

Award Rationale
Esfahk Historic Village
in Iran



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On behalf of

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Project Location of Esfahk Historic Village



Source: Google Maps



Source: Google Maps

1 INTRODUCTION

The application for the TO DO Award 2020 was submitted by the village council of Esfahk and refers to the original **Esfahk Historic Village**. On the basis of the documents submitted, the application was nominated by the TO DO Award jury. From 6th to 15th November 2019, expert Klaus Betz travelled in Iran on behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e. V.) in order to evaluate Esfahk Historic Village on location.

The village of Esfahk (also spelt Esfahak) with a population of 800 inhabitants is situated at an altitude of 1,100 m, along the national road 68, not far from the district capital of Tabas City in South Khorasan Province in the East of Iran. The small oasis village with its date palm grove and irrigated gardens and fields all around is situated in or rather on the edge of the Parvedeh salt desert/salt steppe, with the rocky “camel mountains“ at its back. Their highest elevation is the Jamal peak (“the beautiful one”, “the handsome one“), rising to an altitude of about 3,000 metres.

There are two Esfahks, one situated next to the other. The reason: In South Khorasan in 1978, a devastating earthquake destroyed most of the mudbrick buildings in the old, original village and brought a lot of distress to the community (see chapter 3).

Since then, there has been the newly rebuilt Esfahk, constructed by using more solid materials (stone/concrete), as a regular residence for the inhabitants. But next to it, at a distance of 200 metres, there is the partly restored Esfahk Historic Village, amidst destroyed adobe buildings. With about 3,500 domestic and international visitors annually, it is a highly noteworthy cultural, historic, architectural, touristic, and socio-political gem.

On the basis of his insights and findings, the author recommends awarding **Esfahk Historic Village** with the TO DO Award 2020.

2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

In contrast to the current political situation in and around Iran, at the time of the author’s research in the country there was less political tension to be felt, but rather the manifold worries in the daily lives of the Iranian people (inflation, rent, unemployment). The average monthly income has been 350 to 450 euros.

While the sanctions in place have a major influence on the economic situation in Iran (with a population of 82 million the second largest economy in the region), the domestic economy does not seem to be affected – superficially. However, within four years the exchange rate of the euro to the Iranian rial or toman¹ changed dramatically from 1:3 to 1:12. As a consequence, even textile imports from low-wage countries such as Bangladesh or China have become too expensive, which has, for instance, led to a revitalisation of the Iranian textile industry.²

Despite all the trade restrictions in place, high-tech devices (also by US American brands) or the related software are not necessarily scarce. After all, the Islamic Republic of Iran is surrounded by seven neighbouring countries where exchange is possible by some means or other, or where Iranians can travel.

Mobile network coverage is largely on a par with European standards. The same applies to internet access (except for certain photo and film portals), if it is not temporarily suspended entirely. For example, from 15th November 2019 in response to unrest after a hike in petrol prices.

Iran has a high level of education throughout the country. About 4.8 million students are currently enrolled in public and private universities, almost 46 percent of them being women.

¹ Toman is the name of the old Persian currency. Ten rial are usually called one toman.

² Deutschlandfunk, 13/01/2020

Irrespective of above mentioned, the existence of the “Sepah“ (also called Revolutionary Guard or Pasdaran) affects almost all spheres of Iranian society.³ And the Iranian economy is mainly (70 to 80 percent) in the hands of the state and/or religious foundations.

In 2018, the gross domestic product was 452 billion US dollars (Germany: 3,951 billion US dollars). In 2012, it still was 490 billion US dollars. The most important economic sectors in Iran include the oil, gas, and petrochemicals industries, automobile manufacturing, agriculture, and the metal processing industry. According to official data, the rate of unemployment in the last Iranian year was 12.1 percent, youth unemployment (15 – 29 years) 25.3 percent. Every year, the workforce increases by one million people entering the labour market, according to country information provided by the German Foreign Office.

