

# Around Kabul

## اطراف كابل



Many short-term visitors to Afghanistan tend to arrive in Kabul and then leave as soon as they can, attracted by the better-known attractions of Bamiyan and Herat. That's a shame, because there's still plenty to see within a couple of hours' drive of the capital.

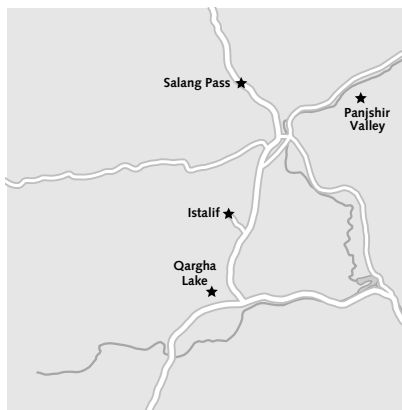
North of Kabul is the wide expanse of the Shomali Plain, a richly fertile region renowned for its fruit, and framed by the Koh Daman mountains of the Hindu Kush. Once a much-contested battlefield, the Shomali Plain is home to the ancient village of Istalif, at the foothills of the peaks, a popular recreation spot for centuries and home to Afghanistan's most recognisable pottery.

The highway continues across the plain until it starts to rise towards the mountains, offering the traveller a choice of destinations. Straight ahead and up takes you along a series of dizzying switchbacks to the Salang Pass, the gateway to northern Afghanistan. A second road tempts you towards a narrow gorge with a rushing river that opens out into the spectacular Panjshir Valley. This is one of the country's most beautiful spots, and the last resting place of one of its national heroes.

Closer to Kabul you can find activities both Afghan and Western in taste. Kabulis take their families to the green surrounds of Paghman for weekend picnics, while at Qargha Lake you might find yourself unexpectedly shouting 'Fore!' at Kabul Golf Club – surely Afghanistan's most peculiar sporting venue.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Shop for traditional pottery in the historic village of **Istalif** (opposite), overlooking the Shomali Plain
- Watch out for unexpected bunkers at the **Kabul Golf Club** (p109) at Qargha Lake
- Visit the tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud in the sublime **Panjshir Valley** (p110)
- Cross the **Salang Pass** (p112), the mountain gateway to northern Afghanistan



For sake of this chapter, we've only considered destinations that make easy day trips north of Kabul. Other potential excursions from the capital include Jalalabad (p182) and Ghazni (p196). Both are subject to particular security issues – check the relevant sections for more details.

