

An Armenian Tale of Rebirth, Survival in Ancient Iran



Wahyuni Kamah

Having spent a few days in Iran, a republic that implements shariah law, I began to wonder if the country had any churches. My curiosity was answered when I stayed in Isfahan, 340 kilometers south of Tehran. Although the cities that I visited in Iran are all uniquely stunning, I must say that Isfahan is the most beautiful, with splendid mosques, amazing palaces, wide boulevards, artistic bridges and minarets. The beauty of Isfahan can be traced back in its history. When Persia was ruled by the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1736), its Emperor Shah Abbas the Great (or Shah Abbas I), reigning from 1588 to 1629, moved the capital from Qazvin to Isfahan. He transformed Isfahan into a beautiful center for the arts.

During his reign, Shah Abbas I made significant changes to the military, politics as well as the empire's economy. The Persians were then at war with the Ottoman Empire. Both struggled to capture, among others, Nakhichevan, a region that consists of what is now Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia.

In 1603 the two empires agreed to split Nakhivhevan, with its north-western frontier allocated to the Persians. Fearing that his enemy will once again attempt to seize the region, Shah Abbas implemented the "scorched earth" strategy of destroying any resources — buildings, farms, crops — that may be of use to invading forces.

The policy forced residents (Armenians) to move from their home city of Julfa and resettle in Isfahan, where a district located on the south of the Zayandeh River was renamed New Julfa (Nor Jugha) to accommodate them.

Though he was a Shiite Muslim, the emperor allowed the newcomers to continue practicing their Apostolic Christian faith. The Armenians were also given the right to elect their own mayor and hold their own courts.

They were encouraged to produce wine and no Islamic restrictions were imposed on them. However, Muslims could not live in New Julfa.

When the Armenians first came to the district, their duty was to construct churches and monastery for their priests. Out of the 24 churches built during that era, only 13 now remain standing, including the *Surp Amenaprgitch Vank* (Armenian Cathedral of Holy Savior).

To encourage financial independence, Shah Abbas I granted Armenian merchants a monopoly on the silk trade. They also received interest free loans for establishing businesses. This allowed them to expand their network and trade with other countries, from Sweden in the north, to Indonesia in the east.

The district not only prospered, it transformed the Persian Gulf into a critical center for trade and culture. The quality of its schools attracted students from across the region.

My friend Shirin took me to New Julfa. As soon as I entered the district, I sensed a different atmosphere, not only from its buildings but also the layout of the district. It is a neat complex and is different from the other parts of Isfahan I had seen. It looks like an enclosed settlement with

The southern Isfahan district of New Julfa (Nor Jugha) in Iran was once a Persian center for trade and commerce, thanks to Emperor Shah Abbas the Great and the support he lent to the Armenians who had settled the area. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah

smooth, cobblestoned roads connecting parts of the quarter.

The roads are clean and the area looks well-maintained. The buildings are mostly made of light yellow bricks. With the exception of the Julfa Hotel and the district's churches, all other buildings are only two floors high.

Houses by the road have inner courtyards protected by high walls. Despite being an Armenian quarter, all buildings bear Safavid architectural influences as in the ayvans, wooden doors and pillars.

Even from a distance, I could easily spot the crosses perched on top of the structure were searching for. After a 10-minute walk, we turned left and I spotted a tower clock rising from behind a long wall. A large group of tourists had already gathered in front of a large gate that lead to the tower.

"Unfortunately, today is a holiday and the church is closed to the public," Shirin told me.

Along the wall, a number of small shops were open, selling souvenirs to visitors who did not want to leave without a keepsake. Signs and labels were all written in Farsi.

On a small pond, I saw a bronze statue of archbishop Khachatour Kesaratsi in his long cloak. The archbishop set up the Middle East's first publishing house 1636. The first book ever to be printed in Persia was a translation of the Book of Psalms into Armenian. The first book printed in Farsi was published 192 years later.

The *Surp Amenaprgitch Vank*, popularly known as the Vank Cathedral (vank means "monastery" in Armenian), is considered Iran's most historically significant church. Originally built in 1606 during Shah Abbas I's reign, its entire architecture reflects a striking mix of European, Safavid and Armenian influences.

The cathedral is now on the entry list for a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) World Heritage Site status.