And yet Tehran’s stock market index “Tedpix“ keeps climbing to ever new heights. Only seemingly a paradox. Whoever has savings and does not immediately invest in material assets will rather invest in Iranian shares instead of depositing the money with a local bank – given the soaring inflation of 40 to 45 percent and interests on savings of only 15 percent.⁴

As compared to the almost euphoric surge in tourism after the nuclear deal of 2015 (from which the USA has withdrawn in the meantime) and hopes that the country would become increasingly open, the booming tourism from Western countries has entered a phase of stagnation. Currently there are only two Western European Airlines serving the Iranian capital. It remains to be seen whether the fact that a Ukrainian passenger aircraft was shot down unintentionally on 8th January 2020 will be of further consequences.⁵

While Iran has remained a very interesting country in terms of its cultural history, without tourist rip-off, with a very hospitable population, and while more hotels have been built and an electronic or digital visa (without stamp in the passport) has made immigration and emigration far easier, many people in Western countries remain sceptical and stay away from Iran.

The significant volume of domestic Iranian tourism would be sufficient for the country, if it wasn’t for the major economic need to generate foreign exchange (and for the Iranian population’s need to meet and talk with foreign visitors). After all, about 60 percent of the population annually travel within Iran: on business, for leisure, or on pilgrimages. The respective infrastructure (road network, bus, rail and domestic flight connections) caters to these travellers.

With a population of 2.5 million, the religious centre of Mashhad (also: Mashad or Meshad) is the country’s second biggest city, receiving up to 25 million pilgrims per year. The reason: The 8th Shia Imam (who died in 818) is buried in Mashhad.⁶ The grave or shrine of Imam Reza (Alī ibn Mūsā ar-Ridā) is considered the most important Shia pilgrimage site in Iran.

Summing it up, the crux of the matter may be the fact that the views one can get of the country from the inside while travelling in Iran will always be overshadowed by the outside view of the political realities of the country. The same applies to an Iran-specific simultaneousness which is difficult to convey. It refers to the strict distinction between the ways in which people have to appear in public and their free individual space in the private sphere. There is an increasing pressure from within the population to change this.

3 ESFAHK HISTORIC VILLAGE

3.1 History and Objectives

At the beginning, it was a disaster that was behind the history of today’s Esfahk Historic Village,⁷ triggered by the earthquake of 16th September 1978. The tectonic tremors at that time not only destroyed the „garden

³ As at mid-January 2020

⁴ Deutschlandfunk, 13/01/2020

⁵ After writing this award rationale, the two remaining Western European airlines, Lufthansa and Austrian Airlines, for the meantime suspended their flights to Tehran until end of March 2020.

⁶ https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%CA%BFAI%C4%AB_ibn_M%C5%ABs%C4%81_ar-Rid%C4%81

⁷ https://www.instagram.com/esfahk_tourism/

city“ of Tabas, the centre of the region, almost entirely (In the meantime it has been rebuilt). It also destroyed another 40 villages in the vicinity and larger periphery (with a death toll of 22,000), including the oasis village of Esfahk. However, its adobe buildings which had collapsed have never been razed to the ground.

Today’s mayor and former headmaster of Esfahk’s school, Hamid Hosseini-Moghaddam (53), was trapped under the rubble at the age of eleven, but could eventually be rescued after four hours. Unlike him, his former student Mohsen Mahdizadeh (34), born in 1986 in Esfahk and now team leader of village committee of Esfahk Historic Village, only knows about the tragedy of his birth place from his parents’ and grandparents’ accounts and descriptions. The same applies to all his team colleagues of his age.

Another aspect is that the whole district around Tabas – seen from Tehran – has been regarded as a rather unimportant and remote region – as compared to important places such as Mashad, Qom, Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, or Bandar Abbas. This has had advantages and disadvantages.

For more than three decades, the young generation born after the earthquake did not see any perspective for themselves in Esfahk and moved away for the time being. Those who did not want to work in nearby Tabas or in the resource-rich mines of the province either went to study or searched for job opportunities in the bigger cities mentioned above (brain drain effect).

