

# Isfahan

## City Guide



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# Introduction

## Isfahan Province

Isfahan Province is located at the center of Iran, owing to its prosperity in large part to its river, Zayande Roud, which is the largest river in central Iran. Isfahan has been one of the important areas of Iran since 7th century BC when it was a part of the territory of Elamites. The early settlements in Isfahan date back to 4000 BC and the relics found in Tape Sialk in Kashan (one of the cities of Isfahan) indicate the history of urbanization in this region from 7000 years ago. The province grew during the history, when it became the capital of three prominent dynasties such as the Ziyarid dynasty from 930 – 935, Seljuk dynasty from 1051 – 118 and the powerful Safavid dynasty from 1598 – 1736.

Isfahan Province, covering an area of 107,018 sq. km, is the sixth largest province in Iran. It has a population of more than 4,879,312 according to 2010 national census. It comprises 17 sub-provinces and 60 towns housing various ethnic groups and tribes. Accordingly, various regional festivals such as the rose water festival and Qali Shouyan are held in different parts of the province.

## Isfahan Boundary

It is bounded by [Semnan](#) and [Qom](#) from the north; [South-Khorasan](#) from the east; [Yazd](#), [Fars](#) and [Kohgiluyeh va Boyer-A mad](#) from south and [Chahar Mahal Bakhtiari](#), [Loresta](#) and [Markazi](#) from the west. Being a very vast province, Isfahan consists of both mountainous and flat lands. The central Zagros mountain range lies on the western border of the province and the Karkas mountains extend from the west of [Kashan](#) to Nain. Its general climate is moderate and dry; however, according to the location of the mountains, the province is divided into three topographic regions: semi-humid, arid and semi-arid.

## Isfahan City

Located on the skirts of the Sofeh Mountain, the city of Isfahan spans over 106.179 square kilometers, with the Zayande Rud River (Zāyande Rūd River) passing through its heart. Isfahan is the third biggest city of Iran, famous for its journey through the history which has left famous traces over the face of this city, significantly from the Seljuk (11th – 12th centuries) and Safavid (16th – 17th centuries) dynasties. The artful bridges, magnificent palaces and mansions, spectacular mosques with turquoise domes and exquisite tilework, have won the city the title of “Cultural Capital of the Islamic World”.



## Isfahan City

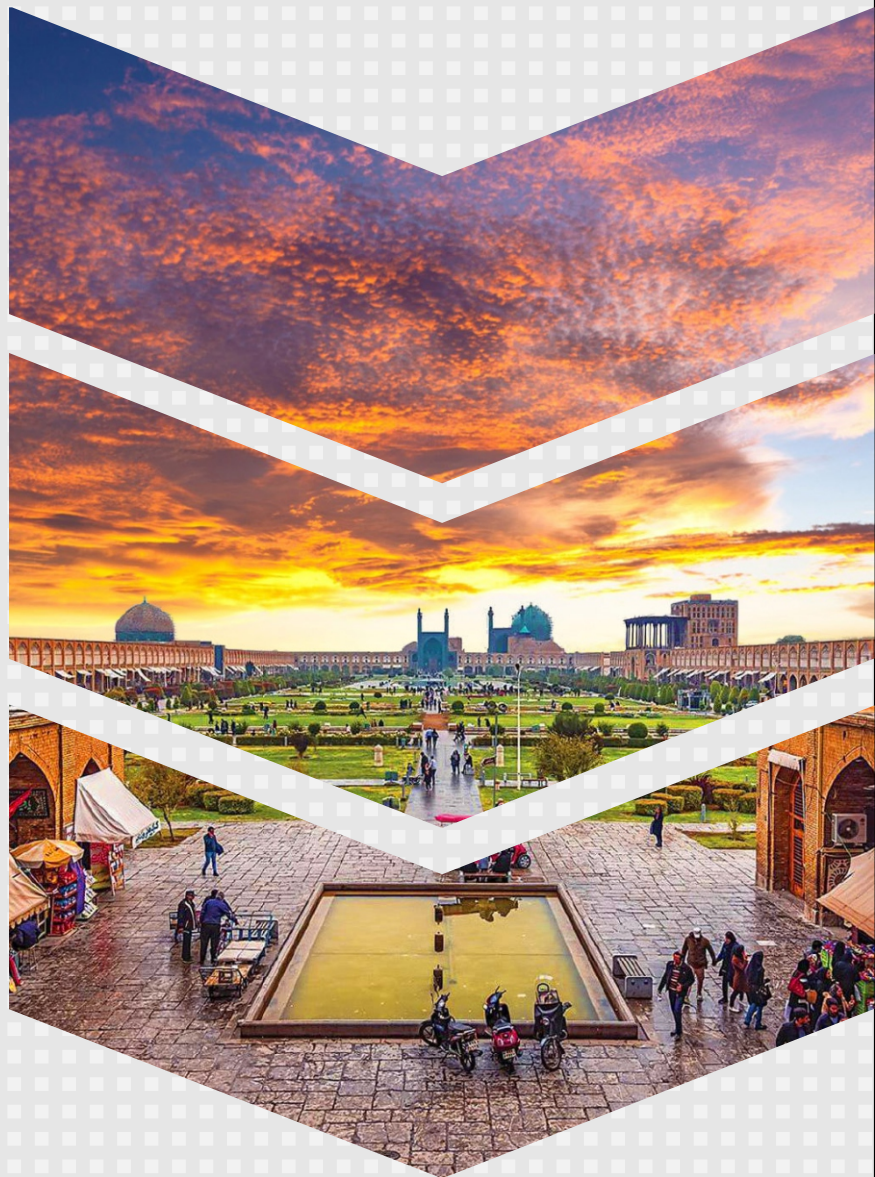
Besides structures manifesting the traditional Iranian as well as Islamic architecture, the city also houses graceful Armenian Apostolic Churches, old Armenian schools and houses as the city is also a house to a considerable number of Armenians. Several periods of economic and artistic prosperity in the previous capital of Iran have resulted in serious artistic and industrial achievements in this city, attributing different titles to the city such as “Isfahan, half of the world” and “The City of Turquoise Domes”.

