

# Flying Visits



Forget current affairs, Iran is a horticultural jewel waiting to be rediscovered, as Sarah Thomas discovered.

My husband and I decided to celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary by joining a group on a trip to Iran run by the specialist cycle tour company Spice Roads. Tourism has been slow to develop in Iran, in part due to the bad press the country receives internationally. Undeterred and lured by the exotic and the unknown, we set off with our fellow cyclists, hijabs at the ready.

Cycling is uncommon in Iran; indeed, we did not encounter any other cyclists at all. A strict Islamic dress code is upheld at all times: men are expected to cover their arms to below the elbow and their legs to the ankles and to avoid tight clothing, particularly cycling shorts. Women must cover the head and neck underneath cycle helmets, wear loose clothing that covers all four limbs, plus an over-shirt extending to mid-thigh level. Fortunately, we were able to leave our faces uncovered.

In 2011 UNESCO added nine Iranian gardens to the World Heritage list, describing them as the best existing examples of the classic Persian garden form. We were fortunate



enough to visit five of these: Eram, Jahan Nama, Nagsh-e Jahan, Begh-e Chehel Sotun and Bagh-e Fin.

Traditionally conceived as symbolising paradise, Persian gardens are geometric and feature rectangular, stone watercourses within an enclosed or walled space. Typically they are divided into four sections representing the elements of fire, water, earth and air – hence the Persian name, *chahar bagh*, meaning fourfold garden.

Our tour started in the south-west of the country in Shiraz, a city with an average September daytime temperature of 30°C (86°F). The city has been at the heart of Persian culture for over 2,000 years. It has a long heritage of poetry, music and splendid gardens that began in the cities of Pasargadae and Persepolis.

These former capitals of the Persian empire are only 60km (37 miles) apart and close to Shiraz, making the latter a good base for our explorations.

*Above:* The three-storey pavilion behind an ornamental pool at Bagh-e Eram, Shiraz.  
*Left:* Cycling through arid desert, irrigated orchards and farmland.



A horticultural treasure and a man-made oasis of lush greenery in an arid environment, Shiraz had a reputation for producing fine wine in the 9th century and there is evidence of grape production here as long ago as 2,500BC. Legend has it that the Syrah (Shiraz) grape originated in the region and was taken to the Rhône Valley in France by the crusader, Guy de Sterimberg.

Important sites in Shiraz include the gardens of Eram and Jahan Nama. Eram (its name means heaven) was developed in the 11th century. This World Heritage site has been modified over the years, but retains the original layout. Given to the University of Shiraz by the government in 1963, it is now also a botanical garden.

A three-storey pavilion, decorated with tiles inscribed with poems by the revered poet Hafez (1325-89), sits behind an ornamental pool and date palm. Hafez often linked gardens with spirituality in recognition of the *pairidaeza bagh* (paradise garden) as a sacred space: “In a garden, renew your Zoroastrian faith./Yes, in the sanctuary of the magi they honour us,/For the fire that never dies burns strong within our hearts.”

Long avenues of 200-year-old cypress trees provide shady walkways. Aromatic myrtles, roses and lush plants grow beside shallow irrigation canals that flow through the garden and irrigate orchards full of pomegranates, oranges, walnuts and olives.

*Above:* The classic Persian garden is a lush paradise within a barren landscape.  
*Above right:* Spring water bubbles up in turquoise-tiled pools and fountains at Bagh-e Fin, Kashan.

*Right:* The long rills at Jahan Nama feature 64 fountains.

*Photos by Nigel Pereira.*



Jahan Nama is a large, 13th-century walled garden that was restored in 2004. There are four broad avenues, which converge on a central octagonal stone pavilion. A long water rill containing 64 fountains runs centrally and is divided into eight sections, each with eight fountains and edged with eight cypress trees lining the channel on each side. The garden has extensive planting with stocks, pansies and other colourful flowers, and is well maintained.

All the gardens we visited are watered daily and tended by teams of gardeners. Public access is by ticket and, although picnics are popular, there is very little litter or evidence of antisocial behaviour.