Until from 2009 a rethinking took place among the young generation. Time and again, when visiting their families, they heard from their parents and grandparents of “what a nice life“ they used to lead in old Esfahk – in the aesthetically beautiful mudbrick houses adapted to the desert climate, the homey alleys, with gardens and fields all around. But then, the parent generation once affected by the earthquake could not imagine reviving the place of horror. So the historic Esfahk initially remained untouched, without ever being razed to the ground.

The young generation of Esfahk did not want to leave it at that. Free of personal traumata, they followed the working motto: “Then let us turn what was bad into something good!“ From now on, they set out to work for the reconstruction of historic Esfahk, including the revival of old traditions. It was a discussion process within the village that took many years.

Linked to this, the young generation of Esfahk also pursued the vision of sustainable and self-determined tourism development which could offer them a perspective and jobs in this remote area. Without external investors and, as it turned out, with a hefty dose of freedom.

Thanks to a series of fortunate coincidences and good knowledge of the processes that are politically appropriate in the region, Esfahk’s disadvantage was within a few years of reconstruction turned into an advantage. Well-known architects, urban planners, and competent tourism experts from Tehran and Mashad heard of the project and understood the opportunities associated with it. Together with their students they spent years working for the project on a volunteer basis and contributed their know-how (earthquake resistant adobe building technology, modern sanitary facilities, gastronomic services, etc.).

All of this while keeping up the local and sustainable self-sufficient life-style and local customs and traditions. Otherwise this knowledge would have been lost within a generation, as the young people who had left initially were rather busy with their Master’s in computer linguistics or their Bachelor’s in Persian literature.

At any rate, against this backdrop Esfahk Historic Village has become a prudently structured model which has brought a few young people back to their native village, or has made others stay. With 30 to 50 women and men employed part-time or full-time⁸; depending on the season and on the number of visitors and overnight guests.

60 to 100 visitors can be hosted in the seven (soon eight) guest houses with up to three or five rooms each, built around an open inner courtyard or a roofed cross-coat. Depending on whether they are Iranian families staying in the rooms (with up to six or eight persons, as often required) or whether foreign/European guests ask for accommodation (with usually only two persons per room). The rates also differ accordingly.

⁸ Not during the very hot summer months. Best time: from February to June and from mid/end of August to November.

The rooms are decorated in a tasteful manner. Here and there, there are small niches in the walls with ceramics, flowers, or woven cloth. As it is the custom in the country, the guests sleep in fresh, clean bed sheets on comfortable mattresses on the floor which is covered with beautiful carpets. In most cases there is also a common room or the open inner courtyard (in both cases the *living room*). Independent of the restaurant, the guest houses have a kitchen, a bathroom/showers and either “oriental” or “European” toilets, often both.

3.2 Concept and Programme

One of the first buildings restored in the Esfahk Historic Village in adobe building style was the former mosque. Its reconstruction was supported/donated by the Iranian tourism and cultural authority. This initiative by the people of Esfahk paved the way for all the reconstruction activities to follow.

With co-funding from provincial authorities, contributions from the village development budget, the family’s own money, and the support of local craftsmen, part of the destroyed historic village was rebuilt step by step. In line with the latest adobe building technology.

This *state of the art* method includes (invisible after the work has been completed) the integration of very stable mesh constructions in the cupolas of the houses and in the main side walls, supported by cross-beams. In case of an earthquake, this prevents the instant break-up or collapse of the building.

In this way, on the basis of reciprocal team work, slowly, over a period of several years, and with continuous voluntary expert advice from Tehran and Mashad, first a restaurant, then one of the now seven (soon eight) guest houses were built. They are all owned by families. Furthermore, there is a reception, a coffee shop, a handicraft and workshop building, a very beautifully built hammam, a small observatory and of course also the “Esfahk mudbrick centre“ and “Esfahk research project of Soil Architecture“⁹ (with classrooms and workshops for students in architecture and design).

