

Iranian Landscapes, Cities and Monuments

Christopher Wood

Iran is four times the size of France and one of the highest countries in the world (average altitude: 1,000m). It is made up of mountain ranges cut by deep, often narrow valleys and surrounding high basins or plains. To the north are the steep, high but narrow Alborz mountains (Mount Damavand: 5654m) which drop steeply to sea level on the Caspian coast. The Alborz range may be seen as a continuation of the Himalayas. Further west, the lower Talish range connects this northern chain to Mount Ararat, just across the border in Turkey. Running south east the length of the country from Ararat to the Persian Gulf is the much broader Zagros range which also rises to over 4000 metres. This range ascends steeply from the Tigris/Euphrates valley system (Iraq) but then spreads over almost half the country, falling more gently in the east. Complex folding and past volcanic activity have riven this broad range with deep ravines and have also created broad, high valleys, (even the lowest are 1000 to 2000 metres above sea level) from which rise volcanic cones. To the east, lesser ranges mark Iran's boundaries with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Alborz, Zagros and eastern uplands surround a great, high central basin, rising to 1000 metres above sea level, which itself is punctured by highlands. The Dasht-i-Kavir and the Dasht-i-Lut are forbidding deserts which are incapable of supporting human life. The only parts of Iran which fall to sea level are the extremely narrow coastal plains on the Caspian in the north and the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman to the south, and that part of the Tigris/Euphrates valley around the southern oil-based city of Ardaban.

This tour first travels west from Tehran along the southern flank of the Alborz to the Zagros Mountains. The path we follow down the latter, through some of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world (eg Hamadan), follows ancient trade routes linking China and Central Asia to the Levant. The Zagros, with its plentiful water, has also provided a corridor for humans since Prehistory, and for groups like the Medes and the Parthians to enter the Mesopotamian region. We follow their pathways, visiting magnificent Achaemenid and Sassanian rock carvings, and the extraordinary Zoroastrian temple and palace complex Takht-e-Soleiman, with its deep pool occupying a volcanic crater.

The landscape through which we travel is especially grand, with fertile valleys framed by high snow capped peaks. Toward the end of this section of our journey, we drive through an extraordinary tortured valley carved by an ancient glacier. We arrive in Ahvaz in Khuzistan-Luristan (SW Iran) and the ancient kingdom of the Elamites. The landscape contrast you encounter could not be greater for you are now in the world of Mesopotamia. From Ahvaz we rise again westwards through oil country into the southern Zagros to Shiraz, Persepolis and Pasargadae. The Fars region, heartland of Persian culture, gave its name to the nation's language. The Qashgha'i and the Khamseh tribes of pastoralists and cultivators people this region. Further west, we near the forbidding desert lands of the central basin, with its oasis cities of Kerman, Yazd and the extraordinary desert fortresses of this region. The most well known is the ancient city of Bam, located on the flank of the Dasht-i-Lut, not far from the border of Pakistan. This city has been almost totally destroyed in a devastating earthquake and we visit instead the fortress at Rayan. Travelling north-west again, we pass through a line of great cities, Kerman, Yazd, Isfahan, Na'in, Ardestan, Qom, all of which lie on the edge of the Zagros range. Landscapes change yet again. To our east lie broad, high (1000 - 2000m) arid plains, less forbidding than the Dasht-i-Lut yet more arid than the Zagros uplands. Although there are some rivers in this region, water is so scarce that the landscape is etched with the long lines of ancient qanâts, underground channels connected to the surface by sinks marked by interminable

rows of low mounds. These distinctive features, which have endured in the landscape since the ancient period, tap water from the slopes of the Zagros and it is for this reason that many cities, towns and villages in this area are to be found on the scarps of mountains.

Iran's climate is characterised by some of the greatest temperature ranges in the world, both between regions and within regions between seasons. The western Zagros region is so icy in winter as to render human habitation almost infeasible, yet life is equally impossible in the burning summers of the desolate centre. In Iran's mountains, steppelands and deserts you will encounter some of the most dramatic scenery in the world.