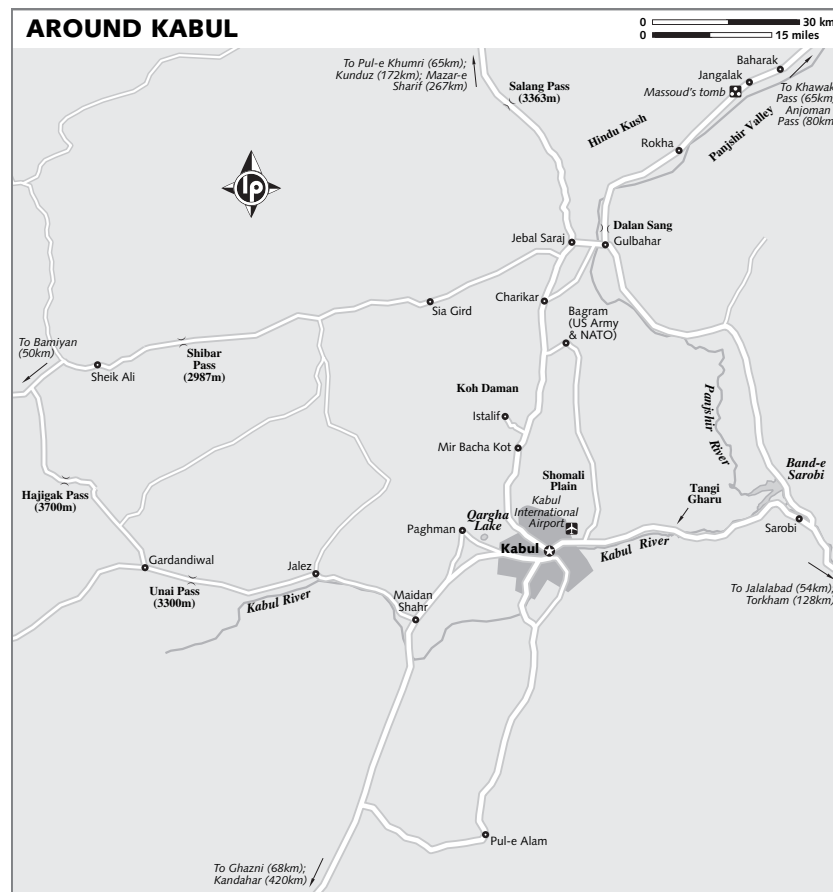
### ISTALIF

The mountain village of Istalif has enchanted travellers for centuries. Babur waxed lyrical about the wine parties held in its gardens, while British officers enjoyed its shady slopes during their first occupation of Kabul. Today it is a popular spot for weekend daytrips for Kabulis and expats alike, coming for the tremendous scenery

### استاليف

and the famous blue pottery made in the village.

Istalif clings to the slopes of the Koh Daman mountains north of Kabul, giving splendid views across the Shomali Plain. This fertile region has traditionally been the breadbasket of Kabul, or perhaps its fruit bowl, for the villages are renowned for their grapes, cherries, figs and mulberries. The Shomali Plain suffered grievously in the recent years of war. Its wide spaces are ideal for armoured warfare, and dead tanks still litter the landscape. The Taliban took particular trouble to subdue the plain and its mainly Tajik population. In 1999 a scorched earth campaign displaced around 140,000 residents, destroying houses and



irrigation canals, and rooting out thousands of acres of vines and fruit trees. The plain is still heavily mined, (so always stick to the beaten track), but since 2001, the vineyards have made an amazing recovery. In summer the main road through the plain is lined with stalls selling grapes by the box-load, from sweet seedless ones the size of your fingernail to larger juicier varieties.

The mountains rise up dramatically on either side of the plain, and about 55km north of Kabul a side road bears west and starts climbing towards Istalif. The road curls around the slopes through orchards and poplars, and crosses a small river to emerge in the main bazaar. At the far end of the bazaar is a small mosque with an unusual hexagonal minaret. There are wonderful views of the Shomali Plain and the mountains from here.

The bazaar is lined with small shops selling pottery. Istalif has been known for its pottery for at least 500 years, and there's a large variety of plates, bowls, pots and even candlesticks on offer. A medium-sized bowl should cost around 100Afg to 150Afg. The decoration is usually a deep blue or brown glaze with simple designs etched onto the surface. They're rustic but utterly charming. All the pottery is made on hand-wheels and fired in wood kilns. The **Turquoise Mountain Foundation** ([www.turquoiseismountain.org](http://www.turquoiseismountain.org)) is currently working with local potters to improve glazing and firing techniques to give Istalif better access to the export market.

There are a couple of chaikhans in the bazaar, but there are plans to develop a traditional-style guesthouse with modern facilities in the village, as well as a visitor's centre. On the road into Istalif, there is a food stand at the **Takht**, set amid plane trees. A hotel stood here in the 1970s and is now used as a police station – with luck they'll allow you onto the terrace, which has sublime views. The police are particularly proud of their nursery of geraniums and roses, which make a strange contrast to the collapsed roof of part of the building – blown up by the Taliban.

Minibuses to Kabul (30Afg, 90 minutes) leave from near the bridge when full – the route is busiest on the weekend. From Kabul, minibuses leave from the Serai Shomali motor park.

