



## *Treasures of Travel*

### *The Splendors of Iran, 2024* *~ 28 days/26 nights ~*

This tour will let you taste more in depth the flavor of Iranian culture, while traveling beyond the history of modern Iran through the land of ancient Persia, the center of many civilizations which with their achievements have contributed to our modern world; the land of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, Omar Khayyam and other renowned historical, literary figures. As you explore the fabled cities of Ahwaz, Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, Tehran, the ancient world famous sites of Ziggurat and Persepolis, you will see the rich cultural and historical heritage portrayed in their well-preserved archeological gems. Besides, the beautiful scenery of the country crowned with mountains will fascinate you, Iranian people's heartwarming friendliness and welcome will follow you everywhere, and the bazaars filled with the aroma of exotic spices will entice you throughout the adventure. Despite numerous invasions from the Greeks, Arabs, and Mongols, Iran and its people firmly retain their own identity and character: sophisticated, diverse, and cultured; embracing it is worth lifetime experience.

#### *Day 1*

Depart the USA on overnight flight to overseas.

#### *Day 2 ~ Mashhad*

In flight, stopping in Europe to change plane for flight to **Mashhad**.

#### *Day 3 ~ Mashhad*

After arrival at Mashhad Airport and passing through customs and passport control, you will be **met and transferred** to your hotel for check in and some rest. In the afternoon we will start our tour taking a short drive to **Nishapur**. Originally established during Seljuk time and at one time a thriving literary, artistic and academic center, the city is now the most famous as the birthplace and **resting place of the poet, Omar Khayyam**. Close by is **the tomb of Attar**, another renowned Persian poet, theoretician of Sufism, and hagiographer from Nishapur, who had an immense and lasting influence on Persian poetry and Sufism. Before leaving the city we'll stop at **Nishapur Caravanserai**, which dates back to Safavid time. Shah Abbas I (1571-1629) is credited with building a network of caravanserais across Iran, to promote the Silk Road trade and economy. During his reign he had 999 caravanserais built. In the evening we'll return back to Mashhad. Overnight in Mashhad/Homa II or similar

#### *Day 4 ~ Mashhad-Tehran*

Today we'll spend our day in Mashhad before it's time to take an overnight train to Tehran. To learn about Shi'ism and feel the heartbeat of devoted religion, Mashhad is the best place to start with. Mashhad is Iran's holiest city and its name literally means 'Place of Martyrdom' or 'Place of Burial of a Martyr'. The city is very sacred to Shiites as the place where the eighth Shiite Imam and direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammad, Emam Reza died in 817 AD and was buried here. What had been a small village of Sanabad has since grown to become Iran's most important pilgrimage centre. In the morning we'll tour **the Holy Shrine**, excluding the tomb of Emam Reza area, which is closed to non-Muslims. Next we'll take a short drive to visit **Ferdowsi's Tomb**, dominating the village of Tus. Ferdowsi is a highly revered Persian poet and the author of the epic of 'Shahnameh' (Book of Kings"), which is the world's longest epic poetry created by a single poet.

In the evening we'll take an **overnight train to Tehran**/1<sup>st</sup> class sleeping train.

### *Day 5 ~ Tehran*

Crowned by the Alborz Mountains, Tehran is the largest city in Iran, and has been the capital since 1789. It is an intriguing and sophisticated city, the center of Iran's great museums which celebrate the renaissance of the Qajar Dynasty, founded by Agha Mohammad Khan.

Upon arrival in Tehran we will start our tour with a visit to **Reza Abbasi Museum**. The museum is named after Reza Abbasi, one of the artists in the Safavid period. The Reza Abbasi Museum is home to a unique collection of Persian art dating back to the second millennium BC, from both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras.

Our next stop will be at the incredible exhibition of the '**Treasury of National Jewels**', which is the largest set of displayed jewels in the world that are in state ownership in one location. The majority of the items now in the collection were acquired by the Safavid dynasty, which ruled Iran from 1502 to 1736 AD. Among the collection you will see the Darya-ye Nur (Sea of Light) - the largest uncut diamond in the world at 182 carats.

