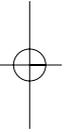
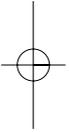




C H A P T E R 18

# Tourism in Iran: central control and indigeneity

Kevin O’Gorman, L.R. McLellan and  
Tom Baum



## Tourism in Iran: the context

Contemporary Iran is a country shrouded in political, religious, cultural, social and economic controversy. It is a country that courts extreme emotional and ideological debate and faces challenges as a tourism destination both because of this controversial context and as a result of its association with conflicts in neighbouring countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

Consideration of the indigeneity of tourism in Iran is complicated by its position at a cultural crossroads, the time-span over which invasions and migrations have taken place and the present day situation where a large population of recent refugees exist from wars and political unrest in neighbouring countries. Iran has enormous cultural diversity on the one hand and a homogeneous religious authority on the other but it is the latter that currently dominates. Add to this a government which protects and promotes its own brand of Islamic indigenous culture and heritage with a fierce pride and an international image epitomised by US President Bush's reference to the 'axis-of-evil' and you have a situation where indigenous tourism in the normal sense of the phrase is suppressed.

Even when used in a conventional sense, the term indigenous tourism is much contested but certain key concerns and debates emerge from the literature (Butler and Hinch, 1996; Notzke, 2004). These include: multifaceted host, guest and intermediary relationships; lack of industry knowledge and incorporation of local cultures; lack of local awareness of tourism and ownership of tourism related businesses; and a need for carefully considered policies to avoid degradation of culture and ensure development is sustainable.

Many of these concerns are relevant in Iran to some extent although it is argued in this chapter that indigenous tourism has been suppressed in Iran. Nevertheless, there are indications that a unique form of local tourism infused with indigenous character has begun to emerge. This local variation of indigenous tourism is taking shape despite the striking homogeneous national image portrayed in the international mass media. The early stage in the tourism development life cycle means that tourism is generally considered as a national phenomenon, at a national scale rather than local. Growing links between tourism and the protection of Iran's national cultural heritage were reinforced in 2005 with the merger of Iran Touring and Tourism Organisation (ITTO) and Iran Cultural Heritage Organisation (ICHO) to form the Iran Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation (ICHTO). Although the strong influence of the central government is clear with direct authority for the new

organisation resting with the Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran (WTO, 2006), the link between culture heritage and tourism allows vestiges of indigenous tourism to survive but not flourish.

### Historic development of the tourism industry

Iran is a country that is rich in diversity in cultural and historic terms, representing a recorded human history that stretches back some 10,000 years. The people who inhabit this country have a long history of involvement in tourism. There is considerable evidence for hostels that dates back to at least 2000 BC. These hostels supplied drinks, sex and accommodation for travellers. Drinks included date palm wine and barley beer, and there were strict regulations against diluting them. Driver and Miles (1952) in the translation of the law code of time (the Laws of Hammurabi) show that the punishment for watering beer was death by drowning, and other interesting laws include one under which any woman who had retired from the priesthood and was caught entering an inn, was to be burned alive. The assumption being that she was going there for sex. There was also a requirement that a tavern keeper, on pain of death, had to report all customers who were felons. Oppenheim (1967) observes that at least some of the roadside government hostels in Mesopotamia welcomed casual non-official travellers, whilst Jacobsen (1970) notes that travellers would be accommodated in the local hostels. Amongst many hardships facing travellers, there was also the danger of being robbed or worse, as one contemporary writer noted 'Men sit in the bushes until the benighted traveller comes in order to plunder his load' (Gardiner, 1961, p. 109). This danger was so widespread that Hammurabi's law code, excused a trader from repaying a loan if his goods had been stolen. Local authorities were also required to compensate any victim of highway robbery in their territories.

