History

Historians are still debating when the first inhabitants settled in what is now Iran, but archaeologists suggest that during Neolithic times small numbers of hunters lived in caves in the Zagros and Alborz Mountains and in the southeast of the country.

THE ELAMITES & MEDES

Iran's first organised settlements were established in Elam, the lowland region in what is now Khuzestan province, as far back as the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. Elam was close enough to Mesopotamia and the great Sumerian civilisation to feel its influence, and records suggest the two were regular opponents on the battlefield. The Elamites established their capital at Shush (p214) and derived their strength through a remarkably enlightened federal system of government that allowed the various states to exchange the natural resources unique to each region. The Elamites' system of inheritance and power distribution was also quite sophisticated for the time, ensuring power was shared by and passed through various family lines.

The Elamites believed in a pantheon of gods, and their most notable remaining building, the enormous ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil (p215), was built around the 13th century BC and dedicated to the foremost of these gods. By the 12th century BC the Elamites are thought to have controlled most of what is now western Iran, the Tigris Valley and the coast of the Persian Gulf. They even managed to defeat the Assyrians, carrying off in triumph the famous stone inscribed with the Code of Hammurabi, a battered copy of which is in the National Museum of Iran (p104), the original having been carried off to the Louvre in Paris.

Ancient Persia, by Josef Wiesehöfer, is a study of the country's origins and why it collapsed so dramatically after the Arab invasions of the 7th century.

About this time Indo-European Aryan tribes began to arrive from the north. These Persians eventually settled in what is now Fars province, around Shiraz, while the Medes took up residence further north, in what is today northwestern Iran. The Medes established a capital at Ecbatana, now buried under modern Hamadan (p200), and first crop up in Assyrian records in 836 BC. But little more is heard of them until Greek historian Herodotus writes of how Cyaxares of Media expelled the Scythians, who had invaded from the Caucasus, in about 625 BC. According to Herodotus, whose histories are notoriously colourful, the Scythians were defeated when their kings attended a party and became so drunk they were easily disposed of.

Under Cyaxares, the Medes became a most formidable military force, repeatedly attacking the neighbouring Assyrians. In 612, having formed an alliance with the Babylonians, the Medes sacked the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and chased the remnants of this once-mighty empire into history. Exactly how the conquering powers divided the spoils of this heady success is uncertain, but it is believed the Medes assumed control of the highland territories. This meant that at his death in 575 BC Cyaxares is thought to have controlled an area that stretched from Asia Minor in the west as far as present-day Kerman in the east. Within a few years, though, this would seem very modest indeed.

THE ACHAEMENIDS & THE FIRST PERSIAN EMPIRE

In the 7th century BC the king of one of the Persian tribes, Achaemenes, created a unified state in southern Iran, giving his name to what would

IRAN'S DYNASTIES & NOTABLE RULERS

Achaemenids 550–330 BC
Cyrus II (the Great) r 559–530 BC
Cambyses r 529–522 BC
Darius I (the Great) r 522–486 BC
Xerxes r 486–465 BC
Artaxerxes I r 465–425 BC
Darius II r 424–405 BC
Artaxerxes II r 405–359 BC
Capitals in Shush, Babylon & Persepolis

Seleucids 323–162 BC

Parthians 247 BC–AD 224
Mithridates r 171–138 BC
Mithridates II r 123–88 BC
Capitals in Rey and Ctesiphon

Sassanians AD 224–642
Ardashir I r 224–41
Shapur I r 241–72
Shapur II r 310–79
Khusro II r 590–628
Capitals at Firuz Abad, then Ctesiphon

Arabs & Turks arrive 642–1051
Umayyad Caliphate r 642–750, capital in Damascus
Abbasid Caliphate r 750–830s, capital in Baghdad 9th century, rule fragments
Tahirids, r 820–72
Saffarids, r 868–903
Samanids, r 874–999
Ziarids, r 928–1077
Buyids, r 945–1055
Qaznavids, r 962–1140

Seljuks 1051–1220
Toghrol Beik r 1037–63
Malek Shah r 1072–92
Capital in Esfahan

Mongol Ilkhanids 1256–1335
Hulagu Khan r 1256–65
Ghazan Khan r 1295–1304
Oljeitu Khan r 1304–16
Capitals in Maraghe, Soltaniyeh

Timurids 1380–1502
Tamerlane r 1380–1405
Shahrokh r 1405–47
Govern from Samarkand, Herat and Qazvin

Safavids 1502–1736
Ismail Savafi r 1502–24
Tahmasp r 1524–76
Abbas I (Abbas the Great) r 1587–1629
Capitals in Tabriz, Qazvin then Esfahan

Nader Shah 1736–1747
Capital in Mashhad

Zand Period 1750–1795
Karim Khan Zand r 1750–79
Lotf ali Khan r 1779–95
Capital in Shiraz

Qajars 1795–1925
Aga Mohammad Khan r 1795–6
Fath Ali Shah r 1797–1834
Nasser al-Din Shah r 1848–96
Capital in Tehran

Pahlavis 1925–1979
Reza Shah r 1925–41
Shah Mohammad Reza r 1941–79

become the First Persian Empire, that of the Achaemenids. By the time his 21-year-old great-grandson Cyrus II ascended the throne in 559 BC, Persia was clearly a state on the up. Within 20 years it would be the greatest empire the world had known.

Having rapidly built a mighty military force, Cyrus the Great (as he came to be known) ended the Median Empire in 550 BC when he defeated his own grandfather – the hated king Astyages – in battle at Pasargadae. Within 11 years, Cyrus had campaigned his way across much of what is now Turkey, east into modern Pakistan, and finally defeated the Babylonians. It was in the aftermath of this victory in 539 BC that Cyrus marked himself out as something of a sensitive, new age despot. Rather than putting the Babylonians to the sword, he released the Jews who had been held there and, according to Herodotus in *The Persian Wars*, declared, among other things, that he would 'respect the traditions, customs and religions of the nations of my empire and never let any of

my governors and subordinates look down on or insult them… I will impose my monarchy on no nation. Each is free to accept it, and if any one of them rejects it, I never resolve on war to reign.'

Cyrus colonised the old Median capital at Ecbatana, redeveloped Shush and built for himself a new home at Pasargadae (p284), establishing the pattern whereby Persian rulers circulated between three different capitals. Unfortunately for him, the Massagetae from the northeast of the empire decided he was indeed imposing his monarchy on them and they didn't like it. Herodotus writes that Cyrus incurred the wrath of the Massagetae queen, Tomyris, after he captured her son and slaughtered many of her soldiers in a battle made especially one-sided because the Massagetae army were all drunk – on wine strategically planted by the Achaemenids. Herodotus writes:

> When Tomyris heard what had befallen her son and her army, she sent a herald to Cyrus, who thus addressed the conqueror: 'Thou bloodthirsty Cyrus, pride not thyself on this poor success: it was the grape-juice…it was this poison wherewith thou didst ensnare my child, and so overcamest him, not in fair open fight. Now hearken what I advise, and be sure I advise thee for thy good. Restore my son to me and get thee from the land unharmed… Refuse, and I swear by the sun, the sovereign lord of the Massagetae, bloodthirsty as thou art, I will give thee thy fill of blood'.

Cyrus the Great, by Jacob Abbott, tells the story of the fair-minded empire builder through the writings of Greek historian Herodotus and general Xenophenon, with extensive commentary from Abbott.

Cyrus paid no heed to Tomyris, who gathered all the forces of her kingdom for what Herodotus described as the fiercest battle the Achaemenids had fought. Cyrus and most of his army were slain. When his body was recovered she ordered a skin filled with human blood and, making good on her threat, dunked Cyrus's head in it. Cyrus's body was eventually buried in the mausoleum that still stands at Pasargadae (p284).

In 525 BC Cyrus's son, Cambyses, headed west to capture most of Egypt and coastal regions well into modern Libya. It was later recorded

THE FIRST CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS…OR NOT

In 1879, Assyro-British archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam unearthed a clay cylinder during a dig in the ancient Marduk temple of Babylon. What became known as the 'Cyrus Cylinder' bears a cuneiform inscription recording, among other things, that Cyrus 'strove for peace in Babylon and in all his [the god Marduk's] sacred sites' and 'abolished forced labour' for those (Jews) who had been enslaved in Babylon.

These passages have been widely interpreted as a reflection of Cyrus's respect for human rights, and many consider it the world's first charter of human rights. Indeed, a replica remains on permanent display at UN headquarters in New York (the original is in the British Museum), and in 1971 the cylinder became the symbol of the 2500th anniversary of Iranian royalty. However, not everyone agrees. Many scholars argue the cylinder is not a charter of human rights, but rather that such statements were common populism among kings at the time. They say that Mesopotamian kings had a tradition dating back to the 3rd millennium BC of making grand and popular statements espousing social reform when they came to the throne, meaning Cyrus's declaration was neither new nor unique.

Whether the cylinder was the world's first declaration of human rights or not, it seems fair to say that Cyrus was an unusually benevolent ruler for his time, and he's well-remembered across the faiths. In the Bible both Ezra and Isaiah speak of Cyrus as a benign ruler responsible for the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem. And he is the only Gentile (non-Jew) designated as a divinely appointed king, or messiah, in the Tanakh.

that Cambyses had quietly arranged the assassination of his brother, Smerdis, before he left. The story goes that while Cambyses was distracted in Egypt, a minor official called Magus Gaumata, who had an uncanny resemblance to Smerdis, seized the throne. Cambyses died mysteriously in 522 BC while still in Egypt. With the king dead, Darius I, a distant relative, moved quickly and soon had 'Gaumata' murdered. This 'justice' was glorified in a giant relief at Bisotun (p199), near Hamadan, where you can see Darius's foot on Gaumata's head. What we will probably never know is whether Darius rid Persia of the so-called 'False Smerdis', or whether he murdered the real Smerdis and cooked up this unlikely story to justify his regicide.

Persian Fire, by Tom Holland, is a page-turning history of the Persian Wars, the first battles between East and West, and the Achaemenid empire at its most powerful. Recommended reading before visiting Shush or Persepolis.