Next we'll see the **National Archaeological Museum**, one of the highlights of the trip. Its outstanding collections include 6<sup>th</sup> century BC relief from the Treasures of Darius the Great from Persepolis and a stone winged lion of Shush. It's time now to explore the **UNESCO World Heritage site Golestan Palace**, built by the Qajar ruler Nasser al-Din Shah and set around a lovely garden. The complex includes the **Ethnological Museum**, the **Garden Hall of Shams-ol-Emareh** and the **Marble Throne Hall**. Overnight in Tehran/Espinas Hotel/Laleh Hotel or similar.

### *Day 6 ~ Tehran*

We will start our full day sightseeing with the exploration of the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex**, set in a beautiful park overlooking downtown Tehran, it has about ten or so buildings, which were part of the palace complex of the last Shah of Iran. Here we'll tour **White Palace**, **Green Palace**, and **Museum of Fine Arts**.

Next we'll tour the **Carpet Museum** to see the collection of the oldest carpets in Iran, with beautiful and elaborate designs. The **Glass & Ceramic Museum** is housed in a beautiful building which dates back to Qajar times when it belonged to a prominent Persian family. With blending features of both Eastern and Western styles, the museum has a lovingly displayed collection of ceramics and glassware dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, including works from Nishapur, Kashan, Rey and Gorgan.

We'll end our day with a pleasant stroll through **Tehran's Grand Bazaar**, simply wandering its labyrinth of streets and alleys, which is far more than a market place, like a city within a city, each corridor specializes in a particular commodity: copper, paper, gold, spices, and carpets, among other things. Overnight in Tehran/Espinas Hotel/Laleh Hotel or similar.

### *Day 7 ~ Alamut Castle- Qazvin*

In the morning we'll leave the capital behind and travel northwest to reach **the Alamut Castle** in the Valley of the Assassins. Tucked away in the remote valleys of the southern foothills of the Alborz Mountains, lie the historic fortresses known as Castles of Assassins, which were made famous in the 20th century in Dame Freya Stark's classic travel book '*Valleys of the Assassins*'.

The views and the countryside are true attractions on the way. Alamut is one of the accessible castles in the area, still known in the local dialect as 'Old Man of the Mountains' and dedicated to the founder of the Assassins, which was originally built in about 860 AD, but captured by the Assassins in 1090. In the evening we'll drive back to **Qazvin** for overnight. Qazvin, famous for its carpets and seedless grapes, was first founded by Sassanid king Shapur I in the 3rd AD, and since then it has always been an important transit center throughout the history, including today. Overnight in Qazvin/Marmar Hotel or similar

### *Day 8 ~ Bander-e Anzali via Masuleh*

This morning we will head to the Caspian Sea with a detour to **Masuleh**, one of the most traditional, beautiful, well-preserved Iranian villages, where buildings have been built into the mountain and are interconnected, courtyards and roofs both serve as pedestrian areas similar to streets.

We will continue our journey to **Bander-e Anzali** which is located on the Caspian Sea to enjoy the beauty of the Sea. Overnight in Bander-e Anzali/Sepid Kenar hotel or similar

### *Day 9 ~ Tabriz via Ardabil*

We will start our drive along the beautiful coastline of the Caspian Sea to reach Tabriz via Ardabil, on the way enjoying spectacular views of small villages, towns and countryside.

The main reason we'll stop in Ardabil is the magnificent **UNESCO World Heritage Site -Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum**, founder of the Safavid dynasty (1502-1722). Ardabil is also known for its silk and carpet trade tradition. Its rugs are renowned and the ancient Ardabil Carpets are considered some of the best of the classical Persian carpet creations. Before heading to Tabriz, we'll also browse through **Ardabil Bazaar** in the heart of the city, which stands as old as the Islamic period. Its shape was described by the historians of the 4th century as a cross, extending in four directions with simply designed domes. Most sections of the bazaar were constructed and renovated during the Safavid and Zand periods.

In the evening we'll arrive in Tabriz, once the capital of Azerbaijan in 3rd century AD, nowadays it is a fascinating city with its mosques, museums, parks and bazaars. Overnight in Tabriz/Pars hotel or similar

### *Day 10 ~ Tabriz*

After breakfast we'll have a short one hour drive from Tabriz to beautiful village of **Kandovan**, famous for the manmade cliff dwellings which are still inhabited by people. It's like a small "Cappadocia" of Iran, as it resembles the dwellings of Cappadocia in Turkey.

