

Tourism

Overview

Tourism is a key sector for economic development and job creation throughout the world and one of the largest and fast growing global service industries. Iran benefits high potential in tourism industry and has various significant features in terms of natural, ecotourism, religious, cultural attractions, national, architectural, climatic conditions and above all, the hospitable people. Having low prices in various areas, Iran domestic market has paved the way for increased number of tourists. Foreign visitors are mostly interested in Iranian history, culture, civilization, natural beauty and business.

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2017, Iran price competitiveness index is 6.7, which approves that the country is the cheapest target for the international tourists while Egypt with 6.2 and Malaysia with 6.1 as the 2nd and 3rd rank stand in this global list. With countless natural beauties, 22 Iranian tourism sites have been registered on the UNESCO World Heritage list, however, Iran seeks to acquire greater share of the global tourism industry.

Recent trends

Global registration of Qanat and Lut: Earlier in July 2017, Lut desert as the first Iranian natural monument and 11 aqueducts were registered thus Iran gained 21st rank in UNESCO.

Electronic Visas: Issuing electronic visa at airports to facilitate the tourists entry from 190 countries was implemented in the year ended March 2017.

Resumption of 3 European Airlines: Air France, British Airways and KLM reused Iranian sky on March, May and November 2017, respectively.

124 hotels are in the final licensing stages, including 47 five-star and 77 four-star hotels are under construction, which will be added to the capacity of four-and-five-star hotels in the next four years, equivalent to the last 90 years.

Memorandum of understanding with Turkey and China: Iranian tourism officials signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkey on the development of tourism cooperation. Construction of 10 hotels in different cities was one of the most important provisions of this memorandum. Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with china on the establishment of tourism facilities and tourism infrastructure as well as the improvement of public services facilities along the Silk Road.

– The largest growth of tourists entering Iran is related to European countries in recent years.

Registered World Heritage Sites in UNESCO

Iran has 22 important and wonderful cultural and natural heritage sites which are registered in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which are as follow:

1. Chogha Zanbil, Khuzestan (1979)
2. Persepolis, Fars (1979)
3. Meydān-e Imam, Esfahan (1979)
4. Takht-e Soleyman, West Azarbaijan (2003)
5. Pasargadae, Fars (2004)
6. Bam, Kerman (2004)
7. Soltaniyeh Dome, Zanzan (2005)
8. Bisotun Complex, Kermanshah (2006)
9. Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran, West Azerbaijan (2008)

10. Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System, Khuzestan (2009)
11. Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex, East Azarbaijan (2010)
12. Sheikh Safi al-din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble, Ardabil (2010)
13. The Persian Garden (2011)
14. Masjed-e Jāmé, Isfahan (2012)
15. Gonbad-e Qābous, Golestan (2012)
16. Golestan Palace, Tehran (2013)
17. Shahr-e Soukhteh, Sistan & Balouchestan (2014)
18. Susa, Khuzestan (2015)
19. Cultural Landscape of Meymand, Yazd (2015)
20. The Persian Qanat (2016)
21. Lut Desert (2016)
22. Historic City of Yazd (2017)

10 Reasons Why You Should Visit IRAN

1. Unique Ancient & Historical Sites

Iran is home to one of the world's oldest living civilizations, with historical and urban settlements dating back to 7,000 BC. The southwestern and western part of the Iranian Plateau contributed to the traditional Ancient Near East with the Elamite Civilization, from the Early Bronze Age and later with various other peoples', such as the Kassites, Mannaeans and Gutians. Hegel once named the Persians as the first Historical People. The Medes unified Iran as a nation and empire in 625 BC. The Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC), founded by Cyrus the Great, was the first of the Persian empires to rule from the Balkans to North Africa and also Central Asia, spanning three continents, from their seat of power in Persis (Persepolis). It was the largest empire up to that time and the first world empire, spanning 5.5 million square kilometers, larger than any previous empire in history.

When it comes to UNESCO-registered World Heritage Sites, Iran can boast an impressive 22 registered cultural sites. Palaces, bazaars, places of worship, ancient water systems and remnants of the great Persian Empire dominate this list.



2. Incredible Architecture

Boasting one of the world's most ancient civilizations, Iran has numerous museums that offer a rich insight into thousands of years of national art and culture.

With more than 70 years of activity, The National Museum of Iran contains 300,000 museum objects in an area of more than 20,000 square meters. In addition to being the country's largest museum of History and Archaeology, it ranks as one of the world's most prestigious museums in terms of grandeur, scale, diversity and quality of its huge monuments. the best, most-visited museums in Iran: the Reza Abassi Museum, the Glassware and Ceramic Museum, the National Jewelry Museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA), the Shiraz Pars Museum and the Iran Carpet Museum.

3. Rich Museums

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4. The Lowest Tourism Cost in the World

For the third time, Iran has been chosen in the latest Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report, published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), as the most affordable foreign tourist destination. The biennial report surveys 136 countries in 14 categories, indicating their performance in delivering sustainable economic and social benefits through their tourism sector. The report states that in terms of price competitiveness, Iran is ranked above tourism industry heavyweights such as Egypt, Malaysia, Russia, Turkey, Greece, Spain, the US, France and Italy. Iran Price competitiveness rating is 6.66, placing it first in the world.

