

Barkouh’s Ashura Ritual Joins National Tourism Calendar

TEHRAN -- A centuries-old Ashura torch-lighting ritual in the village of Barkouh, eastern Iran, has been officially registered in the country’s national tourism calendar, authorities announced on Thursday.

The ritual, known as Mash’al Gardani (torch procession), has been practiced for over 100 years in the village of Barkouh, located in South Khorasan province’s Sarbisheh County. It commemorates the night before the Battle of Karbala, when Imam Hussein (AS) reportedly instructed his companions to light torches around their tents in anticipation of an imminent attack.

“This tradition is not only a mourning ceremony but a powerful symbol of resistance and collective memory,” said Muhammad Arab, Deputy for Tourism, Investment and Resource Mobilization at the province’s Cultural Heritage Department.

During the event, which takes place annually on the night of Ashura, villagers carry large cylindrical iron torches filled with oil-soaked wood through the streets. The flames, along with rhythmic chest-beating and religious chants, create a dramatic visual and emotional atmosphere.

Arab said the ritual had already been listed in Iran’s intangible cultural heritage registry and is now officially scheduled for inclusion in the national tourism calendar.

“This listing allows us to better promote religious and cultural tourism,” he said, adding that such events are capable of attract-

ing both domestic and international visitors.

Barkouh’s Mash’al Gardani is now considered one of the most significant religious heritage ceremonies in eastern Iran. Authorities hope the recognition will help preserve the ritual while supporting sustainable tourism in the region.

In North Khorasan, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage officially added four traditional skills and practices to the country’s national intangible heritage list, bringing the province’s total to 100 registered entries.

The decision was approved unanimously during a recent meeting of the Supreme Council for Cultural Heritage Registration, according to Ali Mostofian, Director General of the province’s Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department.

The newly registered elements include the traditional preparation method of Mash-leh-Sholeh, a local legume-based dish, the art of crafting Dayza play dolls, The techniques and skills of Gerivan kilim weaving and the techniques and skills of Ashki jajim weaving.

“The inclusion of these practices highlights the cultural diversity and richness of North Khorasan, as well as the vital role local communities play in preserving indigenous knowledge and traditions,” Mostofian said.

He added that reaching the milestone of 100 registered intangible heritage elements underlines the region’s importance in Iran’s broader cultural landscape.

Stone Age Hand Axes Unearthed in Eastern Iran

TEHRAN -- In a groundbreaking archaeological breakthrough, the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department of South Khorasan has announced the discovery of the earliest known Acheulean industry artifacts in the eastern Iranian plateau.

Excavations at the expansive prehistoric site of Dagh Jazireh in Ayask have revealed hand axes dating back approximately half a million years—marking a significant milestone in understanding the deep history of human occupation in this region.

Director Ahmad Barabadi highlighted the importance of the find,

draei said, “For the first time in eastern Iran, we have identified hand axes characteristic of the Acheulean industry, a hallmark previously documented mainly in western Iran and other parts of the world.”

The discovery firmly positions eastern Iran within the cultural and technological map of early human development, underscoring its role in the broader narrative of prehistoric tool-making traditions.

The ongoing fieldwork, launched in July 2025 under the auspices of South Khorasan’s heritage authorities, has also uncovered a diverse



noting that recent excavations, conducted after a hiatus of five decades since the last Paleolithic research at Khunik Cave, have yielded rich stratigraphic layers across 13 test pits at Dagh Jazireh. Preliminary assessments place the Middle Paleolithic artifacts between 100,000 and 200,000 years old, while some tools from the Lower Paleolithic period exceed 500,000 years in age. However, Barabadi emphasizes that definitive dating awaits thorough laboratory analysis to scientifically authenticate and contextualize the data.

Leading the excavation, Ali Sa-

array of stone tools, Middle Paleolithic points, and evidence of semi-glacial habitation sites, offering a rare window into human adaptation during fluctuating climatic epochs.

Spanning over 300 hectares in the southwest of Ayask District in Sarayan County, the Dagh Jazireh site stands as the largest Paleolithic complex in eastern Iran.

The landmark discovery not only rewrites chapters of human evolutionary history in the region but also opens promising avenues for archaeological scholarship and the development of scientific tourism in Iran’s eastern frontier.

Karbala Draws 23 Million Devotees for Arbaceen of Martyrdom

TEHRAN/KARBALA -- Every year, in the heart of Iraq, the city of Karbala becomes the epicenter of one of the world’s largest—and most moving—religious gatherings: the Arbaceen pilgrimage.

This year, the numbers reached staggering heights, with nearly 23 million pilgrims flooding into the province to pay homage to Imam Hussein (AS), whose martyrdom in 680 CE remains a defining moment in Shia Islam.

The sheer scale of the event, with its immense physical and spiritual demands, presents a colossal challenge to the Iraqi state and its people—a challenge met this time with a mixture of determination, ingenuity, and communal devotion.

As dawn broke on the day after the peak, the process of returning home began in earnest.

Ghafran Al-Shammari, a steady voice in the labyrinthine machinery of Karbala’s transport and communications, noted the success of this year’s efforts: an unprecedented fleet of vehicles, increased from the previous year, ferried

pilgrims away from the city’s sacred precincts with remarkable efficiency.