Shirin and I continued to stroll down the paved walkway. We passed some small cafes boasting a modern decor and playing Western music. For a moment, I felt as if I was somewhere else — certainly not in Iran.

We reached Julfa Square, an elegant shopping district surrounded by a lovely colonnade. With a small fountain and chairs scattered across the square, the place looked ancient yet stylish.

I then spotted several women wearing Islamic hijabs.

"They are Armenians," Shirin told me, explaining that though they are still free to practice their religion, the women must now adhere to Iran's Islamic dress code of wearing headscarves.

Some 120,000 Armenians currently call Iran their home; a quarter of them live in Isfahan.



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2014-2015 UPCOMING EVENTS

INDONESIA

28 MAR
2PM WORLD TOUR 'GO CRAZY' IN JAKARTA
 IN JAKARTA
 MARCH 28, 2015 | ISTORA SENAYAN, GJK

TICKET PRICE
 DIAMOND - IDR. 2.100.000,-
 FESTIVAL - IDR. 1.750.000,-
 GOLD - IDR. 1.550.000,-
 SILVER - IDR. 1.100.000,-
 BRONZE - IDR. 650.000,-

2PM WORLD TOUR 'GO CRAZY' IN JAKARTA | 28 MAR 2014 | ISTORA SENAYAN, JAKARTA
 The Popular Korean idol group 2PM who just recently proved its mighty power in Korea and Japan after releasing the newest album "Go Crazy" and "Midaretemina".

29 JAN
michael buble
 INDONESIA CONVENTION EXHIBITION (ICE) BSD CITY
 JAN 29th, 2015
 8PM

MICHAEL BUBLE | 29 JAN 2015 | INDONESIA CONVENTION EXHIBITION (ICE), BSD CITY
 Michael Buble is a singer, songwriter and actor born Canadian who has won many awards, including four Grammy Awards and won many awards Juno Awards.

30 MAY
BEST OF BEST
 30 MAY 2015
 LAPANGAN SENAYAN

BEST OF BEST CONCERT IN JAKARTA | 30 MAY 2015 | SENAYAN, JAKARTA
 Best of Best Concert have characteristic with Best of Best line up artists in their respective categories. Guest star is the artist that already have fans and extensive demand worldwide.

22 JAN
MAC DEMARCO
 LIVE IN JAKARTA
 THURSDAY
 22.01.2015
 THE FOUNDRY NO. 8 (SCBD)
 PRESALE REGULAR
 250K/BUKUK

MAC DEMARCO LIVE IN JAKARTA | 22 JAN 2015 | THE FOUNDRY NO. 8 (SCBD)
 The charming Canadian songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and multimedia artist, along with his band, will be bringing his dreamy lo-fi "jazz jazz" sound to Indonesia for the first time.

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 IMBIAH ROAD, SINGAPORE

PETER PAN, THE NEVER ENDING STORY
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ST. JEROME'S LANEWAY FESTIVAL SINGAPORE
 24 JAN 2015 | GARDENS BY THE BAY

LEONARDO DA VINCI'S 'EARLIER MONA USA'
 16 DEC 2014 - 11 FEB 2015 | THE ARTS HOUSE

LILY ALLEN LIVE IN SINGAPORE
 2 FEB 2015 | THE STAR THEATRE

ED SHEERAN LIVE IN SINGAPORE
 14 MAR 2015 | THE STAR THEATRE

15 FEB
HOLI COLOR FESTIVAL
 FEBRUARY 15th 2015
 PARKIR TIMUR SENAYAN, JAKARTA

HOLI COLOR FESTIVAL | 15 FEB 2015 | PARKIR TIMUR SENAYAN, JAKARTA
 The special feature is that the people paint themselves with various colours and throw colourful powder in the air to express the freedom and to colour their everyday life.

14 FEB
ONE FC: ODYSSEY OF CHAMPIONS
 14 FEB 2015 | ISTORA SENAYAN, JAKARTA

ONE FC: ODYSSEY OF CHAMPIONS | 14 FEB 2015 | ISTORA SENAYAN, JAKARTA
 Indonesian MMA icon Fransino "The Pitbull" Tirta will lead the contingent of local fighters who will the co-main event showdown against American MMA legend Jens "Lil Evil" Pulver.

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