#### WARNING

As we were going to press there were reports of anti-government elements operating in Paghman and the surrounding districts. Take trusted security advice before considering a trip to Paghman.

#### PAGHMAN

پغمان

King Amanullah built Paghman in the 1920s as a showcase for his ideas on modernising Afghanistan. It was decorated with pleasure gardens and ornate buildings, including a Victory Arch freely copied from the Arc de Triomphe, celebrating Afghan independence in 1919. Its gardens have since been a popular picnic spot for Kabulis.

Despite its model status, Paghman has played a key part in Afghan conservatism. In 1928 Amanullah held a loya jirga here, which ended in turmoil. The delegates rebelled against his insistence they wear Western dress (top hats, no less), and the subsequent arrests of delegates helped precipitate the rebellion that closed Amanullah's regime. During the 1980s, Paghman was the base for the fundamentalist Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who was a key figure in bringing Arab fighters to Afghanistan and had strong ties to Osama Bin Laden. Despite being implicated in war crimes during the civil war in Kabul, Sayyaf has remained hugely influential in the post-Taliban scene as an advisor to Hamid Karzai.

Paghman was much battered during the war, but still remains green and pretty in places, including the grass amphitheatre of Bagh-e Umumi that held the disastrous loya jirga (Amanullah was even said to race elephants here in his more idle moments). The Bahar Restaurant at the top of the village has simple dishes and drinks, and lovely views over the plains.

Minibuses leave for Paghman from Kabul's Serai Shomali motor park (25Afg, 30 minutes). If you have your own vehicle, it makes sense to also pay a visit to nearby Qargha Lake, which is passed en route to Paghman.

#### QARGHA LAKE

بند قرغه

Qargha Lake is another popular picnic spot for Kabulis, just 10km from the city. It's an artificial lake created in the late '50s by

President Daoud as a recreation facility for Kabul, and the clear air and cool waters make a great respite from the dust and fumes of the city. On Fridays the area throngs with families, and there are plenty of tea and food stalls and children running around to make quite a festive atmosphere.

Qargha Lake is also home to the **Kabul Golf Club** (☎ 079 9226 327/9029 011; [www.kabulgolfclub.com](http://www.kabulgolfclub.com); greens fee 750Afg, club rental 250Afg, caddie fee 250Afg; ☒ 7am-dusk), which must be one of the most unusual courses in the world. King Habibullah introduced golf to Afghanistan in 1919, and is even buried on Jalalabad's municipal course (p183). The Kabul course reopened in 2004 after 26 years' closure. Its reconstruction was led by Muhammad Afzal Abdul, who was the club's last pro in 1978. The club is at the end of the dam.

The course is nine holes, with the back nine played off different tees. The greens are actually 'browns', a mix of sand and engine oil brushed to make a smooth putting surface. Unsurprisingly, the roughs are pretty rough, but even the fairways would challenge Tiger Woods. The club guidelines make interesting reading. Comparing the course to St Andrews', players are advised 'don't even ask for the stroke index because this is Afghanistan and they're all tough.' A second caddie is recommended, to go ahead of your shot to spot your ball. At the end of the round, the branded accessories (even golf towels) make unusual souvenirs.

Every August, the club hosts the Kabul Desert Classic tournament, a fundraising match organised by expats, with proceeds going to local charities.

#### THE BAGRAM IVORIES

The treasures excavated at Bagram illustrate the rich tastes of Kushan Kapisa. Glass from Alexandria, lacquer from China and Greek bronzes have all been discovered. The greatest of these are probably the Bagram Ivories.

Dating from the 2nd century AD, the ivories are a series of intricately carved panels, originally used for decorating thrones and boxes. Their style is instantly recognisable as Indian. Female figures are shown with full bosoms and wide hips, wrapped in transparent veils. Parrots and elephants decorate floral scenes, all carved in painstaking relief. Coupled with the rest of the Bagram finds, they contribute to a uniquely Afghan, yet international culture.

