

# A new dawn for **IRAN**

Ever since the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s, Iran has been something of a closed book to the West. But as regime change in the USA heralds a softening of attitude towards Iran, travellers are starting to rediscover a country radically different from the image presented by the media

WORDS *and* PHOTOGRAPHS by NICK SMITH



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** early morning in the 17th-century bazaar in Esfahan – one of the oldest and largest in the Middle East – where a two-kilometre covered street connects the old town with the new; **BELOW:** schoolgirls make their way to classes in the Masjid-i Imam, one of the two great mosques in Esfahan's Maydan-i Imam (Imam Square)

**S**itting in a teahouse in Esfahan smoking an apple-scented *ghalyan*, Hassan tells me he's quietly optimistic about Iran's future. 'For us Persians, it has been a confusing time. When America invaded Iraq, we were happy.' Hassan seems to use the words 'Iran' and 'Persia' interchangeably, but as I get to know him better, it becomes just about distinguishable that the former refers to the modern political state, and the latter to the geographical region and cultural empire in which he still lives.

Hassan regards himself as informed on international issues. He has been a shop assistant in London, a taxi driver in California and fought in the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s. These days, he's retired, and prefers to spend his time drinking tea and talking with the increasing numbers of foreigners who travel to see the most splendid city in Islamic Iran. At the end of the 16th century, Shah Abbas – the greatest influence on the creation of modern Iran – made the remote desert town of Esfahan his capital, commissioning beautiful works of art and grand architecture. Esfahan has been described for centuries by the people who live there as 'half of the world', and it's easy to see why.

For several mornings, Hassan and I listen to news reports of the run-up to the US presidential election on an old valve radio in the teahouse in a side-street running off the Royal Square. On more than one occasion, he confides in me that his only real worry is that once the USA withdraws from its occupation of Iraq, it will turn the spotlight on his homeland. 'I always believed that my enemy's enemy is my friend,' he says, crunching his way through a plate of saffron-flavoured sugar crystals. But for Hassan, this simplistic

expression of 'realist statecraft' might at last be coming true, because with the subsequent inauguration of Barack Obama as the USA's 44th president, the pressure, for the moment at least, is off.

#### BUSINESS OF TOURISM

Iran's image is changing – thanks largely to the popularity of films such as *Persepolis* and books such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. And although you can't easily read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Tehran (much less Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*), the rules are starting to relax.