In the reconstructed Esfahk Historic Village the villagers managed to create a unique selling proposition which at the same time significantly strengthened people’s self-confidence. The activities and (cultural touristic) programmes and excursions offered have been designed accordingly:

- Beginning with the local cuisine which is served daily at the restaurant: it is rich in herbs, with ingredients from the villagers’ own cultivation (herbal hotpot with kidney beans, chicken leg with saffron rice and barberries, stew or bulgur with pickles, and ”doogh“ [a yogurt drink, a Persian version of ”ayran“] – with mint leaves, rose petals, or wild basil.
- Introduction/sight seeing of adobe building technology.
- Visit to the new village, encounters at the kindergarten, primary and secondary school.
- Guided tour to the fields, traditional irrigation systems (quanat), optional: accompanying shepherds, women collecting herbs
- Visit to the handicraft workshop, knotting techniques, weaving mills, puppet making, purchase of mixed herbs and teas.
- Baking bread on an open fire
- Visit to the hammam and treatments
- Guided tour with an expert explaining the clear starry sky at night (with a professional telescope)
- Excursion to the Korit dam (water reserve) at an altitude of 1,700 m
- Excursion to Tabas (Geopark Centre and Golshan Garden) and to the water-rich village of Ezmeyghan (Azmighan) where paddy is cultivated.
- Relaxing/reading/conversations at the meeting point “coffee shop“ (outside/inside). Either over local

⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/mud.esfahk>

peppermint tea, herbal tea, or – offered as a matter of course –over an espresso or café latte.

4 EVALUATION AGAINST THE TO DO AWARD CRITERIA

Assessing the activities of Esfahk Historic Village against the contest criteria for the TO DO Award leads to the following evaluation.

4.1 Participation

How were/are the interests and needs of the local population taken into account in the planning phase and throughout the project?

Joint or at least majority decisions are not unusual in an oasis village surrounded by the desert. It is a tradition cultivated over many generations to ensure survival. What has been tried and tested will be maintained if possible. New things will be adopted only after in-depth consideration. Changes therefore happen only slowly.

That's why the idea to slowly reconstruct the destroyed Esfahk Historic Village was subject to a process of information, consultation, and discussion among the people of Esfahk over many years. The platform for this process was provided by the village council. At times, more than half of the 800 inhabitants participated in the meetings.

Each and every member of the community who was seriously interested could, was allowed to, and should, if they wanted to, be actively involved in the redesign of Esfahk Historic Village, voice their opinions and make suggestions. The process was a horizontal one, across the local community.

The first result of the deliberations was, with regard to the organisational structure of the project:

- Only local people or people with family roots in Esfahk were allowed to invest in the restoration of the historic village (e.g. common buildings like the restaurant, reception, coffee shop, hammam) or to make use of their right to rebuild their family property in their former village using their own money¹⁰ and to convert their houses into guest houses. External investors have been excluded till date. However, those who were not able to contribute money, but know-how (brick-making, teaching weaving techniques, designing the hammam) were also appreciated.
- In a second step so-called “village teams“ were formed (women and men). Depending on people's competencies and interest, e.g. in: adobe crafts and architecture, reception, reservation and accounting, catering and restaurant, house keeping, technical maintenance and installations, traditional handicraft, operations of the hammam, coffee shop, etc. With their own responsibilities respectively.

4.2 Economic Benefit

Ensuring the economic participation of broad local population strata in tourism

The annual turnover of the community project Esfahk Historic Village amounts to 350 million toman¹¹ (around 25,000 to 26,000 euros). What may sound “little“ due to the exchange rate reflects the economic reality of Iran (and especially of remote rural areas) and is a respectable result.

Directly or indirectly around 25 percent of the local population (i.e. about 200 out of 800 inhabitants) benefit. A cleaning worker gets a bit less than six euros per hour; the monthly wage of the caretaker in

¹⁰ Reconstructing such a house using modern adobe building technology costs about 100 million toman (at the current exchange rate about 8.000 to 8.500 euros). For the rural population in Iran, this is a significant amount.

¹¹ One third of it is earned during the high season alone, during the weeks before and after the annual new year festival “Norouz“ on 21st March (similar to the Kurdish “Newroz“ festival).

charge of the whole complex is about 600 euros.

