CITY PROFILE

MASHHAD

[2015]

V 1.0

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The materials contained in this publication were assembled in December 2015 and were based on information available at that time.

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1.0. Executive summary

Chapter 1 outlines main findings of the report.

Chapter 2 examines the overview of the city in general. It establishes:

Mashhad is the second most populous city in Iran and is the most visited city in Iran.

Having more than 55% of hotels in Iran, Mashhad is the main hub of tourism of the country.

The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, is the focal point of the city and the most powerful factor to attract travelers from around the world and mainly from Asia to the city.

The city's economy is based mainly on saffron, berberis, dry fruits, salted nuts, and precious stones.

Among the major industries in the city, there are strong nutrition industries, clothing, leather, textiles, chemicals, steel and non-metallic mineral industries, construction materials factories, handicraft industry and metal industries.

Mashhad is Iran's second largest automobile production hub.

Main exports of Mashhad are food, chemicals, household goods, precious stones, building stones, carpets, and leather products.

Astan Quds Razavi, an autonomous charitable foundation, is the administrative organization, which manages the Imam Reza shrine and owns and manages various other institutions including several tourism attractions.

Mashhad is home to one of the oldest libraries of the Middle-East with a history of over six centuries.

Chapter 3 examines the tourism trends in Mashhad. It establishes:

Iran's tourism and leisure industry has considerable unexploited potential.

Mashhad is the second religious destination in the world for tourists only beaten by Karbala.

Mashhad attracts more than 25 million tourists and pilgrims every year, out of which 2 million people are foreigners.

Asian tourists represent 99% of incoming foreign tourists of Mashhad.

Most of international visitors of Mashhad are Arab Muslims. Iraqi visitors rank first among foreign visitors of the city.

Studies show that the education of a majority of heads of families visiting Mashhad, is higher school diploma or lower. Same studies show that most of visitors of Mashhad are married.

One out of two travelers to Mashhad, choose to travel by their own car.

A study shows that the average duration of stay for tourists in Mashhad is 7 days. Another study suggests that the average duration of staying in Mashhad is 4 days. This figure is more realistic.

Chapter 4 examines the air, rail, and road connections for Mashhad. It establishes:

Seventeen domestic airlines and ten international airlines have daily flights from and to Mashhad.

As a result of recent sanctions the fleet of all domestic airlines are old.

Mashhad is connected to three major rail lines: Tehran-Mashhad, Mashhad-Bafgh (running south), and Mashhad-Sarakhs at the border with Turkmenistan.

Imam Reza coach station is one of the largest passenger terminals in Iran. It has the capacity to handle 80,000 passengers and more than 2,000 coaches daily.

Chapter 5 examines the accommodation types in Mashhad. It establishes:

Over half of hotels and apartment hotels of Iran are located in Mashhad.

A study shows that most of domestic tourists prefer to stay in cheaper bed and breakfast type accommodation. Most foreign tourists choose apartment hotels.

This study shows that about 70% of domestic tourists in Mashhad are from working class people with lower income.

Based on many studies, around as low as 10% of domestic tourists stay in hotels.

The latest available data shows that occupancy rate of hotel rooms was 43%.

The lack of internationally branded accommodation and quality business hotels in Iran is indeed an immediate market gap. However, considering existence of a number of high quality locally branded hotels in Mashhad, this shortcoming is not very visible in the city.

Geographical profile of different types of accommodation shows that most of hotels and apartment hotels are located around the Holy Shrine in Samen zone, and also in the south and in the west of Samen zone.

Abu Dhabi's Rotana is building two hotels in Mashhad, planned set to open in 2017 and 2018.

Apartment hotels are more popular choice for domestic tourists since they are cheaper option for families with low budget.

Guest houses, which are considered cheapest options, are the most popular type of accommodation for domestic tourists. It is believed that the number of operational local houses offering accommodation for tourists is much higher than official figures, because many of them operate without a license.

In order to have a better understanding of hotels in Mashhad a comprehensive survey was conducted. This survey is based on the data found in online booking websites, website of hotels, and my inquiries made in person at the reception of hotels.

In another attempt to rank hotels based on my own observation, hotels were visited and several parameters were measured. Based on these parameters, each hotel received a score and in that way, the hotels in each star-based category were ranked.

