

Directory

CONTENTS

Accommodation	369
Activities	371
Business Hours	374
Calendars	375
Children	375
Climate Charts	376
Courses	377
Customs	377
Dangers & Annoyances	377
Embassies & Consulates	380
Festivals & Events	382
Food	383
Gay & Lesbian Travellers	383
Holidays	383
Insurance	385
Internet Access	386
Legal Matters	386
Maps	386
Money	387
Photography & Video	390
Post	390
Shopping	391
Telephone	391
Time	393
Toilets	393
Tourist Information	393
Travellers With Disabilities	393
Visas	393
Women Travellers	396

ACCOMMODATION

Iran has a reasonable choice of accommodation, from tiny cells in noisy *mosafekhanehs* (basic lodging houses) to luxury rooms in world-class hotels. Camping, however, is almost nonexistent, and don't expect anything resembling an eco-resort.

The Orwellian-sounding Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance categorises most hotels and decides what they can charge.

Up until recently, in midrange and top-end establishments foreign guests have had to pay more than Iranians for the same room. However, this officially mandated practice of dual-pricing looked like it was coming to an end as this book went to press, which means the prices in this book might

PRACTICALITIES

- Electrical current is 220V AC, 50Hz. Wall sockets are the European, two round-pin type.
- All English-language daily newspapers in Iran are government-run and available only in Tehran and some other large cities. They include the *Iran Daily* and *Iran News*, both of which offer good international coverage; *Kayhan International*, which gives new meaning to 'hardline'; and the *Tehran Times*, which cleaves to the government line.
- All Iranian broadcasters are controlled by the state. However, many Iranians have access to satellite TV, including many stations broadcasting in Farsi from North America.
- On Iranian TV, channels 1 to 4 are national, 5 and 6 province-based. Channel 4 has 10 minutes of news in English at midnight. Most hotels have the 24-hour IRINN news channel, which has a news-ticker in English.
- Good frequencies for the BBC World Service (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/schedules) include 11760Hz, 15575Hz and 1413kHz; and for VOA (www.voanews.com) 11740Hz and 15195kHz.
- Iran uses the metric system. A conversion chart is on the inside front cover.

serve mainly as a guide, see the boxed text, p388 for details.

Dual-pricing or not, it's possible to engage in a bit of friendly negotiation, especially during the low season between mid-October and early March. Having said that, we found that in most of Iran getting anything more than a nominal discount on an *otagh* (room) seemed as difficult as negotiating an end to the nuclear crisis. If dual-pricing is still happening, you could try asking for a discount for longer stays, or learn the Farsi numbers so you can point out the difference between local and foreign prices (most hotels have Iranian and foreign prices displayed in

THE SEASONAL SWING

There are two clear seasons in Iran, with a couple of other spikes. Low season starts in October and continues through winter until shortly before No Ruz (Iranian New Year, on 21 March) and the beginning of spring. From a few days before No Ruz, hotels in popular holiday destinations, such as Kish Island, Esfahan, the Caspian Sea coast and Yazd, are packed, and prices are at their highest. No Ruz also marks the annual government-approved price increase, and after all the madness of the 13-day holiday period is over you'll find prices rise by about 20% from the winter (low season) rate, and stay that way until October. There are a few exceptions. In summer prices along the Caspian Sea coast can skyrocket, while in hot places like Yazd and Bam prices fall with demand. We quote high-season prices (not No Ruz prices) throughout this book.

reception). Though this tactic was usually met with a look of 'so?' when we tried it.

The reluctance to bargain is partly because most cities don't have enough hotels to create effective competition. Bandar Abbas, Esfahan and Kashan are among the worst, while notable exceptions include Yazd, Mashhad and Shiraz. The 'hundreds' of new hotels the government has promised will take time to materialise, and will mostly be in the midrange and top-end brackets.

For foreigners, midrange and top-end places often quote their prices in US dollars, and increasingly in euros, though they will accept (and sometimes require to be paid in) rials. The currencies listed in this book are what the hotels were listing when we visited, though the falling US dollar seems to be pushing many back to rial or euros. In the cheapest budget accommodation sheets and mattresses can sometimes be semi-clean and/or stained. Using a light sleeping mat and sheet or sleeping bag can reduce your chances of itchy surprises. In better places soap and (small) towels are usually provided. Most midrange hotels have toilet paper, but you should always carry an emergency stash.

Hotels will almost always keep your passport overnight so keep a photocopy, and get it back if you're heading out of town for the day. Check-out time is usually 2pm. As you get off the beaten track you're likely to encounter heart-warming hospitality that sucks you into 'real' homestays. It's worth coming to Iran prepared with small presents to express your gratitude, as paying cash for such accommodation might be inappropriate.

Sending postcards and photos to your hosts once you get home will be greatly ap-

preciated. All accommodation in this book is presented in budget order, from cheapest up; budget is generally up to IR220,000 (about US\$25 or €16); midrange is roughly between US\$26 (IR242,000 or €17) and \$US80 (IR746,000 or €54); top-end listings hover upwards of US\$80.

Camping

Iranians love tents, and you'll see them scattered through parks during the No Ruz holiday period. However, there are very few official camping grounds, and unless you can make yourself look like a nomad, camping anywhere else will draw unwanted attention from the authorities. If you do choose to camp rough, steer clear of military facilities and borders.

Long-distance trekkers and mountaineers, who obviously need to camp, should still discuss plans with the provincial tourist information office first (p393) if not accompanied by a recognised guide. The office may be able to write a letter of introduction.

Hotels BUDGET

As well as *mosaferkhanehs*, basic one- and two-star hotels have rooms that fall into the budget range. In these places you normally have an attached bathroom with at least a shower (usually hot) plus air-con, a TV (Iranian channels only), fridge and maybe a phone. The heating and hot water will almost certainly be working.

Prices in this range start at about IR80,000/100,000 for a single/double and go up to about IR180,000/220,000, depending on your negotiating skills. On the down side, double beds are almost unheard of in the budget range, you're unlikely to get

breakfast and some places are not as fastidious as they could be, so watch out for those telltale hairs on your pillow and don't be afraid to ask for fresh sheets.

MIDRANGE

Most two-star hotels, and all three- and four-star places will have a private bathroom with hot shower and toilet, and almost certainly a phone, fridge and TV (sometimes with BBC World and Deutsche Welt). There might even be a reasonable restaurant, and breakfast will often be included. You'll find toilet paper in most places, though bath plugs are a long-shot. Prices start at about US\$15/20 for a single/double and go up to as much as US\$60/85. Like a 40-something boxer, a lot of places in this range charge rates that reflect a more glorious past than the beaten-around present; try negotiating.

The most charismatic midrange places, and those worth aiming for, are the *sonnati* (traditional) hotels. Yazd has many and the first examples have recently opened in Esfahan and Kashan. The upper end of this range is home to a growing number of modern 'apartment hotels', which can be excellent value outside the high season. Most towns of decent size have a government-run Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi). Standards vary considerably but they are usually fair value and often employ at least one English speaker.

TOP END

Many of Iran's top hotels pre-date the 1979 revolution. Several accidentally maintain décor which, like the Bee Gees, is now so out-dated that it's almost retro-cool. Relish these places before they're refitted in typically bland modern-hotel style. Bee Gees-era establishments like to tease you with swimming pools that are never actually filled. Meanwhile those better top-end hotels whose pools do have water will have set segregated swimming times for men and women.

Prices are astronomical by Iranian standards, but pretty reasonable by those of the West, starting from about US\$85/100 for a single/double and rising to about US\$240/300. Some hotels add 17% for tax and service, though we've included this in the total price.

Mosaferkhanehs & Mehmanpazirs

Iran's most basic accommodation options are *mosaferkhanehs* (literally 'travellers' houses'), a dorm or basic hotel, and similar *mehmanpazirs*. Both are very much male-dominated. Standards vary somewhat but generally you can *not* expect private bathrooms nor spoken English. Some bottom-end places won't even have a communal shower. Prices start at around IR30,000 per bed in a noisy, grotty, male-only dorm. Simple, private rooms, perhaps with a sink, cost IR30,000 (US\$3.30 or €2) to IR130,000. Useless old TVs are often added just because it allows the owner to rack up a higher price. In a few cities, including Esfahan, some *mosaferkhanehs* aren't allowed to accept foreigners (see the boxed text, p325). In others, notably Bushehr, Khorramabad and Yasuj, you need written permission from the police to stay anywhere cheap. That's easy enough to organise through a 10-minute visit to the local Amaken – an arm of the police – so long as you don't arrive between 9pm and 6am, when it's shut!

Suites & Homestays

Along the Caspian Sea coast and in those northwestern rural resort-villages most frequented by Iranian tourists, you'll find locals renting out rooms, bungalows and self-contained apartments ('suites') in their homes, gardens or above shops. In the low season prices can be very reasonable, but in summer prices rise by up to 400% and bookings are virtually essential.

Some suites and almost all rooms/homestays are unmarked in Farsi let alone English so it's just a case of asking around for an *otagh*. Food is generally not included.

ACTIVITIES Beach Going

Iranians are not really sun-worshippers and even if they were, the dress code (women must swim in full hejab) and sexual segregation of the beaches takes much of the potential fun out of lying on them. If you're undeterred by women in orange jumpsuits and scarves, Kish Island (p292) is 'Iran's Hawaii', while Qeshm Island (p303) has a much lower profile and a more local feel.

Iranians love the Caspian coast (p174) because, well, it's a coast and they have little to compare it with. But faced with

a scraggy, rubbish-strewn ribbon of black sand, uninspiring architecture and constant rain we think there are better places to spend your visa time.

Cycling

Iran's main highways can be terrifyingly truck-dominated, but the well-surfaced secondary routes are well-suited to cycle touring (p406). You'll find few locals pushing the pedals, but a steady stream of overlanders brave the traffic en route between Europe and Asia.

Diving

Scuba diving and snorkelling is limited to Kish Island (p295) and Qeshm Island (p305) in the Persian Gulf. Readers report the number of dive sites around Kish is limited, particularly when there's more than a zephyr of breeze. More appealing are the range of reefs off Qeshm plus three ships sunk during the Iran-Iraq War.

Mountaineering

It may come as a surprise to learn that Iran boasts several high mountains, some of them permanently snowcapped. Many can be climbed by anyone fit without special equipment, experience or a guide, but you should always check the situation before embarking on a mountain trek. Early June to late August is the best climbing season.

Northeast of Tehran, Iran's highest and best-known peak, Mt Damavand (5671m; p131) has a classic Fuji-esque profile, but reaching the summit is not of great technical difficulty for a mountain of such altitude. The magnificent Alborz Mountains surrounding it contain around another 70 peaks over 4000m. At 4850m Alam Kuh (Mt Alam; p175) is Iran's most technical peak with an 800m near-vertical granite wall on its most difficult northern face: a world-class challenge.

Mt Sabalan (4811m) is an elegantly soaring peak usually approached from Meshgin Shahr (p160), though it's worth arranging guides and equipment in Tabriz (p146) before setting out.

Too tame for climbers, Mt Oshturan (4070m; p212) is the most accessible peak of the splendid Zagros Mountains. It has an attractive lake near the summit and is ideal for mountain walkers.

There are thousands of other mountains in Iran, but they are very seldom, if ever, climbed. If you fancy yourself as a trailblazer, you could investigate Mt Zardkough (4337m) in the Zagros Mountains, west of Esfahan, or the Dena range, northwest of Shiraz, with 37 peaks over 4000m, the highest of them being Mt Gash Mastan (4460m). Until things settle down security-wise, Mt Hezar (4420m) and Mt Lalezar (4374m) in the Payeh Mountains, south of Kerman, and the snowcapped Mt Taftan (4042m) volcano, near the Pakistani border in Sistan va Baluchestan, are best avoided.

Helpful websites:

Mountaineering Federation of Iran (www.iranmountfed.com in Farsi) The Iran mountain federation's site; English page due soon.

Mountain Zone (www.mountainzone.ir) Mostly in Farsi, but has some trip logs in English and a long list of local climbing clubs and their contact details. See also opposite.

Peakware (www.peakware.com) Including summit logs for several Iranian peaks, including Mt Damavand and Mt Sabalan.

Summit Post (www.summitpost.org) Search 'objects' for 'Iran' and you'll find excellent trip reports – some with maps – by 'Nader', whose love for the Iranian mountains is wonderful to read. Highly recommended.

EQUIPMENT RENTAL & PURCHASE

Camping and climbing equipment can be bought relatively inexpensively in Iran. Well-stocked shops include **Varzesh Kooh** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-830 1037; 4th fl, cnr Enqelab Ave & Ferdosi St, Ferdosi Sq) in Tehran and the Nakhajir Camping Shop (p177) in Qazvin. A limited range of equipment can be rented at Darband (p113) and from some mountain guides.

GUIDES & PORTERS

The cost of a guide depends on your bargaining skills, the number of climbers in the group, the equipment needed, the length of the trip and the difficulty of the route you want to undertake. An English-speaking guide will charge about US\$50 a day, and a donkey and handler will cost between US\$25 and US\$80 a day to carry your equipment, depending on how remote your location and whether the donkey is needed for other work.

MAPS

There are few trekking or mountain-climbing maps on Iran available in English, though climbing maps for the Alam Kuh area are

available at the climbing centre in Rudbarak (p175). Elsewhere, spend the money you saved on maps on a local guide. For hiking in the valleys behind Gorgan the commonly available *Golestan Province* map gives a basic outline, while Gita Shenasi (p386) in Tehran has a map of the Alborz Mountains with some peaks and walking routes marked.

Rock Climbing

If clambering about on rocks is more your thing, there are several excellent and accessible places to try. Closest to Tehran is Bander-e Yakhchal (N 35°85'58.0", E 51°44'48.0"), where several low walls and the 200m-high Shervin wall await; there's a hut here called Shervin Hut. The lower 25m have been set up for climbing and reports are that in summer it's a difficult but not especially technical climb to the summit, with stunning views of Tehran. It's busy on Fridays.

Further afield, there are some awesome rocks, sink-holes, sheer cliffs and overhangs around Kermanshah. The cliffs culminate at Bisotun where, just beyond a collection of ancient inscriptions, Farhad Tarash (p200) rock-face is the region's classic climbing challenge. The Kermanshah tourist infor-

mation office (p195) can put you in touch with the local climbers club for support and equipment.

The rocky canyons around Maku (p137), Bijar (p189) and Khorramabad (p208) are easy to reach and tempting to climb, although few locals seem to do so. You'd be wise to check with police or tourist information offices before setting out as certain innocuous looking climbs can overlook sensitive military posts. The 800m-high wall of Alam Kuh (Mt Alam; p175) is a major expedition; there is a thorough description of routes at www.mountainzone.ir. Many waterfalls become good ice-climbs in winter, most accessibly at Ganjnameh (p205), near Hamadan. A good place to meet people who know these climbs is online at www.summitpost.org.

Skiing

There are more than 20 functioning ski fields in Iran. The season is long, the snow is often powdery and, compared with Western fields, skiing in Iran is a bargain. Four downhill fields near Tehran – (p132), Shemshak (p133), Dizin (p133) and Tochal (p133) – are easily accessible, have reliable facilities and equipment for hire. There is

OUTDOOR & ADVENTURE AGENCIES

Some of the travel agencies listed under Tours (p415) can arrange walking and climbing trips. We've had positive feedback about the following companies, which specialise in trekking, mountaineering and eco-tourism in Iran. If you have good (or bad) experiences with these or other agencies, please let us know at www.lonelyplanet.com/contact.

Aftab Kalout (☎ 021-6648 8374; www.kalout.com) Professional Tehran-based outfit specialising in eco-tourism, desert trips, trekking and eco-cum-sociological tours.

Araz Adventure Tours (Map p110; ☎ 021-7760 9292; www.araz.org; 1st fl, 1 Chahar Baradran Alley, North Bahar St, Tehran; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Wed, 8am-12.30pm Thu) This helpful outdoor tourism agency has been recommended by readers. It offers a wide range of mountaineering, climbing, horse- and camel-trekking, plus cultural tours. Director and experienced climber Mohsen Aghajani speaks English. One reader who climbed Mt Damavand with Araz wrote that 'even the cook had made it within 45 minutes of the Mt Everest summit'. Most equipment is provided.

Kassa Mountaineering & Tourism (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-7751 0463; www.kassa.ir/tourism; 9 Naghdi Alley, off Shariati St, Tehran) This private trekking agency offers a full range of trekking and climbing tours, desert expeditions and more. Mountains include Damavand, Sabalan, Zardkough and 'any mountain you want to climb'. It is run by Ahmad Shirmohammad, an experienced climber who speaks English.

Mountaineering Federation of Iran (Map p94; ☎ 021-2256 9995-96; www.iranmountfed.com in Farsi; 15 No 17, 8th Baharestan Ave, off Pasdaran St, Tehran; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Sat-Wed) Experts in anything relating to mountain climbing and trekking, the Mountaineering Federation people are a mine of information and advice. Staff speak English, or can find someone who does.

Sepid Mountaineering Company (☎ 0711-235 5939; 0917-313 2926; www.sepidtour.com or www.iran-sightseeing.com) Based in Shiraz, Abdullah Raeesi and crew organise mountaineering, cross-country skiing, nomad and tours by horse back.

also good downhill skiing available near Tabriz (p152) and Ganjnameh (p205), and smaller fields in the Zagros Mountains near Sepidan (p253) north of Shiraz, and Chelgerd (p252), west of Esfahan.

The ski slopes are also some of the most sexually equal areas of Iran outside of the family home; skiing was banned after the revolution, and after the ban was lifted in 1988 the images were of women skiing in manteaus. But with Khatami's rise to the presidency in 1997 came a considerable easing of restrictions on the slopes. Women must still keep their heads covered, but on higher slopes there is usually plenty of hair to be seen. Needless to say, skiing is very popular among the affluent young.

The season in the Alborz Mountains (where most slopes are located) starts as early as November and lasts until just after No Ruz (ie late March); around Tabriz and at Dizin it can last until mid-May. The slopes are busy with Iranians on Thursdays and Fridays, and with diplomats and expats on Saturdays; other days it should be pretty quiet.

All the resorts have lodges and hotels, which charge from about US\$30 to US\$100 for a room. Ski lifts cost as little as IR40,000 a day. You can hire skis, poles and boots, but not clothes, at the resorts.

For more information, contact the **Skiing Federation** (Map p94; ☎ 021-2256 9595; www.skifed.ir; Shahid Iran Ski Federation, 17 Baharetan 8 Alley, off Pasdaran Ave, Tehran). For reviews and comments about some slopes, see www.goski.com; and for a history of skiing in Iran see www.iranmania.com/trave1/tours/ski/history.asp.

Trekking

Trekking is arguably the single best way to experience a country and Iran is no exception. Trekking information, however, can be hard to come by. Nader's descriptions of various routes on www.summitpost.org are probably the best place to start, while for something more organised see the boxed text (p373) for listings of companies.

Iran offers many excellent one- and two-day walks. Possibilities exist in the mountains north of Tehran, around Darband (p113) and Tochal (p133); at Kelardasht (p175), Masuleh (p171) and Nahar Khoran (p339) in the Caspian region; around Mashhad (p353); from Gazor Khan (p182) and around Orumiye (p140) and Takht-e Soleiman (p187). Day

and overnight desert treks can be easily arranged from Yazd (p257), while longer expeditions can be organised on demand.

For the more adventurous, or those with more time, Iran also offers several longer routes across mountains and through forests.

The Alamut area is rich in trekking options, including some taking you across the Alborz Mountains and down to the Caspian (see p183). There are two main routes and many possible variations, but even for the easiest it's advisable to take a guide.

In remote regions, especially near borders, you may stumble across military/police/security areas; an Iranian guide or a few phrases of Farsi should smooth over any misunderstandings. Drinking water is often scarce, so take your own supplies in desert regions, and purification tablets or water filters elsewhere.

BUSINESS HOURS

Opening and closing times can be erratic, but you can rely on most businesses closing Thursday afternoons and Friday (the Iranian weekend). During summer, many businesses close during the hot afternoons, from about noon until about 4pm; along the blistering Persian Gulf coast, doors stay shut until about 5pm. The most likely time to find anything open is between 9am and noon, daily except Friday. In this book hours will accord (more or less) with the following list unless stated otherwise.

Airline offices Open 9am to 4pm, Saturday to Wednesday, and Thursday mornings.

Banks Open 7.30am to 1.30pm Saturday to Wednesday, 7.30am to 12.30pm Thursday.

Government offices Open offices 8am to 2pm Saturday to Wednesday, 8am to noon Thursday.

Museums Tend to open 8.30am to 6pm summer, 4pm or 5pm winter, with one day off, usually Monday or Tuesday.

Post offices Generally 7.30am to 3pm Saturday to Thursday, some main offices open later.

Private businesses Conduct business 8am or 9am to 5pm or 6pm Saturday to Wednesday, until noon Thursday.

Restaurants Offer lunch noon to 3pm, dinner 6pm or 7pm to 11pm, or whenever the last diner leaves.

Shops Open 9am to 8pm Saturday to Thursday, but likely to have a siesta between 1pm and 3.30pm and possibly close Thursday afternoon.

Telephone offices Operate 8am to 8pm or 9pm; earlier in small towns.

Travel agencies Generally 7.30am to 5pm or 6pm Saturday to Thursday, 7.30am to noon Friday.

CALENDARS

Three calendars are in common use in Iran: the Persian solar calendar is the one in official and everyday use; the Muslim lunar calendar is used for Islamic religious matters; and the Western (Gregorian) calendar is used in dealing with foreigners and in some history books. As a result, Iranian newspapers carry three dates; 23 May 2007 also appeared as Khordad 2 1386 (Persian) and Jamada I 6 1428 (Muslim). The Zoroastrians also have their own calendar (see below for details).

When entering Iran if you're planning to use the whole visa time allocated don't forget to make a note of the Western date for your own reference: the stamp in your passport will usually be in the Persian calendar (and in Farsi numerals). When book-

ing public transport or extending your visa try to double-check the Gregorian date with a calendar (most calendars in Iran show Persian, Gregorian and Islamic dates) or online at payvand.com/calendar.

CHILDREN

In Iran, foreign children will be the source of much amusement and curiosity, which may drive them (and you) to despair after a while. Nappies (diapers), powders, baby formula, most simple medications and so on are available in most cities, although you might want to bring your own to save having to hunt about. The hardest thing will be trying to keep children entertained in a country where journeys are often long and the attractions often rather 'adult'. Parents would want to relate fairly clearly to their

IRANIAN CALENDARS

Persian Calendar

The modern Persian solar calendar, a direct descendant of the ancient Zoroastrian calendar, is calculated from the first day of spring in the year of the Hejira, the flight of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in AD 622. It has 365 days (366 every leap year), with its New Year (No Ruz) usually falling on 21 March according to the Western calendar. The names of the Persian months are as follows:

Season	Persian Month	Approximate Equivalent	Season	Persian Month	Approximate Equivalent
spring (bahar)	Farvardin	21 Mar-20 Apr	autumn (pa'iz)	Mehr	23 Sep-22 Oct
	Ordibehesht	21 Apr-21 May		Aban	23 Oct-21 Nov
	Khordad	22 May-21 Jun		Azar	22 Nov-21 Dec
summer (tabestan)	Tir	22 Jun-22 Jul	winter (zamestan)	Dei	22 Dec-20 Jan
	Mordad	23 Jul-22 Aug		Bahman	21 Jan-19 Feb
	Shahrivar	23 Aug-22 Sep		Esfand	20 Feb-20 Mar

Muslim Calendar

The Muslim calendar, which is used to some extent in all Islamic countries, starts from the month before the Hejira, but is based on the lunar year of 354 or 355 days, so it is currently out of step with the Persian solar calendar by some 40 years. The names of the 12 Muslim calendar months in Farsi are: Moharram, Safar, Rabi'-ol-Avval, Rabi'-ol-Osani (or Rabi'-ol-Akhar), Jamadi-I-Ula (or Jamadi-ul-Awai), Jamadi-I-Okhra (or Jamadi-ul-Sami), Rajab, Sha'ban, Ramadan, Shavval, Zu-I-Gha'deh and Zu-I-Hejeh. The handy website www.rabiah.com converts Islamic (Hijri) dates to Western (Gregorian) ones and vice versa.

Zoroastrian Calendar

The Zoroastrian calendar works to a solar year of 12 months of 30 days each, with five additional days. The week has no place in this system, and each of the 30 days of the month is named after and presided over by its own angel or archangel. The 1st, 8th, 15th and 23rd of each month are holy days. As in the Persian calendar, the Zoroastrian year begins in March at the vernal equinox. Except for Andarmaz, which replaces Esfand, the months of the Zoroastrian calendar are the same as those in the Persian calendar.

daughters aged nine or older that they'll have to wear hejab, and pray there are no tantrums.

Eating with the family is the norm in Iran, and taking your kids into a restaurant will not only be welcome but often bring you more-attentive service. While few menus include special meals for children, staff will usually tailor the size of the meal to the size of the child. Most food is not spicy.

