

# Khana't Caravansary history living in the Iran Capital

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## Abstract

Khana't Caravansary in Amin-ol-Sultan Square is like history living in the heart of Tehran. It is not known when it was built exactly, but on the first map of Tehran implemented by the order of Naseraldin Shah in 1302HG, its location is marked by the name Roghani Sara sounding like a small bazaar selling oil which is somehow related. In any case, Khana't Caravansary is one of the rare historical cultural monuments of the capital still intact after a century of life. Roghani Sara was at that time outside the Safavid wall and near the gate to Shah Abdolazim's Shrine.

According to Mashreq quoting Sharq, Khana't Caravansary lies in the heart of the area around Molavi Crossroad, Sa'heb Jam Street and Amin-ol-Sultan Square. It is one of the first caravansaries built in the city of Tehran, continuing its life by the preserving care of the owners of this unique historical cultural site. Covering an area of 10,000 square meters and inspired by the architecture of Persian Gardens, it contains 52 hojreh-s –chamber-shops, 13 on its each side. At present they are leased to dried fruit and nuts wholesalers.



The great yard has two porches, one on the east side leading to a large entrance and the other on the west leading to a second entrance of the caravansary. There are also big hojreh-s on both sides of the main entrance which leads to the main city bazaar and the remaining parts of Amin-ol-Sultan old square.



According to Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary, khana't and khan mean house as well as caravansary, yet Mohammad Ardehali, one of the private owners and present director the caravansary, says about the name Khana't: "I don't know exactly why it is called as such. Khan means hojreh and Khana't is the plural word, and maybe the caravansary was called such because of having so many chambers." In any case, according to Ardehali, the main architectural features of the caravansary show that it must have been built towards the end of the Naseri era (i.e. under the reign of Naser-aldin Shah). It was first in the hands of Musa Khan Amin-ol-Molk who sold it to my great grandfather Hajj Ali Ardehali in 1906. It has stayed in the family ever since then."

Referring to the existing contract wrote then, Ardehali says: “The name and title of people were mentioned with great respect in those years and a trusted clergy must have approved it which in our case it was Ayatollah Qomi.”



Due to its location along the Silk Road in the past, the caravansary was used as the resting place of travelers and when the first vegetable market was established in Amin-ol-Sultan square, it turned into a great commercial center with merchants bringing their goods mostly dried fruit and nuts and cereals on camels from all over the country while staying in the caravansary for sojourn.

With its great yard, it was the best resting place for the merchants and their camel drivers and that is why the merchants rented the chambers for the whole season. The caravansary was also famous for providing carts drawn by nags.



With the arrival of automobile cars and the resulting perishing life in Amin-ol-Sultan square, the caravansary's commercial life began to decline too and its chambers are now mainly used as store-rooms.

Pointing to the centre of the yard, Ardehali said: There used to be a big water reservoir in the middle of the yard surrounded by tanneries. It was destroyed gradually from 1956-1961, but we have marked the area with red stones.”

One of the calamities that happened to the caravansary was a fire which broke out in 1957 which according to Ardehali was due to chemicals in the rooms “rented by chemical selling merchants. Fortunately, the damage was not extensive, only the ceilings of some of the chambers were ruined which were later restored.”

### **Restoration of the caravansary**

The major restoration of the caravansary took place in 2003 when it was registered as a national monument by the National Cultural Inheritance Organization as a reminder of the prosperous commercial eras of the past. The work of restoration which began in June 2003 was financially provided by Ardehali family supported by Tehran municipality 12 and the national cultural inheritance organization. It was finished in January 2008.

In regard to their financial investment Ardehali says: “None of our family ever thought of selling or destroying the caravansary despite the fact that we could demolish and turn it into a huge shopping mall, as is the custom in our times. Our interest in the urban identity of Tehran encouraged us to go beyond personal interests, as money is not everything in life.”

When asked whether the caravansary is listed among tourist attractions of the capital now or not, Ardehali said: “After the international registration of Norouz in 2009, we held the feast of Norouz here with the cooperation of the national cultural inheritance and the Tehran municipality 12 in 2010 and 2011. The municipality has shown appreciable cooperation by introducing it as a tourist attraction site.”



“We intend to hold the traditional story-telling sessions in this restaurant to keep our culture and identity alive”, said Ardehali. “For the plastic work and ceiling decorations we brought a specialist from Esfahan in order to revive the air of the old times. Our goal is that when an Iranian steps in it be overwhelmed by the feeling of national pride.”

The restaurant is going through the final stages of its completion and it will be opened on the feast of Fetr (last day of fasting).

### **Khana't Caravansary's Entrance the Main Shortcoming:**

The major shortcoming of Khana't caravansary is its entrance. In Ardehali's words: "Visitors enter a serene nostalgic atmosphere from a busy cacophonous crowded place. It would have been excellent to devise a way to reduce the hubbub of the square and cover the floor of the entrance with stones as it was done in the past."



In regard to the entrance door, one of the unique features of Khana't caravansary Ardehali said: "It is made of the wood of plane tree (Platanus) 5.30 meters in height, and despite its great size it turns on only four traditional hinges, representing the great art of Iranian architecture."



The surrounding edges of this huge door are decorated with beautiful tiles on which quotations concerning trade exchange by Imam Ali attract the attention. About the philosophy of this style of tile-work Ardehali explained: “In the past there were clergies sitting in the small and large chaharsu (cross-roads in bazaars) answering merchant’s questions concerning trade exchange according to some verses of the Qura’n. Inspired by that I made a selection of Imam Ali’s advices in this field to be written on the tiles.”

### **Reference**

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