




THE EVOLUTION OF RURAL TOURISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF IRAN

 Amir Hossein
Qezelbash^{1*}
Filippo Randelli²

^{1,2}Department of Economics and Business, University of Florence, Florence, Italy.

¹Email: amir.qezelbash@stud.unifi.it Tel: +393287555619

²Email: filippo.randelli@unifi.it



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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One of the types of modern tourism is rural tourism that has proceeded into a more complicated stage and now it is possible to imply various stages of development in developing countries like Iran. In this case, an evolutionary approach is proposed to carry out multilevel analysis of RT within a region, to the transition from a basic rural economy to a new economic formation, and then the evolutionary economic geography may be a suitable framework. The EEG explains economical transitions as a change from a historically dominant configuration to a new one by the interplay of processes at three various levels, micro (local), meso (regional), and macro (ISDB). The paper is to adjust the EEG approach to the study of RT. We discuss that in Iran the rural transition towards a tourism development was brought up by the sluggishness of the established rural configuration, less capability and subsequently misalignment of economically associated units, shortage of leadership in micro and meso levels are those important problems that have turned into factors disrupting RT development in Iran.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the spatial analysis of tourism economic development in rural areas of Iran. The literature review has never been used before in this context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural Tourism (RT) is no longer a minor agent of the rural economy, landscape, and social change and today many scholars consider it as capable to attract the attention of local, regional, national, and international policymakers (Hall, Roberts, & Mitchell, 2005). RT can contribute to the diversification of farming income (especially on small family farms), bring additional benefits into the rural economy, counteract emigration from rural areas, encourage an increase in cultural exchange between urban and rural areas, and enhance the traditional values of rural life, as well as contribute to the general diversification of the economy (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Telleschi, 1992).

For these reasons, also developing countries have included in their policy programs the goal of enhancing the rise of tourism in rural areas. For many developing countries, RT has become an important issue, allowing the local communities to share their natural environments with tourists seeking for more authentic experiences, while helping rural communities to diversify their sources of income, creating new jobs, and avoiding the movement of young people to urban areas or abroad (Artal-Tur, Briones-Peñalver, Bernal-Conesa, & Martínez-Salgado, 2019).

In this paper, we evaluate the role of RT in the evolution of rural areas in Iran. Due to changes in the Iranian countryside structure and new emerging demands from society, rural development has undergone an important

transformation process since the revolution 1979. With the support of Jihad (spontaneous people-driven agenda), the rural council elections were held in the country, and individuals were identified as members of the village council. However, these councils were more coordinator and supervisor by their nature, and executive affairs at the village level became suspended. Finally, the new law of the Islamic City and Village Councils was adopted in the year 1998 to carry out village planning. With the act of self-sustaining laws for civil offices, the opportunity for the elimination of managerial shortages at the rural level was provided. As a consequence, today RT has an opportunity to be developed in Iran. The goal of this paper is to highlight on the main steps of RT development in Iran.

RT studies have developed a rich palette of theoretical frameworks and they interest a growing number of scholar's worldwide (Béteille, 1996; Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2005; Randelli, Romei, & Tortora, 2014; Sanagustín Fons & Fierro, 2011; Su, 2011). For instance, RT is conceived as integrated with the economic, social, cultural, natural, and human local structures in which it takes place (Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). Other researchers have brought light on the mutual interrelationship between agriculture and tourism (Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005; Pearce, 1990; Walford, 2001). In this literature usually, it is taken for granted that RT emerges from rural facilities and that it has a strong relationship with agriculture. On the other hand, it is not clear how it evolves over time and why it is unevenly distributed around the world. In order to answer questions such as why there is a lack of managerial activities in Iranian rural regions? Or why some areas (e.g. Kerman province) are onward in the process of development of RT? Why the need for responsiveness to the emergence of rural tourism is less seen in the entire country?