# Naqshe Jahan Square

Brewing ideas to move the capital of Safavid dynasty from Qazvin to Isfahan, being geographically, climatically, politically and strategically more suited to the aims of the kingdom, Shah Abbas the Great ordered the construction of new monuments and sites in Isfahan from 1592 to 1598. One of the earliest constructions, symbolically representing the Safavid dynasty and its religious, economic and political pillars, was Meydan-e Naqsh-e Jahan (Naqsh-e Jahan Square).

Shah Abbas ordered to build this square on the remnants of an older one from the Teimurid period. This square was so splendid that the European travelers of the time compared this square to Navona in Rome and Saint Marco in Venice and considered it even more fine-looking. In the Safavid era, the square was prosperous in political, religious and economic affairs and it was a vast space for holding national ceremonies and entertainments.

In the early ages of Qajar, the square was as military barracks. In the same era, the plane trees were cut and despite Zele sultan's (the governor of Isfahan) renovations, the square declined in the late Qajarid era. To have a picture of Naqsh-e Jahan square in the Qajarid and Safavid periods, try to imagine the following scenes in your mind: a big court, something similar to a football pitch, with small streams (Madi) running around the square and pouring into the pools in front of the Jame Abbasi mosque and Qeysarieh bazaar, then from the Qeysarieh bazaar to the gardens in the east side of Isfahan. Sometime around 1930s, during the reign of Pahlavi I, Darvaze Dolat square was expanded and two streets, Sepah and Hafez, were built as major entrances to the square. Later, a pool, measuring 30 \*80, was built in the middle of the square and, between the years 1933-1934, the square became decorated with several flowerbeds. In 1935, electricity came to the square and people could enjoy the nights there as well. More than 100 shops underwent major renovations and turned into handicraft shops in 1938. According to Reza Shah's reformations in the administrative system, several official buildings such as two banks on the right and left sides of the Qeysarieh gateway were established. The buildings surrounding the entrance to the bazaar belong mostly to the first Pahlavi era.



# Tourist Attractions



# Chehel Sotun Palace

Persian garden reflects the rich knowledge of architecture, irrigation, and agriculture used by Iranians during long periods of history. It is omnipresent in Persian literature, music, and painting, preserving a special place in Iranians' unconscious. Persian gardens, generally rectangular in shape and enclosed within high walls contain symmetrical trees, water channels, and stone fountains. One of the most remarkable features in Persian gardens is its division to four sections, which is formed when water streams cross. This design is accompanied by a special building named pavilion (Kooshk in Farsi). They are located in high places, like hillsides, mostly to supply lower temperature, more airflow and, water sources like fountains or rivers. We see porticoes (ayvan), around the building to make a strong connection with the garden's beauties. All these told features may be different in detail in each garden, but they are the same in basics in most cases.

