


In Case You Missed
Hotel Boom in Iraqi Shiite Cities

The holy Shiite city of Najaf in central Iraq, home to the shrine of Imam Ali (AS), the first Shiite Imam, is in the midst of a hotel building boom to accommodate the dramatic rise in the number of visiting pilgrims.

While thousands of mostly Iranian religious tourists already pass through Najaf every day on what are marketed as nine-day tours of Iraq's holy Shiite sites, hoteliers and business groups in the city expect hotel capacity, currently at breaking point, to double in the next three years, AFP reported.

"Even if we multiplied the number of hotels in Najaf by 10 times, it would not be enough," said Farhan Shibli, who already owns two hotels in the city and is building another.

"It is a great opportunity for investors, a golden chance--these two cities, Najaf and Karbala, are ripe for investment in hotels," he added, referring to another holy Shiite shrine city close to Najaf.

The chamber of commerce in Najaf, about 150 kilometers (90 miles) south of Baghdad, estimates about 3,500 pilgrims arrive every day in the city of just 500,000 inhabitants, the vast majority of them from neighboring Iran.

The tourists are mostly on package tours where they spend three days in Najaf principally to visit the shrine of Imam Ali (AS), and three days in Karbala and Kazemain respectively.

Karbala, which has a population of 630,000, is home to the shrines of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shiite Imam, and Hazrat Abbas, the brother of Imam Hussein (AS), while Baghdad houses a mausoleum to Imam Musa Kazem (AS) and Imam Mohammad Taqi (AS), the seventh and ninth Shiite Imams respectively.

Tour groups typically also make a day trip to Samarra, north of the capital, to visit the gold-domed Askari shrine there.

But Najaf's 130 or so registered hotels are barely able to deal with the influx, to the point where 40-odd substandard establishments take in pilgrims, according to the chamber of commerce.

"How many tourists come to Najaf depends on hotel capacity," said Zuhair Sharba, chairman of the chamber of commerce.

"If there are more rooms, more people will come. The problem is there is no additional capacity right now."

Sharba noted that lots of hotels have rooms with four or five beds, but pilgrims who come don't seem to care.

"They just want a place to sleep for the night," he said.

Shibli said religious tourists will pay money just to sleep in his hotels' lobbies, while others will cram several people into individual rooms.

"They just want to use the toilet, have a shower and visit the shrine," he said.

As a result, the Najaf provincial council began giving out permits for new hotel construction two years ago, and hotel capacity is expected to double in the next three years.

Among the new buildings will be around 10 four-star complexes, though the provincial council, in a nod to local religious sensitivities, has barred any of them from having a bar or a swimming pool.

At present, Najaf has just one four-star hotel, the Qasr Dur, around the corner from the Imam Ali's (AS) shrine. Its manager welcomed the upcoming competition, and said it would be better for his business.

"As more four- and five-star hotels come to Najaf, if anything, our prices could go up," said Salman Al-Khatat, arguing that more upmarket hotels would help build a bigger customer base.

Prices at the Qasr Dur start at \$115 a night for a double room, and rise to \$250 each night for a suite. By contrast, Shibli's Dhulfiqar hotel charges \$70 per night.

Older Tourists Favor
Asian Sites

The typical tourist in Asia used to be a young backpacker in need of a shower and a place to sleep overnight, but these days there are just as many older and retired people roaming the continent seeking its secrets.

With money and time to spare, the new breed of western visitor is hitting the road in India, China and elsewhere, armed with an adventurous spirit, an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge and a keen eye for a decent mattress, France24 reported.

"This is a major growing sector for us," said Karan Anand, an executive at New Delhi-based tour company Cox and King's.

"Older people with their pension sorted out often plan their lives around a yearly holiday to interesting places."

Anand said tourists over 55 years have different priorities to younger travelers, rejecting the beaches of Goa for an itinerary focused on local culture and historical hotels converted from former princely palaces.

