

Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Most levels of accommodation are available in Afghanistan, from top-end hotels and en suite yurts to complete fleapits, and everything in between. Kabul naturally has the widest choice of available options, while outside the cities you may not be presented with any meaningful choice at all.

In the book we have defined budget as up to 2000Afg (US\$40), midrange up to 4000Afg (US\$80), and top end as anything over 4000Afg. These prices are for doubles, but in many places you'll just be quoted a flat rate for the room irrespective of occupancy. Rooms come without bathrooms unless noted in the text; breakfast is rarely included.

Even though some budget and midrange hotel rooms listed in the text are described as 'clean', this is a relative term and they're unlikely to be absolutely spotless. It's a good idea to bring a sleeping sheet as the quality of bed linen can sometimes leave a bit to be desired. A *pattu* (the woollen blanket carried by many Afghan men) makes an excellent alternative.

Other useful items to pack are a padlock and a torch or candles. Power cuts are frequent, and in some places there just may not be any electricity at all. Earplugs can also be a good idea, particularly if you end up sleeping at a chaikhana.

Some of the cheaper accommodation places in Afghanistan will not take foreign guests, and while we have attempted to account for this in the text, local conditions can change according to the security environment and the whims of local police. This is something we particularly noted in Kabul, where since our last visit many of the cheap hotels popular with independent travellers had closed their doors to foreigners. At the opposite end of spectrum, many midrange and all top end hotels and guesthouses employ security guards outside their premises.

If travelling in winter, you'll find many places are heated by a *bukhari*, a simple heater run off paraffin, gas or petrol. While undoubtedly warming, these devices can be extremely dangerous. Stories of exploding *bukharis* or people dying of asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide poisoning are a staple of the local press during the colder months. Never sleep in a room with a lit *bukhari*. If you're in Afghanistan long term, investing in a carbon monoxide and smoke detector is recommended.

Finally, Afghan hospitality is famous, and people you meet on the road may invite you to your home. Remember that most ordinary Afghans have very limited resources and may just be offering hospitality they may ill be able to afford for the sake of honour. If the offer is genuine (and you're satisfied as to the safety aspects of the situation), consider carefully as to whether you can accept without burdening your poten-

tial host. A gift for your hosts, such as fruit or sweets, is appropriate.

Camping

We advise against rough camping in Afghanistan, where a tent will quickly draw the attention of locals. In October 2006 two German journalists were murdered when they were camping in Baghlan province, increasing the chances that should the police spot a tent they'll move you on and insist you stay at a hotel or chaikhana. An exception is the peaceable Wakhan Corridor, where you're likely to be trekking with local guides. Camping here is sometimes the only option.

Chaikhanas

The simplest form of accommodation available in Afghanistan is the chaikhana (teahouse). In small towns and places off the beaten track (the central route for instance), they're likely to be the only type of accommodation on offer. In addition, when long trips by public transport demand an overnight stop, it's at a chaikhana where the driver will pull up.

At its most basic form, sleeping arrangements in a chaikhana are no more than the large communal room where meals are taken, either on the floor or on a *takht* (raised platforms). Bed and board are as one – if you eat your evening meal at the chaikhana then you've also paid to stay, so a night should weigh in at under 100Afg. You simply grab a corner, unroll your sleeping bag or blanket and you're away. There's no peace or privacy (and as a foreigner, you're instantly a figure of interest), and no security for your belongings either. Bathroom facilities tend towards the extremely basic, often just a drum of water fixed with a tap. Outside the towns and cities, enquiries as to where the toilet is may find you directed to either a pit latrine or just being waved towards the street outside.

Female travellers won't be allowed to sleep in a communal room with men, but most chaikhanas have at least one or two private rooms, for which you'll pay a small supplement. They're a much better bet for privacy and security, but don't always have a lock. These rooms often come with some bedding, which you may or may not want to examine too closely.

A torch or candles are essential in a chaikhana. In the remote areas a car battery is commonly used to power the lights and blaring TV, as it's cheaper to run than a generator.

Guesthouses

Private guesthouses were very much a feature of the accommodation scene in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Taliban regime, when there was a huge influx of foreigners and a shortage of hotel capacity. Although less popular now than they once were, they can still make a good choice, and are a preferred option for those staying in the country for longer time periods. Prices are normally negotiable for extended stays.

Guesthouses in Afghanistan are essentially private houses that have been converted into B&Bs, and typically have just a handful of rooms and one bathroom shared by all guests. They are often contained in a small compound behind a high wall that offers privacy and security; the best will have a nicely tended garden. Rates normally include breakfast, with other meals offered for extra. Amenities vary widely, but usually include satellite TV and, increasingly, internet access. A private generator should provide a reliable electricity supply. The guesthouse will be run by a *chowkidar* (caretaker), who usually lives on-site. If you're staying long term, you'll find a good *chowkidar* to be worth his weight in gold.

Hammams

If you're staying in cheap accommodation, the local hammam (bathhouse) may be the best way of getting clean. They're busy sociable places, and in the country often the only source of hot water. Prices are usually around 15Afg or 25Afg if there's a private room, and about 100Afg to be washed and massaged by the staff (tips are always appreciated). Bring toiletries and flip-flops (thongs) and keep your underwear on – Afghans of both sexes will be surprised to discover you don't shave your intimate areas.

Locals will generally be happy to direct travellers to the nearest hammam. In the cities there are separate hammams for men and women; in the country access for women is often restricted to a particular

time every week. Herat has the best and most traditional hammams; Kabul has relatively few old hammams left.

Hotels

Hotels come in a variety of stripes in Afghanistan. By the standard of neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran rooms tend to be overpriced, especially in the midrange, where 2500Afg may just get you a slightly dreary room with attached bathroom, hopefully with hot water. At the top and bottom ends of the price range, prices more accurately reflect what you get for the money. In Kabul, the choice and quality of hotels has improved significantly in the last few years.

At the higher price range, you should expect air-conditioning, and a constant electricity supply to power it. Satellite TV and internet is also usually on offer, and maybe even a few extras like a gym or pool in some places. As rates decrease, so does the quality – air-con becomes a fan, private bathrooms become shared, and broken fixtures less likely to be replaced. At the bottom end, you'll end up with a thin mattress looking at grubby walls, but thankful that the smelly (squat) toilets are at the far end of the corridor. Hot water isn't likely to be an option at this budget, so ask about the local hammam, which will have it by the bucket-load.

Most hotels have a restaurant, and even the cheapest places should be able to rustle up a simple breakfast of tea, bread and eggs or jam.

ACTIVITIES

The mountains of Afghanistan could rival Nepal for trekking opportunities, but for the most part, potential is all there is. There's no infrastructure, and anyone set-

ting out will be genuinely breaking new ground – you'll be unsupported in very remote areas.

The one area where the seeds of a trekking industry are taking root is in Badakhshan, where the Aga Khan Development Network has been assisting with setting up guesthouses and formalising guide and animal hire rates. Several mountaineering teams have also tackled Mt Noshaq, Afghanistan's highest peak (7492m). The Panjshir Valley also offers great hiking potential, but you should seek permission from the local commander. A few expats in Kabul have also taken their own canoes to kayak on the Panjshir River, which has good white-water.

Mir Samir, the unattained target for Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, remains unreachable for the foreseeable future due to its location in high-risk Nuristan (ironically Nuristan itself was heavily trekked in the 1980s by journalists crossing from Pakistan with the mujaheddin).

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices and banks are open from 9am to 4pm. The official weekend is Friday, although many offices and business close early on Thursday lunchtime or afternoon. Official business is better conducted in the mornings, before the two-hour lunch break at midday. Private businesses and shops tend to keep longer hours, opening earlier and closing far later, especially where there's money to be made.

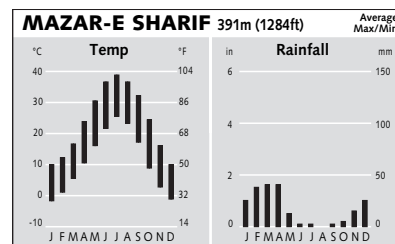
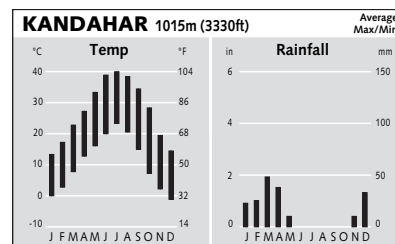
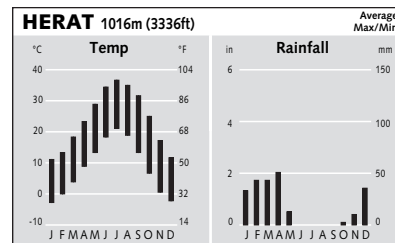
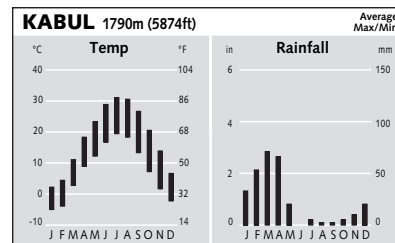
Chaikhans keep the longest hours, usually opening around dawn and closing late into the night, meaning there's almost always somewhere to get food.

During Ramazan, opening hours are shortened by most government offices and businesses. Restaurants (aside from those directly serving the international community) are closed from dawn to dusk, and many take the opportunity to close for the entire month.

CLIMATE

Afghanistan has a four distinct seasons. There's fine weather in spring (March to May) and the country blooms, but rain and melting snow can make many roads difficult to traverse. Summers (June to August) can be blisteringly hot everywhere except

the mountains – Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar all swelter, but Kabul, Bamiyan and Faizabad enjoy pleasant, cool nights. Sandstorms at this time can affect air travel. Autumn (September to November) is one of the best times to visit with pleasant dry weather, and plenty of delicious Afghan fruit. From the end of November, winter sets in, and snow is common across much of the country. Travel



in the mountains is particularly tricky at this time, with some remote regions cut off from transport links completely.

CUSTOMS

Customs procedures and restrictions aren't very transparent. Checks on arrival (by air or land) tend to be lax, with officials only really interested in guns and drugs. Other restricted items that could potentially land you in trouble are alcoholic drinks and large quantities of (non-Islamic) religious material. Foreign currency over US\$20,000 must be declared on arrival (see p212).

On leaving, an easy-to-miss sign at Kabul Airport's passport control announces that carpets and 'handicrafts' must be declared to customs, although no one seems to want to check your bags. Duty must be paid if you're exporting more than 30 sq metres of carpets. Carrying items considered antiquities is liable to bring either a fine or confiscation. Export permits can be requested at the **Ministry of Information & Culture** (☎ 020 2101301; Pul-e Bagh-e Omomi) in Kabul.