Darius had won an empire in disarray and had to fight hard to re-establish it, dividing his sprawling inheritance into 23 satrapies to make it easier to govern. The magnificent complex at Persepolis (p279) was created to serve as the ceremonial and religious hub of an empire whose primary god was Ahura Mazda, also the subject of Zoroastrian worship. The Median capital at Shush became the administrative centre, but Persepolis was the imperial showcase, extravagantly decorated to intimidate visitors and impress with its beauty. The Apadana Staircase (p281), which depicts 23 subject nations paying tribute to the Achaemenid king, is arguably the artistic apex of the site. Darius eventually expanded the empire to India and pushed as far north as the Danube River in Europe.

It was the greatest of the early civilisations. Paved roads stretched from one end of the empire to the other, with caravanserais at regular intervals to provide food and shelter to travellers. The Achaemenids introduced the world's first postal service, and it was said the network of relay horses could deliver mail to the furthest corner of the empire within 15 days.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. When the Greek colonies of Asia Minor rebelled against their Persian overlord, Darius decided to invade mainland Greece to make an example of those states that refused to subject themselves. It didn't work. In 490 BC Darius's armies were defeated at Marathon near Athens. He died in 486 BC.

The subsequent defeat of Darius's son Xerxes at Salamis in Greece in 480 BC marked the beginning of a long, slow decline that would continue, with glorious interludes, for another 150 years.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT & THE END OF PERSEPOLIS

The end of the First Persian Empire finally came at the hands of Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia. Having defeated the Greeks and Egyptians, Alexander saw off Persian armies at Issus in Turkey (333 BC) and Guagamela in present-day Iraq (331 BC). By the time he arrived in Persia proper the end of the Achaemenid empire was almost inevitable, and it wasn't long before the last remaining armies of Darius III were swept aside. Darius himself fled east to Bactria, only to be murdered by his cousin. In the wake of his victory, Alexander spent several months at Persepolis, before the finest symbol of Achaemenid power was burned to the ground. Even today experts argue whether this was the accidental result of a drunken party or deliberate retaliation for the destruction of Athens by Xerxes.

In 311 BC the Macedonian ruler Cassander had Alexander the Great's Persian widow, Roxana, and their son, Alexander IV, put to death to stave off any threat to his rule.

Alexander's empire soon stretched across Afghanistan, Pakistan and into India, but after his death in 323 BC it was divided between three squabbling dynasties, with Persia controlled by the Macedonian Seleucids. Gradually the Greek language replaced Aramaic as the lingua franca, new towns were set up all over the region and Greek culture stamped itself on the older Persian one. However, ambitious satraps and feisty ethnic minorities were bucking the system, particularly the nomadic Parthians.

THE PARTHIAN TAKEOVER

The Parthians had settled the area between the Caspian and Aral Seas many centuries before. Under their great king Mithridates (171–138 BC), they swallowed most of Persia and then everywhere between the Euphrates in the west and Afghanistan in the east, more or less re-creating the old Achaemenid Empire. They had two capitals, one at what is now Rey (p131), the other at Ctesiphon, in present-day Iraq.

The modern term 'parting shot' derives from the ancient 'Parthian shot'. As Parthian horsemen rode away from their enemy they would turn in their saddles and fire arrows at their pursuers. This was the 'Parthian shot'.

Expert horsemen and archers, the Parthians spent much energy fighting with Rome for control of Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia – territories the Romans felt were rightly theirs. This largely ended, however, after the Roman general Crassus, who had defeated Spartacus 20 years earlier and was now one of three men controlling Rome, wrongly concluded his armies had the measure of their Parthian counterparts. In 53 BC Crassus saw his armies routed at Carrhae, in modern-day Turkey (he was then captured, had molten gold poured down his throat to mock his greed, and eventually lost his head). Extended periods of peace followed, though the Romans and Parthians were only ever an ambitious leader away from a fight.

More enlightened than later dynasties, the Parthians oversaw significant progress in architecture and the arts, though little remains today.

THE SASSANIANS & THE SECOND PERSIAN EMPIRE

Like the Achaemenids before them, the Sassanian rise from small-time dynasty to empire was nothing short of staggering. Beginning in their home province of Fars in AD 224, Ardashir I (r 224–41) led a push that saw the Sassanians replace the ailing Parthians in Persia and within 40 years become a renewed threat to the Roman Empire.

Between 241 and 272 Ardashir's son, Shapur I, added Bactria to the empire and fought repeatedly with the Romans. In one of the most celebrated of all Persian victories, Shapur's armies defeated the Romans at Edessa in 260 and took the Roman emperor Valerian prisoner. You can still see the city of Bishapur (p286), where Valerian was kept until he died, and bas-reliefs depicting the victory at Naqsh-e Rostam (p283).

Those Roman soldiers fortunate enough to survive the carnage at Carrhae reported that the Parthians fought under dazzlingly bright flags. It was Europe's first glimpse of silk.

The Sassanians re-formulated Zoroastrianism into a state religion incorporating elements of Greek, Mithraic and ancient animist faiths. They then indulged in sporadic bursts of repression against other religions, including newly emerging Christianity. The Sassanians spoke their own language, Pahlavi, the root of modern Farsi. Several fire temples and other important and imposing structures remain from the Sassanid period. Among the most impressive are the largely intact Ardashir's Palace at Firuz Abad (p285); the crumbling adobe city at Kuh-e Khajeh (p331); the city of Bishapur and the giant Statue of Shapur I (p286) in a nearby cave; and the Arg-e Bam (p322), where investigations following the 2003 earthquake have revealed the outer walls and several other structures were built by the Sassanians. The Sassanian capital was at Ctesiphon in modern Iraq.

The Sassanians developed small industries, promoted urban development and encouraged trade across the Persian Gulf but eventually they, too, were weakened by seemingly never-ending conflict with Byzantium. Ironically it was in its last years that the empire was at its largest, when Khusro II (590-628) recaptured parts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Turkey. However, after Khusro was murdered by his son in 628, at least six rulers, including Persia's only two women monarchs, came and went in the following five years. Persia was in no state to resist when the Arabs attacked in 633.

In 387 the Persian and Byzantine empires agree to solve their long-running dispute over control of Armenia by carving it up; it was one of the first (and ultimately unsuccessful) examples of partition.

THE ARABS & ISLAM

In the late 5th century a socialist called Mazdak won a huge following by preaching that nobles should share their wealth and their women with the oppressed masses.

A crucial chapter in Persian history started when the Arabs defeated the Sassanians at Qadisirya in AD 637, following up with a victory at Nehavand near Hamadan that effectively ended Sassanian rule.

By the time of Mohammed's death in 632 the Arabs were firm adherents of Islam. The Persians found plenty to like in Islamic culture and religion, and happily forsook Zoroaster for the teachings of Mohammed without much need of persuasion. Only Yazd and Kerman (both of which clung to Zoroastrianism for a few centuries more) and a few isolated tribes in the mountains near the Caspian Sea held fast to their old religions. As they rapidly spread across the Middle East, the Arabs adopted Sassanians' architecture, arts and administration practices.

The Umayyad caliphs initially governed Persia from their capital in Damascus, but in 750 a Shiite rebellion led to the elevation of the Abbasid dynasty, which set up its capital near Baghdad. The Abbasid caliphs presided over a period of intellectual exuberance in which Persian culture played a major role. Persians also held many high offices at court, but the Arabic language and script became the norm for day-to-day business.

During the 9th century Abbasid power crumbled and, one by one, regional governors established their own power bases. In eastern Iran these new Iranian dynasties included the Safarrids (868–903), the Tahirids (820–72) and the Samanids (874–999), who set up their capital at Bukhara and revived the Persian language.

Ferdosi wrote his epic poem, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), between about 990 and his death in around 1020. Its 60,000 couplets are considered the foundation stone of modern Farsi, in the same way Shakespeare is considered the father of English.

THE COMING OF THE SELJUKS

Inevitably, these local dynasties could not hold onto their power. The Samanids became fatally dependent on Turkish soldiers, one of whom soon elbowed them aside to found his own Qaznavid dynasty (962–1140); his son Mahmud spread the realm deep into India, introducing Islam as he went.

In turn they were ousted by the Seljuk Turks who pushed on through Persia, capturing Esfahan in 1051 and turning it into their capital. Within a few years they had added eastern Turkey to their empire and, despite numerous rebellions, managed to maintain control with a large and well-paid army.

The Seljuk dynasty heralded a new era in Persian art, literature and science, distinguished by geniuses such as the mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam (p74). Theological schools were also set up throughout Seljuk territories to propagate Sunni Islam. The geometric brickwork and elaborate Kufic inscriptions of Seljuk mosques and minarets can still be seen across Iran, though they're arguably at their finest in Esfahan's Jameh Mosque (p236).

In 1079 mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam calculated the length of the year as 365.242198 days. This preceded the Gregorian calendar by almost 500 years.

The death of Malek Shah in 1092 marked the end of real Seljuk supremacy, and once again a powerful empire splintered into weaker fragments.

GENGHIS KHAN & TAMERLANE

In the early 13th century, the Seljuk Empire came to a final and bloody end when the rampaging Mongols swept across the Iranian plateau on their horses, leaving a trail of cold-blooded devastation and thousands of dismembered heads in their wake.

Under the leadership first of Genghis Khan, and then his grandsons, including Hulagu, the Mongol rulers managed to seize all of Persia, as well as an empire stretching from Beijing (China) to İstanbul (Turkey). Eventually they established a capital at Tabriz (too close, as they later found out, to the Turks). It was Hulagu Khan who put an end to the stealthy power of the Assassins, destroying their castles around Alamut (p182). After a flirtation with Christianity and Buddhism, Hulagu was forced by social pressures in Persia to adopt Islam. He called himself *il khan* (provincial khan or ruler), a name later given to the entire Ilkhanid dynasty (1256–1335).

Marco Polo crossed Iran while travelling to and from China in the 13th century, stopping in Tabriz, Kashan, Yazd, Kerman, Hormoz, Bam, Tabas and Neishabur, among others.

