Nowruz marks the beginning of spring

ONE OF THE OLDEST IRANIAN TRADITIONS

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



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THE PERSIAN NEW YEAR

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How the Haft Sin table is set

Iranians celebrate the Persian New Year (Nowruz) to mark the beginning of spring. This usually occurs on 20th or 21st March, depending on astronomical observations.

Nowruz (or "eyd-i sal-i now") is one of the oldest Iranian traditions. It literally means "New Day" or "New Time" and can be tracked back to the lunar and epic period of ancient Iran.

It originated in Zoroastrianism but it is observed by diverse communities in the world with different religious backgrounds for thousands of years mainly in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

The concept of celebration is inspired from the beauty of love between the Creator (Ahura Mazda) and his creation, the material world. Nowruz is a bond which is renewed at the beginning of every year.

The beginning of spring conjures colourful images in the mind as being the time when flowers flourish and trees awaken from their winter sleep. It brings happiness and reflects light after a grey and cold winter.

I

KHANE TEKANI



to treat guests on the first two weeks

Jews, Zoroastrians and Armenians in Iran, Turkey, Armenia and other countries in Central Asia celebrate Nowruz with the same passion and interest as Muslims in Iran.

When I was very young in Iran, the preparation for Nowruz began early in March by growing lentil or wheat seeds (called Sabzeh) followed by house cleaning (khane tekani). This custom is seen metaphorically by cultivating the Sabzeh and cleansing the house from any negative energies remaining from the winter.

The spirit of newness and freshness signals a new beginning in every aspect of life. Everybody in the family especially children should be dressed with new clothes and shoes. There is a rush to get the best bargains during the New Year shopping (kharid-i Nowruzi). It is a family affair and an exciting period in shopping centers and bazars. The roads are busy and traffic jams increase in the weeks before Nowruz.

New Year shopping also includes buying a variety of fruits, cakes, sweets, and dried fruits (Ajil) to treat guests on the first two weeks at the beginning of the New Year. It is a booming time for confectionary and sweet shops.

It is also a tradition that elders of the family give gifts (Eydi) to younger members of the family, especially children. It is common to hand out shiny new coins and banknotes as Eydi. I remember one year when I was 16 years old, my father gave us books as a gift to encourage us to read.

A few weeks before Nowruz, Haji Firuz, a man with a black coloured face, dressed in a red outfit, appears in the streets with a group of musicians to make funny shows informing people that Nowruz and happiness is coming.

II

CHARSHANBE SOURI



They represent Sky, Guidance, Fire, Water, Plants, Animals and Fertility

In the evening, on the last Wednesday of the year before Nowruz, it is the time for bonfires and fire jumping. This ancient ceremony is called "charshanbe souri". Members of the family gather around a fire, eating and drinking. Everybody is encouraged to jump over the fire saying: "Give me your redness and take away my yellow sickly appearance". Fire had a particular significance in ancient Iranian culture during the Zoroastrian era. What used to be a prayer ceremony is now mainly a game played by children, in relation to the use of pyrotechnic materials.

The festivity of Nowruz at the beginning of spring customarily begins by placing a special traditional tablecloth on the floor or on a table. It is called the Haft-Sin table. Haft-Sin literally means seven 'S's, which relates to seven items starting with the letter S in the Persian language.

The Haft-Sin items usually include: Sabzeh (symbolising rebirth), Samanu (germinated wheat, symbolising affluence), Senjed (the dried fruit of the oleaster tree, symbolising love), Sir (garlic, symbolising medicine), Sib (apple, symbolising beauty and health), Somaq (berries, symbolising sunrise) and Serkeh (vinegar, symbolising age and patience).

The Haft Sin also includes a Mirror (lightness), Quran (for refreshing the bond with our creator but other faiths may have Avesta, Toreh or Bible), lighted candles (representing goodness and warmth), rose water, wheat, goldfish (in a bowl of clear water) and eggs. They represent Sky, Guidance, Fire, Water, Plants, Animals and Fertility.

III

SABZI POLO MAHI



reshteh polo is traditional

Iranians have a special taste for what they eat on each occasion. Sabzi Polo Mahi is a traditional cuisine on Iranian New Year's Eve. It consists of fish and rice mixed with herbs. Reshteh Polo is one of the favorite dishes on the first day of the New Year and consists of rice macaroni and chicken meatballs.

The family gets together around the Haft Sin and prays to God for health and prosperity in the coming year continuing this until the clock turns to announce the precise time of the beginning of spring and New Year.

Since schools are closed for two weeks and most offices are closed at least for three days, families and relatives get a chance to visit each other and enjoy the festivities.

IV

A GREAT HOLIDAY PERIOD



symbolising rebirth

Nowruz is also a great holiday period. Everybody takes advantage to go sightseeing in other cities in Iran. The most popular cities are Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Yazd and Kerman. Those who are interested in a pilgrimage go to the cities of Qom and Mashhad. This is a very busy period in Iran and roads are packed with travellers from all around the country.

The Nowruz celebration comes to an end on the 13th day of Faravardin (1st April), the first month of the New Year. Families go to parks and the countryside for Syzdeh-bedar to enjoy the good spring weather in the last days of a long holiday period. On this day, young girls and unmarried women traditionally tie the blades of Sabzeh, wishing to get married in the new year. It is a custom to throw Sabzeh into the running water, which symbolises cleansing sins and taking away all worries and concerns of the past year.

As I have said, Nowruz is a family occasion to celebrate changes in the season and travel around. If you wish to visit Iran during Nowruz, it is best to arrive a few days before the New Year starts and stay in one of the big cities so that you can enjoy Iranian hospitality and visit historical places. But getting around is time-consuming. Roads are very busy and traffic jams can last for several hours.

And one of the things that you should plan is to be there for the hospitality of Nowruz.

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

Following the nuclear talks between Iran and world powers, the visa restrictions to Iran have been lifted and it is possible to get a visa to visit Iran through tour operators and travel agencies.

If you wish to visit Iran during Nowruz, it is best to arrive a few days before the New Year starts and stay in one of the big cities so that you can enjoy Iranian hospitality and visit historical places.

For more information about tourism in Iran, click here or go to www.tourismiran.ir/en/

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