Iran's diaspora stretches to the furthest corners of the globe. Los Angeles, for example, has earned the affectionate nickname of Tehrangeles for being home to the largest Iranian community outside Iran. The country's revolution in 1979 established the world's first Islamic republic, but also forced out many nationals, and the effects of the subsequent

brain drain have been significant. The government can't provide enough work for its well-educated population, and less than a third of graduates find jobs within a year of leaving university. My travel companion is excited to return, he says, as he hasn't seen his family for seven years. I too am full of anticipation, and try to pull my headscarf on early in the journey. "Leave it as late as possible," the young man reassures me. "Most ladies don't do it until they step onto the tarmac."

I arrive into Tehran at 5AM (it turns out Iran operates 24 hours and no one seems fazed by doing business throughout the night) and, against expectation, have no problems at immigration. The highways in Iran have remained a law unto themselves – at some point someone thought traffic lights might be a good idea, but you can almost see people cackling with abandon as they run reds. I take a very British attitude to all of this, anchoring myself in, closing my eyes and smiling politely. Not that my driver notices – he is too busy smoking, yelling into his two mobile phones and merrily singing along to Madonna.

This trip has been long planned. When I started my Farsi degree in 2010 Iran was in the grip of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ultraconservative presidency. The West's suspicion of Iran's nuclear ambitions increased diplomatic tension. In 2011 the UK closed its embassy in Tehran, simultaneously closing Iran's London embassy, and I saw my chance of a year abroad evaporate. But in the 2013 presidential elections Iranians voted overwhelmingly for Hassan Rouhani, who promised political change and an end to economic sanctions imposed by the US, EU and UN. This year negotiations led to a deal removing sanctions in return for the curtailing and monitoring of Iran's nuclear activity. No guarantees of course, but this could herald a brand-new era for both trade and tourism.

Which isn't to say that I could walk straight in. There are restrictions for UK, US and Canadian nationals who want to visit, as mistrust of foreign 'spies' runs deep. These tourists must be accompanied by a guide at all times and stick to a designated trail, which means no visits to private homes or politically sensitive locations. My best bet was to travel within a tour group, organised through a UK-based travel company and facilitated by an agency within Iran.

I meet my fellow travellers in Tehran. The group is small and mixed, with individuals from Australia, Canada, the US, Switzerland and Ireland. Everyone has different reasons for choosing this unusual holiday: whether they are interested in the culture, food, art and architecture, the antiquities or simply the thrill of visiting a pariah state. In the West the media tends to depict an Iran of ranting mullahs and angry mobs, public hangings, oppression of women and madcap politicians who hint at nuclear armories and proclaim death to the United States and Israel. But my journey is to smash many of these stereotypes, and the trip kicks off with a surprise. Our guide is young and, unexpectedly, female. A small but ever-growing sector of Iran's workforce is female, and women consistently make up around 60 per cent of the country's annual university intake. They may not have it easy, but Iranian women are educated, increasingly independent and slowly gaining prominence in the public space. Three of Rouhani's vice-presidents are female, and he's promised to improve opportunities for Iranian women. A small but ever-growing sector of Iran's workforce is female, and women consistently make up around 60 per cent of the country's annual university intake. They may not have it easy, but Iranian women are educated, increasingly independent and slowly gaining prominence in the public space.

Our tour route is scripted, focusing on ancient jewels and wholesome traditional experiences. Iran's tourism industry is taking baby steps, trying to build itself up despite the challenges of a lack of infrastructure (don't expect much from the hotels) and government restrictions. But the uncultivated beauty of the country is breathtaking. Relative isolation from the wider world means you can expect peace and calm at a wealth of ancient architectural and historical sites; our access is unhindered and, by and large, exclusive. From Tehran we fly to the southern city of Shiraz, set in a dry plain at the foot of the Zagros Mountains. Historically the city was famed for its lush green

gardens, poetry and romance. This reputation has endured, judging by the number of couples canoodling in quiet corners of the public parks.

Shiraz is the hometown of two of Iran's most venerated sages, Hafez and Saadi, ancient love poets whose verses on love, sex, religion, wine-drinking and merry-making are still as treasured and widely read as they were before the 1979 revolution brought traditional religious values back to the forefront of public life. We visit Hafez's tomb, an oasis set back from a bustling street that is popular with aforementioned canoodlers. Earnest devotees take us aside to explain his significance, arguing with each other about translation and meaning. This hospitable familiarity with complete strangers is a recurring theme. We're welcomed everywhere with smiles and food, and interrogated with endearing curiosity about our lives and families.