Tragically, the Mongols destroyed many of the Persian cities they conquered, obliterating much of Persia's documented history. Perhaps feeling guilty about all the violence, they became great arts patrons, leaving many fine monuments, including the wonderful Oljeitu Mausoleum (Gonbad-e Soltaniyeh, p184), near Zanjan. During Mongol rule Farsi definitively replaced Arabic as the lingua franca and Marco Polo followed the Silk Road across Persia (see the boxed text, p34). In 1335 the Ilkhanid empire came to an end when the death of Sultan Abu Said left it with no successor.

The fragmented empire succumbed to invading forces from the east led by Tamerlane (Lame Timur), who swept on to defeat the Ottoman Turks in 1402. Tamerlane came from a Turkified Mongol clan in what is now Uzbekistan. Tamerlane managed to stop the constant warring in Iran and moved the capital from Tabriz to Qazvin (p176). He was yet another of the great contradictions who ruled Persia over the years: an enthusiastic patron of the arts and one of history's greatest killers (after one rebellion 70,000 people are said to have been executed in Esfahan alone).

When he died in 1405, Tamerlane's empire immediately started to struggle. The Timurids in eastern Iran clung to varying degrees of power for several decades, maintaining their support of Persian art, particularly the miniaturists of Shiraz. Gohar Shad, the wife of one of the Timurid rulers, was responsible for the beautiful mosque at the heart of Mashhad's Holy Shrine to Imam Reza (p354).

The pattern of strong ruler, decline and the fragmentation of empire is a recurring theme in Persian history. The years following the Mongol and Timurid periods were no different, with the power divided and fought over by several blocs. Among the more notable groups were the Kara Koyunlu (Black Sheep) tribe, which managed to set itself up in Tabriz and grab power from the Mongols in eastern Turkey. Having held strong for almost two centuries (1275–1468), they, in turn, gave way to the Ak Koyunlu (White Sheep) tribe, which ruled the northeast until 1514.

Genghis Khan took the most beautiful women from the lands he defeated and made them wives or concubines, fathering hundreds of children. A recent study across Asia found that some 16 million men living today can likely trace their heritage back to the loins of the great ruler.

THE SAFAVIDS & THE THIRD PERSIAN EMPIRE

A Sufi called Sheikh Safi od-Din (d 1334) was the inspiration for and progenitor of the Safavi, a powerful sect of Shiite followers from Ardabil (p160). Ismail Savafi, a distant descendent of Safi od-Din, was eventually to conquer all the old Persian imperial heartlands, from Baghdad to Herat. He ruled as Persian Shah (r 1502–24) and although forced out of western Iran by the Ottoman sultan, Selim the Grim, at the disastrous battle of Chaldoran, his Safavid dynasty ushered in a great Iranian revival.

Under Ismail's son Tahmasp (r 1524–76), the capital was moved from Tabriz to Qazvin, and European monarchs started to take an interest in Persia. The Safavids reached their peak under the brilliant Shah Abbas I (Abbas the Great; r 1587–1629), who, with military advice from English adventurer Robert Shirley, finally crushed the assorted Turkmen and Turkish factions to create what is considered the Third Persian Empire.

The Safavids oversaw a renewed flowering of Persian art and architecture. Abbas moved the capital to Esfahan and promptly set about rebuilding the city around what is today Imam Sq (p238). The splendour of the

Safavid court can still be seen in the fantastic frescoes of the Chehel Sotun Palace (p241). Shiism was enshrined as Persia's state religion, bringing it into direct conflict with the Sunni Ottoman Empire.

European powers began looking on Persia as a market. English companies were given business concessions, although the Portuguese, who had controlled Hormoz Island (p306) in the Persian Gulf, were eventually expelled.

The death of Abbas was the signal for the predictable period of bickering and infighting, which eventually left the door wide open for the Afghans, who invaded in 1722. The Afghans besieged Esfahan and eventually took control of the city, slaughtering thousands but sparing the architectural wonders. The first Afghan ruler, Mahmud, went mad and was murdered by a member of his own army.

THE SILK ROAD

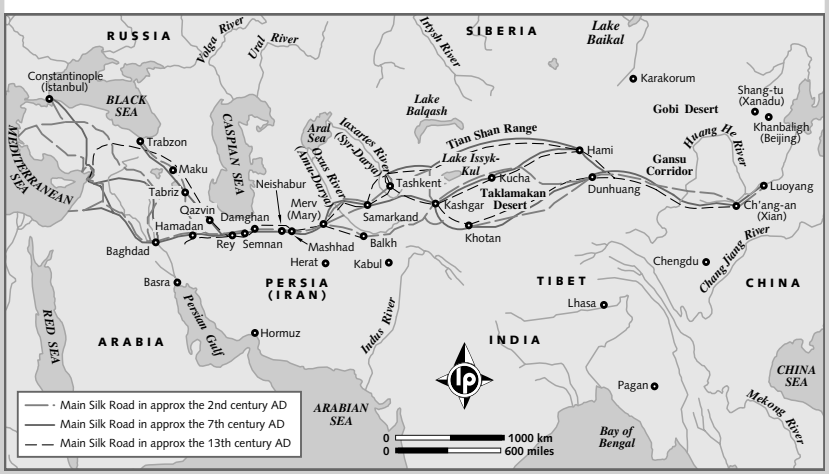
Silk first began moving westward from China more than 2000 years ago, when the Parthians became quite enamoured with the soft, fine fabric. By about 100 BC, the Parthians and the Chinese had exchanged embassies and inaugurated official bilateral trade. The Romans developed an expensive fixation with the fabric after their defeat at Carrhae in 53 BC, and within a few centuries it would become more valuable than gold. The Romans even engaged in some early industrial espionage when the Emperor Justinian sent teams of spies to steal silk worm eggs in the 6th century.

It took many months to traverse the 8000km Silk Road route, though geographically it was a complex and shifting proposition. It was no single road, but rather a web of caravan tracks threading through some of the highest mountains and harshest deserts on earth. The network had its main eastern terminus at the Chinese capital Ch'ang-an (now Xian). Caravans entered present-day Iran anywhere between Merv (modern Turkmenistan) and Herat (Afghanistan), and passed through Mashhad, Neishabur, Damghan, Semnan, Rey, Qazvin, Tabriz and Maku, before finishing at Constantinople (now İstanbul). During winter, the trail often diverted west from Rey, passing through Hamadan to Baghdad. Caravanserais every 30km or so acted as hotels for traders; Robat Sharaf (p365) northeast of Mashhad is a surviving example.

Unlike the Silk Road's most famous journeyman, Marco Polo, caravanners were mostly short- and medium-distance hauliers who marketed and took on freight along a given beat. Goods heading east included gold, silver, ivory, jade and other precious stones, wool, Mediterranean coloured glass, grapes, wine, spices and – early Parthian crazes – acrobats and ostriches. Going west were silk, porcelain, spices, gems and perfumes. In the middle lay Central Asia and Iran, great clearing houses that provided the horses and Bactrian camels that kept the goods flowing.

The Silk Road gave rise to unprecedented trade, but its glory lay in the interchange of ideas. The religions alone present an astounding picture of diversity and tolerance: Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism and shamanism coexisted along the 'road' until the coming of Islam.

The Silk Road was eventually abandoned when the new European powers discovered alternative sea routes in the 15th century.



NADER SHAH & KARIM KHAN ZAND

The Safavids were briefly rescued from oblivion by a soldier of fortune, Nader Shah, who in 1729 scattered the Afghans, along with the Russian and Turkish forces that were encroaching in the north. Nader Shah ruled Persia in all but name until 1736, when he grew tired of the pretence and installed himself as shah, thus ending once and for all the Safavid dynasty. To describe Nader Shah as a brilliant but war-loving mercenary is something of an understatement. He was a megalomaniac who, in a show of supreme self-confidence, invaded India in 1738 and returned with loot that included the Kuh-e Nur and Darya-e Nur diamonds; see the latter in the National Jewels Museum (p105). His constant warring rapidly wore out the country and it was a relief to everyone when he was assassinated in 1747.

A Lor from western Iran (for more on the Lors, see the boxed text, p207), Karim Khan Zand (r 1750–79) grabbed power. Almost uniquely, he had little interest in warfare. Instead he is remembered for moving the capital to Shiraz, where he built the impressive Arg-e Karim Khan (p271) and the Regent's Mosque (Masjed-e Vakil; p271).

A steady trickle of European travellers and adventurers came, saw and wrote about Safavid Persia, most notably the French jewellers Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) and John Chardin (1643–1713), and English buccaneers Sir Anthony Shirley (1565–1635) and Sir Robert Shirley (1581–1628), in the early 17th century.

THE QAJARS & THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

The Qajar dynasty was a disaster for Iran, transforming more than 2000 years of empire and influence into an international laughing stock in just a few decades. Following Karim Khan's death in 1779, bitter and twisted eunuch Aga Mohammad Khan united the Azari Qajars and created a new capital in the village of Tehran. By 1795 he had wrested control of Persia from Lotf Ali Khan, but just a year later Aga Mohammad Khan was murdered by his own servants.

Karim Khan Zand rose to rule much of Persia from a power base of just a few rural families. He is renowned as a more compassionate, humble ruler than any in Persian history, and he insisted upon being called *vakil* (regent) rather than shah.

Both the Russians and British had their eyes on Iran. Russia was determined to gain access to the Persian Gulf and India, while Britain was equally determined to deny them. During the undistinguished reign of big-bearded Fath Ali Shah (r 1797–1834) Russia captured Georgia, Shirvan (today's Azerbaijan), eastern Armenia and Daghestan, all semi-independent entities previously within Persia's sphere of influence.

While responsible for a broad campaign of modernisation, Nasser al-Din Shah (r 1848–96) was generally more interested in collecting art, building museums and servicing his numerous wives. He sired hundreds of princes, all of whom took from the national treasury at will. Inevitably, the Russians asserted control over northern Iran while the British ran things in the south.

The Qajar shahs spent so much on luxuries – such as the Golestan Palace (p101) – that the treasury needed constant topping up through hasty sales of state assets. Foreign buyers were more than happy to pick up the bargains. In one notorious incident, Nasser al-Din tried to sell exclusive rights to exploit all Iran's economic resources (including all the banks, mines and railways) for a one-off sum of UK£40,000 to be followed by payments of UK£10,000 for the next 25 years. He was made to cancel the deal once news of its absurdity leaked out.

