INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF 
ISFAHAN IN THE RE-FUNCTIONALIZATION OF 
CARAVANSERAIS AS TOURIST FACILITIES

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Abstract
Caravanserais are the historical monuments of Iran that have been built centuries ago on the path to commercial and pilgrimage cities for the convenience and comfort of merchants and travelers, or within cities, especially markets, for the trade of merchandises. Many caravanserais built in Isfahan and its communication axes because it is at the center of Iran as the heart of Iran's commercial and social interactions so that by the eighteenth century there were about 1,800 caravanserais in Isfahan Province. Of course, many of those caravanserais have disappeared over time, and today only their names are in history books and travel magazines. Isfahan's first experience in the re-functionalization of caravanserais as tourist facilities dates back to 1957. One of the most luxurious hotels in Isfahan, Shah Abbas Hotel is the caravanserai of King’s Mother, was built by the last king of Safavid, Shah Sultan Hussein (1666-1768). It is about 300 years old. Although modern and equipped, the hotel preserves the authenticity of the Safavid architecture with old paintings and gardens and welcomes thousands of domestic and foreign tourists each year. In recent years, the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of Isfahan Province has renovated caravanserais as traditional restaurants and integrated services to preserve historical monuments and attract tourists. Due to their historical backgrounds and
classical architectural styles, those buildings have been very successful in attracting tourists. Therefore, this paper, with a descriptive, analytical approach, examines the experience of Isfahan in the re-functionalization of caravanserais as tourist facilities.

**Keywords:** Caravanserai, Tourist Facilities, Guesthouse, Safavid era, Isfahan.

**Introduction**

Isfahan Province, which is covering twenty-four cities, is located in the geographic center of Iran. This Province is the sixth largest province and the third most populous province of Iran. The center of this province is the City of Isfahan which is the capital of the world culture and civilization after Mecca. It is one of the most critical roles of the tourism industry in Iran due to having more than a thousand tourism attractions alongside the genius handcrafts and world-renowned arts.

Throughout history, Isfahan was at the center of the importance of military and commercial affairs. Therefore, during ancient times, especially the Achaemenid period, Ribots, Castles, and post offices (Chapar-Khane-ha) were built on the roads and axes of communication in Isfahan. Subsequently, in the Islamic period, with the flourishing of the Iranian-Islamic architecture, many public buildings were built in cities and in communication ways, which mostly served as a haven for passengers and caravans. Most of the caravanserais have built in the Safavid period in Isfahan, each of them despite a simplicity, shows the originality of Iranian culture and civilization.

The first time, French architect and archaeologist André Godard proposed to transform the Abbasi caravanserai into a modern hotel. Since then, the idea of using caravanserais in tourism facilities formed, and today, many caravanserais in Iran have become either a hotel, guest house, and traditional restaurant. Therefore, this article examines the experience of Isfahan in the re-functionalization of caravanserais as tourist facilities and introducing them.

**Caravanserais of Isfahan**

Isfahan’s history dates back to the Iranian plateau, which has always been regarded by the sultans and rulers due to the role of communication between different regions and it has been re-elected as a capital many times. However, its historical life and values were born in the final years of the sixteenth century AD.
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After Shah Abbas (1571-1629), the greatest Safavid king chose Isfahan as the capital. For the sake of security and improvement in political and economic relations, and the prosperity of merchandise and trade, he adopts some measures (Siroux, 1949, 7-8). One of these measures was the construction and restoration of caravanserais along with paving the paths, roads, and communication axes(Siroux, 1949, 25).

Caravanserais, also known as Ribat, Sa’bat, Timcheh, K’arbat, and Khan, are among the historical monuments of Iran which were constructed centuries ago on business and pilgrimage cities for the convenience and welfare of merchants and travelers or within the cities, especially the markets for trading merchants’ goods.

The caravanserais built during the Safavid period were much broader and more luxurious than the caravanserai that had been built up to then in Iran. For this reason, the Safavid period is the golden age
of building Iranian caravanserais. Jean Batiste Tavernier, a French tourist who visited Iran several times between 1632-1668, declares that, when comparing Iranian and Ottoman caravanserais, “Iranian caravanserais are more beautiful and more comfortable than Ottoman caravanserais” (Tavernier, 2004: vol. 1, 73).