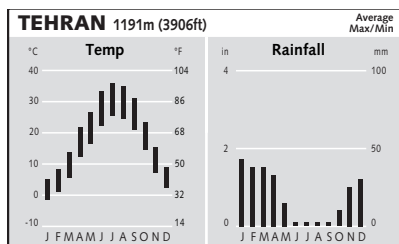
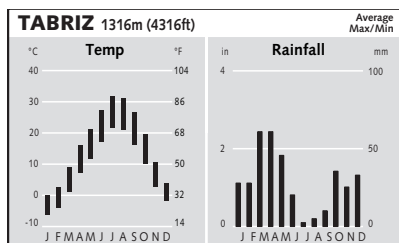
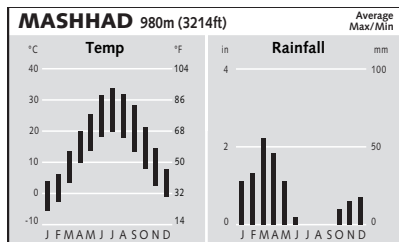
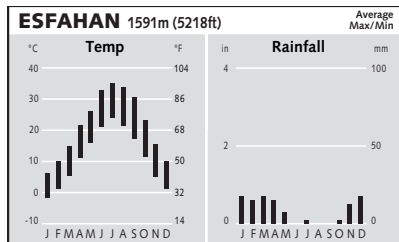
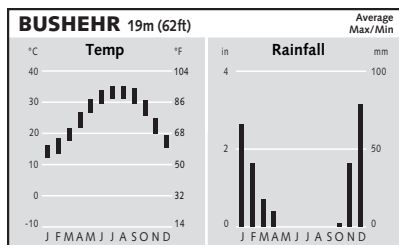
If you have small children and plan on using taxis, you'll probably have to bring your own baby seat. Very few vehicles have seatbelts in the back seats, so it might also be worth insisting on a car that does. At least one bewildered agent we met was forced to have seatbelts fitted in the back seat of his car before his clients would drive anywhere. High chairs, childcare agencies and nappy-changing facilities are scarce indeed. As for breastfeeding in public, it's not a great idea.

CLIMATE CHARTS

Because of its size, topography and altitude, Iran experiences great climatic extremes. Winters (December to February) can be unpleasantly cold, especially in the north and west, and in most of the rest of the country the nights are very cold. In summer (June to August) temperatures as high as 50°C are nothing out of the ordinary along the Persian Gulf coast and southern provinces.

Regular rainfall is more or less restricted to the far north and west – the area north of the Alborz Mountains receives an annual average of about 1300mm of rain, but although year-round cloud helps keep summer temperatures manageable the high humidity makes summer pretty muggy on the Caspian coast. In western Iran winter temperatures are regularly well below zero and snow frequently remains until early spring, making some mountain routes impassable.

Unless you're a mad dog or an Englishman, it's best to avoid the Persian Gulf coast between early May and mid-October, when the double whammy of high temperatures and oppressive humidity take much of the fun out of travel. Further inland, summer temperatures are very warm indeed, but low humidity makes life more bearable. See also *When to Go* (p15).



COURSES

There are not a lot of courses aimed at foreigners. Farsi teachers can be arranged through your embassy or one of Tehran's English-language newspapers, which also advertise private schools. However, these options are mainly for diplomats who don't have to fret about visa extensions.

Or you could arrange it all in advance and come to Iran on a student visa. For free online Farsi classes, try the excellent www.easypersian.com.

Two schools have good reputations for intensive courses.

Dehkhoda Institute (Map p94: ☎ 021-271 1902; icps@ut.ac.ir or dehkhoda@ut.ac.ir; Bagh-e Ferdows, off Valiasr Ave, Shemiran, Tehran) The International Center for Persian Studies at the institute offers five-week and 3½-/seven-month courses. Tuition is inexpensive, but you'll need to find your own accommodation.

University of Isfahan (Map p233; ☎ 0311-793 2039-41; www2.ui.ac.ir or int-office@ui.ac.ir; Hezar Jerib St, Esfahan) This sounds like a good bet. Bob, a traveller who completed a three-month course here in 2007, reported that his US\$2000 paid for 3½ hours of lessons each morning and comfortable accommodation in the university guesthouse on campus, where foreign students share a floor with views over the city. Apply about three months before you intend to arrive (longer for UK and US passport holders) and the university's International Office looks after the rest. One-month courses cost US\$1000. The final word from Bob: 'Needless to say, learning the language takes you into new worlds you might not otherwise see (eg two nights ago I spent a day and night with nomadic shepherds on the summit of Shah-e Kuh above Paveh – priceless)'.

CUSTOMS

Contrary to popular belief, Iranian officialdom is fairly relaxed about what foreigners take into and out of the country; at airports, your bags probably won't be searched at all. However, don't take this to mean you can load your luggage with vodka, bacon and skin mags. You are allowed to import, duty-free, 200 cigarettes and 50 cigars, and a 'reasonable quantity' of perfume. And of course zero alcohol, which remains strictly illegal.

You'll probably get away with any book, no matter how critical of the government, as long as it doesn't have too much female skin or hair visible on the cover.

You should have no trouble bringing in your laptop, shortwave radio, ipod and anything but the largest video equipment. Visitors are supposed to declare cash worth more

than US\$1000. In practice few people do and the authorities aren't really interested.

Export Restrictions

Officially, you can take out anything you legally imported into Iran, and anything you bought, including handicrafts other than carpets or rugs up to the value of US\$160 (hang on to your receipts), as long as they are not for 'the purpose of trade'. Many traders are willing to undervalue goods on receipts issued to foreigners. In our experience, we've never been asked to show any paperwork when carrying (small numbers of) rugs out of Iran.

You can take out a reasonable, non-commercial number of Persian carpets, 150g of gold and 3kg of silver, without gemstones. If you want to exceed these limits, you will need an export permit from the local customs office. Officially you need permission to export anything 'antique' (ie more than 50 years old), including handicrafts, gemstones and coins, so there is always a slight risk that anything vaguely 'antique' looking could be confiscated. If you are worried that an expensive item might be confiscated, speak with the customs office before buying. No more than IR200,000 in Iranian cash is allowed to be taken out of Iran.

American sanctions in theory mean you can't take more than US\$100 worth of goods purchased in Iran into the US.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Earthquakes

Earthquakes happen every day in Iran (see *Shaking Iran's Confidence*, p86), but most travellers will never feel one. If you are unlucky enough to be in the wrong place when a big quake strikes, the following precautions might help.

The greatest danger is from falling debris, so if you're indoors stay inside and try to take cover under a sturdy desk, table or other furniture. Hold on to it and be prepared to move with it. Hold the position until the shaking stops and you can move to a clear area outside. Stay clear of windows, appliances and heavy furniture (such as freestanding wardrobes) that might fall over. In a hotel room, use the pillow to protect your head.

In a mud-brick building it's important to create space (under a bed, perhaps) that won't

BIG JUBS

In almost every Iranian city the main streets are lined with *jubs* (canals, pronounced jubes, like tubes), which originally served to distribute drinking water through the city but now serve as channels for rainwater and water running off nearby mountains. At the best of times they're a pleasant urban feature, with water spreading through the city and trees usually nearby. However, they can also be a hazard for anyone crossing a road without looking carefully, and after rain they can quickly turn into raging torrents.

If you're driving, *jubs* can be even more hazardous. In many towns the road drops straight into the *jub* without any form of kerb whatsoever. In Mashhad, we saw one reverse-park go horribly wrong when the back wheel dropped into the *jub*. The anxious driver tried to drive his way out of the *jub* before his boss, whom he'd just dropped off, returned, but only managed to drop the front wheel in as well. They were still trying to lift it out three hours later.

be filled with dirt and dust, which could lead to suffocation – which was the primary cause of death in Bam (see the boxed text, p323).

If you're outside, get into the open, away from buildings and power lines.

Scams**BOGUS POLICE**

The most notable of Iran's mercifully few organised scams is the bogus police sting. The good news is that a concerted effort by police, particularly in Tehran and Esfahan, has largely ended the problem. Still, it pays to be aware... The usual procedure is for men in plain clothes and an unmarked car to pull up beside you, say 'police' and ask to see your passport or for you to hand over your bag/camera. The usual motive is theft of passports, cameras or money. The best advice is to ignore the 'policemen' and they'll probably leave. If they are real police they will take you to the station or your hotel, otherwise they will eventually disappear. *Never* hand over your passport or anything else to un-uniformed officers until you are at one of these places.

Security

'Iran? Is it safe?' It's a question you'll almost certainly be asked before you come to Iran...and often. But the perception of Iran as an unpredictable, dangerous destination couldn't be further from the truth. Violent crime against foreigners is almost unheard of, and the idea that as a Westerner you won't be welcome is plain wrong. If you do your best to fit in with local customs, you are unlikely to be treated with anything but courtesy and friendliness – that applies to Americans, too.

Of course, crime does still exist, so it pays to take the usual precautions, though in fairness we've heard of very few travellers being robbed. When travelling long distances by public transport, especially on international services, keep your passport, money and camera with you at all times. The occasional pickpocket operates in some crowded bazaars.

Theft from a hotel room is very unlikely, since staff keep careful watch over visitors and residents. This level of observation sometimes extends to hotel staff going through your bags – and 'sampling' your toiletries – while you're out; keep your bags locked. Hotels are locked or guarded at night. Most places have a safe for guests' valuables.

If you're driving, try to avoid parking on the street overnight in Zahedan or anywhere near the Afghani, Pakistani and Iraqi borders.

The most valuable possession Westerners usually bring to Iran – and the hardest to replace – is a foreign passport. Largely because of the difficulty Iranians face in travelling to Western countries, there is a booming black market in forged and stolen foreign passports. If you're carrying it, keep your passport strapped to your body. However, you'll simply have to trust your hotel or *mosafekhaneh*, which will inevitably demand that you deposit your passport overnight.

Several individual and groups of tourists have been kidnapped in the southeastern provinces of Sistan va Baluchestan and Kerman since 1999. In 2007 the situation became so bad that foreigners were banned from travelling in Sistan va Baluchestan. The kidnappings are believed to have been

in response to government successes in their war with powerful drug smugglers who ship huge quantities of opiates from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Europe through these areas. See the boxed text, p325 for details.

Drug smugglers generally aren't interested in the trouble that comes from harming foreign tourists, so if you stay out of their way you shouldn't have any problem. The threat from the People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI; formerly known as Jundallah of Iran) terrorists isn't quite so cut and dried. These guys, who staged bloody attacks in Sistan va Baluchestan in 2005 and 2007, have so far not targeted tourists, but the authorities are very nervous that a foreigner might get caught up in the trouble. Remember that these dangers do NOT apply to any other areas of Iran.

Western embassies (p381) advise their nationals to register with them on arrival, especially if you will be in Iran for 10 or more days, or plan to visit remote places.

POLICE & SECURITY FORCES

It is unlikely you'll have any problem with the Iranian police. The majority of those you'll see will be busy in a fruitless effort

to improve the traffic flow, and they really have no interest in hassling foreigners.

In popular tourist destinations such as Esfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad you'll find Tourist Police in conveniently located booths. One of them should be able to speak English, or at least find someone who does.

Thankfully, the truly dreaded Komiteh (Komiteh-ye Enqelab-e Eslami; the Islamic Revolutionary Committee, or 'religious police'), who used to bail up tourists for less than rigorous adherence to Islamic dress codes, is no more. However, the Basij and Sepah religious militias do sometimes get a bit carried away (see *A Night With the Basij*, below).

SECURITY CHECKS

Although soldiers and policemen roam the streets and patrol the highways checking on the movements of pedestrians and road users, they rarely trouble foreigners. You can expect the usual inspections at airports and in some public places, such as the shrines of Imam Reza in Mashhad and Imam Khomeini in Tehran. Foreigners are expected to carry their passports with them at all times.

A NIGHT WITH THE BASIJ *Andrew Burke*

When the first two bikes screeched to a halt we thought it was another instance of Iranian hospitality. These young guys would ask the lost foreigners looking at the map where they were going and directions would be given. But when the next two pulled up, one with a Hezbollah-style scarf around his face and a gun tucked into his pants, it suddenly looked more sinister. 'Police, police!' one of the bearded men shouted, holding aloft a tatty plastic card that for all we knew could have been his ID for the local video rental store. It was 1am on a large but very quiet Tehran street, and this had all the hallmarks of a robbery. Andrew, a fellow traveller riding his large motorbike from Dhaka to London, decided it was time to split. Alas, a man snatched the keys from his bike and we were going nowhere.

For the next hour we argued by the side of the road. Uniformed police arrived, but it was the young guys in beards and black leather jackets who seemed most agitated. Our frustrated pleas that 'we are Australian tourists' were met with demands that they take the bike, and take us to separate police stations. This didn't sound like a good idea. Eventually, after one guy just rode off on the bike, we and 13 others went to the station. We were under arrest.

After two fruitless hours we were back at the hotel with some idea of what was going on. The original assailants turned out to be members of the Basij ('volunteer'), a hardline militia who see themselves as 'defenders of the revolution'. As Basijis argued with uniformed police at the hotel's front desk, we learned we'd been accused of being British spies and of taking pictures of sensitive sites (at 1am?), and of being on an illegal motorcycle (Iranians are limited to 200cc bikes, but as Andrew's was in transit, it was legal). The real police were as apologetic as the Basijis were enthusiastic with their allegations. Eventually, the Basijis were persuaded that we were not working for MI6, Andrew's bike was returned and we were released, promising next time to get a better map!

This can be tricky as hotels also like to hang onto them throughout your stay. However, as the hotel only needs your passport at night you can retrieve it by day: highly advisable if you're planning any excursion beyond city limits. It's also worth having a couple of photocopies of the front and visa pages handy just in case.

In the eastern provinces, or if travelling late at night, your transport is likely to be stopped more frequently by police searching for drugs and other smuggled goods.

Traffic

Forget religious fanatics, gun-toting kidnapers or any other threats you've associated with Iran, you're more likely to get into trouble with the traffic than anything else. Iranians will tell you with a perverse mix of horror and glee that Iran has the highest per-capita number of road deaths on earth – in 2006 that was nearly 28,000 people, with another 270,000 injured. Somewhat ironically, Iran's president Ahmadinejad holds a PhD in traffic management. He has promised to reduce the death toll: 'The rate of accidents is below our nation's dignity and should be reduced,' he said in 2007.

If you've travelled elsewhere in the region Iran's traffic chaos may come as little surprise, but if you've arrived from the West you will likely be horrified. No-one pays any notice to road rules. The willingness of a car to stop at a busy intersection is directly proportional to the size of the vehicles in its path; that's right, it's survival of the biggest. Playing on this, some cunning motorists have fitted deafening air horns, usually found on trucks and buses, to their Paykans and Prides. A quick blast sees other traffic suddenly screech to a halt, fearing they've been outsized. Meanwhile, the modest little Paykan/Pride sails through the intersection. Size (or at least the perception that you're big) matters.

Some cars and all motorbikes also use the contraflow bus lanes (along which buses hurtle in the *opposite* direction to the rest of the traffic). Motorbikes speed through red lights, drive on footpaths and careen through crowded bazaars.

While traffic in major cities rarely goes fast enough to cause a serious accident, never underestimate the possibility of dying a horrible death while crossing the road. Vehicles

never stop at pedestrian crossings. You will quickly realise that there's little alternative to stepping out in front of the traffic, as the Iranians do, and hoping that the drivers will slow down. It may not be much consolation, but the law says that if a driver hits a pedestrian the driver is always the one at fault and the one liable to pay blood money to the family of the victim. Until you've got your head around the traffic, perhaps the best advice comes from one pragmatic reader: 'Cross a busy street with an Iranian person, but make sure the Iranian is closest to the approaching traffic.'

Unmarried Foreign Couples

There was a time when unmarried foreign couples found getting a room in Iran difficult. Recently, however, hotel staff are starting to understand the weird wishes of foreigners and don't usually ask too many questions – if you are asked it's most likely to be in a low-budget establishment.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to realise what your own embassy – the embassy of the country of which you are a citizen – can and can't do to help you if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, it won't help if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in. Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions would be legal in your own country. Don't expect support for feminist or political statements you make in Iran, for example. In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket is exceedingly unlikely – the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but you can forget a loan for onward travel.

Iranian Embassies & Consulates

This is an abridged list of Iranian embassies and consulates abroad. For a full, reasonably up-to-date list see www.iranianvisa.com.

Afghanistan Kabul (☎ 020-210 1390/4; Charahi Sherpur, Shahr-e Nau, Kabul); Herat (040 220015; Jad-e Walayat, Herat)

YOU'VE BEEN WARNED

Check these websites for the latest (usually quite conservative) travel warnings and advice:

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (www.smarttraveller.gov.au)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade (www.voyage.gc.ca)

Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA; www.mofa.go.jp)

Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.minbuza.nl)

New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (www.safetravel.govt.nz)

UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk/travel)

US Department of State (www.travel.state.gov)

Australia Canberra (☎ 02-6290 2421; www.iranembassy.org.au; 25 Culgoa Crt, O'Malley, Canberra, ACT 2606)

Azerbaijan Baku (consular section ☎ 012-4980766; www.iranembassy.az; Cəfər Cabbarlı küç 44, Baku); Nakhchivan (☎ 0136-50343; Atatürk küç 13, Nakhchivan; ☎ 10.30am-noon Mon-Thu)

Belgium Brussels (☎ 2-627 0380; www.iranembassy.be; Ave Victoria 3, behind Franklin Rooseveltlaan 15, Brussels B1050; ☎ 9am-noon Mon & Fri, 1-4pm Wed)

Canada Ottawa (☎ 613-233 4726; www.salamiran.org; 245 Metcalfe St, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2K2)

Denmark Copenhagen (☎ 39 16 00 73; www.iran-embassy.dk; Engskiftevej 6, 2100 København)

France Paris (☎ 01 40 69 79 60-65; www.amb-iran.fr; 4 Ave d'Iena, 75116, Paris)

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-84 3530; www.iranembassy.de; Podbielskiallee 67, Berlin D-14195); Frankfurt (☎ 069-5600 0739; www.irangk.de; Raimundstr. 90, Frankfurt 60320); Hamburg (☎ 040-514 4060; www.generalkonsulatiran.de; Alsterkrugchaussee 333, Hamburg 22297)

India Delhi (☎ 91-011-23329600; www.iran-embassy.org.in; 5 Barakhamba Rd, New Delhi, 110001); Mumbai (☎ 3630073; www.iriconmumbai.com; 1st fl Swapnalok, 47 Nepean Sea Rd, Mumbai)

Ireland Dublin (☎ 01-288 0252; iranembassy@indigo.ie; 72 Mount Merrion Ave, Blackrock, Dublin)

Japan Tokyo (☎ 3-3446 8022-23; www.iranembassy.jp.com; 10-32-3 Chôme Minami Aazabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo)

Kazakhstan Almaty (☎ 0272-541974-75; 31-33, Luganski St, Almaty)

Netherlands The Hague (☎ 070-354 8483; www.iranianembassy.nl; Duinweg 20, 2585JX, The Hague)

New Zealand Wellington (☎ 04-386 2976; www.iranembassy.org.nz; 151 Te Anau Rd, Hataitai, Wellington)

Pakistan Islamabad (☎ 051-2276270; fax 2824839; House 222-238, St 2, G-5/1 Diplomatic Enclave, Islamabad); Karachi (☎ 021-5874371; fax 5874633; 81 Shahrah-i-Iran, Clifton, Karachi); Lahore (☎ 042-7590926-29; fax 757 0374; 55-A Shadman II, Lahore); Peshawar (☎ 091-845403; 18-C Park Ave, University Town, Peshawar); Quetta (☎ 081-843527, fax 829766; 2/33 Hali Rd, Quetta)

Spain Madrid (☎ 6135 9642; 28016 Calle Jeres 5, Madrid)

Syria Damascus (☎ 011-222 6459; Autostrada al-Mezzeh, Damascus)

Tajikistan Dushanbe (☎ 0372-210072-74; Kucai Bokhtar 18 aka Tehran St, Dushanbe)

Turkey Ankara (☎ 0312-468 2820; Tahrir Caddesi 10, Kavaklıdere, Ankara); Erzurum (☎ 0442-316 2285; Yenisehir Girişi, just off Atatürk Bulvarı, Erzurum); Istanbul (☎ 0212-513 8230; Ankara Caddesi 1/2, Cağaloğlu, Istanbul); Trabzon (☎ 0462-326 7651; Taksim Caddesi, Kizil Toprak Sok, Trabzon)

Turkmenistan Ashgabat (☎ 012-34 14 52; fax 35 05 65; Tehran köçesi 3, Ashgabat)

UK London (consulate ☎ 200 7937 5225; www.iran-embassy.org.uk; 50 Kensington Court, London W8 5DB)

USA Washington The Iranian Interests Section is in the Pakistan embassy (☎ 202-965 4990; www.daftar.org; 2209 Wisconsin Ave, NW, Washington, 20007)

Embassies & Consulates in Iran

The embassies of many European countries, plus the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, were asking travellers to register their presence by phoning in and asking for the consul. If you do, be sure to let them know when you leave. In the event of a genuine emergency (not to ask about the embassy swimming pool), call the number listed here, wait until the message gives you the emergency number, and call that.

Afghanistan Tehran (Map p110; ☎ 021-8873 5040; fax 8873 5600; cnr 4th St & Pakistan St, off Beheshti Ave, Tehran; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Wed) Thirty-day tourist visas cost €75 and are issued in two to three days; Mashhad (Map p354; ☎ 0511-854 1653; Do Shahid St, Mashhad; ☎ 8am-noon Sat-Wed)

Armenia (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-6670 4833; 1 Ostad Shahriar St, Razi St, Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, Tehran; ☎ 9am-noon Sun-Thu) Tourist visas issued in nine to 11 days for US\$50, in three to five days for US\$80. Bring three photos. Call between 2pm and 4pm (not other times) for visa information. Note that visas are also available on arrival at the Armenian border or Yerevan airport.

Australia (Map p110; ☎ 021-8872 4456; www.iran-embassy.gov.au; 15 Esfandoli St, 23rd St, Tehran) Register at www.smarttraveller.gov.au.

Azerbaijan Tehran (Map p94; ☎ 021-2224 8770; www.azembassy.ir; Nader Sq, 15 Golbagh St, Chizar, Tehran;

☎ 9am-noon Sun, Tue, Thu); Tabriz (☎ 0411-333 4802; Mohabbarat St, Valiasr, Tabriz); ☎ 9am-noon Sun-Thu) Single-entry tourist visas issued in three working days for around US\$80 to US\$101. Visas are also available on arrival by air at Baku airport but *not* at the land borders.

Canada (Map p110; ☎ 021-8873 2623; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca; 57 Shahid Sarafraz St, Motahhari Ave, Tehran)

France (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-6670 6005-08; www.ambafrance-ir.org; 85 Nofl Loshato St, Tehran)

Georgia (Map p110; ☎ 021-2260 4154; www.iran.mfa.gov.ge; No 9, 8th Alley, off Shahid Qalandari, Sadr Expressway, Tehran; ☎ 9.15am-1.30pm Sun, Tue, Thu) Two-week tourist visas cost US\$40 and take four days (US\$60 for two-day service). However, most Westerners don't need visas at all.

Germany (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-3999 0000; www.teheran.diplo.de; 324 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

India Tehran (Map p110; ☎ 021-8875 5103-5; www.indianembassy-tehran.com; 46 Mir-emad Ave, cnr Ninth & Dr Beheshti Sts, Tehran; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sun-Thu); Zahedan (Map pp326-7; ☎ 0541-322 2337; off Imam Khomeini St, Tehran) Visas (IR370,000) issued in four days with a letter from your embassy.

Iraq (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-8893 8865-66; Valiasr Ave, Tehran) Just south of Valiasr Sq. Not issuing tourist visas.

Ireland (Map p94; ☎ 021-2280 3835; tehranembassy@dfa.ie; 8 Nahid Alley, Kamraniyeh Ave, Kamraniyeh, Tehran)

Japan (Map p110; ☎ 021-8871 7922; www.ir.emb-japan.go.jp; cnr Bucharest & Fifth Sts, Tehran)

Lebanon (Map p110; ☎ 021-8890 8451; 30 Afshin St, off Nejatollahi St, Tehran) If you need a visa, it costs about US\$40.

Netherlands (Map p110; ☎ 021-2256 7005-7; www.mfa.nl/teh; 1st East Lane, 33 Shahrzad Blvd, Darous, Tehran)

New Zealand (Map p94; ☎ 021-2280 0289; www.nzembassy.com/iran; cnr 2nd Park Alley, Sosan St, Nth Golestan Complex, Aghdasieh St, Niavaran, Tehran)

Pakistan Tehran (Map p94; ☎ 021-6694 4888; fax 6694 4898; Block No 1, Etemadzadeh Ave, Jamshidabad, Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave, Tehran; ☎ 9-11am Sat-Wed) Single-entry visas about US\$35 issued in two days with a letter of introduction from your embassy. Consulates in Mashhad (Map p354; ☎ 0511-222 9845; Imam Khomeini St, Mashhad) and Zahedan (Map pp326-7; ☎ 0541-322 3389; Pahlavani St, Zahedan) were not issuing visas when we asked.