Chehel-Sotun garden is one of the most famous gardens in Iran, thanks to its architecture, its lavish pavilion and also its history. It was constructed by the order of Shah Abbas I and then enlarged and completed in Shah Abbas II era, 1647, to receive the royal guests and high ranking authorities. Major restorations were done later in 1706, after the very fire of the palace in Shah Sultan Hossein era. As it is typical of Persian gardens, when you enter from the eastern portal, a long pool, leading to the central pavilion, catches your eyes. It is a 110-m-long pool, decorated with figurines of angles, the symbols of guardians, and of lions, the symbols of power. These are column bases transferred here from the now destroyed Safavid palace, Sarpushideh. In the past, a branch of Fadan Madi (madi refers to the small streams passing through Isfahan City) used to provide the water supply of the garden, circling around the palace and through its small pools and fountains. Take a walk among the impressive pine and plane trees (you might be pushed to cover all the 16 acres though) and meander through the landscaped paths to visit the 400-year-old fallen trees.

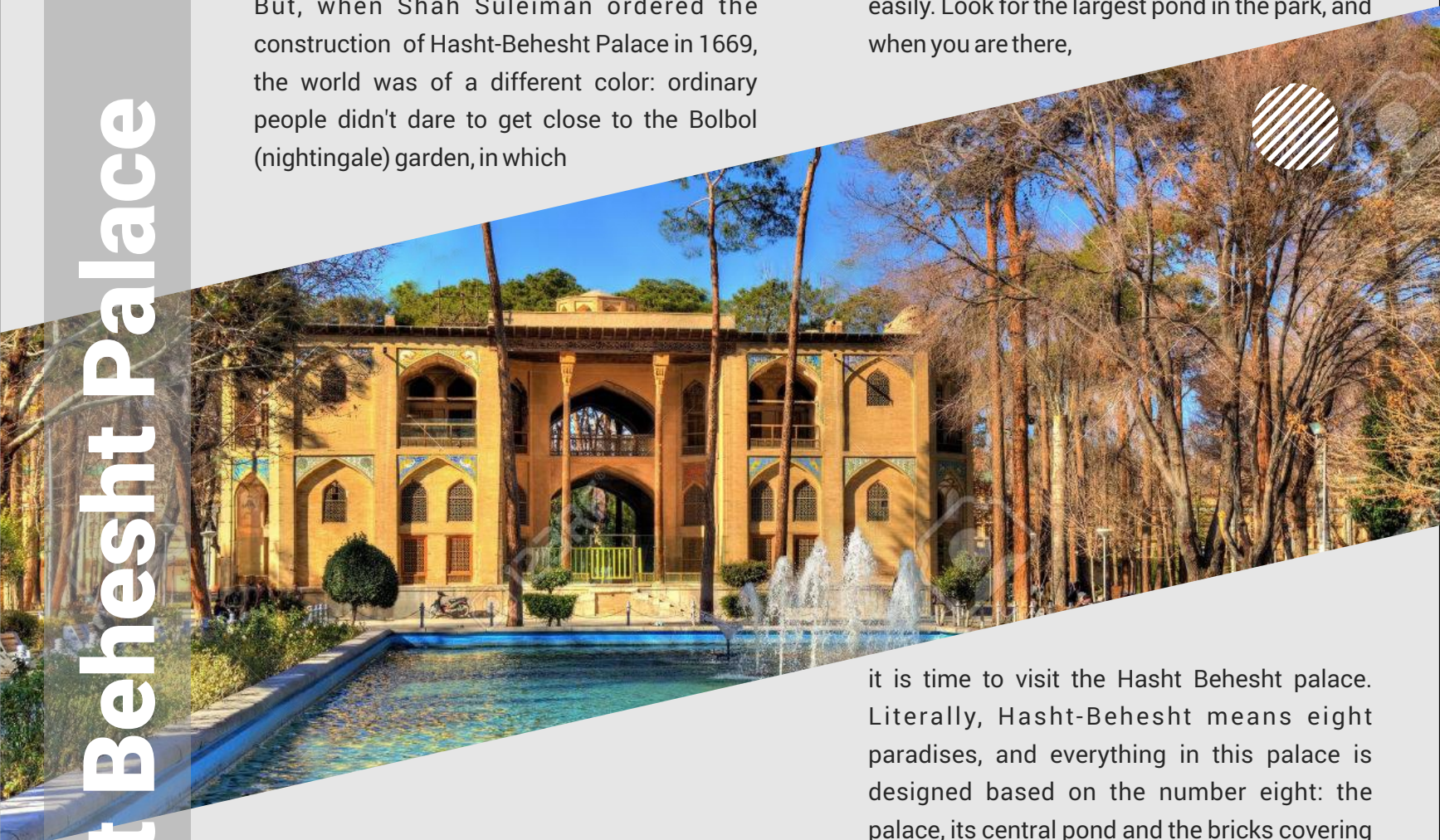
# Hasht Behesht Palace

Hasht Behesht Palace is located in the Shahid Rajayi Park. Mohammad-Ali Rajayi was the second president of Iran, assassinated in a terrorist bombing soon after the revolution, and now the park is named after him. Nowadays, Shahid Rajayi Park is full of hustle and bustle: people come and go, retired men sit and talk about their good old days, families gather to have small picnics and their children play and yell, adding to the merry ambiance of the park. But, when Shah Suleiman ordered the construction of Hasht-Behesht Palace in 1669, the world was of a different color: ordinary people didn't dare to get close to the Bolbol (nightingale) garden, in which

you will enter the main hall, surrounded by double rooms decorated with frescoes. In addition, the hall includes four porticoes (Ayvans), each one overlooking a fantastic view of the garden, and letting in the needed light and air to turn a building into a residence. Also, fireplaces abound in this building, for the obvious reason of keeping away the cold days of winter. In which the Hasht Behesht palace was going to be built. You can find the palace easily. Look for the largest pond in the park, and when you are there,

the Hasht Behesht palace was going to be built. You can find the palace easily. Look for the largest pond in the park, and when you are there, it is time to visit the Hasht Behesht palace. Literally, Hasht-Behesht means eight paradises, and everything in this palace is designed based on the number eight: the palace, its central pond and the bricks covering the floor are all octagonal. The pavilion was mainly used as the resting palace of the king and provided a silent corner for his royal feasts. Passing the entrance on the eastern side,

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And, two very interesting ponds, in addition to the central pond, decorate the northern and southern sides of the palace. One of these ponds is called Morvarid (the pearl) and the other Ab-sahr (the waterfall), following the manner in which water enters them. The existence of pools shows the intelligent utilization of water, as the main element of the garden, which now boasts itself in the pavilion: the combination of water and mirror work does not fail to create a heavenly atmosphere.