The current fate of all the ivories is unknown. Following the looting of Kabul Museum in the 1990s they disappeared from view. Several pieces have turned up on the international underground art markets, with price tags in the hundreds of thousands of dollars – one was famously bought by a Pakistani army general. The Kabul Museum managed to save some of the ivories from the looters, but they remain hidden in safekeeping. For more on the Kabul Museum, see p88.

**Spojmai Lakeview Café** (☎ 079 9003 333; [spojmai@gmail.com](mailto:spojmai@gmail.com); fee for non-members incl one drink 100Afg, mains from 500Afg) is a members club overlooking the lake. Cushions are strewn on the terrace and roof for lounging around in and catching the sun and breeze. Barbeques are a speciality, especially the *chupan kabab* (grilled mutton). Sports on offer include tennis, jet skiing and horse riding.

A return taxi to Qargha Lake from Kabul should cost around 1000Afg. Minibuses (25Afg, 30 minutes) run on the weekend from Serai Shomali.

#### BAGRAM

بگرام

The site of both an ancient city and a modern airbase, Bagram is 50km northwest of Kabul, near the town of Charikar. Modern Bagram was built by the Soviets, and was a key supply route during their occupation. Its possession was much contested between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, and at the time of the American-led war in 2001 the two armies controlled opposite ends of the base. Bagram is now home to around 10,000 international military personnel, mainly American.

The site's history as a military camp is far more ancient. Alexander the Great founded the town, naming it Alexandria-ad-Caucasum, and used it as a base for his invasion of India. It was a major Graeco-Bactrian city and became the summer capital of the Kushan empire in the early centuries AD. Then known as Kapisa, it was one of the most important stops on the Silk Road. Kapisa was a cultural melting pot, its many Buddhist monasteries displaying art influenced

by India, their coffers rich from trade with China and Rome. Any echoes of Kapisa have long been muffled by the sound of military aircraft.

Since the war, Bagram has acquired a black name. It is the site of a notorious detention facility in the 'War on Terror', used as a way station for the US prison at Guantánamo Bay. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have accused the authorities of torture and widespread prisoner abuse at Bagram, allegations denied by the US army, despite their admission of the assault and homicides of several Afghans in custody.

The small town of Bagram on the edge of the airbase has an interesting bazaar (busiest on Friday) selling US army goods and supplies that have been 'lost', sold or otherwise disappeared from the base – anything from army-issue sunglasses to ration packs. A scandal hit the base in 2006 when computer hard drives on sale were found to contain sensitive military information.

Minibuses run to Bagram from Kabul's Serai Shomali motor park (50Afg, 45 minutes). Alternatively, travel to Charikar (40Afg, 30 minutes) and change there. Charikar is famous for its handmade knives, and there are several chaikhanas on the main town roundabout. The big unnamed place on the southwest corner of the roundabout does a heaving trade – as well as kebabs and pulao it has great peppery *shorwa* (soup), and some divine almond ice cream.

## PANJSHIR VALLEY

دره پنجشیر

The stunning Panjshir Valley has become one of the most celebrated places in Afghanistan. Its charging river and fields and orchards made it a popular tourist destination in the 1970s, but a decade later it became known as a symbol of resistance to the Soviets, the unconquerable redoubt of the mujaheddin leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. Having fought for over 20 years, Massoud was killed by Al-Qaeda in September 2001, and his tomb halfway up the valley, near his home village of Jangalak, is a must-see for any visitor.

The name Panjshir means 'Five Lions', for five brothers from the valley who miraculously dammed a river for Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni in the 10th century AD. A *ziarat* (shrine) to them stands near the mouth of the valley.