5. Hospitality, Affectionate People and Delicious Food

If anything, all that Iranians can be accused of is excessive hospitality. So, The Iranians are of such an affable nature as to warm your heart and make your travel more off beat. Joubert (A French Traveler) says: "Our hosts (Iranians) did not neglect us even for a minute during meals. The food was simply fantastic, and they were very attentive even to the guests' smallest needs. The servants also had the utmost care in catering to our needs".



6. Health Tourism

Iran offers a wide range of treatment facilities through an extensive network of highly equipped hospitals (around 850 hospitals) and rehabilitation centers with reasonable costs. A costs analysis procedure shows that treatment costs in Iran are much lower in comparison to developed countries. In 2012, 30,000 people traveled to Iran to receive medical treatment.

Between 150,000 and 200,000 health tourists are estimated to have traveled to Iran in 2015 and this figure is expected to rise to 500,000 in subsequent years.

Spas

Iran has some of the most important hot spring spa centers of the world, attracting millions of visitors each year. The spas are famous for their therapeutic value. The most important Iranian spas include:

– *Mt. Damavand Thermal Springs and Public SPA*

These mineral hot spring are mainly located on the volcano's flanks and at the base, giving evidence of volcanic heat comparatively near the surface of the earth. The main Damavand Hot Spring is Larijan Thermal Springs or Abe Garm-e Larijan.

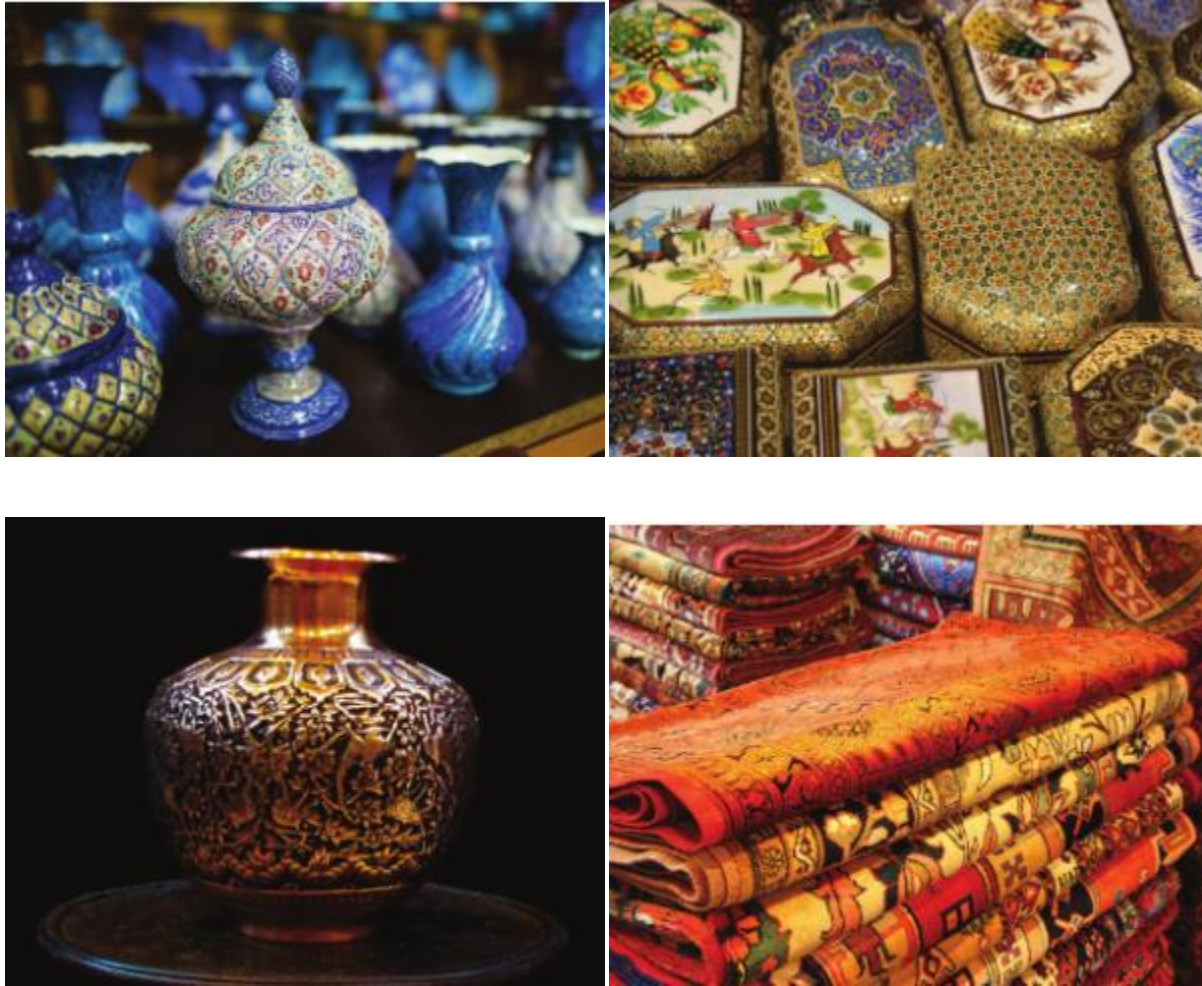
– *Sar Ein Spas*

Sar Ein is located west of the city of Ardabil nearby the town itself (6 Km from the Ardabil – Tabriz road). There are other spas in other Iran cities as well.