The outer space of the palace is covered with tiles, housing interesting paintings. Some of the paintings narrate old stories and fables, some of them contain epic and national symbols, and some others depict scenes of hunting and mythic creatures, for example, the phoenix. The European travelers in the Safavid era found this palace more fascinating than its equals in Europe.



# Historical Bridges



## Khaju Bridge (Pol-e Khaju)

Khaju Bridge (Khājū Bridge) or the Shahi (Royal) Bridge was built over the foundations of Hassan-Abad Bridge, dating back to the 15th century and the Timurid period. The existing Khaju Bridge was built by the order of Shah Abbas II in 1650. It is recorded that when the construction completed, to celebrate the great work done, Shah Abbas II ordered to decorate the bridge lavishly with flowers, lanterns, golden sunshades and exquisite carpets. Khaju is derived from the word Khajeh, a title used for the courtiers and those close to the royal family, and it is applied to the bridge because it was located at the margins of the neighborhood in which bearers of this title lived. Actually, both the neighborhood and the bridge were called Khaju. This bridge is a double-decker one. The upper level was used by the caravans to pass the river, but the pedestrians, who could pass the upper level through its lateral corridors, had the entire lower floor to themselves. To tell you the truth, the lower path, instead of being a simple pass-way, was a den of leisure and pleasure. This is the only bridge that when the river flows you can walk both on and under the bridge. Up to very recently, people gathered under the bridge and those who had a hand in singing would treat the others to charming songs.

Khaju Bridge is the only bridge in Iran with seven-colored (haft-rang) tile decorations. Tavernier, a 17th-century French merchant, visited this bridge and described it as a royal bridge with 21 streams and 26 spans. It is also a bridge with various functions. Its 21 sluices had stone grooves and could regulate water flow by placing wooden panels in these grooves. When the lower sluices were obstructed, a small lake was created which was suitable for boating at the time of festivals. Fireworks and their reflection in the water also enhanced the magnificence and beauty of the bridge. Furthermore, when the wooden hatches closed the lower water path-way, the water level would rise up to 6 meters on the western side of the bridge. This process had the benefit of filling the underground reservoirs, saving the water for hot seasons. There are two pavilions (shahneshin) in the middle of the eastern and western sides of the upper level. Each one of these Shahneshins has a large room, with three balconies. These rooms are covered with murals from the Qajar period (19th century,) hiding Safavid paintings from the 17th century. If you bend a little and look down, the moving water gives you the impression of being in a moving boat. During a flood, conical structures on the upper and lower storeys help water pass through the bridge, avoiding damage to the bridge itself.