When news broke of an attempt to sell the tobacco monopoly, discontent boiled over into revolt. In 1906 the third-last Qajar shah, Muzaffar al-Din (r 1896–1907), was forced to introduce an embryo parliament, the first Majlis, and a constitution. It became known as the Constitutional Revolution.

Worried that such a helpful shah was being weakened, Russia persuaded him to backtrack on his promises. The Majlis was attacked with artillery and in 1908 martial law and dictatorship were introduced by his ruthless son Shah Mohammad Ali, leading to an uprising in Tabriz in 1909 (p146). Shah Mohammad Ali was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, who was still a child. The furore soon died down and in 1911 Shah Ahmad quietly abolished the second Majlis.

When Cossack-soldier-turned-king Reza Shah moved into the Green Palace (p111) he found the dazzling mirrored tiles and four-post bed to be a bit too much, so slept on the floor.

During WWI both Britain and Russia occupied parts of Iran while the Turks ravaged the partly Christian northwest. Inspired by the new regime in Russia, Gilan (the west Caspian area) broke away in 1920 to form a Soviet republic under Kuchuk Khan. The weak Qajar shah seemed unable to respond, so Britain backed charismatic army officer Reza Khan, who swiftly retook Gilan before ousting Shah Ahmad.

THE PAHLAVIS

From the moment in 1921 that Reza Khan staged a coup d'etat to, in effect, end Qajar rule, the poorly educated but wily soldier was king of Persia in all but name. Initially he installed a puppet prime minister, but in 1923 he took that role himself and in 1925 crowned himself, Napoleon-like, as the first shah of the Pahlavi line.

Reza Shah, as he became known, set himself an enormous task: to drag Iran into the 20th century in the same way his neighbour Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was modernising Turkey. Literacy, transport infrastructure, the health system, industry and agriculture had all been neglected and were pathetically underdeveloped. Like Atatürk, Reza Shah aimed to improve the status of women and to that end he made wearing the chador (black cloak) illegal. Like Atatürk, too, he insisted on the wearing of Western dress and moved to crush the power of the religious establishment.

Unlike his royal predecessors and the clerics who followed, who concentrated on religious architecture, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi commissioned secular buildings in strikingly modern styles. Tehran's Carpet Museum of Iran (p108), Museum of Contemporary Art (p108), Tezatre Shahr (City Theatre; p122) and monolithic Azadi Tower (p114) are among the best.

However, Reza had little of the subtlety of Atatürk and his edicts made him many enemies. Some women embraced his new dress regulations, but others found them impossible to accept. Even today, some older Iranians talk of how their mothers didn't leave home for six years; too scared of prosecution to go outside wearing a head-covering, too ashamed to leave home without one.

Despite being nominally neutral during WWII, Reza's outspoken support of the Nazis proved too much for Britain and Russia. In 1941 Reza was forced into exile in South Africa, where he died in 1944. The British arranged for his 22-year-old son, Mohammad Reza, to succeed him. In 1943 at the Tehran Conference, Britain, Russia and the USA signed the Tehran Declaration, accepting the independence of Iran. The young Mohammad Reza regained absolute power – under heavy influence from the British.

By now the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later British Petroleum) was churning out petro-dollars by the million and there were calls for it to be nationalised. When prime minister Ali Razmara was assassinated in 1951, 70-year-old nationalist Dr Mohammad Mossadegh, leader of the National Front Movement, swept into office on the back of promises to repatriate that money. Mossadegh succeeded in nationalising Anglo-Iranian as the National Iranian Oil Company, but in 1953 he was removed in a coup organised by the USA and Britain (see the boxed text, opposite).

With Mossadegh gone, the US government encouraged the shah to press ahead with a program of social and economic modernisation dubbed the White Revolution because it was intended to take place without bloodshed. Many Iranians remember this period fondly for reforms including the further emancipation of women and improved literacy. But for a conservative, mainly rural Muslim population it was all too fast. The religious establishment, the ulema, also took exception to land reforms depriving them of rights and electoral reforms giving votes to non-Muslims.

By 1962 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then living in Qom, had emerged as a figurehead for opposition to the shah. In 1964 the shah approved a bill giving US soldiers in Iran complete immunity from arrest. Khomeini responded by claiming the shah had 'reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog', because if anyone ran over a dog in America they would be prosecuted for doing so, but if an American ran over an Iranian he could do so with impunity. The shah reacted by banishing Khomeini, who fled first to Turkey and then to Iraq.

All The Shah's Men, by Stephen Kinzer, is the incredible true story of the CIA's coup to overthrow Mohammad Mossadegh. It reads like a thriller and draws a line between the coup and the rise of Islamic terrorism. Highly recommended.

In 1971 the shah organised lavish celebrations for the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, hoping to make himself more popular by fanning the flames of nationalism. More than 60 international monarchs and heads of state came to the party, held in a purpose-built tent city (p283) at Persepolis. The news coverage brought Iranian culture to the world, but at home it encouraged those who saw the shah as wasteful and became a rallying call for opposition groups.

Ironically, the 1974 oil price revolution also contributed to the shah's undoing. In just one year the income from oil shot from US$4 billion to US$20 billion, but the shah allowed US arms merchants to persuade him to squander much of this vast new wealth on weapons that then stood idle

MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH & THE CIA'S FIRST COUP

Before Lumumba in Congo, Sukarno in Indonesia and Allende in Chile, Mohammad Mossadegh was the first democratically elected leader toppled by a CIA coup d'etat. Mossadegh, a highly educated lawyer, paid the price for seeking a better deal for Iran from the hugely profitable oilfields run by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. When the British refused Iran a fairer share, he nationalised the company and expelled British diplomats, whom he rightly suspected of plotting to overthrow him. The significance of this act went far beyond the borders of Iran, and Mossadegh was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1951 for his influence in encouraging developing nations to shake off the colonial yoke.

The British were desperate to get 'their' oil back. They encouraged a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil and worked hard to muddy Mossadegh's name in Iran and internationally. After arch-colonialist Winston Churchill was re-elected in 1952, he managed to persuade the new Eisenhower administration in the USA that Mossadegh had to go. The CIA's Operation Ajax was the result. Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of former president Theodore Roosevelt and one of the agency's top operatives, established a team in the basement of the US Embassy in Tehran and soon won the shah's support. But that alone wasn't enough and another US$2 million was spent buying support from senior clerics, military officers, newspaper editors and thugs.

The CIA was new at the coup game – it started badly when Mossadegh loyalists arrested the coup leaders on 16 August. The shah promptly fled to Rome, but three days later there was a second attempt and Mossadegh was toppled. The shah returned and the oil industry was denationalised, but the British monopoly was broken and for its trouble the USA claimed a 40% stake.

Check out www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-cia-index.html for the 96-page CIA history of the coup.

in the desert. As the world slipped into recession, oil sales slumped and several planned social reforms were cut. The public was not happy.

In 1971 the Arabic Islamic calendar was replaced by a 'Persian' calendar (p375).

THE REVOLUTION

Since the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty, resistance had smouldered away and occasionally flared into violence. Students wanted faster reform, devout Muslims wanted reforms rolled back, and everyone attacked the Pahlavis' conspicuous consumption.

The opposition came from secular, worker-communist and Islamic groups whose common denominator was a desire to remove the shah. Exiled Ayatollah Khomeini was an inspirational figure, but contrary to the official Iranian portrayal other people did most of the organising. Among the most prominent was Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, a popular Islamic reformist whose ideas were considerably less fundamental than Khomeini's.

My Uncle Napoleon, by Iraj Pezeshkzad and published in the early 1970s, was an instant bestseller. In 1976 it became a TV series, and its story – of three families living under the tyranny of a paranoid patriarch – became a cultural reference point in the lead-up to revolution.

As the economy faltered under the shah's post oil-boom mismanagement, the opposition grew in confidence and organised massive street demonstrations and small-scale sabotage. The shah responded with brutal force and his security agency, Savak, earned a horrific reputation for torture and killing. In November 1978, he imposed martial law and hundreds of demonstrators were killed in Tehran, Qom and Tabriz. America's long-standing support began to falter and in December the now-desperate shah appointed veteran opposition politician Shapur Bakhtiar as prime minister. It didn't work. On 16 January 1979 (now a national holiday), Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his third wife, Farah Diba, finally fled. He died in Egypt in 1980.

Khomeini's frequent broadcasts on the BBC's Persian Service had made him the spiritual leader of opposition. But at 77 years old, everyone expected that once the shah was ousted he would assume a more hands-off, statesman-like role. They were wrong. On his return to Iran on 1 February 1979, Khomeini told the exultant masses of his vision for a new Iran, free of foreign influence and true to Islam: 'From now on it is I who will name the government'.

AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

An earnest, belligerent and intensely committed man, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is reviled and little understood in the West but revered as a saint by many Iranians. Khomeini was a family man of modest means whose wife hennaed her hair orange until his death; a religious leader who reduced the age at which 'women' could marry to nine; a war leader who sent young men to their deaths on the Iraqi front by persuading them they would go straight to paradise as martyrs; the man who proclaimed the infamous fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

Born in the village of Khomein in central Iran about 1900, Sayyed Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini followed in the family tradition by studying theology, philosophy and law in the holy city of Qom. By the 1920s he had earned the title of ayatollah (the highest rank of a Shiite cleric) and settled down to teach and write.

He first came to public attention in 1962 when he opposed the shah's plans to reduce the clergy's property rights and emancipate women. In 1964 he was exiled to Turkey, before moving on to Iraq. In 1978 Saddam Hussein expelled Khomeini and he moved to Paris. When the shah fled in 1979, Khomeini returned to take control of Iran through force of character and ruthless efficiency, and remained leader of the world's first Islamic theocracy until his death in 1989 (p131).

Today, Khomeini is officially known as Imam Khomeini, raising him to the level of saint, and almost every town in the country has a street or square named after him. His portrait, with prominent eyebrows and stern expression, is everywhere, often beside and thus legitimising that of the current leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLUTION

Ayatollah Khomeini soon set about proving the adage that 'after the revolution comes the revolution'. His intention was to set up a clergy-dominated Islamic Republic, and he achieved this with brutal efficiency.