In the Safavid period, Isfahan experienced the Peak of the flourishing of the Iranian-Islamic architecture, and it became known to half the world (Nesf-e Jahan). The Safavid dynasty was the heir of a royal tradition that had root in the Sasanian arch and the Seljuk dome. The architectural tradition of non-religious buildings had the complete foundation. Different minds, its characteristics were the wooden columns and flat roofs, and the prototype, not Sarvistan, but Persepolis. It is incredible that the architectural discoveries of the Sassanid tradition have not found the broad domain, yet the difference is undeniable and evident (Stevens, 1964: 1).

Many caravanserais in Isfahan and its communication axes were built at the center of Iran as it is the heart of Iran’s commercial and social interactions. Jean Chardin, who visited Iran during the Shah Abbas II period from 1673 to 1677; in his travelogue, he cited 1802 caravanserai in Isfahan. “The result of my research on the works and buildings of Isfahan is as follows: one hundred and sixty-two mosques, forty-eight schools, one thousand and eight hundred and two
The architectural style of a caravanserai as a monastery, and tells the urban and suburban caravanserais as follows: “Iranian caravanserais are built in our monasteries style. In the middle of it is a courtyard surrounded by numerous rooms around it and without paying any price, you can settle in it. Even if a person is staying for one year, there is no need to pay for it. Of course, in urban caravanserais, which have locked rooms and keys, and are mostly used for storing goods, they only charge a small amount for the right of protection. In any case, I must say that the rooms are completely empty, and everyone can get there sooner and can occupy the place, and staying there whenever he pleases, and nobody can resist him” (Della Valle, 2005: Vol. 1, 107-108).

Most of the caravanserais of this period had two porches or four porches and built with circular and octagonal architectural designs commensurate with their geographical location and location within cities and commercial and pilgrimage routes. The caravanserais' use for the temporary residence of merchants, caravans, and passengers has made the pavilion booth far away around the caravanserai. Some caravanserais also have a place for stables, baths and even a place to buy and sell goods.
In the Library of the British Museum, in a manuscript, there are about 40 caravanserais’ names they located around Naqsh-e Jahan Square, and each of those caravanserais was for the sale of certain goods. Among the caravanserais in this manuscript, we can mention the following: the Taville (stable), the Mohabat Ali Beyk Allah, the Anarforushaan (Pomegranate Sellers), the Arabs, Kale pazan, Mahmood Beyk, Jarchi Bashi, Qazvīnian, Mahabadiyan, Ardestaniha, Mordarkeshan, Khansaris, Natanziyan, Sagharchiyan, Bavanatyan, Arabs Bazaar, Boria Bafan (Mat weaving), Abbasi, Maghsoud Attar, Halal, Aligholi Khan, Shah Abbas's daughter, Khajeh Muharram, Khorasaniyan, Khansariyan, Yarbaba, Mostofi Sabegh (former Mostofi), Saroutighi, Lariyan, Yazdiyan, Kashiyan, Mesgaran (coppersmith), Bazaar-e Serajan, Zaman Beyk Nazer, Abrarghoiyan, Hindu-ha caravanserai (Kiyani, 1989, 75).

It must be said some of the caravanserais, mentioned in the manuscript, continue to be commercially and economically active. Chardin also referred to some of these caravanserais in his travelogue (Chardin, 1993: vol. 4, 1440). Some of these caravanserais in the cities and the market remained near were the places where the goods sold, such as the Long Bazaar caravanserai and the Murcheh Khvort caravanserai, changed their use and became gendarmerie, school, and military garrison.

On the eve of the twentieth century, tourism introduced as a clean modern and industrial phenomenon with social, political, economic, cultural, and biological dimensions in the world. It is an
industry, in addition to being able to represent the power level of political and economic balance in the international arena, which can establish socio-cultural relations among tourists and people of different countries. Therefore, in line with its general policies founded based on three theoretical bases of state-building, nation-building, and modernization, the Pahlavi Government gave special attention to tourism and attracting tourists. For the first time, an office called Department of Tourism Affairs established in the Ministry of the Interior in 1935. Then, all affairs related to Iran’s tourism entrusted to this department (Feizbakhsh, 1976: 171). In this regard, Iran has made many efforts to identify the tourist attractions of the country and increase tourism facilities and the historical tourist attractions of Isfahan, most of which belong to the Safavid period, were considered. Therefore, the road network and transportation improved and tourism facilities increased.