Literally, Chahar bagh or Charbagh means four-gardens and refers to two perpendicular paths that create four square gardens. Chaharbagh's structure and design are notable examples of Persian gardens, encompassing green areas, pavilions and irrigation systems.

Chahar bagh street is a Safavid street constructed between 1597 and 1616, during the reign of Shah Abbas the great. Chahar bagh was the most famous boulevard in not only [Isfahan](#), the capital city of the time, but also in all of Persia. Although this legendary promenade has undergone a lot of changes, it still holds stories of those people who spent their days and nights in that refreshing boulevard. This royal recreational street comprised a stone-covered central pathway for horse riding and two walkways on both sides. In total, it had four rows of trees stretching from Jahan Nama garden to Hezar Jerib garden. Jahan Nama garden used to house a pavilion known as Jahan Nama palace which is said to be the palace for women of the court to watch the royal ceremonies. Hezar Jarib was located on the southern end of the street across the Zayanderud river holding a spectacular pavilion known as Hezar Jerib. It was one of the Shah's resorts and owes its name to the greatness of its size.

Chahar bagh used to be intermitted by more than 15 gardens, mansions, and palaces, which were designed with elaborate pictures featuring golden and lazuli colors and resembled the baroque complexes born a century later in Europe. The plane trees rose bushes and fruit trees surrounding the street created a pleasant shadow for pedestrians.

As attested by foreign visitors, the Safavid Chahar bagh used to make one feel enchanted with its pools, fountains, and cascades. Jean Chardin accounts that there used to be seven pools, in different shapes and heights, aligned with gardens on either side of the street.



## Chahar Bagh Promenade

Imagine peaceful evening walks along a street which, as Chardin describes, had trees planted at Shah's presence and its streams were overflowing with water. People used to spread their elaborate rugs beside these streams, under the shadow of tall trees, and sit there for long friendly gaps. Moreover, visitors were mesmerized with the abundance of roses in Isfahan, served with tea in teahouses or sold by beggars.

Chahar bagh or Charbagh has also had phases of decline during the history. According to Henry- Rene d'Allemagne, in the Qajarid era, Zell e Sultan destroyed Chaharbagh by cutting all the old trees and selling them for wood. However, they were restored and you can still enjoy walking under the shadows of its unique trees with flickering light passing through their branches.



# Si-o-Se Pol

## (Thirty-three-arched Bridge)

If you are in the mood for a long walk and enjoying the riverside, you should take your way towards the East. On your way, you will pass two modern bridges, Pol-e Felezi (Metal Bridge), the oldest modern bridge in Isfahan which was built in 1959, and Pol-e Azar (Azar Bridge), and then you will get to the Si-o-Se Pol. Si-o-Se Pol was built during six years (from 1592 to 1598), by the order of Shah Abbas I, and at the expense of one of his most distinguished generals, Allahverdi Khan (after whom the bridge is alternatively named). The architect of the bridge was one of the most famous architects of [Isfahan](#).

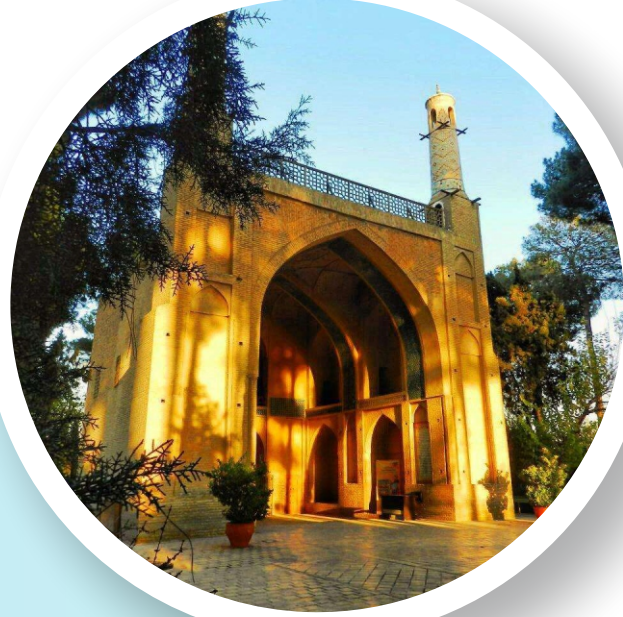
Hossein Banna Isfahani. The upper part of the bridge is lined with two protecting walls, decorated with false arches, each one including a corridor which provides a secure space for the passers-by to cross the bridge. Generally, bridges provide the connection between two separate points as a pass-way, but their story is different in Isfahan. They invite you to stop, contemplate and enjoy the scenery. Each span of the bridge forms a framework of Isfahan, making a live movie of the city when all put together. The lower storey includes 20 rooms, which were used by Shah Abbas and his court during the summer and special occasions. Si-o-Se Pol is 295 m long and 14.75 m wide, connecting the upper and lower parts of the

