



POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS IN IRAN FOR DEVELOPING TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract

Iran as a big country in near east has many natural, historical and cultural beauties for foreign tourists but, like many other developing countries, there are some serious problems and limitations in tourism sector. Iran is one of the 10 important tourism and ecotourism country in the world but, studies shows that share of Iran from nearly 750 billion dollars world tourism incomes in 2005, was only about 7 million dollars.

Incoming increasing, life styles improvements and welfare development at recent years in Iran, lead to splendor of internal tourism especially religious tourism. More than 20 million internal travels to Mashhad city for pilgrimage of Imam Reza shrine in 2005 can confirm this claim. Studies shows that each year a lot of pilgrimage from mainly adjacent countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan and others have come to Iran for pilgrimage the Shiite holy places especially Hz. Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad and Hz. Masoomeh shrine in Qom and some other holy places such as Hz. Shah-e Cherag in Shiraz. Existence of many important holy places in Iran in one hand and existence of a 25 million Shiite Muslim tourist in the world in other hand indicates that Iran's government and tourism organization with considering a precise plan can attract the main portion of above mentioned tourists and their incomes.

Key Words: *Tourism, Religious Tourism, Ecotourism, Iran*

Introduction

Tourism has become the world's largest export industry, generating huge employment opportunity in the remote and backward areas. It is estimated that tourism for 13% of the total world exports and 8.2 % of the global employment.

By looking at the world tourism industry position in 2006, it is revealed that up to 760 million people were traveled in this year. World incomes from this industry were calculated about 700 billion US \$ that is around 10 % of total world gross incomes.

Tourism 2020 Vision is the world tourism organization's long-term forecast and assessment of the development of tourism in the first 20 years of the new millennium. Tourism 2020 Vision forecasts that international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020.

The total tourist arrivals by region shows that by 2020 the top three receiving regions will be Europe (717 million tourists), East Asia and the Pacific (397 million) and the Americas (282 million), followed by Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

According to WTO report, Iran is among the world's top 10 in term of tourism attractions but figures release by the top international tourism body indicate that ,Iran despite its rich culture and historical venues has a partly share of 0.01 percent in global tourism revenues .However, only 0.05 percent of global tourists visit Iran every year. According to the WTO report in 2006, Iran ranked 70th between all countries of world and 13th among Muslim countries with respect to the number of tourists arrivals, which reached on 700000 and 77th place with respect to tourism revenues reaching 477 million US \$.

However, in this paper it is tried to review potentials and limitations of tourism industry in Iran. Experts believe that there are much potential for developing this sector in country but there is need to many changes in many fields.

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A brief look at Iran

Iran with 1648000 square kilometer area and 70 million people is one of the largest countries in the Middle East. This country is bordered to the north by the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea; to the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan; to the south by the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf; and to the west by Iraq and Turkey (Figure 1). The country is dominated by three mountain ranges: the fertile, volcanic Sabalan and Talesh ranges in the north-west; the very long, Jurassic-era Zagros range, down the western border; and the dominant Alborz range, home of Iran's highest mountain, the permanently snowcapped Damavand (5670m/18,600ft), to the north of Tehran. The two great Iranian deserts, the Dasht-é Kavir (more than 200,000 sq km/78,000 sq mi) and the Dasht-é Lut (more than 166,000 sq km/64,740 sq mi), occupy most of the north-east and east of the central plain.

