

Iran

Developing religious sites and tourist infrastructure

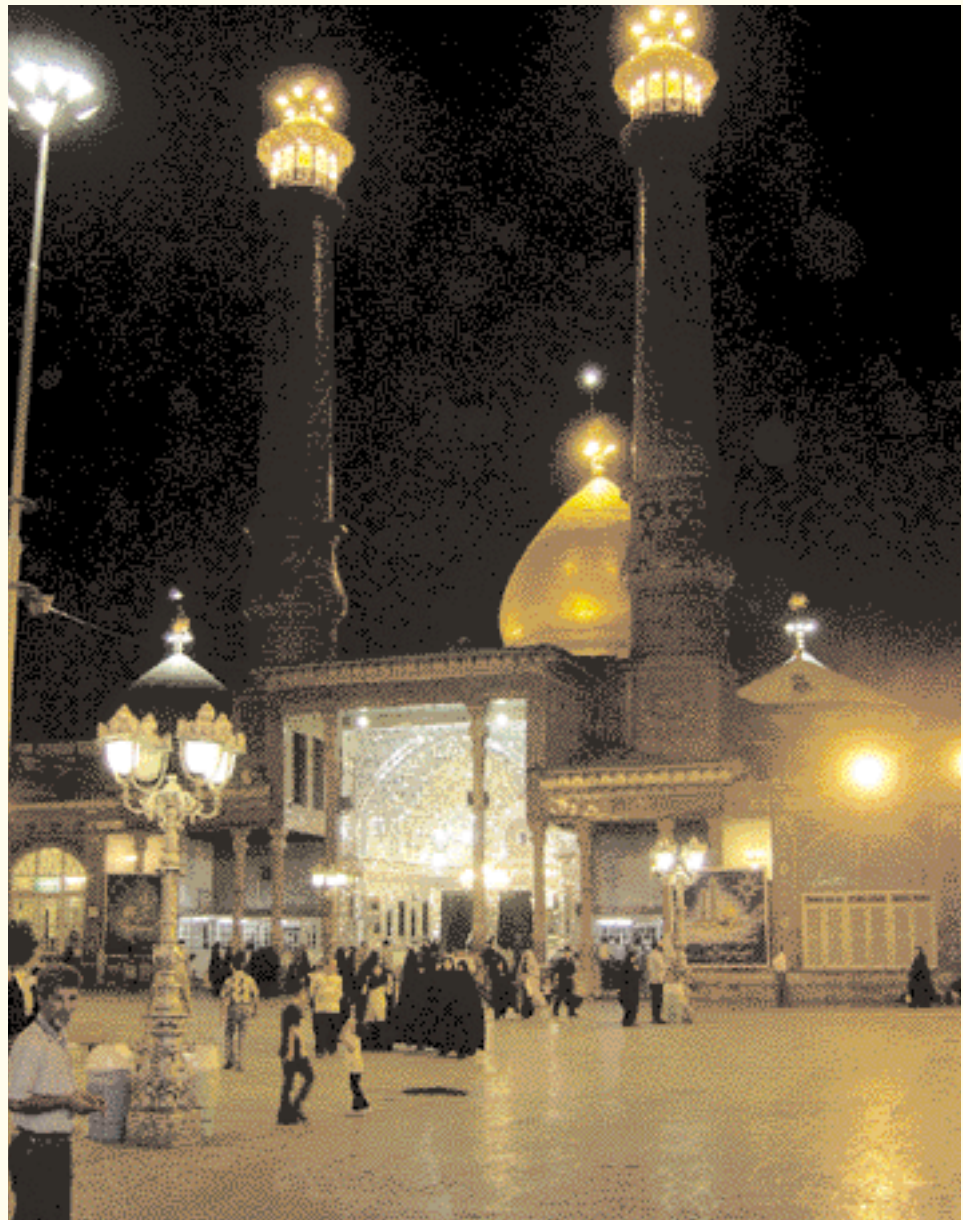
Tehran- A. S. Shakiry

Islamic Tourism was invited by Mr. Rasoul Akbari Chief Executive of Tourism Affairs in Khorasan, who is in charge of the Third Mashad International Tourism Exhibition, to visit the country and I took the opportunity to visit Iran in August from the 16th to the 30th. My last visit was some forty years ago. Before going into detail about my programme I will convey some general impressions:

