



“Contrary to popular opinion, Iran is not a conservative or dangerous country. It is a land of caring people and beautiful architecture,” says **Manish Dikshit**

We architects are a unique lot. We like to travel, see new cultures and be away from our comfort zones. More often than not, it helps keep our creative skills alive. I personally feel it opens up my imagination and helps me learn of new ideas and designs. My last trip was one such adventure which is going to stay in my memory for a long time to come.

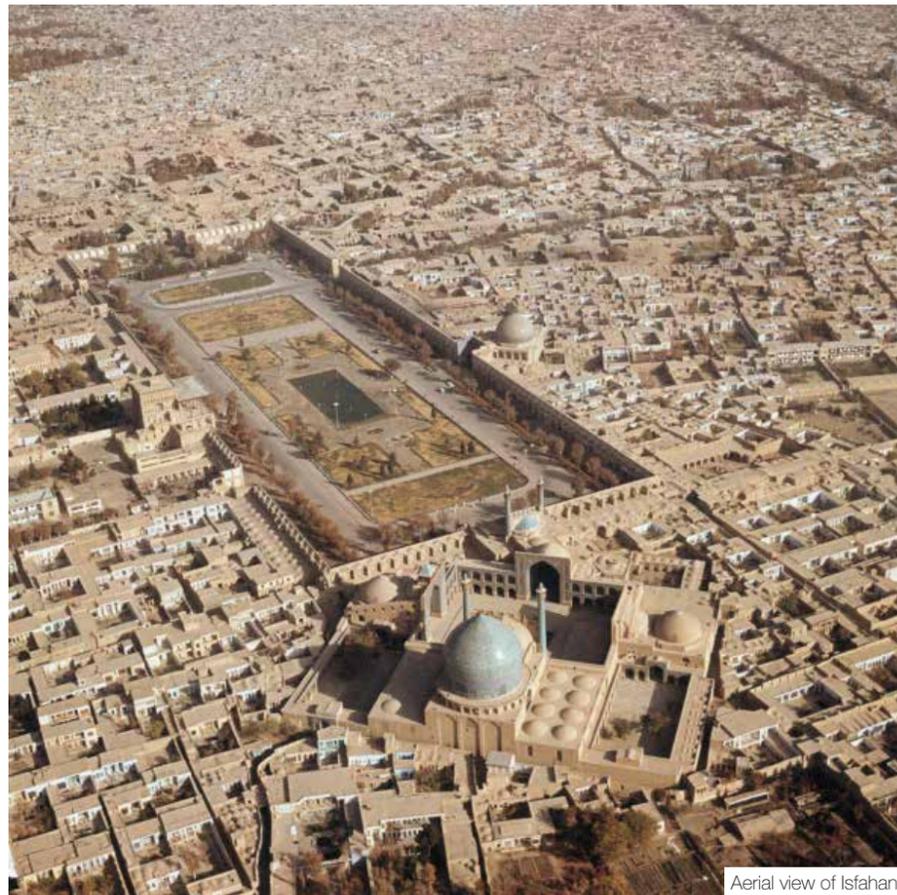
Iran, or the Islamic Republic of Iran as it is officially called, was the destination I recently visited. It was some work assignments that gave me an opportunity to see this beautiful

Persian Empire. ‘Exotic’, ‘dark’, ‘dangerous’, ‘strict’, were some terms which people used to describe it even before I had my tickets booked. But I never found that a reason to not travel to this country.

My trip was to be two days of work and seven days of travel to three architecturally important cities of Iran: Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan.