Chapter 6 evaluates restaurants and cafés in Mashhad. It establishes:

Typical Persian main dishes are combinations of rice with meat, such as lamb, chicken, or fish, and vegetables such as onions, various herbs, and nuts.

Lamb chops (Shishlik) and Lamb shanks (Mahiche) are popular meals for tourists in Mashhad as it is believed that they are served the best in Mashhad and its countryside.

Top restaurants in Mashhad can be split into two categories:

Food oriented: Restaurants which pride themselves on their high quality food

Service oriented: Well-decorated restaurants with a variety of dining places, equipped with well-trained staff providing excellent customer services.

In visiting restaurants, eight factors were designed and each restaurant was given a score for these factors. The average score for these factors was used for ranking the restaurants.

Chapter 7 examines the Holy Shrine in Mashhad and other tourist attractions in the city. It establishes:

Imam Reza shrine is the main tourist attraction of Mashhad and several studies show that visiting the shrine is the main purpose for visiting the city for a majority of tourists.

The Holy Shrine complex is the most visited tourism attractions in Iran.

As the most visited city in Iran, Mashhad has gone under huge development plans in recent years to be ready to satisfy different needs of tourists.

Foreign tourists are advised to observe some Islamic and traditional codes when visiting the shrine. They include:

- In places of worship and pilgrimage, men and women are separated. Therefore, families can be reunited only at one of the courtyards.
- Some porticos are allocated just to ladies or gentlemen.
- Visitors are recommended to avoid taking cameras into the shrine complex.
- It is obligatory for women to wear chador (a long veil) in the shrine complex including in the courtyards.
- Women should avoid performing ablution in the courtyards wherein they can be seen by men.

The office for foreign pilgrims' affairs of Astan Quds is located in Jomhouri Islami courtyard.

Astan Quds museum complex is one of the richest and most exquisite museums of Iran. The complex is located in the eastern quarter of Imam Khomeini courtyard and close to Haram square.

The Astan Quds Razavi Museum is home to over 70,000 rare manuscripts from various historical eras.

Other tourist attractions, other than the shrine are:

- Astan Quds museum complex
- Nader Shah Mausoleum
- Ferdowsi Mausoleum
- Anthropology Museum of Mehdi Gholi Beyk Bathhouse
- The Treasure of Water Museum
- Hezardastan Museum and Spring House
- The Museum of Natural History
- The Museum of Geology
- Tous Museum
- Robat Virani Museum of Anthropology
- Mellat Park

- Water Waves Land aqua park
- Traditional bazaar

Chapter 8 examines the city facilities for its residents and for the tourists. It establishes:

Modern facilities of Mashhad make it ready to host millions of people.

The city has one operational metro line connecting the east of the city to the west.

A traveler can have a prepaid travel card, called "Man Card" which can be used on different means of public transport.

A huge squad of clean and brand new buses are operating in the bus network.

All the maps, guides and bus numbers are in Persian.

The only ways to pay for the buses are none-contact cards called “Man Card” or “Zaer Card”.

Members of public can be asked to use their Man Card in exchange for the fare in cash.

About half of operational taxis in Mashhad are considered old.

In practice taxi meters are not used for calculating the taxi fare. The fare of a journey is based on mutual agreement between the driver and the passenger.

It is highly recommended that visitors set a fixed with the drive price for the journey before boarding the car.

Prior to taking a taxi, tourists are recommended to ask several drivers to make sure that they pay the most reasonable fare.

Residents of the city enjoy a public bicycle sharing system which has been recently launched.

The city has many modern sports facilities including several football stadiums and a cycling track.

Chapter 9 draws attention to online facilities for the city. It establishes:

Mashhad has taken good steps towards an electronic city. The foundations of this goal have been built by the municipality of the city presented in the city portal.

The city portal offers different facilities such as personal account, interactive maps, etc.

Any resident of the city can obtain a personal account in the portal.

The “Man Card” can be linked with the user’s account in the portal and it can be charged online.

A rich interactive map with various layers for different purposes is available.

The section of the city portal for pilgrims offer following services:

Hotels, Apartment hotels, Interactive map for hotels, Cinema tickets, Theater tickets, Travel agencies, Parking in the holy shrine, Gas stations in the city, CNG stations, Weather information, Train tickets, Coach tickets, Tourism attractions, etc.