The movement from a basic and traditional rural economy to a new economic specialization is not a linear process, as it includes experimentation, learning processes, new capabilities, new policies and procedures, adaptability, and reconfigurations. Also, the geographical dimension of the transition changes the background of every process. It follows that policymakers should consider interdependencies among local resources, actors, and the market networks as to adjust policies to the ongoing processes locally and globally. To reveal the dynamics and mechanisms that move towards specialization in tourism, this paper suggests drawing the analysis upon recent evolutionary economic geography (EEG) literature (Boschma & Martin, 2010). This approach could be replicated in other rural regions and the goal is to advise policymakers about the evolutionary path followed by the RT development. The present paper is structured as follows: in section two we introduce the theoretical framework; in section three we present the case study of Iran; in section four we report a multi-level analysis; some final remarks are reported in section 5.

2. AN EVOLUTIONARY FRAMEWORK FOR RT STUDIES

EEG has attracted increasing attention (Boschma & Martin, 2010; Frenken, 2007) and today is a stable framework in the context of geography and it is growing in the tourism studies (for a review see (Brouder, 2014). EEG is concerned with how the processes of path creation and path dependence interact to shape geographies of economic development and transformation (Boschma. & Martin, 2007). The notion of path dependence allows to give to the analysis a prominent historical dimension. The economic landscape does not tend towards some predefined unique equilibrium state or configuration, but is an open system that evolves in ways shaped by its past development paths (Martin & Sunley, 2006).

In order to reveal the transition process towards the development of tourism this paper emphasize on the analysis of past development paths within rural regions. The key concept is the rural configuration within a region, which concerns with production process techniques, farm organization, land use pattern, infrastructures and rural settlements (Randelli et al., 2014). A rural configuration meets the semi-coherent set of guidelines that orient and coordinate the activities of the rural actors. On the one hand, actors enact instantiate and draw upon rules such as cognitive routines and shared beliefs, capabilities and competences, lifestyles and user practices, favorable institutional arrangements and regulations, and legally binding contracts (Geels, 2011). For instance rural regions

of Iran could have the same specialization (e.g. wheat regions) or morphology (e.g. mountainous or hilly, desert regions) but generally different rural configurations. Therefore, a rural configuration address organizational routines, with “how” not with “what” has been produced or provided in a region.

By providing orientation to the activities of rural actor groups and agenda, a rural configuration is also rigid over time in the sense that is open to the process of change but innovations happen only incrementally. In evolutionary process terms, the deep structure of a rural configuration evolves through selection and retention mechanisms (Essletzbichler & Rigby, 2007). In this sense, RT may cause a change that happens firstly as an innovation at the micro-level, and only in a second stage, it might be applied for a change in the rural configuration, opening up a new evolutionary path. It follows that any top-down policy process could have a hard time to be successful. On the other hand, due to locked-in use patterns, the transition processes may stunt, and the change will not occur. In that case, the rural configuration structure is not free to change, and the transition towards the promotion of tourism has a hard time getting into gear.

Who drives the process of change in a specific space and time? EEG examines how the spatial structure of the economy emerges from the micro-behavior of individuals and firms. The economic landscape is the result of an evolutionary sequence in which innovations are selected because, for some reason, they were better than others were to the existing rural configuration (Boschma. & Frenken, 2006). As firms and agenda make choices at the micro-level, this article addresses to farmers and associated legal communities with their procedures over time. It is quite apparent that RT as a new innovative path has a difficult time to emerge if local farmers are not interested in moving it forward.

The selection environment also includes institutions, whose role is proportional to their power in the region (Boschma & Martin, 2010). In this paper, we will distinguish between institutions at the regional and national level from those at the macro-level. All of them may affect on the emergence of new paths at the micro-level of the firm, although, today in Iran the IBP (Islamic Banking Policy), operating through the Organization for Investment Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran, it has a prominent role in the rural development.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF RT IN IRAN

3.1. *Before and After 1979: The Dissolution of an Ancient Rural Configuration and the Slow Emergence of a Rural Renovation*

The creation process of the organization of Tourism, Handicrafts, and Cultural Heritage dates back to the year 1911. When the temporary king paid attention to the valuable cultural heritage of Iran as a public individual by traveling to European countries. The returning of Iranian scholars from European countries increased the level of knowledge and the importance of attending cultural heritage. Over the years, some legal acts were introduced in order to recognize the historical and cultural assets of Iran. In 1964, the ministry of Art and Culture was established and constituted a range of managerial duties into the realm of cultural heritage. Meanwhile, royal palaces were turned into cultural centers. Before the Land Reform (1962-71), traditional management, non-state, grassroots, and participatory management of villages was ruled and well managed within rural areas of Iran. On the contrary, after land reforms, the traditional management system disappeared and the government attempted to establish various governmental agencies and organizations in order to compensate for a managerial shortage in the countryside. The new institutions take over new responsibilities faced to rural area management, but the lack of integration, coordination, and synergy between them was problematic (Rezvani & Moradi, 2019).