Panjshir is possibly the most beautiful valley in Afghanistan. Starting at Dalan Sang, the narrow gorge that forms its mouth, the road proceeds up the valley, which gradually widens to reveal carefully irrigated fields of wheat and maize dotted with villages and walnut and mulberry groves. The Panjshir River itself is rich with fish. It's quite common to see men thigh-deep in the water casting nets and the catch is often for sale cooked at roadside stalls. In late spring, snowmelt turns the river into a torrent, but even in late summer there are plenty of rapids. A few enterprising expats have even managed to take advantage of the fast flowing waters by bringing their own kayaks.

The Panjshir has always been an important highway. Nearly 100km long, it leads to two passes over the Hindu Kush – the Khawak Pass (3848m) leading to the northern plains, and the Anjoman Pass (4430m) that crosses into Badakhshan – used by the armies of Alexander the Great and Timur. The Red Army had some of its darkest days in Afghanistan here.

Panjshir was ideally located for guerrilla attacks on Bagram and the supply convoys crossing the Salang Pass. As the Soviets learned to their cost, it was also brilliantly defensible. In the first three years of the war, there were six major offensives against the Panjshir, all of which ended in defeat for the Russians. Armoured columns could be easily attacked from the mountain walls, and the road easily cut by the mujaheddin. Destroyed tanks still litter the valley floor. Several times Massoud ordered the entire evacuation of the civilian population, to reduce casualties caused by high-altitude bombing. In total there were ten failed assaults on the Panjshir, causing the Russians to call a ceasefire with Massoud, unheard of during the war.

As well as a place of hiding, Panjshir was a source of income for Massoud. Medieval Panjshir had been famous for its silver mines, but repeated Soviet bombing

### WARNING – UXO

The Panjshir Valley remains heavily affected by unexploded ordnances (UXOs), with local hospitals regularly reporting casualties. Always stick to the well-worn paths.

### CROSSING THE KHAWAK PASS

In the winter of 329 BC, Alexander the Great was pursuing the remnant army of the Persian empire across Afghanistan, final victory always one step ahead of him. The Bactrian warlord Bessus had claimed the throne and retreated north of the Hindu Kush, razing the ground behind him, safe in the knowledge that no army could cross the mountains without supplies in winter.

Alexander had a different idea. He led his army up the Panjshir to push across the Khawak Pass, still deep in snow. Local villagers had buried their winter food, so the army had to carry all they ate. They ran out of food and slaughtered the pack animals, eating them raw due to a lack of firewood. Alexander, himself sick with fatigue and altitude sickness rode up and down the great column, driving his men on. The epic crossing took 17 days, when the exhausted army descended to bountiful villages on the northern plains. Incredulous at the feat, Bessus panicked and fled towards the Amu Darya, where he was cornered and executed, the last gasp of the mighty Persian empire.

Today, the Khawak Pass can still only be passed on foot. Locals ascribe the cairns at the summit to the Greek soldiers who fell on the march. 2300 years later, Ahmad Shah Massoud used the pass as a supply corridor to the Panjshir, to harry the soldiers of another superpower.

revealed seams of emeralds in the mountain walls that were mined and smuggled to Pakistan. The emeralds are of extremely high quality, but the mining technique still favoured – using old military munitions in barely-controlled explosions – frequently cracks the gems, reducing their value.

### Massoud's Tomb

Ahmad Shah Massoud's tomb is about 30km from the mouth of the valley, high on a promontory with a splendid view across the Panjshir.

A modest and attractive whitewashed tomb with a green dome was built soon after Massoud's funeral, but when we most recently visited this was being replaced with a far more grandiose structure, a strange hybrid of ancient and modern. The traditional dome and tiles clash with the overblown 21st-century vernacular, all plate glass and fake columns. It's not a particularly happy collision. Only the actual tomb chamber inside, with the simple grave strewn with wild flowers seems to reflect the character of the slain leader.

In comparison, the half-destroyed Russian armoured vehicles next to the grave offer a starker reminder of Massoud's legacy. There's a small kiosk next door selling cards and books about Massoud, but nothing in English.