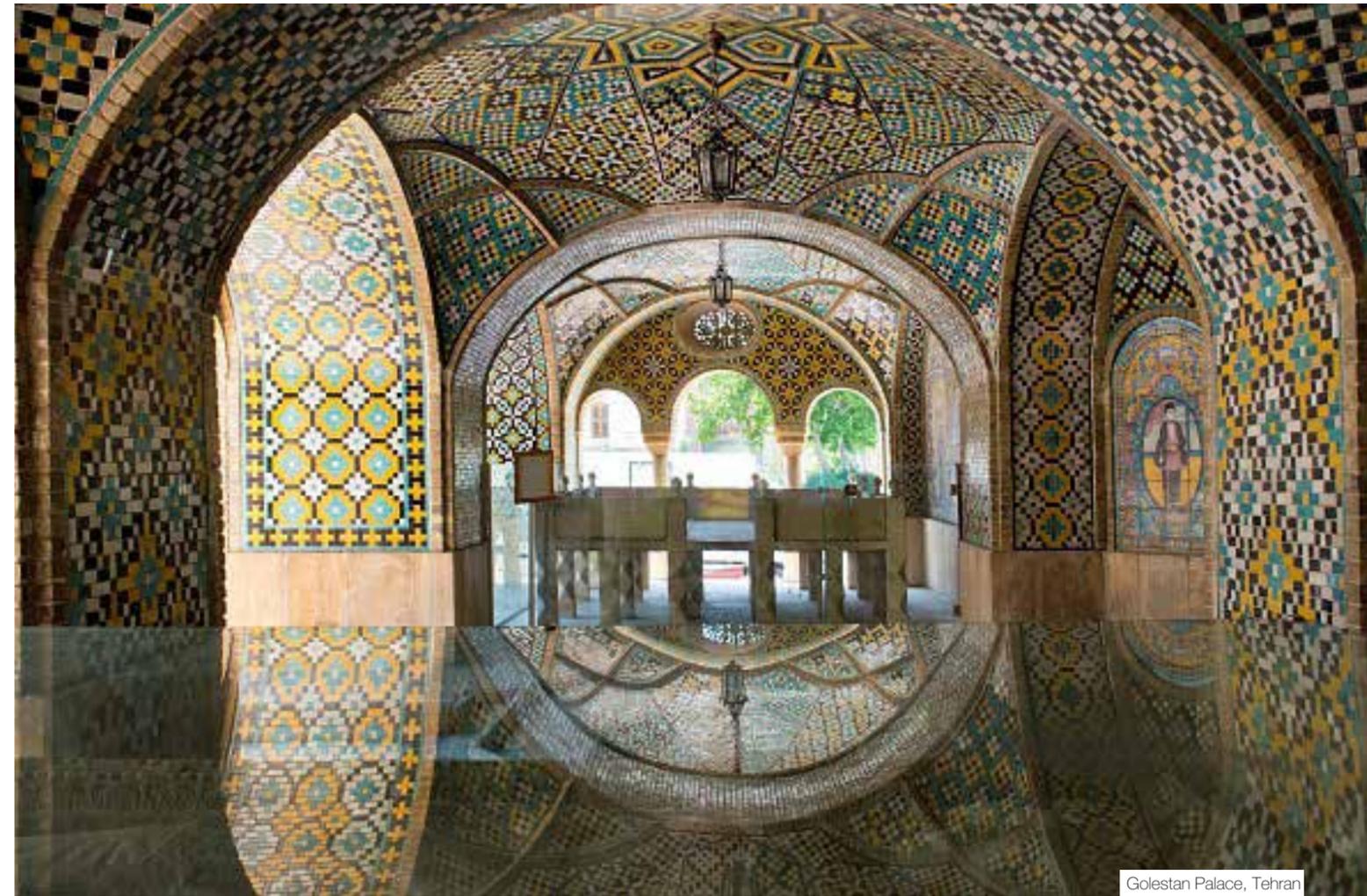
Tehran

This city is the political capital of Iran, and has



Aerial view of Isfahan

Manish Dikshit is one of the two partners at the helm of Aum Architects, a Mumbai-based firm. Prior to founding his own practise, Dikshit worked with eminent architects like Hafeez Contractor and Nozer Wadia, as well as working with D.I.D. Consultants. Apart from his work as an architect and interior designer, Dikshit also served as a guest lecturer at the Rachna Sansad Institute of Interior Design.



Golestan Palace, Tehran

a mix of its traditional and modern traditions infused in it. Despite the tiring overnight flight, I was very surprised as I landed at Imam Khomeini International Airport. Never has the media shown us this side of Iran. India has always been a friend of Iran, so our media has had plenty of liberty to showcase the better side of the story. I leave that to the political bloggers to talk about.

The airport itself is like any other international airport in the world, with ramps, shopping and parking lots. The minute I took my ride from the airport, which is an hour and half away from the main city, the toll way was at par with any of the roads I have travelled around the world, with flyovers and bridges covering the way.

On the way to my hotel, Homa International, I came across few modern mosques under construction. One of them was Tehran’s Grand Mosalla. I was told it is being built as the second largest mosque in terms of number of people that can pray inside it. It sits on a 650,000 sq m site, 450,000 sq m of which will

be a covered area on completion. Neither of the famous Saudi Arabian mosques in Medina and Mecca, Islam’s holiest sites, are more than 400,000 sq m. Medina’s covered space is only 100,000 sq m. The Grand Mosalla is the creation of architect Parviz Moayed Ahd, 80, who divides his time between Paris and Tehran.

Construction began six years ago. Only 25 per cent of the complex is completed, but 80,000 cubic metres of concrete have been poured and 30,000 tonnes of steel used so far. One of its prayer halls spans 50,000 sq m, with ceilings 14 m high. The mosque’s dome will be 57 m in diameter and will be crowned by a stylized arch spanning 130 m.

As my cab zoomed past it, its sheer size was exhilarating. As we closed towards the north of Tehran, the mountains surrounding the capital created a photographic backdrop for the cityscape. One can see modern architecture along with few vernacular designs along the way to city centre.

I couldn’t but help notice that my hotel’s

architecture felt very similar to the Oberoi hotel in Bombay in the 1980’s in terms of the wooden panelled hallway, antique chandeliers and the smell of rose wood. They have maintained the pre-revolution structures so well that one can feel the bell bottom age around them.

My first day went by with walks around the hotel, seeing the by-lane residential apartments which, according to me, were overwhelming. These buildings were all clad with local marble (sold as Italian marble in India). Some of the designs were so luxurious with cast iron gates and balcony railings, large lobbies and French wooden windows that they would give our Indian architects a complex.