7. Iranian Handicrafts and Handmade Art

Iran has been a center of civilization for at least 7000 years, in Arts and Crafts. Iranian Art has one of the richest art heritages in world history. It encompasses many subfields, such as the following:

Calico (Ghalamkar), a type of Textile Printing; Gerehchini, like what is seen in the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque diorama, where frames of wood and panels of glass are set next to each other in mostly geometrical designs; Local musical instruments (Tar & Setar); Silverwork, for making many objects out of silver (these include trays, candle holders, fruit dishes, cups and other decorative objects); Woodcarving (like wood working on tables and furniture); Engraving (Ghalamzani), Inlaid work or Khatamkari, Miniature, tiling, stone carving, brickwork, stuccos and tile panels.



8. Iran's Ecotourism Potentials

Iran is a country with a dazzling variety of natural attractions, including mountains, lakes, caves, forests, rare plant and animal species, mineral waters and numerous islands on its southern and northern beaches. All of these attractions have made Iran a favorite destination for sightseers. Swimming and water skiing are certainly exciting experiences not to be easily forgotten.

Considered as one of the world's top five countries in terms of biodiversity, Iran is home to 519 bird species, 172 mammal species, 199 reptile species, 20 species of amphibians, 173 species of fish and 9,000 distinctive plant species. There are also 9 biosphere storages, 50 interior lakes, 548,000 km of coastal lines in the north and

south, including numerous islands, 23 national parks, 35 wildlife refuges and 111 protected zones. Popular ecotourism attractions in Iran include mountain and desert treks, bird watching in coastal areas and wetlands and diving. There are a number of natural parks and protected zones, such as the Golestan National Forest, Dasht-e Kavir, Lar, Khosh Yellagh, the Bakhtegan Lake and the Bamoo Mountain, which offer ecotourism attractions.

9. Iranian food

There are over 400 different kinds of food and sweets in Iran. The existence of various ethnic groups in Iran, alongside its rich culture, has made Iranian Cuisine highly diversified. Some of the most popular Iranian foods include, AabGousht (Dizi), Fesenjan (Pomegranate Walnut Stew), Bademjan (Eggplant and Tomato Stew), Baghali Polo (Rice with Dill and Fava Beans), Zereshk Polo (Rice with Barberry), Ghorme Sabzi (vegetable stew), Ash-e Reshteh (noodle and bean soup), Tahdig (Crunchy Fried Rice), Morassa Polo (Rice decorated with nuts and dried fruit) and Kebab (Barbecue, Lamb, Chicken, Lamb Liver, Ground Meat). Both hot and cold drinks are also common in Iran.





10. Visit a Land of Four-Seasons

Iran is one of the few countries with four distinct seasons each year. Travelling to Iran in different seasons means encountering distinctive and divergent scenes and adventures. In summertime, the weather can be cold in some parts of the north while warm or scorching hot in others. In wintertime, major parts of the country can be blanketed in snow while others in the south and southeast hot and humid. The North is covered with Evergreen Forests and borders a Grand Lake (Caspian Sea) supporting a moderate climate. The South is bounded by the Persian Gulf, with a hot and humid climate, dotted with enchanting and glamorous Palm Forests which calm the mind and feed the soul. The East runs through hot desert regions and a multitude of colored sand with sky nights filled with stars, versus the West, a vast land chained together with some of the highest mountains anywhere to the west of itself.

In other words, Iran enjoys the characteristics of all the seasons. Iran truly is a land of wonder, paradox and diversity, hence the title, “Iran: a World inside a Country”.