Almost the entire (male) population of the Panjshir attended Massoud's funeral in September 2001, and thousands of mourners still visit the grave on the anniversary of his death. Official commemorations are

held in Kabul on 9 September, moving to Panjshir the following day. It's an emotional scene, held under tight security.

Despite his death, Massoud maintains a powerful presence in the valley. His portrait is everywhere, even on the windshields of vehicles. While other Afghans may hold mixed feelings about the man, Panjshiris are proud of their most famous son. In the immediate post-Taliban period, the Panjshiri faction of the Northern Alliance held all the main reins of power, and immediately upgraded the valley to full provincial status.

### Getting There & Away

Minibuses to Panjshir run from Kabul (100Afg, 2½ hours) every day, via Jebal Saraj. Ask for Rokha or Baharak, the nearest villages to Massoud's Tomb. A return trip in a taxi should cost around US\$50. The road through the valley is paved.

Security is tight in the valley, and all vehicles are stopped at a checkpoint just past Dalan Sang. It's advisable to bring your passport, and if travelling by private vehicle, a driver who has been to the valley before. Permission from the *amniyat* (security officers) is needed to travel past Massoud's Tomb.

In theory it is possible to continue up the valley to cross the Anjoman Pass (p166). It is essential you check in with the *amniyat* if trying this, as they will probably insist on your being accompanied by a soldier (and paying for it). Failure to do so would almost certainly result in arrest.

There is a **Governor's Guesthouse** (r US\$20) in Rokha (sometimes known as the Royal Guesthouse or Massoud's Guesthouse). To stay overnight, visit the Governor's office in Rokha for written permission.

## SALANG PASS

کوئل سالنگ

All road traffic between Kabul and north Afghanistan must cross the **Salang Pass** (3363m). One of three main passes across the Hindu Kush, the Salang was pierced in 1964 by the construction of a huge tunnel. Before then, the two halves of the country were effectively cut off from each other by the first snows of winter.

The Salang Tunnel is a marvel of Soviet engineering, and its military importance became apparent as soon as Russian tanks rumbled through en route to Kabul. In the 1980s Massoud's fighters regularly ambushed convoys from his nearby Panjshiri stronghold, while General Dostum's control of the tunnel gave him the keys to northern Afghanistan for several years. Since the fall of the Taliban, the pass more prosaically claims to be the site of the world's highest mobile phone tower.

The road to the Salang starts to rise into the mountains at **Jebal Saraj**. The centre of town is marked by a small white palace on a rise, which reputedly belonged to the Tajik rebel Bacha Saqao, who claimed the Afghan throne in 1929. The road splits here, with a spur leading northeast to the Panjshir Valley. Chaikhana in Jebal Saraj double up as popular carwashes – look for the many fountains of water shooting into the air,

powered from the mountain streams above. The same waters powered Afghanistan's first hydroelectric station here during Habibullah's reign.

From Jebal Saraj, the road is a climbing procession of switchbacks, passing tiny villages clinging to the slopes, and groves of mulberry and cherry trees alongside the river. In several places, the swift waters have been dammed to make pools, which locals populate with wooden duck decoys for hunting.

Around 35km from Jebal Saraj, look out for a large and recently rebuilt *ziarat*. In the 1970s a terrible accident was prevented when a conductor – the brakes of his bus having failed – threw himself under the wheels of the vehicle to stop it careering to its doom. It's a popular place to stop for prayers and, after experiencing the way many drivers treat the Salang as an alpine racecourse, you may wish to do the same.

The pass itself is 12km from the *ziarat*. A series of covered galleries mark the approach, protecting the road from landslides. The mouth of the tunnel yawns into the side of the mountains. Nearly 3km long, claustrophobes won't enjoy the trip, which is gloomily lit and thick with traffic fumes. Delays at the tunnel are not uncommon, with traffic frequently held up to allow one-way passage only. These delays can become even more severe with the snows of deep winter, and although the pass is kept open all year, it's sensible to bring some supplies and clothes against the weather when traversing at this time.