Tourist facilities are all the armies connected with tourism, especially when regarded as an industry. Types of tourist facilities include a hotel, a hotel-apartments, guest houses, traditional restaurants, guesthouses, gazebos, and pensions.

In 1957, after reviewing the location of the Madar-e Shah caravanserai (Shah's mother) and its proximity to the collection of works of Naqsh-e Jahan Square, the supreme tourism council decided to restore the ruined Madar-e Shah caravanserai and to make a magnificent hotel with its architectural changes. This event is the first experience of Isfahan in the re-functionalization of caravanserais as tourist facilities. Since then, particularly in recent years, Isfahan Cultural Heritage, Arts, and Tourism Organization have resurfaced the caravanserais in the form of hotels, traditional dining rooms, and service complexes as preserve historical monuments and attract tourists.

Many tourists are attracted to these caravanserais due to their historical background and classical architectural style and reside in such museum-hotels which have a traditional environment with unique Iranian atmosphere. since the internal and foreign tourists visiting Isfahan are cultural tourists, willing to visit the historical and cultural monuments remained from the Seljuk and Safavid periods, they stay at this museum hotels and have an attractive and memorable experience there. The caravanserais that transformed into tourist facilities in Isfahan are Madar-e Shah caravanserai, Maranjab caravanserai, Abbasi caravanserai, Koohpa caravanserai, and Aminabad caravanserai. They introduced below:
Madar-e Shah Caravanserai (Abbasi Hotel)

One of the most luxurious hotels in Isfahan and the Middle East is the Madar-e Shah caravanserai, built by the last Safavid king, Shah Sultan Hussein (1666-1768), and more than three hundred years old. The caravanserai and its marketplace have been the Waqf of the Chaharbagh school (Siroux, 1949: 28). This caravanserai is made up of two floors and a large courtyard that passes through the stream of Farshadi.

Picture 6: Chahar Bagh School and Caravanserai and Abbasi market Plan

The caravanserai shape is rectangular and has a four-porch plan decorated with bricks and tiles. As shown in the picture, this caravanserai has been a booth, stables, water storage, and spring house.

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The first picture of this caravanserai following the collapse of Safavid (1722) has depicted by Pascal Coste, a French painter, architect and Orientalist who visited Isfahan in 1805.

Subsequently, in 1883, the first child of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, Mass'oud Mirza Zell-e Soltan, sought a new place for the settlement of his military armies and decided that to restore and revive the caravanserai and its market, changing its name to Fath-Abad. This caravanserai until 1923 was still military. In the middle of Pahlavi’s rule, which Iran's insurance company rented this site for sixty years to
build a modern hotel; it severely ruined over time. The hotel construction project was started in 1957 in this caravanserai.

There were two goals in renovating the caravanserai: preserving the authenticity of its exterior and the re-functionalization of caravanserais as hotel rooms. First, the walls and ceilings restored. Adobe replaced with brick and concrete. The style and appearance of the doors and windows preserved. Everything they could remake repaired carefully and what was lost by the time rebuilt. More than 150 of the best and most distinguished Isfahan artists have played in the creation of the world's oldest hotel. The caravanserai's reconstruction finally completed in 1966.

The hotel is made up of 231 rooms, suites and apartments by international standards and is very modern and equipped. In Abbasi hotel, the authenticity of the Safavid architecture has been preserved with paintings, stucco moldings, tiles, and old temples, and has created a gentle and soulful environment. Several restaurants and halls of this hotel named after one of the famous buildings in Isfahan and decorations are similar to each other.
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At present this caravanserai, with its beautiful decorations, paintings, stucco-works, and wooden works, is not only a luxurious hotel but also one of the most attractive sights of Isfahan.

The Hall of Naqsh-e Jahan, Alighapou, Chehelsotun, and Hasht Behesht, and so on, are among the hospitality halls of this
guesthouse. In addition to being the host of thousands of domestic and foreign tourists, the Abbasi hotel has a host of numerous national and international conferences due to its large number of halls.