Iran has often been characterised as a high plateau connecting the Central and East Asian world with the Middle East, Anatolia and the Russian world. Frequent invasion of this central region and other, more peaceful incursions of nomads have resulted in a diverse ethnic mosaic of Kurds, Turkoman, Azerbaijani, Lurs, Bakhtiari, Qashgha'i, Gilakis, Mazanderani, Arabs and Persians, each with its own stories, rituals, dress and cuisine. Climate, topography and history, moreover, have created a dichotomy between nomadism and transhumance (movement between high and low pastures) on the one hand, and city-dwelling, on the other. Even in the wettest and therefore most populous region of the northern Zagros, a harsh environment has led to large-scale nomadism alongside village habitation. Archaeological evidence actually suggests that in the ancient period the population of Iran was more urbanised than in succeeding centuries. Invaders, especially the Mongols destroyed many cities which led, over time, to an increase in nomadic pastoralism. This trend is being somewhat reversed at present through the growth of conurbations like Tehran. You will encounter nomads in many regions of the country, as well as villages which have changed very little in the last millennium.

The vicissitudes of Iran's history have shaped its cities which, as already noted, rose and fell with successive hegemonies. You will visit the ruins of ceremonial imperial capitals like Persepolis with its vast structures and elegant reliefs of processions of Persia's diverse subjects, from Transoxiana to Egypt. Most living cities, however, follow the Muslim norm, with labyrinthine covered bazaars and specialised residential districts. Isfahan, imperial city of Shah 'Abbas, has a grand urban complex composed of the great Meydan, a huge square graced on each side by a monumental portal, two of the world's finest mosques, and the 'Ali Qapu, which doubled as a gateway to the Safavid palace and a pavilion from which the rulers could watch polo matches and military processions below. Nearby is a magnificent garden area graced with pavilions and laid out like a great carpet; you will encounter a number of fine Persian gardens which paralleled, and were in turn copied in, carpet designs and the garden settings of Persian miniatures.

In most cases the Medieval fabric of Iranian cities has been punctured by broad, straight 20th century thoroughfares which have modified their original organic form. Within these cities, however, you will encounter myriad fine mosques, madrasas (religious schools), khanaqahs (sufi 'monasteries'), tombs - which are the most ubiquitous element in the Muslim architectural landscape - and fine houses with extraordinary badgirs, 'wind catchers' which funnelled breezes to rooms below. Often these houses have underground apartments, a creative response to temperature variation which first evolved in the ancient period.

We shall follow the genesis and development of the Persian mosque type, with its central courtyard flanked by galleries and up to four iwans, high vaulted halls of ancient Persian origin, modelled upon Zoroastrian fire temples. Unlike the trabeated mosques of the Middle East and North Africa with their multiple aisles articulated by forests of columns (eg Córdoba), Iranian mosques, especially after the Seljuk period (1038-1194), have great square, domed halls marking the qibla (wall facing Meccah). These are linked to the ablution courtyards by iwans. The genius of Iranian construction is seen in the various ways in

which the transition was made in different periods from the square plan of the inner prayer hall to the round base of its dome. Another distinctive element in Iranian architecture is the pishtaq, or high formal gateway composed of an arch set within a rectangular frame and functioning like a shallow iwan. Often a pishtaq is flanked by high minarets which are emblematic rather than practical; the call to prayer would not be heard from their heights. Iran's fine madrasas also often have iwans and pishtaqs. In the countryside are to be found many beautiful caravanserai (inns), which reflect the importance of trade in Iranian history. The most ubiquitous elements in the landscape are, however, shrines which first developed in Bukhara to the north (Mausoleum of the Samanids, 892-907), reaching their finest monumental expression in Samarkand and in many Iranian tombs, like the Tomb of Uljytu, Sultaniyya (1307-13), whence their forms were exported to Egypt and India (eg. Taj Mahal). Iran evolved a second form of mausoleum, the tower tomb, imported by Turkic peoples from the north; these may have evolved from tents.

Whereas Persepolis is a city of stone, most Iranian cities and monuments are built in baked or unbaked brick. Early extant examples, especially those of the Seljuks, show how brick patterns were used to marvellous decorative effect as well as revealing the building's structure. Later, the Timurids and Safavids developed exquisite covers of coloured tiles which clothe their buildings, hiding structural elements. Brick construction also encouraged the use of stucco, an alternative to stone carving, especially in the creation of inscriptions for mosques, madrasas and tombs. We shall explore the evolution of brick, tile and stucco decoration and the debt which these forms owe to the ancient Persian love of pattern; for this was one of the great aesthetic ideals ancient Persia bequeathed the world.