For the other two days, I did typical traveller things, visiting some of Tehran’s tourist famous traps.

Shiraz

On the fourth day, I took an early morning flight to Shiraz, the cultural capital of Iran.



Vank Cathedral, Isfahan

Shiraz is known as the city of poets, literature, wine and flowers. It is also considered by many Iranians to be the city of gardens. The city's municipality and other related institutions have initiated restoration and reconstruction projects.

Some of the most recent projects have been the complete restoration of the Arg of Karim Khan and of the Vakil Bath, as well as a comprehensive plan for the preservation of the old city quarters. Other noteworthy initiatives include the total renovation of the Qur'an Gate and the mausoleum of the poet Khwaju Kermani, both located in the Allah-u-Akbar Gorge, as well as the restoration and expansion of the mausoleum of the famous Shiraz-born poets Hafiz and Saadi.

I could feel the art all around me the minute I landed. That day, I got a chance to visit the tomb of Hafez, the great Sufi poet who influenced and shaped Iranian art culture from frescos to great music. The geometric landscape reminded me of my history classes in architecture and how it came to India during the Mughal rule. My personal choice of landscape has always been a free flowing form, like in nature. But with such great structures, symmetrical designs in landscape enhanced the buildings' appearance.

Persepolis

After visiting a few other monuments, it was time for me to move to my next destination: Persepolis, the ancient city and birthplace of Zoroastrianism. Never had I imagined the small Parsi population in my city were from this strong empire. The sheer size of these structures was exhilarating, with some columns carved out of a single stone. The



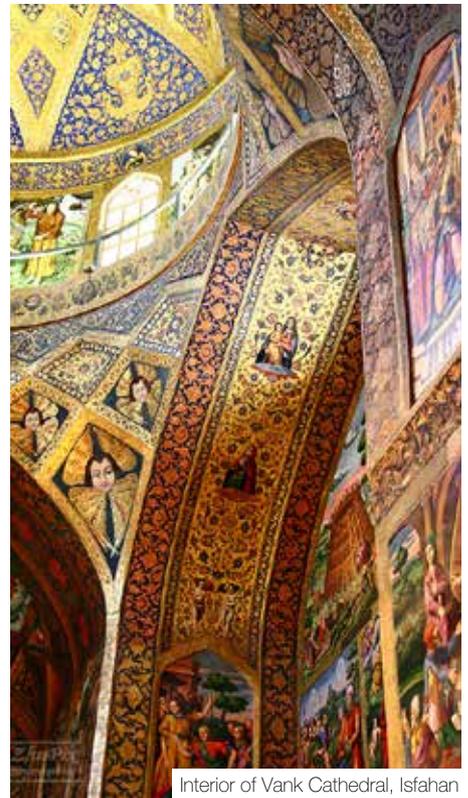
Arches of Khaju Bridge, Tehran

scale and proportion was overwhelming. From Persepolis, I went to the town of Isfahan, which is in the centre of Iran.

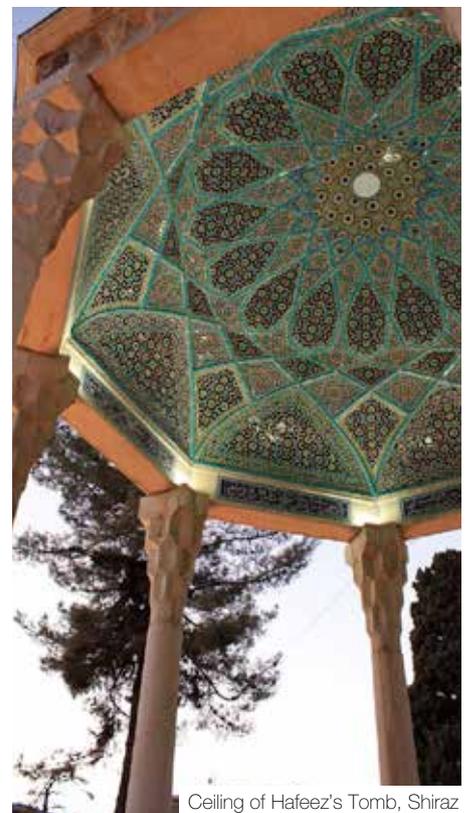
Isfahan

Three important things I did in Isfahan were to visit the Khaju Bridge, the main bazaar square and the Armenian Church. The Khaju Bridge was beautiful, reflecting the lights through the river that flowed under it. I was amazed at the perfect array of arches and the technology used for water harvesting. According to the locals, the main bazaar square is supposed to be the second largest square in the world after Beijing. The square has everything one could expect in a modern day shopping mall; clothes, food, entertainmen and a mosque. Even the king's palace was part of this enormous square.

Thus ended my trip. Contrary to popular opinion, Iran is not a conservative or a dangerous country, but a country with caring people, beautiful architecture and delicious cuisine. The memory of beautiful landscaped gardens and Islamic dome architecture will remain with me for a long while.



Interior of Vank Cathedral, Isfahan



Ceiling of Hafeez's Tomb, Shiraz