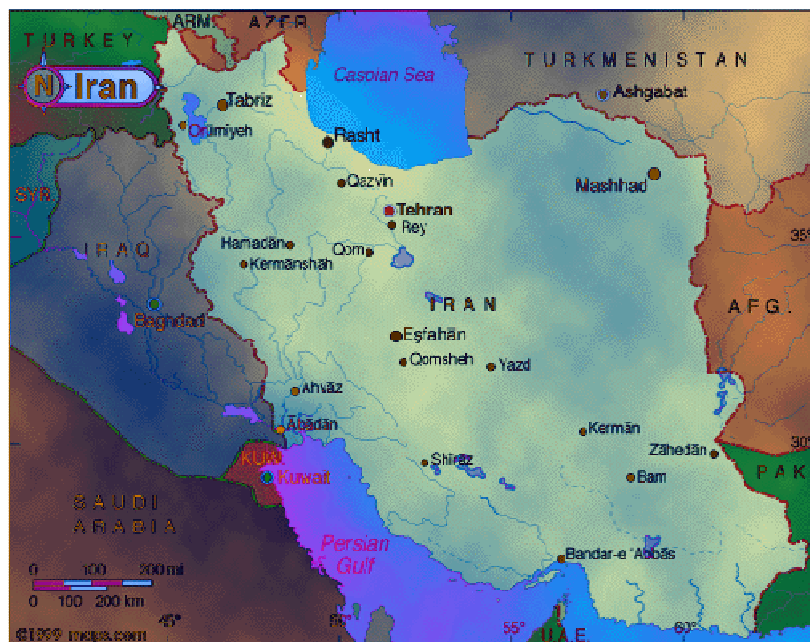


Figure 1: location map of Iran

Tourism and Eco-tourism potentials in Iran

Iran is a unique country in terms of its tourist attractions and abundant resources. The most important characteristics of the country are its diverse natural and ecotourism attractions, religious, ethical and cultural diversity, its national and Islamic architectural style, diverse climatic conditions and above all its people's hospitality. Iran is not only a nation with reach historical and cultural sites but, it has unique environment and nature in which four season of the year could be observed. There are 17 kinds of climates in the world that 12 kinds of them can be seen in Iran. The numbers of registered historic buildings are 11000 and many historical works and buildings of Iran have been registered in the list of world cultural heritage. According to many foreign, Iran's archeology, cultural heritage, traditions and diversity of nature are the main factors which attract foreigners to Iran.

Some Physical attractions

Due to their physical and climatic location which is located in volcanic and high pressure belts of world, Iran has a series of topographic, geomorphic, geologic and climatic characteristics. Some of the important features of physical attractions in Iran are listed bellow:

High mountain chains such as Elburz and Zagros with their splendid peaks such as Damavand with 5671 m, Dena with 4409 m, Sabalan with 4811 m, Sahand with 3347 m,

Shirkuh with 3313 m and Taftan with 4042 meter above sea level are only some of the most examples.

Forests and protected natural zones in north (figure 2) and west parts of Iran also very beautiful mangrove jungles in Persian Gulf.

Very wonderful Karstic features for examples Alisadr and Goori Gale caves in provinces of Hamedan and Kermanshah.

Very beautiful lakes such as lakes of Urmia, Hamoon, Maharloo, Zarivar, Bakhtagan and others.

Splendid islands that some of them very famous such as Kish and Gheshm.

Marshes and their scarce species of animal and plant for example Anzali marsh in Gilan province.

Rivers, such as Karoon, Zaiande Roud, Aras and others.

Sand dunes, salty playas and many other features in desert region of Iran.

Mineral waters and hot water springs such as tourist zones around Sabalan, Damavand and Taftan mountains. Sarein city is one of them.



Figure 2: Forest in North of Iran (Ramsar)

Some historic attractions

Iran has a long history so there are many Islamic and pre-Islamic buildings and works in Iran. A few examples are:

-Ruins of Perspolis (figure 3), Naghshe Rostam, Pasargad, Arg-e- Karim Khan and Bazar-e- Vakil (Shiraz), Arg-e- Bam (Bam), Ali Ghapoo, Chehelsotoon and Imam square (Isfahan), Houses of Borojerdaha, Tabatabaeiha and very nice air traps (Kashan), Ruins of Hegmatane and Ganjname (Hamedan), Arge Alishah and Azure mosque (Tabriz), Tagh-e-Bostan and Bisotoon (Kermanshah), Falakol Aflak castel (Khorramabad), Shahr-e-sookhte (near Zabol), Masjed-e- Jame and Tkieye Amir Chakhmagh (Yazd).

Some cultural attractions

Due to location of Iran among ancient civilizations, there are many tribes who live in throughout Iran. Tribes of Fars, Turk, Arab, Kurd, Lor, Balooch, Turkmen and others have lived in Iran from ancient times. Cultural characteristics of Iranian tribes beside their similarities have many attractions for a lot of world tourists. Some of these are:

- About 5 per cent of total Iran's people live in the form of migration which called Ashaier or Ilat. These immigrant people mainly lives in Ardebil, east Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Lorestan, Fars and some other provinces and have many special various marriage and mourning ceremonies which can attracts many tourists.

- About 40 per cent of Iranians living in rural regions. From this view point the rural communities of Iran have a high potential for developing the rural tourism that is one of the important kind of tourism. Virgin rural areas, handicrafts of rural peoples various ceremonies of rural communities are only some of these attractions.

- Handicrafts of Iranian tribe's show rich culture and civilization of Iran. Handicrafts such as carpet, inlaid works, relief works, pottery and many other works are a few examples of cases.