If you are importing goods for business, information about customs can be found on the website of the **Ministry of Finance** (www.mof.gov.af).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Afghanistan presents unique potential risks to the traveller, with the danger of an insurgency in the south, plus warlordism and terrorist violence in some other parts of the country. It's essential to keep abreast of the current political and security assessments both before travelling and while in-country. For a more detailed discussion of these issues see the chapter Safety in Afghanistan, p68, and the risk assessment boxes at the front of the regional chapters.

DOCUMENTS

We recommend that you carry at least one photocopy of your passport (front and visa pages), travel insurance policy and airline tickets on your person. It's also a good idea to leave copies with someone you can contact at home (or make scanned copies and keep them in a webmail account). Passport photocopies can also be useful for casual inspection at checkpoints.

Permits aren't needed for travel within Afghanistan, with the exception of entering

DUST!

The comparative rarity of paved roads can make Afghanistan feel like the dustiest country in the world; even Kabul is regularly engulfed in swirling dust storms. Chest infections are common complaints among visitors. Both Afghan men and women use their scarves to keep out the dust on bumpy roads – you should do the same.

the Wakhan Corridor. For more details on the paperwork needed here, see p168.

Student and youth cards are of no use, although as with any photographic ID they can be useful as a decoy if someone wants to keep your passport.

ELECTRICITY

Mains electricity, when available, is 220V, 50Hz AC. Plug sockets take round two-pronged plugs. Availability is the key issue – a constant and stable electricity supply is a huge problem in Afghanistan. Kabul currently receives between two to six hours of mains electricity a day, and the roar and drone of generators provides a constant aural backdrop. Herat and Mazar-e Sharif, both of which import electricity from neighbouring countries have more reliable electricity supplies, but power cuts are still common. Travelling along the highway between Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif it's possible to see the great rows of destroyed power lines, along with the newly built pylons intended to finally provide a reliable electricity supply to the capital by around 2008 – seven years after the fall of the Taliban.

If you're using any electric equipment, particularly computers, it's vital to have a surge protector and uninterruptible power supply (UPS) plugged in between your equipment and electricity socket. Both are widely available in larger towns and cities across the country.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

We strongly advise that travellers register with their embassy on arrival in Kabul, but you should be aware of what your embassy can and can't do for you. Your embassy general won't help much in an emergency if the trouble you're in is remotely your fault. Embassies won't be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country. Embassy attitudes may also be compounded if your government is currently advising against travel to Afghanistan. In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance (such as a new passport) but you'll be expected to have your own insurance.

For details of all Afghan embassies abroad, go to the website of the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.gov.af).

Afghan Embassies & Consulates

Afghanistan has diplomatic representation in the following countries, among others. Where there is more than one listing per country, the embassy is listed first, followed by the consulates in alphabetical order:

Australia (☎ 02-6282 7311; www.afghanembassy.net; PO Box 155, Deakin West, ACT 2600) Hosts nonresident envoy to New Zealand.

Belgium (☎ 02-761 3166; ambassade.afghanistan@skynet.be; 281 Rue Francoise Gay, Brussels B-1150)

Canada (☎ 613-563 4223/65; www.afghanemb-canada.net; 246 Queen St, Ottawa K1P 5E4)

China (☎ 010-6532 1582; afgemb.beijing@gmail.com; 8 Dong Zhi Men Wai Da Jie, Beijing)

France (☎ 01-45 25 05 29; www.ambafghane-paris.com; 32 Ave Raphael, Paris 75016) Hosts nonresident envoys to Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland.

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-224 87229; afghanische-botschaft@t-online.de; Wilhelmstrasse 65 D, 10117); Bonn (0228-256797; Liebfrauenweg 1A, 53125)

India (☎ 011- 410 331; afghanspirit@yahoo.com; Plat No 5, Block 50F, Chanakyapuri, Delhi 110021)

Iran Tehran (☎ 021-873 7050; afghanembassytehran@hotmail.com; 4th St, Dr Beheshti Ave); Mashad (☎ 0511-854 4829; afghanistan_ge_con_mashad@samaniir.net; Sevom Isfand Sq, off Doshahid St, Emam Khomeini Ave); Zahedan (☎ 0541-243 7113; g_c_afgh_i_zahedan@yahoo.com; Kheyaban-e Daneshga, Koi Estandari)

Italy (☎ 06-8621 6111; afghanembassy.rome@flashnet.it; Via Nomentana 120, Rome 00161) Hosts nonresident envoy to Greece.

Japan (☎ 03-5465 1219; www.afghanembassyjp.com; 3-37-8-B Nishihara, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 151-0066)

Kazakhstan (☎ 327-255 2792; Khan Tengri 59, Almaty)

Kyrgyzstan (☎ 312-426372; afghanemb_bishkek@yahoo.com; cnr Ayni & Toktonaliev, Bishkek)

Netherlands (☎ 20-6721311; afconsholland@yahoo.com; Wellesparkerweg 114, Amsterdam)

Norway (☎ 22 83 84 10; www.afghanemb.no; 17 Kronprinsens Gt, 0244, Oslo) Hosts nonresident envoys to Denmark and Sweden.

Pakistan Islamabad (☎ 051-282 4505/6; nstarzi1@yahoo.com; House 8, Street 90, G-6/3); Karachi (☎ 021-582 1264; agc_karachi@yahoo.com; 33/2 9th St, Khayaban-e Shamsi, Phase V, Defence 75500); Peshawar (☎ 091-285962; The Mall, Saddar Bazaar); Quetta (☎ 081-843364; 45 Prince Rd)

Russia (☎ 095-9287581; safarat_moscow@yahoo.com; Sverchkov Per 3/2, Moscow)

Tajikistan Dushanbe (☎ 372-216394; afghanemintj@yahoo.com; Pushkin 34); Khorog (☎ 35220-2492; Kheyaban Kermshayef 17)

Turkey Ankara (☎ 312-4381121; 88 Cinnah Caddesi, Cankaya); Istanbul (☎ 212-361 5500; info@afghanconsulateistanbul.com; Pamuk Palas 13/7, Taksim)

Turkmenistan (☎ 12-480757; Garashsyzlyk köçesi, Berzengi, Ashgabat)

UK (☎ 020-7589 8891/2; www.afghanembassy.co.uk; 31 Prince's Gate, London SW7 1QU)

United Arab Emirates Abu Dhabi (☎ 2-665 5560; PO Box 5687); Dubai (☎ 4-398 8229; PO Box 113233)

USA Los Angeles (☎ 310-473 6583; afghanconsulate@hotmail.com; 11040 Santa Monica Blvd, CA 90025); New York (☎ 212-972 2276; info@afghanconsulateny.org; 11th fl, 360 Lexington Ave, NY 10017); Washington DC (☎ 202-416 1620; www.embassyofafghanistan.org; 2341 Wyoming Ave NW, 20036)

Uzbekistan (☎ 71-134 8432; Murtazayev 6/84, Tashkent)

Embassies & Consulates in Afghanistan

All of the following embassies and consulates are in Kabul unless otherwise noted. New Zealand and Ireland do not maintain diplomatic representation in Afghanistan. For information on visas for onward travel to neighbouring countries see p211.

Australia (☎ 020 2104474; in Kabul Serena Hotel, Jade-e Froshgah)

Belgium (Map p85; ☎ 070 200135; House 40, Lane 3, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Canada (Map p85; ☎ 079 9742 822; House 256, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

China (☎ 020 2102548/9; Shah Mahmoud Wat, Shahr-e Nau)

France (Map p85; ☎ 070 284032; near Charahi Zambak & Charahi Ariana, Shahr-e Nau)

Germany (Map p85; ☎ 020 2101512; Charahi Zambak, Shahr-e Nau)

India Herat (☎ 040 224432; Sarakh-e Qulurdo); Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2200133; Interior Ministry Rd, Shahr-e Nau); Mazar-e Sharif (☎ 070 309982; Dand Chowk, District 6); Mazar-e Sharif (☎ 070 500372; Darwaza-ye Balkh)

Iran Herat (☎ 040 220015; Jad-e Welayat); Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2101393/4; Charahi Sherpur, Shahr-e Nau); Mazar-e Sharif (Kheyaban-e Nasir Khusrau)

Italy (Map p85; ☎ 020 2103144; Charahi Ariana, Shahr-e Nau)

Japan (Map p85; ☎ 020 290172; Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Kazakhstan (☎ 070 277450; House 1, Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Netherlands (Map p85; ☎ 070 286640/1; Ghiyassudin Wat, Shahr-e Nau)

Norway (☎ 020 2300900/0899; Lane 4, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Pakistan Jalalabad (Charahi Marastoon); Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2300911/3; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan); Kandahar (☎ 070 302520; Noorzo Shah Bridge, District 2)

Russia (☎ 020 2300500; Darulman Wat, Karte Se)

Sweden (Map p85; ☎ 020 2301416; House 70, Lane 1, Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Switzerland (Map p85; ☎ 020 2301565; House 486, Lane 3, Street 13, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Tajikistan (Map p85; ☎ 020 2101080; Street 10, Wazir Akbar Khan)

Turkey Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2101581/79; Shah Mahmoud Wat); Mazar-e Sharif (☎ 070 500501; Baba Yadgar Kamarband)

Turkmenistan Herat (☎ 040 223534; Jad-e Welayat); Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2301504; Lane 3, Street 13, Wazir Akbar Khan); Mazar-e Sharif (☎ 050 5023; Darwaza-ye Tashkurgan)

UK (Map p85; ☎ 070 102000; Street 15, Wazir Akbar Khan)

USA (Map p85; ☎ 020 2300436; Charahi Massoud)

Uzbekistan Kabul (Map p85; ☎ 020 2300124; House 14, Street 13, Wazir Akbar Khan); Mazar-e Sharif (☎ 050 3042; Darwaza-ye Tashkurgan)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Afghanistan's new year (Nauroz; p204) is a major cause for celebration, but there are several important holy days for travellers to be aware of.

Islamic Holy Days

The Muslim calendar is lunar, and shorter than the Western solar calendar, meaning that the calendar begins around 11 days earlier in each solar year. Dates run from sunset to the next sunset. The Hejira year is dated from the time of the Prophet Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina in AD 622.

Each month begins with the sighting of the new moon. Religious officials have the authority to declare the sighting, so while future holy days can be estimated, the precise dates are in doubt until a few days before the start of that month. Ask an anxious Afghan what date the Ramadan fast is going to end and you'll understand the frustrations. For this reason, the dates given here are only approximate. Offices and businesses all shut on these days, except for the first day of Ramadan.