[Chahar-Bagh Avenue](#). This bridge is the longest bridge in Isfahan, about 2.2 times longer and 3.5 times wider than the [Khaju bridge](#).

During the Safavid era, the Abrizan or the Ab-Pashan celebrations were held at this bridge. Also, because of its proximity to the Jolfa quarter, the Armenians held their Khaj-shuyan celebration here. Frederick Charles Richards, a British artist, points out that when you visit Si-o-Se Pol, the memories of all bridges, from Ponte Vecchio in Florence to bridges of London, come alive in your mind. And, Lord Curzon states in his book that it is worthy to travel to Iran, even if it is only for visiting Si-o-Se Pol.

# Monar Jonban

(shaking minarets)



Isfahan's westernmost landmark is the most famous shaking minaret in the world. The only existing date in Monār-Jonbān (Shaking Minarets) is the one inscribed on the gravestone of Amu Abdollah Karladani. As the inscription on the gravestone shows, Amu Abdollah was a Sufi sage who died in 1315. He used to live near his tomb which was a village called Karladan. The minarets were added to the tomb in the early 18th century (the last days of the Safavid dynasty). After adding the shaking minarets, the tomb of Amu Abdollah Karladani functioned as the porch ( ayvan) of the whole monument.

The architectural style of the monument is known as the Mongolian style, that is, the style prevalent in the Iran of the 13th and 14th centuries. Dark blue tiles, in the form of four-pointed stars, alternating with turquoise polygons, decorate the two domes and the surrounding space of the porch (ayvan).

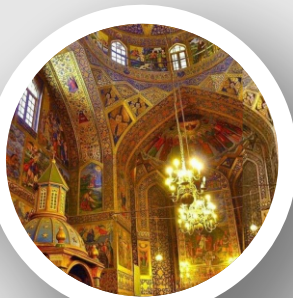
The name of the building is derived from its shaking minarets which are the most interesting part of the ensemble. Every time one of the 17-meter-long minarets of the monument is shaken, the other minaret, and then the whole building, begin to shake, in a manner visible to the naked human eye. One reason for this phenomenon or mystery is the narrowness, and so, the lightness of the minarets. Another reason is the 3 cm gap which exists between the stem and the main construction of the minarets. Also, some square-shaped wooden frames are used in the body of the minarets which function as flexible supports, letting them shake from side to side with no damage done to the structure. This U-shaped structure, like a tuning fork, bears the kinetic load and stand firm and upright after each time.

Visiting Jolfa quarter never ceases to inspire. During the reign of Shah Abbas the first, a new phase of the war began between the Safavids and the Ottoman Empire. In 1601, the Safavid army was forced to draw back and, to prevent the Ottoman army from crossing the southern part of Aras River, Shah Abbas ordered the evacuation of all the residential neighborhoods in the Ararat plateau and Nakhchivan region. As a result, an obligatory migration was organized and the Armenians were sent to different regions of Iran, including [Gilan](#).

During the Safavid era, the Abrizan or the Ab-Pashan celebrations were held at this bridge. Also, because of its proximity to [Mazandaran](#), [Hamedan](#), [Kashan](#), [Fereydan](#), [Chaharmahal-va-Bakhtiari](#), [Shiraz](#), and

[Isfahan](#). Then, a group of Armenian elites, such as merchants, artisans, and craftsmen, mostly from Iravan, [Tabriz](#), and Nakhchivan, were transferred to [Isfahan](#), and settled along the southwestern bank of Zayandeh-Rud. To keep the memory of their lost house alive, the good old city of Jolfa in Nakhchivan, Armenians chose to call their recent settlement as New Jolfa. And, this name, though shortened to Jolfa, is still attached to the Armenian neighborhood of Isfahan.

