

Itinerary

The Persian Passage: An Immersive Iran Experience

Days 1 & 2: Tehran – the Capital

The trip starts in Tehran, Iran's largest city and capital. Tehran is perched on the footsteps of the snowcapped Alborz Mountains. It is Iran's most liberal city and its modern face. Explore the city's bazaars (*Tajrish Bazaar, Bazaar-e-Bozorg*), the opulent palatial residences of the Shah (*Golestan & Navaran Palaces*), and the city's magnificent monuments (*Azadi Tower*), stroll the city's leafy neighborhoods, boulevards, and parks (*Tajrish, Vali-asr Street & Park-e-shar*) and travel around the metropolis on the Tehran Metro, the largest subway system in the Middle East.

On the evening of day 2, we will take a two-hour train ride from Tehran to Qom.

Day 3: Qom – the Religious and Revolutionary heartbeat

Spend a good half a day exploring Qom, Iran's religious capital and the birthplace of the Iranian Revolution – one of the most profound events to have happened in the last century in the Middle East. Visit the intricately designed and always bustling *Holy Shrine of Fatimah Masoumeh*, one of Shia Islam's holiest sites, as well as learn about Shia Islam – the main branch of Islam in Iran. We will also visit *the House of Ayatollah Imam Khomeini* – the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

In the late afternoon, we will take a two-hour public bus ride from Qom to Kashan.

Day 4: Kashan – a beautiful oasis

Kashan is a delightful oasis town at the edge of the Dasht-e-Kavir Desert. It's well-known for its magnificent architecture, covered bazaar, rose water production, and traditional and majestic hotels that feature lush courtyards. Spend the night in one such hotel: the Mahinestan Raheb Hotel.

In the afternoon, we will take a five-hour public bus ride from Kashan to Esfahan.

Days 5-6: Esfahan is Half the World

"Esfahan is half the world", goes a Persian saying. It's the Paris of Persia – or some might even argue that Paris is the "Esfahan of Europe". Wide tree-lined boulevards crisscross Esfahan, and the city boasts a good number of grandiose and splendid monuments. In addition to the city's must-sees (*Naqsh-e-Jahan Square, Imam Mosque, Chehel Sotoun, Vank Cathedral, Allahverdi Khan Bridge*) we'll also be witnessing some local activities (*Pahlevani and Zourkhaneh rituals*), and will be heading to the hills outside the city to enjoy panoramic views of the city. Esfahan is the birthplace of our trip leader Javad Sharifi – it's his stomping grounds – and at his home, his mother will be preparing a large traditional dinner for our travelers!

In the evening of day 6, we will take a private-hire van and travel to Khorramdasht, a village two hours away from Esfahan.

Days 7 & 8 : Khorramdasht – A taste of rural Iran

Spend two days in Khorramdasht, a village home to around one hundred people in the Varzaneh Desert, and experience life in rural Iran. Khorramdasht is our trip leader Javad's ancestral village. Life in Khorramdasht is slow-paced and revolves around cattle farming and carpet-making.

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Night 8 & Day 9: Varzaneh – Dunes and mirages

Conclude day 8 by erecting a tent and camping on the dunes of the Varzaneh Desert. Enjoy breathtaking sunset views and have dinner around a bonfire and grill *Kebabs* – local and succulent meat-on-skewers dish. If the weather is good, look up and marvel at the beauty of the sky filled with bright stars and, possibly, the Milky Way.

Rise early on Day 9 just in time to witness the sunrise, and enjoy a few hours soaking in the vibes and feeling the breeze of the desert. Then, we will travel by private-hire for two hours to Yazd.

Day 10: Yazd – Nestled between two deserts

Nestled in between two deserts, Yazd is well-known for its mud-brick houses and buildings, forests of wind towers or *badgirs*, and its maze of winding and twisting alleyways lined with traditional teahouses, cafés, and artisanal workshops. Yazd is home to a large Zoroastrian population, a people who practice a 5000-year-old religion. Visit the city's **Zoroastrian Fire Temple**, a major center of worship for the Zoroastrian people, as well as a vast Zoroastrian complex named **the Towers of Silence**, a tower that is perched on a hilltop that was once the site of sky burials.

Day 11: Persepolis – the ruins of an ancient city

On day 11, we will start the day early in the morning and travel by private-hire van for five hours from Yazd to Persepolis.

In its heyday, Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, a great empire of antiquity that stretched from Egypt all the way to the mountains of Central Asia and the plains of Northern India. It was a city known for its pomp and grandeur until it was sacked, pillaged, and razed to the grounds by Alexander the Great's invading army. Today, the majestic ruins of this once-great city still stand, having withstood the test of time for more than two millennia.

After exploring Persepolis, we will travel by private-hire van to Shiraz in the evening. Shiraz is only an hour away from Persepolis.

Day 12: Shiraz – The heartland of Persian culture

Shiraz is a pleasant city set in the fertile plains of Central Iran and is often regarded as the cultural hub of Persian culture. It's home to splendid gardens, exquisite mosques (**Vakil Mosque & Nasir Al Mulk Pink Mosque**), and magnificent shrines (**Shah-e-Cheragh Shrine & Tomb of Hafez**), and is the focal point of many of Persia's literary works.

After strolling the streets of Shiraz, we'll board an overnight train bound for Tehran in the late afternoon. Traveling by overnight train is an experience in itself, where you get to be up close with citizens from all walks of life, such as cross-country traders, farmers visiting a neighboring village for a wedding ceremony, students returning home for the semester, and hawkers peddling their goods on board.

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Days 13 & 14: Tehran – the conclusion

Our overnight train pulls into Tehran Railway Station in the morning of day 13. We will visit more sights of the capital, this time with a particular emphasis on Iran's contemporary history. Places on the list include the gargantuan complex that is the *Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini* – the burial ground of Iran's former leader, the *site of the former U.S. Embassy*, and *the Holy Defense Museum* – a museum dedicated to the 8-year Iran-Iraq war.

We'll also window shop at *the Iran Mall*, the World's largest shopping complex home to more than 2500 stores.

The tour ends in the afternoon of day 14 in Tehran.