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Letter from Iran

Iranian hospitality A hidden treasure

After making many field trips to the Islamic Republic of Iran **Kevin O’Gorman** reflects on the origins of Islamic and Iranian hospitality before highlighting some of the operational complexities of running the one of the highest hotels in the world.

DESPITE RECENT CONTROVERSIES, Iran is an incredibly diverse country that is rich in cultural and historic terms, representing a recorded human history that stretches back some 10,000 years. There is considerable evidence for commercial hospitality that dates back to at least 2000BC.¹ Following a short background to Islamic hospitality, this article presents a contrast between the ancient and contemporary hospitality offered in Iran, in particular focusing on the operational complexities of running one of the highest hotels in the world.

There has always been a strong tradition of hospitality in the Islamic world, as with the mediaeval Western monastic tradition.² This Islamic practice is emulating that of Ibrahim.³ Ibrahim is considered the first true Muslim and seen as a role model for hospitality. The sharing of food makes the guest a temporary member of the host’s family. Ibrahim became terrified when his guests’ hands could not reach the food (*Qur’an* 51:23), for the sharing of food normally proves that the guest’s intentions are not hostile; in the case of Ibrahim his guests were divine messengers. Eating together confers both rights and duties; for example, the host must protect the guests as if they were members of the host’s family. Even today, this hospitable relationship is established through the sharing of bread and salt, and it lasts for two days and the intervening night, traditionally referred to as three days.⁴

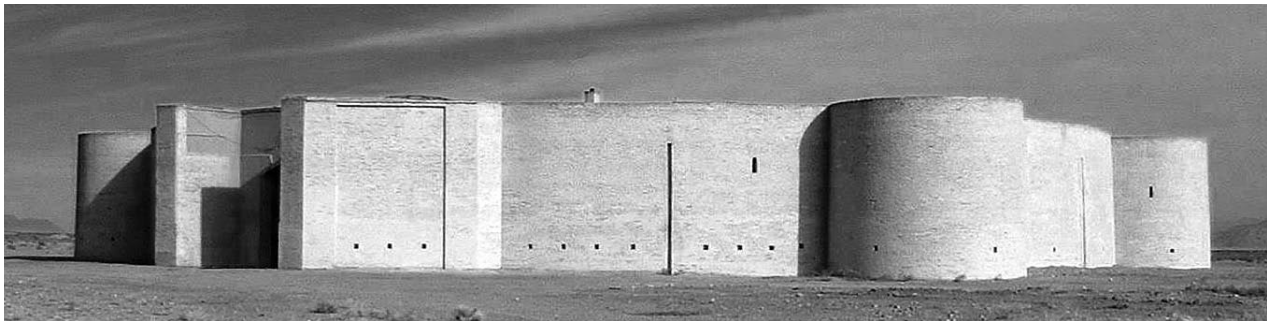
There is a strong Middle Eastern literary tradition based around hospitality, particularly that of the Bedawīn. The collection of poems gathered together in the ninth century known as the *Hamāsa al-sughrā* makes frequent references to hospitality.⁵ The poet observes that at night the fires attract travellers and without inquiring about the stranger, or even when the stranger is known to be an enemy, a meal is prepared for the guest. Then he is given a place to sleep—sometimes the guest sleeps with the family, at other times a special tent is erected. Even if they are a timid and gentle household, they will endure

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anything and are always ferocious in defence of their guests. Hospitality is frequently mentioned in Islamic traditions known as *hadīths*: one such tradition notes that if the guest stays longer than the ‘three days’ it becomes charity, and it is forbidden for a guest to stay when he becomes a burden to his host.⁶

Provision for travellers

Caravanserais were hostels for travellers, where accommodation was often given for free for the traditional



three days, although in reality most travellers wished to continue their journey after just the one night. In contrast to the mediaeval Western monasteries, caravanserais could also be used as commercial centres

hospitality, like the building of caravanserais, would make the ruler 'renowned for ever; he will gather the fruit of his good works in the next world...'

for merchants. Establishing caravanserais to provide hospitality for travellers is often reflected among the traditions and writings. For example, the historian al-Tabarī (c 910AD) records how the governor of Samarqand (now called Samarkand, Uzbekistan) in 719AD was ordered to:

*establish inns in your lands so that whenever a Muslim passes by, you will put him up for a day and a night and take care of his animals; if he is sick, provide him with hospitality for two days and two nights; and if he has used up all of his provisions and is unable to continue, supply him with whatever he needs to reach his hometown.*⁷