Arrival tourists

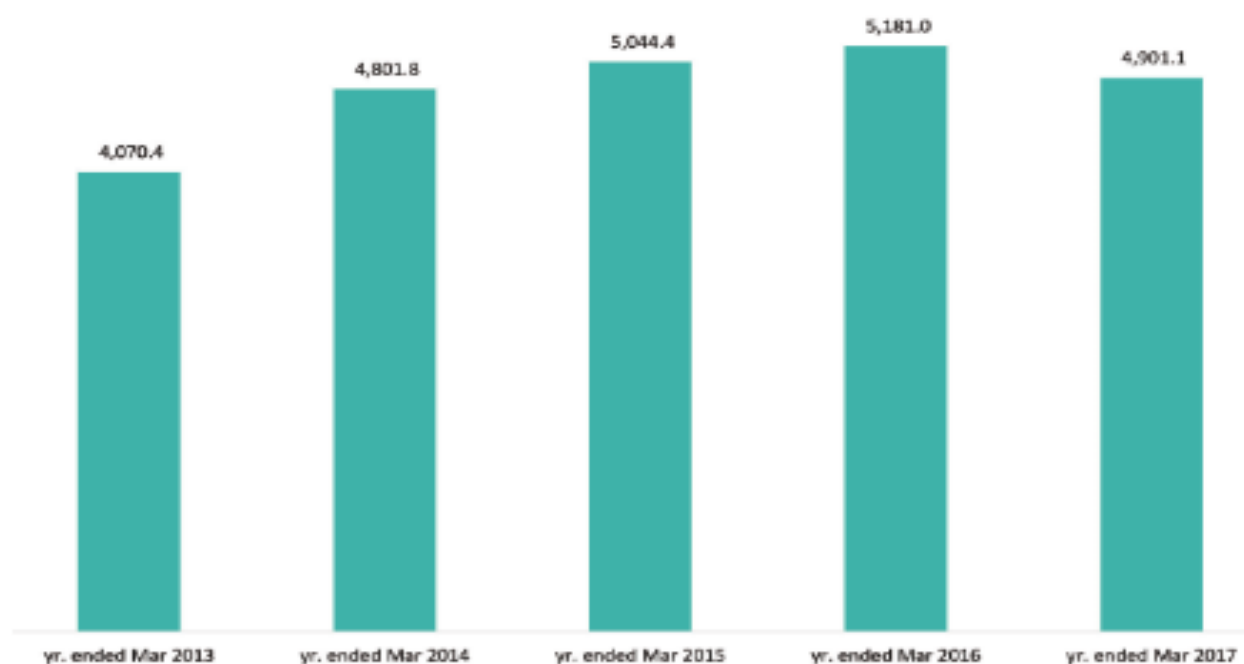
The number of arrival international tourists amounted to 4,901,083 with a decrease of 5.4% in the year ended March 2017, compared to last year. Of these, about 2,300,000 were pilgrim-based, 1,100,000 seeking for job and visiting relatives, 500,000 for business and trade activities, 429,000 for historic and cultural, 273,000 for health and medical, 149,000 recreational passengers and 95,000 visited for training and other motivations in the year ended March 2017.

**Table 24-1 International arrival passengers
(000 persons)**

	Yr. ended Mar 2013	Yr. ended Mar 2014	Yr. ended Mar 2015	Yr. ended Mar 2016	Yr. ended Mar 2017
Total	4,070.4	4,801.8	5,044.4	5,181.0	4,901.1
Air	953.0	1,331.1	1,517.9	1,681.9	1,692.3
Rail	0.6	0.7	-	-	-
Land	3,097.1	3,439.7	3,367.3	3,315.7	3,180.6
Sea	19.7	30.4	28.8	28.1	28.2

Source: ICHTO

Figure 24-1 International arrival passengers trend (000 persons)



Source: ICHTO

Iraq, Azerbaijan and the sum of European countries had the largest share of passengers entering Iran.

Figure 24-2 Composition of international arrival passengers in the year ended March 2017



Source: ICHTO

More than 746,960 European tourists visited Iran in the year ended March 2017, accounting for 15.1% of all tourists entering Iran which grew by 9.4%, year-on-year.

Table 24-2 Arrival european tourists

	Yr. ended Mar 2016		Yr. ended Mar 2017	
	Quantity	Share	Quantity	Share
Turkey	446,935	8.6	415,011	8.5
Germany	50,377	1	61,541	1.3
France	19,963	0.4	41,431	0.8
Italy	24,238	0.5	38,131	0.8
Russia	21,906	0.4	27,066	0.6
Georgia	17,952	0.3	25,666	0.5
Netherlands	11,321	0.2	17,849	0.4
England	10,184	0.2	17,596	0.4
Austria	8,121	0.2	12,923	0.3
Sweden	11,466	0.2	12,834	0.3
Spain	7,226	0.1	9,761	0.2
Ukraine	7,821	0.2	9,664	0.2
Swiss	5,257	0.1	7,586	0.2
Belgium	4,789	0.1	6,702	0.1
Denmark	4,495	0.1	6,355	0.1
Poland	4,419	0.1	6,086	0.1
Norway	3,619	0.1	4,626	0.1
Finland	1,693	0.0	2,759	0.1
Greece	2,212	0.0	2,593	0.1
Others	18,613	0.4	20,780	0.4
Total of Europe	682,607	13.2	746,960	15.1
Total	5,181,018		4,901,083	

Source: ICHTO

In the year ended March 2017, the European tourists' arrival had upward growth with the highest rate for French tourists by 107.5%. 10 European countries with the largest share of visiting Iran are France, England, Finland, Austria, Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Georgia, Denmark and Belgium.

Figure 24-3 The growth rate of European tourists in the year ended March 2017 (%)