While the room rate including breakfast is seven euros per person for Iranian guests (85,000 toman if there are many people using one room), while foreign guests/Europeans pay about 17 euros for a single room and 25 euros for a double room. Iranian guests pay 2.10 euros for a meal at lunch or dinner, foreign guests between 2.50 and 3.30 euros.

This shows that despite the fact that it is a remote area prices are actually far too low – considering the standard/facilities of the guest houses (also see conclusion) and the excellent local cuisine.

From the overall profit, all the salaries and wages (house keeping, reception, etc.) will be paid out first. Furthermore, ten percent will be deducted and saved. Then the remaining profit will be shared by the – so far – seven house owner families, depending on their accommodation capacities.

What is surprising is the fundamental view shared by the Esfahk Historic Village team (checked several times, confirmed several times) that they don't see themselves under economic pressure and would therefore a) like to limit the number of guest houses to eight and b) make future partnerships depend on whether the same values are shared.

4.3 Awareness Raising

Enhancing the awareness of local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development for their economic, social and cultural lives

The possible risks and opportunities associated with tourism have been a key concern not only within the Esfahk Historic Village, but also in the entire village. At a formal level both the mayor Hamid Housseni Hosseini-Moghaddam and the village team consisting of female and male team leaders have been able to rely on the external advice they have been getting, as mentioned above.

The objective always remains the cautious (from a Western perspective: very slow) development of the project. At an informal level it is the casual daily conversations with the community or the dialogue between the members – e.g. after the weekly Friday prayers. Irrespective of those, rules have been elaborated which mutually apply to everybody involved: to both the community of Esfahk and the visitors of Esfahk Historic Village. These are the main ones:

- Cars are not allowed inside Esfahk Historic Village (there are car parks outside)
- Smoking and alcohol are prohibited
- Waste must not be thrown away within the Historic Village or in the neighbourhood
- Mutual respect and no molestation of visitors by local people and vice versa
- Respect for local religious customs

The following chapter needs to be seen in direct connection with these rules.

4.4 Cultural Identity

Strengthening local culture and the cultural identity of local people, avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism, supporting intercultural encounters and exchange between hosts and guests

In a historical perspective we can say: The oasis village of Esfahk had been isolated for a long time – surrounded by desert and salt steppe. Over the centuries the community developed their own economic system ensuring their survival, and their own social behaviours. And in this way also their identity.

After the earthquake, the latter was rather endangered by the emigration of young people seeking a modern lifestyle influenced by the West. A reversal/strengthening of this identity did not take place until the Esfahk Historic Village was restored, as the project highlighted two aspects at the same time: The community's

appreciation of their own culture and the fact that it is possible to build bridges between the “old” and the “new” life.

Things have changed, thanks to the local community’s possibility of taking part in the project by playing a pro-active role (see offers under 3.2), of contributing suggestions for the visitor programme, and of deriving economic benefits out of it: Tried and tested traditional elements could be revived and preserved, new elements integrated (coffee shop with espresso, computer, internet, or guests asking questions and speaking other languages).

4.5 Decent Work

Creation of qualified jobs and/or improvement of the working conditions in tourism with regard to social security, working hours, education and training, and remuneration

In the evaluation of Esfahk Historic Village this criterion is applicable only in a limited manner. First and foremost, the project has been about the creation of jobs for the young generation – through their own initiative and beyond the earlier subsistence economy.

Furthermore, there is no danger here of demeaning, exploitative mechanisms, since the community – as described under 4.1 – works together in village-based, consensus-oriented and team-based processes – to the benefit of the village. In addition, the income from tourism in Esfahk Historic Village is in some cases rather an additional income. For example, the manager of the little observatory in Esfahk works as a librarian in nearby Tabas during the day. During starry nights he takes visitors or local people on a “journey through the Milky Way”.

Seen in this way, the rationale behind this criterion – focussed on the situation of employees in a mass tourism destination – is not comparable beyond this point.

4.6 Gender Equality

Equal participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes within the frame of their cultural background and values

As far as this criterion is concerned, the outside view of Iran, as opposed to the inside view, is of critical importance. It is clear that in an Iranian village, women play a vital role in family life. So at first glance: an understanding of roles that has been passed on over generations.

