



COUCHSURFING IRAN

Amr Badawy turns his experiences in Iran into a book in the hopes he can break the stereotypes surrounding the little-visited destination

*Written by
photo courtesy Amr Badawi*



While the concept of couchsurfing may now be a familiar one in Egypt, there's still not many of us willing to trade in a luxury hotel room for a stranger's couch. But the social media website — which brings together intrepid travel enthusiasts from around the world in search of a destination's true taste — is seeing more and more Egyptians taking the plunge to stay at a host's house in a country they've never visited before.

Amr Badawy, the author of the book *Couch Surfer in Iran*, is a 35-year-old travel enthusiast and member of Couchsurfing.com, who has always had a great passion for exploring the globe “but never imagined myself as a writer,” he confides. Working by day in the finance department of a petroleum company in Cairo, Badawy sees the need to get away every once in a while. “I think it is one of life's great pleasures to pursue one's hobbies and interests without letting your job keep you from doing so.”

After traveling to many countries through couchsurfing.com, Badawy wanted to experience a new kind of destination — one that most Egyptians would likely have lots of doubts about.

“The idea most people have about Iran is mainly from the media: politics, security issues, nuclear weapons, women who wear chadors, Khomeini and the Islamic revolution, but not much about the real Iran,” Badawy says. Besides an interest in Iran's rich civilization and history, Badawy's decision to write a book about his experience as a couchsurfer in Iran was inspired by the sum of misconceptions and contradictions he witnessed on his trip. “[I had heard about the country from friends who traveled to Iran and told me about it, but I [never imagined the extent] of these misconceptions [until] after my visit.”

In the back of his mind, Badawy was under the impression he would be stopped at the airport and interrogated about the reasons behind his visit to Iran, after which he would be deported back to Egypt. “Fortunately none of this ever happened, and things went very smoothly,” he recalls.

Badawy depended completely on couchsurfing.com to get the most of the local Iranian experience by staying at several Iranian houses. In the book, Badawy explains the preparation for the trip did not take much. “Iran is such a huge country and places are very distant from each other. The most important thing was planning a well-organized map,” he says.

Couch Surfer in Iran encapsulates Badawy's experiences not only words but pictures too. As a professional photographer, he was able to capture





the moments through his lens and each chapter in the book carries the name of the places he visited or a misconception he had about the destination. One chapter, for example, is titled “Amazingly No One Tried to Make Me Convert to a Shiite.”

Badawy’s first stop was in Shiraz, in the south of Iran, where he was invited to dinner at an local family’s house. “I was very lucky that my first meal on my trip was homemade Iranian food,” the traveler says. “I was welcomed by Malika [the daughter] who was now without the hijab in front of a stranger (unlike earlier outside the house).” After dinner Badawy wanted to start exploring, wearing a T-shirt, shorts and his backpack. But he quickly found out men are prohibited from wearing shorts and that he could easily be chased down by PVPV (promotion of virtue and prevention of vice) guards.

Switching his shorts for trousers, Badawy began to travel around Shiraz. “On the street the first thing that grabbed my attention about the beautiful city of Shiraz is that it is very clean and deco-



rated with trees, most of the buildings in the center of the city are only two floors high.”

Shiraz is well known for its mosque’s unique architecture and design. Among those Badawy stopped to admire was the Naseer El Malk Mosque, also known as El Wardi, built in 1888. “It was given the name El Wardi because of the extensive use of colored glass and turquoise stones on its eastern side,” Badawy explains. Other landmarks in Shiraz include the city of Persepolis, one of Iran’s oldest civilizations. After Shiraz, Badawy’s travels took him to the cities of Isfahan, Qom, Tehran and finally Qazween.

But *Couch Surfing in Iran* is not just a travelogue, it also presents the history of Iran in an indescribably simple and to-the-point manner. As one reader puts it, “Badawy has, without a shadow of a doubt, succeeded in changing many readers’ perception about Iran, and most importantly in an eloquent and picturesque style that makes you [not want to put the book down] and read it all at once.” **et**