A sophisticated network of irrigation systems bringing water from the Zagros Mountains on Iran’s western border enabled the development of a unique blend of landscape architecture. For over 2,000 years, man-made, gravity-fed, underground tunnels known as *qanats* have been carrying water from aquifers and wells to supply the pools and irrigation channels that lead from gardens and farms in the vicinity to nearby orchards.

The earliest Persian gardens were created by Cyrus II ‘the Great’ (r. 559-530BC) who began building Pasargadae – the capital of the Achaemenid empire – in 546BC.

In a place where water is scarce, green space is highly prized and the city was described by the Iranian philosopher Zarathustra as a lush paradise within a barren landscape.

Cyrus died in battle, leaving the capital unfinished. The archaeological site, which is 130km (81 miles) from Shiraz, consists of the remains of two royal palaces and the remnants of water channels and an irrigation system.

The so-called classic Islamic



gardens and architecture of the 16th century are the result of a fusion of style between ancient Persia and later Islam. These gardens always include pavilions, areas of shade and sunlight, and cypress trees planted in columns to form vaulted arches. The creation of a microclimate helped to nurture lush vegetation and flowers such as roses.

After Pasargadae, we cycled 60km (37 miles) to Persepolis. Created by Darius I in 515BC, it remained the capital of the Achaemenid empire until 330BC when it was burned to the ground by Alexander the Great. The ruins are impressive and extensive, although many artefacts are now preserved in the British Museum in London.

Our route north took us past Doroodzan Lake as we cycled through desert, irrigated orchards, farmlands and mountains 2,362m (7,750 ft) high towards the city of Yazd.

Accommodation varied between wild camping and the Zein al din Caravansarai on the ancient Silk Route. These caravansarai (road-side inns with an inner courtyard) are being restored and turned into comfortable hotels. The original layout – which combined a kind of motel, fort and market place – is being preserved.

Traditionally, travellers shared washing and dining facilities, sleeping in dormitories subdivided by suspended carpets. At nightfall the vast wooden doors would be locked, thus protecting and enclosing the people, their camels and merchandise. The merchants used every opportunity to sell their wares inside the caravansarai, often only travelling part of the Silk Road to purchase their essentials before returning home. Trade generated in this way was an important factor in creating wealth across the region.

Yazd is a beautiful old city with interesting ornate mosques and fountains. It is known as the 'City of Windcatchers' after the structures designed to capture and channel even the lightest cooling breeze into the streets. This 7,000-year-old adobe city is still a centre for the Zoroastrian faith, which was the national religion of Persia from 650BC until the Moslem invasion in 633AD.

Although Yazd has green spaces, attractive squares with pools and fountains, and the UNESCO-listed Bagh-e-Dolat Abud garden – which boasts the highest windcatcher in the city – we did not have time to visit any particular gardens.

In 1598, the capital was moved yet again by Shah Abbas I 'The Great' (r. 1587-1629), head of the third Persian empire, the Safavid. As we entered Esfahan, its shady, tree-lined boulevards were a contrast to the



other cities we had seen. The park at Esfahan has a waterfall, rock garden, lawns, roses, shrubs and other seasonal flowers and is not based on the classic Persian design.

We enjoyed a picnic there with many Iranians. The park was completed in the 1990s as part of the government's Green Space Development project, which aimed to mitigate the loss of such sites. New parks were planned in major cities, including Tehran.

At the very heart of the Safavid capital, Shah Abbas I created Nagsh-e Jahan Square, which translates as 'The Image of the World' and is now part of the World Heritage listing. Construction was only completed in the last year of his reign and demonstrates many features of the fusion style that combines Persian and Islamic designs in architecture and landscaping.

The square is 560m (612 yards) long and 160m (175 yards) wide and was designed to showcase the jewels of the empire. This vast urban space was used for celebrations, public executions and even polo matches.