However, beyond that (if you don’t just focus on their headscarfs and the clothes covering their whole body) the women in Esfahk – *one* result of the many village council meetings prior to the reconstruction – have long been integrated into the tourism concept of Esfahk Historic Village. Mainly the young ones. And with their own teams which are again lead by women.

For instance, the entire restaurant management, sourcing, and delivery of local food supplies. They are in charge of the reception and accounting. At their handicraft workshop with its almost 30 members (with their own building within the *Village* area) they sell almost 70 percent of their handicraft products, as well as mixed herbs, spices, different types of tea, and of course the most exclusive product of all: saffron, harvested in a cumbersome manner.

This does not mean that the male and female society has become irrelevant. Many things still continue to follow local traditions and necessities, but the differentiation is longer so clear-cut. Up to being able to laugh in the presence of a stranger, and open, clear eyes.

4.7 Environmental Sustainability

Taking into account criteria of low environmental and climate impact and sustainable use of natural resources

Here again, the fact that Esfahk is a small oasis village plays a critical role. Surrounded by desert and salt steppe, the sustainable use of scarce resources has always been of vital importance. The sparing, meaningful use of water and wood is one of the most important imperatives. That's why the community is currently expanding the well-thought-out system of small irrigation canals (qanats) for the fields and gardens, based on the principle of sufficiency (not using more than what is enough).

Sustainability thinking also applies to the cultivation of food crops. What is served at Esfahk Historic Village is produced locally, is organic and does not require transport over long distances. Which again helps the local farmers or shepherds.

In the reconstruction of the historic *Village* houses, raw materials available on location were used: timber, adobe and mud (except for the mesh constructions mentioned earlier). At the macro level (climate debate) adobe buildings will increasingly gain importance. Besides, they are also advantageous at the micro level: healthy indoor climate, comfortably cool in summer, in winter they regulate the air moisture.

In the guest houses in Esfahk Historic Village there is electric light, of course, but in order not to affect the view of the starry sky with unnecessary "light pollution", and alleys and footpaths between the houses are lit by candle light, lanterns, or small kerosene lamps.

Not all is perfect, but the community is currently working on improvements. The sewage from the guest houses currently still goes to drainage pits. In the future, closed tanks will be used, in which a bacterial process will eventually lead to grey water quality, at least.

And last but not least: "environmental protection" is not an official subject in school curricula, but every Tuesday evening one of the teachers of Esfahk teaches interested students in the field of environmental education, as part of a kind of „environmental sciences club“. This is in line with the efforts of having a certain part of South Khorasan Province declared a national park in the near future, in cooperation with the municipal administration of Tabas. Should this effort turn out successful, the oasis village of Esfahk would be part of it.

4.8 Future Sustainability

Ensuring the economic and institutional sustainability of the project

Concept, structure and design of the rural community project Esfahk Historic Village ensure a high degree of economic and institutional sustainability. It is also likely thanks to its cautious development and the restriction to a maximum number of eight guest houses, which the community has in the meantime imposed on itself.

Irrespective of the current situation in Iran, domestic Iranian tourism will at least continue to generate a certain income. However, on the long run it would be more advantageous for Esfahk Historic Village if more foreign guests came. At the moment, they make up about 500 out of 3,500 visitors.

5 CONCLUSION

Many supposed eco-lodges (like our TO DO Award winner Boomkolbeh) or eco-tourism projects emerged in Iran over the past few years. Many of them do not live up to the expectations connected with such concepts. But with Esfahk Historic Village a project has developed that is convincing and authentic in terms of quality of accommodation, gastronomy, and the opportunities offered in terms of experiences and adventures. Guests feel comfortable. There are indeed projects in Iran which seem to be an anticlimax compared to this one.

And – it would be appropriate to increase the rates, at least for foreign visitors with hard currency. However, the community of Esfahk does not seem to find they could do that, in such a remote place, off the most important centres of cultural heritage in Iran. But this might change. If the outside views of Iran change and the inside views of the country get more emphasis.

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