"Older people seek a learning experience, combined with an easy pace," he said. "And they appreciate a proper, expert guide to explain what is around them."

Comparable data is scarce but 103,000 British residents aged between 55 and 64 travelled to India in 2009, and 51,000 went to China, according to the Office for National Statistics.

"I started my company to take young professionals abroad for adventurous holidays, but then realized I was getting lots of calls from their parents," said Tom Barber, owner of London-based Original Travel. Barber said that more than half of all his clients who go to China are over 50, and that--except for young honeymooners--the figures are the same for India.

Travel sector professionals point out that improving food and hygiene standards at hotels across Asia have reduced the "fear factor" among senior tourists.

The Arab world may look off-limits in the current upheaval, but countries in the Middle East like Iran, Oman and Syria appear to be the next target for older tourists from the West.

Kaveh the Blacksmith Persian Hero

Kaveh the Blacksmith is a mythical figure who led a popular uprising against a ruthless foreign ruler, Zahhak. His story is narrated in Shahnameh (Grand Book), the national epic of Iran by 10th-century Persian poet Ferdowsi.

Based on Avestan tradition, Zahhak, or more correctly Azhi Dahaka, is from Babylonia and more or less a demon, not human, Peyvand.com reported.

According to Ferdowsi, Zahhak was born to an Arab ruler named Merdas. Because of his Arab origins, he is sometimes called Zahhak-e Tazi, the Arabian Zahhak. He was handsome and clever, but had no stability of character and was easily influenced by evil counselors.

Ahriman the Evil, therefore, chose him as the tool for his plans for world domination.

> Zahhak's Nature

When Zahhak was a young man, Ahriman first appeared to him as a glib, flattering companion, and by degrees convinced him that he ought to kill his own father and take over his territories. He taught him to dig a deep pit covered with leaves in a place where Merdas was accustomed to walk. Merdas fell in and was killed. Zahhak, thus, committed patricide to become king.

Ahriman now took another guise and presented himself to Zahhak as a marvelous cook. After he had presented Zahhak sumptuous feasts for many days, he was

skilled physician. He counseled Zahhak that the only remedy was to let the snakes remain on his shoulders, and sate their hunger by supplying them with human brains for food every day otherwise the snakes will feed on his own.

From a psychological viewpoint, the snakes on Zahhak's shoulders could represent his lust for killing or a form of sadism which, if left unsatisfied, would torment Zahhak.

According to Ferdowsi, Zahhak is originally human, but turned into a monster through the trickery of Ahriman. He develops three heads, two snake heads and a human face.

Zahhak's tyranny over the world lasted for centuries. But one day Zahhak had a terrible dream--he saw three warriors attacking him and that the youngest knocked him down with his mace, tied him up and dragged him off toward a mountain.

He summoned wise men and dream interpreters to explain his dream. One said that it was a vision of the end of Zahhak's reign, that rebellion would rise and dispossess Zahhak of his throne. He even named the man who would take Zahhak's place: Fereydoun.



a document testifying to Zahhak's righteousness, so that no one could have any excuse for rebellion.

However, one man spoke out against this charade, a blacksmith named Kaveh. Before the whole assembly, Kaveh told how Zahhak's minions had murdered 17 of his 18 sons so that Zahhak might feed his snakes' lust for human brains--the last son had been imprisoned, but still alive.

In front of the assembly, Zahhak had to pretend to be merciful and released Kaveh's son. But when he tried to get Kaveh to sign the document attesting to Zahhak's justice, Kaveh tore up the document, left the court and raised his blacksmith's apron as a standard of rebellion--Derafsh-e Kaviyani (Kaveh's Banner). He proclaimed himself supporter of Fereydoun as

ruler.

> Outcome

Many followed Kaveh to the Alborz Mountains where Fereydoun was living. He was now a young man and agreed to lead the people against Zahhak. Zahhak had al-



willing to give Ahriman whatever he wanted.