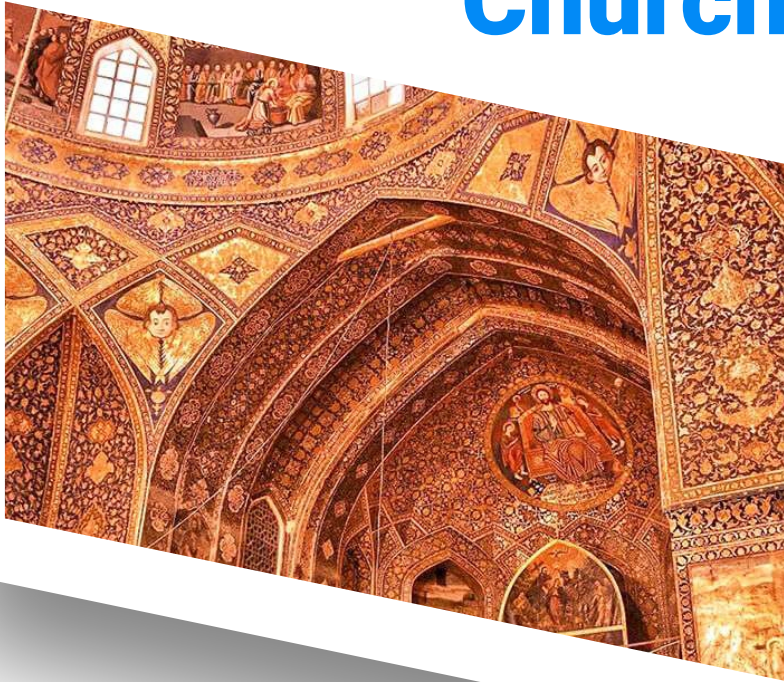
During the reign of the Safavids, Jolfa's prosperity was due to the most beautiful houses and churches located in this quarter, mostly built by the wealthy Armenian merchants who were in the trade with European countries. The Armenians of Jolfa made a great change in its architecture, mixing their own traditions and motifs with the Iranian art and culture. The characteristics of Islamic and Safavid architecture are evident in these structures. Nowadays, Jolfa is closed to traffic, creating a space filled with youngsters, cafés, and restaurants.



## Jolfa Quarter



# Bedkhem Church



Bedkhem Church or Bethlehem Church was constructed and completed in 1627 with the initiative and financial support of a wealthy Armenian merchant, Khajeh Petros. The walls of the Bedkhem Church bear elaborate paintings, representing a combination of Iranian and Italian artistic styles. They are mostly painted by European and Armenian artists depicting stories from the Gospel and Torah. As a matter of fact, the Bethlehem Church holds much more paintings and gold-work than any other church in [Isfahan](#).

Bedkhem church bears inscriptions depicting the date of its construction and renovations. To commemorate the charitable work of Khaje Petros, an inscription in Armenian language is placed on the southern entrance. His tombstone is also located on the western entrance of the church.

Another inscription on a floral lazuli tile is installed above the western entrance showing that the church was renovated by several wealthy Armenians in 1899, which was during the reign of Mozaffar al-din Shah Qajar (1896-1907).

# People & Culture



## Notable People

Isfahan's population consists of different ethnic groups who have gathered in the city in different periods of history for economic and industrial reasons. The majority of the locals are Fars but there are also other ethnic groups including Bakhtiaries, Lors, Turks, Georgians, Gypsies, Armenians, Jews and Zoroastrians. The official religion of Isfahan is Shia Islam. The language of people in Isfahan is Farsi, spoken with a sweet Isfahanian accent.

Isfahan is reputed for its notable figures, shining as stars in various and divergent fields of activity. Some of these figures include: Sohrab Sepehri, an Iranian poet and painter who influenced Iranian modern poetry; Mohammad-Ali Jamalzade, an Isfahanian writer and poet; Jalil Shahnaz, a soloist of Tar (a traditional Persian instrument); Mahmoud Farshchian, a well-known Iranian painter and miniaturist; Ismail Hossein, a master in the art of handicrafts.

# Food & Drink



The [cuisine of Isfahan](#) is characterized with three delicious foods which have to be tried once visiting the city.

## Biryani

which looks like a hamburger, is a mixture of grilled lamb meat, liver, onion, salt and chili pepper.

