

NEWSLETTER

INTERNATIONAL

 ENGLISH VERSION

IRAN



LIVING AND WORKING IN IRAN



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“HERE IN IRAN IT IS IMPORTANT TO SHOW THINGS ON YOUR OWN EXAMPLE”

What made you come to Tehran?

Lufthansa employees change the place of their business once in four or five years. Previously, I worked in Bucharest and Baku, and was responsible for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan – I am kind of an experienced roamer. The current agreement remains valid till 2019, however, it may be prolonged.

I was on a short trip to Iran earlier in 2003. Last year I was offered to take this position, i.e. twelve years after I had an opportunity to make my first impression.

I was very positively impressed by the changes I saw after my first visit before taking the new job.

In general, there are two types of employees at Lufthansa. Some like such spots as New York, London or Paris. For me they are less attractive because of the proximity to the domestic market of Germany, which is felt in the established processes. Thus, I prefer the spots that are rather “challenging”, like to look behind the scenes, learn local customs, and meet interesting people and cultures.

How do you live in Iran, how is your everyday life in Tehran?

I was fortunate to get a free flat in the apartment house of my predecessor. Otherwise expats have to live in a hotel for several months before they find something that fits them.

I am married but my wife and both kids have not come to Iran with me. Every 14 days I fly back home. I work ten days in a row and then have four days off in Germany. Of course, it is not the most common way of living but it suits me very well. My kids are not too small, which is important. It would not work if they were babies. I have a driver assigned for the purpose of corporate security. However, I am about to rewrite my license so that I could drive myself with regard to some limitations. However, a driver is required for my job. The distance between the Imam-Khomeini airport and my apartment is 70 km!

Driving is no big deal if you avoid rush hours. It is also a huge difference whether you take the driver’s or passenger’s seat. If you move in a flow, you can control everything on your own, and it’s ok.

People respect each other despite traffic jams. There are no honking horns when people get into a jam and do not move at all; quite unlike in Baku for instance. Everyone moves on, without crowding, and everything works despite the chaotic appearance.

How do you spend your leisure time, what opportunities do you have in Tehran and Iran?

I do not have lot of leisure time with my working schedule. You can do skiing in Tehran till April. The neighboring mountains have a height of up to 4,000 m.

The country has lots of landscapes, from a desert to the Caspian Sea that looks like the Black Forest back in Germany. The cultural potential is extremely high, like in Shiraz or Isfahan.

The Iranian culture is one of the eldest in the world. Nowadays, Europeans show more interest in this region. There is a boom in precious student trips and rising business interest after the lifting of the sanctions.



Stefan Verseemann

is Station Manager Iran with Lufthansa Group. He has been living in Tehran since September 2015.

Therefore, we have increased our offer by more than two times within half a year, introduced larger aircrafts, increased flight frequency, and created new routes. Thus, new flights will be arranged from and to Munich, and Vienna will be used for flights to and from Isfahan.

There are restaurants and shopping malls in Tehran, where you might think as if you were in a European metropolis. You may find nearly anything there.

The religious legislation sets on some limitations. There are no public swimming pools, men only are admitted to football stadiums. However, one can see that the country with great caution becomes slightly more open.

Alcohol is strictly prohibited, however, there are tea rooms that are open for nearly 24 hours a day. Some Armenian restaurants offer alcohol but for Christians only and in very moderate doses.

Women probably feel somewhat restricted. The rules are not as strict as in Saudi Arabia. Some women wear burka and chador but rather for their own religious reasons; they are not a must. I do not know how it is in other cities and towns of the country though the environment in Tehran feels to be kind of looser. Tehran is more open for the world than one may think.

Do you have often to fight bureaucracy in the course of your professional activities?

In this regard, it depends on how you treat it. You reap what you sow. You shall never behave like an arrogant European. Of course, you would lose any respect. If you discuss certain problems in a due manner, you will always find a reasonable form of cooperation.

However, it is not like Europe as you have to plan significantly more time for discussions and issue solving with other people. Sometimes, you get a replacement for your contact persons. The new contact persons know nothing of your problem, and you have to get back to the very beginning with your problem.

The manner of cooperation with the airport has positively changed within the last months. Both of us – Lufthansa Group and the airport – together want to improve the services rendered to passengers. We also benefit from the fact that this year Lufthansa celebrates its 60th anniversary since it started flights to and from Iran.

What kind of experience have you gained from cooperation with Iranian employees?

Iran has a good educational system. The young generation is proactive and eager to study. I am very impressed with our employees; everyone works flat out to achieve our common targets.

