

Mosque underneath volcano Damavand
Courtesy Exodus Travels



Isn't it Time to Return to **IRAN?**

Beyond Mosques and Minarets **By Maria Lisella**

Once President Obama signed the Joint Plan of Action with Iran on July 14, 2015, public perception of Iran changed dramatically. Travel sanctions were lifted (not without warnings) as did the veil of negative perceptions. Iran has recaptured the attention of globetrotters who've been waiting to tick it off their bucket list. Tourism is an important government directive in Iran. According to sources, the country is investing to invigorate tourism, in contrast to the past. Recent statistics indicate a 40 percent rise in tourism since 2014.

Operators concur, travel to Iran from the U.S. trickled, but never vanished. **Iran Doostan Tours (IDT)** first hosted a group of U.S. carpet experts in 1990; and organizes tours for museums and universities. **Exodus Travels** has been in the region since 1974, and **Iran Luxury Travel's** sole focus is Iran.

START A CONVERSATION

Mention Iran at travel gatherings and the very first question people will ask is "Is

it safe"?

"While many people are hesitant and concerned, that does not mean that we should not start to have discussions about "destination" Iran and what it means and how to present and sell it," says René M. Du Terroil, North America representative for IDT. "Few Americans realize that there are no sanctions or restrictions on travel to Iran," Steve Kutay, CEO of Iran Luxury Travel, notes.

Currently the State Department lists a travel warning for Iran advising to avoid non essential travel, specifically to the borders Iran shares with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Typically, these are regions tourists do not visit. American, Canadian and United Kingdom citizens are required to travel to Iran in organized tours - groups or FITs - led by a guide. In Iran, American citizens are referred to the Swiss Embassy for now.

This has spurred a very wide range of offerings beyond the classical golden triangle of Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd, but also cultural and cuisine tours, active adventures to Alpine regions for hiking, birding, and climbing expeditions in the Alborz mountains, which reward visitors with local flavor and greater contact with people and places.

WHEN AND WHAT TO SEE

"I speak seven languages, and have traveled to more than 80 countries, and of all of them, Iran holds the most fascination for me and my wife Pat. The country's rich history, architecture and culture; warm and welcoming people; and spectacular scenery are unmatched," says Kutay.

Home to 19 UNESCO World Heri-



Above: Avon Lake, Valley of the Assassins



Above: Dizin Hotel, view by Emisek

tage Sites with 39 more under consideration, Iran's top attractions include the world's best preserved Ziggurat in Susa, 18th century Armenian Churches and the Safavid "renaissance" historic center of Isfahan. The country's geographic diversity ranges from ancient desert cities to Alpine ski resorts to semi-tropical islands. Iran is much more than mosques and minarets and bazaars, but it is that too. Products on the market include expeditions to the Alborz mountains as well as very traditional cultural heritage programs based on the classic "golden triangle" itinerary of Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd. Spring and fall are the most popular seasons to travel, though skiers can enjoy a winter visit to the slopes outside Tehran.

Reports Kutay, "Most of the tourist cities have nice restaurants. I would say Iran is at least on the level of Turkey, but the highway system in Iran is much better, with a vast network of four-lane highways, as is the domestic air system." The only caveat is the traffic congestion in Tehran, where there is a dearth of traffic lights.

"There are only a few luxury hotels in each city, but we book our travelers into them," says Kutay. Two properties his company uses are the **Espinas** in Tehran and the **The Grand Hotel Shiraz** in Shiraz - the base for visiting Persepolis.

COMMISSIONABLE TOURS

Iran Doostan Tours' principals visit the U.S. frequently and will give presentations to agents. IDT is preparing a FAM trip and will be at upcoming travel shows.

www.irandoostan.com

Iran Luxury offers tours starting \$2,495 per person. Commissions increase based on volume. **www.iranluxurytravel.com**

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GIVING BACK

At **Authentic African Safaris**, they believe in giving back. They arrange safari expeditions to raise funds for Tanzania Children's Fund, an organization that works towards improving life and education for marginalized children with efforts to eliminate poverty for families in northern Tanzania. All proceeds from the expeditions scheduled for June and July of 2016 will go towards helping this organization build a better home for these families and children in need. In order for you to have both fun and give back, there's the "CLIMB-KILI CHALLENGE" hashtag #ClimbKiliChallenge from which all proceeds go to the Tanzania's Children Fund. Schedule your safari or climb today, in order to both have a good time, and help out the Tanzania Children's Fund!

www.authenticafriansafaris.net

LUXURY IN ISRAEL

Travel has changed so much over the past 15 years with technology making the world smaller and travel destinations more accessible. One fact you can rely on is that the **Dan Hotels, Israel**, while encompassing every technological advantage of today, retains its high standard of service and hospitality. Top of the list for luxury in Israel is the magnificent **King David, Jerusalem**, flagship of the Dan Hotels. This Grande Dame of Jerusalem has undergone many renovations during its long history, but retains the same style and ambiance of the original designers. They provide every luxury and comfort, plus view of Jerusalem. There are three other Dan properties in Jerusalem for all tastes and budgets. Basically, Israel and the Dans have it all!

www.danhotels.com

Exodus Travels has been selling tours to Iran for the past 40 years. They work with travel agents and have created the Agent Adventure Club, providing discounts on all Exodus holidays for agents, and a series of bi-monthly incentives and

contests to earn prizes. For every 10 bookings made, agents earn a free spot on any one of their tours valued at \$2,500.

www.exodustravels.com

Iran Tours offers a wide selection of tours to Iran. Their first-hand experience

and expertise allows them to provide an exceptional, personalized experience for their clients. www.irantravels.com

All tour operators interviewed for this article offer travelers assistance in processing travel documents.

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