First of all, Iran is a very large country: its cities are unique and spread throughout this vast land. Each city has its own distinct traditional carpet, characterised by a unique design, weaving, colours and other features. The carpets carry the name of the city in which they have been made, such as Kashani, Asfahani, Tabrizi, Kharasani etc. There are many holy shrines, such as the Shrine of Imam al-Ridha in Mashad. Most cities have a shrine of one of the descendents of the prophet the main attraction for local and foreign visitors. Iran has many archaeological sites the remains of empires that governed this part of the world and a large section of the old world. There is also the enchanting nature of the mountains, forests, waterfalls, steppes, rivers and coasts on the Qazwin Sea, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, all ideal for beauty and relaxation. I was lucky to have taken more than 350 photos of the few locations I visited and each photo illustrates a different world. But even a million pictures could not do justice to Iran's tremendous tourist potential. I will now go through the details of my trip and I will start with the Third Mashad International Tourism Exhibition.

Third Mashad International Tourism Exhibition

When I reached Mashad airport, flying in from Tehran, I was met by Ms Saida Sharifi who was waiting for me with another female colleague. She was appointed by the organisers to be my host. An Iranian from the Arab minority of Abadan, Miss Sharifi escorted me to the five star Pars Hotel. Next day I was visited by Miss Sharifi and her ➤



Shah Abdul-Adim.

شاه عبد العظیم.

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Reconstruction at the Syeeda Masoumah/ Qum. من أعمال التطوير في المعصومة / قم.



Music band.

فرقة الدفوف.



The children getting their faces painted.

تزيين الأطفال في أجنحة معرضهم.



Mr. H. Sharifi answers the visitors at the Islamic Tourism stand. حسين الشريف يرد على استفسارات زوار جناح السياحة الإسلامية.

brother, Abdul-Hussein. They accompanied me to the exhibition to see the stand booked for Islamic Tourism Magazine. After initial registration, I noticed that the stand was not equipped and the three of us worked hard to refurbish it. We were helped by many people working on other stands and some of the organisers. I wish to especially thank the engineer Hussein Zamani. The stand was quickly and successfully assembled with some rented furniture.

When the exhibition opened there were many diverse, beautiful stands reflecting the businesses, budgets and tastes of their owners. Although smaller than similar international exhibitions, the Mashad International Tourism Exhibition was comparable in terms of diversity, although local taste dominated. Exhibitors came from Central Asia: Afghanistan, Kazakshtan and Kergazia and also from Gulf states: Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. African countries, such as Tanzania, were also represented.

Many VIP's visited Islamic Tourism's stand, especially young women looking for

information. Their questions regarding tourism astonished me. Mrs Fariba Hatmzadeh, of the organizing committee, was a great help and ensured some senior Iranian officials spoke to us. They were very interested in our work and we received favourable comments and encouragement from Mr. Rasouli, the Governor of Kharasan, Mr Rasoul Akbari head of tourism in Kharasan and Mr. Javaherzadah public relations manager in the same organisation. We discussed the possibility of a Persian edition of the magazine to compliment our English/ Arabic and French/ Arabic editions. The exhibition was held in conjunction with an exhibition of childrens' games and art and young, cheerful voices echoed in the gardens. The major exhibitors came from highly successful firms in the travel and transport sector in Iran and neighbouring countries. There was also a strong presence of large hotels ranging from five to three star establishments.