The foundation of socio-economical agriculture increasingly influences land-use patterns. As in many other countries of the world, until the Land Reform the rural configuration was based on sharecropping. In the case of Iran, sharecropping was carried out individually and in-group.

The social consequences of the unequal distribution of land led to a distinct lack in the productivity of agriculture. Land reform in the first phase (1962-64) changed the organizational structure of land use and the

cultivation remained untouched during these reform phases. Limiting rural property to the size of one village caused an immediate availability of lands for farmers. More than one million farmers benefited from this second phase of the land reform and its legislation. Then "integration phase of the Iranian land reform" was introduced to extend the use of agricultural machinery and the increase of productivity (Planck, 1962). While many farms, corporations had success in achieving higher productivity, indeed for agro-business firms; the harmful effects of the Reform were much more prominent, including the dissolution of a significant number of smallholdings. Established firms of village lands, destruction of so many villages to the resettlement of their population, an even higher number of unemployed farmers (Daftary, 1973).

A political event in the year 1979 led to considerable organizational changes in managerial performance. Anyway, due to insufficient knowledge and low education, there was a lack of managerial capacity in every section of the government, especially in rural areas. With the support of Jihad (spontaneous people-driven agenda), the rural council elections were held all over the country and local leaders were identified as members of the village council.

Finally, the new law of the Islamic City and Village Councils was adopted in the year 1998, establishing a prominent role for Village Councils as self-sustaining civil conducted institutions and contributing to reducing managerial shortages at the rural level (Rezvani & Moradi, 2019). In the early 1990s, Iran gradually started also the transition from a strong Centralism to a free market environment (Abazari & Parnian, 2014).

3.2. Since 2000: The Rise of RT in Iran

Since 2000, the tourism sector has started to grow all over the country, although nowadays none of the official sectors of government could provide reliable data able to distinguish between domestic or foreign tourists. The most updated statistics point at 6 million of overnights stays by late 2017 (Statistical Yearbook, 2017).

Revitalizing historical monuments and creating employment in rural places is the top priority of the Cultural Heritage Organization. Consequently, the Minister of the Organization started to invest on projects able to boost the rural economy. In 2008, the program of Tourism Specified Areas was announced in order to implement and foster the provisions of the Government's Fourth Five-Year Plan. The program was targeting several rural villages of particular interest for the development of tourism. According to the program, see Figure 1 the two provinces of Tehran and Isfahan are the most populated areas of targeted villages. These villages are in a geographical area in which there is one or more or a set of historical, natural, and cultural attractions that, according to the Planner, will provide an incentive for travel and accommodation.

The Office of Tourism for Specified Areas and Infrastructure is responsible to collaborate with the relevant units of the organization in order to provide the necessary credit for the establishment of infrastructure and services in these areas by the non-governmental sector. One of the most critical issues in the path of development of targeted villages is a vast bureaucracy in issuing a license.