Sweden (Map p94; ☎ 021-2229 6802; www.sweden.abroad.se/tehran; 2 Nasdaran St, cnr of Boostan St, Nth Pasdaran, Tehran)

Switzerland (Map p110; ☎ 021-2200 8333; www.eda.admin.ch; Yasamin St, off Sharifi Manesh, Elahieh, Tehran)

Syria (Map p110; ☎ 021-2205 9031-32; Afrika Hwy, Arash Blvd, Tehran) If you need one, visas in one or two days for about IR500,000.

Tajikistan (Map p94; ☎ 021-2283 4650; 10, 3rd Alley, Shahid Zeinaly St, Niavaran, Tehran) North of the Niavaran Palace; issues tourist visas for IR280,000 in about four days.

Turkey Tehran (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-3311 5299; www.e-konsolosluk.net; 314 Ferdosi St, Tehran); Orumiyyeh (☎ 0441-222 8970, Beheshti St, Orumiyyeh); Tabriz (☎ 0411-300 1070, Firoudi St, Tabriz)

Turkmenistan Tehran (Map p94; ☎ 021-2220 6731; 5 Bavati St, off Vatanpour St, Farmanieh, Tehran; ☎ 9.30am-noon Sun-Thu); Mashhad (☎ 0511-854 7066; Do Shahid St off Dah-e Dey Sq, Mashhad; ☎ 8.30-noon Mon-Thu & Sat) You need an invitation letter (eg from www.stantours.com) to apply for a tourist visa. Transit visas are sometimes possible without such documentation if you show a valid onward visa for Uzbekistan. Either way your application will normally be referred to Ashgabat which usually takes at least a week. Once approval has been given, speed of stamping depends on the price paid.

United Arab Emirates Tehran (Map p110; ☎ 021-8678 1333; 355 Vahid Dastjerdi Ave, Tehran); Bandar Abbas (☎ 0761-222 4229; Nasr Blvd, Bandar Abbas)

UK (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-6670 5011; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iran; 198 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

US Interests Section (☎ 021-8878 2964; 59 Farzan-e-Gharbi, Africa Ave, Jordan, Tehran) Part of the Swiss Embassy, it cannot offer full consular services.

Uzbekistan (Map p94; ☎ 021-2229 1519; 15, 4th Dead End, Aqdasieh St, off Pasdaran St, Aqdasieh, Tehran) Most countries need a letter of invitation (LOI) from Uzbekistan. If you have one, a normal 15-day tourist visa takes about two weeks to arrange (US\$65), or US\$93 for urgent service. Alternatively, use a travel agency in Tehran. The embassy is near the Sadaf Shopping Centre.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The majority of Iran's festivals are religious (see Holidays, opposite). Iran's few major festivals are concentrated in Dahe-ye Fajr, or the 10 Days of Dawn (1 to 11 February), which commemorates the lead-up to Ayatollah Khomeini's coming to power.

Keep an eye on www.tehranavenue.com for new festivals. Festivals worth noting:

Fajr Film Festival (www.fajrfestival.ir) Held 1 to 11 February. Iran's premier arts festival, it features Iranian and international films in several cinemas across Tehran.

International Fajr Theatre Festival (en.theater.ir) Held 1 to 11 February, primarily at Tehran's Tezatre Shahr (City Theatre; p122).

International Festival of Ritual and Traditional Plays (en.theater.ir) August or September.

Tehran Short Film Festival (www.shortfilmfest-ir.com) Usually held in October or November. Organised by the Iran Young Cinema Society.

FOOD

Restaurants often add 10% or 15% to the bill in the name of service, though the waiter will rarely receive anything unless you add a further amount. In this book the 'service charge' has usually been included in the overall meal price (see also Tipping, p389). For lots more on Persian cuisine see p78.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Despite what President Ahmadinejad might like to say, Iranian gays and lesbians do exist. Unlike most other places, however, in Iran homosexuality is not only illegal but punishable by hundreds of lashes and even death. In 2005 two men were hanged in Gorgan for the 'crime' of having consensual sex. Barbaric laws aside, there is no reason why gay and lesbian travellers shouldn't visit Iran. There are no questions of sexuality on visa application forms, and we have not heard of any homosexual travellers being treated badly as long as they refrained from overt signs of affection.

Arranging meetings with Iranian gays and lesbians will, however, be tough. With so many cultural and legal constraints, it's no surprise that the nearest thing to a gay 'scene' are a few nervous-looking men sitting alone in Daneshgu and Laleh parks in Tehran. For lesbians it's even more difficult; most Iranians would probably deny the existence of women who prefer women.

The best way to contact the gay and lesbian communities, such as they are, is through the internet, which can open up all sorts of doors more safely than chancing it in the park. The website of the Iran Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Organisation (www.homanla.org) has interesting articles on homosexual life in Iran plus plenty of links.

Of course, it makes sense not to advertise that you're part of a same-sex couple. Most hoteliers will accept that you're 'just good friends', though you might find in some places that discretion is the better part of valour when seeking a double bed. In Yazd there is one smooth hotel in the old town noted for being more gay-friendly than others.

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays commemorate either religious or secular events. It's worth staying aware of the dates, especially if you are plan-

ning to extend your visa. Government offices and just about everything else will close for the morning, at least, on a holiday, but often small businesses will open after lunch. Transport functions fairly normally and hotels remain open, but many restaurants will close. Holidays are sometimes extended for a day if they fall near the Iranian weekend.

At the time of writing the Majlis (parliament) was considering cutting five dates from the holiday roster, including 15 Khor-dad (Anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini; p385), 30 Safar (Death of Imam Reza; below), 25 Shavval (Death of Imam Jafar Sadegh; below) and 13 Rajab (Birthday of Imam Ali; below).

Religious Holidays

Religious holidays follow the Muslim lunar calendar, which means the corresponding dates in the Western calendar move forward by 10 or 11 days every year.

Tasua (9 Moharram)

Ashura (10 Moharram) 7 January 2009, 27 December 2009, 16 December 2010, 6 December 2011. The anniversary of the martyrdom of Hossein, the third Shiite imam, in battle at Karbala in October AD 680. This is celebrated with religious theatre and sombre parades.

Arbaeen (20 Safar) The 40th day after Ashura.

Death of the Prophet Mohammed (28 Safar) 24 February 2009, 13 February 2010, 3 February 2011, 22 January 2012

Death of Imam Reza (30 Safar)

Birthday of the Prophet Mohammed (17 Rabi'-ol-Awwal) 14 March 2009, 3 March 2010, 20 February 2011, 10 February 2012

Anniversary of the death of Fatima (3 Jamadi-l-Okhra) 28 May 2009, 17 May 2010, 7 May 2011, 25 April 2012. Fatima was daughter of Prophet Mohammed.

Birthday of Imam Ali (13 Rajab) 6 July 2009, 26 June 2010, 15 June 2011, 3 June 2012

Mission of Holy Prophet (27 Rajab)

Birthday of Imam Mahdi (15 Shaban) 6 August 2009, 27 July 2010, 17 July 2011, 5 July 2012

Death of Imam Ali (21 Ramadan) 21 September 2008, 11 September 2009, 1 September 2010, 21 August 2011, 10 August 2012

Eid al-Fitr (1 Shavval) 1 October 2008, 20 September 2009, 10 September 2010, 31 August 2011, 19 August 2012. The Festival of the Breaking of the Fast that marks the end of Ramadan. After sunset on the last day of Ramadan large meals are consumed across the country.

Death of Imam Jafar Sadegh (25 Shavval)

Eid-e Ghorban (10 Zu-l-Hejeh) 8 December 2008, 27 November 2009, 17 November 2010, 6 November 2011, 26 October 2012. Marks the day when Abraham offered

to sacrifice his son. Expect to see plenty of sheep being butchered.

Qadir-e Khom (18 Zu-l-Hejjeh) The day Prophet Mohammed appointed Imam Ali as his successor while returning to Mecca.

RAMAZAN (RAMADAN)

During the month known in Iran as Ramazan, Muslims are expected to perform a dawn-to-dusk fast that includes abstaining from all drinks (including water) and from smoking. This is seen less as an unpleasant ordeal than a chance to perform a ritual cleansing of body and mind. Some people, especially in cities, don't fully observe the fast, but most do for at least part of the month. Some Muslims are exempted from the fast (eg pregnant and menstruating women, travellers, the elderly and the sick), as are non-Muslims but they mustn't eat or drink in front of others who are fasting.

Ramazan can be a trying period, particularly if it falls in summer when the days are that much longer and the heat and hunger tend to shorten tempers. Businesses and shops keep odd hours and very little serious business gets done. However, public transport continues to function and travellers are exempt from the fast so you don't need to worry about finding

'APPROXIMATE' DATES FOR RAMAZAN:

- 1 to 30 September 2008
- 22 August to 19 September 2009
- 12 August to 9 September 2010
- 1 to 30 August 2011
- 21 July to 18 August 2012

food on flights, trains or bus trips, and many hotels keep their restaurants open. Other restaurants either close altogether or open only after dark. Many shops selling food remain open throughout Ramazan, so you can buy food to eat in your room.

Although you shouldn't have many problems in larger cities, in rural areas finding any food might be difficult during daylight hours.

Secular Holidays

Secular holidays follow the Persian solar calendar, and usually fall on the same day each year according to the Western calendar.

Magnificent Victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (11 February; 22 Bahman) The anniversary of Khomeini's coming to power in 1979.

IRAN'S AGE-OLD CELEBRATION OF THE NEW YEAR

No Ruz literally means 'new day' and while the celebration is for Persian new year, much of the traditional ceremony is about renewal and hope for the future. The roots of the No Ruz tradition stretch deep into history, with the spring equinox (usually 21 March) having been celebrated since before Achaemenid times. It's a peculiarly Persian tradition that has nothing to do with Islam – a fact that many Iranians are proud of but which doesn't sit well with the Islamic theocracy.

No Ruz festivities stretch for about three weeks. Apart from frenzied shopping, the outward sign of No Ruz is street-side stalls selling the *haft seen*, or seven 's'es; seven (or more) symbolic items with Farsi names starting with the letter 's'. They are supposed to be laid on a table at home, though you'll see them everywhere from TV news studios to taxi dashboards. Today's most commonly seen *seen*, and their symbolic meanings:

- *sabzi* (green grass or sprout shoots) and *samanu* (sweet wheat pudding) represent rebirth and fertility;
- *seer* (garlic) and *sumaq* (sumac) symbolise hoped-for good health;
- *sib* (apple) and *senjed* (a dried fruit) represent the sweetness of life;
- *sonbol* (hyacinth) is for beauty

On many tables you'll also see *sekeh* (a gold coin, symbolising adequate income), *serkeh* (vinegar to ward off bitterness), a mirror, a Quran and candles. You'll also see sorry-looking goldfish in tiny bowls. No-one we asked knew how or why the goldfish found its way into this tradition. Fish might have represented Anahita, the ancient god/angel of fertility, or perhaps it simply symbolises

Oil Nationalisation Day (20 March; 29 Esfand) Commemorates the 1951 nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

No Ruz (21 to 24 March; 1 to 4 Farvardin) Iranian New Year.

Islamic Republic Day (1 April; 12 Farvardin) The anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

Sizdah be Dar (2 April; 13 Farvardin) The 13th day of the Iranian New Year, when Iranians traditionally leave their houses for the day.

Heart-Rending Departure of the Great Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran (4 June; 14 Khordad) Commemorates the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. About 500,000 Iranians flock to Tehran, Qom (where he trained and lived) and the village of Khomein (where he was born).

Anniversary of the Arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini (5 June; 15 Khordad) In 1963 Khomeini was arrested after urging the Muslims of the world to rise up against the superpowers.

NO RUZ

No Ruz (see the boxed text, opposite), the Iranian New Year, is a huge family celebration on a par with Christmas in the West. From a practical point of view, Iran virtually shuts down from 21 March (the beginning of new year) and Sizdah be Dar (2 April).

Finding hotel accommodation (especially midrange and top end) is very tough from about 18 March until 2 April and all forms of long-distance public transport are heavily booked, though savaris run more frequently making some shorter-hop trips easier than at other times. Most businesses, including many restaurants, close from 21 to 25 March inclusive. It's not impossible to travel during No Ruz, but you should think twice, then think again, before heading to popular tourist destinations, such as Esfahan, Mashhad, Yazd, Shiraz and anywhere on the Persian Gulf or Caspian coasts. Mountain areas like rural Kordestan and primarily business cities like Tehran and Kermanshah, remain relatively uncrowded. And on the positive side museums and tourist sites stay open much longer hours while some normally closed attractions open specially.

INSURANCE

A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities, which can include scuba diving, skiing, motorcycling, even trekking.

You might prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you

life – and the poor goldfish is the easiest 'living' being to put on a table – an estimated five million live, and then die, on Iranian tables every No Ruz.

On the Tuesday night before the last Wednesday of the year another pre-Islamic tradition is played out. *Chahar shanbe-soori* (Wednesday Fire) sees people sing, dance (men only) and jump over fires. The jumping symbolises the burning away of ill luck or health, to be replaced by the healthy redness of the flames. Unfortunately, actually finding a fire can be tough. *Chahar shanbe-soori* is viewed as a pagan festival by the government. When we went fire jumping outside Mashhad the animosity between revellers and the (often half-hearted) Basij militiamen was instructive. Basijis would arrive and order fires to be doused and dancing to stop. After being ignored for a few minutes they would leave, accompanied by laughter and fire-crackers hurled in their direction. Some towns do now have grudgingly 'approved' fire-sites but visiting these can become deafening and rather hazardous due to the uncontrolled impromptu displays for fireworks thrown by excitable youths.

After all this No Ruz itself finally arrives. Families gather around the *haft seen* table to recite a prayer seeking happiness, good health and prosperity, before eating *sabzi polo* (rice and vegetables) and *mahi* (fish). Mothers are also expected to eat symbolic hard-boiled eggs, one for every child. At the moment of the equinox (announced on every radio station) people kiss and hug and children are given *eidi* (presents). For the following two weeks Iranians cross the country to visit relatives and friends in their home towns, before No Ruz celebrations finish on the 13th day of the year, *Sizdah be Dar* (usually 2 April). Everyone leaves home to go picnicking out of town, taking their *haft seen sabzi* with them. The *sabzi* is either thrown into water or, in some cases, left to blow off the roof of the car. Either way, the *sabzi* is meant to have soaked up the bad aspects of the previous year, so this ceremony symbolises getting rid of bad luck.

having to pay on the spot and claim later. Check that the policy covers ambulances or an emergency flight home. Make sure the policy covers Iran and adjacent countries if you're travelling on. Some insurers, particularly in the USA, consider the region a 'danger zone' and either exclude it altogether or insist on exorbitant premiums.

INTERNET ACCESS

In Iran, internet cafés are known as *coffeenets*, though you'll rarely find coffee on the menu. You can get online in all Iranian cities and big towns, and a growing number of smaller centres. Most *coffeenets* charge about IR10,000 an hour; more in hotels. Speeds are variable, but most cities now have ADSL connections. If you plan to use a messenger service, note that Yahoo! Messenger (www.yahoo.com) is used almost everywhere, but MSN Messenger (www.msn.com) is harder to find. Skype (www.skype.com) is growing in popularity, but many *coffeenets* don't have headsets.

Unfortunately, Iranian *coffeenets* are badly infected with viruses. During this research trip our USB memory stick picked up more than 50 viruses, worms, Trojan horses, key-loggers and other nasties. So be careful about doing internet banking unless the anti-virus software is up to date, and scan carefully before sticking anything into your own computer that has been in an Iranian machine.

One way to avoid viruses is bring your own computer and connect to dial-up from your hotel. In most cases you'll need an adaptor to plug into the phone line. Most are unusual two-pin types that your RJ-11 plugs into the back of; they're available in electronics stores.

Even with the adaptor, you'll still have work to do to get online. First, you need to find out if your hotel has a switchboard sophisticated enough to allow long local calls (many switchboards look like they've been around since Alexander Graham Bell's day). If they do, you'll then need to buy a pre-paid access card, which costs about IR10,000 for five hours. Unfortunately, most of these have access numbers for local areas only, so you'll need to buy a new one in each city – it won't break the bank. The cards are available at *coffeenets* and newsstands.

LEGAL MATTERS

Like most things in Iran, the legal system is based on Islamic principles. The system, however, is not the strictest interpretation of Sharia law. Most of the same activities that are illegal in your country are illegal in Iran. The main difference is that the penalties can be much harsher. For most minor crimes, foreigners will probably be deported, though this is not an absolute. A few years ago a German businessman was sentenced to death for having sex with an unmarried Muslim woman, though he was eventually released after serving about two years in jail. The penalties for drug or alcohol use and smuggling are harsh. Carrying the smallest amount of hashish can result in a minimum six-month jail sentence; don't expect assistance from your embassy or a comfortable cell. Trafficking heroin or opium carries the death penalty.

There are two 'crimes' that foreigners may not be aware of. Homosexual activity is illegal and has resulted in the death penalty for some Iranians. Deliberate refusal to wear correct hejab (the Islamic dress code for women) can also result in a public flogging (although a foreigner will probably be deported).

In the unlikely event you are arrested, it's best not to reply to, or appear to understand, any questions in Farsi. If you do choose to answer questions, do so politely, openly and diplomatically. In our experience – yes, we have been arrested a couple of times (see the boxed text, p379) – the primary motives for arresting a foreigner are usually curiosity, mild suspicion and the desire to appear powerful. Answer your interrogators so that their curiosity is satisfied, their suspicion allayed and their sense of their own self-importance flattered. Take special care not to incriminate yourself or anyone else, especially anyone Iranian, with a careless statement, and get in contact with your embassy in Tehran as soon as possible if things get heavy.

In Iran, people are legally allowed to vote at age 15, can legally drive when they are 17, and can legally have sex when they're married – girls can be married when they turn 13 and boys when they are 15. Premarital and gay sex are both illegal.

MAPS

The undisputed king of Iranian map-making is **Gita Shenasi** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 021-6670 9335;

www.gitashenasi.com; 15 Ostad Shahrivar St, Razi St, Valiasr Crossroads, Enqelab-e Eslami Ave; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Wed & 8am-1pm Thu) in Tehran, which publishes an impressive array of maps covering all the major towns and cities and some of the mountain ranges. A growing number of its maps are in English, while many others list the names of major streets, suburbs and squares in English, although everything else, including the text and indexes, is in Farsi. Maps are harder to find outside Tehran.

Gita Shenasi's *Iran Road Map* (1:2,250,000) is updated annually and is highly detailed, but annoyingly it doesn't have any route numbers on the major intercity roads. Finding maps outside Iran isn't easy; look for the excellent *Reise Know-How Iran* (1:1,500,000).

Gita Shenasi publishes climbing maps, such as *Central Alborz*, *The Peaks of the Sabalan* and *Damavand and its Ridges*, but their usefulness is limited because many places are marked only in Farsi.

MONEY

The official unit of currency is the Iranian rial, but Iranians almost always talk in terms of tomans, a unit equal to 10 rials (see Rials or Tomans?, below). We can't emphasise enough how important it is to get your head around the idea of tomans as soon as you can. Throughout this book we use the abbreviation 'IR' to indicate Iranian rials. For an idea of costs see p16; and for exchange rates see the inside front cover.

For all intents and purposes, Iran is a purely cash economy. No credit cards. No travellers cheques. Just bring cold, hard cash – preferably in high-denomination

euros or US dollars. Apart from some hotels, carpet shops and tour agencies where you can pay in dollars or euros, all transactions are in rials (or tomans). In this book, we've listed prices in the currency in which they are quoted. You'll obviously need to carry a mix of rials and dollars or euros – you'd need a wheelbarrow to cart around everything in rials.

Which brings us to the question of what sort of cash you should bring to Iran. It used to be, somewhat ironically, that the US dollar was king in Iran. But in response to strong US condemnation of Iran's nuclear program and falling US dollar, the Ahmadinejad government has encouraged Iranian banks and businesses to turn away from the dollar and toward the euro. So much so that some banks won't even change dollars anymore. On this research trip we had no problem changing dollars (as long as the notes were printed since 1996), but if you have to choose between one or the other then it's safer to go for euros. UK pounds get decent rates in most bigger towns too, but can't always be exchanged at borders or in smaller money-changers, so have at least a few dollars or euros for emergencies.

There is a thriving business in UAE dirhams along the Persian Gulf coast. However, Turkish lira are treated with the utmost scorn everywhere except close to the Turkish border; ditto for the Afghan, Azerbaijani, Turkmen and Pakistani currencies.

Whichever currency you choose, the most important thing to remember is to bring as much cash as you're likely to need, then a

RIALS OR TOMANS?

No sooner have you arrived in Iran than you will come up against the idiosyncratic local practice of talking about prices in tomans even though the currency is denominated in rials. While most travellers eventually get used to this, at first it is completely bamboozling. One toman is worth 10 rials, so it's a bit like shopkeepers in Europe asking for 10 cents whenever they wanted €1.

To make matters worse, taxi drivers and *bazaris* (the shopkeepers in the bazaar) will often say 'one' as shorthand for IR10,000. However, before you consider cancelling your trip to Iran on the grounds of commercial confusion, rest assured that after a few days you'll understand that the two fingers the taxi driver just showed you mean IR20,000. And as you start to get a feel for what things cost, you'll understand that if something sounds too good to be true – or too bad – it probably is.

In the interim, you can always have the price written down, and then to double-check ask whether it's in rials or tomans (written prices are usually expressed in rials) – using a calculator is handy, too, as the numbers show in Western rather than Arabic numerals.

bit more. Getting your hands on money once you're inside Iran is a nightmare.

ATMs

Although Iran has a functioning network of ATMs (cashpoint machines), they can only be used with locally issued bank cards, so are useless to travellers unless you open a local account.

Banks

Although it sometimes seems as if every fourth building in Iran is a bank, only a few banks will actually change your money and then usually only US dollars, euros or, less often, British pounds in cash. Your best bet will always be the central branch (*markazi*) of Bank Melli (BMI) in whichever town you are in. In larger cities you may also be able to change money at the central branches of the other major banks: Bank Mellat, Bank Tejarat, Bank Sepah and Bank Saderat. Banks that offer foreign-exchange facilities nearly always have the sign 'Exchange' or 'Foreign Exchange' displayed in English near the entrance. At these banks there should be someone who speaks English. You will need to take your passport with you when changing money in a bank, and in some smaller cities a Farsi-speaker will help you to get through the mountains of paperwork. Often it takes around 30 min-

utes or longer and requires five different signatures.

While banks usually open at 7.30am, most will not change money until the day's rates have been faxed through from Tehran between 9am and 10am.

Cash

Although there are coins for IR1, IR2, IR5, IR10, IR20, IR50, IR100, IR250 and IR500, only the latter four denominations are at all common. Indeed, so rare are IR1 coins (no longer minted) that they are considered lucky despite being utterly worthless. There are notes for IR100 (rare), IR200 (rare), IR500, IR1000 (two varieties), IR2000 (two varieties), IR5000 (two varieties), IR10,000, IR20,000 and, since March 2007, a IR50,000 note bearing the three-ellipse nuclear symbol. The red-coloured IR20,000 and IR50,000 notes look confusingly similar. Hang on to your filthy IR500 and IR1000 notes to pay shared taxi fares.

Most of the time no-one seems to care what state rial notes are in, then out of the blue someone will reject one on the grounds that it has a tiny tear or is too grubby. Note that this tolerance doesn't apply to foreign currencies, which need to be clean and without any tears whatsoever. If they're not falling apart, Iranian banknotes are easy to read as the numbers and names are printed

DUAL-PRICING

First, we'd like to applaud the Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance for abolishing the practice of charging foreigners 10 times the Iranian price to see historical monuments and museums. Entry fees are now the same for everyone, except at a few privately run places that don't receive government funding, such as Vank Cathedral in Esfahan and Bagh-e Eram (Garden of Paradise) in Shiraz.

However, as we went to press officially sanctioned dual-pricing was still happening...just. The practice of charging foreigners 30% to 50% more than Iranians for the same hotel room looks like it might finally be coming to an end. In early 2008 the government tourism organisation ordered all hotels to use one rate for all – a policy called *yeksansazi*. Not surprisingly, hoteliers were not happy about this new directive, and a months-long argument ensued while some hotels obeyed and others did not. The outcome remains unclear. The most logical conclusion would be a single price that sits between the old Iranian and foreign prices.

What does this mean for you? Well, the hotel prices listed in this guide will be indicative more than literal, with rampant inflation also playing its part.

In the unlikely event that the hoteliers win and dual-pricing continues, it's worth keeping it all in perspective. A small but growing number of hotels do charge the same rates for everyone, and elsewhere you'll find the vast majority of transactions will be perfectly fair. Indeed, there's a good chance you'll be humbled by someone for whom IR20,000 is a fortune insisting on paying your share of a meal.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

So you've been robbed, lost your wallet, maybe bought one too many carpets and you're out of cash. Don't despair. What is described here is definitely not something to build into your travel plan, but if you need money sent from abroad, this system should work – assuming sanctions haven't cut off Iranian banks entirely.