Blue-tiled minarets and domes surround the square with the Sheikh Lotfallah mosque to the east, the pavilion Ali

Qapu to the west, the portico of Qeyss Arigel to the north and the Masjed-e shah mosque to the south, orientated towards Mecca. During our visit it held military recruiting stations and a display of armaments.

The Bagh-e Chehel Sotun surrounds the royal pavilion of Shah Abbas II (r. 1642-66). The garden stretches between Naqsh-e Jahan Square and Chahar Bagh Abbasi Street and covers 6.7ha (16½ acres). It is symmetrical in design with a decorative



Top: The Bagh-e Chehel garden at Esfahan, built by Shah Abbas II.  
Above: Mausoleum at Shiraz of the revered Persian poet Hafez.



rectangular pool in front of a pavilion. Twenty columns support the entrance canopy of the pavilion, which is known as 'The 40 Columns', because double the number of columns are reflected in the pool. The garden is planted with plane trees and flowering plants.

Our next journey was north to the oasis city of Kashan, which still relies on *qanats* for water. The Bagh-e Fin, another World Heritage garden just outside Kashan, was designed for Shah Abbas I in the 16th century. It is the very epitome of the Persian garden's evocation of heaven, a concept that has influenced garden development as far away as India and Spain.

Bagh-e Fin's location is arid, but the garden itself is supplied with spring water – moved by gravity without the use of pumps – which irrigates the turquoise-tiled pools and fountains and, via canals (*jubs*), the neighbouring orchards. Some areas were damaged by an earthquake in 1778, but restoration during the 19th century and in 1935 has maintained the original design.

Two pavilions provide attractive, soothing resting places. The central *shoter gelou* (a two-storey pavilion pool house) and the recreational pavilion at the rear were undergoing restoration but were still accessible to visitors. The *hammam* (bath house) is an important feature.

The evergreen cypress trees planted in avenues lining the shady walkways and water channels are up to 500 years old and complement the deciduous trees, creating a year-round haven. Almond, orange and plum trees provide blossom and fruit.



Top: The central square in Yazd, the 'city of windcatchers'.  
Above: Evergreen cypress trees line shady walkways and water channels at Bagh-e Fin, in Kashan.

We happened to be visiting Iran during the major religious festival of Ashura, which commemorates the Martyrs of Shia Islam dating back to the original Shia martyr, Imam Husayn Ibn Ali (AD 680), grandson of Muhammed. (Sunni Muslims celebrate the delivery of the Israelites by God from Egypt across the opening of the Red Sea, whilst the Shia mourn their martyrs.)

This is an extremely important religious festival for Iranians, who are predominantly Shia. It was striking how every village and town exhibited large photographs of their dead sons from various recent conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The water in the fountains was dyed red and there were numerous sombre parades in the streets, involving self-flagellating men.

Finally we arrived in Tehran, spectacular in its setting with the Alborz mountains behind and the Caspian Sea beyond. Residents ski and climb on Tochal, a mountain immediately behind the city. Tehran is a vibrant metropolis, with iconic architecture, museums, galleries, restaurants and, of course, beautiful parks and gardens.

The Azadi Tower – known as the gateway into Iran – was built in 1971 following a design competition. It is made from 8,000 marble blocks, is 15m (50 ft) high and is intended to commemorate 2,500 years since the creation of the first Persian empire. The tower is part of the Azadi Square complex, which includes a modern park, fountains and a cultural museum.

The Tabiat Bridge in the northern area of Tehran is a modern pedestrian structure that was completed in 2014, following a design competition. At 270m (295 yards) long, it links the Ab-o-Atash Park in the west with the Taleghani Park in the east. The bridge passes high above a busy road system, providing access to the parks via multiple pathways. The gardens of the 16th-century Golestan Palace – site of numerous coronations – have been preserved but were temporarily closed to visitors when we were there.

Although our group was essentially on a cycling tour, we were impressed by the beauty and preservation of the Persian gardens that we visited. The people are understandably very proud of their heritage. Perhaps cultural exchange and an appreciation of shared history of horticulture should transcend geo-politics. 🌿

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