Of the Muslim holy days, the most important is Eid-e Qurban. The Feast of Sacrifice (called Eid ul-Adha elsewhere in the Muslim world) commemorates the Prophet Ibrahim's readiness to obey Allah even to the point of sacrificing his son. In the run up to Eid-e Qurban, markets throng with goats and sheep; those who can afford it slaughter one, sharing the meat with relatives and the less privileged. The holiday takes place at

ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS

Hejira year	Prophet's Birthday	Ramazan begins	Eid al-Fitr	Eid-e Qurban	Ashura
1428	31 Mar 2007	13 Sep 2007	13 Oct 2007	20 Dec 2007	29 Jan 2007
1429	20 Mar 2008	2 Sep 2008	2 Oct 2008	9 Dec 2008	19 Jan 2008
1430	9 Mar 2009	23 Aug 2009	21 Sep 2009	29 Nov 2009	8 Jan 2009

Actual dates may occur a day later, but not earlier, depending on western hemisphere moon sightings.

the end of the Haj season, roughly 70 days after the end of Ramazan. It lasts for three days, during which Afghanistan effectively shuts down.

Ashura is an important Shiite festival. It marks the death of Hussain at Karbala in Iraq in 680, the event that provoked the schism between Sunni and Shiite Islam. Men pound their chests and chant the name of Hussain and his companions. Some practise self-flagellation, bloodying their backs with blade-tipped chains. The mourning period for Hussain continues for 40 days.

For more on Ramazan, the month of fasting, see right.

Nauroz

Nauroz, or New Year, is the most widely celebrated holiday in Afghanistan apart from Eid-e Qurban. The holiday is an adaptation of pre-Islamic renewal celebrations held on the spring equinox. The date is now fixed on 21 March. It probably has Zoroastrian roots, and was being celebrated in the country before Alexander the Great. Given these ancient roots, it's no surprise that the Taliban tried to ban it.

Nauroz is a time for picnics and visiting relations. Wheat seedlings are often grown and small fires are lit to be leapt over to symbolise renewal after the winter. Tables are traditionally laid with seven items beginning with the Dari letter 's': *sabzeh* (wheat, for rebirth), *samanak* (a sweet pudding, for affluence), *sir* (garlic, for health), *sib* (apples, for beauty), *sumaq* (berries, representing sunrise), *serkeh* (vinegar, for patience) and *sekkeh* (coins, for prosperity). *Haft-mewah*, a dish of seven fruits is also specially prepared. Rain on Nauroz augurs a good harvest. The *sabzeh* is thrown away into running water 13 days after Nauroz, by which time it has symbolically collected all the family's bad luck for the year.

Across the north, the holiday is often marked with *buzkashi* matches (see p57). Afghanistan's biggest public Nauroz celebrations are held in Mazar-e Sharif, attended by tens of thousands of people (p152).

FOOD

Eating is relatively inexpensive in Afghanistan, but if you spend much time out of Kabul and on the road you're liable to become bored with the limited variety of food on offer. *Pulao* (rice dish) and kebabs are mostly the order of the day, sometimes enlivened with soup or a small *qorma* (stewed vegetables).

The chaikhana is the backbone of the Afghan eating experience. Diners normally sit on the floor or on *takhts* (raised platforms) in front of a large roll of oil cloth that acts as a table substitute. Many chaikhanas will have a separate 'family room' for women and children to eat in, often just a sheet partition. Prices include tea and often a space to sleep for the night (see the Accommodation section, p199).

In larger towns you'll find a little more variety, including approximations of Western fast-food outlets. Street stalls are often a better bet, serving up cheap plates of *boloni* (stuffed vegetable pancakes), *samosas*, *mantu* (steamed meat dumplings) and the like. In season, there is always plenty of fruit on offer, from juicy melons from the north to plump Kandahari pomegranates.

Kabul has a wide variety of international restaurants aimed at the expat community. Expensive by Afghan standards, they offer a break from meat and rice. Alcohol availability has recently been severely clamped down on due to popular disapproval.

Ramazan

Ramazan (Ramadan elsewhere in the Muslim world) is the auspicious holy month

of sunrise-to-sunset fasting, marking the period when the Prophet Mohammed received his revelations. No eating, drinking or smoking is permitted during daylight hours, although children, the pregnant, sick or elderly are exempt.

Non-Muslims are not expected to fast, but in practice you end up adapting to some degree. Local restaurants close during daylight, and many shut for the entire month. You'll do a lot of eating and drinking in private. Eating in public should be strenuously avoided – it's incredibly rude to indulge in front of those who are abstaining, and it's possible you might attract negative attention for being culturally disrespectful.

This said, the celebratory aspects of Ramazan can almost compensate for the hardships of the day just passed. *Iftar*, the breaking of the fast, is a time of great activity, when people come together to eat, drink and pray. As in the rest of the Muslim world, dates are traditionally the first thing to be eaten, but *boloni* are also popular. Traffic can be terrible in the approach to sunset, with everyone clamouring to get home – hungry taxi drivers don't appreciate being flagged down at this time.

The end of Ramazan is marked by the festival of Eid ul-Fitr, which can last up to three days, and Afghans usually spend it visiting family and friends. For approximate dates of Ramazan, see opposite.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is illegal in Afghanistan, and penalties are theoretically harsh, including jail terms – the Taliban used to debate whether the appropriate punishment should be being pushed off a cliff or crushed under a toppled wall. Afghan men often hold hands in public, but this is an accepted expression of nonsexual friendship. Like heterosexual foreign couples in Afghanistan, gay and lesbian travellers should respect local sensibilities and refrain from all public displays of affection.

For all this, there is a tradition in some strands of Afghan (and particularly Pashtun) society where men seek sex with younger males, so-called *bacha baaz* (boy players). Something of an open secret, this behaviour is not recognised as formally homosexual in any way and is widely tolerated.

HOLIDAYS

On the days listed below (and on the Islamic holidays noted on opposite), businesses and government offices are closed.

21 March Nauroz; new year (see opposite)

28 April Victory Day; celebrating the mujaheddin victory over communist rule in 1992.

1 May National Labour Day

4 May Remembrance Day for Martyrs and the Disabled

19 August Independence Day; celebrating victory in the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919.

9 September Ahmad Shah Massoud Day; commemorating the assassination of the Northern Alliance leader in 2001.

INSURANCE

To say Afghanistan can be an unpredictable place is something of an understatement, so travel insurance is essential. However, many insurance companies regard Afghanistan as a conflict zone. Coupled with advice from government travel advisories, this means that not all brokers will issue insurance for a trip to Afghanistan. Discuss this with your broker and check the small print for exclusions on the policy before signing up. Note that insurers may make a distinction between 'active' and 'passive' war zones, where premiums reflect the level of risk. Cover for land mine injuries are often specifically excluded by some companies. A minimum of US\$1 million medical cover and a 'medivac' clause covering the costs of being flown to another country for treatment is essential.

Specialist policies are available with some brokers aimed specifically for those working in conflict zones, although they're not always cheap. **AKE Group** (☎ in the UK 020 7816 5454, in the USA 678-580 2336; www.akegroup.com), a dedicated security and risk management company has been recommended. In the UK, also try **Medicare** (☎ 020 7816 2033; www.medicare.co.uk) or **J&M Insurance** (☎ 01992 566939; www.jmi.co.uk). In the USA, try **New York International Group** (☎ 212-268 8520; www.nyig.com) or **Safe Passage International** (☎ 303-988 9666; www.spibrokers.com).

In Afghanistan, medical services insist on payment on the spot, so collect all the paperwork you can when being treated for a claim later. Some policies ask you to call them (they'll usually call you back) so that an assessment of your problem can be made.

INTERNET ACCESS

The internet has caught on in a big way in Afghanistan. All major towns have cyber-cafés or 'internet clubs', with prices varying between 50Afg to 80Afg. Connections are usually good, and offer facilities like Skype and burning CDs of digital photos.

LEGAL MATTERS

Although corruption is rife in the Afghan National Police, it's unlikely that you'll actually be arrested unless there are supportable charges against you. Always keep your embassy's contact details on your person and try to contact them without delay if you are arrested. Remember that all visitors are subject to the laws of Afghanistan. If the 'problem' is an imaginary one, the ability to be extremely patient and drink large quantities of tea may eventually see the issue disappear.

MAPS

Some maps of Afghanistan are available in bookshops in Kabul, but they tend to be expensive. *Afghanistan* (produced by Nelles) is a good 1:1.5 million map. For those going further east, the 1:2 million *Afghanistan & Pakistan* map by GeoCenter is also recommended. Both maps have good mountain coverage, but can be vague with detail in some areas – village names are often hazy.

AIMS (www.aims.org.af) has excellent reference and topographical maps of the country, serving the Afghan government and assistance community. Maps include street plans and highly detailed provincial and district maps. They can be downloaded as PDF files, or ordered as poster-sized maps from the AIMS office in Kabul (p84). On all maps, beware variants in spelling: Tarin Kowt on one map may be Tirin Kot on another, or even Teren Kotte.

MONEY

Afghanistan's currency is the afghani (Afg). Paper notes come in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20, 50, 100, 500 and 1000. One, two and five afghani coins are slowly replacing the grubbier small notes. When the afghani was relaunched in 2002 to encourage economic stability, there were around 10,000Afg to the US dollar; since then the currency has consistently floated at around 45Afg to 50Afg to the dollar.

Afghanistan's war-shattered banking system has been slowly rebuilding itself, but the distinction between the formal and black economy remains vague in many places. Despite government attempts at regulation, the country effectively operates a two-currency system – US dollars are an accepted form of payment for many goods and services (including hotels). Throughout the guide we have followed local practices, listing the currency payment is usually requested in. For smaller sums, including public transport and local restaurants, payment in afghanis is usually demanded. In some places, payment may even be accepted in currencies from neighbouring countries – Pakistani rupees in Jalalabad and Kandahar for instance.

ATMs

Automatic teller machines (ATMs) have slowly been introduced in Kabul, operated either by Afghanistan International Bank (AIB) or Standard Chartered. These accept MasterCard and Visa, but not always all cards (technically the machines are also wired for Cirrus and Maestro, but we didn't have much luck on this front). Check with your bank before departing that your card can access international banking networks. The ATMs give either afghanis or dollars according to the machine, and tend to have set working hours. While very useful, they shouldn't be relied on as your sole source of cash if possible. At the time of research, the only ATM outside Kabul was at Bagram Airbase.