Groups such as the People's Feda'iyin, the Islamic People's Mojahedin, and the communist Tudah had been instrumental in undermining the shah and his government. But once the shah was safely out of the way they were swept aside. People disappeared, executions took place after brief and meaningless trials, and minor officials took the law into their own hands. The facts – that the revolution had been a broad-based effort – were revised and the idea of the Islamic Revolution was born. Leaders such as Ayatollah Taleqani were sidelined or worse. Taleqani is still revered as a hero of the revolution, but many Iranians believe he died because Khomeini refused him the asthma inhalers he needed to survive.

Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, by Nikki R Keddie, is a thorough analysis of the causes and effects of the revolution, focusing more on economic than religious factors.

Following a referendum in March 1979, in which 98.2% of the population voted in favour, the formation of the world's first Islamic Republic was announced on 1 April 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini became the Supreme Leader.

Almost immediately, the Islamic Republic was viewed suspiciously and accused of adopting confrontational policies designed to promote other Islamic revolutions. In November 1979, conservative university students burst into the US embassy and took 52 staff hostage, an action blessed by Khomeini. For the next 444 days the siege of the US embassy dogged US president, Jimmy Carter. Worse still, a *Boy's Own*–style attempt to rescue the hostages ran aground quite literally when the helicopters supposed to carry them to safety collided in the desert near Tabas. Amid the crisis, presidential elections were held and Abol Hasan Bani-Sadr, Khomeini's friend since the days of his Paris exile, was elected, with Mohammad Ali Rajai as his prime minister.

Shah of Shahs, by journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, is a fast-paced yet perceptive account of Iran in the decade leading to the revolution, written in a style that draws attention to the absurdities of a deadly serious situation.

THE IRAN–IRAQ WAR

In 1980, hoping to take advantage of Iran's domestic chaos, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein made an opportunistic land grab on oil-rich Khuzestan province, claiming it was a historic part of Iraq. It was a catastrophic miscalculation that resulted in eight years of war and up to 500,000 deaths on each side.

Ironically, the invasion proved to be pivotal in solidifying support for the shaky Islamic Revolution by providing an obvious enemy to rally against and an opportunity to spread the revolution by force of arms. Iraq was better equipped and better supplied, but Iran could draw on a larger population and a fanaticism fanned by its mullahs.

Fighting was fierce, with poison gas and trench warfare being seen for the first time since WWI. A group of Islamic volunteers called Basijis, many as young as 13, chose to clear minefields by walking through them, confident they would go to heaven as martyrs. By July 1982 Iran had forced the Iraqis back to the border, but rather than accept peace Iran adopted a new agenda that included occupying Najaf and Karbala, important Shia pilgrimage sites. The war dragged on for another six years, ending shortly after an Iranian airliner was shot down by the US Navy over the Persian Gulf.

Although nominally *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* by Azar Nafisi, is a work of literary criticism, in reality Nafisi writes a beautiful and powerfully moving memoir of her life in Iran after the revolution.

During the war Iraq bombed nearly 3000 villages and 87 Iranian cities, virtually obliterating Abadan and Khorramshahr. Millions of Iranians lost their homes and jobs, and some 1.2 million fled the battle zone, many moving permanently to far-away Mashhad. A cease-fire was finally negotiated in mid-1988, though prisoners were still being exchanged in 2003. Iranians

refer to the war as the 'Iraq-imposed war' and it remains a huge influence on the country. Pictures of martyrs can be seen in every city, and barely a day passes without TV broadcasting interviews with veterans.

Bashu, the Little Stranger, Behram Beiza'i's 1986 film, tells the story of a little boy finding a new mother in southern Iran. It was the first antiwar film, made at the height of the Iran–Iraq War.

While war was raging, different factions within Iran continued to jostle for supremacy. In June 1981 a bomb blast at the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party killed its founder Ayatollah Beheshti and 71 others, including four cabinet ministers. A second bomb in August killed President Rajai and the new prime minister. The Islamic People's Mojahedin, once co-revolutionaries but now bitter enemies of the clerics, were blamed. By the end of 1982 all effective resistance to Khomeini's ideas had been squashed.

AFTER KHOMEINI

When Ayatollah Khomeini died on 4 June 1989 he left an uncertain legacy. Khomeini's position as Supreme Leader passed to the former president, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The presidency, which had previously been a largely ceremonial post, was transformed with the election of the cleric Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who began a series of much-needed economic reforms. Despite being widely seen as the richest – and most corrupt – man in the country, Rafsanjani was re-elected in 1993. Social and religious conservatism remained firmly ingrained in Iranian society and he could never be described as a liberal, but domestic policy took on a far more pragmatic tone. This included an aggressive campaign to curb sky-rocketing population growth through contraception. A greater focus on the poor brought electricity, running water, telephone and sealed roads to rural areas long ignored under royal rule.

At the urging of the new Islamic government, Iranian women had, on average, six children each during the 1980s; the population almost doubled in a decade.

On the international front, however, Iran continued to be unpopular. In 1995 the USA slapped a trade embargo on Iran on the grounds that it was a state sponsor of terrorism.

KHATAMI & THE REFORMISTS

In 1997 the moderate, reform-minded Ayatollah Hojjat-ol-Eslam Sayyed Mohammad Khatami won the presidency in a landslide. Almost everyone, and especially the ruling clerics, was shocked. Khatami was a liberal by Iranian standards, but he was also an insider. He had studied theology in Qom, had held important posts during the Iran–Iraq War and served as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance for 10 years until he was forced to resign in 1992 – for being too liberal.

During the 1980s and early '90s several high-profile opposition leaders were assassinated while in exile in Europe. These included Kurdish human rights activist Dr Kazem Rajavi, shot in Switzerland in 1990, and former prime minister Shapur Bakhtiar, stabbed to death in Paris in 1991.

His election sent an overwhelming message of discontent to the ruling Islamic conservatives and resulted in a spontaneous, unlegislated liberalisation. Suddenly, harsh laws on dress and social interaction were no longer being strictly enforced and women, especially those in Tehran and other major cities, embraced make-up, figure-hugging manteaus and hair-colouring products with unbridled enthusiasm.

Khatami promised 'change from within', a policy of avoiding confrontation with the clerics and engineering change from within the theocratic system. When reformers won a large majority in the Majlis in 2000 and Khatami was re-elected with 78% of the vote in 2001, hopes were high. But what the public wanted and what Khatami and the Majlis were able to deliver proved to be very different. Of the hundreds of pieces of legislation the Majlis passed during its four-year term, more than 35% were vetoed by the conservatives on the Guardian Council (see Government, p42).

The conservative backlash didn't stop there. Reformist intellectuals were assassinated, students beaten for protesting, dozens of reform-minded newspapers were closed and editors imprisoned. It was an effective campaign. With the reformers either unable or too scared to institute their promised reforms, the public lost faith in them and the idea of 'change from within'.

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By 2004 living in Iran had become significantly easier than it had been before Khatami's election. Women had won greater freedoms, limited economic liberalisation had spurred economic growth, and art and cultural activities were (relatively) thriving. Huge amounts of money were being spent on infrastructure, with new roads, railways and, in four cities, underground railways. But many Iranians were disheartened. So many promised reforms – both economic and social – had not been delivered that they lost sight of what had been achieved. The Majlis elections in February 2004 saw more than 2000 mostly Reformist candidates, including 82 sitting members, barred from running by the Guardian Council and many chose not to vote as a means of protesting. The conservatives were swept back into power and for the last year of his presidency, Khatami was almost powerless.

Shortly after the 1989 publication in Iran of *Women Without Men*, the author, Shahrnush Parsipur, was arrested and jailed. Banned in Iran, the novel is an allegory of women's lives, following five women who come to live around a garden.

IRAN TODAY

In May 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president. The former Republican Guard member and Tehran mayor was seen as a lightweight compared with the seven alternative candidates and his populist campaign had been ignored by most 'experts'. Which is exactly why he won.

Despite his religious conservatism, Ahmadinejad's man-of-the-people image appealed to a population frustrated and angry with the clique of clerics, military and their cronies that had become Iran's new elite. His message was summed up in an advertisement showing Ahmadinejad sitting in his sparsely furnished 750-square-foot south Tehran apartment while a narrator asked: 'Where's the swimming pool?' The contrast with his opponent in the run-off, ex-president Rafsanjani, was stark: everyman versus the wealthiest man in Iran. Sure, Ahmadinejad would be a gamble, but what did the poor have to lose?

From the outset Ahmadinejad's presidency has been unconventional, even by Iranian standards. Regular promises to 'put petroleum income on people's tables', stimulate the economy and create jobs went down well initially (for more details on Iran's economy, see p43). But within months, Ahmadinejad replaced many experienced bureaucrats with his own ex-Revolutionary Guard cronies, and the impossible promises were being seen for what they were. Employment wasn't rising but inflation was. Social crackdowns were more frequent and strict. Ahmadinejad might be honest and have good intentions, Iranians were saying, but he's incompetent.

On 26 December 2003, the oasis city of Bam was devastated by an earthquake that killed more than 31,000 people and destroyed the ancient Arg-e Bam. See p322 for details.

The only issue on which he had wide-ranging support was the nuclear energy program (not bombs). Also see the Nuclear Issue (p42) and Snapshot (p25). In a region where the USA is widely perceived as arrogant and overbearing, Ahmadinejad's high-profile refusals to be pushed around (or negotiate) brought him and his stone-white 'Ahmadinejad jacket' celebrity status. His statements about Israel were more controversial, but the international spotlight rarely wavered.

The majority of Iranians were less than impressed, if not outright cynical. What was their president doing gallivanting across the world stage, provoking sanctions and perpetuating the perception that Iranians were all crazy, when things at home were not good at all? And, thanks to the growing isolation, getting worse. Petrol prices rose and quotas were introduced. Getting a visa to travel had become even harder and dissent was punished. Where was the promised oil money on the table?

WHY IS IRAN SO UNPOPULAR?