- One of the important cultural attractions of Iran is the tombs of outstanding persons such as Hafez (figure 4) and Sadi in Shiraz, Ferdosi in Tous Baba Taher and Aboo Ali Sina in Hamedan, Khaghani and Shahriar in Tabriz, Attar and Omar Khayyam in Neishaboor , and others are only some of the cases.

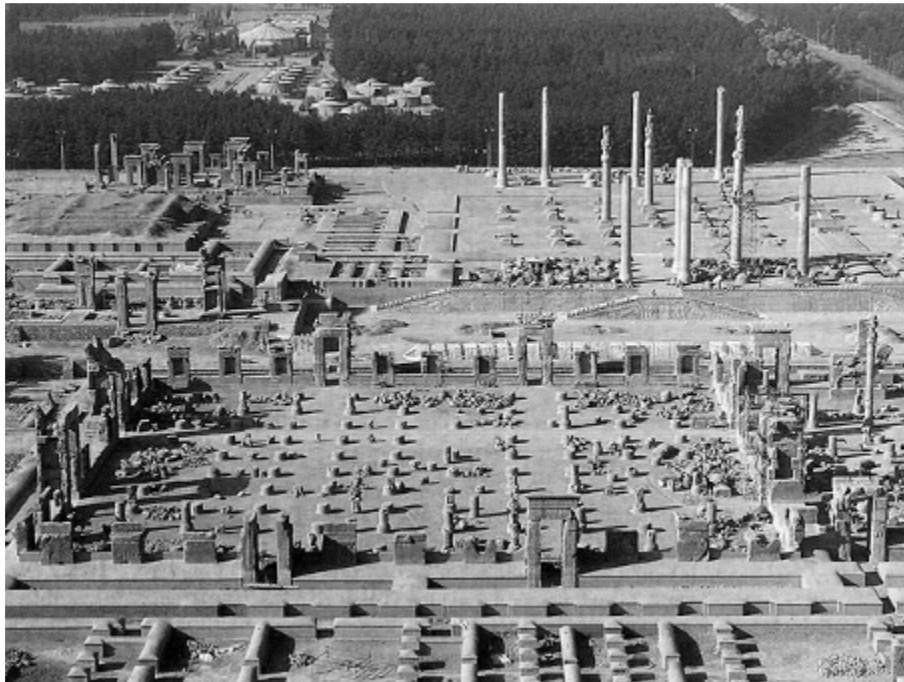


Figure 3: Ruins of Perspolis

Some religious and pilgrimage attractions

There are around 70000 shrine and tombs in Iran which belongs to grandsons of Shiite Imams. Some of these shrines are famous for all Shiite Muslims around the world but others only famous for local peoples. Outside of Iran there are near 250 million Shiite Muslims that 25 million of theirs travel each year. So there is a high potential for expansion of pilgrimage tourism in Iran. Existence of Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad (figure 5), shrine of Masoome in Qom, shrine of Imam Khomeini in Tehran and others indicates the high capacities of Iran for developing the pilgrimage tourism.

As the economy picks up and more Iranians are able to go on vacation, domestic tourism is turning into an important economic sector. Over the last decade the number of domestic tourists has increase on average between 5% and 10% each year. Studies show that in 2006 about 25 million pilgrims traveled to Mashhad. According to says of Khorasan province governors, the incomes of Mashhad from pilgrims in this year were 3000 billion Rials (about 300 million US \$) (19). It is predicted that during next 20 years each year about 46 million tourists will travel to Mashhad for pilgrimage Imam Reza shrine and other pilgrimage places of this city (11).

Beside the above mentioned shrines, shrine of Shah-e- Cherag in Shiraz, shrine of. Abdolazim in Ray, shrine of Jalaladdin Ashraf in Astanei-e- Ashrafie, shrine of Seyyed Mohammad Agha in Jolfa are important than others. Also there are many historic mosques

in throughout Iran that respectable for many of world Muslims. Mosque of Sheikh lotfollah in Isfahan, mosques of Jame in Yazd and Naein, mosque of Vakil in Shiraz, mosque of Azure in Tabriz are some examples of these mosques.

As we say about the religious and pilgrimage tourism in Iran, it doesn't rely only to Islamic heritage and pilgrimage buildings. There are many holy and pilgrimage places for followers of other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Christianize and Judaism. Worship and holy places for Christians such as Vanak Church in Isfahan, Tataoos Church in Makoo and St Stefano's Church in Jolfa attracts each year many Christians.

The most important holy and pilgrimage places for Zoroastrians in Iran consist of Check Checko fire temple in Yazd and temple of Takhte Soleyman In Takab.