The application of strict Islamic law and a consequent political ambivalence to international tourism is not universal in predominantly Muslim countries. Indeed, Din (1989) focuses on aspects of Islamic hospitality that stress the obligation to guests and strangers that are at the heart of the religion's teachings. Hospitality is frequently mentioned in Islamic traditions known as *hadīths*, one such tradition notes that if the guest stays longer than the '3 days' it becomes charity, and it is forbidden for a guest to stay when he becomes a burden to his host (ibn Anas, 1999). Establishing hostels for travellers, is often reflected among the traditions and cited in writings. For example, the

historian al-Tabarī (c 830 AD) records the governor of Samarqand (now called Samarkand, Uzbekistan) in 719 AD 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 2 days and 2 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

(al-Tabarī], 838/1989, p. 94).

Samarqand was located along the Great Silk Road, one of the most important trading routes in the region, and no doubt had a regular supply of traders and travellers. There is further evidence from the seventh and eighth centuries, as another writer ibn Abd al-Hakam (1040/1922) who died in 860 AD makes mention of guest houses built by the governor of Egypt, al-Muqaddasī (946/1877) and gives anecdotal evidence from 710 AD that the ruler of Damascus was roundly criticised for funding the construction of a Mosque rather than maintaining the roads and building inns for travellers. In the ninth and tenth centuries there was a well established record of hospitable works for travellers in Bukhara, Uzbekistan (al-Narshakhī, 959/1954) and in the eleventh century a governor in Western Iran had 'built in his territories three thousand Mosques and inns for travellers' (ibn Abd al-Hakam, 1014/1922, p. 133).

Henderson (2003) notes that academic interest in the relationship between Islam and tourism has been relatively limited but that this is an emerging field of study. Unlike the seminal works of Ritter (1975), Din (1989) and Kessler (1992) which all review tourism and leisure within a broad framework of Islam, Henderson's study is a contextualisation of Islam within a single country case study and, in this, has similarities to the earlier contributions of Ap et al. (1991), Baum and Conlin (1996) and Sharpley (2002). This country case study of tourism, while not solely located within a discussion of links between this economic activity and religion at regional or local scale, draws strongly on the Islamic context which dominates all facets of life in contemporary Iran. It is an unavoidable relationship which impacts on all aspects of tourism in the country – operations, marketing, management and, ultimately, economic viability.

Today, Iran's heritage draws both on indigenous histories and cultures as well as the impact of waves of invaders, notably the Greeks of Alexander the Great, the Arabs who introduced Islam to the country, the Mongols from the east and in the twentieth century, the influence of the oil hungry west (Britain, France and the US). Iran's tangible cultural assets include seven

ancient locations recognised by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as World Heritage Sites as well as a range of renowned Islamic shrines and cultural sites. Iran's natural heritage is also diverse, including desert, mountains and coasts across climatic zones from temperate to sub-tropical.

What has generated particular interest in Iran as a host country for domestic and international tourism is the effect of religious interpretation by the country's brand of contemporary Islam on the political, religious, cultural, social and economic environment and the everyday lives of citizens and visitors alike. Iran adheres to strict standards of observance and the application of stringent penalties for non-compliance with respect to social and cultural behaviour impacting upon personal association, dress and the consumption of alcohol and other recreational drugs. Undoubtedly, these rules impact upon Iran's image, market potential as a destination for international tourism and the role of indigenous people in tourism.

### Iran's tourism, geography, product and performance

We have already indicated that Iran has an abundant wealth of natural and cultural assets, most of which are largely under exploited from a tourism perspective. Major landscape features include the Alborz, Zagros and Sabalan mountain ranges, the Dasht-e-Kavir and Dasht-e-Lut deserts, the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf coasts and the valleys and plateaus of Western Iran. The potential to develop tourism products for international markets (diving, winter sports, hiking) exists in terms of resources but is inhibited by cultural and political barriers as well as a lack of investment in facilities and transport infrastructure. Indigenous communities have little awareness of tourism and little control over much potential development or access to tourism markets.