From the moment the Islamic Republic was formed Iran has been a pariah state. The reasons seem simple enough. Three decades of outrageously provocative statements and, less often, actions dominate Iran's media image and the response of foreign governments to it. Think of Iran and most people think burning flags, chador-clad women and bearded men demanding 'Death to America, Down With Israel', support for 'terrorist' organisations in Lebanon and Palestine, and American hostage diplomats. More recently, President Ahmadinejad and his pronouncements on nuclear power and Israel, in particular, have dominated coverage.

Unfortunately for the rest of Iran, it is rarely reported that many of the president's views are out of step with average Iranians. Following is a brief summation of Iran's stated policies on key issues of discord.

The Nuclear Issue

Iran says it is developing a nuclear energy program as an alternative to fossil fuels. It says nuclear weapons are not part of the plan. But Iran's refusal to declare the program for years, or to allow full or timely inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, has raised persistent doubts. For most Iranians, completing the nuclear fuel cycle is a matter of national pride, but few want the bomb. Iran sticks vehemently to its 'peaceful purposes' line. Why build a nuclear reactor and need another country to supply the fuel, it asks, when we can produce it ourselves? It's hard to argue with that but if, after all the denials, Iran does produce a nuclear bomb, whatever little credibility the Iranian government retains in the international community will be gone.

Israel

Israel, and the Israeli role in the problems in Palestine, has been the subject of verbal attacks by Iranian leaders for 30 years. Throw in the nuclear fears and it becomes even more combustible. Ahmadinejad was reported as saying Israel should be 'wiped off the map'. The translation of what he actually said in Farsi has been widely debated, but the message that went out was fairly clear: Iran wants to nuke Israel. Fortunately, about 99% of Iranians – and perhaps even Ahmadinejad himself – don't want this at all; see Snapshot (p25).

'State sponsor of terrorism'

Another old chestnut – Iran has long been accused of establishing and funding Palestinian 'terror' groups Hezbollah and Hamas. Iran has never admitted this, though the evidence is strong. Exactly how much influence Iran has over these groups is unknown, though that didn't stop George Bush describing Iran as a 'state sponsor of terror' as he lumped it into the Axis of Evil.

In early 2008 Majlis elections saw conservative candidates retain a clear majority after many Reformist candidates were barred from running. The most notable change was that supporters of President Ahmadinejad did badly, often being defeated by more pragmatic conservatives. Presidential elections are scheduled for May 2009. For more on Iran today, see Snapshot (p25).

Government

All Iranian men and women can vote after the age of 15.

Iran's system of government, the Islamic theocracy, is unique in the world. In effect, it is two parallel governments: one elected and comprised of the usual ministries and bureaucracies found in any country; and another that exists in the shadows, controlled largely by Islamic clerics, rarely reported about in the media and answerable only to the Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since 1989.

The 'normal' branch of government comprises a president and the Majlis, Iran's parliament. The president is elected in a direct vote, as in the US. The 290-member Majlis is elected at a different time. Both serve four-year terms, with the president serving a maximum of two terms. Lower levels of government are a mix of elected – such as city mayor – and appointed officials.

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The relationship between the president, his government and the Majlis is similar to that of the US President, his administration and the Senate. The president is head of government and can fill government posts from the level of minister right down to provincial positions. He can set and pursue policy, but does not always have the final say because he is not the head of state.

For millennia Iran was called Persia. However, Reza Shah hated the name and in 1934 changed it to Iran – derived directly from Aryan (meaning 'of noble origin').

That role belongs to the aptly-named Supreme Leader. Unlike constitutional monarchs or ceremonial heads-of-state, Iran's Supreme Leader is supremely powerful, though the influence he chooses to exercise is seldom reported in the press.

He sits above the Guardian Council, a 12-man group that interprets the constitution and can veto any law passed by the Majlis. This was a power regularly exercised when the Reformists dominated the Majlis between 2000 and 2004. The Guardian Council also decides who can run for president or seats in the Majlis; in 2008 more than 2000 out of a total of 7597 would-be candidates, meaning only about one third of seats had a Reformist on the ballot. The make-up of the Guardian Council illustrates just how concentrated power is at the top of Iranian politics. Six of the men are Islamic jurists appointed by the Supreme Leader, while the other six are Islamic jurists elected by the Majlis from men appointed by the head of the judiciary – who is himself appointed by the Supreme Leader.

The influence of this unelected branch of government extends far beyond the power of veto. The Basij (Volunteers), Sepah and Pasdaran are hardline armed militias with hundreds of thousands of members, and they report not to the president but to the Supreme Leader. They are, in effect, a second police force, though one that is more influential than the formal uniformed police. For example, during the 2000–2004 Reformist-dominated Majlis, they worked tirelessly to undermine both Khatami and the parliament. For months Basijis followed sitting Majlis members around, building dossiers that 'proved' they were unworthy of office. Presented with such evidence, the Guardian Council then banned them from standing in the next election.

Economy

Although Iran is traditionally an agrarian society, the world's second-largest known reserves of both oil and natural gas have made fossil fuels the energy behind the whole economy. Oil accounts for 80% of export earnings and about 45% of gross domestic product. Record high oil prices have been a boon for Iran, with much revenue spent on large infrastructure projects. But Iran is dangerously reliant on this single source of income and, unlike its Persian Gulf neighbours, has done little to address the issue.

President Ahmadinejad has said he prays to God he will 'never know about economics'. His populist ideas include privatising state-run industries and giving 'justice shares' to ordinary citizens. These people, however, are sceptical.

At a glance, the numbers don't sound so bad. The Iranian economy has been growing at a respectable 5% a year, foreign debt is less than US$10 billion, and a relatively small 16% of people live below the poverty line. Look deeper at this state-dominated economy, however, and it's much less encouraging. More than 25% of GDP is spent on subsidies, the vast majority on making petrol and electricity cheap. Such cheap fuel has led to a 10% annual increase in consumption. And with Iran's creaking old refineries only able to pump two thirds of what they could 30 years ago, Iran had been forced to import about 45% of its refined oil – mostly as petrol. Local critics ask why some of these subsidies haven't been used to upgrade existing infrastructure.

That the government controls more than 60% of the economy is another factor stifling growth. Much of this control is in the hands of *bonyads,* shadowy state-religious foundations that are well-connected and exempt from tax, thus out-competing most private business. The main nongovernment industries are agriculture (especially pistachios), carpet weaving and manufacturing.

Economic sanctions have made doing business significantly more difficult for Iranians and reduced foreign investment to a trickle. But after years of isolation and the experience of surviving eight years of war, Iran's economy is betterequipped to withstand sanctions than most.

The Culture

Kamin Mohammadi & Andrew Burke

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Iranians are the most surprising people. Where you might expect them to be austere, they are charming; rather than dour, they are warm; and instead of being hostile to foreigners, they are welcoming and endlessly curious.

The truth of the Iranian national psyche lies in the gap between reality and Western perception. Before the revolution, the West's experience of Iranians was drawn from the country's elite that travelled and came abroad for their education. The revolution turned that image on its head. Suddenly Iranians were scary, hysterical people chanting 'Death to America', covering their women in black chadors, and supporting a fundamentalist regime that apparently took their society back to the Middle Ages.

The area of land that is Iran has been continuously inhabited by a single nation for longer than any other land.

Let's dispel these images. Despite the Islamic government and the Sharia laws that rule the country, Iranians are not frightening people. They are generally warm and welcoming to a degree that can be, and often is, embarrassing to Westerners. Any rhetoric that comes from the regime regarding countries such as the USA rarely extends to individuals from those countries.

Iranians take their role as hosts very seriously; there are well-developed rules governing social conduct and interaction. This comes from a genuine desire to put others' needs first and please where possible. *Ta'arof*, the Iranian system of courtesy, can be a minefield if unknown (see below),

TA'AROF

At the end of your first taxi trip in Iran, there's a good chance you'll ask the driver *'chand toman'* (how many tomans?) and he'll reply *'ghabeli nadari'*. His words mean 'it's nothing', but the taxi driver still expects to get paid. This is *ta'arof,* a system of formalised politeness that can seem very confusing to outsiders, but is a mode of social interaction in which everyone knows their place and their role.

Despite the apparent contradictions in the taxi, you'll soon learn that *ta'arof* is more about people being sensitive to the position of others than mere routine politeness. *Ta'arof* gives everyone the chance to be on equal terms: this ritual display of vulnerability is never abused. So for example, an offer of food will be turned down several times first, giving the person making the offer the chance to save face if in reality they cannot provide a meal. A good rule is to always refuse any offer three times but, if they continue to insist, do accept. When a shopkeeper, restaurateur or (less often) a hotel manager refuses payment when asked for a bill, do remember that this is just *ta'arof* – don't leave without paying! If you accept an offer that is in fact *ta'arof,* the shocked look on the vendor's face should soon reveal your error.

Ta'arof also involves showing consideration of others in your physical actions, so try not to sit with your back to people, especially your elders, and be prepared for a delay at every doorway as Iranians insist that whoever they're with goes through the door first with repeated *'befarmayid'* (please). Be prepared for lots of small talk at the beginning of any exchange, as the health of every member of your family is enquired after. Try to return this courtesy as it will be well appreciated. Also be prepared for questions considered quite personal in the West, such as your salary, marital status, why you don't have children and so on. This is quite normal. Steer away from politics or religion unless your Iranian host broaches the subject first.

And don't forget to pay the taxi driver…think of it this way: it would be bad form for the taxi driver to not offer you the trip for free, and worse form for you to accept his offer.

but it makes Iran a haven for travellers – you will be treated with unfailing politeness wherever you go.

A glance at Iran's history will give another insight into the Iranian character. Despite several devastating invasions, Iranians have always managed to keep their own unique culture alive and somehow subvert the invading culture and assimilate it with their own. Thus the Iranian way is to bend to the prevailing wind only to spring back in time with regained poise. Ever-changing fortunes have taught Iranians to be indirect people, unwilling to ever answer with a bald negative and unable to countenance rudeness or public displays of anger.

The name Iran – from the Middle Persian 'Eran' – comes from the term for Aryan, 'the land of the nobles'. It was first used in the 1st millennium BC.