Important pilgrimage places for Judaism in Iran consist of Shrine of Ester Mordakhai in Hamedan, Shrine of Prophet Daniel in Shoosh (figure 6) and shrine of Prophet Haiaghooch in Toyserkan.



Figure 4: Tomb of Hafez in Shiraz



Figure 5: Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad

Limitations of tourism development in Iran

The available statistical facts suggest that in 1969 some 241,198 tourists visited Iran. In 1975, the figure almost doubled and increased to 588,768 persons. However, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the emergence of the Iran-Iraq war, the influx of tourists reached its lowest level. In 1982, only 68,595 tourists visited Iran.

However, in 1989 globetrotters once again showed an interest in visiting Iran. In wake of the new tourism policies, in 1997, Iran managed to attract some 764,092 tourists, a figure close to the booming days of the tourism industry in the pre-Islamic Revolution era. From then on, the number of visitors to the country increased significantly in light of the policies adopted for restructuring Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization. In 2000, some 1,341,762 tourists toured Iran.



Figure 6: Shrine of Prophet Daniel in Shoosh

However, Iran failed to attract no more than 700000 tourists in 2006, while this country has very high capacity and high potentials in related to tourism and ecotourism. Experts believe that developing of tourism in Iran need to a suitable and fit able model but yet there isn't any fit able model for expansion and developing the tourism. For planning of such fit able model the bellow cases are necessary:

- Full attention to local culture throughout the country.
- Special emphasise on local tourism with regard to regional tourism planning.
- Complete attention on environment at ecotourism plans.
- Enactment of laws for tourist rights.
- Expansion and development of information technology in related to tourism.
- Full study of supply and demand processes which is need for tourism industry.
- Establishing of a unique center in order to decision making for tourism and mixing all of different parallel organizations.

Full attention on global tourism markets in future.

According to experts, limitations of tourism development in Iran aren't only belongs to the lack of invests and credits also, aren't only belongs to existence difficulties in organism of tourism. A main limitation of this sector of industry in Iran, according to some experts belongs to existence of disagreement between Islamic culture position and demands of tourists (1). Some of experts believe that existence of unclear atmosphere among some of governors and some groups of peoples in Iran, play important role in attraction of tourist to country.

However, in most places tourists, domestic as well as foreign have little choice regarding accommodation, food, entertainment and other tourism related services. Most tourist services in Iran are overpriced (compared to the quality of service), sometimes completely missing and there is little choice. There is a big demand for services in various tourism segments and different levels of purchasing power to offer in each segment good value for the money.

Furthermore, there are many other limitations which some of theme is listed bellow:



Pessimism and lack of confidence to tourist especially foreign tourist in Iran among some of governors and some groups of people.

Uncertainty and ambiguity in aims and policies in relation to tourism.

Lack of accordance and formation about tourism activities.

Shortage of invest and credit for expansion and recruitment of tourism foundations.

Lack of efficient specialists in different parts of this industry.

Shortage of educational centers which are necessary to development of a progressive tourism industry.

Shortage of invest and credits for preparing of necessary equipments.

Possession of some touristy places by some organizations.

Weakness of publicity and information about attraction of tourism.

Existing of negative publicity about tourism security in Iran.

Instability of prices and increasingly inflation.

Lack of tendency in private sector to invest fund in tourism sector.

Lack of tendency in bank systems to invest capital in tourism industry.

Shortage in facilities such as hotels and other kinds of requirements.

Shortage of entrainment places in cities and along roads.

Shortage of traveling equipments such as bus, train and air plane.

Lack of cooperation between linked organizations. and

Existence of many restrictive laws and regulations in relation to tourism.

Conclusion

Iran is a Shiite country and there are many religious sites in country, including the holy shrine of Imam Reza ,in Mashhad and also the holy shrine of his sister Hazrat Masoumeh in the holy city of Qom.

Religious sites in certain parts of Iran such as Khorasan, Qom Shiraz and several other cities have been among other reasons to attract tourists from among Shiite Muslim communities in the region. Furthermore, there are many holy and pilgrimage places for followers of other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Christianize and Judaism.

There are ample natural attractions and historical monuments scattered across the country, including those in tourist cities of Shiraz, Isfahan, Hamedan, Toos of Mashhad and Ardebil.

It has been anticipated that with the visit that about 20 million tourists pay to the country in the year 2025 a sum of over 25 billion US dollars would be gained. In order to realize such a goal a growth rate of about %30 has been stipulated for tourism industry in the course of the Fourth Development plan. It is foreseen that share of tourism out of direct employment would increase to %4 and to %10 out of indirect employment in the Fourth Plan.

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