Iran is located at an intersection between major Asian, Middle Eastern and European cultures. The country bears witness to the manner in which its culture and heritage have been influenced by many of these and, in turn, has influenced their own development. In the contemporary world, this crossroads location creates real challenges as the country adjoins highly sensitive political and religious neighbours, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Armenia and Turkey. As a result, there is evident reluctance on the part of international markets to visit Iran to experience the unique cultural and heritage opportunities that the country has to offer.

Cultural assets range from the era of the great Persian empires, extending back some 10,000 years. Particularly notable is the renowned site of Darius' Persepolis and a wealth of complementary sites within a small radius of this attraction. While the major heritage and cultural attractions are efficiently managed by the ICHTO there is a wealth of archaeological resources in the area, many of which are unexplored and unrecorded. Visitors can, therefore, wander unfettered over large areas of the countryside and experience 'living archaeology' in an unmanaged environment. Iran is also home to the Zoroastrian religion and sites in Cham Chak, Isfahan and Yazd provide unique insights into this ancient but living religion. The Arab invasions of Iran some 1,400 years ago brought Islam to the country and there is a wealth of sites of historic and religious significance throughout the country, representing the influence of both internal ruling dynasties and external invasion.

Iran's turbulent trading history is represented in a number of important trading routes that criss-cross the country. These routes leave a legacy of sites and historic and contemporary cultural experiences that link Iran to countries to both the east and west. The Silk Road is, perhaps, the best known of these routes, running from Xian in northern China through Iran to Istanbul. Others include the Spice Caravan Route, the Great Northern Caravan Route, the Ancient Royal Road and the maritime trading routes through the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea. Complementing these international routes is a series of domestic caravan routes across the country.

Religious and pilgrimage tourism is very important to Iran. Zoroastrian religious sites attract international visitors to the country, from India and elsewhere. The highest profile form of pilgrimage tourism in Islam is the Haj to Saudi Arabia but far more important in this context is domestic and regional pilgrimage tourism to holy shrines and sites in cities such as Qom and Mashad. Iran receives a large pilgrimage market based on these Shiite shrines, as well as pilgrims travelling through Iran on their way to and from Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Karbala in Iraq. This major component of Iranian domestic and regional tourism is highly resistant to conflict, as evidenced by continuing visitation to Karbala at the height of the civil strife in that region. No formal quantification of the total extent of this form of tourism was found.

The only contemporary large-scale tourism development in Iran is Kish Island, which is secular in its focus. Kish is located in the Persian Gulf and was developed as a destination for leisure and retail travellers, aiming to compete in the domestic and international marketplace with Dubai and similar destinations.

The development as a resort had little to do with the indigenous people or culture having been initiated by the last Shah in the 1970s as a playground for the rich international market and his privileged guests. Tourism in Kish went into decline after the revolution.

### Political – economic constraints

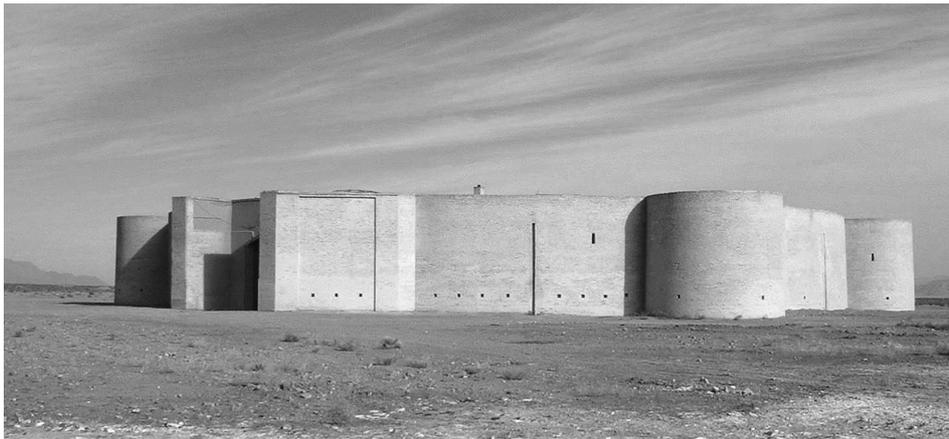
The economic and business structure of Iran is likewise complex and, at times, contradictory. As such, it constrains tourism in general and indigenous tourism in particular. About 80% of the country's exports are generated through oil and gas revenues and this has a major distorting impact on attempts to develop other sectors in the economy, including tourism. At present, a one dollar rise in the price of crude oil is worth more to the national exchequer than the sum total of international tourism receipts. As a result, sectors such as agriculture, tourism and manufacturing that operate outwith the oil economy are inefficient, internationally uncompetitive and neglected in political and organisational terms. A lack of strategic economic planning, reflecting extended conflict during the 1980s with Iraq and subsequent and on-going threats to national security, perceived and real, has severely hampered the development of the economy.