Upon our return back to Tabriz we'll spend the rest of the day on sightseeing the city, which includes the visits to: **Tabriz/ Azerbaijan Museum, Qajar Museum ( Amir Nezam House)** built in the period of the Crown Prince Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), and the famous **UNESCO World Heritage Site historic Bazaar complex**, which started to be built more than 1000 years ago, but most of what remains today dates back to the 15th century. It is 3.5 km/2.5 ml long with some 7,350 shops and 24 separate caravanserais. Overnight in Tabriz/Pars hotel or similar

### *Day 11 ~ Zanjan*

One of the most scenic journey today will bring us to Zanjan with the major stop on the way at the **UNESCO World Heritage site of Takht-e Soleyman**, the Throne of Solomon. This archeological site includes the principal Zoroastrian sanctuary partly rebuilt in the Mongol period as well as a temple of the Sassanid period dedicated to Anahita. The designs of the fire temple, the palace and the general layout have strongly influenced the development of later Islamic architecture.

Overnight in Zanjan/ Grand Bozorg hotel or similar

### *Day 12 ~ Hamadan*

On the way to Hamadan we'll stop at Soltaniyeh to visit the building, which this small town is famous for, the **UNESCO World Heritage Site Gomabad-e Soltaniyeh/ Dome of Soltaniyeh**. This is a great mausoleum of the Mongol Sultan Oljeitu Khodabandeh, which has one of the largest domes in the world-up there with the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and St. Paul's in London. Visible from far across the surrounding plain, the mausoleum's striking dome is 48 m/157ft high and nearly 25m/82ft wide.

Once a famous Silk Road city, near ancient Ecbatana- the capital of Media, Hamadan was later used as summer residence by the Achaemenid kings because of its high elevation at the foot of Mount Alvand. Parthian rulers made it their capital and established the main mint, producing assorted bronze denominations.

Upon arrival in Hamadan we'll have a sightseeing tour which will include: **Hegmataneh**- ancient Ecbatana- Median and Achaemenid city slowly being excavated north of town center; ancient inscriptions of **Ganjnameh**, which were carved in granite in two sections. The one on the left was ordered by Darius the Great (521-485 BC) and the one on the right by Xerxes the Great (485-65 BC). Both sections were carved in three ancient languages: Old Persian, Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Elamite. The inscriptions start with praise of the Zoroastrian God (Ahura Mazda) and describe the lineage and deeds of the mentioned kings. Next will be **the mausoleum of Esther and Mardochius**, as well as tomb of **Bu Ali Sina**, better known to the west as **Avicenna**, the great philosopher and physician, famous for his successful medical career and numerous books on philosophy and medicine, including a widely respected and used medical encyclopedia 'Canon Medicinae'.

Overnight in Hamadan/Buali hotel or similar

### *Day 13 ~ Kermanshah*

In the morning we'll first head to **Sanadaj**, making a stop there for a glimpse of Kurdish way of life since the city has Iran's most Kurdish population. You will find men still dressed in traditional boiler suits and cummerbunds, and women in colorful dresses. Our next stop, before we reach Kermanshah, will be at a picturesque village of **Palangan** in Kurdistan province of Iran, where the roof of one house serves as the courtyard of the upper house, inhabited by friendly and welcoming people, to experience the laid back rhythm of village life. Overnight in Kermanshah/Pars hotel or similar

### *Day 14 ~ Ahvaz*

In the morning while still in Kermanshah, which is one of the oldest cities in Iran dating from 4th century AD, we'll see **UNESCO World Heritage site Teq-e Bostan**, these well-preserved bas-reliefs date back to Sassanid dynasty. We'll carry on with our journey following the old caravan route, which in ancient times connected the capitals of Babylonia and Media (Babylon and Ecbatana) to **Bisotun for its Rock reliefs**, a **UNESCO World Heritage site**, authored by Darius the Great sometime between his coronation as king of the Persian Empire in the summer of 522 BC and his death in autumn of 486 BC. The inscription includes three versions of the same text, written in three different cuneiform script languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian (a later form of Akkadian.) It starts with a brief autobiography of Darius the Great and mentions the battles and rebellions he fought against various governors who tried to dismantle the Persian Empire, after the death of Cyrus the Great who originally founded it, of course attributing his success to the "grace of Ahura Mazda". The inscription was illustrated by a life-size bas-relief of Darius I, the Great.