**Maranjab Caravanserai in the heart of the desert**

![Maranjab Caravanserai in the heart of the desert](image12.jpg)

**Picture 12: Maranjab desert sand dunes**

![Maranjab desert sand dunes](image13.jpg)

**Picture 13: Salt Lake**

In 1604, Shah Abbas I of Persia built Maranjab caravanserai in the heart of the desert of Aran and Bidgol near the freshwater springs and Qanat in the south of Salt Lake. The meaning of the word Maranjab is unknown. Since ancient times, this desert has been named this name.
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Picture 14: Four-poached plan

Picture 15: Exterior View
The caravanserai on the Silk Road has a four-porch plan, six decorative towers. Maranjab Caravanserai, which has 28 rooms around the courtyard, with its four chambers located in the quadrangle of the building, is probably the residence of the rich people of the caravan. All rooms have three steps from the courtyard floor. The roof of the caravanserai is paved with bricks and mounted on the wall around the roof of the cabin for watching and shooting. Materials used in the construction of Maranjab Caravanserai are from brick, stone, and tile. During the build of this caravanserai in the Safavid period, because of the distance from the city and the difficulty of transporting materials for the building of the caravanserai and furnishing its matters, a brick factory was built on the western side of the caravanserai, whose its works are still under the sand. The water source of this caravanserai on the eastern front has become a beautiful pond today. The water of this pond is provided by two sweet and salty Qanat, which are 8 km away and are in close nearness to the caravanserai. The collection of works in Maranjab includes two castles, a caravanserai, a brick factory and two arches of qanats, which is the date of the building of two castles older than the caravanserai. Maranjab caravanserai is in the desert, and the caravan for a trip to Khorasan, Isfahan, Rey, and vice versa passed this way. The restoration of this caravanserai began in 1999 and lasted four years. Today, tourists in the Maranjab Desert settle in this caravanserai.

Picture 16: Caravanserai Towers
Traditional dining room of the caravanserai with local cuisine in a great space reflects the architecture of its day to its guests.

Picture 17: Caravanserai Chambers

**Abbasi (Madar-e Shah) Caravanserai**

The mother of the seventh King Safavid, Shah Abbas II (1632-1666) a caravanserai built in Murcheh Khvort district. The place where the last stop of the travelers was before entering the Safavid capital. The caravanserai shape is rectangular and has a four-porch plan decorated with bricks and tiles. There are four towers in four corners of the caravanserai and two semi-circular towers on its western and eastern sides. This royal caravanserai is one of the most beautiful Iranian ones. It has 18 chambers, each with a porch (Kiyani, 1982: 161). The great dimensions of this building, its magnificent...
court yard, the independent sections, and the stables and large guarded areas, its role illustrate well (D'Allemagne, 1956: 884).

Maxime Siroux writes about this caravanserai: Ambassadors and political delegations stopped at this place before they arrived in the Safavid capital of Isfahan, dressed in formal clothes, and then accompanied with specialist guards to the city. He attributed the construction of this building, according to its evident skill, to the architects of the Shah Abbas II Safavid period (Siroux, 1949: 79).

The building, with an area of approximately 6500 square meters, is ranked among the largest caravanserais. A large rectangular courtyard occupies the center of the building, four iwans at the center of its sides and their flanking iwan-che-ha form the courtyard's facades (Siroux, 1978: 276). Each iwan-che-ha has a chamber behind it. The arcs of the iwan-che-ha surrounding the courtyard are regular and identical, and the walls accurately built with a constant thickness. The stables of this caravanserai appear in two configurations: square porch stables located at the four porch of the building, which accessed through the chamfered corners of the courtyard, and; elongated stables located behind the chambers of the southeastern and northwestern sides, which accessed through the last arcades of these two sides. These two types of stables could easily be interconnected; however, the designer has preferred to segregate them (Ganjnameh, 2004: 33-34).

![Abbasi Caravanserai](image)

Picture 18: Abbasi Caravanserai

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In 2010, the caravanserai restored as a typical tourist destination including shopping malls, playgrounds as well as recreational and accommodative space. At present, with traditional and classical restaurants and dining rooms in a beautiful and pleasant environment hosts domestic and foreign tourists.

**Koohpa’s Abbasi Caravanserai**

This caravanserai built in the historic city of the Koohpayeh by Shah Abbas I. It is more than 400 years old. This caravanserai was the site of the deployment of the Gendarmerie forces in the middle of the Pahlavi era (Siroux, 1949: 240). Its structure is rectangular and has a four-porch plan decorated with bricks. This large caravanserai has numerous small chambers.