Cash

We prefer not to recommend that travellers carry large amounts of cash with them, but in Afghanistan this is largely unavoidable. This is a country where cash – or rather the US dollar – is king. There are a few precautions to minimise the risk of losing your stash to misadventure.

It's unwise to carry wads of money in your wallet, and you're similarly more prone to being robbed if you carry valuables in a shoulder bag, which can easily be snatched. Keep a small amount of money for the day in a handy but concealed place (eg in an inner pocket), and the bulk of your resources more deeply hidden. A well-concealed money belt is one of the safest

ways of carrying your money as well as important documents such as your passport. It's also a good idea to have emergency cash (say US\$100 in small bills) stashed away from your main hoard, as a backup.

One alternative to carrying large sums of money with you on the road (and away from Kabul's ATMs) is fast international money transfer by Western Union. These are found in almost every Afghan town, and often in branches of Kabul Bank in the cities – see regional chapters for details. Fees are paid by the person wiring the funds, not by the person collecting.

Changing Money

It's far easier to change money on the street than in a bank, and in our experience some tellers will actually advise you to do just the same. Only Kabul Bank seems to consistently change money, but in a country where much of the economy operates outside the banking system, almost everyone uses moneychangers.

Moneychangers tend to operate on the street, with small stands rather than formal shops. The main moneychanging areas are listed in the text – look out for men holding thick wedges of afghanis and clutches of US\$100 bills. Afghan moneychangers are a pretty honest bunch as a whole, but always take your time to count out the bills, and don't hand over your money until you've done so. Insist on smaller denominations if you're handed everything in 1000Afg notes.

If you're not happy to change money standing on the street, doing it from a taxi is an acceptable practice. Alternatively, most hotels and many shops (particularly those dealing with imported goods, or carpet shops) are usually willing to change money. When bringing currency to Afghanistan get new dollar bills; higher denominations are preferred. Euros and sterling can be easily changed in the cities, but other currencies can be problematic. Currencies from neighbouring countries are freely exchangeable, but you get better rates closer to the relevant border – eg Iranian rials in Herat, or Tajik somani in Kunduz.

Credit Cards

Flashing your plastic is currently of limited use in Afghanistan, and then only really in the capital. Only the most upmarket Kabul

hotels accept payment by credit card. Most Kabul airline offices and travel agents will take them (plus a few enterprising carpet shops), but as a general rule banks won't give cash advances on credit cards.

Travellers Cheques

Most banks in Afghanistan will look at travellers cheques with some curiosity before pushing them back over the counter for you to take elsewhere. A few lucky (and pushy) people have managed to change travellers cheques at the main branch of Da Afghanistan Bank in Kabul, with punishing commission rates, but this is the exception rather than the norm.

This said, it can sometimes be possible to cash travellers cheques with moneychangers. The moneychangers bazaar in Kabul is the best place to try, but you might also have luck at the congregations of changers in Herat and Mazar-e Sharif. Their stalls might be lo-tech, but mobile phones put them in instant contact with the international currency markets. A little persistence, and a willingness to pay commission might work wonders – we've even heard of moneychangers cashing cheques drawn on travellers' personal bank accounts.

If you do try bringing travellers cheque, always carry the purchase receipts and a note of the serial numbers in a separate place from the cheques.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Afghanistan is a photographer's dream, so bring more film or digital memory sticks than you think you'll need. Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography* has been designed to take on the road, and has valuable tips and techniques on shooting everything from mountains to portraits.

Film & Processing

International-brand colour film and processing are available in all cities and most large towns, but check use-by dates when buying film. Photographic studios increasingly offer digital services, although only in the cities will you find much choice if you need to buy another flash-card.

Restrictions & Etiquette

The Taliban famously banned all photography of living things, a move that becomes

PINHOLE PORTRAITS

As digital cameras catch on in Afghanistan, it's a surprise to see street photographers still taking portraits with old-fashioned box pinhole cameras on wooden tripods. Sitting for your shot, the photographer takes the cover off the lens to directly expose the photographic paper inside. This is printed to make a negative, which is then photographed and the process repeated to produce a slightly blurred and ethereal portrait that looks like it was taken in the 19th century, rather than the 21st. Allow at least 30 minutes to get an unusual, but very Afghan, souvenir.

deeply ironic as soon as you realise the Afghans' great love of having their picture taken. Always ask '*aks gerefii?*' ('May I take your photo?') before snapping away. This love of being photographed only extends to male Afghans, however, and open photography of women should be avoided. It is deeply insulting to take pictures of women without permission and doing so can easily lead to an ugly scene, especially if a male relative is nearby. This can even apply if you're shooting a street scene and a woman happens to be in the foreground. Although the 'burqa shot' is one of Afghanistan's more iconic images, resist the temptation. Even if no protest is made, don't underestimate the grave offence you might have unwittingly caused. Women photographers are often permitted more access than men, especially if they've established some rapport.

As in many developing countries, prohibited subjects include military sites, airports and embassies. Avoid these completely, along with photos of international military forces.

POST

International post is generally reliable but can be very slow. It can take anything between two weeks and a month for letters to reach their destinations, irrespective of where they're headed. Either way, if you're only on a short trip you're likely to beat your postcards home. A postcard currently costs 34Afg to send to Europe or Australia, and 40Afg to North America. Stamp-lovers will enjoy the process of sending mail, as the clerk picks out designs of various ages

and then carefully franks them. One card we sent reached its destination with stamps from 1969, 1984 and 2003 on it!

Mail is best sent from the major cities (Kabul by preference), which is faster and more reliable. Although many small towns have post offices, mail is liable to go astray; we're not sure we'd entirely trust the crudely made wooden 'post box' we saw nailed to a tree in Samangan's bazaar.

Sending packages is a daylong process involving a complicated customs declaration paper chase. It's more efficient (if more expensive) to use an international shipping company. DHL, TNT and Federal Express all have offices in Kabul. A 500g package sent from Kabul costs around US\$130 to the USA or Europe, taking five days to arrive.

It's just about possible to receive mail by post restante. Have mail addressed to the main post office (eg Shahr-e Nau, Kabul), with your name underlined. Take your passport; there's a nominal fee for collection.

If you're based in Afghanistan longer term, a more reliable way of receiving mail is to set up a PO Box. You need proof of identity (usually accompanied by a letter from your employer vouching for you) and a couple of passport photos. The fee is 530Afg per six months. Mail takes around two to three weeks from Europe or the USA.

REGISTRATION

There's no need for travellers to register with the authorities on arrival in Afghanistan. In towns not used to seeing foreigners, some hotels may ask that you register with the police before allowing you to check in. This is more common at the cheaper end of the accommodation, where local authorities sometimes place restrictions on where foreigners can and can't stay overnight – the police and security services tend to do nightly checks of cheap hotels.

SHOPPING

Afghanistan is full of enough interesting handicrafts and souvenirs to have you worrying about your baggage allowance on the plane. Kabul has the widest choice (and highest prices); Herat and Mazar-e Sharif are also good places to go shopping.

Prices are never fixed, so be prepared to haggle. There's no rule on how much to offer, but it's best to treat the deal-making

TOP AFGHAN SOUVENIRS

After the obligatory carpet, here are some of our most iconic souvenirs from Afghanistan:

- A *chapan*, the striped and quilted silk Uzbek robe that Hamid Karzai is never seen without
- A *pakul*, the pancake-flat hat immortalised by Ahmad Shah Massoud
- Lapis lazuli jewellery, from the mines of Badakhshan
- A delicately embroidered *suzani*, an Uzbek hanging or bedspread in silk or wool
- Handmade green and blue Herati glass
- Rustic blue and brown pottery from Istalif
- A cover for bottles in the shape of a miniature *burqa*
- A CD of music by Ahmad Zahir
- Opium cutter and scraper

as a game rather than becoming obsessed with driving the price into the ground. Both sides will take it in turns to be disinterested and then outraged at the prices offered before finding common ground.

For more on that most famous of exports, the Afghan carpet, see p53.

TELEPHONE

A limited fixed-line telephone network exists in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e Sharif and Jalalabad, managed by the state-run Afghan Telecom. However, Afghanistan has quickly taken to mobile phones. Three companies currently compete for custom: **Roshan** (www.roshan.af; prefix 079/075), **AWCC** (www.afghanwireless.com; prefix 070) and **Areeba** (www.areeba.com.af; prefix 077). A fourth network, run by **Etisalat** (www.etisalat.co.ae) was due to launch soon after we went to press. Afghanistan uses the GSM system, although demand frequently overloads the different networks at different times. As a result, it's not uncommon to see Afghan businessmen clutching a handful of phones, one for each network. At the time of writing, Roshan was Afghanistan's most popular network, with the widest coverage.

The networks have international roaming agreements with many foreign networks, but it can work out cheaper to buy a

local SIM card on arrival in Afghanistan for about 2000Afg (including several hundred afghanis credit). Take a copy of your passport to the dealer. Calls within Afghanistan cost around 5Afg to 7Afg per minute according to the network, and around 20Afg per minute overseas. Top-up scratchcards for more credit are available everywhere from shops and street sellers.

If you're going to be spending time outside the reach of mobile phone coverage, a satellite phone from **Thuraya** (www.thuraya.com; prefix 088216) can be a good investment, albeit not a cheap one. Handsets cost US\$750 in Kabul, and phone calls cost US\$1 a minute to any phone worldwide, or US\$0.50 to another Thuraya number. To use a Thuraya phone, dial 00 to get the international code, followed by the country code, and then the number.

In the big cities, it's easiest to place a call at a post office or an Afghan Telecom office. You give the number to a clerk who directs you to a booth and places the call. Calls to the US cost around 22Afg per minute, 22Afg to Europe and 25Afg to Australia. Local calls cost around 5Afg per minute. In addition, public call offices (PCOs) are common in the major cities, usually just an office with a desk and phone, or simply someone on the street with a table and chairs and a pile of mobile phones.

TIME

Afghanistan runs on GMT plus 4½ hours. There is no daylight saving. The clocks are an hour ahead of Iran, and 30 minutes behind all its other neighbours.

TOILETS

Public toilets are effectively non-existent in Afghanistan. While midrange hotels and international restaurants will have sit-down toilets, everywhere else you'll find squat toilets giving your thigh muscles a work-out.

CROSSED LINES

Afghanistan's telephone system is in a constant state of flux. While we have taken every care to check all telephone numbers at the time of research, it is highly likely that many numbers will change during the lifetime of this guide.