We'll make our final sightseeing stop in **Khorram Abad**. The landmark of this picturesque town is the **Falak-ol-Aflak fortress** which dominates the area. Probably there has been a fort on this site since the Sassanid times, but this one was the citadel of the Atabegs, the powerful rulers of the Lorestan province from the 12th century until 1600 when Shah Abbas I defeated the last Atabeg king.

Nowadays the fortress houses a very interesting museum with magnificent photographs and artifacts describing the traditional life of Lorestan. Overnight in Ahvaz/Pars Hotel or similar.

### *Day 15 ~ Ahvaz*

Today we will have a full day sightseeing tour of the surrounding area of Ahvaz, the home to famous Ziggurats. Our first stop will be at famous historical **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Shush**, which is first of all, a well-known prehistoric city dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC; as well as an important Elamite city around the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC; and finally the capital of the Achaemenid Kingdom. We will stroll through the ancient Royal Town, once the quarter of the court officials; Apadana, where Darius the Great built his palace; and visit the nearby **Tomb of Daniel**. Next we'll tour the **UNESCO World Heritage Site Choqa Zanbil** - one of Iran's three Ziggurats (pyramidal tiered temple), built about 1250 BC, which served as a worship and burial place of the Elamite Kings. The site remains one of the best surviving example of Elamite architecture anywhere. Our sightseeing day will end with a stop in the pretty town of **Shushtar**, another **UNESCO World Heritage Site** famous for its ancient **Shadorvan and Bande-e Qaisar Bridges** from the Sassanid period, as well as **Qajar water mills**. In the evening we'll arrive in Ahvaz. Overnight in Ahvaz/Pars Hotel or similar.

### *Day 16 ~ Yasuj*

Our final destination today is **Yasuj**, which we'll reach via **Izeh**, where we'll have a sightseeing stop at **Kul-e Farah** - the site of six Elamite rock reliefs. It has been suggested that this is a kind of open sanctuary for religious ceremonies involving the sacrifice of animals. Three are on rock faces, while the other three are on large boulders. They depict scenes of sacrifice, processions and a banquet, and three show groups of musicians. The inscription on relief I mentions Hanni, the son of Tahhi, and is therefore dated to Hanni's time, 7th century BCE. We'll carry on with our drive towards **Yasuj** via Dehdez, Pataveh, enjoying breathtaking views of the Zagros Mountains, with its valleys, rivers and long history of nomadic life. Overnight in Yasuj/Parsian hotel or similar

### *Day 17 ~ Shiraz*

Our destination today is the beautiful city of **Shiraz**, the heartland of Persian culture, known as the center of education and sophistication. It is a romantic city of nightingales, poetry, roses and wine (remember the Australian wine called Shiraz!). Before arriving in Shiraz we will stop to tour the amazing site of **Bishapur**, founded by Shapur I in 266 AD, who was the second Sassanid king and inflicted a triple defeat on the Romans. Sightseeing will include: the Sassanid city, the Anahita Temple, and the impressive bas reliefs of the Sassanid Kings. Overnight in Shiraz/Zandihey Hotel, Homa Hotel or similar.

### *Day 18 ~ Shiraz*

We'll start our sightseeing today making a short trip to visit the **UNESCO World Heritage Site Pasargadae**, the capital of Cyrus the Great, as well as his last resting place. Among so many ancient sites we will visit in Iran, **Persepolis** is the crown jewel which is another **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. This most extensive, impressive, and inspiring site, was just a summer capital or possibly a religious shrine of the Achaemenid Kings. 2,500 years later, the site is as overwhelming as ever, with its **City Walls, Entrance, Palace of 100 Columns, Apadana Palace and Staircase, Royal Palaces, Museum, Treasury and Tombs**. We'll tour the famous **UNESCO listed Necropolis (Nagsh-e Rostam)** nearby with its incredibly dramatic rock carvings of the Royal Tombs of Elamite, Achaemenid and Sassanid Kings. We will also see the four fine Sassanid bas-reliefs at another **UNESCO site Nagsh-e Rajab** from the reign of Ardashir I and Shapur the Great before returning to Shiraz. Upon coming back to Shiraz, we'll browse through **Shiraz Bazare Vakil** and visit the **Tomb of the celebrated poet Hafez**. Overnight in Shiraz/Zandihey Hotel/Homa Hotel or similar.