In the women's section of the Shah Cheragh mosque in central Shiraz I'm accosted and quizzed: Why am I in Iran? What do I think of the country? Why do I speak Farsi? My experiences in these segregated areas of the mosques are some of the most affecting of my journey. I'm welcomed into intimate moments – women weeping at shrines, gossiping after work, meeting for picnics and napping in corners. I'm enveloped in embraces, my cheeks are pinched and plenty of jokes are cracked about marrying me off to brothers or cousins.

The wearing of the chador (a semicircular cloak that completely covers the head and body) is compulsory for women in most mosques and religious places, although my best attempts are laughed off. Many women still choose to wear the chador in all public spaces, but younger women tend to wear the authorised alternative, a manteau (a loose trench coat of sorts that buttons to the neck and covers the arms, torso and thighs) along with a hijab. On the streets women push the boundaries of the government's prescriptions with bright colours, hijabs resting on top of high-piled hairdos, manteaus that barely cover bums and heavy make-up. Skinny jeans, Converse trainers and high heels are flaunted, as is the trademark plaster across the nose, which highlights the prized nose job that nearly half a million Iranian women (and some men) undergo every year. All this suggests that the authorities are taking a lenient approach to the fashion habits of Iran's youth. But the morality police are ever-present and ready to swoop in extreme cases. In Shiraz's Eram Garden I'm berated by a policewoman for my sloppy hijab and ankle-revealing trousers, although she softens when she discovers I'm a tourist, and asks what I've got planned for my holiday. The younger generations are well-educated, well-informed and ready to shed the politicised image attached to their parents by the events and consequences of 1979.

The next leg of our journey sends us east as we drive for long, hot days through deserts and dried-up river valleys, then over cool villages perched high on mountain peaks. We spend a day in the sprawling ruins of Persepolis under a burning sun. This is Iran's historical pride and joy, a -2,500-year-old Unesco World Heritage site built as a ceremonial capital during the Achaemenid dynasty. The scale of the site and level of preservation is awesome. There are the mandatory souvenir and food outlets – not to mention loudspeakers blasting epic narratives from Iran's history – but Persepolis remains relatively undeveloped as a tourist site, other than as a much-loved day out for Iranian families with picnics. Picnicking is taken very seriously in Iran and occurs at all times of day or night, and in any location (in parks, on highway verges and even in cemeteries...)

In the dry, desert city of Yazd – a conservative heartland famed for its seminaries and spooky, narrow-laned ancient town – we visit the ancient Zoroastrian Towers of Silence, where the deceased were placed in tall, open-topped constructions for vultures to pick clean. The practice was banned in the 1970s and the site is now a base for young men to race dirt bikes and flirt with schoolgirls. Approximately 60 per cent of Iran's population is under 30, and the younger generations are well-educated, well-informed and ready to shed the politicised image attached to their parents by the events and consequences of 1979. But the faces of Ayatollah Khomeini – founder of the Republic and spiritual father of its enduring Islamic revolution – and Ayatollah Khamenei, his successor and



the current Supreme Leader, are everywhere you go, staring out from shop windows, galleries, hotels and cafés.

We go on to spend a few days in Isfahan, a buzzing metropolis in central Iran known as Maidān-e Naqsh-e Jahān (image of the world square) and absorb its abundance of architectural beauty. In a small coffee shop on a leafy side street, a twenty-something Isfahani unravels some more preconceptions for me. Internet and satellite television have schooled Iran's youth in the weird and wonderful world of European and American film, music and celebrity culture; you can't escape the Kardashians, even in the Islamic Republic. But my new friend isn't a fan of Kim. His passions are Nirvana, photography and cinema, although not the kind of films you might expect: "Tourists come here and they say, 'hey, I've seen Kiarostami! I've seen Panahi!' and I'm like, 'yeah, but talk to me about David Lynch! Talk to me about Stanley Kubrick!'" He shows me his Instagram profile, where his artistic photos have gained him thousands of followers. While Facebook is banned (but easily accessed through VPNs) Instagram has been a surprise hit in Iran, encouraged by the government as a tool to show off the country's virtues. Accounts are operated with ruthless efficiency and I receive pity for my shambolically small following. Rich Kids of Tehran, an ostentatious account showcasing the hedonism and high fashion of Iran's upper echelons has nearly 100,000 followers. It's censored by the regime for 'un-Islamic' content but this seems to have little effect on its popularity.

These government restrictions on 'immoral' behaviour (no drink, drugs or nightclubs in the Islamic Republic, in theory) have forced Iran's youth to be imaginative in their creation of social spaces. Coffee shops have become precious areas for chitchat over espressos, or illicit meet-ups between couples over fruit smoothies. Trendy restaurants serving burgers and non-alcoholic mojitos are hotspots for nights out. Meanwhile sleek white galleries and fashion boutiques are destinations for the cultured and coutured to meet, think and play. Iran has a long history of arts and culture (see Ferdowsi, Rumi, Hafez, Saadi, Nizami, Behbahani, Hedayat, Farrokhzad, Yusij, Panahi, Kiarostami, Farhadi, Makhmalbaf et al) and while things have seemed quiet from the outside since 1979, the producers, facilitators and consumers have been quietly but fiercely enduring.