The economy consists of four distinct elements. Key strategic industries such as oil and gas are state monopolies although foreign joint venture elements are also present in this sector. Similarly, banking and finance are nationally owned and operated. The second economic group consists of quasi-state organisations, frequently in the form of conglomerates operating as trusts under the auspices of religious or welfare agencies. The largest of these is Bonyad, which has interests across the economy from oil and gas to manufacturing. Bonyad also operates the largest group of hotels in the country (Parsian) as well as a major travel and tour operating company. Business organisations, including a civil airline (Iran Air, owned by the state), run by branches of the military also fall within this category. State and quasi-state organisations do not operate under commercial criteria like profitability and are subject to poor and inconsistent management and high levels of political interference.

The third sector of the economy is an extensive private sector, predominantly consisting of small and micro-businesses across the manufacturing and service economy mostly owned by native Iranians. The private sector is particularly visible in retail, travel and hospitality and includes a range of innovative and efficiently

operated concerns. An example of this would be Caravanserai Zeineldin, which is owned by the ICHTO, 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 original caravanserai origins (see Figures 18.1 and 18.2). Three brothers contributed respectively finance, design skills and links into the European travel trade, particularly in Spain, where one of them operates a major travel business. They now employ a professional Iranian hotelier to manage the project and operate the caravanserai. It attracts international visitors, mainly from Spain but also elsewhere in Europe, as well as domestic tourists. Meals are also provided for passing international tour groups. There are also some larger private businesses such as the airline Mahan but they are very much the minority. The final sector of the Iran economy consists of subsistence agricultural concerns across the country.

A key characteristic of Iranian commerce is the almost total absence of foreign investment and management, although changes to the law in recent years could alter this situation. Iran is not a signatory to General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) or a member of the World Trade Organization with the result that international patent, trademark and copyright law are not enforced and participation in today's global economy beyond the oil and gas sector is limited. In tourism, the only international investment is in the case of a small number of businesses, generally hotels, that are part or wholly-owned by expatriate Iranian investors and operate independently without



**Figure 18.1**  
Caravanserai 'Zeineldin': exterior view

international brand affiliation. This absence of international investment in tourism, is a reflection of a number of factors: (1) the generally precarious state of tourism in the country as a result of on-going political and regional security issues; (2) the religio-ideological opposition to collaboration with major international ownership, franchise, management or alliance ventures in the tourism sector, in part because these frequently have substantial American involvement; and (3) the parochial perception of politicians and others that, in a 'simple' sector such as tourism, Iran does not require the engagement with the global economy. As a result, attempts to engage collaboration of major, non-American partners (Canadian, French) in the hotel sector have floundered on political rocks in recent years.



**Figure 18.2**  
Caravanserai  
'Zeineldin': interior  
view

Plans to involve regional foreign capital in the refurbishment of Tehran's flagship political and convention hotel, the Esteghlal, were vetoed at the national government level because, firstly, the hotel would have been externally managed and, secondly, a perception that the work could be undertaken with local expertise. As a result, the project remains uncompleted, is of mediocre standard and has cost far more than it would have with foreign engagement. In the transport sector, Iran Air operates apart from any of the main airline alliances and does not offer its passengers the benefits of interlining or through ticketing in a manner that is cost effective to Iran's main tourist market, that of expatriate visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travellers from the US. Therefore, this lucrative business is siphoned effectively through Amsterdam, Frankfurt, London, Milan and Paris by major European airlines who are able to offer through prices to the US that compare with those of Iran Air to its European destinations.