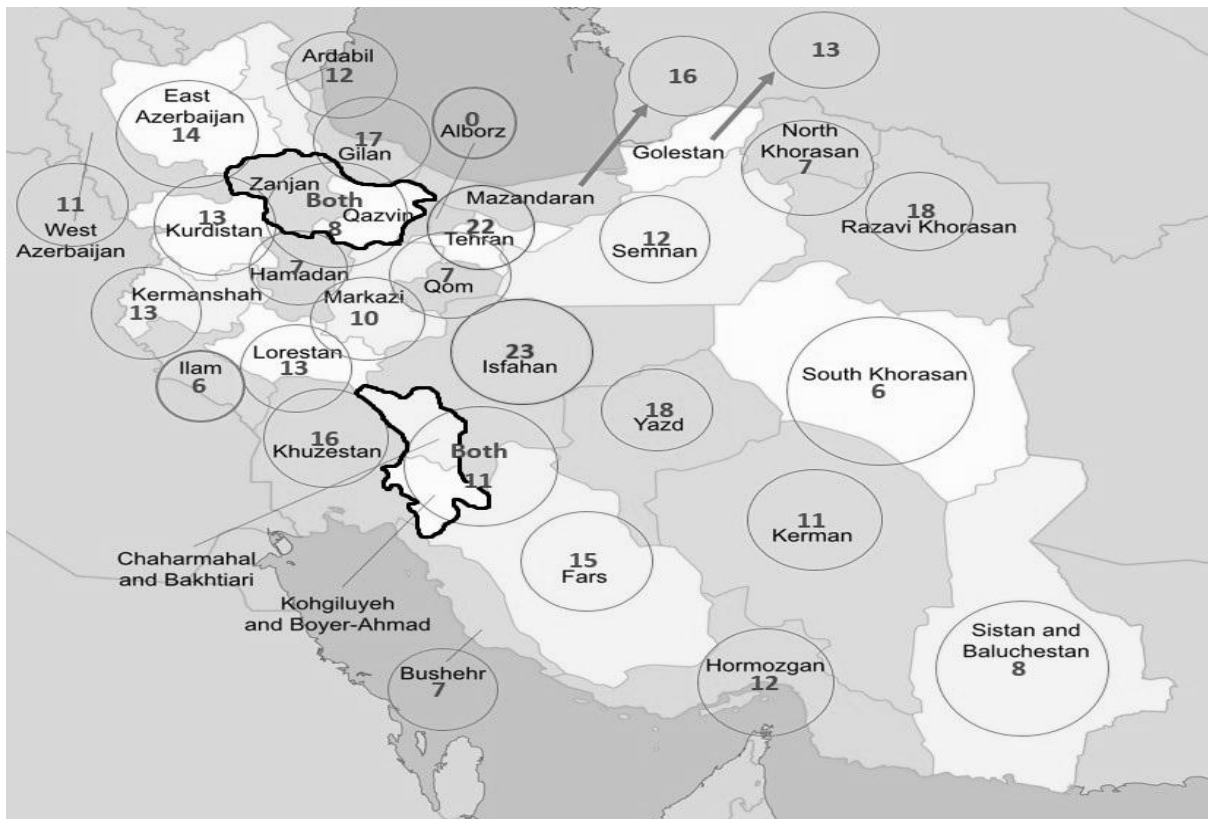


Figure-1. Number of targeted villages.

Source: Statistical Yearbook (2017).

Besides the Government's Fourth Five-Year Plan, we have then the Agency of Local Authorities that, together with private investor can decide to develop tourism accommodation.

Among the different type of accommodation, eco-lodges are typical of rural areas as they represent the rural customs and culture of rural areas in Iran. Over these years, the number of eco-lodges was increasing up to more than 1,000 units see Table 1. Most of eco-lodges are mainly situated in suburban areas close to monumental places. The data shows that the identified purposes did not correspond precisely with the cultural values express by the central Government (targeted villages). The case of Isfahan is emblematic: it has the highest number of eco-lodges among Iran regions but none of them is located in the targeted villages. The authorities responsible for the construction of residences (who can be private investors) do not care about MCTH that has planned and approved its funding. The local community is not well justified in constructing such accommodations so that the goal of this program has been derailed by its main path.

The lack of cultural-environmental education for the indigenous community is the main reason. Officials of the tourism organization can provide international standards in this regard, as well as the establishment of active monitoring sectors on the on-going activities. Following with training of expert assessors, they provide a platform for the development of these units.

In order to prepare the transition toward the development of RT in rural areas of Iran, there was the need of preparing local actors to the implementing of eco-lodges. Local actors are aware of their historical, natural, and cultural resources but they have not a background for tourism development. Consequently, the goal of developing RT was facing with the resistance of the local people.

Table-1. Number of eco-lodges in Iran.