Iran's attitudes to the West are contradictory. Whereas most Iranians can talk at length about the faults of Western governments, holding first the British and then the Americans responsible for much of Iran's 20th-century history (with some justification), they can nonetheless admire Western attitudes. They will alternately boast of Iran's superiority in terms of culture, home life and morality and then apologise for Iran's inferiority.

Remember that Iranians are proud of their Aryan roots, which distinguish them from the people of south Asia or the Middle East. Iranians intensely dislike being classed as Arabs, who remain unforgiven for their invasion of Iran in the 7th century. Iranian racism is reserved for Afghan refugees and the Arabs of neighbouring countries, who are regarded as having no culture aside from what their invasion of Iran gave them. But such is the power of Iranian courtesy and hospitality that you will rarely see such attitudes displayed openly and especially not extended to travellers.

Shiites were historically persecuted by the Sunni majority and so developed a doctrine whereby it is fine to conceal one's faith in order to escape persecution.

The Iranian spirit is tolerant and eternally buoyant. The Iranian plateau can be a harsh land, hence the necessary creativity of the Iranian soul. The traditional Persian garden, walled in from the desert and divided by water channels, occupies a profoundly primal place in the Iranian heart, inspiring the designs of rugs, informing the brilliance of miniatures and lending its colours to the tiled domes of mosques. The play of light and colour preoccupies all aspects of Iranian art and even Shiism can be seen as an expression of this, based as it is on the 'Light of Mohammad', a spiritual thread passed on through the imams.

In essence the Iranian soul is a deeply sensual one – perhaps the biggest surprise for Westerners expecting religious fanaticism and austerity. What is universal in the Iranian character is the enjoyment of the cadences of poetry read aloud, their wonderful food and their admiration of natural beauty. They are tied absolutely to the land, although most now live urban lives.

Somewhere in every modern Iranian the desires expressed by Omar Khayyam (p74) in his 12th-century poem *Rubaiyat* still resound:

A book of verses underneath the bough
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness
And wilderness is paradise enow.

LIFESTYLE

The majority of Iran's urban dwellers live in flats, and more and more houses in Tehran and the major cities are being razed, with apartment blocks taking their place. Land in Tehran is as expensive as many North American and European cities, and the cost of living increasingly prohibitive, particularly for young couples who can rarely afford their own

'WHAT IS YOUR IDEA ABOUT IRAN?' *Andrew Burke*

It's a question I've been asked hundreds of times while travelling in Iran, and one that simultaneously reflects a strong sense of national pride and an equally strong insecurity about Iran's place in the world. Iranians are well aware the rest of the world has a one-dimensional understanding of their country and culture. It's something they don't like, and something that many feel makes them – undeservedly – second class citizens of the world. Iranians like to think of themselves as equals to Europeans, and don't like being treated as second-rate or somehow fanatic when they visit these places.

So when you're inevitably asked what you think about Iran, remember it's a genuine question and you're expected to give a genuine answer. Quite often it leads to further conversation, particularly among young people who speak (and want to practise) English. These conversations are a great way to get a little further inside the Iranian way of thinking, and way of life, and for Iranians to better understand your way of life.

place. Many newly married couples will live with parents for years before they can afford their own place. With the monthly rent for an average two-bedroom property in Tehran coming in at around US$600, and the salary of a mid-ranking civil servant US$250 a month, the struggle to make ends meet dominates many lives. Hence, many ordinary Iranians work more than one job and, in the case of the middle classes, often both men and women work.

Dara and Sara are dolls developed by a government agency to promote traditional values and rival Barbie (though so far Barbie is winning hands down!).

The gap between rich and poor is huge, with the middle class shrinking. Teachers, earning not much more than US$200 a month, are the sort of state employee hardest hit by inflation rates running at between 13% and 25% per annum, depending on which arm of government you believe (see p25); unofficial figures are higher. On the other hand, a fortunate minority, some of whom have made a fortune from land and property speculation, continue to build lavish villas with swimming pools behind high walls in Tehran's breezy northern suburbs. Or they live in one of the many glistening new apartment towers punctuating the hilly north of Tehran, in marble-and-glass apartments filled with cappuccino machines, Le Corbusier chairs and home gyms. The women of such families tend not to work but instead lead lives revolving around their children, visiting parents and friends and working out with personal trainers.

In contrast a middle-class couple may leave their modest apartment together in the morning after the typical Persian breakfast of bread, cheese, jam and tea. Their children, if small, will mostly be looked after by grandparents while the couple go to work. One or the other may make it back for lunch, unless living in Tehran where distances are greater and traffic hideous. In the evening the family meal will be taken together, often with the wider family and friends. Iranians are social creatures and many visits take place after dinner.

Jafar Panahi directs a Kiarostami script in *Crimson Gold*. This Cannes award-winning film is a dark tale of the ruin of a young pizza delivery boy and the madness of modern life in Tehran.

In poorer or more traditional families it is likely that the woman will stay at home, in which case her whole day revolves around housework, providing meals for her family and shopping (in ultraconservative families the men may do the shopping).

Iranian meals can take time to prepare and though supermarkets exist and some pre-packaged ingredients are available, mostly there is no convenience food. Just buying, cleaning and chopping the herbs served with every meal can take a good chunk of the afternoon. Working women generally see to these tasks in the evenings, when they may prepare the next day's lunch. Perhaps in more enlightened families men help with the cooking and housework, but as both the mother and grown sons of

lonelyplanet.com

one Iranian family we know told us: 'men who cook are not real men'. Mostly it is safe to say that men's role in the home is largely confined to appreciating the quality of the cooking. Which they do well, Iranians being true gourmands.

Estimates suggest Iran has more than one million drug addicts, even though drug dealing and even drug use can be punishable by death. However, Iran has enlightened policies for treating addiction, including methadone programmes and clean needles for addicted prisoners.

Family life is still of supreme importance although there is ongoing talk of the erosion of family values. Often families include children, parents, grandparents and other elderly relatives. As a result Iranian society is more multigenerational than Western society, something that's most obvious on holidays and weekends when you'll see multigenerational families walking, laughing and picnicking together.

It's extremely unusual to live alone and unmarried children only leave home to attend university in another town or for work. Although the young people of Iran long for independence and their own space, just like their Western counterparts, there is not much cultural precedence for this. Those who do live alone – mostly men – are pitied. Women living alone are regarded with extreme suspicion, the presumption being that they are of dubious moral character. Being married and having a family is regarded as the happiest – not to mention the most natural – state of being.

Education is highly regarded; literacy is well above average for the region at 77%, according to Unesco. Many middle-class teenagers spend up to two years studying for university entrance exams, though the sheer number of entrants, ideological screening and places reserved for war veterans and their offspring make it very hard to get in. And once out of university, there is no guarantee of work. With the sexes segregated at school and boys and girls discouraged from socialising together, trying to get to know members of the opposite sex is a huge preoccupation for Iranian teenagers. They hang around shopping malls, in cafés and parks, parade up and down boulevards and spend lots of time cruising around in cars. This is especially noticeable in Tehran.

More than 97% of all children are enrolled in schools, with the rations being almost equal among girls and boys.

Drugs are available and increasingly a problem, from the army of war-veteran addicts to middle-class kids with nothing better to do, via a wide range of social problems, including a lack of jobs and opportunity. Social taboos make it hard for parents to seek help for addicted children, though when they do, they find Iran has some of the most progressive addiction treatment practices on earth. The phenomena of teenage runaways, especially girls, is another social problem that gives weight to those decrying the breakdown of traditional family structures.

For the most part, though, the average Iranian family is a robust unit and, despite economic and social differences, most operate in broadly the same way. They provide an essential support unit in a country with no state benefit system.

POPULATION

When Iranians meet they inevitably ask: 'Where are you from?' This is because Iran has a multiplicity of distinct ethnic identities who are all, nevertheless, Iranian. It is important to understand that though the indigenous ethnicities are very much part of life, there is a unifying Iranian identity that keeps all these separate peoples part of a bigger whole.

The population of greater Tehran is about 14 million – almost one-fifth of Iran's population. That's comparable to 50 million people living in New York City.

Iran's population has more than doubled since the revolution, as contraception was outlawed and large families encouraged. This policy was hastily reversed when the economic implications became clear and in recent years population growth has fallen sharply. Having said that, the number of Iranians is still growing and with all those born in the 1980s now beginning to have children of their own, expect that growth to continue. In 2007 the population was more than 70 million, with almost 70% of those under 30 years old and about one-third under 15, creating serious issues with unemployment and underemployment; (see Iran's Big Brain Drain, p53).

Rakhshan Bani Etemad's latest film, *Mainline* (2006), looks at drug addiction among a middle-class Iranian family, with the protagonist, Sara, played by her daughter, actress Baran Kosari.

The rapid urbanisation of Iranian society started well before 1979, but was intensified by the Iran–Iraq War. Now an estimated 70% of the population live in cities and large towns. Traditional rural life is becoming a thing of the past.

The following are brief summaries of the main ethnic groups you'll find in Iran. For more detailed descriptions, follow the cross-references to the relevant chapters.

Persians

Persians are the descendents of the original Elamite and Aryan races who arrived in what is now Iran during the 3rd millennium BC. The Persians, or Farsis, were originally the tribes that came to establish the Achaemenid Empire and now make up about 50% of the population. Persians are found across Iran, but Tehran, Mashhad, Esfahan, Yazd and particularly Shiraz have the highest concentrations. Farsi is the main Iranian language and Persian culture is often considered Iranian culture. For more on Persian culture, see Lifestyle (p46) and the National Psyche (p45).

Azaris

Commonly called 'Turks' in Iran, the Azaris make up about 25% of the population. They speak Azari Turkish, a dialect mixing Turkish with Farsi. They are concentrated in northwest Iran, in the Azarbayjan provinces around Tabriz. See p146 for more.

As the largest and most influential ethnic group, Persians fill most of Iran's senior government posts. However, people from most other ethnic groups (as opposed to religions) can still reach the top – Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is an ethnic Azari.

Kurds

Iran has more than six million Kurds. The Kurds lay claim to being the oldest Iranian people in the region, descended from the Medes. In Iran, Kurds live in the mountainous west, particularly Kordestan province near the Iraqi border. Kurds also live in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Kurds are widely feared and misunderstood by other Iranians. For more on the Kurds, see p190.