This building has a detailed input structure. Behind the portico, a large vestibule surrounded by chambers and rooms on two floors has created an elaborate entrance ensemble, not unlike a small

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Timcheh. The above floor chambers of this area had latticed brick walls which assured the lighting of the entrance. Today these walls have disappeared. The higher floor areas and chambers of the entrance enjoy adequate ventilation and probably used by major travelers. The upper floor chambers also connected to iwancheh-ha on either side of the southeastern iwan. In consequence, this side of the courtyard presents a quasi-two-storied facade. Its central iwan is taller than the caravanserai’s other iwans, which has given a distinctive appearance to the building’s entrance side in its overall mass (Ganjnameh, 2004: 22-27).

In the exterior facade of the caravanserai, four tall watchtowers stand at the corners of the building and three more rises above the center of its sides. These watchtowers, as well as all the building's roof edges, are crenelated in view of eventual exchanges of fire; which shows the designer's concern for this caravanserai's defensive capabilities.

This caravanserai was restored and reconstructed in 2012 to accommodate tourists. It is one of the unique traditional hotels in Iran, featuring alcoves for the king, prime ministers, chambers, and dormitories. Traditional dining room, a conference hall, shops for selling handicrafts and traditional and local products are among other amenities offered at this hotel which attracts many tourists.

**Aminabad Caravanserai**

This caravanserai is on the Isfahan-Shiraz Road with an octagonal plan decorated with bricks, and It has eight circular towers
such as Deh-Bid and Khan-Khoreh (Siroux, 1949, 73). Each side of the building is 16.7 meters, and its outer side is 23.3 meters to a radius of 21.5 meters.

Siroux believes this caravanserai have been made during Shah Abbas I of Persia (1571-1629) (Siroux, 1949: 74-75). It registered on the National Heritage List in 1969. In the first Pahlavi era, the caravanserai was transformed into military barracks, and later into a gendarmerie garrison. This heavily damaged caravanserai has been reconstructed in recent years by the Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of Isfahan Province and is ready to be used for hosting tourists. This building is one of the rare caravanserais designed and built on an octagonal base. It covers approximately 2800 square meters, and an octagonal courtyard occupies a considerable area at its center.

Siroux believes that this octagonal layout has been adopted to resolve the awkward corner design of other caravanserais (Siroux, 1949: 292). Regardless of this arrangement, the four-iwan model retained by the existence of central iwans opposed two by two on four of the courtyard's sides. Each of the secondary sides (without iwans) consists of six iwan-che with chambers behind them, and each of the leading sides comprises a central iwan flanked by two chambers and iwan-che-ha.
Each of the northern, eastern and western iwans has a Shah-Neshin behind it and connect to its flanking chambers. In this way, each iwan forms a large consistent spatial ensemble together with its surrounding areas. The base of the Shah-Neshin behind the northern iwan is different from those of the two other Shah-Neshin, being circular.
The iwan of the southern side is two-storied and more profound than the other iwans. It has become part of an entrance ensemble and, together with its flanking areas and the entrance portico, it constitutes the tallest section of the caravanserai. The chambers and iwan-che flanking the iwan are two-storied. Thus, a distinct spot created in the facade encircling the courtyard and the entrance to the building emphasized (Ganjnameh, 2004: 87-89).

**Conclusion**

Isfahan province has caravanserais inside and outside the city. Inside the city's caravanserais, there are more traded goods. Some of these caravanserais inside the market are still active, and their usage has not changed. Outside city caravanserais are built to rest the caravans. These caravanserais have been abandoned since the late nineteenth century and only listed on the National Heritage List.

In the late nineteenth century, the tourism industry and the supply chain of this industry were considered countries, and many international and national measures have been taken to improve this industry. Iran is one of the countries enjoying a long tradition in the field of tourism because of its specific geographical location; ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity; natural and diverse attractions; historical and artistic monuments; and cultural heritage. However, it always faced with a lack of tourism facilities. Despite the extensive measures taken by governments in the field of tourism facilities, the shortage is still persistent. The use of caravanserais in a tourist facility, despite its first experience dating back to 1957, has been forgotten until the 2000s. The desire of tourists to reside in traditional environments, which is a full mirror of the originality of Iranian culture and civilization, along with eating local foods of the area, led to the attention of the caravanserais as tourism capacity. During these years, many caravanserais restored and refurbished to utilize tourist facilities. After the masterpiece of architecture, the Abbasi hotel, it is possible to mention the Abbasi caravanserai, Maranjab, Koohpa, and Aminabad.

**Work Cited**