Thus, it is evident that this focus on the creation of a wholly independent national tourism sector has significant operational and marketing consequences for tourism in Iran. While many of these consequences can be viewed as negative, the lack of foreign investment does provide an opportunity for local, small-scale indigenous tourism. Ownership isolationism, in small peripheral tourism locations, can have benefits to a tourism economy (Baum, 1996, 1999). Yet, this opportunity for indigenous tourism tends to be overshadowed by other barriers. Fundamentally, tourism in Iran operates as it does today because either core markets have no option but to avail themselves of its products and services (business, government, VFR) or the pull of key historic and cultural attractions is such that visitors are willing to compromise on aspects of quality and, in the case of transport, safety, in order to access these sites.

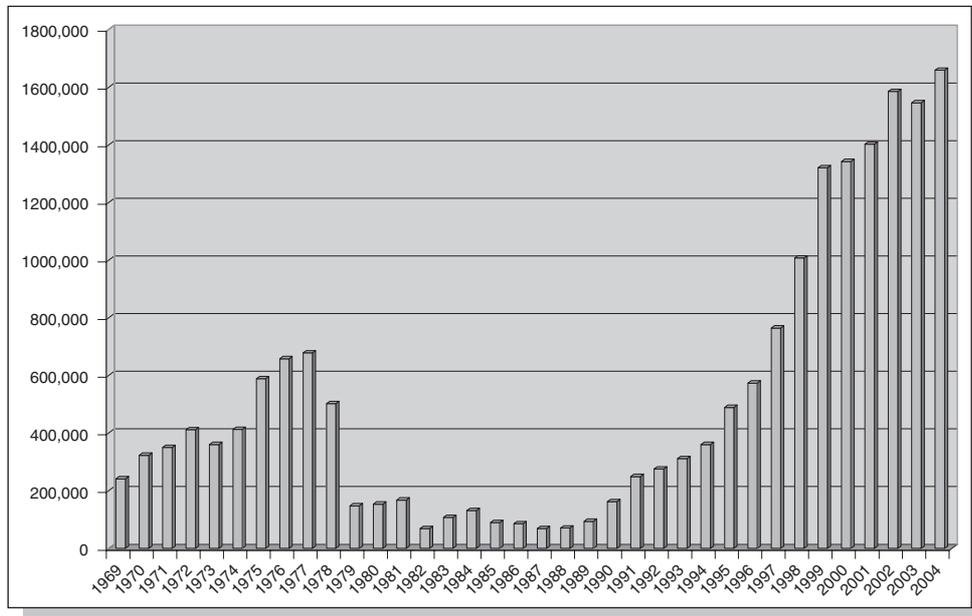
Marketing of tourism in Iran at national and regional/provincial level is primarily product oriented with little input from, or recognition of Iran's indigenous people as an attraction or assets for tourism. Tourism orthodoxy in terms of the dominant religion impacts on availability of crafts and cultural artefacts and tends to marginalise those indigenous groups that do not conform to the mainstream.