Samarqand was located along the Great Silk Road, one of the most important trading routes in the region, and had a regular supply of traders and travellers. This ancient route is one of the best known of the world's historical trading routes, traditionally running from Xian in northern China through Iran and on to Istanbul. There is other evidence from the seventh and eighth centuries: ibn Abd al-Hakam, who died in 860AD, makes mention of caravanserais built by the governor of Egypt;⁸ and there is evidence from 710AD when the ruler of Damascus was roundly criticised for funding the construction of a mosque rather than maintaining the roads and building caravanserais.⁹ In the ninth and tenth centuries there was a well-

established record of hospitable works for travellers in Bukhara, Uzbekistan¹⁰ and in the eleventh century a governor in Western Iran had 'built in his territories three thousand mosques and caravanserais for strangers.'¹¹ Provided for religious reasons, hospitality, like the building of caravanserais, would make the ruler *renowned for ever; he [the ruler] will gather the fruit of his good works in the next world and blessings will be showered upon him.*¹²

A comprehensive system of caravanserais existed all across Iran and throughout the whole Islamic world, providing hospitality and care for travellers, both



pilgrims¹³ and strangers.¹⁴

In Iran today 120 of these caravanserais still exist in various states of repair. Some have been redeveloped and are used as city-centre hotels, others still operate like the caravanserais of old. At Zein-i-edin in the desert, about 100km outside Yazd in the direction of the Afghan border, there is a restored caravanserai on the route of the Great Silk Road (pictured left). It is owned by the Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation, and, until recently, was neglected and derelict. Four years ago it was secured on a 12-year lease by three brothers with an agreement to renovate the site as a hotel designed in a style sympathetic to its origins. They employ a professional Iranian hotelier to manage and operate the project. It attracts international visitors, mainly from Spain but also from elsewhere in Europe, domestic tourists and also provides meals for passing tour groups.

Tochal hotel and recreational complex

Today the capital city, Tehran, has a population of around 12 million people and is principally situated at an altitude of 800–1,600m. Taking a cable car from the north of the city, the intrepid traveller can reach one of the world's highest hotels, located near the summit of Mount Tochal at approximately 4,000m (13,000ft) in the Alborz mountain range and adjacent to metropolitan area. The area was first used as a ski

resort in 1975 until the Islamic Republic of Iran was declared after the revolution of 1979, when the regime of the last Shah was overthrown, and the hotel was closed.

However 2002 saw the reopening of the Tochal Hotel and recreational complex. The lower-altitude parts of the complex consist of various amenities including restaurants, coffee houses, ski slopes, tennis club, health and fitness club, paintball, archery and designated running paths. It also contains three ski slopes and three separate chairlifts, one of which offers approximately 4.5km of continuous descent. The slopes are open from the beginning of November through until the end of the June. These ski slopes are the unique in location—nowhere else in the world are ski slopes of such magnitude situated in a capital city.

The hotel itself is reached by a gondola-style cable car that starts at 1800m (the highest point of metropolitan Tehran) and reaches the summit of 4,000m, 7.5 km or 45 minutes later. Alternatively, there are hiking routes to the summit where walkers can stop en route at the various restaurants and coffee houses located on the mountain side. After reaching the summit there is the option of a 2km ski run or a 10-minute chair lift down to the hotel in the Tochal mountain valley (3,600m).

The hotel is built in the style of a typical Swiss three-storey mountain chalet, with 30 suites and rooms. These are all equipped with the standard amenities: minibar, satellite television, air conditioning, triple glazing,

Tochal hotel and recreational complex looks at a glance just like a typical Swiss three-storey mountain chalet. It is hard to imagine that here you are only 45 minutes and over 2000m above the city of Tehran. (The author)



three-layer windows, clothes warmers and dryers and an interior design that is intended to inspire a sense of warmth. By European standards the facilities are incredibly cheap, with a rate of \$35 for a single room to \$150 for the royal suite that can sleep up to four people; these prices include bed, breakfast, unlimited skiing and a fast-track pass for the ski-lifts and cable cars; the rates are not seasonally adjusted. The guests can be generally divided into two groups: young skiers, snowboarders and climbers; and those who wish to relax and unwind in a calm and more liberal environment.

The hotel is run by a staff of between 20 and 25 who have to contend with working and sometimes living at high altitude, and to struggle against the associated climatic conditions. The hotel facilities include a lounge and bar area located on the first floor of the hotel, which offers a magnificent view over the snowy Tochal mountain peak. The lounge also contains a wide-screen television which seems to be constantly tuned to *BBC News 24*; the next plan is to offer wireless Internet throughout the hotel. The main restaurant has the capacity for 120 guests and serves both Iranian and international food; it doubles as a conference and seminar venue when required. There is also a self-service restaurant which, during the height of the season, serves over



Among the seven ancient locations in Iran recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites are the Palace of Darius at Persepolis, sacked by Alexander in 320BC and, nearby, the renowned site of the tomb of Cyrus, which held the first charter of human rights. (The author)



1,000 snack meals to skiers and snowboarders every day. There is also a ski-school which offers tuition and equipment hire; the staff patrol the slopes.