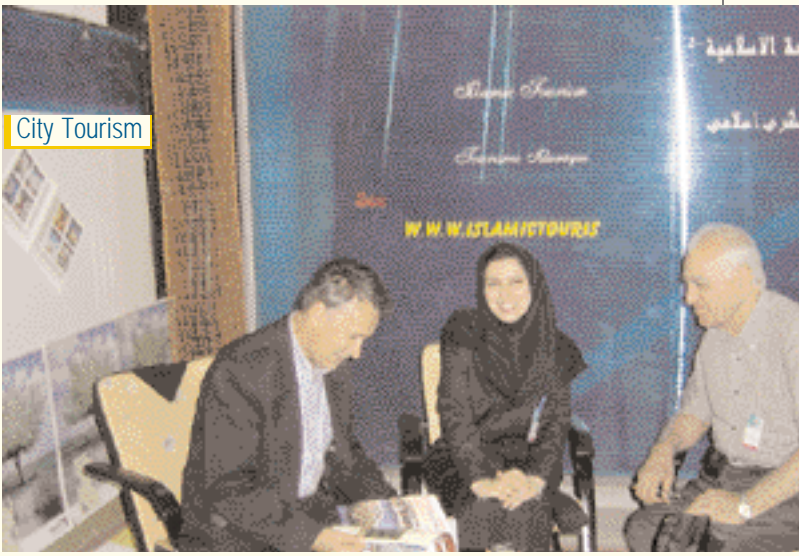
Before coming to Mashad, Iran's tourism capital, I visited Qum and the shrine of

Syeeda Fatimah al-Massoumah, the sister of Imam Ridha, with its magnificent buildings and was amazed by the size of the shrine and its courtyards.

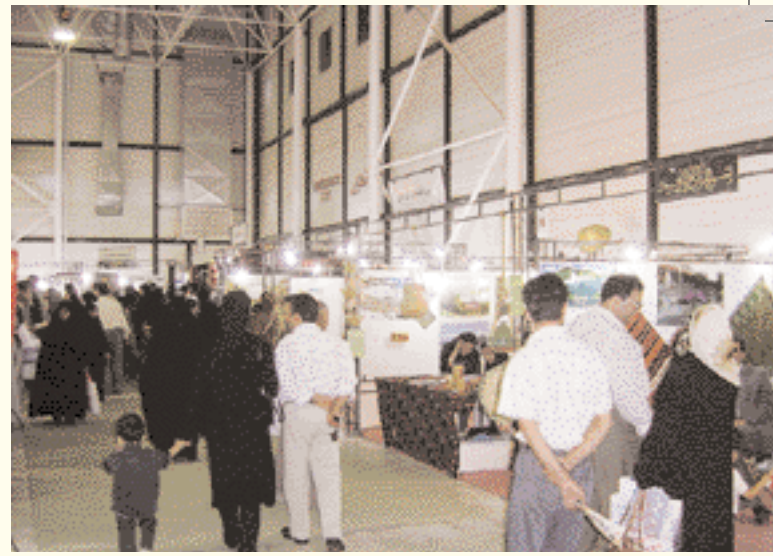
The shrine of Ridha

Imam Ridha has a big shrine in Mashad with a golden dome, 21 walkways, more than 10 courtyards, a museum, a library, religious schools and mosques. They are all managed by a special, large, independent establishment, comparable to a government body. This beautiful shrine is the culmination of 12 centuries of Iranian Islamic architecture characterised by the extensive use of the best Iranian tiles, Kashi Sanjari, and golden domes. This huge area of tens of thousands of square miles, can't cope with the large numbers of visitors. I managed to reach the shrine twice, once after 10pm and once after noon prayers but the number of visitors prevented me from reaching the mausoleum. Visitors have to make arrangements for their programmes in advance. In a recent, new development large numbers of newly wed young couples come to spend their ➤

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Mr. Shakiry with Mr. Al-Khatib. الشاكري مع السيد محمد الخطيب وهو صاحب وكالة سفر.



Inside the exhibition.

داخل المعرض.



A team of workers at the exhibition.

بعض المضيفات في المعرض.



Mrs. Fariba Hatamzadeh, Mr. Jafar S. Zeraati and Mr. Farid Javaherzadeh.