Here in Iran it is important to show things on your own example. Then people will stay after working hours if it is required to complete the task. At first I had to promote employees' initiatives and motivated them to suggest improvements.

They did not expect the chef to ask for their feedback and suggestions instead of giving instruction. I always say: "I am a foreigner and need suggestions of local employees". Currently, I am extremely pleased with commitment of our team of 20 persons.

What would you recommend Europeans who are interested in Iran?

Do not judge Iran based on newspaper reports. All Europeans who come here return with a completely different positive impression of the country. It is not like the Arabian world; it is a common mistake to mix up the two cultures. Iran is more

European than Arabian as Persian and Arabian worlds are completely different. German people are always welcomed in a friendly and hospitable manner. All visitors whom I know have come home with a very-very positive impression and pass on such feedback. Anyway, come and get your own impression!

„IRANIANS REMIND ME ITALIANS IN TERMS OF TEMPERAMENT“

What made you come to Germany?

I moved to Germany in 1984 at the age of 15 years. It was at the time of the war between Iran and Iraq, so my family decided that I should continue my education in Europe.

At first I came to a boarding school in the Lower Rhine region, where I studied German for half a year. Afterwards I directly entered a gymnasium. Then I completed my high and higher school education.

After I wrote a thesis at RWTH Aachen I got some offers to come back to Iran as I had studied aerospace and written a thesis in fuel cell technology. Iran was interested in this. However, I decided to stay in Germany in the light of the events of the time, and took my first job with Volkswagen. Nevertheless, I have always kept my eye on Iran and thought how one could help the country.

How different is German daily routine from the Iranian one?

This question is very complex. Those who do not know Iran face so many stereotypes. These countries have much in common, though there are some interesting differences. Shopping might be a trivial topic. Supermarkets and shopping centers with a broad range of products are situated at each and every corner in Europe. In Iran, they appeared just a few years ago.

Conventionally, there are lots of small family shops in Iran, where you may buy the most important everyday products like milk, butter, rice, noodles, tinned food, candies, beverages, and drugstore items. In other equally small shops you may find vegetable, meat and bread. Or household items, electrical items, clothes, shoes, and cosmetics. There are also lots of mostly small specialty shops. Thus, shopping requires some more time as different shops are placed in different locations.

The life style of most Iranians is arranged around the family, which plays a most important part, therefore, a lot of time is regularly spent in visiting and hosting family members. The same may be said of meetings with friends. Lots of holidays and meetings with friends and family are mostly spent in your own four walls. Though Iranians like to go to restaurants and cafes and do it quite often, afterwards they still mostly move to someone's home.

I have noticed a change in the mode of leisure activities. A few years ago, women used to practice sport in closed premises and special-purpose sport clubs because of the dress regulations. Nowadays, many Iranian men and women enjoy outdoor mountain biking, hiking, or skiing in Tehran and other beautiful spots if they can afford it. Expats shall know that there are really no official cultural offers for international



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artists in the field of music, theater and cinema. Iranian cinemas mostly focus on Iranian movies. People like them.

Iran is famous for its numerous sights of historical importance. Particularly, e.g. Isfahan, ruins of Persepolis and Shiraz, where so many things still remind us of both outstanding poets - Sa'di and Hafes.

Different landscapes in different climate zones invite visitors to go on discovery trips, like the Caspian Sea or the Persian Gulf with its broad sand beaches. Many associate Iran mostly with large salt and sand deserts, however, there are also e.g. alpine mountain areas.

What do you think are the most important features of the Iranian mentality? What is to be taken into account in the course of work with Iranian employees?

The Iranian mentality is complex; there is no common "Iranian mentality" because of the ethnical variety. Mostly there are Persians, Kurds, Luris, Baluchs, Azeris and other ethnical groups.

It results in strong local differences, perhaps even more pronounced than those between Friesian and Bavarians. Probably, it is caused by the size of the country and variety of living environments.

I believe that all in all it has the air of politeness and gentleness. The pride is also important. Iranians are proud of their traditions and culture.

Iranians remind me Italians in terms of temperament, as both nations like to gesticulate and involve the entire body into conversation.

Iranians are ready to take risk, they live without any safety nets and false floors. Their families are most important for them, as it has already been mentioned. An invitation to ones' home is a most common sign of hospitality.

Iranian employees are often well educated, even though there has been little international exchange within the last years. Many are curious, success-oriented and would like to continue development.

Iranian employees need to be praised. They are not eager to share any information; therefore, it may be necessary to ask them for it several times. Their pride is the main reason for such behavior – they want to save their face and prefer not to share any information as afterwards they might need to acknowledge a mistake.