Only at the top-end of the spectrum will you find toilet paper on offer, otherwise a tap or ewer of water will be provided for ablutions (the left hand is used, which is why Afghans eat with the right).

In the countryside, a pit latrine is often the best that can be hoped for, which often demand nostrils of steel to overcome the smell. Otherwise, requests for the *tashnab* or *joab-e chai* (literally 'the answer to tea') will result in you walking to the nearest bush, which can be an issue for female travellers. If you're on the road, always remain aware of the risk of landmines before stepping off the path.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Afghan Tourist Organisation** (ATO; ☎ 020 2300338; Great Massoud Rd) is struggling to bring back the tourist heyday of the 1970s. ATO also has offices at the airport, in Kabul at the Intercontinental Hotel and on Asmai Wat (near the National Gallery), as well as branches in Bamiyan, Herat and Faizabad. Available services are somewhat limited, as staff don't actually expect to see many tourists, but ATO can organise drivers and translators, and sell you copies of Nancy Dupree's 1970s guidebooks. Government plans to train official guides have yet to come to much. Better quality tourist information can usually come from the new private tour operators in Kabul – see p86. There are no ATO offices outside Afghanistan.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Travel in Afghanistan presents severe challenges for a physically disabled person. The rigours of road travel, the lack of decent footpaths and wheelchair-accessible buildings all pose serious problems. However, travel is possible for those with an iron will, plenty of stamina and the willingness to adapt to whatever hurdles present themselves. Travelling with an able-bodied companion can help immensely in overcoming these obstacles. At the very least, hiring a vehicle and guide will make moving around a great deal easier.

Despite the many difficulties, physically disabled travellers may actually get a more positive response from locals than in other countries in the region. One legacy of decades of war is the high number of amputees, those impaired by polio and other disabili-

ties. With between 700,000 and one million disabled Afghans, it's thought that up to 15% of the population is affected directly or indirectly by disability. Making contacts with local disability groups could potentially prove a strong focus for your trip.

For more information, consider contacting **Mobility International USA** (MIUSA; ☎ 541-343 1284; www.miusa.org; 132 E Broadway, Suite 343, Eugene, OR 97401), who offer general travel advice for physically disabled travellers. Its website has links to disability organisations working in Afghanistan, and MIUSA has operated exchange programmes in other parts of Central Asia.

VISAS

All nationalities need visas to visit Afghanistan. Visas are relatively straightforward to obtain, but must be applied for in advance as they are not issued on arrival at Kabul airport or at any land border.

All visa applications require a letter of introduction, stating the purpose and duration of your trip. If you're travelling for work purposes this should be from your employer. The situation for tourist visas depends on the embassy you apply at. If you're travelling independently, a letter written by yourself stating your purpose and itinerary often suffices. Bemused consular officials have been known to request applications be made in person so they can interview applicants as to why they want to holiday in Afghanistan. Otherwise, the Afghan tour operators listed on p217 should be able to provide you with a letter of introduction for a small fee. Call your nearest embassy well in advance of travel to check current requirements.

At the time of writing a one-month single-entry visa in London costs UK£30, UK£55 for a three-month multiple-entry visa, and UK£115 for a six-month multiple-entry visa, all issued in two days. The embassy in Washington charges US\$50 for a one-month single-entry visa, US\$100 for a three-month multiple-entry visa, and US\$180 for a six-month multiple-entry visa. Visas take two weeks to process, with a premium charged for same-day issue.

In neighbouring countries, Peshawar, Tehran, Mashad and Tashkent are good places to apply for an Afghan visa. One month single-entry visas cost US\$30 to US\$45 and are generally issued on the same day.

Visa Extensions

Visas can be extended in Kabul at the **Interior Central Passport Department** (Map p85; Passport Lane, off Interior Ministry Rd, Shahr-e Nau). Tourists require one passport photo and a letter requesting an extension from the head office of the ATO. The letter costs US\$10 for a one-month extension. The process takes about an hour if the queues aren't too long.

If you're working in Afghanistan, you'll need a letter of support from your organisation, or in the case of journalists, a letter from the **Ministry of Information & Culture** (☎ 020 2101301; Pul-e Bagh-e Omomi) in Kabul. Visa extensions cost US\$30 for three months, which must be paid into the central branch of Da Afghanistan Bank, with the receipt presented at the passport office along with one passport photo.

Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Afghanistan, see p203. Be warned that the Iranian and Pakistani embassies attract huge queues of visa applicants.

India Applications can only be made at the embassy in Kabul (open 9am to noon Monday to Thursday). Six-month visa issued in 24 hours for US\$65. Bring three passport photos.

Iran Transit visas from Kabul or Herat (both open 8am to 2pm Saturday to Wednesday, 8am to noon Thursday) cost from US\$20 to US\$60 according to nationality. One-month tourist visas cost from US\$60. Both require two photos, and possibly a letter of introduction from your home embassy. Issue time is one day to a fortnight, again according to nationality: Americans and British are given the hardest time.

Pakistan The embassy in Kabul (open 9am to noon Sunday to Thursday) is picky about issuing visas for nonwork purposes. Tourist visas cost about US\$60 according to nationality, and take several days, with two photos.

Tajikistan One-month visas cost US\$80; a letter of introduction from your embassy is sometimes requested. Be there as soon as the embassy opens (9am to noon Saturday and Sunday) and be persistent to have your application processed. Visas can take up to a fortnight to issue.

Turkmenistan Visas issued in Kabul (open 9am to noon and 2pm to 4pm Monday to Thursday) and Herat (open 9am to noon Saturday to Wednesday). Transit visas cost US\$31, one-month tourist visas around US\$125. As well as two photos, you need a letter of invitation from a Turkmen travel agency specifying your point of entry. Applications can take up to a fortnight to process.

Uzbekistan Visas issued in Kabul (open 9am to noon Monday to Thursday) only. A one-month visa costs US\$100 with two photos and a letter of invitation from an Uzbek travel agency. Visas are issued on the spot.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Afghanistan has a conservative culture where attitudes to women are bound up with the protection of honour. Society generally seeks to minimise contact between unrelated men and women. As a result foreign women travelling or working on their own, away from male relatives, are often viewed with a mixture of curiosity and astonishment. Being disregarded is a common reaction, and if you're with a male companion you shouldn't be surprised if an Afghan directs his attention and conversation in that direction.

There is no legal obligation to wear a headscarf, but in practice all foreign women do. Walking around Kabul with a bare head would attract a lot of attention; in the countryside such behaviour would be nothing short of scandalous. As a general rule, the more conservative or rural the area you are in, the more discreetly you should dress. In keeping with local sensibilities, your clothes should hide the shape of your body. Bare arms and tight fitting clothes should be avoided, but whatever you wear you'll still have to get used to being stared at. Trying to wear the burqa is both unnecessary and a cultural no-no for foreign women. The *pirhan tonban* (traditional male clothes; also called *shalwar kameez*) of baggy trousers and long shirt is comfortable and popular with many women working in Afghanistan. Baggy clothes can also provide useful cover should you need to go to the toilet while travelling off the beaten track. Facilities in chaikhans are usually limited.

Foreign women can interact with Afghan women in a way impossible for men. Afghan men may also make special allowances for your status. 'I often joke that there are three genders here: male, female, and foreign woman', commented one female NGO worker we met during research. Afghan men can sometimes be unsure about the correct protocol of dealing with a foreign woman. It's best to wait for them to offer a hand to shake rather than offering your own, and try to avoid excessive eye contact with Afghan men you don't know. If harassed in a public place, several women have advised making a loud scene to shame your harasser. Avoiding walking alone at night is advice we'd equally extend to foreign men. You'll also need to cultivate patience and learn to trust your own instincts.

Transport

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are few direct flights to Afghanistan from outside the immediate region. The most popular route from Europe or North America is to fly to Dubai, from where there are plenty of connections to Kabul. Coming from the east, the most convenient hubs to catch flights from are Delhi and Islamabad.

Entering by land, Afghanistan maintains open border crossings with all its neighbours except China.

ENTERING AFGHANISTAN

When entering the country by air, formalities are fairly simple, but be prepared for long queues. You'll have to fill in an entry form stating the purpose of your visit and your profession. Baggage reclaim can sometimes be something of a scrum, but at least the carousel normally has electricity these days. Customs checks on arrival are fairly cursory.

Crossing land borders is also usually straightforward, but customs checks on leaving Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, particularly the Central Asian republics and Iran, can often be exceedingly thorough.

There is no currency declaration unless you're carrying cash worth more than 1,000,000Afġ (US\$20,000), in which case you need a Currency and Negotiable Bearer Instrument Report. In practice, this is only

checked on exiting Afghanistan, and can be obtained before leaving at Da Afghanistan Bank in Kabul or at the airport.

AIR Airports & Airlines

Currently only **Kabul International Airport** (KBL; ☎ 020 2300 016) receives commercial flights into Afghanistan. There is an ATM and currency exchange at the airport. At the time of research, Ariana had announced a direct Kandahar–Dubai service.

There's a restricted choice of airlines flying to Kabul. Since the fall of the Taliban, plenty of airlines have announced services – including Lufthansa, Qatar Airways and Turkish Airlines – only to cancel them abruptly, either due to security concerns, or (it's rumoured) pressure from vested Afghan interests.

INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES IN AFGHANISTAN

Air Arabia (G9; ☎ 079 9700 095; www.airarabia.com; hub Sharjah International Airport) Flights suspended at the time of research.

Ariana Afghan Airlines (FG; ☎ 020 2100 271; www.flyariana.com; hub Kabul International Airport)

Azerbaijan Airlines (J2; ☎ 070 296 914; www.azal.az; hub Heydar Aliyev Airport, Baku)

Indian Airlines (IC; ☎ 079 9308 303; www.indian-airlines.nic.in; hub Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi)

Kam Air (RQ; ☎ 020 2301 753; www.flykamair.com; hub Kabul International Airport)

Pakistan International Airlines (PK; ☎ 020 2203 500; www.piac.com.pk; hub Islamabad International Airport)

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with your airline or travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates carbon dioxide (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

In addition to the international carriers, there are also three carriers serving the international community: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Pactec and the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS). While primarily operating domestic flights, they do offer some international connections to Islamabad (Pactec and UNHAS), Dubai and Dushanbe (UNHAS only). ICRC flights all originate in Peshawar. Flights are only open to accredited NGO workers. For more information see p218.

Tickets

Not many travel agencies (traditional or online) outside Afghanistan will issue tickets for Ariana or Kam Air – see individual regions in this chapter for more information. It's now possible to book online with Ariana, with Kam Air about to follow suit as this book was being researched. Note that when booking return flights, both Ariana and Kam Air frequently issue open returns by default so it's essential to check this when booking, and always reconfirm your tickets in Kabul.