السيدة فاربيا حاتم ، السيد جعفر الزيرائتي، والسيد فريد جعفرزاده.

honeymoon at this shrine and enjoy its peaceful surroundings and pleasant environment.

The museum

One of the most important features of the shrine is the museum and library also jam packed with visitors and researchers. I received a warm welcome, exchanged views about Islamic websites and presented some of the researchers with a collection of Islamic Tourism magazines and some books.

Mashad

I had the opportunity to visit the busy, competitive markets surrounding the shrine. There was an eagerness to satisfy the visitors' requirements for accommodation and food. I also visited the modern markets filled with Iranian products but did not manage to visit the ancient sites, leisure tourism centres or resorts which are abundant in Mashad and other parts of Khorasan.

Expansion of the shrine

There is a major expansion in building and extending the mosques and shrines through major projects which require massive investment, architectural skill and know how. One cannot help wondering where the money for such massive ventures comes from. Is it the generosity of the believers? Is it the government? Is there a need for such an expansion? It is obvious that it is necessitated by the huge crowds from inside Iran and the rest of the Muslim world, who come to visit the shrines on religious occasions and throughout the year, as well as to enjoy their holidays in Mashad. But even this tremendous expansion cannot accommodate all the visitors. Economically speaking financing the shrine provides a guaranteed investment. Many countries are trying to develop their tourist industries but do not make such tremendous investments in religious shrines and cities.

Tehran

On my return journey to Tehran, I visited the shrine of the 9th century personality, Shah Abdul-Adhim, a descendent of Imam Ali. I was amazed by the magnificent building and its richness. I also visited the carpet market and craft shops filled with amazing objects which I am at a loss to describe, so I will let the pictures speak for themselves.

Iranian women and the veil

Foreign visitors, especially Europeans, are attracted by veiled women, a distinguishing feature of Iranian society. Women constitute around 50 percent of the population and can be seen everywhere in all the cities, with their elegant features behind black veils. They are very confident, have a strong faith and are no longer directing their mental energies to make-up and outward appearances. So where are their energies directed? It is very obvious for all to see that Iranian women ➔

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The exhibition Hall.

مدخل قاعات العرض الرئيسية.



فنان إيراني مشارك في المعرض.



The forest of Darband.

غابات دربند.



The main bazaar in Tehran.

سوق طهران الرئيسي.

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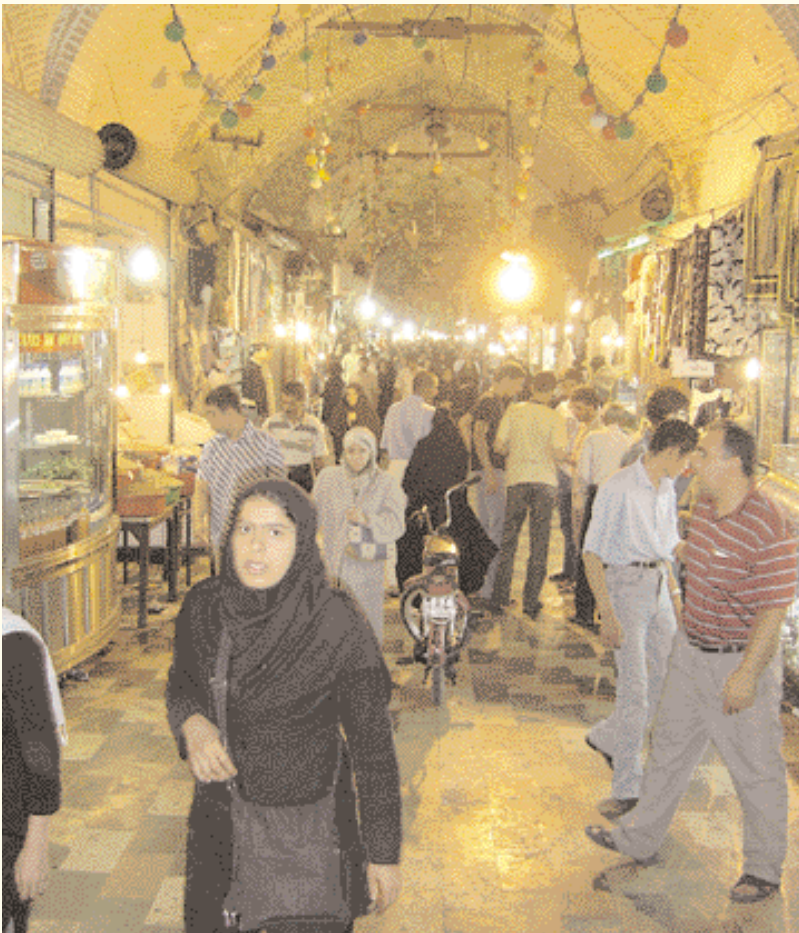