Critics is not really popular here, feedback is always flowery and indirect. Employees often go to their shell when spoken to too directly by their superior.

How different is the Iranian business environment from the German one?

On the one hand, not at all different, on the other hand, there are enormous differences. Negotiations are more or less the same. Iranians are experts in negotiations, they are well prepared, objective, know the subject matter and the specifics. Like in the West actually.

Public bodies are different and, in my opinion, require optimization from the point of efficiency. One needs to spend a lot of time here, there is too much of bureaucracy and everything is processed very slowly; to some extent it is similar to German offices...

One needs to know the administrative processes and be extremely patient to reach the target.

All in all, the Iranian business culture is rather conservative. Hierarchy, behavior and etiquette play a significant part and are crucial for a responsible party.

Respectful attitude is a must at negotiations in Iran.

“IRAN IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT IN TERMS OF COMMERCE”

What made you come to Tehran?

I used to be the head of an Austrian consulting company that had business with a large Iranian food producer.

During a workshop in Dubai that lasted for several days I got an offer to come to Tehran and work as the Chief Marketing Officer for the enterprise. At the same time I used to be the Executive Vice President in a division of the company. Last year I gave up the position as the material part of my duties was completed.

My consulting company renders services to international companies of the consumer goods industry, the increasing number of which get interested in the Iranian market. It is crucial for them to understand the market and the country, to set up business correctly from the very beginning and to remain successful on a long-term base. For this purpose, we offer a full range of services to use the opportunities arisen after the Nuclear Agreement.

Here are most common questions: How do I find a business partner, with whom chemistry would be just right? How can I as a consumer goods producer get into 300,000 shops? Shall I choose a joint venture or a distribution partner? How to develop a brand despite so many legal and cultural limitations to the brand communication? How shall I carry out due diligence when reliable data is so rare?

How do you spend your everyday life?

All the time I live in Tehran, my wife commutes between Tehran and Dubai. Foreigners are not allowed to buy an apartment, so we have to rent it.

My wife prefers Dubai, as she finds the life there easier. Working in Tehran and living in Dubai – all this fits very well. In Iran women have to follow some rules, for instance wear headscarves, and respect the prohibition of skirts.

How do you spend your leisure time, what opportunities are available in Tehran?

I like travelling across Iran and in the surroundings of Tehran. There are so many historical sights, and the nature is marvelous. Tehran is located at the foot of the 4,000 m high Alborz mountain range, where you may go skiing in winter. The Damavand, the highest Iranian mountain, is a 2 hours' drive from Tehran. Domestic flights are very cheap and cost nearly as much as bus tickets in Europe.

Most leisure time in Iran is spent with family and friends. We are happy to have many Iranian friends and, thus, feel integrated. We may go out nearly every evening, if we like to. Of course, our friends are mostly open-minded Iranians. They really long for communication with foreigners after such a long period of isolation, we almost do not deal with conservative Iranians.

There are no night clubs in Tehran, though restaurants are good. Certainly, it is nothing like Europe in terms of going out. Though something always happens at the streets, it is nothing like Vienna at all.

There are fitness studios, one of them is situated right next to my office. It is also possible to do water sports, though women and men shall do it separately.

All in all, I do not miss a thing in Tehran, however, one needs to have a habit of liv-



Dr. Gerhard Barcus

is Managing Partner of Certius Business Consulting; he has been living in Tehran for three years now. The Austrian focuses on market entry consulting of international enterprises of the consumer goods industry.

ing in a very huge city. Public transportation is complicated in Tehran. Still, my wife and me like everything here. We have a pleasure of living in Iran and enjoying its exotic and fascinating culture.

Iran is thought to be very bureaucratic. Do you often have to fight through such barriers?

I personally seldom contact any state authorities; it is what my team is in charge of. So many things are prohibited at first, so many things are complicated, though in the end it is still OK. As usual, if you find something complicated you may always contract a service provider to fix it for you.

I have established a company in Iran, where I am a co-founder, and faced no problems in that regard.

One can always get a work permit, especially, if they invest into Iran. I have never heard of someone having any issues with residential status.

To what extent does religious legislation influence the everyday life?

The Iranians have significantly less rites than Arabians, especially in Saudi Arabia. In any case, as a foreigner you will not face any problems, though you have to follow the rules.

Men are not allowed to wear any shorts, and women have to wear headscarves, though foreigners are generally treated with much understanding. However, if a woman would like to visit a mosque, she needs to be dressed in an appropriated way.

Of course, alcohol is strictly prohibited. However, no religious prohibitions apply to foreigners. Calls to prayer are mostly heard during Ramadan, though not as prominent as in Arabia.