- 1 Go to the nearest Bank Melli (BMI) central branch, preferably in Tehran where Mr Abdollahi at counter 13 speaks English and has helped many travellers out of such situations.
- 2 Find an English speaker, *insh'Allah*, outline what you want to do and give them your local contact details.
- 3 Get the Swift identification code for this particular BMI branch (eg Tehran central branch is MELIIRTH060); and ask whether there is a BMI branch in your home country (these are listed at www.bmi.ir), or which bank in your country has a relationship with BMI (eg in Australia, it's ANZ).
- 4 Ask your saviour at home to go to a branch of the nominated bank (eg ANZ) with your full name, passport number and the Swift code, and deposit the money.
- 5 Between two and four days later, the cash should arrive at your branch in Iran.

Be warned that the charges in your home country can be high. But if you're desperate, this is the least of your worries. Once you're in the money again, don't forget to pick up a decent souvenir for your saviour.

in Farsi and English. However, coins are only marked in Farsi.

Credit Cards

The 'war on terror' and the US trade embargo mean you cannot use any credit card in Iran. You cannot pay for a hotel, a plane ticket, nothing. You cannot draw cash on your credit card, despite what one German bank told a traveller we met, who then had to spend 10 traumatic days getting money sent from home. While a handful of carpet shops and travel agencies with foreign accounts will take credit cards, it's not worth relying upon. Better to just file away the plastic and be sure to bring enough cash.

International Transfers

It should be possible to have money transferred from overseas to a bank or an individual's account in Iran; for details, see Show Me the Money, above. Note, however, that economic sanctions might mean banking relations with some countries are cut completely, in which case transfers will become almost impossible.

Moneychangers

The quickest and easiest way to change cash is at an official money-exchange office, where the whole deal is done in seconds, unlike in most banks where half an hour is

fast. Exchange shops can be found in most cities, usually signed in English.

Changing money in an exchange shop is much safer than doing so with a street moneychanger. If you do change on the street, expect to be treated like a total moron with no idea of current rates. You should demand the same rate as you'd get in the bank and expect the changer to take a IR10,000 'service fee'. Count the money carefully, and don't hand over your bill until you're sure it's correct. If you can't find a bank or exchange office, carpet shops, jewellers or someone in the bazaar should be able to help.

Tipping

Tipping is not a big deal in Iran. In upmarket restaurants (mainly in Tehran) a 10% gratuity might be expected – on top of the 10% service charge that's often built into the bill. But everywhere else any money you leave will be a pleasant surprise. It's normal to offer a small tip to anyone who guides you or opens a building that is normally closed. If your offer is initially refused, you should persist in making it three times before giving up (see Ta'arof, p45). You'll be relieved to hear there is no culture of 'baksheesh' in Iran.

Travellers Cheques

American Express. Leave home without it! Like credit cards, travellers cheques are

useless in Iran. Only a couple of banks attached to international hotels in Tehran can (unofficially) change travellers cheques, but even this could change at any time so don't rely on it.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Iran has jumped on the digital photography bandwagon as much as any other country and that's good news for travellers. Many *coffeenets* have card readers so you can upload your images to the internet and/or burn them to CD or, less often, DVD. Memory cards in all but the very latest formats are available at reasonable rates in the larger cities, the widest range being in Tehran.

If you're still using film then you'll have no problem finding garden variety films at good prices. Higher speed films are now much harder to find, and slide film almost impossible outside Tehran, so bring all you're likely to need. Note that airport X-ray machines are not exactly state-of-the-art so it's worth getting the security guards to hand-check your film; they'll usually do so if you ask (or plead) nicely.

Photographing People

Most Iranians are happy to have their picture taken provided you ask first. However, where lone women are concerned it doesn't matter how nicely you ask, the answer will almost always be no. If you point your lens at a woman without permission you can expect her to quickly disappear into her chador or scarf. Exceptions might be made for women photographers.

Offering to take pictures of your Iranian friends and post or email to them later is greatly appreciated – as long as you remember to post or email them. If you don't plan to keep the promise, don't make it.

Restrictions

In Iran it is especially important to avoid photographing government buildings, airports, naval dockyards, nuclear reactors, roadblocks, military installations, embassies/consulates, prisons, telephone offices or police stations – basically, any government building at all. We know of a group of Polish travellers who were detained for hours in Bandar Abbas for taking a picture of the port, and we can speak from

first-hand experience of being arrested in Howraman-at Takht (p194) for unknowingly taking a photo of a hill that happened to be the Iraq border. When you see a 'No Photography' sign, take heed. If you're in doubt, ask. If you get caught, don't try to be anything except a dumb tourist.

Technical Tips

The sunlight can be strong during the day, so think about underexposing by a third or half a stop between about 11am and 3pm. A polarising filter will also help to cut out some of the glare, which can be particularly bad in cities such as Tehran, where the pollution is so bad. If hazy, polluted sky is ruining your pictures – such as in Imam Sq in Esfahan – consider coming back at night when the lighting means it's just as beautiful but you can't see the smog.

POST

Postage is very cheap. The cost of sending an airmail postcard to anywhere is IR1000. The cost for a normal-sized letter by airmail to anywhere outside Iran should be IR4000. The service is reliable and reasonably swift. Postcards usually reach Europe in four or five days. In contrast, the domestic postal service is reliable but slow, and sending a letter across the world is often quicker than getting it across the country.

If you're sending mail to a complicated address or to somewhere remote, try to get someone to write the address in Farsi on the envelope. Post boxes are few and far between, except outside post offices. Poste restante is little used and, according to readers, unreliable.

Parcels

Sending a parcel out of Iran can be a frustrating exercise in form shuffling, but it's reasonably priced and your package will usually arrive. Take your unwrapped goods to the parcel post counter (*daftar-e amanat-e posti*) at the main post office (*postk-huneh-ye markazi*) in a provincial capital – the bigger the better. There it will be checked, packaged and signed for in triplicate. There are three parcel services – *pishtaz* (express), *havayi* (airmail) and surface. Rates tend to vary depending on who is quoting them, but a 5kg parcel to anywhere by surface mail should cost less than

US\$20. The customs officer on duty at the post office generally has discretion over what can be posted abroad, so be nice (see also p377 for customs regulations). You will usually be asked for a photocopy of your passport.

SHOPPING

Iran has plenty of products that make good souvenirs, with the widest selection sold in Esfahan and Shiraz. Prices are low and quality ranges from cheap rubbish, such as plaster of Paris griffins at Persepolis, aimed at domestic tourists, to high-quality carpets. If you are prepared to search through old stuff in smaller bazaars you should come away with a great souvenir and a good story as to how you found it. If you'd prefer to do it all at once and aren't too worried about price, the bazaars in Esfahan and Shiraz are for you.

Various places in Iran specialise in specific products. Often, knowing the best place to buy something is as important as getting a good price. Export restrictions apply to some goods (see p377). Persian carpets are the ultimate souvenir and are available almost everywhere – see p61 for much more on carpets.

Minyaturha (miniatures; see p69 for more information) are another popular, distinctly Iranian souvenir, and Esfahan is probably the best place to buy them. What constitutes a 'real' miniature is widely debated (should they be painted on paper or camel bone?), however most of what you see will be on camel bone. Better miniatures are likely to cost at least US\$50 for a tiny work, climbing into the thousands for the best pieces. Apart from Esfahan, Manuchehri St in Tehran has some good examples. Tehran Bazar, Khorramabad and Orumiye are also good for miniatures, and *qabha-ye aks* (picture frames) are good in Orumiye.

There are dozens of shops and factories selling *sefalgari* (pottery) and *moza'i-ha* (mosaic tiles) at Lalejin, near Hamadan; Maraqqeh, near Tabriz; Minab, near Bandar Abbas; and around Rasht and Masuleh.

Traditional clothes can make great souvenirs. *Givehs* (lightweight shoes) and *abas* (traditional coats without sleeves) are available in the Kermanshah and Khuzestan provinces. Uniquely embroidered *abas* from

villages near Bandar Abbas and Bushehr are especially impressive. All sorts of beautiful garments and fabrics called *termeh* are found in Yazd province. Traditional woolen Kurdish coats and hats from Kordestan and Ilam provinces are popular, and the women of Masuleh will probably attempt to fleece you for their fine woollen socks.

Intricate *shisheh alat* (glassware) can be bought in Yazd and Tehran.

Be wary unless you know what you're doing when buying *javaheer alat* (jewellery). If you do, there are plenty of gorgeous choices: traditional jewellery from Kordestan, turquoise from Mashhad, and silver filigree necklaces and earrings from villages in Zanjan province.

Bags made from *charmineh* (leather) from Hamadan and Yazd are popular, and Tabriz is renowned for its *abrishom* (silk).

Some interesting metalwork souvenirs to pick up include knives from Zanjan, anything made of silver or gold from Khuzestan province, Kerman or Shiraz, and *servis-ha-ye chay* (tea sets) and *qalyans* (water pipes) made from *mes* (copper) and *beronz* (bronze).

Za'faran (saffron) from Mashhad, and *hanna* (henna), particularly from Tabriz and Yazd, are readily available.

Woodwork is widely available, but for carvings and *moarraaq* (marquetry inlay-work), some of the best deals come from Sanandaj and Esfahan.

Most cities have bookshops selling at least a couple of inexpensive English-language coffee-table books about Iran. Finally, another popular souvenir that's available in every bazaar in the country is the *qalyan*. Prices start at about IR40,000 for a smaller pipe with wooden accessories, and a stock-standard pipe with some long-dead shah on the bowl will set you back about IR80,000. Prices rise fast when you step into a souvenir shop.

TELEPHONE

Phone numbers and area codes continue to change with disconcerting regularity in Iran. For example, in 2005 all Tehran landlines had an extra digit added. Fortunately, you didn't need to be a rocket scientist to work out the change; the first number was repeated, so 123 4567 became 1123 4567. If you find the numbers in other big

WHAT A BARGAIN!

As a general rule, the prices of groceries, transport (except private taxis) and most things with a price tag attached are fixed, and fixed prices are undoubtedly more prevalent than they were a few years ago. On the other hand, virtually all prices in the bazaar are negotiable, particularly for souvenir-type products and absolutely always for carpets. In tourist areas, such as Imam Sq in Esfahan or the Bazar-e Vakil in Shiraz, bargaining is essential.

Bargaining can be tough if you're not used to it, so here are a couple of pointers. First, when you find something you like be sure not to show too much interest. Vendors can smell desperation a mile away. Second, don't buy the first one you see; subtly check out a few alternatives to get an idea of the price and quality. With this knowledge, casually enquire as to the price and then make a counter-offer, thus beginning the bargaining process. The vendor will often beseech you to make a better offer: 'But I have nine children to feed'. However, having looked at the competition you know what is a fair price so only edge up slowly. If you can't agree on a price you could try walking out of the store, but if the shopkeeper calls your bluff you'll struggle to knock the price down any further than you already have.

Remember that bargaining is not a life and death battle. A good bargain is when *both* parties are happy and doesn't necessarily require you to screw every last toman out of the vendor. If you paid more than your travelling companion, don't worry. As long as you're happy, it was a good deal. Remember, too, that no-one is forcing you to buy anything. Your money will stay in your pocket until you decide to take it out. And, unlike at home, if you do get ripped off in Iran the damage won't be too great.

cities have changed, they might have followed this method.

Some old-style payphones still work and take IR50 and IR100 coins. Cards for newer payphones are available in newsstands and come in denominations of IR5000, IR10,000 and IR20,000. Calls are so cheap that you'll need to really like the sound of your voice to get through the larger card. Local calls are just IR42 per minute, though it's more if you're calling a mobile or long distance. In our experience, however, every second card phone is broken and you can't make international calls from them. In some cities international calling cards are available from newsstands, grocery stores and *coffeenets*, where you dial a local number and punch in a code.

Local calls are so cheap that if you ask nicely most hotels will let you make a few free of charge. Airports and major bus terminals usually have at least one public telephone permitting free local calls.

International calls are also relatively cheap – just IR1700 per minute to most countries. These rates can be had at small, private telephone offices (usually open from about 7.30am until 9pm). The process is pretty simple: give the number you want to the front desk and wait for a booth to become available. You'll normally be charged a minimum of three minutes.

You can't make reverse-charge (collect) calls to or from Iran. Iran's country code is ☎ 98, to dial out of Iran call ☎ 00; if calling from outside Iran, drop the initial 0 from all area codes. See also the inside front cover for some useful numbers.

Mobile Phones

Iran has three mobile-phone networks. Government-run MCI and private Thaliya have very extensive coverage but are for residents only and their whopping sign-up costs average US\$300 (down from US\$1000 a few years ago). For travellers, a much better option is Irancell (www.irancell.ir) whose pay-as-you-go SIM card costs just IR300,000. We just had to show our passports to get one, though in some places you might need a local friend to fill the (all Farsi) papers and provide a local address. To top up your credit, buy scratch cards from vendors displaying yellow and blue MTN signs, who usually charge more than the card's face value (haggle). At the time this book went to print calls cost about IR850 a minute domestic, and IR4000 a minute international. Irancell also offers a 'Data SIM', which only allows SMS messages, at IR100 locally and IR1500 for international. Irancell is growing fast and in early 2008 had coverage in all but three provinces – Kerman, Sistan va Baluchestan and Khuzestan.

Thuraya satellite phones also work in Iran.

TIME

Compared with some of their Middle East neighbours, Iranians are fairly punctual and will expect you to be the same.

Time throughout Iran is 3½ hours ahead of Greenwath Mean Time (GMT), so noon in Tehran is 3.30am in New York; 8.30am in London; 10.30am in Turkey; 11.30am in Azerbaijan; noon in Afghanistan; 1.30pm in Pakistan and Turkmenistan (note this when preparing to cross borders); and 6.30pm in Sydney. For more, see the World Time Zones (Map pp450–1).

For years Iranians enjoyed daylight saving between No Ruz (usually 21 March) and mid-September. But in 2007 conservatives within the government decided that daylight saving was too disruptive to prayer times, and it was scrapped. If the government changes, daylight saving might be back – check online for the latest.

TOILETS

Most Iranians have squat toilets at home, but the majority of better hotels have thrones or a choice of loos. Almost all public toilets are squats and while some are regularly cleaned, others are very definitely not. Still, there are usually enough options that you won't have to enter anywhere too stinky. Mosques, petrol stations, bus and train stations and airport terminals always have toilets, *sans* TP.

Fortunately, buying toilet paper is easier than it once was. Most of the bit-of-everything grocery stores stock it, and if you can't find any there's always the ubiquitous box of tissues. Many midrange hotels have joined their top-end counterparts in supplying toilet paper, though sometimes you'll need to ask. Most plumbing is not designed for paper so put your used sheets in the bucket next to the toilet.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The ominous-sounding Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance is responsible for 'cultural affairs, propaganda, literature and arts, audiovisual production, archaeology, preservation of the cultural heritage, tourism, press and libraries'. As the list suggests, tourism is not its top priority, though it's rising.

In 2007 the first national tourism website (www.tourismiran.ir) was launched. It's planned to eventually be available in 11 languages, but at the time this book went to press was still largely useless. Cultural Heritage offices, universally known as *Miras Faranghi* in Farsi and often housed in restored historic buildings in provincial capitals, dispense information. They don't see too many walk-in tourists but will usually try to find someone who speaks English and search around in filing cabinet drawers until you have a showbag full of brochures, maps, postcards and other promotional paraphernalia. Some cities also have more proactive private or semi-private tourist offices, where basic information is available in English and guides and tours can be arranged, usually at reasonable prices.

There are small information booths in train stations, where staff are usually good on timetable information, and international airports, where they might speak English and have a map, but little else. Information offices in bus terminals are generally useless.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Facilities are rare, but as long as you are healthy and come with the right frame of mind there is no reason why travellers with disabilities shouldn't enjoy Iran. Wheelchair ramps are starting to appear, largely to cater to disabled veterans from the Iran–Iraq War, though it will be a long time before you can depend on the ramp's presence. Only the more upmarket hotels are guaranteed to have elevators big enough for wheelchairs and European-style sit-down toilets. Bring your own medications and prescriptions.

For more information on travelling with disabilities, see these websites:

Access-Able Travel Source (www.access-able.com)

Radar (www.radar.org.uk)

Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality (www.sath.org)

VISAS

Perhaps the biggest reason more people don't come to Iran is that getting a visa can be unnecessarily frustrating. Even though part of the Iranian government is trying to attract international tourists, with the ambitious if spectacularly deluded target

of 20 million tourists by 2020, suspicion bordering on paranoia elsewhere in the government makes getting a visa such a protracted hassle that a lot of people either don't bother or give up.

Trying to work out the best way to get your visa isn't easy because the rules seem to change without warning or explanation. Sometimes this change results from actions on a bigger political stage. If, for example, your nation has diplomatic trouble with Iran, as happened with Canada following the death in a Tehran prison of Iranian-Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi in 2003, then getting your visa will become that much harder. Canadians have been struggling to get visas ever since.

At the time of writing it was actually harder to get a visa than it has been for several years. When we visited in 2003 and 2005 it was simply a matter of applying to the embassy, paying the money and waiting (admittedly, several weeks) for the visa – we were even granted 45 days in 2005. But by 2007 the embassy told us to not even bother submitting the forms unless we had a 'sponsor'. This requirement for an Iranian sponsor has become almost universal in the past couple of years. Fortunately, it's not as big an obstacle as it sounds. For most people, their 'sponsor' will be a visa agency or travel agency. The good news is that using an agency should (this is not guaranteed) make the process faster and simpler – for us, we had the visa in our passport nine days after contacting the agency. See below for all the details.

So before you shut the book and start planning a holiday to Turkey instead, take comfort in the knowledge that most people do eventually get a visa, usually for 30 days (which can then easily be extended – see the boxed text, opposite). And once they've been to Iran, almost everyone thinks the hassle was worth it.

For details on the back-door route through Kish Island, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kish office, p293.

Applications for Visas

Turkish passport holders can get a three-month tourist visa on arrival. Everyone else will need to pay and apply well ahead of departure; to be safe that means at least a month but usually longer. Israelis (and anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport)

are not allowed in under any circumstances. Contrary to popular misconception, US citizens are welcome, but need to be on a tour (an organised group or private guide) or be prepared to badger the Iranian-interests section in Washington for many months.

PROCESS

All visa applicants must be 'approved' by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran. At the time of writing the official approval times were about five to seven working days, unless you're using a British, Canadian or Danish passport (10 to 15 days) or a US passport (45 days!). If you're approved, the MFA sends an approval number to the relevant embassy by telex, which can take a couple of days (why not by email? We don't know either). When the relevant embassy or consulate has this number, take or send your passport in, with the fully completed paperwork, photos and fee, and (if you are using an agency – see Sponsors, opposite, for more details) a note with your approval number. The visa should then be issued in a day or two.

Don't be put off if you're refused a visa the first time you apply. Although it won't help future applications, some travellers have been successful at a second attempt even at the same consulate, notably by using a different agency.

Note that all applications stall when the MFA in Tehran closes for holidays. That includes two full weeks between about 21 March and 3 April for No Ruz.

Once visas are issued you must enter Iran within 90 days. If you're on a long trip this can be a hassle, so we recommend contacting an agency about two months before you want to enter Iran, nominate an embassy/consulate nearer to Iran (in Turkey, Azerbaijan or Pakistan, for example), and get your approval number sent to that embassy.

Getting the Paperwork Right

However you choose to apply, you'll need to supply full personal details, copies/scans of your passport, an outline of your itinerary and photographs. For women, you'll probably need to have your hair covered (any scarf will do) in the photo. Some embassies/consulates even require you to be covered when going to collect your visa.

While we don't advocate lying on your application form, don't complicate matters

MORE TIME, PLEASE

First the good news: there is *usually* little difficulty in extending a tourist visa to 60 days, or even 90. This is how it works.

Head for the provincial police headquarters (*shahrbani*) or Foreign Affairs office, often called Aliens Bureau or passport office (*edareh gozannameh*), in your city of choice. Take your passport, two or sometimes three mugshots of yourself, photocopies of the picture page of your passport and your existing Iranian visa, and IR100,000 for the extension, plus about IR3000 for the processing.

Once you've filled out the appropriate form (twice) you'll be asked to deposit your IR100,000 at a specific (hopefully nearby) branch of Bank Melli – just turn up and say 'visa' and the bank staff will usually fill the deposit forms for you. When you return with your bank receipt, you might be lucky and be able to collect your passport with new extended visa immediately, but it rarely works as quickly as this.

Instead, you'll probably have to wait a few hours or, in some cases, several days. As such, it's worth carefully choosing the city where you plan to extend and trying to tailor your itinerary to suit. In general, cities familiar with tourists are the best places: Shiraz was easiest for us, with Esfahan, Gorgan and Rasht not far behind. Second-string options include Kerman, Bushehr and Tabriz. Smaller cities often take longer to issue the extension, if at all, and are less likely to grant you a full 30 days.

Timing is also important: you can only apply for an extension two or three days before your existing visa is due to expire, and your extension starts on the day it's issued, not the end of your original visa. In theory you can extend as many times as you like up to a total stay of 90 days.

The bad news is that transit visas cannot be extended, so those crossing Iran in five days can face real problems. However, if your visa is up and you've not yet made it to the border, here are a couple of tips we received from a helpful visa official:

- A doctor's note on official stationery stating you were unwell and needed, say, two days rest will act as a quasi-extension once you get to the border, or can be used to extend for a couple of days in the nearest Aliens Bureau.
- If you are heading east and are only a couple of days over, officers at Zahedan have been known to collect a small fine and extend your visa on the spot before you leave, just to make it all legal.

It's best not to rely on these last-gasp options. Everything here is subject to sudden change so ask other travellers and check the Thorn Tree (thorntree.lonelyplanet.com) before making firm plans.

unnecessarily by claiming you're something unloved like a journalist or, according to one woman we heard from, anything to do with fashion (very dangerous!). It's better just to say you're a teacher, student or nurse. Having said that, be aware that the MFA might Google your name and we heard of one woman whose application was rejected when the authorities recognised her photo on her website and the stories didn't gel. If you have a website, consider taking it or your picture down during the application process.

Similarly, keep controversial places like Bushehr and Natanz off your itinerary. Whatever you have written on the application, you'll be able to go anywhere in Iran with the tourist visa once it's issued.

SPONSORS

If you know someone in Iran they can sponsor your application, but it's much easier to use an agency that is used to dealing with the MFA, and indeed often has close relationships with people within the ministry. Usually agencies are worth the money.

Visa Agencies

The following agencies have been recommended by readers or have been used by the authors themselves. Not one is perfect and there have also been complaints. Problems usually arise when the applicant has no time left and their application isn't approved as quickly as they'd hoped, or been promised. You don't need a degree in nuclear physics to work out that to avoid

trouble you do need to apply as early as possible.

Iranianvisa.com (www.iranianvisa.com) Charges €30 (€32 with charges) and operates through an easy-to-use website.

Pars Tourist Agency (www.Key2Persia.com) Charges US\$30 but offers discounts if you book tours/tickets through its Shiraz-based agency (p271), and a 50% refund if you're rejected.

Persian Voyages (www.persianvoyages.com) More expensive at UK£70, but reliable even when other agencies have failed. Usually quite fast.

WHERE TO APPLY

Iran would prefer you to apply in your home country, but if you're using an agency this isn't necessary. If you don't use an agency, you'll have to deal with the peculiarities of individual Iranian missions. Check Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum (thorntree.lonelyplanet.com) for recent feedback from travellers.

The best embassies hand out one-month tourist visas in a week or two (if you've got the right passport). The worst (like Delhi in India) will only issue transit visas to non-Indians, and then only after you've waited weeks.

Costs

Visa costs vary from place to place. Most Iranian embassies (p380) in Europe have websites detailing costs and what you need to supply. For example, in their home countries in December 2007 Brits were being charged UK£61/68 for a transit/single-entry tourist visa, Canadians C\$47/70 (*insh'Allah*), and Germans, French, Dutch and Swedes €40/60. Iranianvisa.com has an incomplete list of visa fees.

Visa Extensions

What if you overstay? Don't. You'll be fined IR300,000 for each day you overstay, and you could be stuck for up to a week sorting out paperwork. For emergency overstay procedures, see the boxed text (p395).

Other Visa Types

BUSINESS VISAS

Business visas can be harder to get than tourist visas. To get a two-week or one-month (extendable) business visa you must have a business contact in Iran who can sponsor your visit through the MFA in Tehran.

TRANSIT VISAS

A five-day transit visa is really a last resort. Transit visas cost almost as much as tourist visas and while in theory processing could be quick, in reality it often takes two or three weeks. One advantage is that you don't need an agency-sponsor but you might need a letter of recommendation from your embassy, which might actually cost more. The main disadvantage? Iran is a big country, five days is a very short time and Iran *does not extend transit visas*.