Ahriman merely asked to kiss Zahhak on his two shoulders, which he agreed. Then Ahriman touched Zahhak's shoulders with his lips and vanished. At once, two black snakes grew out of Zahhak's shoulders. They could not be surgically removed, for as soon as one snake-head had been cut off, another took its place.

Ahriman now appeared to Zahhak in the form of a

Zahhak became obsessed with finding Fereydoun and destroying him, though he did not know where he lived. His spies went everywhere looking for Fereydoun, and finally heard that he was but a boy, being nourished on the milk of the marvelous cow Barmayeh.

The spies traced Barmayeh to the highland meadows where it grazed, but Fereydoun had already fled before them. They killed the cow, but had to return to Zahhak with their mission unfulfilled.

> Kaveh's Uprising

Zahhak tried to consolidate his rule by coercing an assembly of the leading men of the kingdom into signing

ready left his capital, which fell to Fereydoun with small resistance. Fereydoun freed all of Zahhak's prisoners.

Kaveh is the most famous of Persian mythological characters known for resisting the despotic foreign ruler in Iran. He rebels against the foreign ruler of Persia and leads the people to overthrow the tyrant king.

By the late Sassanid era (224-651), Kaveh's Banner had emerged as the standard of the Sassanid dynasty.

The tomb of Kaveh is believed to be situated on a hill near a village named Mashhad-e Kaveh in Isfahan province.

International Celebration of Norouz Planned

Iran will host senior officials from 20 countries in the international Norouz celebrations organized to mark the upcoming Persian New Year (March 21).

High-ranking officials from the Persian-speaking states of Tajikistan and Afghanistan will join representatives from countries that celebrate Norouz such as Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Albania and Turkey.

Iran first organized the event after the International Day of Norouz was registered on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on February 23,

2010, Mehr News Agency reported.

The 2010 edition of the program was also attended by officials from neighboring countries, including Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Tajik President Imomali Rahmon and Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov.

The Norouz festivities will be held this year during March 26-28, 2011. Norouz, which coincides with the first day of spring on the solar calendar, is mostly celebrated in Iran, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

It marks the departure of winter and the arrival of the lively spring. This shift has been extensively expressed in the works of both contemporary and classical Persian poets and writers, which in recent decades have been widely translated into other languages as well.

Persian poems have also been composed, which were later performed by the legendary singer Barbad from the reign of Sassanid King Khosrow Parviz as well as contemporary classical singers.

Some verses of these poems have

been turned into proverbs by the common people, which are used widely in daily conversation.



Heavy Rain Threatens Persepolis

Recent rainfalls in southern Iran have gravely endangered the Achaemenid site of Persepolis near the city of Shiraz in Fars province.

Water has gathered at the foot of Persepolis columns and disrupted visits to the ancient site, CHN reported.

Experts say water causes serious erosion in the ancient structures.

Persepolis is the oldest city with a sewage system and most of its canals are still functional.

Reports, however, say some canals are clogged and heavy rainfalls have caused huge amounts of water to gather at the site and workers have failed to stop its flow.

"Upon entering the site, I realized that I should have checked the weather forecast to enjoy my visit here," said a tourist as he walked in water coming up to his ankle.

"I got the chance to visit Persepolis after so many years, but unfortunately it is not possible to see all parts of the complex," he added.

Mehran Mohammadi, the head of the Iranian Association of Hafez Studies who was also visiting Persepolis, said that since Persepolis was built at the foot of Rahmat Mountain, it is threatened by floods.

"The sewage system and canals were built to carry wa-

ter in case the city was flooded, but most of them were destroyed during later wars," he said.

Mohammadi said officials should have plans to protect Persepolis against natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes.

Another visitor from the southern Iranian city of Yazd said if the current problem is not resolved, the whole site will be submerged.

"Many parts of Persepolis have remained safe because of the functioning canals, but the amount of water is now so much that many of the ancient passages have been clogged," he said.