What experience have you gained from cooperation with your Iranian employees?

What are the specifics of the Iranian mentality?

Iran is completely different in terms of commerce. The Iranian management culture is person-oriented unlike in Europe. In Iran you have to work more intense through personal relations.

School and education require more individual work and less cooperation. Individual achievement is more valuable than collective one. This results in much politics in the companies and affects the efficiency.

Europeans make a decision and implement it. It is different in Iran, well, they make a decision, though in the end none hardly does anything. There is no commitment to fulfilment.

Foreign companies in Iran have a different culture. If there is competition among Iranian and foreign companies, foreigners mostly win. Young Iranians would like to work for foreign companies and adapt to their customs. As foreigners we have to find a balance, fit into the new environment and at the same time make efforts to achieve excellent performance.

"PRIDE AND FAMILY ARE OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE IN THE EAST"

Your father comes from Iran and your mother – from Germany; how have you spent your childhood?

I was born in Germany, though since my childhood I have been roaming between Germany and Iran because of my parents' biography. I went to the Embassy school in Tehran and have two native languages. For the first time I came to England at the age of twelve and afterwards completed higher school there. Afterwards I went to Stuttgart, studied aerospace and worked for a German-French enterprise for many years.

How different is the everyday life in Iran from that in Germany?

It depends on the epoch in question. Germany before and after the reunification used to be completely different, just like Iran before and after the revolution.

If we speak of the present, I may say the following: There are certain limitations in Iran that are of different nature than those in Germany. Nowadays, there are strict religious rules in Iran.

For instance, German people may enjoy numerous swimming ponds alongside with the North and Baltic Seas. Iranians have the Caspian Sea, though they cannot enjoy free swimming as men and women have to spend their time there separately.

Differences in the freedom of action are huge. There are lots of sport clubs with the best equipment for sports activities available for the broad public, particularly lots of fitness studios, sport centers and gyms, modern and clean spas. Though there are some clubs in Iran, they are made for higher social circles who may afford it. However, there are plenty of sports opportunities available in Iran, from skiing at the height of 3,000 m in the Elbrus to the North of Tehran up to hiking in the forests at the Caspian Sea.

In Iran, young people do not have a plenty of opportunities for their leisure time like in Europe. In Germany, there are any entertainments available for public such as different movies, dancing events. In Iran, religious events provide a certain replacement for them.

Unofficially, there are satellite receivers, and translation of international programs is tolerated to a certain extent. However, sometimes penalties are imposed. At the same time, telecommunication networks are well developed and a lot of global information sources are available via Internet. However, some Internet connections are not available.

In terms of social differences, it is to underline that Iranians live in large families and that the head of a family as a rule has rights of determination. In Germany, people are rather autonomous and move in smaller groups. Of course, both social forms have their advantages and disadvantages.

How different is the Iranian business environment from the German one?

The Iranian business environment consists of many layers; Iranians have a pronounced trading mentality that has been developing within many thousands of



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years in the bazars and the commercial influence of which is also seen in the everyday life.

The variety of ideas, innovation capacity and intelligence of Iranian experts have allowed Iran achieving significant progress and remarkable autonomy through development and manufacturing of own products.

In comparison to other Middle East countries, a lot of new products are developed, designed and manufactured independently by a well-educated young middle class. Including women with university and other higher school degrees.

You can find the newest and most modern products and systems from all over the world despite the trade embargo. However, they are too expensive and an average consumer cannot afford them. At the same time there are lots of alternatives from Korea, China or Japan.

What do you think are the most important specifics of the Iranian mentality that shall be taken into account in the course of cooperation with Iranian employees?

Foreign managers in Iran shall be emphatic, and have skills of intercultural communication and dealing with local people. Unfortunately, I see again and again that European enterprises make serious mistakes in the Middle East.

You can save lots of money, time and nerves if you know how to address the people and what regional customs prevail. For instance, Ramadan is important for Islamic countries. It is a Lent. And it affects the performance within the period of its duration. A European may feel annoyed or even doubt it. It affects the working time, and one may treat it this way. The question is whether this is really expedient.

The intercultural issues are also not always easy. In return, it is complicated for Iranians to get accustomed to European specifics, they need a lot of time for it.

Pride and family are of utmost importance in the East. It helps if you really manage to create a family environment in a company.

All in all, a German in Iran always has an advantage even from the historical point of view as Germany has never had any colonial power in Iran. Germany is associated with reliability, integrity, quality, and even all the values and virtues, which has become so popular in Germany particularly because of its large middle class. It is easy enough for a German to start doing business in Iran – however, in such case they have to meet the expectations.



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