## Tourism performance

The performance of indigenous tourism is often judged in relation to that of mainstream tourism but the lack of data on indigenous tourism in Iran makes direct comparisons impossible. Nevertheless, the performance struggles of mainstream tourism

suggest a similar situation for indigenous tourism. In 1999, it was estimated that Iran's international and domestic transportation system and related tourist facilities and services handled the requirements of 1.3 million international visitors and 32.5 million domestic tourists and international tourism generated receipts of US\$ 773 million (ITTO, 2002). By 2004, the numbers of inbound international visitors had grown to over 1.6 million as indicated in Figure 18.3 (UNWTO, 2006). The trend points to significant growth in international visitors up to 1999 but it must be remembered that the early part of this decade was dominated by the aftermath of war between Iran and Iraq. Indeed, from a longer-term perspective the number of international tourists fell from 680,000 in 1978 to 9,300 in 1990 (ITTO, 2002). Overall, Iran's international tourist market is primarily regional, mainly by land from neighbouring countries, accounting for around 80% of arrivals. Much of this traffic generates relatively low gross yields in per capita expenditure terms.

Iran's international tourist market comprises a number of distinct segments. The most important is the business sector, representing about 30% of total travellers. Iran caters for relatively small meetings, incentives, convention and events segment and a small summer and winter vacation market from the Middle East, representing 4% of total visitors. The pilgrimage



**Figure 18.3**  
Inbound tourism of Iran (Source: UNWTO Compendium of Tourism Statistics, 2006)

market based on its Shiite shrines, as well as pilgrims transiting through Iran overland to and from Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Karbala in Iraq accounts for about 30% of total visitation. VFR travellers are also a relatively large segment with the combination of both regional and long-haul travellers representing about 26% of the total. Finally, Iran receives a relatively small sightseeing segment, mainly from long-haul originating countries, accounting for about 10% of the total market. There is great potential demand here in particular for cultural and indigenous attractions. This visitor market is currently small but is growing and tends to be resilient to lack of facilities and local inconveniences. Iran's additional travel restrictions, poor travel infrastructure and image may be holding back this potential demand.

There is a lack of data on the characteristics and volume of domestic tourism (Alipour and Heydari, 2004). Most domestic tourism is generated in the urban areas in particular Teheran, travels in family groups and visits the coastal regions, Caspian or Gulf (Kish Island), and the cultural or pilgrimage heritage cities such as Mashhad, Esfahan, Shiraz and Kerman with the main purpose being vacation (39%), VFR (21%) and visiting a shrine (30%) (Alipour and Heydari, 2004).

### Issues and problems in Iranian tourism

Economically and politically, tourism is always likely to be a minor industry relative to the oil and other sectors with the result that politicians have little interest in it. This lack of interest is even greater in relation to niches such as indigenous tourism. A counter argument to this reality, which does not receive widespread attention in Iran, is the employment creation potential of tourism. Oil and gas, notwithstanding their value to the country, generate relatively few benefits in employment terms. At the same time, the country's major social and economic challenge is unemployment and under-employment among the youth. The under 25s constitute 75% of the total population and in some urban areas up to 50% of these young people do not have gainful employment. Tourism, despite its labour intense characteristics and geographical dispersion, is overlooked as a sector that can provide opportunity to this group.

Tourism in Iran is characterised by huge opportunity in terms of natural and cultural assets. At the same time, such opportunity is countered by what can be described as political ambivalence at best and antipathy at worst. Encouraging tourism in Iran is a highly contested issue between two main factions in

the government, one that views tourism as means to achieve economic benefits and modernise, the other that sees tourism as leading to globalisation and thus threatening Islamic values and norms. The current political orthodoxy is highly suspicious of foreign, non-faith influences and this situation acts contrary to interests seeking to develop tourism as a respectable and respected sector of the economy, particularly in rural and remote areas where indigenous tourism is likely to emerge. Rather than protect and support locally based tourism, the prevailing national ideology stifles local businesses from benefiting from cultural assets. The current environment is not, however, as overtly hostile to tourism as that which existed in the immediate post-revolutionary era. During the period of the Khomeini led government, the state destroyed some historical monuments in the manner of the Taliban in Afghanistan but, more recently, a degree of restraint has prevailed. However, the image of Iran in the international tourist market is almost unique in terms of negative media attention over a sustained period. Only Libya and perhaps Cuba have suffered similar long periods of extremely negative western media coverage. As an outcome, the core perception of Iran in the eyes of the world and in particular, in the eyes of potential tourists from North America and Europe has been of a troubled, strife torn country that should be avoided.