Islamic Tourism Magazine in the carpet shop.

مجلة السياحة الإسلامية تستعرض أسواق السجاد الإيراني.

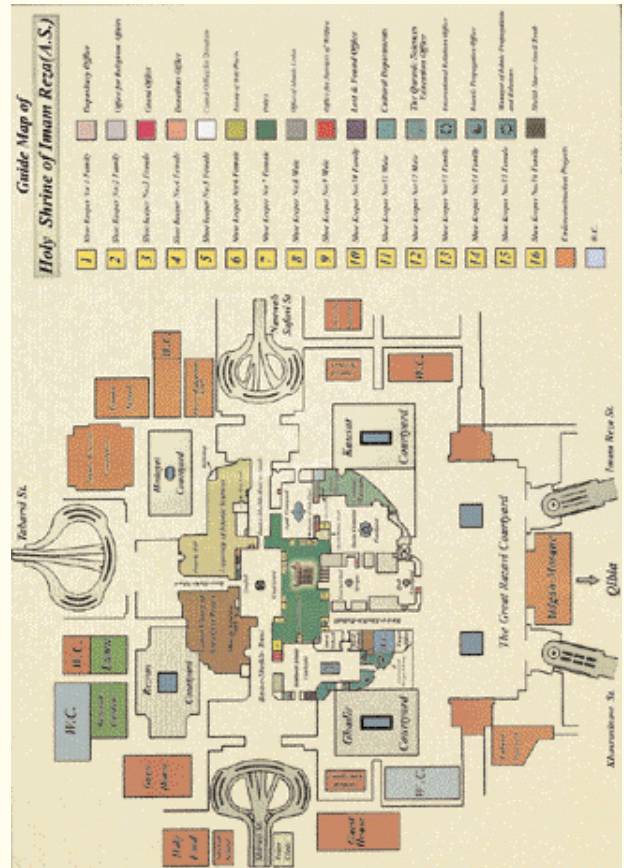


From right: Mr. Hassan Rasouli من اليمين حسن رسولی رئیس محافظة خراسان ورسول اکبري رئیس منظمة السياحة في خراسان. Mr. Rasoul Akbari the Manager of Tourism Affairs of Khorasan.



A bazaar in Tehran.

مدخل سوق طهران الرئيسي.



A map of Imam Ridha shrine. خريطة حرم وصحون الإمام الرضا (عليه السلام).

are investing their mental energies working to develop society . They compete with men in all sectors and their ambitious nature ensures they succeed. The demeanor of Iranian women made a deep and lasting impression on me and changed my behaviour when talking to them. I used to lower my gaze when addressing veiled woman but I was forced to treat them as equals because of their strong

personalities. They are imposing their will on all levels of society, becoming directors of companies and departments, and working in all sections of the productive and industrial sectors, as well as carrying out their duties as housewives and educators of the next generation. But they do not neglect their appearance in the close environment of family and friends. The large Iranian jewellery markets, with

fashionable products, cater to the feminine side of their natures. The empowerment of Iranian women is just one of the positive changes I noticed after an absence of 40 years. The country is also busy nowadays building infrastructure: roads, railway lines, hotels and other essential features such as accommodation, as it prepares to enter the world's travel markets with confidence and success. ■