### *Day 19 ~ Shiraz*

This morning we'll make two stops in Shiraz, before heading to Firuzabad. First we'll tour one of the most elegant mosques in Iran, **Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque**, built relatively recently, at the end of the 19th century, it's famous for its unusually deep shade of blue and pink tiles.

Next will be the beautiful **Bagh-e Naranjestan**, also known as **Orange Garden Museum**, with its traditional and historical house, built between 1879 and 1886 by Mirza Ibrahim Khan from the Qavam family, who were merchants originally from Qazvin, but they soon became active in the government. A short drive will take us to **Firuzabad**, which was flourishing during Sassanid dynasty. Besides the ruins of **Ardeshir's Palace** and **some Sassanid bas-reliefs**, you may see some nomads on the way, as Firuzabad is center of nomadic peoples, especially Qashqai nomads. Overnight in Shiraz/Zandihey Hotel/Homa Hotel or similar.

### *Day 20 ~ Kerman*

It's time now for a spectacular drive to the desert city of **Kerman**, which became very famous during the Safavid rule in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Kerman is believed to have been founded in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD by the Sassanid King Ardashir I. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century it was ruled by Arabs, Seljuks, Turkmen, Mongols and Qajars. We will stop en route in **Sarvestan**, whose history goes back some 2,600 years when the Achaemenids established the Persian Empire, being a powerful Sassanid stronghold in the 5th century, to visit the **Sassanid Palace of Sarvestan**. Overnight in Kerman/Pars Hotel or similar.

### *Day 21 ~ Kerman*

Today we will have a lovely trip outside Kerman which will include the nearby cities, starting with **UNESCO World Heritage Site Arg-e Bam**. The origin of this enormous citadel on the Silk Road can be traced back to the Achaemenid period (6th to 4th centuries BC) and even beyond. The heyday of the citadel was from the 7th to 11th centuries, being at the crossroads of important trade routes and known for the production of silk and cotton garments. What makes Bam special and with no doubt, one of the highlights of a visit to Iran, is the incredible, ancient mud-brick fortified city, which was almost completely destroyed by earthquake of 2003. As a World Heritage Site, several countries are cooperating in the reconstruction. It's incredible to see the combination of the traces of the earthquake and archeological restorations still going on on the site. Next we'll stop in **Rayen** to visit **Arg-e Rayen**, a miniature version of Bam- the medieval mud-brick city which is extremely well preserved, despite numerous natural disasters. **Mahan** is famous for its pleasant tree-lined streets, relaxed atmosphere, beautiful palaces, and gardens, as well as its fine mausoleums. We'll stop at the **Mausoleum of Shah Nimatullah Vali** who was a Sufi saint and poet and died here in 1431. His tomb is an excellent example of the importance that traditional Persian architecture places on the harmony between nature and building. Shah Nimatullah Vali was the founder of a Dervish order, centered in Mahan, which continues to be an active spiritual force in Iran today. The roots of the philosophy they practice dates back to the Achaemenids. Born in Aleppo, Syria, the poet spent many years wandering through Central Asia before finally settling in Mahan where he was attracted by the surrounding violet-colored mountains. We will also see **UNESCO-listed Bagh-e Shahzade**, a beautiful garden with split-level fountains leading to a large palace which was once the residence of Qajar dynasty. Overnight in Kerman/Pars Hotel or similar.

### *Day 22 ~ Yazd*

Before we leave Kerman for Yazd, we'll spend the first half of the day in the city to get the better feeling about it. In the morning we'll shortly visit **Harandi Music Instrument museum**, and well preserved **Friday Mosque** dating from 14th century. Next we'll have a relaxed walk through **Vakil Bazaar**, visiting **Hamom (bathhouse) Museum** and enjoying some tea in old **bathhouse** which has been converted to a teahouse.