Line	Province	Population	Eco Lodges	Rooms	Employees	Beds	Eco-Lodge in targeted villages
1	Easter Ajerbaijan	3909652	39	-	-	-	-
2	Western Azerbaijan	3265219	5	8	9	36	3
3	Ardebil	1270420	2	48	26	144	1
4	Ilam	580158	9	18	32	225	2
5	Alborz	2712400	2	10	10	225	1
6	Isfahan	5120850	262	1787	855	9147	-
7	Boushehr	1163400	6	17	16	65	-
8	Tehran	13267637	2	7	10	35	1
9	Chahar Mahal Bakhtiyari	947763	20	51	27	178	4
10	Khuzestan	4710509	1	7	4	40	-
11	Southern Khorasan	768898	26	142	58	690	7
12	Razavi Khorasan	6434501	19	114	89	685	10
13	Northern Khorasan	863092	22	72	55	380	10
14	Zanjan	1057461	43	17	22	78	1
15	Sistan and Baluchistan	2775014	16	57	47	1329	-
16	Semnan	702360	55	214	114	1183	-
17	Fars	4851274	58	253	231	1113	-
18	Qazvin	1273761	6	23	18	142	3
19	Qom	1292283	1	4	6	16	-
20	Kordestan	1603011	2	7	6	32	2
21	Kermanshah	1952434	6	26	27	140	-
22	Kerman	3164718	210	695	352	4244	-
23	Kohgeloyeh o' Boyerahmad	713052	1	7	2	30	-
24	Gilan	2530696	7	22	21	70	5
25	Golestan	1868619	17	45	51	247	4
26	Lorestan	1760649	12	65	63	660	-
27	Mazandaran	3283582	70	255	212	1011	20
28	Markazi	1429475	4	19	14	78	-
29	Hormozgan	1776415	6	29	30	299	-
30	Hamedan	1758268	12	56	36	245	2
31	Yazd	1138533	79	445	181	1296	8
Total	-		1020	4520	2631	23896	82

New routines have not yet been able to match within local communities. Investors and non-indigenous authorities need to communicate to get the support of the local community for the support of Central Government's programs. According to us, the familiarity of external investors with the experiences of the local community could have made the process of developing tourism in rural areas smoother.

4. A MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

In this paper, we will distinguish between institutions at the Micro, Meso, and Macro levels. Rural development requires alignment among the three different levels.

The aforementioned misalignment between the MCTH policy goals and the development of eco-lodges at the regional level is due to the lack of comprehensive intersections between the managerial agenda. Mainly, shortage of mentorship among associated organizations specifically the Organization of Cultural and Tourism, Handicraft to navigate the measures after they rolled out the procedures of establishing eco-lodges. An important critical issue

was bureaucracy in issuing the license of the establishment by MCTH and unconfirmed investors by related local and provincial units.

Furthermore, the MCTH should consider that at a micro level the village council is the closest organ to the body of the village people. One of the main roles of Village and Urban council is to provide for the implementation and to assist in the preparation of programs and to coordinate the advancement of affairs in the production, industrial and agricultural units, councils composed of representatives of workers and peasants, and other staff and managers, and in training, administrative units. Services, and the like, consist of councils composed of members of these units. Law should determine the manner of formation of these councils and the scope of their duties and powers. This principle directly notes the necessity of focusing on productiveness on different aspects of rural areas mainly, tourism and services products.

At the meso level it is the Handicraft and Tourism Cultural Heritage Organization (Partnership with Agricultural Bank). At the meso level the link between Agriculture Bank and MCTH, ranges of similar principles have been provided. This can lead to probable misalignments in further. Organizational delegation as one of the paths of making ease of current measures will not well come along. In this case, enforcing limited legitimacy should be highly focused and considered in the service structure of each of these two organs. On the other hand, there is not any supplementary communication of these two sectors. Regulation amendments and reduction in some tasks must be in top priority to diminish current misalignment.

At the macro level: Islamic Development Bank. It can be seen as kind of interrelation between Agriculture Bank and Islamic Development Bank as an operating body in macro level. The task nature of these two Banks indicates a significantly similar performance and command that it needs improvements in the management. As a consequence, it lacks in a better bilateral connection.

Any further step of the tourism development in rural areas should be managed by the involvement of the three levels. The evolution of RT in Iran is then hindered first by a lack of integration among the three levels that bring to a misalignment between policy programs and local agency.