There is very little seasonal variation in pricing for flights to Afghanistan, but demand can be heavy in the run-up to the Nauroz and Eid al-Adha holidays.

Airline Safety

Flying into Kabul has always been a bit of an adventure. In the 1980s and '90s, approaching planes had to steeply corkscrew when approaching the airport as an anti-missile defence, while as recently as 2006, new arrivals were greeted by the sight of the 'Ariana Graveyard', a twisted and shattered junkpile of destroyed airliners. The same year also finally saw the installation of a radar system at the airport.

Poor maintenance has been a worry for Ariana flights, and the UN and many embassies ban their staff from flying with the airline, which has also been barred from EU airspace. Much of the fleet are second-hand planes from Indian Airlines, but these are slowly being replaced. Kam Air uses newer planes and is generally regarded as being better run, but it has Afghanistan's one recent fatal crash to its name: a flight between Herat and Kabul crashed in February 2005 with the loss of 104 lives. Snowy conditions were blamed.

Winter can cause severe problems at the 1800m-high Kabul airport, and flights are frequently cancelled due to snow and poor visibility. Factor in extra travel time if visiting Afghanistan during the winter, as delays can last several days.

DEPARTURE TAX

There is a 500Afg/US\$10 departure tax upon flying out of Afghanistan. Domestic flights have a departure tax of 50Afg/US\$1.

Europe

Airiana operates a weekly flight between Frankfurt (Germany) and Kabul, as well as a weekly flight every Monday between Moscow and Kabul, with a stopover in Baku (Azerbaijan). The Frankfurt flight uses new planes to allow Ariana to operate in EU airspace. There are flights between Istanbul (Turkey) and Kabul every Tuesday and Friday, the latter via Ankara (Turkey). Ariana has offices in these countries:

Azerbaijan (☎ 12 93805; 16 Pushkin St, intersection 28th of May, Baku 1010)

Germany (☎ 69 2562 7940; Frankfurt Airport)

Russia (☎ 495-2026269; 8/1 Povarskaia St, 121069 Moscow)

Turkey (☎ 212-664 6930; Yenidoğan Mh. 42, sok 72 Zeytinburnu, Istanbul)

At the time of research, Kam Air had just announced a weekly Istanbul–Kabul service, and **Azerbaijan Airways** (☎ 12 493 4004; booking@azal.az; 66-68 28th of May St, Baku 1010) flies between Baku and Kabul every Wednesday.

In the UK, agents selling Ariana and Kam Air tickets include **Ariana Travel** (☎ 020 8843 0011; ariana.travel@hotmail.com; 136 The Broadway, Southall, UB1 1QN) and **Afghan Travel Centre** (☎ 020 7580 7000; 107 Great Portland Street, London).

Middle East

Dubai is the busiest route into Kabul, with Ariana and Kam Air both operating daily flights, as well as a new Ariana Kandahar–Dubai route.

It's important to note that while the vast majority of international flights to Dubai arrive at Terminal 1, flights to Kabul are via the completely separate Terminal 2. There is a free airport bus (15 minutes) linking the two, alternatively a taxi will cost about 25AED. As flying via Dubai involves a change of airline as well as terminal, passengers cannot normally check their bags through all the way to Kabul. This means having to go through UAE immigration on arrival at Dubai before transiting to Terminal 2. Visas are not required for citizens of most developed

countries including all EU states, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea and Singapore – but check requirements before travel.

The cargo airline **DFS** (☎ 04 299 7556; www.dfsmiddleeast.com) sometimes sells seats on its Dubai–Kandahar flight.

In Dubai, **Eisa Travels** (☎ 04 223 7348; PO Box 11266) represents Ariana. **Kam Air** (☎ 04 223 6060; kamairdubai@hotmail.com; near Emirates Bank, Baniyas Rd) sells tickets direct.

From Iran, **Ariana** (☎ 021 8855 0156; Block 29, Kheyaban Khalid, Tehran) run a weekly service from Tehran, while Kam Air have a weekly flight to Mashhad. **Iran Asseman** (☎ 021 8889 5567; www.iaa.ir; Enqelab Ave, Nejatollahi St, Tehran) have one flight a week from Tehran to Kabul via Mashhad. Ariana also fly to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Asia

From India, both **Ariana** (☎ 11-2687 7808; Ashok Hotel, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi) and Kam Air fly twice weekly from Delhi. Ariana also has an Amritsar–Kabul flight. **Indian Airlines** (☎ 11-2331 0517; Malhotra Bldg, Connaught Pl, New Delhi) fly between the Indian and Afghan capitals twice a week.

From Pakistan, **Ariana** (☎ 051 287 0618; Kashmir Commercial Complex, Fazel-e-Haq Rd, Blue Area, Islamabad) fly once a week from Islamabad. **PIA** (☎ 111-786-786; Quid-i-Azam Airport, Karachi) operate an identical schedule.

Both Ariana and Kam Air fly once a week to Almaty (Kazakhstan). There's also a weekly flight to Dushanbe (Tajikistan) with **Ariana** (☎ 1413-669 880).

North America

There are no direct flights between North America and Afghanistan. In 2006 **Ariana** (☎ 866-330 3431) started offering online booking packages from the USA and Canada to Kabul, including connecting flights with either Lufthansa or Air France to their direct Frankfurt–Kabul service. In Canada, you can also try the **Ariana GSA** (☎ 905-389-0999; 203-801 Mohawk Rd West, Hamilton, Ontario, L9C 6C2). For Kam Air tickets in the USA or Canada contact **Kam Air** (☎ 888-952-6247; sales@flykamair.ca).

In the USA, other agents who can arrange flights to Afghanistan include **Afghan Tours & Travel** (☎ 703-998 7676, ext 222; ahmedb1961@yahoo.com; 4300 King Street, Suite 139; Alexandria, VA 22302) or **Pamir Travel** (☎ 510-791 5566; hashmat@pamirtravels.com; 37477 Fremont Blvd. Suite C, Fremont, CA 94536).

LAND

Afghanistan's traditional position as the crossroads of Asia can make entering the country by land an evocative trip. Sneaking over the high passes like so many Great Gamers or journalists with the mujaheddin (Islamic fighters) is, however, no longer necessary: border procedures are, for the most part, a formality these days.

Iran

Crossing from Mashhad in Iran to Herat is one of the most straightforward entry points to Afghanistan. Alexander the Great pioneered this overland route, followed nearly 2500 years later by the Hippy Trail. In the 1970s, as some Afghans grew weary of the kaftan-clad hordes, a sign appeared in the consulate in Mashhad: 'Visas will not be given to people with long beards or hair like that of beetle.'

The highway between Herat and the border crossing at Islam Qala (Taybad in Iran) has recently been upgraded, allowing a quick transit. Direct buses run daily from Mashhad to Herat (IR70,000, seven hours), which is slightly cheaper than travelling piecemeal from Mashhad. On the Afghan side of the border, note the huge parks of vehicles imported from Dubai and waiting to clear customs. From Islam Qala it's around 90 minutes' drive to Herat. There are plenty of shared taxis (60Afg) after immigration. There are also direct Herat–Mashhad buses (see p141 for details).

Mashhad is an excellent jumping-off point for Herat. The Great Mosque in the vast Emam Reza Shrine Complex is the most outstanding surviving building commissioned by Gowhar Shad (p138). A dazzling confection of Timurid mosaic tiling, it gives a taste of how Herat's Musalla Complex must once have looked, and should not be missed.

Pakistan

There are two official border crossings open to foreigners between Pakistan and Afghanistan: at Torkham between Peshawar and Jalalabad through the Khyber Pass, and at Spin Boldak (Chaman on the Pakistani side), equidistant between Quetta and Kandahar. In the current political climate, we strongly advise against attempting to cross the latter border independently – see p190

for more information. For trekking into north Pakistan from the Wakhan Corridor, see p172.

Minibuses and shared taxis run daily from Kabul and Jalalabad to Torkham. Border formalities on the Afghan side are relaxed, but more chaotic on entering Pakistan. The road from Torkham to Peshawar passes through the Tribal Areas of North West Frontier Province, an autonomous area belonging to the Pashtun tribes where the Pakistan government's writ is light. It is forbidden for foreigners to travel on this road without an armed guard from the Khyber Rifles – you'll be assigned one after immigration. There's no fee, but the soldier will expect a tip of around Rs200 once you get to Peshawar. Technically foreigners are also forbidden to take public transport on this road, leaving a taxi (Rs1200, two hours) the only option, although we've heard of a few travellers who have snuck onto local buses.

From Peshawar to Torkham, some paperwork is involved. You need a Tribal Area Permit, obtained for free at the **Home Department of Tribal Affairs** (☎ 9210507; off Saddar Rd), to travel to the border. Take your passport plus photocopies of your Afghan and Pakistani visas and the photo page to the Foreign Section staff office on the third floor. The permit specifies the exact date of travel, and should be applied for no more than two days in advance. With luck, the process takes around an hour. Make three or four photocopies of the permit to give to police checkpoints along the route.

Ideally arrange a taxi the day before travel. Before leaving Peshawar you must go to the **Khyber Political Agent** (Stadium Rd) to collect your gunman. Without him you'll be turned back at the first checkpoint. There's plenty to see as you drive through the Khyber. Look out for the army badges on the hills near Jamrud Fort, belonging to British and Pakistani regiments who served here. The massive fortified home of the notorious drug smuggler Ayub Afridi at Landi Kotal (complete with anti-aircraft guns) is also unmissable, and a keen reminder about who really rules this part of the country. There are good views of the Khyber and across to Torkham from Michni checkpoint, but ignore the children who assail you trying to sell afghani banknotes at over-inflated rates.

Onward transport from Torkham is plentiful, and you'll probably get mobbed by touts so keep control of your bags. Travelling straight through, if you leave Peshawar at 8am, you should arrive in Kabul by around 4pm. See p185 for transport options once in Afghanistan.

Afghan and Pakistani authorities make regular pronouncements on establishing a direct Peshawar–Jalalabad bus service, but at the time of research, there had only been a few erratic departures. It's not known whether foreigners will be allowed to take this service if it runs regularly in the future.

Tajikistan

There are three crossing points between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, two of which are in Badakhshan. The busiest and most accessible is at Shir Khan Bandar near Kunduz. The Badakhshan border posts are at Ishkashim and Khorog.