Source: ICHTO

International departure passengers

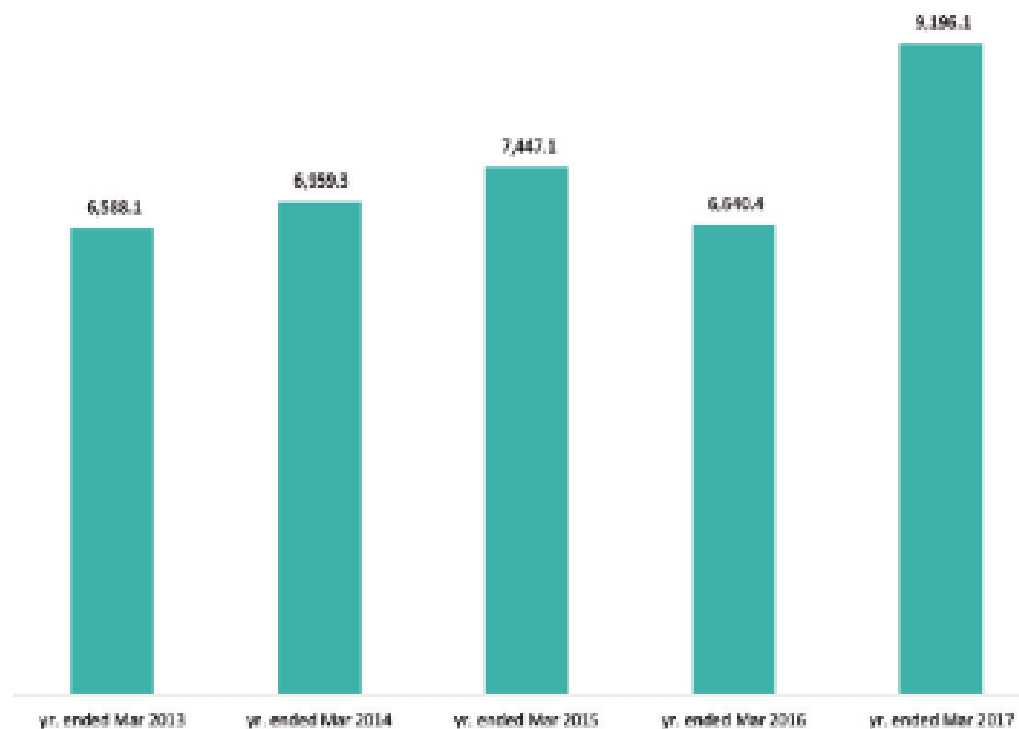
The number of departure passengers was 9,169,106 with 38.5% growth in the year ended March 2017.

Table 24-3 International departure passengers (000 persons)

	Yr. ended Mar 2013	Yr. ended Mar 2014	Yr. ended Mar 2015	Yr. ended Mar 2016	Yr. ended Mar 2017
Total	6,588.1	6,959.3	7,447.1	6,640.4	9,196.1
Air	3,721.8	3,902.7	4,446.1	4,304.5	4,653.6
Rail	15.2	16.3	-	-	-
Land	2,703.1	2,857.1	2,774.8	2,148.9	4,377.9
Sea	148.0	183.1	226.2	187.0	164.6

Source: ICHTO

Figure 24-4 Total international departure passenger trend (000 persons)



Source: ICHTO

Iran Domestic Tourism

Iranian tourism industry is being maintained by the large number of domestic tourists who take frequent trips within the country every year. Latest statistics about domestic passengers show that in the first 4 months of the year ending 2018, around 81 mn passengers and had a growth of 23% compared to the same time of previous year.

Some of international hotel brands have planned to enter Iranian market. Also, a large number of hostels and Eco-lodges with high standards provide affordable and pleasant accommodation for backpackers and young tourists seeking adventure.

Tourism's Contribution in Iran Economy

Direct contribution to GDP

The direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP was 367,635 bn IRR (11.9 bn USD), 2.9% of total GDP in 2016 and is expected to rise by 7.5% in 2017 and to rise by 2.6% pa from 2017-2027, to 512,811 bn IRR (16.6 bn USD) 2.7% of total GDP in 2027.

Total contribution to GDP

The total contribution of travel and tourism to GDP was 973,880 bn IRR (31.5 bn USD), 7.7% of GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 6.6%, in 2017 and to rise by 3.0% pa to 1,388,250 bn IRR (44.9 bn USD), 7.3% of GDP in 2027.

Direct contribution to Employment

In 2016 travel and tourism directly supported 559,500 jobs (2.2% of total employment). This is expected to rise by 4.9%, in 2017 and rise by 1.3% pa to 670,000 jobs (2.1% of total employment) in 2027.

Total contribution to Employment

In 2016, the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment including jobs indirectly supported by the industry was 6.5% of total employment (1,624,500

jobs). This is expected to rise by 4.3% in 2017 to 1,695,000 jobs and rise by 1.5% pa to 1,964,000 jobs in 2027 (6.2% of total).

Table 24-4 Contribution tourism of economy

	2016	2016	2017		2027	
	bn USD ¹	% of total	Growth ²	bn USD	% of total	Growth ³
Direct contribution to GDP	11.9	2.9	7.5	16.6	2.7	2.6
Total contribution to GDP	31.5	7.7	6.6	44.9	7.3	3.0
Direct contribution to employment (000 jobs)	560	2.2	4.9	670	2.1	1.3
Total contribution to employment (000 jobs)	1,624	6.5	4.3	1,964	6.2	1.5
Visitor export	4.2	4.5	11.6	6.6	3.7	3.4
Domestic spending	16.7	4.1	6.5	22.9	3.7	2.5
Leisure spending	19.3	2.7	7.3	26.0	2.4	2.3
Business spending	1.6	0.2	10.0	3.4	0.3	6.8
Capital investment	3.5	3.3	6.3	6.2	3.9	5.3