A second crucial feature of RT development is to pay attention to the potential demand. Who are the tourists interested in the “targeted villages”? Governments often ignore this pre-condition analysis and do not prepare the local community to participate in decision-making. If we want to develop RT in rural peripheral regions of developing countries, we have to reduce several gaps, from infrastructures to cultural gaps. As a result, the acquaintance of tourists region and the motivations to visit the “targeted villages” have been weak (Rezvani & Moradi, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Tourism development in the current situation of rural areas in Iran has not been able to be as effective in the economic development of these areas (Taghdisi, Varesi, Ahmadian, & Asgari, 2015). However, until now, the development of rural areas has been unmatched by somewhat unplanned programs. Uncertainty and lack of proper communication between the local community and non-indigenous people can be the reason for the weak policies from the government and its agents, organizations, and institutions to supply appropriately. When a rural community does not intend to accept a new type of routine or is not supported in the transition then it is easy a mismatch with well-documented and accurate programs. In the matter of managing organizational tasks, the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization have failed to perform tasks that could be delegated to other relevant institutions and organizations to improve and facilitate the progress of rural areas. The creation of a bipolar and fault type between the local community and the country's executive system is the outcome of an imbalance in addressing the needs, especially the host community. The exchange of knowledge and technology and the proper understanding of adaptation will not have the operational capability. The cognitive and absorptive capacity of the villagers and social classes is a kind tensile, which depends heavily on intellectually economic facilitators. In an

evolutionary process that entails new routine such as tourism for rural communities, also education and the learning process as a whole have a key role. The decisive point of this evolutionary approach for RT is that more success of tourism within rural areas is not only dominated by micro-level processes but also by the improvements at the meso and macro level.

In the absence of any social transformation in the way of rural livelihoods, in particular, the diversification of agricultural products and the creation of accommodations, there will be no structuralism transformation. Clearly, we might state that economic decisions are made of societal decisions. Organizations and economic units have been active in this area to increase the income level of rural families and to achieve socio-economic maturity. One of the most important programs was the targeted subsidiary scheme, which was approved and adopted by the parliament under the Fifth Development Plan. However, cash subsidies have had little effect on the economic recovery process for the villagers. It appears to be an essential issue with weaknesses in the implementation of this program. The excessive slope in the price of commodities, as well as energy carriers, has reduced the power of subsidies (Sajasi, 2016).

According to the decision-making model identified that there were three kinds of approachable initiatives that villagers prioritized to advance positively rustic changes: Investing in livestock activities, Investment in land integration and monolith (Sharecropping), and Investment in providing conversable and creative industries of agriculture and livestock (Sajasi, 2014). The results revealed that villagers pursued different goals in the process of improving their lives by using subsidies and showed a considerable contribution to any participation of which lead to rural development. The villagers identified conversable and creative industries of agriculture as a priority, which is directly related to investing in the accommodations sector.

To disconnect tourism from agriculture can be considered other misalignments between micro, meso, and macro levels. The organizational bulk as a thinker has not yet recognized the shortages, because they do not speculate the trend of people's needs in rural areas. So then no innovation in the organization nor among local firms and individuals will be felt. Subsequently, no delegation is expected in organizations, because it requires a considerable level of expertise and knowledge into the research frame to attract more human resources that are expert. Based on the above decision-making model, it is obvious that villagers do not expect to address investments in creative industries as the priority, since they need to firstly earn a living through livestock activities.

Furthermore, due to the development gap of Iranian cities compared to those in developed countries (saturated urbanization) in terms of service delivery, there is no significant demand that could affect the RT business market. Therefore, different speeds in urbanization also cause the average growth of RT in Iran. Migration to cities in recent years has also disrupted the distribution of services (reverse migration is not entirely stopped yet).

In conclusion, Iran's relatively enormous gap from developed countries makes the need for the emergence of RT less crucial. Furthermore, any top-down strategy in the development of RT has a very low probability to be successful. In the developing countries, RT should be developed together with agriculture and in particular with the involvement of local communities. From an evolutionary perspective, policymakers should support existing micro-foundations rising in some rural areas. In the case of Iran, there are several minor cases involved in a preliminary stage of RT development that might be supported by policymakers. For instance, Abyaneh (Central Iran), Hajij and Oraman (both in the west of Iran) villages are welcoming tourists from the rest of the country. In these regions, traditional festivals, ritual arts, and performances of ancient cultivated manners of agricultural productions on the land farms are a preliminary local resource capable to attract domestic or foreign tourists.

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