In the late afternoon, our drive to **Yazd** will take us through many acres of pistachio fields. Beautiful oasis city of Yazd was founded in the 5th century AD. Located in heart of Iran between the Kavir and Lut deserts, it was a major stop on the Silk Road between Central Asia and India. Because of its dry climate, the architecture of Yazd is perhaps the most traditional Persian to be found. The weavers of Yazd are famous for their silk brocades which still can be found. Marco Polo stopped here on the way to China and called it the "good and noble city of Yazd". Yazd also has an interesting mixture of cultures and religions; it is the center of the Zoroastrian religion dating back to 550 BC as the state religion, which faded away with the Arab conquest. Today there are about 400,000 Zoroastrians left in the world, of which about 60,000 live in or around Yazd. Overnight in Yazd/Dad Hotel or similar.

### *Day 23 ~ Yazd*

Old city of Yazd is easy and enjoyable to explore on foot. This morning we will have an introductory tour of the town's **Bazaar, the Friday Mosque, the Old Town, Alexander's Prison, the Zoroastrian Fire Temple and the UNESCO-listed Dowlat Abad Garden**. While strolling along narrow labyrinth streets of Yazd we'll notice many beautiful old buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century including feudal hexagonal houses with elegant wall and window decorations. The city is dominated by beautifully designed wind towers which cool the private homes and palaces, public buildings, gardens, and pools which are supplied with water by water channels, called Qanats.

The **Amir Chakhmaq Complex** in **Amir Chakhmaq Square** is one of the most recognizable and unusual buildings in Iran with its stunning three-storey facade. From the top we will have a magnificent view over the sun-baked roofs crowned with wind towers. Next we will tour **Bagh-e Doulat Abad**, the residence of the former ruler Karim Khan Zand, with the opportunity to see how the wind towers actually work in this beautiful garden. Our further stops will be at the **Zoroastrian Fire Temple** where the sacred flame has apparently been burning since about 470 AD, followed by the **Tower of Silence**, Zoroastrian burial site, which is the most intriguing historical site. In accordance with Zoroastrian beliefs about the purity of the earth, this circular, raised structure was used by Zoroastrians for exposure of the dead, particularly to scavenging birds. Certainly this is a custom going back to Neolithic times (7,000 BC) which was practiced in Catalhoyuk in central Anatolia. Overnight in Yazd/Dad Hotel or similar.

### *Day 24 ~ Isfahan*

Between Yazd and Isfahan, **Na'in** will make a good stop to tour **Pirnia traditional house** which is a perfect example of this region's desert houses in terms of architecture and art, constructed in the Safavid Period. The city is also known for its carpets with classical designs and textiles. Possibly visit a textile workshop as well. Overnight in Isfahan/Abbasi Hotel, Kowsar Hotel or similar.

### *Day 25 ~ Isfahan*

**Esfahan** is undoubtedly the jewel of all cities of Iran. Under a succession of enlightened and cultivated Safavid rulers, most notably Shah Abbas I, came the final refinement of styles that marked the culmination of the Persian Islamic style of architecture. The greatest expression of the above mentioned was Shah Abbas I's royal capital of Isfahan, a supreme example of town planning, with the most magnificent collections of buildings from one period. Shah Abbas I initiated one of the world's grandest experiments in city planning, moving the capital from Qazvin to Esfahan in 1598 where it remained until 1722. Mosques, palaces, bazaars, bridges and public parks were built under the monarch's personal supervision over the next thirty years.