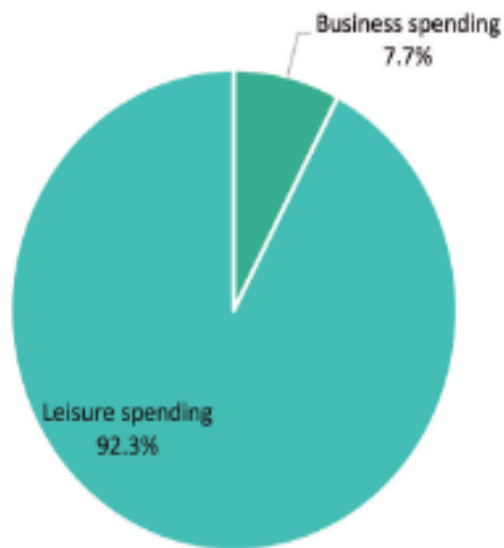
Source: WTTC

1. 2016 constant prices & exchange rates; 2. 2017 real growth adjusted for inflation (%); 3. 2017-2027 annualized real growth adjusted for inflation (%)

Leisure travel spending (inbound and domestic) generated 92.3% of direct travel and tourism GDP in 2016 (597,218 bn IRR) and 7.7% for business travel spending (50,059.8 bn IRR). Leisure travel spending is expected to grow by 7.3% in 2017 to 640,784 bn IRR and rise by 2.3% pa to 805,386 bn IRR in 2027. Business travel

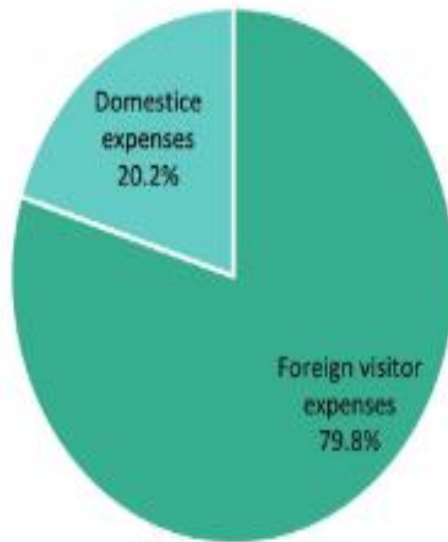
spending is expected to grow by 10.0% in 2017 to 55,053 bn IRR and rise by 6.8% pa to 105,827 bn IRR in 2027.

Figure 24-5 Travel and tourism's Contribution to GDP - Business vs. Leisure (2016)



Source: WTTC

Figure 24-6 Iran travel and tourism contribution to GDP- Domestic vs. Foreign (2016)



Source: WTTC

Domestic travel expenditure accounted for 79.8% of direct travel and tourism GDP compared with 20.2% for visitor export in 2016. Domestic travel expenditure is expected to grow by 6.5% in 2017 to 550,221 bn IRR and rise by 2.5% pa to 707,589 bn IRR in 2027. Visitor export are expected to grow by 11.6% in 2017 to 145,616 bn IRR and rise by 3.4% pa to 203,623 bn IRR in 2027.

The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP is nearly three times greater than direct contribution.

According to the World Economic Forum in 2017, about 3.5 bn USD are expended by arrival of 5.2 mn international tourists. Iran average receipts per tourists were 665.1 USD.



Arrival Tourists & Visitor Export

Visitor export is a key component of the direct contribution of travel and tourism. In 2016, Iran gained 130,525 bn IRR in visitor export. In 2017, this amount grew by 11.6% and is expected to attract 5,531,000 international tourist arrivals. By 2027, inbound tours are predicted to reach 9,858,000 arrivals, 203,623 bn IRR, with an increase of 3.4% pa.

The Competitiveness Index

Iran travel and tourism competitiveness index obtained 114th rank out of 139 countries in 2011. With increase of 16 places, Iran obtained rank 98 among 140 countries in 2013. In 2015, Iran obtained ranked 97 among 141 countries and finally in 2017 with promotion in ranking, Iran obtained the rank 93 among 136