Back in Tehran I part ways with guide and group and go in search of some of these producers. With a population of 15million if you count its outskirts, Iran's capital ranks as the third-largest city in the Middle East. It's not a beautiful place to the outsider (an impenetrable jumble of concrete high-rises and traffic-clogged highways) but you can't help but be infected by its mad energy. Mercedes and Jeeps jostle for spaces in the roads alongside Iran's staple white Paykan cars (mass-produced since the 1960s and responsible for the constant haze of pollution over Tehran) and the grey of the skyline is peppered with neon lighting and flashy advertising. Street hawkers and food vendors flog wares outside shiny shopping malls, where high-end stores sell the latest model of mobile phone or games console. Most 'Western' products – iPhones for instance – are available here, for the right price. The scale of the city makes it difficult to know where to look for an arts scene. Fortunately for me, Lila Nazemian, an Iranian-Canadian curatorial associate for Leila Heller Gallery in New York, is home for a holiday, and on hand to give me a whistle-stop tour.

Our first visit is to the Aaran Gallery in downtown Tehran. Established by Nazila Noebashari seven years ago with a mission to promote contemporary Iranian art, the gallery primarily features the works of artists between the ages of 30 and 40. Nazila is bombarded with requests to represent more creatives; Tehran, and Iran in general, doesn't yet have the infrastructure to support its wealth of talent. She explains that she often sees families supporting children through art school and beyond, while a poor economy and unreliable public funding make it impossible for many artists to make a living.

But there are success stories. Mohammad Ghazali is a -35year-old photographer who trained in Germany and Paris and currently works with AG Gallery in Tehran. We meet at his apartment

on the ground floor of his family home in central Tehran. It is chicly furnished, filled with light and – remarkably for this city of noise – incredibly peaceful. Fluffy cats lounge on the chairs and sofas, each with their own adoption back-story. Over tea and shirini (sweet pastries) he shows us some of his work. Mohammad shoots in analogue and produces eerie, suggestive images, using mixtures of his own photographs and abandoned rolls of film found in old cameras he buys. His work has featured in galleries across the Middle East and in 2004 he won first prize at the ninth Tehran Photography Biennial for his self-portrait. When I ask Mohammad if he ever feels restricted by political twists and turns he explains that Iranian artists operate regardless of the political situation, adapting and searching out alternative funding in the form of private foundations and donors. As Nazila explains to us in her Aaran Gallery: "Iranian art is not a luxury, it's a way of life."

An example of such adaptation is Peyman Shafieezadeh, a 33-year-old multimedia artist who recently completed a residency in Hudson, New York with the prestigious Art OMI. Peyman's work deals with the concept of perspective, both physical – through collages and 3D mixed media – and cultural, using emotive, popular images. As he shows us around his studio he explains that his paintings are about "paradigms, pattern, systematic thinking... routines, behaviour, how behaviour is born". Appropriately, our conversation rests heavily on the idea of preconceptions. In the States he was struck by viewers' compulsion to politicise and orientalise his work: "When they read my name, my country, they already had images in their mind of what I was, what they wanted to talk about." A narrow stereotype of Iran, he says, has become entrenched in Western understanding of the country, and this in turn has reflected back onto the nation's collective consciousness.

But change is in the air as Iran opens up to the outside world. Nazila has received requests from eight international groups of buyers (in USA, Hong Kong and Europe) who want to visit the gallery next year. Meanwhile Lila cites the mere existence of an Iranian pavilion at the recent Biennial in Venice as a huge step. It was underfunded and many of the participants didn't even live in Iran, but the fact that it was even there was symbolic. Mohammad reserves judgment, using a game of volleyball he's just been watching as an example; the game looked good on the television – Iran were well ahead and set to win – and then suddenly they lost. Nothing is guaranteed where Iran's politics are concerned. Peyman emphasises an Iranian tradition of overcoming oppression – be it ancient invaders, British and US imperialism or unfair demonisation. He references the ancient epic Shahnameh, a national treasure written by the medieval writer Ferdowsi that blends myth and history, in which the weak endure and good always prevails. It could be a metaphor for the endurance and the identity of modern Iran. As the doors swing open to international tourists, Iranians finally have a chance to express this identity and culture to the outside world. The reality is more nuanced than any headline suggests, and much more compelling.