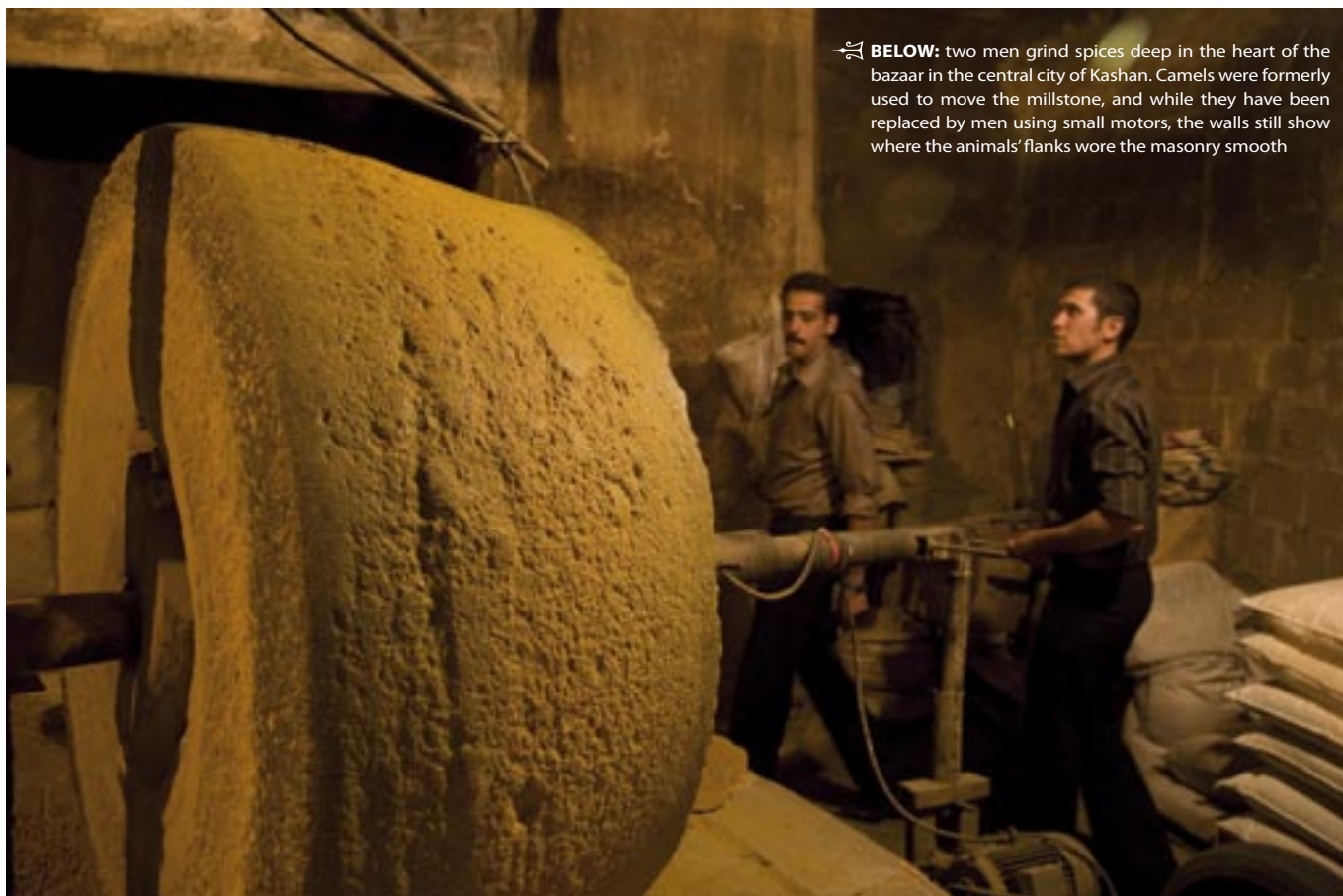
And the increasing ease with which you can travel here means that it's becoming popular again. During the late 1960s and '70s, Iran was the Middle East's top tourist destination, but numbers dwindled following the overthrow of the Shah. Three decades on, and the tourism industry is booming again. Statistics released by the Iranian tourism office show that the number of foreign tourists has doubled in the past three years.

'Roughly one million tourists visited Iran in 2004,' says Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei, chief of the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHHTO). Mashaei highlights the improved tourist facilities and recognises the contribution that electronic visas are making in simplifying the immigration procedure. To date, 250,000 e-visas have been issued, and visa applications from territories such as South Korea have quadrupled. Iran's 20-Year Vision document projects investment of more than US\$32 billion in the country's tourism sector and predicts that by 2025, Iran will account for two per cent of all international tourists.

*'Three decades since the overthrow of the Shah, Iran's tourism industry is booming'*



**ABOVE:** this elderly man in the Masjid-i Imam in Esfahan makes a living from describing the history of the mosque in both English and German for a few dollars a time



**BELOW:** two men grind spices deep in the heart of the bazaar in the central city of Kashan. Camels were formerly used to move the millstone, and while they have been replaced by men using small motors, the walls still show where the animals' flanks wore the masonry smooth

One of the reasons for this is the success of the touring exhibition *The Glory of Persia*, which recently moved from Japan to South Korea. A dazzling showcase of artefacts that date back to the sixth century BC, the exhibition acts as an introduction to Iranian history, culture and art. The ICHHTO, which has also recently taken major Iranian cultural exhibitions to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, Britain and Mexico, is now planning to set up camp in the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it's scheduled to host an exhibition in 2013.

More immediately, the British Museum is currently hosting *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, the first major exhibition to explore the rule and legacy of Shah Abbas, Shah of Iran from 1587 to 1629. According to Sheila Canby, the exhibition's curator, 'Shah Abbas was restless, decisive, ruthless and intelligent. This exhibition will provide a rare opportunity to learn about this important ruler. Shah Abbas was a critical figure in the development of Iran and his legacy is still with us today.'