VISAS ON ARRIVAL

Iran introduced the visa-on-arrival in 2005, designed mainly for business people. In theory, you can fly into Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad or Tabriz and be issued a seven-day visa at the airport. In practice, this service is unreliable, at best. Indeed, we have heard of people being unceremoniously turned around and sent back to whence they came even though they met all the requirements. And citizens of several countries – including the UK, US, Australia and Ireland – cannot get this type of visa under any circumstances. All up, these are only good for desperate last resorts.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

The overwhelming majority of Iranians can't do enough to help travellers and to make them feel welcome – this applies to both women and men. Most women travellers enjoy Iran and have few problems.

Attitudes towards Women

As unusual as Iranian culture is to Westerners, Western culture is to Iranians. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: some Westerners assume all Iranian women are black-cloaked, repressed victims, while some Iranians see Western women as 'easy' and immoral. These perceptions of Western women are created largely by foreign movies and media. They're also rooted in the fact that most Iranian women don't travel without men; the implication is that if you're doing so then you must be of dubious moral standing.

It is inevitable that some men will look at you with an unnerving mix of curiosity, lust and hope. It will rarely go beyond just looking, or a hopeful 'hello, missus!' or perhaps some suggestive comment in Farsi. Reply-

NEVER REALLY ALONE IN IRAN *Kerryn Burgess*

I was enjoying tea in the mountain village of Masuleh. As I popped a sugar cube into my mouth, the Iranians at the next table invited me to join them – why was I alone, they asked?

In a month of travelling in Iran, I never reconciled my experience of unending hospitality with the perceptions of my friends back home in Australia. According to them, I should have received a bravery award for holidaying alone as a woman in a country where, they believed, women wore *burqas* (a mask with tiny slits for the eyes) to scuttle to the market in between terrorist attacks.

My new tea-house companions were two scrawny men and a young, superbly athletic woman carrying an enormous backpack and ropes for rock-climbing. Samira, from Tehran, spoke perfect English. 'I was watching you before,' Samira said to me, 'and wondering why you were alone. I thought, I hope one day I can be as brave as her.'

Despite Samira's perceptions of my bravery, in a practical sense I faced no challenges to equal the vertical rock faces she planned to climb and hungry wolves she was hoping to avoid while camping in the mountains with her fiancé. The summer heat, my limited Farsi skills, and the proliferation of awful fast-food restaurants were my biggest 'problems', none of them specific to women. In every other practical way, Iran is an easy destination for women travelling with a companion, whether male or female.

In a social sense, it's not always the easiest country if you're alone, particularly for women. Take the stigma factor of the solo female diner at a restaurant in the West and multiply it by 100. One of my journal entries reads: 'Another desultory dinner time alone; have waited 15 minutes for a waiter to come within shouting distance, while everyone around me stares.' The waiter probably assumed I was waiting for someone else, because Iranian women never, ever eat out alone.

That said, Iranians were unfailingly welcoming and helpful, even those who were puzzled at my strange lonesome behaviour. Every day, strangers invited me to join them for tea, or to share their picnic, or just to chat. I soon learnt what to say in response to the ubiquitous line of questioning: 'Where are you from? Are you married? (No.) Are you alone? (Yes.) Why? *'Man odat daram. Injaree lezat mibaram.'* ('I'm used to it. I enjoy it.')

Despite the solo dining, the pleasures and surprises of travelling in Iran far outweighed the inconveniences. I discovered, for example, the sense of camaraderie that exists in the women's section of a mosque. In a *hammam* (bathhouse), another woman massaged my back, then showed me how to rub my heels against the rough concrete floor to slough off the dead skin. In the bazaar, a mother of six told me how to make *bastani* (Iranian ice cream). And before I left the tea-house in Masuleh, a woman I'd never met wordlessly handed me a gift, a silver statue of Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet), smiled sympathetically at my aloneness, kissed me three times, and walked away.

Kerryn Burgess is Lonely Planet's Middle East commissioning editor.

ing with a cheerful 'hi, how are you?' will sometimes surprise your 'suitor' into silence. Other times, depending on his proficiency in English or yours in Farsi, it will lead to an interesting, friendly and entirely platonic exchange that might even extend beyond 'where are you from?', if you're lucky. Don't assume that your every interaction with local men will be awkward or threatening or intimidating in some way, or have sexual overtones. Many men will be delighted to chat, and you'd be missing out if you always ignored them. That said, the male attention can become wearing. If it does, it can be

refreshing to seek out the company of local women.

You will, of course, be accepted into female society far more than any man (Iranian or foreign), and this is one of the huge advantages women travellers have. Most Iranian women will open up to you far more in exclusively female company than in mixed company. The women's sections of mosques, public parks where groups of women congregate to chat, read, study or relax, women's clothing stores staffed by women, and the food sections of bazaars are all good places to meet local women.

You might feel happier travelling in a group or with a male companion, but neither is essential. Some travellers suggest wearing a wedding ring even if you're not married, but be aware that you're then likely to be quizzed with genuine fascination about your 'husband's' occupation, why he's not with you, why you don't have children, or if you do, how old they are... You might feel more comfortable simply being honest. In general, Iranians understand that foreigners have different rules.

If you're travelling with a man, you might find that Iranian men (and Iranian women in the company of Iranian men) will talk almost exclusively to the foreign man. This can be unsettling, especially if the conversation lasts for several hours over dinner, and you, as a woman, are rarely even acknowledged. However, attitudes like this are slowly changing. As their awareness of the world increases, Iranians are becoming more accepting of women travellers and more prepared to approach and engage them, especially in cities. As a foreign woman you will sometimes be considered an honorary male and be accepted into all-male preserves, such as teahouses, in a way that most Iranian women could not dream of being.

Some restaurants and teahouses have separate areas set aside for women and families. Where that's the case, you'll be directed straight to them. In some people's homes, men and women eat separately when guests are present, although as a foreign woman you will often be regarded as an 'honorary man' in this situation.

On city buses, women have their own entrance in the middle of the bus, and must sit at the back. You give your ticket to the driver through the front door, then get on through the back. On intercity buses, Iranian women never sit next to men unless they're related, and you should follow suit unless you want to give an Iranian man an embarrassing shock. Women should not shake hands, or have any other physical contact, with unrelated men. However, Iranian men who are accustomed to dealing with foreigners will sometimes make an exception to this rule.

Safety Precautions

Violence against foreign women is almost unheard of in Iran, even if the odd grope in

a shared taxi is not. And while there's a reasonable chance your bum will be pinched by some guy during the course of your trip, it's important to remember that not every man who speaks to you has ulterior motives. Foreign women who've travelled through Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt or Morocco say they've felt more comfortable in Iran where the level of harassment is lower.

Of course, you should take normal safety precautions and avoid staying in the cheapest *mosaferkhanehs*. Sharing a room with a foreign man shouldn't be a problem, even if he's not your husband.

Try to avoid looking men in the eye unless you know them well, as this will almost certainly be interpreted as a come-on. If you're travelling alone or with female friends, then to avoid the possibility of misunderstandings on anyone's part, it's best to be cautious about accepting invitations to 'tea' at a man's house unless at least one of his female relatives will also be present.

If you are harassed, tell your persecutor firmly, but politely, to desist (English will do; your meaning will be clear from your tone), and try to enlist the sympathy of other Iranians. If they think someone is behaving badly towards you, they will probably stop him out of shame. Try to avoid screaming blue murder; it might make the situation worse. If the problem persists, a mere mention of the police ('polis') should have a sobering effect.

What to Bring

If you use tampons, take enough to last your whole trip. They're hard to find in Iran and expensive. Sanitary pads are widely available. It's also handy to take some plastic bags for carrying out your toilet paper, tampons and pads from toilets that don't have rubbish bins.

What to Wear

Since the revolution of 1979 all women in Iran, including foreigners, have been required *by law* to wear long, loose-fitting clothes to disguise their figures, and to cover their hair. This form of dressing is known as hejab, a term that refers in general to 'modest' dress, and is also used to refer specifically to the hair-covering.

Signs in public places show officially acceptable versions of hejab: the chador (lit-

erally 'tent' in Farsi), an all-encompassing, head-to-toe black garment held closed with hand or teeth; or a manteau (a shapeless trench coat or shirt dress) with loose trousers and a *maqna'e* (a nun-like head scarf, or wimple).

In reality the dress code is more relaxed and open to interpretation. It's not unusual to see young Tehranis wearing figure-hugging manteaus, tight jeans, and colourful headscarves perched on the back of their dyed hair. Foreign women are not usually judged as harshly as Iranian women when it comes to hejab, and few Iranians will bat an eyelid if you have your fringe showing. Though as anywhere, it pays to look at what women around you are wearing; for example you'll probably want to dress more conservatively in Qom than you would in Tehran. For an idea of the diversity of Iranian women's fashion, search Google images for 'women's fashion Iran'.

Wearing any scarf and a man's long-sleeved shirt several sizes too large should get you through immigration and your first day or two. However, you'll probably want to buy a manteau as soon as possible because otherwise you'll feel dowdy around so many stylish Iranians. They're easy to find and cheap at about US\$15 to US\$30. Younger travellers can go for a mid-thigh version but older women may want something longer. Wear your manteau over jeans or comfortable trousers suitable for the season.

If you're coming to Iran from Pakistan or India a *shalwar kameez*, a long, loose men's shirt worn over baggy trousers, is also acceptable (albeit far from fashionable), provided it completely covers your bottom. Some travellers wear long Indian skirts with baggy hippie tops, but locals perceive this as sloppy.

Hejab in summer is hell. At this time of year manteaus in light, natural fabrics are strongly recommended, though they can be oddly difficult to find in Iran. It's coolest to wear nothing underneath your manteau except a bra, but this could be embarrassing if you're invited to someone's house and are expected to remove your manteau. In such situations Iranian women carry a blouse to change into. Alternatively, some readers suggest wearing a synthetic sports top or a light shirt in any material that wicks away sweat, such as CoolMax or Dry-FIT. Even inside someone's home, tight, strappy tops, singlets and plunging necklines are usually inappropriate. If you're thinking about the bra-only option, pack a few safety pins to hold together the parts of the manteau that might gape. They're also good for pinning your headscarf under the chin if you get tired of it slipping too far back.

Very fine, light silk scarves stay in place more easily than slippery polyester or heavy silk. They're hard to find in Iran, so shop before you arrive for a summer trip. Sandals without socks are fine for summer wear.

The only times when foreign women must wear a chador are when visiting some shrines and mosques. These can almost always be borrowed onsite. If you choose to struggle with a chador more generally you run the risk of being thought of as try-hard by women in smaller towns and being laughed at by more 'modern' women in cities, such as Tehran.

If you're hiking or camping, you should still wear hejab. Your guide might suggest it's OK to remove your manteau and headscarf if there's no-one around and you're in a remote area. However, you should always wear them as you approach or stay in villages, even if your guide says (because he wants to make you happy) it's not necessary.

Transport

CONTENTS

Getting There & Away	400
Entering the Country	400
Land	402
Sea	405
Tours	405
Getting Around	406
Air	406
Bicycle	406
Boat	407
Bus	407
Car & Motorcycle	409
Hitching	412
Local Transport	412
Minibus	414
Private Taxi	414
Savari (Shared Taxi)	415
Tours	415
Train	416

GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Arriving in Iran is usually straightforward. Assuming you have a visa, most immigration and border officials are efficient and tourists rarely get too much hassle. If you're flying in, you should be negotiating with a taxi inside an hour. Land borders can take longer if you're on a bus or train. Of course, women need to be adequately covered from the moment they get off the plane or arrive at the border (see p398, for details).

ESPECIALLY IN IRAN, THINGS CHANGE...

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to know that the information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Where we have listed prices, they should be read as a guide only. In a country where inflation was running at about 25% and fuel costs rising sharply when we were researching, prices on the ground will almost certainly be higher than those listed here.

Such economic factors are particularly trying for small businesses, so don't be surprised if some services have closed altogether. Having said that, we're confident we've listed strong businesses wherever possible. We're also confident that on the ground you will be able to get the latest taxi/bus/train fares yourselves, just as you check with airlines or travel agents to make sure you understand how a given airfare (and ticket) works. Shop carefully, of course, and for more up-to-date details ask other travellers on the Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree).

Passport

Iran has issues with Israel. If you're travelling on an Israeli passport you'll be turned away at the border (and you won't even get onto a flight coming into Iran). Similarly, having an Israeli stamp in your passport will see you turned away or put on the next flight out (for details see Applications for Visas, p394).

AIR

Airports & Airlines

The vast majority of international flights come to Tehran. However, a growing number of travellers are choosing to start or end their trip in Shiraz, thus saving some backtracking.

Tehran has two international airports, the old Mehrabad International Airport (THR) and new Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA). As of late 2007, all international flights except those to/from Medina, Jeddah and Damascus fly into IKA. As IKA isn't that big, delays on arrival are very possible. A second terminal is being built and can't come soon enough.

Elsewhere in Iran, Shiraz, Esfahan, Bandar Abbas and Kish are (in that order) potentially useful arrival or departure points, while Abadan, Ahvaz, Mashhad, Tabriz and Zahedan are less useful.

Iran Air is the national airline and has the Homa, a mythical bird, as its symbol. It has a reasonably good reputation. As the government-owned carrier, it offers service with an Islamic flavour (ie no pork, no alcohol and no exposed hair on the hostesses).

Women flying on Iran Air used to have to wear hejab from the time they arrived at the departure airport, but these days most women don't put on the headscarf until the plane has landed; if you're unsure, just watch what other women do. The same applies to all other airlines.

Use the following lists when looking for direct flights to/from Iran. For airline offices in Tehran, see p123.

IRANIAN AIRLINES & THEIR INTERNATIONAL DESTINATIONS

All airlines are based in Tehran except for Taban Air, which is in Mashhad.

Caspian Airlines (code RV; www.caspian.aero) Beirut, Budapest, Damascus, Dubai, Istanbul, Kiev, Minsk, Yerevan.

Iran Air (code IR; www.iranair.com) Amsterdam, Ankara, Bahrain, Baku, Beijing, Caracas, Cologne, Copenhagen, Damascus, Doha, Dubai, Frankfurt, Geneva, Gothenburg, Hamburg, Istanbul, Kabul, Karachi, Kuala Lumpur, Kuwait, London, Milan, Moscow, Mumbai, Paris, Rome, Seoul, Stockholm, Tashkent, Tokyo, Vienna.

Iran Aseman (code EP; www.iaa.ir) Bishkek, Dubai.

Kish Air (code Y9; www.kishairline.com) Damascus, Dubai, Istanbul.

Mahan Air (code W5; www.mahan.aero) Arbil, Almaty, Bahrain, Bangkok, Dammam, Damascus, Delhi, Dubai, Istanbul, Kochi, Lahore, Seoul, Sharjah, Tokyo.

Taban Air (code TBM; www.tabanair.ir) Almaty, Damascus, Dubai.

FOREIGN AIRLINES & THEIR DESTINATIONS

Aeroflot (code SU; www.aeroflot.com) Moscow.

Air Arabia (code G9; www.airarabia.com) Sharjah; budget airline.

Air France (code AF; www.airfrance.com) Paris.

Air India (code AI; www.airindia.com) Delhi.

Alitalia (code AZ; www.alitalia.com) Milan.

Ariana Afghan Airlines (code FG; www.flyariana.com) Kabul.

Armavia (code U8; www.u8.am) Yerevan.

Austrian Airlines (code OS; www.aa.com) Vienna.

Azerbaijan Airlines (code J2; www.azal.az) Baku.

British Airways (code BA; www.britishairways.com) London.

China Southern (code CZ; www.cs-air.com/en) Beijing, Urumqi.

Emirates (code EM; www.emirates.com) Dubai.

Etihad Airways (code EY; www.etihadairways.com) Abu Dhabi.

Gulf Air (code GF; www.gulfair.com) Bahrain.

Iraqi Airways (code IA; www.iraqairways.co.uk) Baghdad.

Jazeera Airways (code J9; www.jazeeraairways.com) Kuwait.

KLM (code KL; www.klm.com) Amsterdam.

Kuwait Airways (code KU; www.kuwait-airways.com) Kuwait City.

Lufthansa (code LH; www.lufthansa.com) Frankfurt, Munich, Zurich.

Pegasus (code LH; www.flypgs.com/en) Istanbul.

Qatar Airways (code QR; www.qatarairways.com) Doha.

Syrian Arab Airlines (code RB; www.syriaair.com) Damascus.

Tajik Air (code 7J; www.tajikair.tj) Dushanbe.

Turkish Airlines (code TK; www.turkishairlines.com) Istanbul.

UM Airlines (code UF; www.umairlines.com) Kiev.

Tickets & Routes

If you're going to Iran you probably know how to find a fair-priced plane ticket, so we'll keep this brief.

Most travellers fly into Tehran, though Shiraz is a good alternative if you want to avoid back-tracking. Buying tickets in Iran for flights from Iran is best done through an agent; Iranian airlines have yet to master internet bookings or even reservations.

The Middle East is a popular staging point, with several airlines connecting Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Kish to the rest of the world via various Gulf airports. Iran Air and other Iranian and regional airlines fly to/from Abu Dhabi (UAE), Bahrain, Beirut (Lebanon), Damascus (Syria), Doha (Qatar), Dubai (UAE), Kuwait, Sharjah (UAE), Istanbul and Ankara, among others. It's worth checking whether your airline flies to Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, Qeshm or Kish Islands, because shorter flights are cheaper and it could save you doubling back to Tehran.

Flights to Central Asia are less frequent and more expensive than you might expect, though things are getting better. Iran Air, Iran Aseman and Caspian Airlines fly between Tehran and Almaty (Kazakhstan), Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Baku (Azerbaijan), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and the respective national carrier usually does too. Ariana flies to Kabul.

Elsewhere in Asia, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, Thailand and Singapore are all connected by direct flights to Tehran. Travellers from Australia and New Zealand usually stage through these (usually Singapore or

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 CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change), but planes are 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 see www.lonelyplanet.com.

Getting to Iran Without Taking to the Skies

Of course, it's possible to come to Iran without getting on a plane and a good number of people do. Getting to Tehran by road or rail from, say, London will create less CO₂ per passenger than the 610kg created by air, though it's hard to say exactly how much less. That depends on a huge array of factors, including the type of transport (electric or diesel train?), how new/old your vehicle is, when it was last serviced, and how heavy is your driver's foot.

Bangkok) or the Middle East. Connecting to Africa is best done on Emirates or Etihad in the UAE.

There are no direct flights from North or South America. Instead, most people come through Europe, where a host of airlines have regular flights to Tehran, or the Middle East. As usual, less direct routes (eg via Moscow) are usually cheaper.

LAND

People have been crossing Iran by land for thousands of years, from the earliest merchants seeking fortunes on the Silk Road (see p34) through to those seeking something altogether different on the 1960s and '70s 'Hippy Trail'. The relative *laissez faire* of '70s travel came to an abrupt end when things got heavy, man, with the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, not to mention the Iran–Iraq War.

Well, the good news is that, the 'war on terror' notwithstanding, it's easier to cross in and out of Iran than it has been for 25 years. The border with Afghanistan

is open; routes into Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are do-able with varying degrees of hassle, and Turkey is a piece of cake. Most overlanders say the Pakistan crossing is straightforward if not necessarily comfortable. In theory it's possible to cross into Iraq, but think 20 times before you try it.

In recognition of Iran's pivotal position in trans-Asian travel, in this book we've summarised the details of all the crossing points available to foreigners in 'Crossing the Border at...' boxes within the text. General points are given here, but for the specifics follow the cross-references to the relevant chapter. All legal crossing points are marked on the colour map.

Bicycle

There is no reason why you can't ride in and out of Iran at any of the land borders. A small but steady stream of cyclists cross between Turkey and Pakistan, and we have had no reports of trouble at those borders, or any others.

Car & Motorcycle

To bring your own vehicle into Iran, you must be more than 18 years old and have a current international driving permit. For the vehicle, you'll need a *carnet de passage* (temporary importation document), which can be obtained from the relevant international automobile organisation in your country.

Most people with vehicles have reported hassle-free crossings in and out of Turkey and Pakistan. As long as everything is in order it's just a matter of following and waiting. Officials will probably note your vehicle's details in your passport to make sure you don't leave the country without it. Third-party insurance is compulsory for foreign drivers, but can be difficult to obtain outside Iran (if you do get it, make sure the policy is valid for Iran and accredited with Iran Bimeh, the Iranian Green Card Bureau). If you need it, buying the insurance in Maku (p136) is cheaper than at the border.

No-one but the police is allowed to have a motorbike over 150cc. Foreigners, however, are allowed to ride bikes of any size so long as they take the bike with them when they leave. With big bikes so rare, expect to attract a great deal of attention if you're on one. For information about driving around Iran, see p409.

Shipping bikes across the Persian Gulf is time-consuming, annoying and relatively expensive, but a reasonable number of people do it nonetheless. Rules and ferry times change regularly. Try the following websites for details.

Africa Overland Network (www.africa-overland.net)
Asia branch has links to blogs by overlanders.

Horizons Unlimited (www.horizonsunlimited.com)
Aimed at motorcyclists, but good for anyone with a vehicle. For the most up-to-date detail, search the Middle East thread on its HUBB forum, which has detail on borders, fuel, shipping and repair shops. The overlander's Bible.

Border Crossings

AFGHANISTAN

The border at Dogharon, 20km east of Taybad, is open and straightforward. Daily buses between Herat and Mashhad make the trip even simpler still. Visas are *not* issued here. See the boxed text (p368) for more information.

ARMENIA

The border between Iran and Armenia is only 35km long, with one crossing point in

Iran at Norduz. Armenian visas are issued at the border for US\$30, though sometimes the bus leaves before you have your visa – apart from that it's pretty smooth. See the boxed text (p158) for more information.

AZERBAIJAN

The Azeri border has two recognised crossings: between Astara (Azerbaijan) and Astara (Iran; see the boxed text, p166), and Culfa (Azerbaijan) and Jolfa (Iran; see the boxed text, p157), the latter leading to the exclave of Nakhchivan, from where you cannot enter Armenia and must fly to get to Baku. Visas are *not* issued here. When we crossed the Astara border for this book it was thoroughly straightforward.

Bus

These days direct buses between Tehran and Baku, via Astara, are as rare as rocking-horse shit. Which is a good thing, because if you're not on a cross-border bus you'll avoid a three- to seven-hour delay as your conveyance gets a full cavity search, which is considerably less interesting than it sounds. Crossing as a pedestrian is *much* easier.

Train

A train linking Qazvin to the Azeri border at Astara, via Rasht, will allegedly begin service during the life of this book.

IRAQ

Until there is a dramatic improvement in the security situation, you'd need to have rocks in your head to even consider crossing into southern Iraq. And anyway, the border posts at Mehran and Khosravi – servicing the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq – are open for locals only. Further north, the Haj Omran border near Piranshahr is the gateway to Iraqi Kurdistan and opens fitfully; see the boxed text (p144) and check Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) for the latest information.

PAKISTAN

Along the 830km border with Pakistan, the only recognised crossing for foreigners is between Mirjaveh (Iran) and Taftan (Pakistan). For border details see the boxed text (p330). For bus information, see p328; for train options, see p329.

TO THE ORIENT BY TRAIN

After decades of frustration for trainspotters and travellers alike, it will soon be possible to climb aboard a train in London, or almost anywhere in Europe, and travel exclusively by rail all the way to India. It will be possible when the missing length of track, across the barren deserts between Bam and Zahedan, is finished – supposedly in late 2008.

The new, standard-gauge track will link Zahedan to the rest of the Iranian network via Bam and Kerman. In Zahedan it will change bogies to connect with the wide-gauge Pakistani railway, though there are plans to standardise the entire Pakistani network to allow trains to run directly through to India and China. If the oft-talked about but much-delayed Trans-Asian Railway comes to fruition, Kunming in China will be linked to Kapikule in Bulgaria via an 11,460km line. And if politicians can get their act together, you'll be able to continue through to Thailand, Indochina and Singapore by rail...but hang on a minute, now we're getting way ahead of ourselves.

For now, getting to India shouldn't be too tough. Sure, we're not talking about the expensive luxury of the modern-day *Orient Express* trains, which only run as far as Venice. Indeed, there is little 'express' about it. But for scenery, comfort and the chance to meet the locals, it's hard to beat going across Asia by train. If you fancy it, see www.seat61.com to plan your itinerary.

TURKEY

There main road crossing to/from Turkey is at Gürbulak (Turkey) and Bazargan (Iran), where there are hotels, moneychanging facilities and regular transport on either side of the border, though staying in nearby Maku (p136) is more pleasant; see the boxed text (p136) for details.

Foreigners can also cross at Esendere (40km from Yüksekova, Turkey) and Sero, near Orumiyeh in Iran. There is nowhere to stay on either side and transport can be infrequent; see the boxed text (p140) for further information. Motorists usually cross at Gürbulak and Bazargan.

Bus

Travelling by bus you have two options. The easier is to take a direct long-distance bus to, say, Tehran or Tabriz from İstanbul, Ankara or Erzurum.