Today we'll have the pleasure of a full day exploration of Esfahan, which retains much of its past glory. Since the central focus of this fascinating city, which never failed to inspire European merchants and ambassadors to the Safavid court, is the **UNESCO World Heritage Site** of immense rectangular **Royal Square- the Naghsh-e Jahan Square**, also nowadays known as **Imam Square**, we'll start our sightseeing from this point. Four jewels of 17<sup>th</sup> century architecture which are outstanding examples of Iranian and Islamic architecture adorn each side of the square, symbolizing the political, economic, religious and cultural spheres of Safavid Persia. Our first stop will be at **Imam Mosque**- one of the most beautiful mosques in the world, lavish decoration of it in the form of its blue-tiled mosaic designs perfectly complements the architectural elegance. Next we'll tour **Ali Qapu Palace** with some very fine paintings, tiles, and wood carvings, initially intended as a monumental gateway to the royal palaces which lay in the parkland, later it served as a seat of shah where he received notables and ambassadors. From here we'll head to **Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque**, which was also built during the reign of Shah Abbas I, which he dedicated to his father-in-law Sheikh Lotfollah, a revered Lebanese scholar of Islam. This mosque is unusual because it has neither a minaret nor a courtyard. Its pale tones of the cupola stand in contrast to the remainder of the façade, and the interior is absolutely breathtaking. We'll continue the exploration with a visit to the fascinating **Jameh (Friday) Mosque** which represents an authentic museum of Islamic architecture displaying styles from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the stylish simplicity of the Seljuk period, through the Mongol period and onto the more baroque Safavid period. Next we'll have the opportunity to enjoy a walk through historical **Bazaars of Isfahan** and see or learn more about Iranian arts and crafts. In the evening there will be the opportunity to watch Zurkhaneh Performance. Zurkhaneh literally means 'house of strength' and is unique to Iran going back to hundreds of years, that's where men practice special exercises, which has historical and sometimes spiritual meaning. Overnight in Isfahan/ Abbasi Hotel, Kowsar Hotel or similar.

### *Day 26 ~ Isfahan*

We will start our sightseeing with **Chehel Sotoun Palace** (Forty Columns) standing in a very pretty garden with its beautiful frescoes and paintings. There are more fascinating sites coming: **Vank Cathedral**, located in Armenian quarter of 'New Jolfa' which dates from the time of Shah Abbas I, who appreciated the skills of industrious Armenian merchants and craftsmen and respected their religious freedom. Vank cathedral is quite simple from outside, but the interior is richly decorated and shows magnificent mixture of Christian and Persian decorative art and designs; nearby is the **Armenian Museum** which has a fine collection of Armenian art and history in Iran.

We'll also walk in the former **Jewish Quarter, called the Juibareh**. Persian Jews have lived in the territories of today's Iran for over 2,700 years, since the first Jewish diaspora when the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V conquered the (Northern) Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and sent the Israelites (the Ten Lost Tribes) into captivity at Khorasan, historical region in northeast Persia. About 95% of Jewish population of Iran have migrated to Israel, the United States and Western Europe, but there are still several thousands of Jews living in some leading cities of Iran including Isfahan.

At last we'll see some of the famous old bridges of Isfahan built over Zayandeh River. Two of them **Si-o-Seh Pol and Khaju** bridges were built in the 17th century during the reign of Shah Abbas I. **Shahrestan Bridge** is the oldest, most of its 11-arched stone and brick structure is believed to date from the 12th century. Overnight in Isfahan/ Abbasi Hotel, Kowsar Hotel or similar.

### *Day 27 ~ IKA Airport via Abyaneh- Kashan*

As we leave Esfahan, our first stop today will be in **Abyaneh**, one of the most fascinating villages in the country which is under the protection of **UNESCO**. The city which once had a Zoroastrian population, is dominated by ochre-colored houses with lattice windows and fragile wooden balconies, and has some magnificent views across the valley.

Next we'll arrive in small oasis city of **Kashan**, favorite place of Shah Abbas I who beautified it and asked to be buried there. In Kashan, we will visit **the UNESCO World Heritage Site Bagh-e**



**Tarikhi-ye Fin** or the **Fin Garden**, a beautiful garden and a classical Persian vision of paradise. Besides, Kashan is home to some of the best traditional houses in the country which belonged to wealthy merchants, these private residences have lovely courtyard, flanked by summer and winter houses, external area for entertaining the guests and servants' quarters. Before we leave the city we'll tour **one of these traditional houses** and **the Bazaar**.

We drive to the airport for overnight/ Ibis hotel or similar

### *Day 28 ~ Home*

We will **transfer** you to the airport for your flight home

### *Best time to travel:*

Spring and Fall