But it isn't just a question of Iran touring the world. Although independent travel is still difficult, travel companies at the more adventurous end of the spectrum are



**IRAN**  
CO-ORDINATES

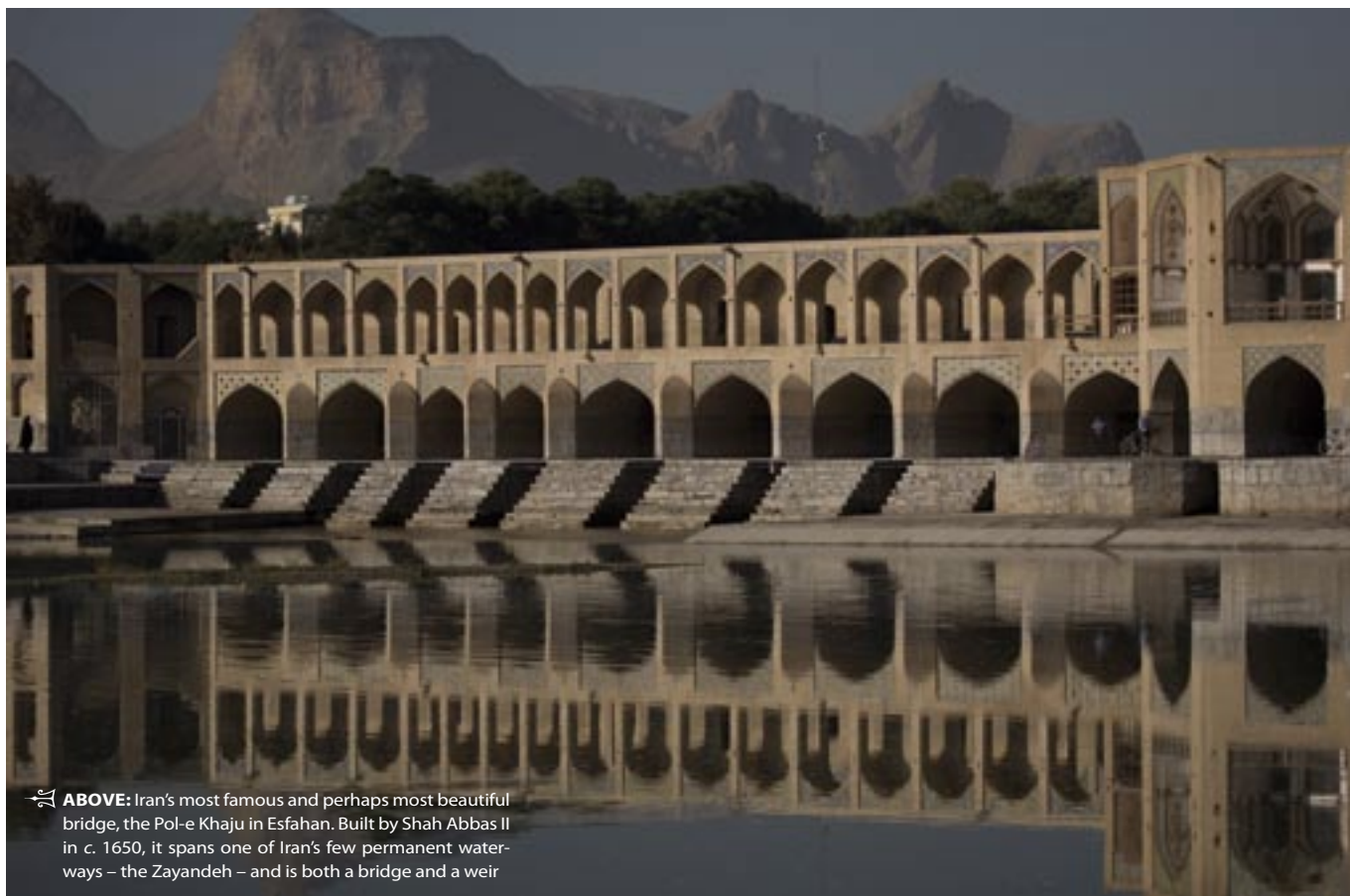
Nick Smith travelled to Iran with desert and cultural specialists Simoon Travel, which organises tailor-made and group tours to Persia as well as Libya, Algeria and Oman. Experienced guest lecturers often accompany the tours, and group sizes don't exceed 15. The company also works closely with schools to offer educational trips to these destinations. For a brochure, call 020 7622 6263 or visit [www.simoontravel.com](http://www.simoontravel.com)

starting to offer Iran as a destination for escorted travel. One such operator is Simoon Travel. Managing director Amelia Stewart explains: 'The reason we wanted to move into Iran was that we knew it would be so different from the much-maligned portrait painted by the Western media. We wanted to see for ourselves, and we weren't disappointed.'

