

# Kashan: A Gem of Traditional Persian Architecture

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Here I am in Kashan, a city in Isfahan Province, about a three-hour drive to the south of Iran's capital Tehran.

The city of around 280,000 people was the capital of the Persian Empire during the reign of Shah Abbas Safavid II (1642-1666) of the Safavid Dynasty. Some Safavid rulers liked to live in Kashan more than in Isfahan, the then capital.

The name Kashan was taken from the words Key Ashian, meaning the place of rulers. In addition, Kashan has been the center of arts and high-quality crafts such as ceramic tiles, silk, carpets, rugs and handicrafts.

Kashan is considered to have a hot-arid climate. The city keeps some of best examples of traditional Persian houses for the desert climate. In traditional Persian architecture, climate and culture are two important factors to organize the space.

The wall is made of mud, mud brick, stone or brick. The surrounding exterior wall is thick to protect the internal part of the house from the heat of the sun and desert storms. The external part is simple, while the internal part is glorious.

From the outside, it is impossible to see inside of the house. This is because the house has one main entrance with an octagonal vestibule that serves a lobby and corridor that leads to an open courtyard. For security and privacy, all windows overlook the courtyard, none of the house has external windows. The house has wind towers as ventilation for the whole building. The architecture of these traditional houses successfully adapts to the surrounding climate.

The house was usually designed according to functional terms and it also depended on the demands of the owner.

In line with the culture, these traditional houses mainly have two parts. One part is the internal section, called the andarooni. Andarooni is for the family members where they could do their affairs privately since wealthy families usually had visitors and friends coming, and they needed privacy for their own. The other part is external section, the birooni, where the head of the house sat and visitors were received.

To cure my curiosity on Kashan traditional house, I visited the old neighborhood of the city on Alavi Street where several traditional houses are located.

One of the famous and the frequently visited by tourist is the Boroujerdiha House. The Boroujerdiha House belonged to a wealthy merchant, Haj Seyed Hassan Natanzi, who was popularly called Boroujerdi as he brought merchandises from Borujerd, a city in Lorestan Province, Iran. He asked a talented architect Ali Maryam Kashani to build the house for his bride from the well-off Tabatabaei family. Built in 1857, Ali Maryam Kashani took 18 years to build the house, he was assisted by 25 laborers, painters and architects and 150 craftsmen were said to help him as well. The result was an authentic masterpiece of traditional Persian house.

After passing the octagonal vestibule of the lobby and the corridor, I was greeted with a beautiful, rectangular, central courtyard. It has a pool in the middle. The pool is flanked by some trees and shrubs on both sides. The house was plastered with subtle stucco works depicting flowers, fruits and figures. It has two parts: the northern half has the living quarters for wintertime, while in the southern half lies the living space for the summer.

The house has a ground floor, a first floor and a basement. I entered the hall room in the north that has five doors. The first floor of the house was for private rooms. Inside the hall, I was notably mesmerized with the beautiful wall

paintings by prominent royal painter of Qajar Dynasty, Kamal ol-Molk. The hall is also adorned by intricate, artistic carvings and relief. They were just really magnificent. This reception hall has a raised platform that would normally be used for important guests.

The hall has meshed windows on top as well as ventilation holes on the dome. The internal dome is decorated with Yazdibandi decorations, which are miniature arches within a bigger arch.

The other visitors could not help but shoot pictures with their cameras in the hall. I spent quite a while inside, enjoying the lovely reliefs and wall paintings.

Situated on a 1700-square-meter lot, the Boroujerdiha House is also famous for its unusual shape of wind towers that cool the temperature of the house.

The minimally altered house is now a museum that is open for public.

Before designing and building the Boroujerdiha house, architect Ali Maryam Kashani had earlier built the house for the Tabatabaei family. I visited the Tabatabaei House, located a walking distance away from the Boroujerdiha House. Just like in the Boroujerdiha House, the entrance is just two simple doors. For privacy and security, each door has a knocker that each belongs to men and women. The knocker for women has a lower sound, while the knocker for men has a higher sound. By recognizing the sound, the host would know whether the visitor was a man or a woman.

As I arrived in the major courtyard, I was instantly stunned with what I saw. The beautiful arched porches and the carvings and reliefs on the wall facing to the courtyard were dazzling. The courtyard has two rectangular ponds.

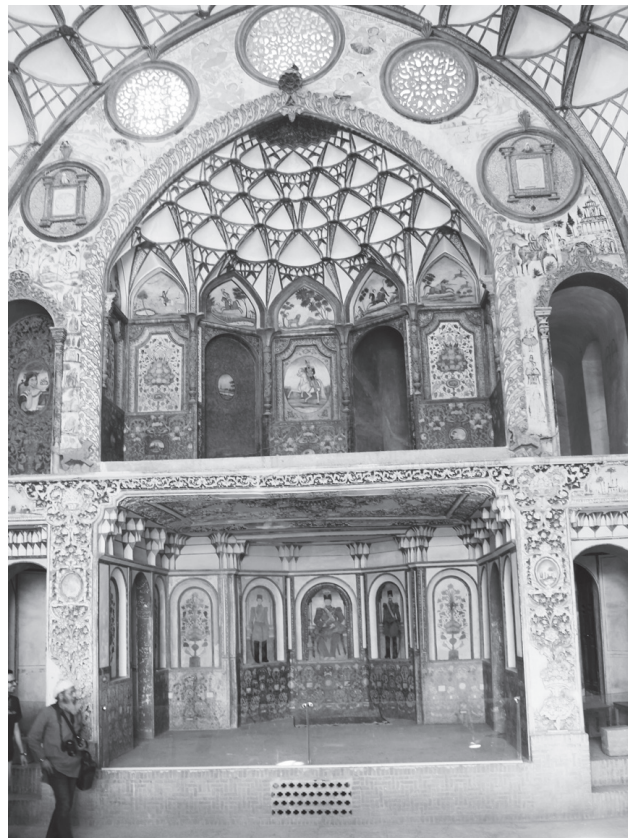
I went to the southern part of house, which is taller than the northern part. It has a semicircular facade with stucco carvings on the wall with decorated columns. The door is designed by a geometrical wooden frame and stained glass. Inside is a reception hall with royal parlor. The Yazdibandi decoration, paintings, and stucco works in the two courtyards on both sides of the hall are dramatic.

The northern part of the house is more private with stairs to the basement in upfront. I could get lost while exploring the house since there are many inter-sections and connecting rooms. Seeing most parts of the house, I could tell that the Tabatabaei family was very wealthy.

Before leaving, I stayed for a while in the major courtyard. My eyes browsed the whole house again. Now I believe a saying that Persian craftsmen could make gold out of dust.



In addition to its popularity as a center of Persian arts and crafts, the city of Kashan in Iran also boasts some of the best examples of traditional Persian houses for the desert climate. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah



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