The Government in Iran does not help counter this image as tourism still tends to be subjugated to the 'big project' of promoting a religious – political agenda. For example, the August 2004 public execution of a 16-year old girl in the main street of a Caspian seaside resort, during the height of the tourist season received widespread national and international press coverage and blighted local tourism. Throughout the 1990s negative international media exposure was tempered by the hope that tourism development would be encouraged as part of an attempt to create an image of greater openness under President Khatami. But a constant barrage of damaging news items in the western media reinforced the old negative image. After encouraging foreign tourists to watch the solar eclipse in Iran in 1999, a relatively isolated incident led to the usual western headlines: 'Tourists kidnapped in Iran'. 'Three Spaniards and one Italian were abducted by an armed gang' (BBC, 1999a) and 'Official inquiry into Iran eclipse harassment' as a result of foreign tourists visiting to view the eclipse, particularly women, being subjected to hostile slogans and harassment by Islamic hardliners (BBC, 1999b). The George Bush 'axis-of-evil' speech in 2002 led to a BBC feature on 'my holidays in the axis-of-evil' (BBC, 2003) where a journalist ventured into the six countries mentioned,

with the intent of showing the non-threatening character of day-to-day life in these areas. While this seemed to be the case in five of the countries (Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, Syria and Libya), in Iran the journalist was 'detained and intimidated' as the cameras, tapes and tourist visa were viewed as the instruments of spies. This type of behaviour towards visitors by Iranian authorities undermines the work done by official tourism organisations like ITTO and ICHTO. The latest example of this indifference to or ineptness in public relations is the announcement by President Ahmadinejad in October 2006 that all nuclear facilities were to be opened to foreign tourists to prove the nation's disputed atomic programme is peaceful (BBC, 2006a; Sunday Times, 2006).

The lack of foreign investment in tourism can also be seen as a major mainstream tourism challenge, especially in the hotel sector, in that both product and service are woefully inadequate for the contemporary international leisure and business market. Service standards in the major state and quasi-state hospitality businesses are among the poorest in the world, contrasting with the warmth and natural hospitality of service in small, private, indigenous businesses throughout the country. Part of the problem lies in the widespread system of political and religious patronage and favour that operates in the allocation of senior government and quasi-government positions. This means that the leadership of public sector tourism, both in promotional and operational roles, is rarely professional or long term. Alongside this managerial failing, is the absence of effective and co-ordinated human resource development in support of the tourism sector, both in terms of pre-entry training and in relation to the in-service, life-long development of existing tourism employees.

There are also major infrastructure issues with respect to accommodation and, in particular with respect to transport. The country suffers badly from the US embargo in the area of air transport, what might be described as the 'Tupolov blight' (BBC, 2006b). In organisational and facilitation terms, there is a lack of credit card facilities necessary for modern tourism, also as a result of the embargo, and poor or out-of-date systems are generally in place. Such transportation problems constrain tourism development in the periphery where indigenous attractions are concentrated.

In marketing terms, international tourism to Iran is severely challenged by problems with respect to national image, relating to regional political concerns and also national social and cultural matters, notably the hijab requirement for women and the ban on alcohol. For example, there is evidence that some Chinese

tour operators are unwilling to promote Iran because of the hijab requirement. Wider concerns about human rights issues are also a barrier to visitation and are further complicated by the challenges facing minority indigenous groups in Iran.

### Contested indigeneity

At the core of Iran's representation in the world, in terms of mass media and the minds of potential visitors, is the tension between its national Islamic identity and the myriad of local cultural characteristics. The power and uniqueness of the imagery and centralised control have combined to suppress regional identities and create homogeneous national icons, at least in the eyes of the inexperienced. Somewhat ironically, it can even be argued that the national has become the indigenous at least from the perspective of the international market.

