

The most beautiful natural wonders in Iran

If mosques and ancient ruins aren't enough to satisfy your touristic needs, Iran's varied and dramatic landscapes offer the demanding traveler a wealth of awe-inspiring, unspoiled views to discover.

From mountains to deserts, to forests and caves, here we review the 10 most beautiful natural wonders of the 18th largest country in the world.

■ Mount Damavand

Located 66 kilometers northeast of Tehran, at a height of 5,610m, Mount Damavand is the highest mountain in the Middle East, and a worthy challenge for any accomplished mountaineer. Visible from Tehran on a clear day, the mountain is snow-capped all year round, and features prominently in Persian folklore and literature.

Located in the Alborz Mountain range, reaching Damavand's peak will take the best part of two days – and earn you the eternal respect of any Iranians in your life. The climbing season is June-September.

■ Turkmen Sahra

The Turkmen Plains, or the Turkmen Sahra, lies in Iran's north eastern region, bordering Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea. The seemingly interminable rolling green hills remain virtually untouched and tricky to access without your own car – but the views are simply spectacular.

One focal point to head to is the Khaled Nabi cemetery. Also nearby is the famous 11th century tower structure Gonbad-e Qabus, memorialized in the west in Robert Byron's travelogue *The Road to Oxiana*.

■ Dasht-e Lut

The Dasht-e Lut (Lut Desert) is one of Iran's two great deserts, covering an area of over 50,000 square kilometres in the central eastern part of the country. Reportedly laying claim to the hottest land surface temperatures ever recorded – an astonishing 70.7 degrees – it is not an ideal location for an afternoon picnic.

Nevertheless, the weather-beaten, moonscapes of the desert make an unforgettable venue for night-time camping beneath the stars, and the views at dawn are



From left above: A view of Turkmen Sahra from Khaled Nabi cemetery, dunes of the Maranjab Desert, Masal forest and Badab-e Surt

mesmerising. Tour guides will take you from the city of Kerman for a reasonable fee. Be sure to check out the mysterious kaluts too – the famed giant rock formations of the desert.

■ Salt Plains, Dasht-e Kavir

The Dasht-e Kavir, or Kavir-e Namak (the Great Salt Desert), is Iran's other massive desert, located in the centre of the Iranian plateau, northwest of Isfahan and Yazd. Harsh, barren, and unfathomably hot, you won't want to wander the expanse aimlessly or unaccompanied, but it remains an impressive sight to behold.

The Namak (Salt) Lake, 100 kilometres from Qom, is the most tourist friendly feature of the desert, the magnificent, white vastness of which will give the salt flats of Bolivia a run for their money.

■ Maranjab Desert

A two-hour drive from the city of Kashan in Isfahan province, the Maranjab desert

boasts some of the sandiest dunes in the country. Whilst most of Iran's deserts are salt, rocky, or scrubland, Maranjab caters to more stereotypical desert fantasies.

You can combine a tour with a visit to the Namak Lake, not far from here, with the option to rest your head in the remains of a 16th century caravanserai (be prepared for very basic facilities).

■ Masal Forest

The forests of the northern province of Gilan are an area of outstanding natural beauty, and offer some beautiful hiking trails for tourists. An eight hour drive from Tehran, the mountainous Masal region has some particularly popular walking routes, although you'd be wise to bring your own supplies as shops and hotels are few and far between.

The mixture of lush lowlands and mountain forests make for a pleasing contrast with the harsh landscapes of southern Iran, although lynxes, wolves, and bears are said

to inhabit these territories (attacks on humans are extremely infrequent).

■ Latun Waterfall

Whilst in Gilan province, it's worth heading to the northern county of Astara to see Iran's highest waterfall. Against a breathtaking backdrop of forested mountains, Latun falls from a height of 105 meters. The tranquility of the surrounding waters makes a perfect lunchtime pit stop, or even a refreshing swim if you are feeling adventurous.

■ Badab-e Surt

For geology enthusiasts, the curious rock formations of the Badab-e Surt are a must-see natural wonder. Located in Mazandaran province in northern Iran, about 100 kilometres south of the city of Sari, the area consists of golden, orange, and red stepped terraces of sedimentary rock, formed by deposits of minerals carried from nearby hot springs. The two springs of the travertine landscape are said to have medicinal properties, and the glistening flats are amongst the most photogenic sites in Iran.

■ Qeshm Island

Situated in the Persian Gulf just south of the port city Bandar Abbas, Qeshm is famed for its unspoiled natural beauty and diversity. The largest island in the Persian Gulf, Qeshm boasts some particularly impressive geological features: the Namakdan salt caves, for example, are reportedly the longest of their kind in the world. The intriguing erosions of the Chahkouch Valley are also worth a visit, if only for the eerie, post-apocalyptic ambiance they provide. Ferries are available from Bandar Abbas.

■ Namarestagh

Namarestagh is a beautifully lush region in Amol County, Mazandaran province. A hidden treasure for trekkers, when exploring the verdant foothills in the shadow of snow-capped mountains, few can resist an enveloping sense of wonder. A hospitable climate and welcoming locals, this rural utopia promises to warm the soul and quiet the mind of any passing wayfarer.

(Source: *The Culture Trip*)

A CLOSER LOOK

Months after ISIS attack, Egypt's tourism industry still paying the price

Marjolein Morshuis's scuba diving business once boomed with tourists eager to explore coral reefs off the shore of Hurghada, Egypt. But that was before the Islamic State blew up a Russian charter jet over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula last October, prompting Russian and British airlines to suspend flights that once brought millions of tourists to Egyptian resort towns along the Red Sea.



Where Morshuis used to easily fill her boats with 35 divers at a time, these days she's lucky to get 10. She isn't the only one struggling: This week, Egypt's privately owned Youm7 newspaper reported that some 70 percent of the 246 licensed diving centers in Egypt's Red Sea governorate have closed down, while another 20 percent of them are no longer fully operating.

The newspaper report makes all too clear what Cairo has feared for months: Egypt's economy is paying a hefty price for the Islamic State's attack against the Russian passenger jet. Tour companies, which provide the country's second biggest source of income, have struggled since the terrorist attack in October to reassure foreigners that Egypt is a safe place to go on vacation. "The absence of Russian tourists has damaged our business," Morshuis told Foreign Policy in a phone call from Hurghada.

Soon after the Oct. 31 crash, Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended all of his country's commercial flights to and from Egypt. That harshly curbed the flow of Russian tourists to Egypt, which numbered roughly 3 million in 2014.

Citing security concerns, all major British airlines, AirFrance, and German airline Lufthansa have also cancelled flights to Sharm el-Sheikh airport, where the ill-fated Russian flight took off.

These flight bans are turning previously bustling resort destinations into ghost towns. In January, the governor of south Sinai estimated the occupancy of hotels in Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada at less than 20 percent, and the loss in revenue at more than \$250 million per month. The number of British visitors alone to Sharm el-Sheikh is reportedly down by roughly 85 percent.

Egyptian officials are desperately trying to convince European nations to resume flights to Sharm el-Sheikh airport. They have doubled the number of security personnel there, and are screening those workers as well as passengers. Additionally, the tiny airport is now deploying bomb-sniffing dogs to root out threats.

(Source: *Foreign Policy*)

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