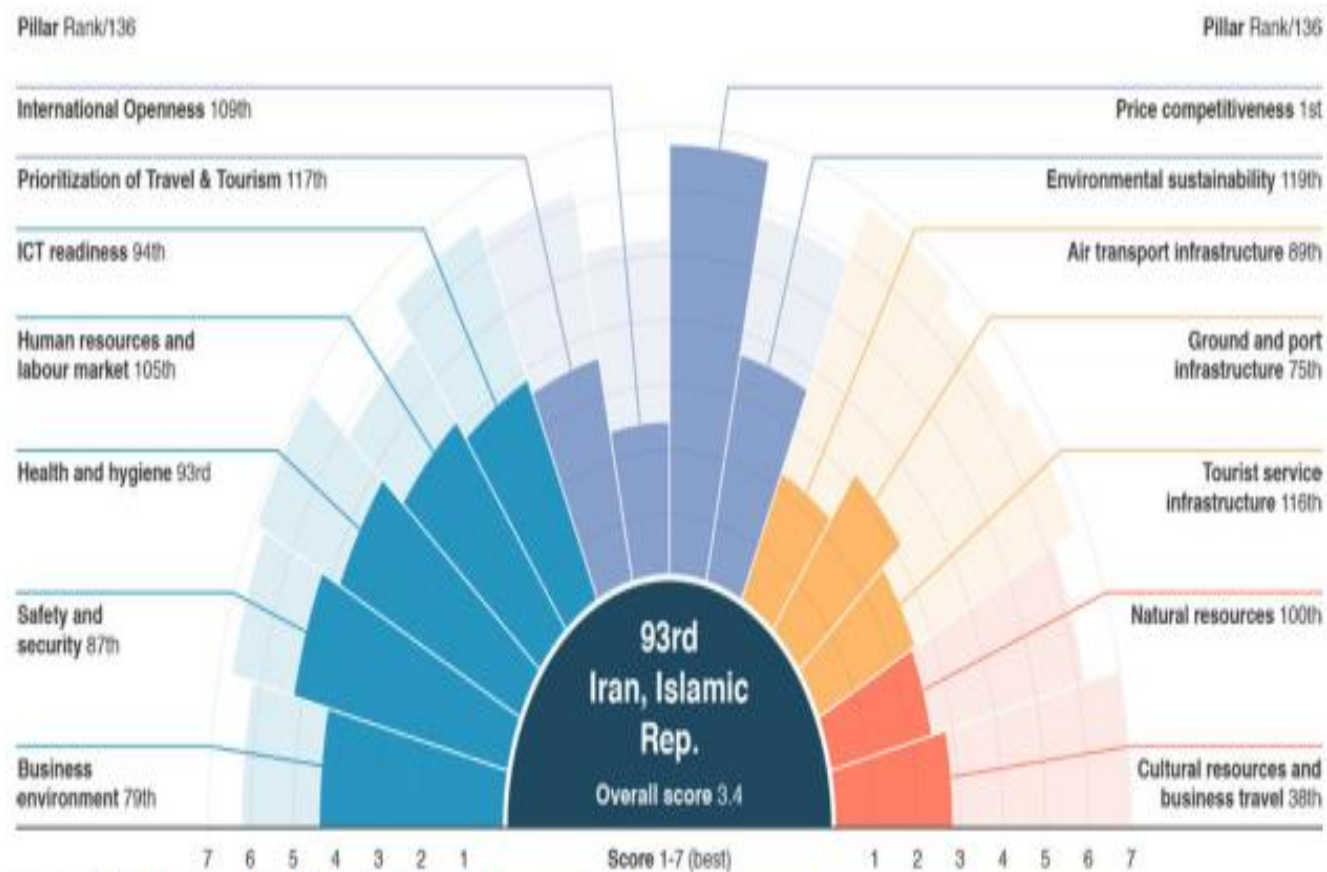
countries. Iran's score in 2017, travel and tourism competitiveness index is equal to 3.4 and promoted from the Middle East 9th ranking in 2015 to 8th ranking in 2017.

Table 24-5 The competitiveness key Indicators in 2016

International tourist arrivals	5,237,000
International tourism inbound receipts	3,483 mn USD
Average receipts per arrival	665.1 USD
T&T industry GDP	10,145.7 mn USD
T &T industry employment	476,019 jobs

Source: WEF, the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report

Figure 24-7 The competitiveness performance overview



Source: WEF, the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report

Table 24-6 Iran hotel's quantity by star

Hotel Grade	Hotel Quantity	Percentage	Rooms	Beds
One star	370	32.1	8,555	23,023
Two stars	348	30.2	10,652	25,665
Three stars	294	25.5	14,260	36,999
Four stars	105	9.1	9,132	20,610
Five stars	36	3.1	7,517	15,536
Total	1,153	100	50,116	121,833

Source: ICHTO

Laws & Regulations

Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization is responsible for the establishment, development and operation of tourism facilities in Iran. This includes planning for tourism facilities development through FDI, financing and partnership with the private sector. The ICHTO issues licenses and supervises the establishment and administration of hotels, restaurants and travel agencies, while provides qualifications and ratings of these units.

- Observing Islamic rules including Hijab or Islamic dress code is obligatory in Iran.
- Changes to the land use for the construction of hotels will be decided upon and put into action extraordinarily at ICHHTO's suggestion in article five commission law of establishing the high council of urbanization and architecture.
- The tax due to change in land use and sales density will be paid to the related municipality by the investors in installments of five to ten years after exploitation.
- Also, according to the note of the above mentioned article, the municipalities are required to estimate and collect the determined tax, according to the rates of the industrial sector with the most discounts.
- In addition to this, according to part (b) of article 12, Iran touring and tourism institutions and travel agencies are entitled to industrial rates with regards to costs of fuel, water, electricity and telephone membership and use. Related organizations are required to estimate and collect the related costs without consideration of construction license type, land use and amount used.

Iran tourism advantages

- Iran benefits the most important advantages since having the rich cultural, ancient and historical heritage among the regional countries in attracting foreign tourists. The history of 7,000 years' civilization, the monuments registered in the UNESCO list, such as Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and the Chogha Zanbil Temple, bring Iran to the scene of events and have always been an attraction for tourists, businessmen and merchants.



- Iran's Geopolitical status on the Silk Road and access to international waters, direct link with the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan on the one hand and the Persian Gulf countries, on the other hand, are important advantages in tourism development.
- Expansion of government support to create the infrastructure for investment in the tourism industry, in the field of electricity, water, gas, telephone and access networks resulted in significant private sector investment to establish tourism facilities such as hotels, residential complexes, motels, camps etc. have turned into a country with the potential and capacity to welcome tourists.