Buses to/from Tehran cost about IR250,000 to İstanbul (about 36 to 42 hours), but IR300,000 to Ankara, which is nearer. They leave from both the central and western bus terminals; several bus companies offer the service, but usually it's just one bus that runs (see p124 for bus departures). Those in the know swear it's better to take the Ankara bus, which is full of students and embassy workers, rather than the İstanbul bus, which is full of traders and therefore more likely to be taken apart at customs.

Alternatively, take it more slowly and enjoy some of eastern Turkey and western Iran along the way. By taking a bus to – but

not across – either border you'll avoid having to wait for dozens of fellow passengers to clear customs. It's usually possible to cross from Erzurum (Turkey) to Tabriz (Iran) in one day if you start early.

It takes longer in winter when high mountain passes near the border are frequently snowbound.

Train

The train from İstanbul to Tehran via Ankara and Tabriz is called the *Trans-Asia Express*. It runs weekly in either direction and, at the time of writing, trains on the 2968km journey left Tehran at 8.15pm on Thursday (IR577,300), and departed İstanbul at 10.55pm Wednesday (about €40). It takes about 70 hours and seating is in comfortable 1st-class couchettes with four berths. Check www.rajatrains.com or the Turkish railways website at www.tcdd.gov.tr for the latest timetables and prices, and www.seat61.com for trip reports. (See also p125 for train departures from Tehran.)

The *Trans-Asia Express* is two trains; an Iranian train between Tehran and Van, on the shores of Lake Van in eastern Turkey, and a Turkish train from Tatvan to Ankara and İstanbul. It's evoked some strong feelings among readers, usually relating to the concept of 'express', though complaints have been fewer in recent years. Delays are likely in winter when snow can block the tracks and low temperatures can freeze the plumbing. However, there's a distinctly romantic touch to such a long train trip, as one reader reported:

This was one of the most enjoyable trips I have made. I was the only foreigner on the train, and once this was discovered I had not nearly enough time to visit all the different compartments full of people wanting to chat (and feed me! Oh, so much food...). It is quite a spectacle to watch the (largely middle-class) female passengers switch from coats and scarves into T-shirts and hairpins as soon as you cross the border. The men, of course, fetch beer and the whole thing has a bit of a party atmosphere. I spent the days learning to sing the poems of Hafez and being pursued by the suddenly liberated single girls (Valentines apparently being in the air). All in all, a very, very interesting trip – definitely a journey.

Joshua Smyth

Readers report that although you need to pay for the whole trip even if you are planning to get off at Ankara, the ticket is valid for six months and it is possible to make a new reservation on the same ticket for a later trip to İstanbul. Food on the Turkish train has been criticised for its price and quality. When changing from the ferry to your new train the berth numbers are usually ignored, so you could just grab anything you can find.

TURKMENISTAN

There are three border posts open to foreigners along this 1206km-long frontier. From west to east, there is inconvenient and little-used Incheh Borun and Gyzył-Etrek (see the boxed text, p342), Bajgiran and Howdan (see p346) linking Mashhad and the Turkmen capital Ashgabat, and Sarakhs and Saraghs (see p366) for those heading east. You must change transport at all three crossings.

The paperwork and organisation involved in travelling to Turkmenistan is still a big hassle; the people at **Stantours** (www.stantours.com) seem to be the best at making it all go as smoothly as possible.

SEA

Iran has 2410km of coastal boundaries along the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and Caspian Sea, but there are relatively few ways to enter or leave Iran by sea.

Caspian Sea

Boats with passenger berths do cross the Caspian, but that's about as definitive as we can be. Schedules are non-existent and most travellers have neither the time, the patience nor the requisite degree of masochism to bother. If you're still keen, start sniffing around in Noshahr (p173).

Persian Gulf

The main shipping agency for trips across the Persian Gulf is Valfajre-8. Valfajre-8 operates car ferries and catamarans from Bushehr (p291), Bandar Abbas (p302) and Bandar-e Lengeh (p298) in Iran to destinations including Sharjah, Kuwait City and Bahrain. Services are not exactly frequent and not that much cheaper than flying; for departure details see www.irantravelingcenter.com/valfajr8_persian_gulf.htm.

TOURS

Many travellers visit Iran on an organised tour, a situation likely to continue as long as visas are hard to come by. Apart from the convenience, having an English-speaking guide can be worthwhile.

The following are some experienced and reputable agencies that offer organised tours to Iran from outside the country (for adventure tours, see the boxed text, p373). Note that almost all of these companies use local operators once you get to Iran. If you can live without that foreign tour leader, consider booking direct through an Iranian operator (p415).

Australia & New Zealand

Equitrek (☎ 02-9913 9408; www.equitrek.com.au)

Tailor-made horse riding tours of the northeast.

Passport Travel (☎ 03-9500 0444, www.travelcentre.com.au) Standard highlights trip, plus a more exotic tour of northwest ethnic groups.

Continental Europe

Catai Tours (www.catai.es) For Spanish speakers.

Clio (☎ 01 53 68 82 82; www.clio.fr) French operator of cultural tours.

Pars Travel (☎ 069-230882) In Frankfurt, mainly flights and some tours.

UK

Ace Study Tours (☎ 01223-835 055; study-tours.org) Ace Study provides infrequent study tours with professional lecturers.

Magic Carpet Travel (☎ 01344-622 832; www.magic-carpet-travel.com) Established, Iranian-owned operator specialising in Iran tours.

Persian Voyages (☎ 01306-885 894; www.persianvoyages.com) Iran specialist with a range of tours; Nasrin is very helpful.

USA & Canada

Americans often use organised tours as it's difficult to get a visa otherwise.

Bestway Tours & Safaris (☎ 800 663 0844; www.bestway.com) Upmarket trips, some combining nearby stars.

Distant Horizons (☎ 800 333 1240; www.distant-horizons.com) Small groups accompanied by a scholar.

Geographic Expeditions (☎ 800 777 8183; www.geosex.com) Mainly bespoke tours aimed at the upper end.

Silk Road Tours (☎ 888 881 7455; www.silkroadtours.com) Regular package and tailor-made tours.

GETTING AROUND

Most visitors are pleasantly surprised by the transport system in Iran. Once you accept that the driving is...erm...more imaginative than what you're used to at home, you'll appreciate that services on most forms of public transport are frequent, fairly punctual and very cheap. For planes and trains it's worth booking ahead if you're travelling on a weekend or any public holiday, especially No Ruz, Ramazan and Eid al-Fitr. At No Ruz bus fares usually rise by about 20%. For more information on holidays, see p383.

AIR

The days of US\$5 flights from Tehran to Esfahan are gone, but domestic air fares in Iran are still cheap; Tehran to Shiraz, for example, is just IR245,000. Happy days!

Airlines in Iran

Iran Air is the largest among a growing roster of domestic airlines and boasts an extensive network of flights, covering most provincial capitals. Domestic prices are set by the government, so it doesn't matter which airline you fly the price will be the same. Flight details are included in the relevant Getting There & Away sections throughout this book.

Of the others, Iran Aseman and Mahan Air fly the most routes, while Caspian Air-

lines, Kish Air and Taban Air have fewer. For website details, see p400. Generally speaking, Iran Air is the most reliable, but whichever airline you choose you stand a good chance of being delayed. On this trip all three domestic flights we took were delayed by more than an hour. Despite this, it's worth trying to get to the airport a good hour ahead of domestic departures (just in case it leaves on time).

Except for Iran Air, which has unnecessarily large offices across the country, airline offices can be hard to find. It's much easier to visit one of Iran's thousands of travel agencies, which can book you onto any airline. When making a booking, check the aircraft type and avoid, wherever possible, the clunking old Tupolevs still struggling through Iran's skies.

Booking domestic flights from outside Iran can be difficult in some places and nigh-on impossible if the flight is on a smaller airline. None of the airlines yet do online bookings. However, some readers report it's possible to book domestic flights by calling an Iran Air office outside Iran. They give you a booking reference which you take to an Iran Air office in Iran or to Tehran domestic terminal...you pay for it then.

BICYCLE

Excellent roads, friendly people and a relatively small risk of theft mean Iran sounds like an ideal cycling destination. And indeed, there are usually one or two travellers pedalling across the country and reporting a fantastic experience full of selfless hospitality. It's not, however, all easy. Vast distances, dodgy traffic and hot, tedious stretches of desert road – not to mention seasonal winds – can get tiring. You'll need to carry plenty of water and food to last the long desert stretches, camping equipment if you are not sticking to major towns, a decent map, and a phrasebook.

If you arrive in a village or small town and find either nowhere to stay or only a hotel you can't afford – and if you can't persuade the caretaker at the local mosque to take you in – you might have to load your bike on a bus or truck and head for the next big town.

The biggest drawback with cycling, as with most other activities in Iran, is the

need to stay covered up. We have received varying reports from travellers: some say that it's fine to wear cycling gear when actually on the road, as long as you have clothes at hand to cover up as soon as you stop; others say that women in particular must be covered at all times.

Spare parts can be hard to find and there is nowhere to rent bicycles for long distances, so bring your own.

BOAT

The only places you're likely to use a boat are between the mainland and some islands in the Persian Gulf (see p287).

BUS

In Iran, if you can't get somewhere by bus (or minibus), the chances are no-one wants to go there. More than 20 *taavonis* (bus companies) offer hundreds of services all over the country, so business is highly competitive, fares cheap and, on busier routes, departures are frequent. Most buses are comfortable, with your own cushioned seat and, except on very short trips, standing is not allowed. Fares don't vary much between companies, but they do vary between classes of bus – see One Habitat, Two Species: Mahmooly or Volvo? (p408).

Don't be confused by the names of the destinations on a bus. It's common for a bus travelling between, for example, Khorramabad and Ahvaz, to have 'Tehran-Istanbul' written on the front or side in English. Similarly, phrases like 'Lovely bus' are not

always a fair reflection of reality. There are no bus passes.

Bus Companies

Most bus companies are cooperatives and until recently they were referred to simply as Cooperative Bus Company No X (Sherkat-e Ta'avoni Shomare X), or whatever number it is. In recent years most have taken on more varied names, but in the terminal they'll still direct you to, for example, 'ta'avoni hasht' (cooperative number 8). The best *ta'avonis*, with the most extensive network of services, are TBT (Taavoni 15) and Iran Peyma (often with the word 'Ta'avoni' or 'Bus No One' written on it).

For a bit more comfort Seiro Safar and Hamsafar offer newer, better buses for a little more, though most travellers don't bother seeking out a specific company and just take whichever is the next bus going their way. The exception is with bus types – see the boxed text (p408).

Bus Terminals

Most bus terminals are located at the edge of town and are easy to reach by shuttle or private taxi, less so by local bus. In some cities there's more than one bus terminal; if in doubt, ask at your hotel or charter a taxi to the relevant terminal. Tell the driver 'terminal-e' (your destination) and he'll know where to drop you – pronounce 'terminal' with a prolonged 'aal' at the end.

Bus terminals are filled with the offices of individual bus companies, though

CHECKPOINTS

If you're travelling to or from the Pakistan or Afghan borders, or from Bandar Abbas, you're likely to have to stop at checkpoints designed to catch smugglers. In some cases a customs official or policeman will get onto the bus and walk up and down, presumably looking for obvious smugglers or 'illegal aliens', before waving the bus on. However, searches can be much more thorough and time consuming.

Taking the bus from Zahedan to Bam we witnessed both the reasons for and effect of such searches. Each of our bags had our ticket number written onto it, just in case we tried to deny it later on. Then we had to wait an hour before we departed while a couple of men, clearly with the understanding of the bus staff, used a knife to pry open the underneath of several seats and stuff contraband within. At the checkpoint, after waiting an hour while other buses were searched, we got off the bus and, like everyone else, took all our luggage to a nearby table. The officers didn't pay too close attention to our bags once they realised we were travellers, but they did spend 45 minutes opening and searching everything else on the bus, as well as sniffing around inside. Apparently they didn't find whatever had been secreted inside the seats, as the grinning smugglers retrieved it soon after we moved on.

timetables are rarely in English. Just ask 'Shiraz?', 'Esfahan?' or wherever and you'll be directed to the right desk, or listen for your destination being screamed out when a bus is about to leave. When you hear that a bus is 'leaving now', 'now' can be defined as sometime within the next 45 minutes or so.

Terminals always have somewhere to buy food, and some larger terminals have a post office, police station, left-luggage facilities and maybe even a hotel. The information desks are basically useless; as the woman working behind the desk at one Tehran terminal told us with a frustrated shake of her head: 'We'd like to be able to help, but the companies never give us their timetables, so we can't'.

If you're leaving a junction town, such as Zanjan or Kashan, you may need to flag down a passing bus on the road instead of going to the terminal. Position yourself near enough to the passing traffic that you can shout out your destination without being run over – a combination that is not as simple as it sounds. Roadblocks, roundabouts, service stations and junctions are the best places to hail passing buses – locals will point you to the right place.

Costs

Mahmooly buses usually cost a bit more than half what a Volvo costs. For example,

the 1024km trip from Tehran to Kerman costs IR52,000/90,000 by *mahmooly*/Volvo, while the 440km journey between Tehran and Esfahan costs about IR23,000/50,000. Either way, it's cheap, though expect prices in this book to rise steadily.

Reservations

It's possible to buy tickets up to a week in advance, except at No Ruz when most people don't bother. Between major cities, such as Esfahan and Tehran, buses leave at least every half-hour between about 5am and 1am. In medium-sized towns, such as Hamadan and Kerman, buses to nearer locations leave every hour or so, but longer trips (and any cross-desert trip) will often be overnight. In smaller places, where there may be only one or two buses a day to your destination, it is essential to book ahead.

There are often no-shows for bus trips, so seats can magically appear on otherwise full buses just before departure. Alternatively, you might be offered the back seat. If you're desperate, then looking like it, plus helpless and lost, usually helps.

Tickets are almost always in Farsi, so learn the Arabic numbers to check the day of departure, time of departure, bus number, seat number, platform number and fare. If it's incomprehensible someone at the terminal, should point you in the right direction.

ONE HABITAT, TWO SPECIES: MAHMOOLY & VOLVO

Iran's roads are home to two main species of bus, the *mahmooly* (mercedes antiquus) and the Volvo (bus invita Minerva). Both enjoy a wide range of habitats, happy to roam relentlessly across deserts or forage through remote mountain roads in search of prey, known as passengers. They are seldom seen without an accompanying crew of three Iranian men (quem pilosus). But while the *mahmooly* and Volvo coexist fairly peacefully within the bus kingdom, they do boast some important differences.

Mahmooly

Apart from the odd throwback, *mahmooly* (or 'normal' in Farsi) buses share a common gene stock that can be traced back to the Mercedes family in Germany. Herded by salesmen, they began an epic migration during the 1960s and within two decades had come to dominate the Iranian roadscape. They were celebrated for their beauty and comfort, notably their curvaceous bodies, colourful hides, generous legroom and large windows. And while some remain in rude health even into their 40s, with working air-conditioning and carefully groomed curtains, the herd as a whole is in decline. By the late 1990s, the *mahmooly* had slowed so much that it began to be replaced, particularly on longer journeys, by new predators that came thundering in from far-off Scandinavia....

The Journey

Don't count on averaging more than 60km/h on most bus journeys. Buses often arrive in a town in the early hours of the morning, which can be a hassle. On most trips of more than three hours you'll stop at roadside restaurants serving cheap food. Ice-cold water is normally available on the bus and is safe to drink. Every two hours or so the driver will stop to have his tachograph checked by the police as a precaution against speeding. If it's summer, try to get a seat on the side facing away from the sun.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

A small but steady stream of travellers take vehicles across Iran as part of a trip between Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Most report the country driving is great and the city driving is not. If you're considering an overland journey check out www.africa-overland.net/asia-overland, or www.horizonsunlimited.com.

Iranian roads can be dangerous; see p98 for the shocking figures.

Bringing Your Own Vehicle

If you are driving your own vehicle, you should always slow down and get ready to stop at roadblocks. Usually if you wind down your window, smile nicely, and give the officials your best 'I-don't-know-what-to-do-and-I-don't-speak-Farsi' look, you

will be waved straight through. At worst you'll have to show your passport, licence and vehicle documents, and if your papers are in order you shouldn't have any hassles.

Keep to the main roads near the Pakistan, Iraq or Afghanistan borders to steer clear of suspicious drug smugglers or equally suspicious customs and police officials. Be sure to find a hotel with safe parking when in the southeast, where your vehicle might be stolen, stripped, driven across the border of Afghanistan or Pakistan and bought by a drug smuggler, before you've finished your plate of kabab. Of course, ensure there is sufficient height clearance before checking in; most places marked with a parking symbol in this book have enough clearance for 4WDs.

Driving Licence

To drive in Iran you need an international driving licence. Get one from the national automobile association in your home country.

Fuel & Spare Parts

For Iranians the price of fuel is always a hot topic (see Inflation, Rising Prices & You, p25). For you, however, if you use diesel it's likely to be the source of incredulity and, let's face it, unbridled joy. That's because diesel costs a whopping IR165L (that's

Volvo

The first of these was the Volvo. Bigger, faster and with a respiratory system evolved to breathe ice-cold air more reliably, Iranian passengers were soon lining up to roam with the Volvo even though it cost almost twice as much to do so. Volvo herders learnt new hunting techniques, luring passengers with boiled lollies, packaged cakes, biscuits, a steady stream of Zam Zam (soft drink) and deafeningly loud Bollywood movies.

Seeing the success of the Volvo, other European sub-species began to appear in the Iranian habitat. MAN, Scania and similar boxy European breeds rolled in, and Iranians began calling these sub-species different names depending on their age and location. Some older buses, their air-conditioners no-longer working and their engines weak with age, are called 'lux', or 'super-lux', and cost slightly less to roam with, while in some areas newer Volvos are called 'super', an apparent reference to the awe in which they are held. In this book, we refer to all new buses, be they Volvo, MAN, Scania or even some exotic Korean breeds, as Volvos. Passengers unsure of which herd to saddle up with should consider these points. Seats in *mahmooly* buses are usually just as comfortable as those in Volvos, are cheap enough you can buy two for the price of one Volvo seat, and the air-con usually works. Speed and cost are the real differences, as was illustrated during a migration from Shiraz to Tehran. We ranged with a Volvo while a fellow traveller chose a *mahmooly*, telling us 'there's really not that much difference – save the money'. Alas, his *mahmooly* took 19 hours, our Volvo 12½.

about €0.01), meaning you can fill up and get change out of a euro. Happy days! However, the price of petrol has recently taken a steep hike, though it remains very reasonable; see What Fuel Cards Mean For You (opposite).

Once you're on the road, you'll find large towns at least every 100km except in the remote deserts of eastern Iran. But *benzin* (petrol) stations can be hard to find, so it's worth keeping your tanks topped up. Not all stations sell diesel and there is usually nothing written on the pump to differentiate it from *benzin* – be sure to ask. Readers have complained that while fuel is dirt cheap it can also be just plain dirty – especially near the Pakistan border – so don't expect the same mileage as you would at home. More problematic, though, are the eternal shortages and long queues in towns within 100km or so of a border, where well-organised smuggling operations leave little for locals. Somewhat ironically, Iranian motor oil can also be of dubious quality. International brands are safer.

Even the tiniest settlements have repair shops. The price for repair work is open to negotiation but you might not have much say over the quality of the spare parts – unless you're driving a Paykan or Pride. In the height of summer, scalding heat makes tyre blowouts fairly common.

Hire

The concept of car rental barely exists in Iran, not least because without a functioning system for accepting credit cards it's hard for anyone leasing a car to be sure they can make good any damage. Instead, 'car rental' here means chartering a taxi, either privately or through a travel agency. Local drivers-cum-guides are mentioned throughout this guide.

Insurance

Your vehicle will need a *carnet de passage* and a green card, both of which you should organise before you arrive. It's possible to get into Iran without a green card from Pakistan, but getting into Turkey can then be problematic.

Road Distances (km)

Ahvaz	---																				
Ardabil	1310	---																			
Bandar Abbas	1280	1930	---																		
Bushehr	490	1610	930	---																	
Esfahan	750	1030	960	580	---																
Gorgan	1270	770	1730	1630	840	---															
Hamadan	640	670	1420	1050	470	730	---														
Kerman	1230	1630	490	880	660	1440	1130	---													
Kermanshah	490	790	1770	970	650	920	190	1290	---												
Khorramabad	380	930	1330	860	370	900	260	1030	320	---											
Mashhad	1770	1330	1380	1650	1220	570	1230	890	1420	1390	---										
Orumiyyeh	1060	530	2030	1550	1070	1300	610	1740	580	870	1800	---									
Qazvin	880	480	1650	1360	560	530	230	1220	420	490	1080	770	---								
Rasht	1040	270	1660	1520	760	500	400	1360	590	670	1070	800	170	---							
Shiraz	660	1520	620	300	490	1320	950	570	1110	860	1380	1320	1050	1250	---						
Tabriz	1080	220	1930	1560	1040	1000	610	1640	590	880	1500	310	480	490	1530	---					
Tehran	870	590	1330	1230	440	400	340	1040	530	500	890	910	150	330	930	600	---				
Yazd	1080	1270	660	730	300	1080	730	360	950	670	920	1380	830	1000	450	1280	680	---			
Zahedan	1760	2160	740	1400	1190	1520	1660	530	1820	1560	950	2270	1760	1900	1100	2170	1570	890	---		
Zanjan	970	380	1650	1340	760	720	330	1360	420	590	1210	590	180	350	1240	280	320	1000	1890		

	Ahvaz	Ardabil	Bandar Abbas	Bushehr	Esfahan	Gorgan	Hamadan	Kerman	Kermanshah	Khorramabad	Mashhad	Orumiyyeh	Qazvin	Rasht	Shiraz	Tabriz	Tehran	Yazd	Zahedan
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WHAT FUEL CARDS MEAN FOR YOU

After years of multi-billion dollar government subsidies and much debate, Iran's state-regulated and ridiculously low *benzin* (petrol) prices were finally raised in mid 2007. The price hike is tied to a new rationing system, by which drivers are entitled to a per-day quota. The quota depends on whether the vehicle is used for private or commercial use. The whole system is underpinned by an ambitious system by which every vehicle owner is issued a ration card, which is swiped through a machine to record the date and quantity of every litre bought. At the time of writing, motorcycles were allowed the equivalent of 1L per day, standard cars 4L a day and taxis about 20L a day. So what does this mean if you're driving your own vehicle in Iran?

Diesel

If you use diesel then start cheering now! Prices are fixed and are not subject to rationing, so you can buy diesel across the country for IR165 a litre. Diesel stations can be hard to find, but you'll know one when you find it by the long line of trucks parked outside.

Benzin (Petrol/Gasoline)

In theory, without a ration card you can't buy *benzin*. After much initial confusion, foreigners can now buy ration cards for 100L (IR500,000) or 300L (IR1,500,000) at the National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (usually called NIOPDC) office in each major town. Yes, that's five times what Iranians have to pay. Present the card at the *benzin* station and pay an additional IR1000 for each litre you buy (that's so the station gets the local rate).

Okay, so where do I get a card? Coming from Turkey, the NIOPDC office in Maku (at 39° 17'06.43" N, 44° 32'20.47" E) is the place to go. Take your ownership documents. Elsewhere you'll have to ask for the local NIOPDC office; this system was introduced after we researched so they're not marked on our maps. Overlanders who have travelled with this system report that in larger cities, especially Tehran, it's very difficult to buy petrol without the card. However, a thriving black market operates elsewhere, which you'll probably need to use to avoid running your card dry.

Iranians pay IR1000 per litre for their rationed amount, and can then buy extra for IR3000 a litre – still half of what foreigners must pay. The result is a black market where *benzin* sells for between IR3000 and IR4000 a litre, except near borders where it can be three times that much. The sellers will be petrol station owners, other drivers (usually taxi drivers because of their larger ration) and even, according to one driver, the police themselves. Going to a *benzin* station and looking lost seems to be the best method. If this sounds like a big hassle, then the good news is that you're in Iran...if you run out of gas, some random, kind-hearted Iranian is guaranteed to help out.

Road Conditions

Road surfaces are generally excellent. On the other hand, driving at night is more dangerous because of occasional unmarked potholes and the risk of running into tractors and other vehicles crawling along the road with no lights. On intercity roads most signs are in English and Farsi, including directions to most cities, towns and villages. Within cities, street signs vary between non-existent (quite rare these days) and thorough to the point of telling you when a street is a dead end!

Road Hazards

Iranian drivers in the cities. Camels in the deserts. Unmarked speed bumps everywhere. The last are both highly annoying and dangerous, and you'll often be completely

unaware they exist until your car suddenly lurches and jumps as you launch over the bump. Such speed bumps are often at the edge of towns, so watch for brake lights ahead.

If you're in an accident the Iranian involved will probably call the local traffic police. If you're alone, call the emergency number – ☎ 110 for police, ☎ 115 for ambulance. You should never move the vehicle from the road until the police have come to make their report. As a foreigner, you'll probably be held responsible.