## Khoresht Mast

is a traditional popular dessert special to Isfahan. It is a kind of sweet yellow pudding made by meat, yogurt, rose water, turmeric, saffron and pistachio slices.

## Gaz

is a sweet candy from Isfahan which dates back to 450 years ago and is widely known as Persian Pistachio Nougat in America and Europe.





Isfahan is [famous for its handicrafts](#): tile work, miniature, inlaid work (**Khatam**), rugs, carpet, embroidery, engraving (**Ghalam Zani**) are some of the popular kinds of handicrafts produced in the city.

The Safavid era brought about the flourishing of arts in the city as the kings were also patrons of arts and architecture. Today, the artisans of Isfahan have followed their predecessors' tradition and extended the beauty of their masterpieces by their own talent



- **The 1st of Azar** was chosen as the “day of Isfahan” in 1383, in order to honor the historic city of Isfahan. The week from the 1st to the 7th of Azar is called “the Week of Isfahan” and witnesses several celebrations dedicated to the city, its culture and history. The Week of Isfahan is also declared on the historical and cultural calendar of UNESCO.

- **The International Film Festival for Children and Youth** is held in Isfahan and aims to make children and youth familiar with the international cinema. Professional filmmakers also attend the festival. The festival hosts different events such as the release of butterflies for the opening ceremony, in memory of the martyrs of Islamic Revolution; the festival of kites; carnivals of happiness in the city and street theaters.



# Restaurants

Half of the world is in your dish in Isfahan's top restaurants

Good food = good mood. This is the most popular and universally consented equation ever! Seriously, every meal of a working day seems like a rewarding stop along a five/six-hour long marathon during a work day. Now this also applies while traveling. Food is one of the most important components of each culture and is as important in understanding it as the historical landmarks and attractions of the new destination.

Iranian dishes have meat or animal products as their base. However, this doesn't mean they don't eat vegetarian food. Here you can also find out about the places where you can have a vegetarian meal.

## What are the Top Restaurants in Isfahan?

Here we have listed some of the top restaurants in Isfahan, offering the best traditional dishes in the city. You will find names of restaurants with international dishes, as well. We have listed them so that you know where to visit if you want to eat a food that tastes a little more like home.

### Shahzad Restaurant

- Iranian environment
- Iranian dishes

### Abbasi Hotel Restaurant

- Spectacular environment
- Spectacular environment
- Delicious Iranian and international dishes
- Café

### Toranj Restaurant

- Historical house-turned restaurant
- Traditional and international dishes
- Café

Live traditional music

### Malek Soltan Jarchi Bashi Restaurant

- Iranian dishes
- Iranian setting

### Sofreh Khane Sonnati

- Traditional Iranian restaurant
- Iranian food

### Aazam Beryani

- Iranian restaurant
- Iranian food (specifically Isfahani food)

### Azadegan Teahouse (Chah Haj Mirza)

- Exotic environment
- Iranian dishes
- Traditional Iranian teahouse

### Ghasr Monshi Restaurant

- Traditional environment
- Live traditional music

### Keryas Restaurant

- Traditional Iranian environment
- Traditional dishes



### **Nikan Restaurant**

- Modern environment
- Iranian and international dishes

### **Hermes Café and Restaurant**

- Modern environment
- International dishes
- Café

### **Arabo Sandwich**

- Take-away restaurant
- If you like to grab a sandwich and go on touring instead of sitting at a place, then Arabo Sandwich is right around the corner, near Vank Cathedral. Don't underestimate the shop by its small size as it is the ultimate sandwich hub of many Isfahanians.



## **Hotels & Hostels**

You can find different kinds of accommodations suitable for your budget in Isfahan, from five star to hostels and traditional houses. Here we have listed some of the cool ones in Isfahan.

### **Abbasi**

- 5 star
- Traditional

### **Kowsar Isfahan Hotel**

- 4 star

### **Aseman Hotel**

- 4 star

### **Ghasr Monshi Boutique Hotel**

- Traditional House

### **Keryas Hotel**

- Traditional House

### **Mahbibi Hostel**

- Local house and hostel

### **Ragrug Hostel**

- Hostel



## Airport & Bus Terminals

The Shahid Beheshti International Airport is only 26 kilometers away from Isfahan. Although there are only a limited number of International flights to and from the airport, domestic flights to almost all cities of the airport fly daily.

The city of Isfahan has two bus terminals, Sofeh and Kaveh. They are located at two opposite sides of the city, and depending on where you're coming from or where you're headed for, you can use the services of either one.