From Shir Khan Bandar there is a daily ferry (US\$10) across the Amu Darya to the Tajik town of Panj-e Payon (Nizhniy Panj on old maps). The ferry leaves Panj-e Payon at 10am, and Shir Khan Bandar after lunch. There's no ferry on Sundays. A new bridge has been built across the river here that will make this border crossing quicker, and was due to be inaugurated as we went to press.

There are daily shared taxis between Panj-e Payon to Dushanbe (TJS50, four hours). On the Afghan side, it's one hour by shared taxi to Kunduz (80Afg). With a very early start, it's just about possible to travel overland between Dushanbe and Kabul in one long day.

The borders in Badakhshan are easier crossing into Afghanistan. The Tajik side of the border is the Gorno–Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) for which a special permit is required. This is normally only available in Dushanbe, but anecdotal evidence suggests that persistence can sometimes persuade the Tajik embassy in Kabul to issue the necessary paperwork. Contact Great Game Travel (see opposite) which also has an office in Dushanbe, and can help arrange GBAO permits.

The border crossing at Ishkashim is open Monday to Thursday. There's a bridge across the Panj River here, a couple of kilometres from both towns. There's a daily minibus between Afghan Ishkashim to Faizabad

(600Afg, eight hours). On the Tajik side there are a couple of homestays, and onward transport to Khorog (TJS20, three hours).

The largest town in Tajik Badakhshan, Khorog also has a border crossing, as well as an Afghan consulate. The border crossing is a bridge over the Panj. While a good road connects Khorog to the rest of Tajikistan, transport connections are extremely scant on the Afghan side. If you don't have your own vehicle, hire is very expensive. A bad road leads west past Lake Shewa to Faizabad, but despite what some maps say, there's no road south along the river to Ishkashim.

Turkmenistan

There are two official border crossings on the Afghan–Turkmen border. Torghundi in Afghanistan to Serkhetabat in Turkmenistan (Kushka or Gushgi on some maps) is the border crossing more commonly used, due to its proximity to Herat. A more obscure alternative is at Imam Nazar, near Andkhoy.

The Turkmen authorities love paperwork. To enter the country overland, you need to have your point of entry marked on your visa. For tourist visas, you generally also have to be met at the border by an official guide.

From Herat, shared taxis run irregularly to Torghundi, and you'll probably end up having to hire one outright (1000Afg, two hours). The road is poorly maintained and may be problematic in winter. Make sure the driver takes you to the actual border, which is 4km past the town. There's a customs fee of 550Afg. The Turkmen border is a 1.5km walk past the Afghan post, and the waiting customs officials will probably take your luggage apart. There's an entry tax of US\$10 (with US\$1 bank fee). You must also declare all foreign currency and register with the police on arrival – keep the receipt as it's checked when leaving the country.

There's no accommodation at Serkhetabat, so the best option is to head to Mary. As the border is regarded as sensitive by the Turkmen authorities, a special permit from the capital is required to stop overnight in the area. There are road and rail links to Mary (the railway actually extends a few kilometres into Afghanistan for freight trains).

The border post in the flat steppe at Imam Nazar is far more remote, and not

even marked on all maps. The exact demarcation of the border has become disputed in recent years due to the shifting Amu Darya and Murghab rivers, with Turkmenistan now claiming areas that have always been Afghan. As a result, cross-border traffic has dwindled to a trickle, but is still possible for the adventurous.

There is no public transport linking Andkhoy to Imam Nazar or on to Kerki once you're in Turkmenistan, and as there's barely a road a 4WD is recommended. Anticipate paying around 1000Afg for the two-hour trip. Wet conditions can make this route very tough in spring and into summer. The Turkmen border post is a 2.5km walk past Afghan immigration. Once in, take whatever transport is available to Kerki, another two hours on a rough and rolling track.

Uzbekistan

The Friendship Bridge across the Amu Darya links Hairatan in Afghanistan to Termiz in Uzbekistan. Its name became something of a bad joke when it turned into the main invasion route into Afghanistan for the Red Army in 1979. Although technically an open border, Uzbekistan's police-state paranoia can make crossing here something of an unknown quantity at times.

The border was officially opened to tourist traffic in 2005, but the message doesn't seem to have reached all the Uzbek officials at the bridge. While we've had several reports of independent crossing here without problems, a few have reported that only people on accredited business were being allowed to enter or leave Uzbekistan here. For humanitarian workers, this involves a letter being sent to the Termiz UN office, where your details are accredited and passed on to the border officials who put your name on a list of those approved to cross the border on that particular date.

If the border continues to be subject to the whims of the bureaucrats, we suggest contacting the Uzbek embassy in Kabul before heading to the border, and asking for written permission to cross to Termiz. If you're in Uzbekistan, talk to a reliable Tashkent travel agency or contact the **Office of Visas & Registration** (OVIR; ☎ 132 6570) in Tashkent directly.

Assuming the border is open, the easiest way to get to Hairatan is from Mazar-e

Sharif by private taxi (500Afg, 30 minutes). Shared taxis are scarce. The Amu Darya is wide here and it takes around 10 minutes to walk across the bridge. The Uzbek border guards are pretty surly. The bridge is 10km from the centre of Termiz, and there are a few *marshrutka* (minibuses) that make the run into town (S200, 20 minutes).

Termiz has several interesting Buddhist and Islamic sites that make lingering a day worthwhile, but note that its location on a sensitive border means you need to register with OVIR on arrival if staying overnight.

TOURS

The changeable nature of Afghanistan means that travelling with a reliable tour operator can sometimes be a better option than going independently. Always ask about the company's security procedures before booking.

Afghanistan

Afghan Logistics & Tours (Pvt) Ltd (☎ 070 277408/079 9391 462; www.afghanlogisticstours.com; House 106, Street 1, Charahi Ansari, Shahr-e Nau, Kabul) Experienced operator with individual and group tours across the country. Also offer translators and vehicle hire.

Great Game Travel (☎ 079 9489 120/077 9489 120; www.greatgametravel.com; Street 3/1 House 3, Proje Wazirabad, Proje Taimani, Kabul) High-quality secure jeep tours and mountain trekking mainly in northern Afghanistan. Also has offices in Faizabad and Dushanbe.

UK

Hinterland (☎ 01883 743584; www.hinterlandtravel.com) Rugged overland trips crossing Afghanistan from Iran to Pakistan.

Live! Travel (☎ 020 8894 6104; www.live-travel.com; 120 Hounslow Rd, Twickenham, TW2 7HB) Tailor-made cultural trips.

Wild Frontiers (☎ 020 7736 3968; www.wildfrontiers.co.uk; Unit 6, Townmead Business Centre, William Morris Way, London SW6 2SZ) Group tours to north Afghanistan, including Badakhshan.

USA

Distant Horizons (☎ 800 333 1240; www.distant-horizons.com; 350 Elm Avenue Long Beach, CA 90802) Cultural tours of Afghanistan, often in conjunction with Tajikistan or Pakistan.

Reality Tours (☎ 415 255 7296; www.globalexchange.org; 2017 Mission Street #303, San Francisco, CA 94110) Alternative travel, centred on visiting community groups and NGOs working in Afghanistan.

If travelling in remote areas or in winter, your vehicle should contain adequate tools and spares, emergency rations and (ideally) communication equipment. For more security tips for the road, see p73.

Hire

It's not possible to hire cars without drivers in Afghanistan. In Kabul there are a number of private companies that hire out reliable vehicles with drivers such as Afghan Logistics & Tours (see p104). Outside Kabul, the best bet is to ask at your hotel or the transport park, and get trustworthy recommendations if possible.

Hiring a 4WD with driver (typically a Toyota Landcruiser or Surf) typically costs around US\$150 per day, including fuel.

Taxi

There are two main ways of travelling by car in Afghanistan if you don't have your own vehicle: ordinary taxi or shared taxi.

ORDINARY TAXI

In this case you'd hire an entire taxi for a special route, ideal for reaching off-the-beaten-track places, or where minibus connections are hit-and-miss. A private taxi allows you to stop at will and will hopefully give you some control over the manic tendencies latent in many Afghan drivers – don't be afraid to suggest a preference for the brake over the accelerator pedal. Select your driver with care, and always look over his vehicle. If you're travelling solo, it's often recommended to visibly note the car's registration number and phone it through to a friend with your itinerary.

You'll have to negotiate a price before setting off. Along routes where there are also shared taxis this is simple arithmetic, adding up the total number of individual fares. Make sure everyone is clear which route you'll be taking, how long you want the driver to wait for you at the destination and whether or not fuel is included. You may have to haggle hard, as many drivers will see the opportunity to add 'foreigner inflation' to the price.

SHARED TAXI

Aside from minibuses, shared taxi is the main form of road transport around Afghanistan, and operates on the same principle, whereby a yellow taxi or private car does a regular run between two destinations and charges a set fare for each of the seats in the car. These cars can almost always be found in the same transport depots as minibuses. Fares are more expensive than a minibus, but you reach your destination faster.

Most shared taxis are yellow Toyota Corollas, and typically take two passengers in the front seat and three in the back seat. The front middle seat can be quite uncomfortable on bad roads, leaving you getting friendly with either the driver or the gear stick. Drivers will often sell the front seat to just one passenger at a slight premium. It's always possible to buy an extra seat for comfort or just to get the car to depart faster.

HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and we certainly don't recommend it in Afghanistan. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small, but potentially very serious risk. Never try flagging down a lift in areas where security is known to be poor.

In Afghanistan there is little meaningful distinction between hitching and taking a taxi. Anyone with a car will stop if you flag them down. Drivers usually expect some money for picking you up, so it's best to offer a little; it may be refused, but it's more likely not to be. Keep public transport fares in mind so that, should you strike someone trying to extort silly amounts from you, you'll have some idea of how much is fair to offer. Many Afghans will be baffled by the sight of a foreigner without a vehicle and pick you up out of curiosity.

In some parts of Afghanistan, hitching a ride on trucks can sometimes be the only way of getting around – for example on the central route in winter. The big Kamaz trucks normally get through, but can be painfully slow. Most NGOs are banned from picking up passengers on the road.

Health

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Prevention is the key to staying healthy while travelling in Afghanistan. With luck, the worst complaint you might come down with on your trip is a bad stomach; while serious infectious diseases can and do occur in Afghanistan, these are usually associated with poor living conditions and can be avoided with a few precautions.

BEFORE YOU GO

Health matters often get left to the last minute before travelling. A little planning is advisable, however – some vaccines don't ensure immunity for two weeks, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure.

Travellers can register with the **International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers** (IAMAT; www.iamat.org). Their website can help travellers to find a doctor with recognised training. Those heading off to very remote areas (particularly for work) may find a first-aid course useful.