Road Rules

Lanes? What are they? Driving across Iran is not a task to be taken lightly. In theory, the rule is that everyone drives on the right,

but this can't be depended upon; faced with a one-way street going the wrong way, the average Iranian driver sees nothing wrong with reversing down it. In theory, you give way to the traffic coming onto a roundabout, though this seems a tad unimportant when some drivers simply drive the wrong way around it. Take 10 Iranian car drivers and an otherwise deserted open road and you can be sure that all 10 will form a convoy so tightly packed that each of the rear nine can read the speedometer of the car in front. The phrase 'optimum braking distance' is not widely understood in Iran.

However, take comfort in the knowledge that Iranian drivers are almost unfeignably adept at avoiding accidents, and most foreign drivers make it across Iran without too much trouble.

HITCHING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. However, many people do choose to hitch, and the advice that follows should help to make their journeys as fast and safe as possible. Women, however, should never hitch in Iran.

Hitching, as understood in the West, is a novel concept in Iran. Although you will often see people standing by the roadside waiting for a lift, they are actually waiting for space in a bus, minibus or shared taxi, for which they expect to pay. Occasionally drivers will offer foreigners a free ride in return for English practice or out of simple hospitality. Like anywhere, you're most likely to find rides in more remote areas. We heard of one traveller who hitched the Howraman valley with his 12-year-old son, and loved it. And as we found hitching through the Dasht-e Lut, host drivers will be typically generous; ours bought us food, shared their smoke, even tracked down some rocket fuel in a tiny desert town because they thought we wanted it, and refused all attempts to pay them. In such a case it's nice to have something small to thank them with.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Bus

Most Iranian towns and cities have local bus services. Because local buses are often

crowded and can be difficult to use unless you know exactly where you're going, most travellers use the ubiquitous shared and private taxis instead.

Bus numbers and destinations are usually only marked in Farsi, so you need to do a lot of asking around – most people will be happy to help (even if you don't entirely understand their reply). Except in Shiraz and on one new private operator in Tehran, tickets must be bought at little booths along main streets, or at local bus terminals, before you get on the bus. Tickets on state-run buses cost between IR100 and IR500. Private companies cost a bit more.

Small children of both genders and all women have to sit at the back of the bus. This segregation can be complicated if you are travelling as a mixed couple and need to discuss when to get off. You must give your ticket to the driver either before you get on or after you get off, depending on the local system. Women must pass their tickets to the driver while leaning through the front door of the bus and then board the bus using the back door.

Metro

Metros are the great hope for Iranian cities slowly being strangled by traffic. The Tehran Metro (p127) is growing and similar systems are being built in Mashhad (p363), Shiraz (p279) and Esfahan (p232); the first two of which should, *insh'Allah* (god willing), be operational during the life of this book.

Minibus

If you think using local buses is a hassle, don't even bother trying to use the infrequent and desperately crowded minibuses. Quite often they are so crammed with passengers that you can't see out to tell where you're going. You normally pay in cash when you get on – about IR1000 a ticket depending on the distance. Men and women get a seat anywhere they can; there is no room for segregation. Minibuses stop at normal bus stops or wherever you ask them.

Taxi

A shared or private taxi is the quickest and most hassle-free way of getting around a town or city, unless there's a Metro going your way.

IS THIS SEAT FREE?

Choosing where to sit on Iranian transport is fraught with difficulty. On city buses, even married couples must sit separately; men at the front of the bus, women at the back.

In contrast, on intercity buses and minibuses, seating is generally arranged so that women sit next to women and men next to men, unless they're couples or family. A woman is not expected to sit next to an unrelated man even if there's only one spare seat left on the bus, and people will move around until the gender mix is right.

If you decide to take a shared taxi you will find people hopping in and out of the front and back like yo-yos in an attempt to ensure that unrelated men and women don't end up side by side. Despite this, often it's impossible to arrange and you'll end up sitting next to someone of the opposite sex without anyone getting too upset. On the Tehran Metro women have the option of the women's only carriage or squeezing in with the men. And on sleeper trains you might find yourself in a mixed compartment if you don't specify that you want a single-sex compartment.

SHUTTLE (SHARED) TAXI

In most towns and cities, shared or shuttle taxis duplicate or even replace local bus services. They usually take up to five passengers: two in the front passenger seat and three in the back. Until recently shared taxis were always Paykans (see the boxed text, p414), often coloured orange, or with a dash of orange somewhere. But these are slowly being replaced by smaller Kia Prides (or similar). Either way, after a while you will get used to using shuttle taxis, especially if you try them out somewhere other than Tehran first.

Shuttle taxis travel between major *meydans* (squares) and along main roads, so the key to using them is to learn the names of the *meydans* along your intended route. They sometimes make slight detours for passengers at no extra charge; for a longer detour, you may be charged IR500 or IR1000 extra. You'll usually find them outside bus terminals, train stations, airports and near major *meydans*, or you can hail one on the street.

There is a certain art to finding a shuttle taxi going your way. Start by stepping onto the road far enough for the driver to hear you shout your destination, but close enough to the kerb to dash back in the face of hurtling traffic. If the driver has a spare seat, he will slow down for a nanosecond while you shout your one-word destination – usually the name of a *meydan*. If he's going your way he'll stop.

When you want to get out simply say *kheili mamnun* (thank you very much) or make any other obvious noise. Drivers appreciate exact change, so try and keep

plenty of those filthy IR500 and IR1000 notes handy; you normally pay when you get out.

Fares, which are fixed by the government, range from about IR500 for the shortest trip to IR5000 for long trips in Tehran, depending on the distance and the city (Tehran's fares are naturally the most expensive). Try and see what other passengers are paying before you hand over your money, though most drivers are straight enough.

If you get into an empty shuttle taxi, particularly in Esfahan and Tehran, it might be assumed you want to charter it privately. Similarly, if everyone else gets out the driver might decide you are now a private fare. Clarify what you want by saying *dar baste* (closed door) or *nah dar baste* (for details, see below).

PRIVATE TAXI

Any taxi without passengers, whether obviously a shared taxi or a more expensive private taxi (usually yellow), can be chartered to go anywhere in town; an act usually called 'service' or 'agence'. Unless it's a

NAH DAR BASTE!

If you hail an empty taxi the driver will probably think you want to hire it privately. He might ask you: '*Dar baste?*', which literally means 'Closed door?', or perhaps '*agence?*' If you want to share, then make your intentions clear by leaning in and telling him simply '*Nah dar baste*', or 'No closed door'. He'll soon let you know if he's interested or not.

THE PERENNIAL PAYKAN

For more than 35 years the Paykan was almost the only car you'd see on Iranian roads. The Paykan (which means Arrow – don't laugh) is a replica of the 1966 Hillman Hunter, an uninspiring vehicle if ever there was one. But it was exactly the sort of cheap, no-frills car Iran needed when it was first sold there in the late 1960s. The boxy white Paykan, the very definition of utilitarian, went on to dominate the roadscape more than any other car since the Model-T Ford. Indeed, it became so well loved that in the years before production was finally stopped in 2005 there was a two-year waiting list to get one.

But while Iranians respect the Paykan's ability to get the job done – just – they are also aware of its diabolical impact on the environment. The Paykan burns, on average, between 12L and 15L of leaded petrol per 100km. That is at least double the exhaust most modern cars pump out, and with no catalytic converter, the poisons are even greater. So bad that, according to reports, the Iranian government actually paid Iran Khodro to shut the factory. Still, with more than two million Paykans on Iran's roads (more than 40% of all vehicles) they'll be around for decades yet. And if reports are to be believed, the Paykan will live on in Africa, where the production line has been sold to a Sudanese company.

complicated deal, including waiting time, simply hail the vehicle, tell the driver where you want to go, and ask 'chand toman?' Immediately offer about 60% of what he suggests but expect to end up paying about 75% or 80% of the originally quoted price. Taxi drivers are probably the most likely people in Iran to try to rip you off, but the prices are still pretty reasonable.

AGENCY TAXI

Agency taxis, also known as 'telephone' taxis, don't normally stop to pick up passengers; you have to order them by telephone or at an agency office. There are agency-taxi offices in even the smallest towns and hundreds of them in Tehran. Some of the top hotels run their own taxi services, and any hotel or *mosafekhaneh* (lodging house) can order a taxi for a guest. Naturally, this is the most expensive way of using taxis, but you get a better car, the comfort of knowing there will be someone to complain to if anything goes wrong and, possibly, a driver who speaks English. One reader wrote to say that lone women are advised to get someone to call them a taxi if they're travelling after dark, thus avoiding being hooted at or ignored by dozens of drivers as they try to hail one. Demand is such that Tehran now has a women-only taxi company (p129) – female drivers, female passengers, no groping.

MINIBUS

Minibuses are often used for shorter distances linking larger cities and towns to

surrounding villages. Sometimes they're an alternative to the bus, but usually there's no choice; just take whatever is going your way. Minibuses are particularly popular along the Caspian Sea coast, and between Caspian towns and Tehran.

Minibuses are marginally more expensive than buses, but not enough to worry about. They are often faster than larger buses and because they have fewer passengers they spend less time dropping off and picking up. On the downside, they're not at all comfortable and usually leave only when they're full, which can mean a long wait.

Minibuses sometimes leave from a special terminal and sometimes from the main bus terminal. If in doubt, just charter a taxi and tell the driver you want to go to the terminal-e Rasht, Tehran or wherever. Arriving in a town, they have an annoying habit of depositing you in the middle of nowhere. Luckily, hopeful taxi drivers will probably be waiting.

PRIVATE TAXI

Almost every single taxi in the country is available for private hire. Needless to say, prices are open to negotiation. One excellent way to avoid getting ripped off is to ask the driver of a savari (see opposite) for the price per person of a certain trip then multiply it by four or five.

If you prefer to hire the taxi and driver for the whole day you are looking at somewhere between about IR150,000 and IR500,000 – depending on a long list of fac-

tors, including your ability as a negotiator, the quality of the car, the distance you plan to drive and where you are. The smaller the town, the cheaper the price. Some drivers charge by the kilometre, with IR800 being the usual rate.

SAVARI (SHARED TAXI)

You can almost always find a savari for a trip between towns less than three hours apart. Savari means 'shared taxi' and is usually applied to intercity versions of the species. Speed is the main advantage because savaris are generally less comfortable than buses. Sometimes two people will be expected to squeeze into the front passenger seat, though for longer journeys four passengers all up is the norm.

Savaris rarely leave with an empty seat unless a passenger (or all passengers) agrees to pay for it. These days most savaris are Kia Prides (or the rebadged Saipa Saba) and bigger Peugeot 404s, though there are still plenty of Paykans around. Peugeots usually cost a bit more.

As a general rule, savaris cost about three times more than *mahmooly* buses. This is still cheap and worth using for quick trips, especially through dull stretches of countryside. As usual, lone women will normally be given the front seat.

Savaris usually leave from inside, or just outside, the relevant bus terminal, or at major squares at the beginning of whichever road they're about to head down. If in doubt, charter a private taxi and tell the driver 'savari' and your destination.

TOURS

Most organised tours start and finish in Tehran, with a quick look around the capital before concentrating on the must-sees: Shiraz, Esfahan and Yazd, with either Tabriz or Mashhad, or possibly Kerman and Rayen, thrown in.

The handful of Iranian travel companies listed here have been recommended by readers. Most offer standard itineraries plus something different, and can organise tailor-made trips to suit particular interests. They can help with visas if you give enough notice. Guides who speak English, French, German, Japanese and sometimes Spanish or Italian can be arranged. Costs depend on the length of the tour, the mode

of transport, the type of accommodation and the current exchange rate. Expect to pay in dollars or euros.

These companies often act as local handlers for foreign-based agencies selling tours to Iran, so booking direct should give you the same tour (without the foreign tour leader) for significantly less than foreign agencies charge. Feedback on these or other operators is welcome and will help us keep this list as helpful as possible; see www.lonelyplanet.com/contact. See also the boxed text (p373) for specialist adventure agencies.

Abgin Cultural Tours of Persia (☎ 021-2235 9272; www.abgintours.com) Based in Tehran; offers wide range of fixed tours plus flexible, personalised trips. Great feedback from travellers.

Adibian Travel Agency (Map p354; ☎ 0511-859 8151; www.adibiantours.com; 56 Pasdaran Ave, Mashhad) Long-established agency specialising in Khorasan province, but able to arrange tours across Iran.

Aftab Kalout Eco-Tour (☎ 021-6648 8374/5, 0912 612 3768; www.kalout.com) Eco- and adventure-tour specialists, particularly desert tours. Based in Tehran.

Arg-e-Jadid (Map p110; ☎ 021-8883 3583; www.atc.ir; 296 Motahhari Ave, Tehran) Large organisation with lots of tour options; mixed reports on guides.

Caravan Sahara (Map p110; ☎ 021-8881 1970; www.caravansahra.com; Caravan Sahara Bldg, 29 Qaem Maqam-e Farahani Ave, Tehran) Big group with a big range of tours.

Pars Tourist Agency (Map p268; ☎ 0711-222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd, Shiraz) Highly professional, well-organised outfit dealing purely with foreign travellers. Has literally dozens of tour options, from high-lights through cultural to mountaineering. Offer free online chat consultations in English, German and French.

Freelance guides can be found in most cities around the country. Some are mentioned in relevant chapters, and these few have been highly recommended.

Ali Taheri (☎ 4443 1105, 0912 134 9345; www.iran-tehrantourist.com) Tehran-based driver and guide with his own car.

Arash Sadeghzadeh (☎ 0917 317 1652; travellingtoiran@gmail.com) Young Shiraz-based guide with deep knowledge of and enthusiasm for Iranian history.

Gholamreza Shahdadian (☎ 0912 121 3969; www.wguides.net/g_shahdadian) Experienced guide based in Tehran and specialising in tours to the northeast and the southern deserts.

Mohsen Hajisaed (☎ 0913 351 4460; yazdguide@yahoo.com) Young, well-organised and connected guide based in Yazd.

TRAIN

Travelling by train is an inexpensive way to get around Iran and meet Iranians, many of whom approach their rare rail trips with some excitement.

Iran's first line was the trans-Iranian railway, built in the 1930s to connect the Caspian Sea at Bandar-e Torkaman with the Persian Gulf at Bandar-e Imam Khomeini. Passing through mountains and passes, it is one of the great engineering achievements of the 20th century. It will soon be joined by other engineering marvels. First among them is the track between Esfahan and Shiraz, which will quite literally bore its way through the Spartan mountainscapes of the Zagros as it links these two historic cities.

The line is part of an ambitious program to expand Iran's rail network. Recently completed lines include Qazvin to Astara via Rasht and Mashhad to Bafq. The long-awaited Bam to Zahedan (see the boxed text, p404) stretch is set to open late 2008, and other lines either being built or proposed by Raja Trains, the national rail network, include Arak to Kermanshah and Khoramshahr to Basra, in Iraq.

Tehran is the main hub and most services begin or end in the capital. There is at least one daily service to Mashhad, Esfahan, Tabriz, Bandar Abbas and Kerman. Trains usually depart on time, but departure and arrival times for stops en route are often in the middle of the night. For the latest routes and prices, see www.rajatrails.com.

The average age of passenger carriages is 26 years but they're still fairly comfortable, efficient, reasonably fast and always cheap. For overnight trips a 1st-class sleeper is a delight, and while they cost a bit more than a Volvo bus, the comfort level is about 10 times greater. And, of course, trains are much safer than buses.

On most 1st-class services meals are served in your compartment and aren't too

bad. Long-distance trains also have a restaurant car, and iced water is available. Security is better than in most other countries in the region, but it's worth asking someone to look after your luggage (or chaining it to something solid) before leaving your compartment.

Classes

The majority of trains have two classes, though a significant minority have only one. If you decide a 2nd-class compartment is too crowded for you, you can often upgrade to 1st class along the way, provided there's space.

On overnight trains (usually to/from Tehran) the 1st-class carriages have sleepers with four or six bunks. They are not all sexually segregated and one reader wrote to complain of having a man in another bunk stroking her arm in the night; women might want to ask specifically for a single-sex sleeper. Some trains on the Tehran to Mashhad route, Iran's busiest, are very comfortable indeed. The *Simorgh*, for example, is more expensive than other 1st-class options but includes dinner, breakfast, a very comfortable bed and the mixed blessing of a TV. You can ask to be seated in a non-smoking compartment.

Costs

As a rough guide, a seat in 2nd class costs about the same as a *mahmooly* bus, and a 1st-class seat is about 1½ times the price of a Volvo bus, depending on the class of train; see www.rajatrails.com for specifics.

Reservations

Train ticketing is on an integrated system, so you can book tickets at stations and travel agencies around the country up to a month in advance. Especially for trains leaving on Thursday, Friday and public holidays, it's worth booking ahead.

Health

CONTENTS

Before You Go	417
Insurance	417
Recommended Vaccinations	417
Medical Checklist	418
Internet Resources	418
Further Reading	418
In Transit	418
Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)	418
Jet Lag & Motion Sickness	418
In Iran	419
Availability & Cost of Health Care	419
Infectious Diseases	420
Traveller's Diarrhoea	420
Environmental Hazards	420
Travelling With Children	421
Women's Health	421

Due in part to its dryness and relative isolation, your chances of getting seriously ill with a virus or other infectious disease in Iran are fairly small. The most common reason for travellers needing medical help is as a result of accidents – the quality of Iranian cars and, more to the point, Iranian driving is dangerously low. If you are unfortunate enough to need a hospital, the good news is that Iran is home to some of the best in the Middle East. Many doctors have been trained in Europe or North America and, especially in the larger cities, you shouldn't have too much trouble finding one who speaks English. In remoter areas, medical facilities are more basic.

BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save you a lot of trouble later. See your dentist before a long trip; carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you); and carry a first-aid kit.

It's tempting to leave it all to the last minute – don't! Many vaccines don't ensure immunity for two weeks, so visit a doctor

four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. While yellow fever is not a problem in Iran, if you're arriving from a country where it is a problem you might be asked to show proof of yellow fever vaccination before you're allowed in.

Travellers can register with the International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers (IAMAT; www.iamat.org). Its website can help travellers to find a doctor with recognised training. Those heading off to very remote areas may like to do a first-aid course (Red Cross and St John Ambulance can help), or attend a remote medicine first-aid course such as that offered by the Royal Geographical Society (www.rgs.org).

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 documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures (in many countries doctors expect payment in cash); it's also worth ensuring your travel insurance will cover repatriation home or to better medical facilities elsewhere. Your insurance company might be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, but it's probably faster to ask your hotel or, in an emergency, call your embassy or consulate. Travel insurance usually covers emergency dental treatment. Not all insurance covers emergency aeromedical evacuation home or to a hospital in a major city, which may be the only way to get medical attention for a serious emergency.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization recommends that all travellers regardless of

the region they are travelling in should be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as hepatitis B. While making preparations to travel, take the opportunity to ensure that all of your routine vaccination cover is complete. However, in Iran outbreaks are rare.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

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

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

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. The World Health Organization (www.who.int/ith) publishes a superb book, *International Travel and Health*,

TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available.

Australia (www.dfat.gov.au/travel)

Canada (www.travelhealth.gc.ca)

UK (www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice)

USA (www.cdc.gov/travel)

which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. MD Travel Health (www.mdtravelhealth.com) provides complete travel health recommendations for every country, updated daily and free. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website (www.cdc.gov) is also useful.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Travel With Children* 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 *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood (Oxford University Press), *International Travel Health Guide* by Stuart R. Rose, MD (Travel Medicine Inc) and *The Travellers' Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester (Sheldon Press).

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 blood 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 of the foot, ankle, or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and breathing difficulty. If this happens to you seek medical attention. To prevent DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust

your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) 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 some people swear by.

IN IRAN

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

There are few, if any, reciprocal medical arrangements between Iran and other countries so be prepared to pay for all your medical and dental treatment. The good news is that costs are negligible. The quality of hospitals varies from place to place, but in Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz, in particular, you'll find international-standard hospitals and well-trained doctors.

But, seriously, medical care is not always readily available outside major cities. Medicine, and even sterile dressings or intravenous fluids, may need to be bought from a local pharmacy. Nursing care may be limited or rudimentary as this is something families and friends are expected to provide. The travel assistance provided by your insurance may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, otherwise ask at your hotel. In an emergency contact your embassy or consulate.

Standards of dental care are variable and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. Travel insurance usually only covers emergency dental treatment.

For minor illnesses such as diarrhoea, pharmacists can often provide advice and sell over-the-counter medication. They can also advise when more specialised help is needed.

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 the local population in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an

injection alone, or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice and, although it is rarely fatal, can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. Symptoms include dark urine, a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes, fever and abdominal pain. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is given as an injection: a single dose will give protection for up to a year while a booster 12 months later will provide a subsequent 10 years of protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine, heptyrix or viatim.

Hepatitis B

Infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse can all transmit hepatitis B. It can cause jaundice, and affects the liver, occasionally causing liver failure. All travellers should make this a routine vaccination. (Many countries now give hepatitis B vaccination as part of routine childhood vaccination.) The vaccine is given singly, or at the same time as the hepatitis A vaccine (heptyrix). A course will give protection for at least five years. It can be given over four weeks, or six months.

HIV

HIV remains mercifully rare in Iran but the growing use of prostitutes and, more problematically, the large number of intravenous drug users, means the HIV rate is rising. For some visa types Iran requires a negative HIV test.

Leishmaniasis

Spread through the bite of an infected sand fly, leishmaniasis can cause a slowly growing skin lump or ulcer. It may develop into a serious life-threatening fever usually accompanied with anaemia and weight loss. Infected dogs are also carriers of the infection. Sand-fly bites should be avoided whenever possible.

Malaria

There is very little malaria in Iran. Still, it's worth knowing that malaria almost always starts with shivering, fever and sweating.

Muscle pains, headache and vomiting are common. Symptoms may occur anywhere from a few days to three weeks after the infected mosquito bite. The illness can start while you are taking preventative tablets if they are not fully effective, and may also occur after you have finished taking your tablets.

Poliomyelitis

Generally poliomyelitis is 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. 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 animal, rabies is fatal. 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. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated you will need a course of five injections starting within 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. Vaccination does not provide you with immunity; it merely buys you more time to seek appropriate medical help.

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is found in Iran, especially in the southeast. TB is spread through close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG vaccine is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population. It is more important for those planning on a long stay or mixing closely with local people. TB can be asymptomatic, although symptoms can include cough, weight loss or fever months or even years after exposure. An X-ray is the best way to confirm if you have TB. BCG gives a moderate degree of protection against TB. It causes a small permanent scar at the site of injection, and is usually only given in specialised chest clinics. As it's a live vaccine it should not be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised

individuals. The BCG vaccine is not available in all countries.

Typhoid

This is spread through food or water that has been contaminated by infected human faeces. The first symptom is usually fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Septicaemia (blood poisoning) may also occur. Typhoid vaccine (typhim Vi, typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

While water is safe to drink almost everywhere in Iran, avoiding tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected can help you avoid diarrhoea. Eat only fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked and avoid dairy products that might contain unpasteurised milk. Freshly prepared meals are best; while pre-prepared dishes like *khoresht* should be avoided by anyone with a fragile stomach.

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five 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.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Heat illness

Heat exhaustion occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt, and travellers will be especially susceptible during Iran's oven-hot summers, particularly if you are engaging in a greater level of exercise than you usually would. Be especially careful on desert treks out of places like Yazd.

Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water such that you produce pale, diluted urine. The treatment of heat exhaustion consists of fluid replacement with water or fruit juice or both, and cooling by cold water and fans. The treat-

ment of the salt loss component consists of salty fluids as in soup or broth, and adding a little more table salt to foods than usual. Electrolyte replacement sachets are the easiest and fastest way to treat dehydration.

Heatstroke is much more serious. This occurs when the body's heat-regulating mechanism breaks down. An excessive rise in body temperature leads to sweating ceasing, irrational and hyperactive behaviour and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is an ideal treatment. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement by intravenous drip is usually also required.

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. Using DEET-based insect repellents will prevent bites. Mosquitoes also spread dengue fever.

Bees and wasps only cause real problems to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis). If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings you should carry an adrenaline injection or similar.

Scorpions are frequently found in arid or dry climates. They can cause a painful bite, which is rarely life threatening.

Mercifully, Iran doesn't seem to suffer too badly from bed bugs, though occasionally they do pop up (as opposed to appearing – who's ever seen one of the critters?) in hostels and cheap hotels. They lead to very itchy, lumpy bites. Spraying dubious-looking mattress with insecticide will help get rid of them, or use a sleep sheet.

Scabies might also be found in cheap accommodation. These tiny mites live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. Scabies is easily treated with lotion available from pharmacies; people who you come into contact with also need treating to avoid spreading scabies between asymptomatic carriers.

Snake Bites

Your chances of getting bitten by a snake in Iran are microscopic. To make them even smaller, don't stick your hand into holes or cracks. Half of those bitten by venomous snakes are not actually injected

with poison (envenomed). If bitten by a snake, do not panic. Immobilise the bitten limb with a splint (eg a stick) and apply a bandage over the site, firm pressure, similar to a bandage over a sprain. Do not apply a tourniquet, or cut or suck the bite. Get to medical help as soon as possible so that antivenin can be given if necessary.