Simoon's itinerary is based on a classic journey along an old Silk Road trading route from Shiraz north to Tehran. Lovers of Robert Byron's classic *The Road to Oxiana* will be familiar with the names of many of the places of archaeological and architectural interest: Persepolis, Pasargadae, Esfahan, Yazd. Those with a wider-ranging knowledge of Persian travel literature will recognise the trip as an almost exact replica of one of the legs of Michael Carroll's 'Travels in Old Iran' from the 1960s, which he describes in his largely forgotten

classic *From a Persian Tea House*.

Travellers expecting a literary, cultural and archaeological feast won't come away disappointed. 'One of the great things about travelling in Iran,' says Stewart, 'is that the people make it. They are so warm and welcoming, charming and funny. They will go out of their way to ensure your time in Iran is memorable.'



**ABOVE:** Iran's most famous and perhaps most beautiful bridge, the Pol-e Khaju in Esfahan. Built by Shah Abbas II in c. 1650, it spans one of Iran's few permanent waterways – the Zayandeh – and is both a bridge and a weir

#### PERSIAN PERCEPTIONS

Many writers have tried to capture the magic of Iran. Isabella Bird, Vita Sackville-West and Freya Stark all chipped in with observations on subjects as diverse as the beauty of Persian gardens, traditional village weddings and descriptions of the ancient underground irrigation tunnels that deliver water from the mountains to the desert cities. Lord Curzon, the great imperialist and president of the Royal Geographical Society immediately prior to the First World War, wrote perhaps the most important book on the subject, *Persia and the Persian Question*. This book's influence was such that two decades later, writers daring to comment on Persia were openly apologetic to Curzon for encroaching on his territory.

One such was WP Cresson, an RGS Fellow who, writing in 1908 in *Persia: The Awakening East*, describes his arrival in Tehran in such wonderful prose it's worth quoting at length: 'Since daybreak we had been hoping, at every moment, to catch our first glimpse of the towers and minarets of the Persian capital. From time to time, in answer to repeated questioning, our sleepy driver would wave his whip in a comprehensive sweep that took in the whole sky-line ahead, empty of any sign of habitation except the occasional distant village of high-walled garden, and muttering a reassuring "Tahran anja" would lapse once more into a state of blissful unconsciousness.'

### *'Iran's historical sites knock spots off those of Egypt, Greece and Turkey'*

———— FIND OUT MORE ————  
For further information about Shah Abbas: *The Remaking of Iran*, visit [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

Arriving in modern Tehran today is nothing like that, although the reasons for wishing to go there in the first place are probably identical. Iran ranks seventh in the world in terms of number of UNESCO World Heritage sites, and knocks spots off the overcrowded commercialised mega-archaeology of Egypt, Greece and even Turkey. When you go to Persepolis today, or for that matter Pasargadae or any of the other wonderful sites of ancient archaeology, you'll most likely find yourself on your own.

#### BEYOND THE CLICHÉ

The more I travelled through Iran, the more I realised that every media-constructed pre-conception I had was almost entirely wrong. Our media insists on bombarding us with absurd clichés of rogue nuclear reactors, public executions and starving, oppressed masses forced to eat the bark off the trees to survive. On the other hand, the romantic fiction of most guidebooks published today gives the impression that modern Iran is awash with nightingales, pomegranates and poetry.

'I don't understand any of this,' says Hassan as we embark on yet another glass of sweet tea. 'We only have one nuclear power station, and we use it for generating our domestic power. And I haven't seen a nightingale in years. When you go home, tell your friends to come and see Persia for themselves.'