There was an almost poetic symmetry in the way the mawakib—volunteer-run rest stations that sprang up like oases along the pilgrimage routes—expanded from 12,000 to 15,000, supported by security personnel and even military students. This collective mobilization evoked a sense of shared purpose, a community woven together by faith and resilience.

Muhammed Shia Al-Sudani, Iraq’s Prime Minister, remarked on the smoothness of the departure, emphasizing the government’s commitment to streamlining transportation, safeguarding border crossings, and preparing airports for the massive exodus of pilgrims.

The role of Iranian pilgrims—numbering over four million—was also pivotal, with some three million having already returned and nearly 700,000 still walking the ancient paths in reverence. At the bustling Mehran border, a fleet of 1,000 buses and legions of volunteer guides ensured that



pilgrims’ journeys remained fluid and safe.

What unfolds during Arbaceen is not merely a religious ritual; it is a profound testament to the enduring human spirit. In the face of logistical complexity and geopolitical tensions, the pilgrimage remains a beacon of unity, faith, and sacrifice.

The flood of humanity moving

through Karbala is at once a reenactment of a 14-century-old tragedy and a living, breathing expression of hope and devotion. In these moments, the city is transformed—not only into a site of mourning but also into a stage where history and faith converge, and where the ties of community are renewed with every step taken toward home.

Beneath the Desert, a 2,500-Year-Old River Still Runs in Qasabeh

TEHRAN -- The Qanat of Qasabeh in Gonabad stands as a remarkable testament to ancient hydro-engineering and sustainable water management, functioning uninterrupted for over 2,500 years.

As the deepest known mother well among Iran’s historical qanats—reaching over 330 meters—Qasabeh continues to defy regional drought trends, supplying vital irrigation and domestic water to local communities.

In an era of intensifying climate challenges, this ancient water system offers a living model of resource stewardship, community governance, and technological adaptation.

According to Hamidreza Mahmoudi, director of the Qasabeh World Heritage Base, the qanat’s recent rejuvenation through systematic dredging increased its water discharge from 130 to 151 liters per second.

These interventions reveal not only the durability of the qanat’s original construction but also the continued reliance of local populations on heritage technologies in the absence of reliable alternatives.

The site, recognized as the leading com-



ponent in the UNESCO World Heritage inscription of eleven Persian qanats, reflects the fusion of cultural practice, environmental adaptation, and historical memory.

Anthropologically, Qasabeh functions as both infrastructure and landscape—an inhabited artifact shaped through generations of labor and meaning-making.

The qanat’s use is embedded in localized social structures and ritual practices, including the communal distribution of water through systems like the dividing cup (livān-e taqsim) and nard-e māhi (fish ladder), both of which have recently been added to Iran’s intangible heritage registry.

These elements demonstrate how water

management is entangled with social justice, symbolism, and cosmological order.

The recent development of a 2.7-kilometer heritage tourism trail—highlighting mosques, gardens, mills, and the qanat’s outlet—underscores the evolving relationship between heritage and economy.

With state-led efforts to formalize tourism infrastructure and preserve physical structures, new meanings are being layered onto ancient ones, raising questions about authenticity, accessibility, and commodification.

Yet, challenges loom. Urban encroachment, illegal wells, and agricultural land conversion are leading threats to qanat sustainability.

While the Gonabad site remains relatively protected due to long-standing bans on well-digging in its vicinity, many neighboring qanats have gone dry.

Mahmoudi calls for a national allocation of protective funding for all registered heritage qanats, suggesting that only coordinated, cross-sectoral governance can ensure their survival.

Zanjan’s Salt Mummies Museum Reopens After Preservation Work

TEHRAN -- For travelers craving a unique cultural adventure, Zanjan’s Salt Men Museum has reopened its doors, inviting visitors to explore one of Iran’s most extraordinary archaeological wonders.

After a brief closure for essential preservation work, the museum is once again ready to reveal its captivating collection of naturally mummified human remains—known as the Salt Men—offering a rare window into life from thousands of years ago.

Nestled in the heart of Zanjan province, the museum presents an unforgettable experience that blends history, mystery, and anthropology. These remarkably preserved figures are a testament to Iran’s rich past, frozen in time beneath layers of salt, and now painstakingly conserved to share their story with the world.

The reopening of the Salt Men Museum joins a recent wave of cultural revivals in the region. Iconic landmarks like the stunning Dome of Soltaniyeh—an architectural marvel—and ancient sites such as the tombs of Chalabi Oghlu and Molla Hasan Kashi, the Dash Kasan temple, and the charming Rakhshuykhaneh Museum, are also welcoming visitors, enriching Zanjan’s appeal as a destination for heritage lovers.

With convenient visiting hours—open Saturday through Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Thursdays and Fridays until 8 p.m.—there’s plenty of time to immerse

yourself in these cultural treasures.

Whether you’re a dedicated history buff or an intrepid traveler eager for a story etched in time, Zanjan’s Salt Men Museum promises a mesmerizing encounter with Iran’s ancient past that will linger long after you leave.



Picture of the Day



Life beneath the palm groves of Shadgan and Mahshahr, southwest Iran.

Photo by Tasnim