Water

Tap water is safe to drink in most of Iran, though many travellers stick to bottled water, which is widely available. Do not drink water from rivers or lakes as this may contain bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhoea or vomiting.

TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

All travellers with children should know how to treat minor ailments and when to seek medical treatment. Make sure the children are up to date with routine vaccinations, and discuss possible travel vaccines well before departure as some vaccines are not suitable for children aged under one year old.

In hot, moist climates any wound or break in the skin may lead to infection. The area should be cleaned and then kept dry and clean. Remember to avoid contaminated food and water. If your child is vomiting or experiencing diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders for reconstituting with boiled water. Ask your doctor about this.

You won't see many dogs in Iran, but if you do, children should avoid them, and other mammals, because of the risk of rabies. Any bite, scratch or lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should immediately be thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought.

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, and diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case.

Emergency contraception is most effective if taken within 24 hours after unprotected sex. Apart from condoms you should bring any contraception you will need. Tampons are almost impossible to find in Iran, but sanitary towels are available in cities.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible but there are important things to consider. Have a medical check-up before embarking on your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage is most likely, and after 30 weeks, when

complications such as high blood pressure and premature delivery can occur. Most airlines will not accept a traveller after 28 to 32 weeks of pregnancy, and long-haul flights in the later stages can be very uncomfortable. Antenatal facilities vary between cities in Iran and there are major cultural and language differences. Taking written records of the pregnancy, including details of your blood group, are likely to be helpful if you need medical attention while away. Ensure your insurance policy covers pregnancy, delivery and postnatal care.

Language

CONTENTS

Farsi	423
Learning the Language	423
Transliteration	423
Pronunciation	423
Accommodation	424
The Farsi Alphabet	424
Conversation & Essentials	425
Directions	425
Health	425
Emergencies	426
Language Difficulties	426
Numbers	426
Question Words	426
Shopping & Services	427
Time & Dates	427
Transport	427
Travel with Children	428

Farsi (also often referred to as Persian) is the official language of Iran. Travelling in the country without at least a basic grasp of Farsi will prove difficult, as English speakers are few and far between.

FARSI

Farsi is an Indo-Iranian language and a member of the Indo-European language family. While it is written in Arabic script, which runs from right to left, the language itself isn't related to Arabic at all.

There are a number of mutually intelligible dialects spoken in Iran. The words and phrases in this language guide are based on the Tehrani dialect, and reflect mostly colloquial, everyday speech. Tehrani is considered to be the standard dialect, and the one spoken by most Farsi speakers. This is distinct from Classical Farsi, which is not an everyday language, but a literary form, normally used only in books or speeches.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Lonely Planet's compact, but comprehensive *Farsi Phrasebook* is a good way to get started and will prove invaluable during

your stay. You can also advance your language skills before you head off by working through the excellent free lessons available online at Easy Persian (www.easypersian.com). Another great resource is *Teach Yourself Modern Persian* (by Narguess Farzad), consisting of a 304-page course-book and two audio CDs. If nothing else, you should familiarise yourself with the modified Arabic alphabet used to write Farsi. The chart on p424 shows all the Farsi letters in their various guises (according to position within a word), plus the nearest-sounding Latin letters used to represent them.

TRANSLITERATION

Transliterating from non-Roman script into the Roman alphabet is always a tricky affair. Formal transliterations of Farsi are overly complicated in the way they represent vowels, and they do not accurately represent the spoken language. In this language guide the system used is designed to be as simple as possible for spoken communication, even at the expense of absolute accuracy.

PRONUNCIATION

In general, the last syllable of a multisyllable word is stressed, unless the last vowel in the word is a short vowel.

Vowels

a	as in 'father'
e	as in 'bed'
i	as in 'marine'
o	as in 'mole'
u	as in 'rule'

Consonants

The letters **b, d, f, j, m, n, p, sh, t** and **z** are pronounced as in English.

ch	as in 'cheese'
g	as in 'goose'
gh/q	a guttural sound like a heavy French 'r' pronounced at the back of the mouth; can appear in transliterations as either gh or q
h	as in 'hot'
kh	as the 'ch' in Scottish loch

THE FARSI ALPHABET

Final	Medial	Initial	Alone	Transliteration	Pronunciation
ا			ا	a	short, as in 'act', long, as in 'father'
ب	ب	ب	ب	b	as in 'bet'
پ	پ	پ	پ	p	as in 'pet'
ت	ت	ت	ت	t	as in 'ten'
ث	ث	ث	ث	s	as in 'set'
ج	ج	ج	ج	j	as in 'jet'
چ	چ	چ	چ	ch	as in 'chat'
ح	ح	ح	ح	h	as in 'hot'
خ	خ	خ	خ	kh	as the 'ch' in Scottish loch
د			د	d	as in 'dot'
ذ			ذ	z	as in 'zoo'
ر			ر	r	as in 'run'
ز			ز	z	as z above
ژ			ژ	zh	as the 's' in 'measure'
س	س	س	س	s	as s above
ش	ش	ش	ش	sh	as in 'shed'
ص	ص	ص	ص	s	as s above
ض	ض	ض	ض	z	as z above
ط	ط	ط	ط	t	as t above
ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	z	as z above
ع	ع	ع	ع	'	a glottal stop (see below)
غ	غ	غ	غ	gh/q	a rough, guttural sound (see p423)
ف	ف	ف	ف	f	as in 'fact'
ق	ق	ق	ق	gh/q	as gh/q above
ک	ک	ک	ک	k	as in 'kit'
گ	گ	گ	گ	g	as in 'get'
ل	ل	ل	ل	l	as in 'let'; the common sequence l+a becomes لا
م	م	م	م	m	as in 'met'
ن	ن	ن	ن	n	as in 'net'
و			و	u/w	as in 'rule'/as in 'wary'
ه	ه	ه	ه	h	as in 'hot'
ی	ی	ی	ی	i/y	as in 'marine'/as in 'yacht'

l always as in 'leg', never as in 'roll'
r trilled
s as in 'sin'
y as in 'yak'
zh as the 'g' in 'mirage'
' a very weak glottal stop, like the sound made between the words 'uh-oh' or the 't' in Cockney 'bottle'

'trick' not 'battle'; the sole exception is *Allah* (God), in which the l's are swallowed as in English 'dollar'.

ACCOMMODATION

Do you have any rooms available?
otagh khali darin

I'd like a ... room. *ye otagh e ... mikham*
single *taki*
shared *moshtarak*

Note: doubled consonants are always pronounced as two distinct sounds, as in 'hat'-

How much is it for ...?
one night *ye shab*
a week *ye hafte*
two people *do nafar*

We want a room with a ... *ma ye otagh ba ye ...*
bathroom *mikhayim*
shower *dastshuyi*
TV *dush*
window *televiziyon panjere*

CONVERSATION & ESSENTIALS

The all-purpose greeting in Iran is *salam aleykom*, which does duty for 'good morning', 'good afternoon' and 'good evening'. The same expression is used throughout the Muslim world, so if you learn only one phrase in Iran, this is it!

When addressing a stranger, especially one older than you, it's polite to include *agha* (sir) or *khanom* (madam) at the beginning of the first sentence, or after one of the standard greetings. *Agha ye* and *Khanom e* are the equivalents of Mr, and Mrs/Miss/Ms *Agha* can be used before or after the first name as a title of respect, eg Mohammad Agha or, more likely, Agha Mohammad.

The pronoun *shoma* is the polite form of 'you' singular, and should be used when addressing people you don't know well – *to* is only generally used when talking to close friends and relatives of the same generation or older, and to children and animals.

Welcome. *khosh amadin*
Greetings. *salam aleykom*
Hello. *salam*
Good morning. *sob bekheyr*
Good day. (noon) *ruz bekheyr*
Good evening. *shab bekheyr*
Goodbye. *khoda hafez*
How are you? *haletun chetor e?*
Fine – and you? *khubam – shoma chetoin?*
Yes. *bale*
No. *na*
Please. *lotfan*
Thank you. *dastet darnakone*
Thank you (very much). *(kheyli) mamnum* (also common is *dastet darnakone*)
You're welcome. *kharesh mikonam*
Excuse me/I'm sorry. *bebakhshid*
I like ... *man ... dust daram*
I don't like ... *man ... dust nadaram*

What's your name? *esmetun chi ye?*
My name is ... *esmam ... e*
Where are you from? *kojayi hastin?*
I'm from ... *man ahl e ... am*
It is God's will. *mashallah*

mother *madar*
father *pedar*
sister *khahar*
brother *bavadar*
daughter *dokhtar*
son *pesar*
aunt *khaleh (maternal)/ ameh (paternal)*
uncle *dai (maternal)/ amu (paternal)*
wife *zan*
husband *shohar*

SIGNS		
ورود	<i>vorud</i>	Entrance
خروج	<i>khoruj</i>	Exit
باز	<i>baz</i>	Open
بسته	<i>baste</i>	Closed
ممنوع ورود	<i>vorud mamnu'</i>	No Entry
ممنوع دخانیات	<i>dokhaniyat mamnu'</i>	No Smoking
ممنوع	<i>mamnu'</i>	Prohibited
توالث	<i>tuvalat</i>	Toilet
مردانه	<i>mardane</i>	Men
زنانه	<i>zanane</i>	Women

DIRECTIONS

Where is the ...? *... koja st?*
Can you show me (on the map)? *mishe (tu naghshe) be man neshun bedin?*
Is it far from here? *un az inja dur e?*
Go straight ahead. *mostaghim berin*
To the left. *samt e chap*
To the right. *samt e rast*
here *inja*
there *unja*

behind *posht*
in front of *jeloye*
far (from) *dur az*
near (to) *nazdik be*
opposite *moghabele*

HEALTH

Where is the ...? *... koja st?*
chemist *darukhune*
dentist *dandan pezeshk*
doctor *doktor*
hospital *bimarestan*

EMERGENCIES

Help!	<i>komak!</i>
Stop!	<i>ist!</i>
Go away!	<i>gom sho!</i>
Call ...!	<i>... khabar konin!</i>
a doctor	<i>ye doktor</i>
an ambulance	<i>ye ambulans</i>
the police	<i>polis o</i>
I wish to contact my embassy/consulate.	
<i>mikham ba sefarat/konsulgari khod am tamas begiram</i>	
Where is the toilet?	
<i>tuvalet koja st?</i>	
Shame on you!	
<i>khejalat bekes! (said by a woman to a man bothering her)</i>	

I'm sick.	<i>mariz am</i>
antiseptic	<i>zedd e ufuni konande</i>
aspirin	<i>asperin</i>
condom	<i>kandom</i>
contraceptive	<i>zedd e hamelegi</i>
diarrhoea	<i>es-hal</i>
medicine	<i>daru</i>
sunblock	<i>kerem e zedd e aftab</i>

I have ...	<i>... daram</i>
anaemia	<i>kam khuni</i>
asthma	<i>asm</i>
diabetes	<i>diyabet</i>

I'm allergic to ...	<i>be ... hassasiyat daram</i>
antibiotics	<i>antibiyutik</i>
aspirin	<i>asperin</i>
bees	<i>zanbur</i>
peanuts	<i>badum zanini</i>
penicillin	<i>penisilin</i>

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Do you speak English?	<i>shoma ingilisi baladin?</i>
Does anyone here speak English?	<i>inja kesi ingilisi balad e?</i>
I understand.	<i>mifahmam</i>
I don't understand.	<i>na mifahmam</i>
How do you say ... in Farsi?	<i>... ro dar farsi chetori migin?</i>
What does ... mean?	<i>ma'ni ye ... chi ye?</i>
Please write it down.	<i>lotfan un o benevisin</i>

NUMBERS

Unlike Arabic written text, numbers are written from left to right (as in English). The numbers four and six can be written two different ways depending on the calligraphic style

0	<i>sefr</i>	.
1	<i>yek</i>	۱
2	<i>do</i>	۲
3	<i>se</i>	۳
4	<i>chahar</i>	۴ or ۴
5	<i>panj</i>	۵
6	<i>shish</i>	۶ or ۶
7	<i>haft</i>	۷
8	<i>hasht</i>	۸
9	<i>noh</i>	۹
10	<i>dah</i>	۱۰
11	<i>yazdah</i>	۱۱
12	<i>davazdah</i>	۱۲
13	<i>sizdah</i>	۱۳
14	<i>chahardah</i>	۱۴
15	<i>punzdah</i>	۱۵
16	<i>shanzdah</i>	۱۶
17	<i>hifdah</i>	۱۷
18	<i>hijdah</i>	۱۸
19	<i>nuzdah</i>	۱۹
20	<i>bist</i>	۲۰
21	<i>bist o yek</i>	۲۱
22	<i>bist o do</i>	۲۲
30	<i>si</i>	۳۰
40	<i>chehel</i>	۴۰
45	<i>chehel o panj</i>	۴۰
50	<i>panjah</i>	۵۰
60	<i>shast</i>	۶۰
70	<i>haftad</i>	۷۰
80	<i>hashtad</i>	۸۰
90	<i>navad</i>	۹۰
100	<i>sad</i>	۱۰۰
167	<i>sad o shast o haft</i>	۱۶۷
200	<i>divst</i>	۲۰۰
300	<i>sisad</i>	۳۰۰
400	<i>chaharsad</i>	۴۰۰
500	<i>punsad</i>	۵۰۰
1000	<i>hezar</i>	۱۰۰۰
2000	<i>do hezar</i>	۲۰۰۰
3000	<i>se hezar</i>	۳۰۰۰
4000	<i>chahar hezar</i>	۴۰۰۰

one million *yek milyon*

QUESTION WORDS

Who?	<i>ki?</i>
What?	<i>che?</i>

When?	<i>key?</i>
Where?	<i>koja?</i>
Which?	<i>kodam?</i>
Why?	<i>chera?</i>
How?	<i>chetor?</i>

SHOPPING & SERVICES

Where is the ...?	<i>... koja st?</i>
bank	<i>bank</i>
church	<i>kelisa</i>
city centre	<i>markaz e shahr</i>
consulate	<i>konsulgari</i>
embassy	<i>sefarat</i>
hotel	<i>hotel</i>
lodging house	<i>mosaferkhūneh</i>
mosque	<i>masjed</i>
market	<i>bazar</i>
police	<i>polis</i>
post office	<i>edare ye post</i>
public telephone	<i>telefon e umumi</i>
public toilet	<i>tuvalet e umumi</i>
tourist office	<i>edare ye jahangardi</i>
town square	<i>meydun a shahr</i>

I'd like to buy ...	<i>mikham ... bekharam</i>
How much is it?	<i>che ghadr? (you can also say chand toman? – literally 'how many tomans?')</i>
I don't like it.	<i>az un khosh am nemiyad</i>
May I look at it?	<i>mishe negali esh konam?</i>
I'm just looking.	<i>faghat negah mikonam</i>
I think it's too expensive.	<i>fekr mikonam un kheyli gerun e</i>
I'll take it.	<i>un o mikharam</i>

more	<i>ziyad</i>
less	<i>kam</i>
smaller	<i>kuchiktar</i>
bigger	<i>bozorgtar</i>

TIME & DATES

What time is it?	<i>sa'at chand e?</i>
today	<i>emruz</i>
tomorrow	<i>farda</i>
yesterday	<i>diruz</i>
tonight	<i>emshab</i>
morning, am	<i>sobh</i>
afternoon, pm	<i>ba'd az zohr</i>
day	<i>ruz</i>
month	<i>mah</i>
year	<i>sal</i>

Saturday	<i>shanbe</i>
Sunday	<i>yek shanbe</i>
Monday	<i>do shanbe</i>

Tuesday	<i>se shanbe</i>
Wednesday	<i>chahar shanbe</i>
Thursday	<i>panj shanbe</i>
Friday	<i>jam'e</i>

TRANSPORT
Public Transport

Where is the ...?	<i>... koja st?</i>
airport	<i>furudgah</i>
bus stop	<i>istgah e utubus</i>
train station	<i>istgah e ghatar</i>

What time does the ... leave/arrive?	<i>... che sa'ati harekat mikone/mirese?</i>
boat	<i>ghayegh</i>
bus	<i>utubus</i>
plane	<i>havapeyma</i>
train	<i>ghatar</i>

What time is the ... bus?	<i>utubus e ... key miyad?</i>
first	<i>avval</i>
last	<i>akhar</i>
next	<i>ba'di</i>

I'd like a ...	<i>... mikham</i>
one-way ticket	<i>belit e ye sare</i>
return ticket	<i>belit e do sare</i>

1st class	<i>daraje yek</i>
2nd class	<i>daraje do</i>

How long does the trip take?
in mosaferat cheghadr tul mikesh?

Does this bus go to ...?
in utubus be ... mire?

Do you stop at ...?
dar ... tavaghghof darin?

Could you let me know when we get to ...
mishe vaghti be ... residim be man begin?

Where does the ... bus leave from?
koja mitunam utubus e ... ro savar sham?

I want to go to ...
mikham be ... beram

How much is it to ...?
be ... che ghadr mishe?

Does the bus stop for toilet breaks?
in utubus baraye dast shuyi negah midare?

Private Transport

I'd like to hire a ...	<i>mikham ... keraye konam</i>
car	<i>mashin</i>
4WD	<i>patrol</i>
motorbike	<i>motorsiklet</i>
bicycle	<i>docharkhe</i>

Is this the road to ...?

in jadde be ... mire?

Where's a service station?

pomp e benzin e ba'di kojast?

Please fill it up.

lotfan bak o por konin

I'd like ... litres.

... litr benzin mikham

diesel *gazoyil*

leaded petrol *ma'muli*

unleaded (petrol) *bedun e sorb*

How long can we park here?

che ghadr mishe inja park kard?

(I/We) need a mechanic.

ye mekanik (mikhaham/mikhayim)

The car/motorbike has broken down at ...

mashin/mororsiklet dar ... kharab shode

I've run out of petrol.

benzin am tamum shode

I had an accident.

man tasadof kardam

TRAVEL WITH CHILDREN

Is there a/an ...? *yek...hast?*

I need a ... *man yek...lazem daram*

baby change room *otaghe avaz kardane bachche*

car baby-seat *sandaliye bachche*

children's menu *liste ghazaye bachche ha*

disposable nappies/

diapers *pushak*

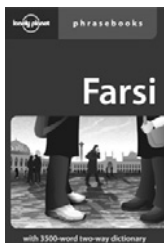
formula (infant milk) *shire khoshk*

highchair *sandaliye boland*

potty *lagane bachche*

stroller *kaleske*

Are children allowed? *bachche ha ejaze darand?*



Also available from Lonely Planet:
Farsi Phrasebook

Glossary

Here, with definitions, are some unfamiliar words and abbreviations. Generally the Farsi words in this book are transliterations of colloquial usage. See Language (p423) for other useful words and phrases. See also the food glossary (p84) for culinary terms.

agha – sir; gentleman
Allah – Muslim name for God
aramgah – resting place; burial place; tomb
arg, ark – citadel
astan-e – sanctuary; threshold
ateshkadeh – a Zoroastrian fire temple where a flame was always kept burning
ayatollah – Shiite cleric of the highest rank, used as a title before the name; literally means a ‘sign or miracle of God’
azad – free; liberated
azadi – freedom

badgir – windtower or ventilation shaft used to catch breezes and funnel them down into a building to cool it
bagh – garden
bandar – port; harbour
Bandari – indigenous inhabitant of the Persian Gulf coast and islands
bazan – ancient; ancient history; antiquity
bazar – bazaar; market place
bazari – shopkeeper in the bazaar
behesht – paradise
boq’eh – mausoleum
borj – tower
bozorg – big, large, great
burqa – a mask with tiny slits for the eyes worn by some Bandari women

caliphate – the dynasty of the successors of the Prophet Mohammed as rulers of the Islamic world
caravanserai – an inn or way-station for camel trains; usually consisting of rooms arranged around a courtyard
chador – literally ‘tent’; a cloak, usually black, covering all parts of a woman’s body except the hands, feet and face
coffeenet – internet café
cuneiform – ancient wedge-shaped script used in Persia

dar baste – literally closed door, used in taxis to indicate you want a private hire
darvazeh – gate or gateway, especially a city gate
darya – sea
dasht – plain; plateau; desert, specifically one of sand or gravel

enqelab – revolution

Farsi – Persian language or people
Ferdosi – one of the great Persian poets, born about AD 940 in Tus, near Mashhad; wrote the first epic poem, the *Shahnamah* (see p74)
fire temple – see *ateshkadeh*

gabbeh – traditional rug
golestan – rose garden; name of poem by *Sa’di*
gonbad – dome, domed monument or tower tomb; also written ‘gombad’

Hafez – one of the great Persian poets, born in Shiraz in about AD 1324; see the boxed text (p74)
haj – pilgrimage to Mecca
halal – permitted by Islamic law; lawful to eat or drink
hammam – bath, public bathhouse; bathroom
Hazrat-e – title used before the name of Mohammed, any other apostle of Islam or a Christian saint
hejab – veil; the ‘modest dress’ required of Muslim women and girls
Hossein – the third of the 12 *imams* recognised by Shiites as successors of the Prophet Mohammed (see the boxed text, p56)
Hosseinieh – see *takieh*

imam – ‘emam’ in Farsi; religious leader, also title of one of the 12 descendants of Mohammed who, according to Shiite belief, succeeded him as religious and temporal leader of the Muslims; see the boxed text (p56)
Imam Reza – the eighth Shiite *imam* (see the boxed text, p353)
imamzadeh – descendant of an *imam*; shrine or mausoleum of an *imamzadeh*
insh’Allah – if God wills it
istgah – station (especially train station)
iwan – ‘eivan’ in Farsi; barrel-vaulted hall opening onto a courtyard

Jameh Mosque – Masjed-e Jameh in Farsi; meaning Congregational Mosque, sometimes mis-translated as Friday Mosque

kabir – great
kalisa – church (sometimes cathedral)
kavir – salt desert
khalij – gulf; bay
khan – feudal lord, title of respect
khan-e sonnati – traditional house
kuche – lane; alley

Kufic – ancient script found on many buildings dating from the about the 7th to 13th centuries

madrseh – school; also Muslim theological college

Majlis – Iranian Parliament

manar – minaret; tower of a mosque

markazi – centre; headquarters

masjed – mosque; Muslim place of worship

Masjed-e Jameh – see *Jameh Mosque*

mehmankhaneh – hotel

mehmanpazir – a simple hotel

mehmansara – government-owned resthouse or hotel

mihrab – niche inside a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca; in Iran, specifically the hole cut in the ground before the niche

minbar – pulpit of a mosque

Moharram – first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, the Shiite month of mourning

mosafekhaneh – lodging-house or hotel of the cheapest, simplest kind; ‘mosafer’ means traveller or passenger

muezzin – person at mosque who calls Muslims to prayer

mullah – Islamic cleric; title of respect

No Ruz – Iranian New Year’s Day, celebrated on the vernal equinox (usually around 21 March)

Omar Khayyam – born in Neishapur in about 1047 and famous as a poet, mathematician, historian and astronomer; his best-known poem is the *Rubaiyat*; see the boxed text (p74)

pasazh – passage; shopping arcade

Persia – old name for Iran

Persian – adjective and noun frequently used to describe the Iranian language, people and culture

pik-up – utility vehicle with a canvas cover

pol – bridge

qal’eh – fortress; fortified walled village

qalyan – water pipe, usually smoked in traditional teahouses

qanat – underground water channel

qar – cave

Quran – Muslim holy book

Ramazan – ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar; the month of fasting

rial – currency of Iran; equal to one-tenth of a *toman*

rud, rudkhuneh – river; stream

Rumi – famous poet (born in 1207) credited with founding the Maulavi Sufi order – the whirling dervishes (see the boxed text, p74)

ruz – day

Sa’di – one of the great Persian poets (AD 1207–91); his most famous works are the *Golestan* (Rose Garden) and *Bustan* (Garden of Trees); see the boxed text (p74)

sardar – military governor

savari – private car; local word for a shared taxi, usually refers to longer trips between cities

shah – king; the usual title of the Persian monarch

shahid – martyr; used as a title before the forename of a fighter killed during the Islamic Revolution or the Iran–Iraq War

shahr – town or city

shuttle taxi – common form of public transport within cities; they usually run on set routes

ta’arof – ritualised politeness; see the boxed text (p45)

takht – throne, also the daybed-style tables in teahouses

takieh – building used during the rituals to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein during Moharram; sometimes called a *Hosseinieh*

tappeh – hill; mound

terminal – terminal; bus station

toman – unit of currency equal to 10 *rials*

vakil – regent

yakh dan – mud-brick ice house

zarib – the gilded and latticed ‘cage’ that sits over a tomb

ziggurat – pyramidal temple with a series of tiers on a square or rectangular plan

Zoroastrianism – ancient religion, the state creed before the Islamic conquest; today Zoroastrians are found mainly in Yazd, Shiraz, Kerman, Tehran and Esfahan

zurkhaneh – literally ‘house of strength’; a group of men perform a series of ritualised feats of strength, all to the accompaniment of a drumbeat; see the boxed text (p52)

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