The Islamic Republic of Iran was declared after the revolution of 1979 overthrew the regime of the last Shah. The previously secular, westward looking economy and society, with strong business and military ties to the US, was replaced by a virulently anti-American regime; a theocracy seeking national unity under the umbrella of common religious values. In reality, Iran is by no means a homogeneous society. Contrary to popular belief, it is not mono-cultural, mono-linguistic or mono-faith.

The country is diverse in its peoples, cultures, languages and, to some extent, its religious groupings. The country recognises seven minority communities and tribes and five languages. These are predominately located close to national boundaries and include Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Azaris and other groups. In terms of religions, the Iranian constitution recognises the political and worshipping rights of Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenian Christians and Sunni Muslims within a majority Shia Muslim population. This diversity provides richness to the cultural tableaux of the country and has significant, if under exploited, potential in terms of indigenous tourism.

The living culture is seen especially in the towns, villages and rural areas where the indigenous people and the art, crafts, costumes, cuisine, music and traditions of diverse ethnic communities remain unadulterated by tourism development. However, the same factors that preserve their culture mean they are remote and inaccessible to all but the hardest independent traveller. Basic information, transportation and tourism facilities are absent. The root cause seems to lie in the unenthusiastic government attitude to tourism where urban-based tourism is allowed but more remote, conservative (Islamic) areas are screened from 'infection' by western, modern visitors.

Another factor is the centralised control of tourism that discourages, or at least does not actively encourage, local initiatives. It is noted by Alipour and Heydari (2004) that Iran's tourism development is far from locally initiated and developed. The controlling influence remains predominantly at the centre and apart from pilgrimages, the bulk of tourism activities are confined to Teheran and a few traditional tourist magnets such as Esfahan and Shiraz. Some progress is evident in planning tourism developments such as at Kish Island or in historic cities like Qazvin where a rich cultural and built heritage is being restored for potential tourism in the future. However, even here there is evidence of tension in developing indigenous tourism with top down direction from central ministries overriding local needs, and local suspicion of visitors who do not conform to their brand of conservative religious norms. Minor exceptions include itineraries where tourists stay with nomadic tribes such as the 'Nomads of Iran' tour (<http://www.irantrip.com/iran-travel-itineraries/Iran-nomads-Tour.htm>). There are estimated to be around 1.2 million nomadic pastoralists in Iran organised in over 500 tribes but there has been little development of the associated indigenous tourism product potential. There is currently insufficient demand and the management, organisation and distribution of tours are centralised through government agencies.

## Conclusion

Despite the constraints to indigenous tourism in Iran that have been outlined in this chapter, a range of indigenous projects driven by private sector investment in the form of hotels, caravanserais, restaurants and craft projects have begun to emerge. The majority of these are small-scale local enterprises that are poorly promoted at a national level. Iran is a country with considerable raw potential for indigenous tourism development. However, the political will to address this opportunity is currently absent and this reality will continue to impair the development of the tourism sector in general and the indigenous sub-sector in particular in the foreseeable future.

Thus Iran falls into the category of protecting and promoting 'whole country', national indigenous culture with a fundamentalist Islamic fervour. This strategy is followed at the expense of the diverse range of regional and local communities and their potential for development through locally based indigenous tourism. Nevertheless, the central tourism authorities in Iran (ICHTO) are happy to appropriate the imagery of indigenous cultures for brochures and touring packages, all largely with



strict direction from the core. From a market perspective, over 25 years of demonisation in the international media has ensured that Iran has an exotic, 'other' quality that accentuates a homogeneous image of the culture. The combination of central control and lack of demand means there has been little motivation for local communities to exploit or develop tourism in the periphery. In the event of growing interest and visitor numbers seeking authentic indigenous cultural products, the deep rooted enterprising bazaar culture, where market exchange has been refined over centuries, would provide a strong base for indigenous offerings. Lack of experience with and awareness of tourism's potential to benefit their communities means that many issues arising in relation to indigenous tourism elsewhere in the world have yet to emerge in Iran.