- Existence of Imam Reza (AS) shrine in Mashhad and Hazrat-e Masoumeh (AS) in Qom, along with religious minorities are the best religious attractions in Central Asia and the Caucasus.
- The cost of medical services in Iran is much lower than developed countries and competitive to developing countries. The Iranian currency (Rial) weakness against the dollar is the most important reason.
- Quality hospitals with high-tech equipment and medical and beauty services. (Focused on the private sector)
- Notable Iranian physician and professors and their impressive reputation in medical tourism. Iran is also known as the capital of nasal surgeries.
- Iran has long been in the vicinity of more than 10 countries with a population of more than 300 mn people. Some of which are often weak in medicine and are potential markets.
- Hot springs, salt domes, saltwater lakes and mud treatments are among the benefits of medical tourism.
- Iran is among the world best pioneers holding out stem cells spinal cord, infertility, radiology, corneal transplantation, kidney and liver transplantation, able to compete with advanced countries.
- Iran has many capacities to attract tourism in the four corners, including mineral and hot springs in most provinces.
- Among top 10 in terms of tourist attractions
- Among top 5 in terms of ecological tourism attractions
- 1 mn civilization, tourism, eco-tourism and historical sites
- 23,000 heritage monuments

- 22 monuments as UNESCO World Heritage records
- 202 registered environmental sites
- The most attractive country with low services price for tourists

Investment incentives

The tax resulting from change of land use and sales of density will be paid by investors in 5 to 10 year installments from the beginning of operation to the municipalities of the region.

According to the approved law of the government, 1,166 special touristic zones in suitable regions have been identified and approved in order to attract foreign and domestic investment. These zones are categorized to four categories such as international, national, provincial and local, each area with cultural, recreational centers and services including banking, hospitals, hotel, accommodations, parks, retailers and handicrafts markets.

In order to expedite the development of hotels, resorts and other tourism establishments, the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization requested the following items:

- 1- The National Housing and Land organization is obliged to provide the required land to the investors at the price determined by experts in the form of a 5-year hire-purchase.
- 2- The Forestry and Grassland Organization and the provincial for natural resources and the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad are to provide the investors with the required land at the regional price.

Investment opportunities

According to the indicator “tourism services infrastructure” Iran lacks a favorable status and is ranked 116th among 136 countries. In terms of the number of hotel rooms per 100 individuals, Iran ranked 114th among 136 countries. There has been less investment in the tourism industry in over the past 40 years. According to the 6th development plan, the share of income of inbound tourists should be 5 times the current level. The poor infrastructure of tourism, especially in the hotel sector, has gained special interest. Accordingly, the numbers of Iranian hotels are expected to increase from 1,220 in 2017 to 1,600 hotels in 2020 comparatively, 250 of which are 4-star or 5-star hotels.

The area considered for further expansion in the tourism sector is hotels, eco-tourism, coastlines, and restoration of historical relics, handicraft townships and health tourism (e.g. Hydrotherapy). Yearly, 30,000 passengers visit Iran to receive medical treatment (2012). In fact, when it comes to the medical tourism, Iran is the leading country in the Islamic world. Unique geographical position, Iranian currency fluctuation that leads to lower prices in healthcare services, as well as the development in medical research and technology are assumed as some advantages. According to the World Tourism Organization, the rapid growth rate of the healthcare system has increased by 5% in last decade which seems to indicate will be one of the most visited countries by medical tourists higher than neighboring countries such as Azerbaijan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf States.

Post-sanctions

The JCPOA has opened a new vision in the tourism industry in Iran, a prospect that can be used as an opportunity for tourism development in all its aspects. Following the JCPOA, the tourism market has become more dynamic. Relations

expansion, particularly, bilateral tourism ties, lifting of sanctions, Iranian active diplomacy in the international arena, positive image after JCPOA, high-ranking European delegations and encouragement of private sector activities have led to revive Iran's title in tourist attractions.

During the post-JCPOA period, more than 30 meetings were held with foreign delegations at the level of tourism ministers, ambassadors and other senior officials, resulting in the conclusion of several memoranda. Besides the several brand hotels in the final stages of the agreement, well-known brands in Iran tourism market are the most promising advantages.

SWOT

Strengths

- Lowest price in the world
- 15th rank in UNESCO World Heritage
- 10th rank based on tourism attractions (called the cradle of civilization)
- Extensiveness of the tourism industry
- Low exchange rate for foreign tourists
- General tendency to pass time outdoors based on cultural background
- Hospitality and cultural uniqueness
- Interesting ancient, historical and natural sites
- Numerous religious sites
- Affordable healthcare services

Weaknesses

- Neglecting private and non-governmental sectors capacity
- Problem with banking services to foreign tourists
- Lack of tourism experts and professional HR
- Lack of hotels and proper residential
- Weak marketing and promotion

Opportunities

- Cultural similarities with regional and trans-regional countries
- International tourism growth
- Sanction's lifting positive effects on foreign relations
- Ecotourism opportunities
- High need for resorts and hotels
- Iran's the stability as a great opportunity for the tourism development, compared to other neighboring countries

Threats

- One-way travels of Iranian tourists to neighboring countries as tourist export without any benefits
- Unfair political propaganda against Iran
- Insecurity in the Middle East especially neighboring countries