Although many hotels have their own website, they are usually not offering up to date and real time information. Moreover, most of them cannot be used for online booking.

Visitors are advised to use domestic travel websites offering online reservation services.

Hotels and apartment hotels of Mashhad cannot be booked through international booking websites.

Travel booking websites have become recently popular in Iran. For the purpose of this study, seven hotel booking websites were chosen and their facilities and functions were examined.

1.1. Recommendations

Mashhad is the most popular city for tourists and it is worth considering as the option number one for any tourism related investment in Iran.

Considering the following facts, the investment in online booking facilities for hotels is considered challenging:

Hotel accommodation is not the most favorite option for domestic tourists as:

- A large portion of domestic tourists prefer to stay in families' and friends' house or in rental apartments. Just as little as 10% stay in hotels.
- A large portion of tourists for Mashhad are from working class families, which makes them less likely to use hotels or apartment hotels.
- A study shows that a majority of Mashhad visitors choose to find their accommodation on spot by visiting local houses available for short term stay.

The possible target could be foreign tourists but they comprise a very small proportion of total number of tourists

Foreign tourists mainly come from Muslim countries, and they usually have low budgets. It should be noted that most of foreign tourists are from Iraq and the Shiite population of Arab countries in which Shiite people are in minority and they are not as wealthy as Sunnis.

The education of heads of family is typically high school diploma or lower, which makes it less likely to use modern tools such as the Internet to book rooms.

Since most hotels do not have good websites for booking, it could be considered a gap in the market to fill by an online booking website. However, the competition with existing booking website would be fierce. Because, the leading website (eghamat24.com) is a government sponsored website belonging to the Ministry of Tourism. This website enjoys government resources, advertisement spaces in government-owned public places and a large number of staff.

This website also has an advantage of being the exclusive option for government agencies when they need to book a hotel.

The available data for profiling and identifying the foreign visitors of Mashhad is not enough.

However, following means are recommended to be used for this purpose:

- Looking at frequency of flights from countries and foreign cities
- Conducting a field study including a comprehensive survey

Considering above mentioned factors and the fact that providing an accommodation booking website would be a good traceable revenue vehicle, it is recommended that:

- This business to be established using considerable amount of financial and human resources in order to be able to compete with the government owned website.

- The website includes features which do not exist in other websites such as reward programs, comprehensive user guides, functional languages in English and Arabic

2.0. Introduction

2.1. Research Objectives

This paper seeks to present a profile of the city and an overview of the tourism in in Mashhad and to highlight accommodation, transport, and other facilities of the city available for tourists.

2.2. Methodology

The purpose of this report is to identify tourism attractions and potentials of the city of Mashhad in Iran.

This research was conducted in 2 phases.

The first phase involved desk study of tourism industry in the city of Mashhad.

Main sources of data and information for this phase included:

- Official websites of the government agencies
- Travel websites offering accommodation reservation
- Official news agencies
- National and local newspapers and news agencies
- Academic papers on the tourism industry

Based on findings of the first phase, the second phase was developed. This phase involved the field study of the target location. This goal was achieved by visiting tourism attractions, hotels, apartment hotels, restaurants, parks, museums, etc.

The main objective of this phase was to witness tourism trends in the city and tourists behavior in finding accommodation, restaurants and so on.

Data gathered from the field study was analyzed and presented in tables and figures when possible.

2.3. City overview

Mashhad is the second most populous city in Iran and capital of Khorasan Razavi Province. It is located in the northeast of the country, close to the borders of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The city was a major oasis along the ancient Silk Road connecting with Merv in the East.

The city is most famous and revered for housing the tomb of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam. Every year, millions of pilgrims visit the Imam Reza shrine and pay their tributes to Imam Reza.

Mashhad is also known as the city of Ferdowsi, the Iranian poet of Shahnameh, which is considered to be the national epic of Iran.

The city is the administrative center of Mashhad County (or the Shahrestan of Mashhad) as well as the somewhat smaller district (Bakhsh) of Mashhad. The city itself, excluding parts of the surrounding Bakhsh and Shahrestan, is divided into 13 smaller administrative units, with a total population of more than 3 million.