

Churches of Iran

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According to historians, divine religions have always gained their due respect in Iran. Christians too have been living freely in Iran since the pre-Islamic era. The history of Iranian Christians bears testimony to this fact. The Church of Holy Mary is also considered as one of the oldest churches in the world. Many old churches in Iran are said to have been built since the early days of Christianity.

During the reign of Shah Abbas, the Safavid king, his sagacious policies caused a sizable number of Armenians from Armenia and Azerbaijan to transfer and settle in Isfahan and other regions of Iran. A place called Jolfa was built at the banks of Zayande-rud River in Isfahan and became the residence of these migrating people. Meanwhile, after a short lapse of time, some Armenians moved to the northern province of Gilan and some resided in Shiraz in southern end of the country. Although Isfahan is world famous for Islamic architecture, it has one of the most fascinating Christian churches in the Middle East, i.e., the Armenian cathedral. When the Armenian populations migrated to live in Isfahan by the invitation of Safavid king, Abbas I, Persian architects were ordered to build churches for the new inhabitants.

They inevitably borrowed elements from mosque architecture yet built noteworthy churches. After the death of Shah Abbas the 1st, his successor, Shah Abbas the 2nd, also paid close attention to the welfare of the Armenians and more churches were erected in Jolfa. The influx of many Europeans during the reign of the Qajar led to the flourishing of other churches, in addition to those that were constructed previously. A number of these edifices have lasted and acquired architectural and

artistic significance. Azerbaijan is host to the oldest churches in Iran. Among the most significant are the Tatavous (St. Tatavous Cathedral), which is also called the Ghara Kelissa (the black monastery). This is located at the Siahcheshmeh (Ghara-Eini) border area south of Makou. There is also the church known as Saint Stepanous, which stands 24 kilometers south of Azerbaijan's Jolfa town. Generally, each church has a large hall for congregational prayers, it's for most parts is raised like a dais, adorned with the pictures or images of religious figures and it also serves as an altar. Hence, candles are lighted and the church mass is conducted by the priest. On the foreground is the praying congregation which faces the platform where the priest is leading the rites in the church. While the mass is being said, the people stand, kneel, or sit depending on what the rites require. The structure of churches in Iran follows more or less the pattern of Iranian architecture, or they are a mixture of Iranian and non-Iranian designs.

Church of Holy Mary

The Church of Holy Mary in Orumieh is considered one of the most ancient churches in the world. The church is said to have been in this city shortly after the departure of Jesus. In the Assyrian language the Church is called "Mart Maryam" or "Holy Virgin".

Some historians consider this church as the second oldest church after the Church of Bethlehem in Palestine. The square-shaped church building is highly firm and simple. The thick bases of the church are made of stone and mortar. The interior of the church includes a worship hall, an altar, some rooms and vestibules. As in the past, various aromatic and wild plants ornament the interior of the church. No icons or drawing of saints can be seen in the church, for members of the Eastern Church do not believe in their use.

A Chinese princess who visited the church in 642 A.D. contributed to its reconstruction. Her name was then engraved on a stone installed on the church wall. The famous Italian traveler, Marco Polo, is another visitor of the Church of Holy Mary who has described the church in his travelogue. In 1903, the prominent American Orientalist Professor Abraham Jackson, visited and photographed the church. Based on some accounts, the church was in the past surrounded by a beautiful garden and the fragrance of flowers and blossoms permeated the air.

St. Stepanous Church

This is an old church located in an intersection, west of Marand –Jolfa highway and east of Khoy-Jolfa road in North-West Iran. Also having a pyramidal dome, it is, nevertheless, quite beautiful and far more pleasant to behold than the Saint Tatavous Church. The general structure mostly resembles Armenian and Georgian architecture and the inside of the building is adorned with beautiful paintings by Honatanian , a renowned Armenian scholar and historian, recorded that the church was originally built in the 9th century AD, but repeated earthquake in Azerbaijan completely eroded the previous structure. They church was rebuilt during the rule of Shah Abbas the second.

Historical Churches of Jolfa – Isfahan

The most important historical church in Iran is the old cathedral, commonly referred to as the Vank (which means cathedral in Armenian language). This large building was constructed during the reign of Shah Abbas the first and completely reflects Iranian architecture. It has a double-layer brick dome that is very much similar to those built by the Safavids. The interior of the church is decorated with glorious and beautiful paintings and miniature works that represented biblical

traditions and the image of angels and apostles, all of which have been executed in a mixture of the Iranian and Italian styles. This ceiling and walls are coated with tiles from Safavid epoch.

The Armenian Church in Shiraz

In the eastern section of Ghaani Avenue, in a District called “Sare Jouye Aramaneh”, an interesting building has survived from the era of Shah Abbas the second. Its principal structure stands in the midst of a garden-like compound and consists of a prayer hall with a lofty flat ceiling at several cells flanking the two sides of the building. The ceiling is decorated with original paintings from Safavid era and the adjoining cells are adorned with niches and arches and plaster molding, also in the Safavid style. This is considered a historical monument at Shiraz and definitely worth a visit.

Saint Simmons Church in Shiraz

This is another relatively important, but not so old church in Shiraz. The large hall is completely done in Iranian style while the roof is Roman. Small barrel-shaped vaults, many Iranian art work and stained glass window panes adorn the church. Meanwhile, another church called the Glory of Christ, stands at Ghalat, 34 km from Shiraz. This building has survived from the Qajar period and is surrounded by charming gardens.

Saint Tatavous Church, Tehran

This Edifice is located at the Chale Meidan district, one of the oldest districts in Tehran. It stands south of the Seyed Esmail Mausoleum, at the beginning of the northern part of the so-called Armenians’ Street. The oldest church of Tehran was built during the reign of the Qajar King, Fathalishah. The building has a dome-

shaped roof and four alcoves, an altar and a special chair reserved for the Armenian religious leader or prelate. The vestibule leading to the church contains the graves of prominent non-Iranian Christians who have died in Iran.

Meanwhile, in Bushehr, there is a church from the Qajar period that is a good a specimen of Iranian architecture. All the windows are modeled after old Iranian buildings and the coloured panes are purely Iranian art work.

There are also many other churches in Ourumieh, in hamlets surrounding Arasbaran, Ardebil, Maragheh, Naqadeh, Qazvin, Hamedan, Khyzestan, Chaharmahal, Arak, in the Vanak Village north of Tehran.