Bring medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter docu-

menting their medical necessity. See your dentist before a long trip; carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you).

INSURANCE

Adequate health insurance is vital when travelling to Afghanistan. Check in advance that your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures – doctors in Afghanistan expect payment on the spot. Your policy should ideally also cover emergency air-evacuation home, which may be essential for serious problems. For more on insurance issues regarding Afghanistan as a conflict zone see p205.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your trip. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received.

Yellow fever vaccination is mandatory if arriving from a country where the disease is endemic. The World Health Organization also recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to Afghanistan:

Adult Diphtheria & Tetanus Single booster recommended if none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include sore arm and fever.

Hepatitis A Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side effects such as headache and sore arm occur in 5% to 10% of people.

Hepatitis B Now considered routine for most travellers. Usually given as three shots over six months, a rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually headache and sore arm. In 95% of people lifetime protection results.

Measles, Mumps & Rubella Two doses required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flu-like illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.

Polio Only one booster is required as an adult for lifetime protection.

Typhoid Recommended unless your trip is for less than a week. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available, but the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.

These immunisations are recommended for long-term visitors (more than one month) or those at special risk:

Japanese B Encephalitis Three injections, with a booster recommended after two years. Sore arm and headache are the most common side-effects.

Meningitis Single injection. There are two types: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years' protection; the meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years' protection. Recommended for long-term visitors aged under 25.

Rabies Three injections in all. A booster after one year provides 10 years' protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally headache and sore arm.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Following is a list of other items you should consider packing in your medical kit when you are travelling.

- Antibiotics (if travelling off the beaten track)
- Antibacterial hand gel
- Antidiarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- Paracetamol (eg Tylenol) or aspirin
- Anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- Antihistamines (for hay fever and allergic reactions)
- Antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- Steroid cream or cortisone (allergic rashes)
- Bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- Adhesive or paper tape
- Scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- Thermometer
- Pocket knife
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- Permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents, and bed nets
- Sun block
- Oral rehydration salts
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Syringes and sterile needles (if travelling to remote areas)

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet. The **World Health Organization** (www.who.int/ith/) is an excellent resource

TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

The following government travel health websites are useful resources to consult prior to departure:

Australia (www.smartraveller.gov.au)

Canada (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html)

UK (www.dh.gov.uk/policyandguidance/healthadvicefortravellers/)

United States (www.cdc.gov/travel/)

for travel health information, along with **MD Travel Health** (www.mdtravelhealth.com), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel Asia & India* is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Travellers' Health* by Dr Richard Dawood (Oxford University Press) and *The Travellers' Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester (Sheldon Press), an especially useful health guide for long-term expatriates working in the region.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Though most clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain in the lower leg, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, regularly contract your leg muscles while sitting and drink plenty of fluids. Recent research also indicates that flight

socks, which gently compress the leg from the knee down, encourage blood to flow properly in the legs and reduce the risk of DVT by up to 90%.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue or nausea. To avoid jet lag, set your watch to your destination's time zone when you board your plane, drink plenty of (non-alcoholic) fluids and eat lightly. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your eating and sleeping schedule as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side-effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN AFGHANISTAN

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Health care in Afghanistan is basic at best, and there is a nationwide shortage of doctors. Although there are a handful of good hospitals in Kabul, medical facilities are not generally up to international standards and serious cases are likely to require evacuation. While most towns have pharmacies, it can nevertheless be difficult to find reliable medical care outside the cities. Take care when buying medication, as fake, poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time; travel to the nearest quality facility immediately to receive attention. Recommended hospitals are listed under Information in the major city sections of regional chapters in this book; your embassy may also be a useful contact.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

The strains of travel – unfamiliar food, heat, long days and erratic sleeping patterns – can all make your body more susceptible to stomach upsets.

In terms of prevention, eat only fresh fruits or vegetables if they are cooked or if

you have washed or peeled them yourself. Water should be treated before drinking. Meals freshly cooked in front of you (like much street food), or served in a busy restaurant are more likely to be safe. It's also very important to pay close attention to personal hygiene while on the road. Afghan meals are eaten with the hand, so always wash before eating (even the smallest restaurant will have water and soap) and after using the toilet. Antibacterial hand gel, which cleans without needing water, is a real travellers' friend.

If you develop diarrhoea, drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution – readily available in pharmacies. Avoid fatty food and dairy products. A few loose stools don't require treatment but, if you start having more than four or five watery stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours, is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain you should seek medical attention.

Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is actually rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut, and a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated, complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

Giardiasis

Giardia is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardia, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to giardia. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated, but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole; Metronidazole is a second option.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It causes a high temperature

and severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat requiring a tracheostomy to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with locals in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an injection alone, or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years. Diphtheria outbreaks are not uncommon in Afghanistan, particularly in and around IDP camps.

HIV

HIV is spread via infected blood and blood products and through sexual intercourse with an infected partner. There is a small risk of infection through medical procedures, such as blood transfusion and improperly sterilised medical instruments. At the time of researching this book, Afghanistan had less than 100 officially recorded cases of HIV, but screening was limited to blood donors and the real figure is presumed to be far higher. Increasing drug use and lack of public information may lead to greater infection rates. Be aware that clinics in Kabul treating expats regularly report other sexually transmitted diseases.

Leishmaniasis

Spread through the bite of an infected sand fly, leishmaniasis can cause a slowly growing skin lump or ulcer, leading to disfigurement. It may develop into a serious life-threatening fever usually accompanied with anaemia and weight loss. Sand fly bites (most common between dusk and dawn) should be avoided whenever possible.

Kabul is the largest centre of cutaneous leishmaniasis in the world, although WHO-distributed insecticide-treated bednets are attempting to address the problem, in tandem with its malaria-control programme.

Malaria

There is a significant malaria risk in Afghanistan between May to November in parts of the country below 2000m (including Kabul). Outbreaks most commonly occur after rains or flooding, especially in rural areas. Spread by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito, both *Plasmodium vivax* and *P. falciparum* strains exist in Afghanistan. Remember that malaria can be fatal and the risk of contracting the disease far outweighs the risk of any antimalarial tablet side effects.

The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headaches, diarrhoea, cough and chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be confirmed through a blood sample. Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance, and prophylactic antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking these steps:

- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Natural repellents like citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than those containing DEET
- Mosquitoes bite between dusk and dawn: sleep under a permethrin-impregnated mosquito net
- Wear long sleeves and trousers (not a problem with Afghanistan's dress code) in light colours
- Use mosquito coils
- Spray your room with insect repellent

There are a variety of antimalarial medications available. Before travelling, seek medical advice about the right medication and dosage for you. Women should take particular advice if pregnant or taking the contraceptive pill. Note that chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine resistance has been recorded in Afghanistan.

Doxycycline A broad-spectrum antibiotic. Potential side-effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), indigestion, nausea, and thrush in women. More serious side effects include ulceration of the oesophagus – you can prevent this by taking the tablets with a meal and plenty of water, and never lying down within 30 minutes of taking them. Doxycycline must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Larium (Mefloquine) This has received much bad press among travellers, some justified but most not, and the weekly tablet suits many people. Side effects are rare but can include depression, psychosis and fits, so anyone with a history of these conditions should not take it. Larium must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

Malarone This drug is a combination of Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headache. It's the best tablet for short trips to high-risk areas, and must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

Poliomyelitis

Generally spread through contaminated food and water. It is one of the vaccines

given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue), or as an injection. Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world where polio is still endemic. Polio may be carried asymptotically, although it can cause a transient fever and, in rare cases, potentially permanent muscle weakness or paralysis.

Rabies

Spread through bites or licks on broken skin from an infected mammal, rabies is fatal and endemic to Afghanistan. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of post-bite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible and seek medical advice. Vaccination does not provide you with immunity, it merely buys you more time to seek appropriate medical help.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Along with Malaria, TB is one of the most serious health issues facing Afghanistan. Medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions against TB. Vaccination is usually given only to children under the age of five, but pre-and post-travel TB testing is strongly recommended for adults at risk. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

Typhoid

This serious bacterial infection is spread via food and water. It gives a high and slowly progressive fever and headache, and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful what you eat and drink.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Air Pollution

Air pollution is an increasing problem in Afghanistan's cities, particularly in Kabul where a combination of dust and the pollution from vehicle congestion and massed generators gets everyone coughing. If you

have severe respiratory problems speak with your doctor before travelling. Air pollution can cause minor respiratory problems such as sinusitis, dry throat and irritated eyes. If troubled, leave the city for a few days and get some fresher air.

Altitude Sickness

Lack of oxygen at high altitudes (over 2500m) affects most people to some extent. The effect may be mild or severe and occurs because less oxygen reaches the muscles and the brain at high altitudes, requiring the heart and lungs to compensate by working harder. Symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) usually (but not always) develop during the first 24 hours at altitude. Mild symptoms include headache, lethargy, dizziness, difficulty sleeping and loss of appetite. AMS may become more severe without warning and can be fatal. Severe symptoms include breathlessness, a dry, irritative cough (which may progress to the production of pink, frothy sputum), severe headache, lack of coordination, confusion, irrational behaviour, vomiting, drowsiness and unconsciousness. There is no hard-and-fast rule as to what is too high: AMS has been fatal at 3000m, although 3500m to 4500m is the usual range. Note that quick ascents and descents – such as traversing the Salang Pass between Kabul and northern Afghanistan in a vehicle – are extremely unlikely to cause AMS.

Treat mild symptoms by resting at the same altitude until recovery, or preferably descend – even 500m can help. Paracetamol or aspirin can be taken for headaches. If symptoms persist or become worse, however, immediate descent is necessary. Drug treatments should never be used to avoid descent or to enable further ascent.

Diamox (acetazolamide) reduces the headache of AMS and helps the body acclimatise to the lack of oxygen. It is only available on prescription and those who are allergic to the sulfonamide antibiotics may also be allergic to Diamox.

The **British Mountaineering Council** (www.thebmc.co.uk) has an excellent series of downloadable fact sheets on altitude sickness.

Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly, especially at high altitudes. Always

use a strong sunscreen (at least SPF30), and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. If you become sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort. One percent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine.

Lice can inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an antilice shampoo such as permethrin. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks are contracted after walking in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in the armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash at the site of the bite or

elsewhere, fever or muscle aches, you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others, apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy, so remember to take condoms with you just in case. Sanitary towels are available in the larger cities, but tampons are hard to find outside Kabul.

Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.