Located in a mountain valley at 3,600m, the hotel has to deal with some extremes of weather which

lead to considerable operational challenges. It is isolated in snow fields from October till the end of June: during this period there is no vehicle access and everything must be brought by cable car. The temperature varies from +25°C in the summer to below -30°C in winter, when the wind-chill can lower the temperature to around -50°C and the wind can reach speeds of 60km per hour.

Most of the guests are residents of Tehran who live at 1,000m, and have travelled to 4,000 m in only 45mins. This rapid ascent to an altitude over 2500m can induce high-altitude illnesses, the medical conditions that can develop in unacclimatized people

shortly after an ascent to a high altitude.¹⁵ These conditions include acute mountain sickness, cerebral oedema and pulmonary syndromes. The most common symptoms are headaches, loss of appetite, nausea, fatigue, dizziness and insomnia, all of which usually appear within 8–16 hours of arrival at high altitude.¹⁶ Acute mountain sickness tends to develop in about half of the guests within the first 24 hours of their

stay: in accordance with the best medical advice the hotel recommends preventative medication 48 hours before the guests arrive.¹⁷

Comprehensive medical facilities are also provided by the hotel in order to assist both resident guests and day visitors and the hotel is equipped with a heli-pad for evacuation to Tehran hospitals; there is a doctor on call in the hotel 24 hours a day. During check-in guests are also given a brief medical examination, to ascertain both their personal health and physical ability. The hotel only accepts guests aged between five and 60 years of age. As one of the hotel physicians reports, the hotel clinic normally has several trauma patients each day, mostly originating from mountain climbing and ski accidents. The most serious accident victims have to be stabilized and evacuated to Tehran hospitals for specific diagnosis and management; the hotel is delighted to report that there have been no fatalities so far.

There is a power supply that is meant to serve the hotel from the city; however, this is sporadic at best and most of the time it has to rely on generators to provide electricity for the hotel, the staff accommodation and chair lifts. Water is supplied from a deep borehole well; this provides the drinking water of the entire hotel and is closely monitored for purity. The waste water drains into septic tanks, which are considered to be harmless to the mountain environment; all other refuse must be transported back to the city on specially designated gondolas. Most of the gasoline required by the hotel is supplied by tanker during the summer period; however, sometimes during the winter deliveries are required by cable car. Liquid gas for the kitchen is delivered in pressurised bottles by cable car and chairlift.

For eight months of the year the hotel's entire delivery system depends on a cable car and chairlift system that was constructed in 1975. The gondolas are not climatically controlled and often the adverse weather and change in atmospheric conditions experienced on the journey cause canned drinks to explode and fresh produce to freeze. In an attempt to combat this, the hotel attempts to stock up on imperishable stock during the summer, when some supply trucks can reach it by road. The hotel also controls the level of wildlife—rabbits and foxes during the winter and

scorpions during summer.

Although the Tochal complex has opportunities for skiing for eight months of the year, and a hiking and climbing market for the other four, the hotel has an occupancy rate of roughly 12 percent. This is partly due to reliance on the cable car which can only operate from dawn to mid-afternoon and cannot be used in adverse weather conditions; however, the staff feel it is also due to insufficient and ineffective marketing.

Tourism potential in modern Iran

Despite Iran's turbulent reputation, the Iranians are some of the most hospitable people on the planet, and Iran's tangible cultural assets include seven ancient locations recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites as well as a range of renowned Islamic shrines and cultural sites. The cultural assets range from the era of the great Persian empires, extending back some

For eight months of the year the hotel's entire delivery system depends on a cable car and chairlift system that was constructed in 1975

10,000 years. Particularly notable among them is the famous site of the tomb of Cyrus, which held the first charter of human rights, and the nearby Palace of Darius at Persepolis, sacked by Alexander in 320BC. Iran is also home to the Zoroastrian religion and sites in Isfahan and Yazd provide unique insights into the first of the monotheistic religions.

However, the country is in close proximity to highly sensitive political and religious neighbours, including Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result of the geo-political uncertainty in the region, over 50 percent of the tour groups that had been expected in the next two years have cancelled. This evident reluctance on the part of international markets to visit Iran is denying many people the chance to experience traditional hospitality and the unique cultural and heritage opportunities that this wonderful country has to offer.

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