BUTT OF THE JOKE *Mark Elliott*

'If you drop your wallet in Qazvin, don't bend down to pick it up!' Political correctness has yet to touch the Iranian sense of humour and poor Qazvin, 'where birds fly on one wing', suffers constantly from jibes about predatory homosexuality. Other regions are equally unfairly stereotyped for jocular effect. Men from Rasht are portrayed as sexually liberal and constantly cuckold, Shirazis as lazy and fun-loving (in reality, everyone loves Shirazis), Turkmen as vengeful, Kurds as hot blooded and the Loris of Lorestan as congenitally untrustworthy. In common jokes Azaris are supposedly slow-witted yet cash-canny with Tabrizis surly and religious, but those from Orumiyeh, by contrast are relaxed and open-minded. Within their loose-fitting *dishdasha* robes, Iranian Arab men are whispered to be endowed with an especially impressive set of wedding tackle.

But it's Esfahanis, who are reputed to be cunning and tight with money, that you're most likely to hear about. One Yazdi man gleefully told us that Esfahanis are 'like the Scots; they'll do anything to save a few tomans'. While in Shahr-e Kord we were told a supposedly true story of how a tired truck driver from Shahr-e Kord had run into a brand new Mercedes driven by a Yazdi. The furious Yazdi's first accusatory question was: 'Are you Esfahani?' When the driver replied 'No, I'm from Shahr-e Kord', the Yazdi's mood immediately softened. 'Okay, then,' he's reported to have said, 'You're not Esfahani, you can go.'

Arabs

Arabs make up about 3% of the Iranian population and are settled mostly in Khuzestan, near the Iraq border, and on the coast and islands of the Persian Gulf. They are often called *bandari* (*bandar* means port), because of their historical links to the sea. Their differing language (a dialect of Arabic), dress and faith (many are Sunni Muslims) mean other Iranians consider them exotic. See also p291.

Bahman Ghobadi's film *A Time for Drunken Horses* shared Cannes' 2000 Caméra d'Or prize with Hassan Yektapanah's *Djom'eh*, another masterful film using children and nonprofessional actors to follow the story of Kurdish orphans living in a border village. Ghobadi has since had hits with *Turtles Can Fly* and *Half Moon*.

Lors

These proud people constitute about 2% of Iran's population and are thought to be descendants of the first peoples in the region, the Kassites and Medes. Many speak Lori, a mixture of Arabic and Farsi, and about half remain nomadic. Most of the rest live in or near the western province of Lorestan; see the boxed text, p207.

Turkmen

Making up about 2% of the population, Iranian Turkmen are descended from the nomadic Turkic tribes that once ruled Iran. They live in the northeast of the country, especially around Gorgan and Gonbad-e Kavus. They speak their own Turkic language; see the boxed text, p343.

Baluchis

The population of dry, barren Sistan va Baluchestan province is largely Baluchi. Baluchis comprise around 2% of Iran's population and are part of a greater whole that spreads into western Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their culture, language and dress are more associated with Pakistan than Iran; see p315.

Gabbeh, directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, is a beautiful film centred on a *gabbeh*, a type of Persian carpet made by Qashqa'i nomads, and the love story of a nomad girl with the same name.

Nomads

About a million people still live as nomads in Iran despite repeated attempts to settle them. Most migrate between cooler mountain areas in summer and low-lying warmer regions during winter, following pasture for their goats and sheep. Their migrations are during April and May, when they head uphill, returning during October and November. The majority of nomads are Turkic Qashqa'i and Bakhtiyari, but there are also nomadic Kurds, Lors and Baluchis; see Nomads, p285.

ESTEGHLAL OR PERSEPOLIS? *Andrew Burke*

The departure lounge at Mehrabad airport in Tehran is packed as I wait for one or another delayed domestic flight. But rather than reading books or arguing with ground staff, the vast majority of people (both men and women) are glued to the football on the big screens.

It's red versus blue, and as a shot whizzes past the post the entire departure lounge seems to simultaneously inhale or exhale, depending on who they're supporting. But this is not Man U and Chelsea, it's Iran's two biggest football clubs, Esteghlal and Persepolis.

Both teams are based in Tehran. Persepolis (pronounced 'perspolis' and playing in a red home strip) is known as the working-class team and has the dubious honour of being both the most-loved and most-hated team in Iran – by a considerable margin; Persepolis has won five national titles. Esteghlal (blue home strip) is the wealthy club and has won seven titles. Just to confuse you, Esteghlal Ahwaz also plays in the Persian Gulf Cup – the fourth name for the national league since its inception in the early 1970s.

If you're a football fan, it might be worth adopting one of these teams and boning up on the names of their top players if you fancy some lively debate. If that sounds too hard, don't worry – most Iranian football fans are fully conversant on the major European leagues.

SPORT

Iran is not a country you'll automatically associate with sport. And while football is a national obsession and you'll see kids playing in streets and squares across Iran, you won't see too many pitches. This is partly because religious strictures mean women should not see unrelated men in shorts, so most grounds are behind large walls. Women are barred from attending men's sporting events even though they are, conversely, free to watch them on TV; this oft-debated issue is dealt with in Jafar Panahi's film *Offside*.

Chess *(shatranj)* originally came from India, but it was refined into the version that is played today in ancient Persia.

Modern-day restrictions aside, Iran does have an interesting sporting history. Polo is believed to have originated in Iran and was certainly played during the reign of Darius the Great. A couple of millennia later, the huge main square of Esfahan was used for polo matches that would be watched by the Safavid Shah Abbas I from the balcony of the Ali Qapu Palace. Today you can still see the burly stone goal posts at either end of the square – see p238 – while stylised polo matches can be seen in thousands of miniature paintings. Real-life polo has made a tentative comeback in recent years, though you'll do very well to see it.

Another ancient sport peculiar to Iran is the *zurkhaneh* (literally, 'house of strength'); for details, see p52.

On the international stage, Iran has enjoyed considerable success in wrestling, weightlifting and tae kwon do – all of Iran's 46 Olympic medals (including 10 gold) have been won by men competing in these sports. As well as football, Iran competes internationally in volleyball, fencing, track, shooting and martial arts. Shooting and tae kwon do have become popular with women because it's possible to compete while wearing hejab.

As of February 2008, Iran ranked 39 in the FIFA World Rankings, making it the second highest-ranking team in Asia, after Japan. Iran's highest ever ranking was 15.

Skiing (p373) is the sport travellers are most likely to participate in. Iran has sent both cross-country and downhill skiers to the Winter Olympics, though with limited success so far. Mountaineering is also becoming more popular, which is not surprising given how many Iranians hike in the mountains or take a leisurely walk (accompanied by elaborate picnics) in the city parks on holidays.

Football

Iran has been competing in international football since 1941 and won three Asian Cups during the '60s and '70s. But it wasn't until the 1998 World Cup that it really made its mark on the world stage. Having been the last country to qualify after a dramatic away goals victory over Australia (a victory we're still being gleefully reminded of 10 years later!), Iran faced up to the USA and won a match charged up with two decades of political enmity. In Iran the success was greeted by the largest crowds since the revolution; so big, in fact, that the government became seriously worried that all this unity might morph into something more dangerous to the regime.

Offside, Jafar Panahi's 2006 film, follows a handful of women who disguise themselves as men to get into Azadi Stadium to watch Iran's 2006 World Cup qualifying match. It is funny, eloquent and offers a fascinating glimpse into the realities of life in Iran.

As it happened the team didn't progress beyond the group stage but when it returned home hundreds of women forced their way into the Azadi Sports Complex in Tehran to welcome them, to which the authorities turned a blind eye. That same year a women's football league was formed. All-women football matches are held indoors and no males – including male managers – are allowed to watch. In 2008 the Iranian women's team will compete in its first Asian Women's Cup.

Iran's men's professional league has 18 teams in the top division and runs from August to May, with games played most Thursdays and Fridays. For a word on the teams you need to know about, see the boxed text Esteghlal or Persepolis?, opposite.

ZURKHANEH

Unique to Iran, the *zurkhaneh* (literally, 'house of strength') dates back thousands of years. As it was refined through the ages, the *zurkhaneh* picked up different components of moral, ethical, philosophical and mystical values of Iranian civilisation, making it unique. Incorporating the spiritual richness of Sufism, traditional rituals of Mithraism and the heroism of Iranian nationalism, its appeal lies somewhere between sport, theatre and religion. A group of men, standing around the perimeter of a lowered pit, perform a series of ritualised feats of strength, all to the accompaniment of a leader pounding out a frenetic drumbeat. The leader sings verses from epics such as the *Shahnameh* and recites poetry by Hafez, while the performers whirl dervishlike in the centre of the floor. The performance, which takes place in a small, traditional gymnasium often decorated like a shrine, is open to the public and usually free (a small donation is sometimes expected); Esfahan, Yazd and Kerman are good places to look. You won't see too many local women in attendance – Western women are welcomed as honorary men.

For more information about *zurkhaneh,* see www.pahlavani.com.

IMMIGRATION & EMIGRATION

For almost three decades Iran has hosted huge populations of refugees with little international assistance. In 2007 more than 950,000 refugees were officially registered with the UNHCR, but it's believed the real number is closer to two million. The vast majority of these are Afghans, though there are also Iraqi Shiites and Kurds.

Afghan refugees started arriving in Iran in 1980 and soon spread out from camps on the eastern border into larger towns. Most have settled onto Iranian society's lowest rungs, living in the oldest and cheapest parts of Iranian cities and working menial jobs that Iranians don't want to do; almost every construction worker in the country is Afghan. Unlike Iraqis, Afghans don't have full access to health and education in Iran. In short, while the Iranian economy relies on the cheap labour provided by Afghans, they are widely distrusted and treated as second-class citizens.

Since the fall of the Taleban Iran has encouraged Afghans to go home. At the same time it has started fining and imprisoning employers who provide jobs to foreigners – usually Afghans – without work permits. By choice or otherwise, many Afghans have gone back to their homeland, but a good percentage of them cannot find jobs or secure lodgings and are soon back in Iran.

Most of the 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds who took refuge in Iran during the 1990s have since been repatriated. However, many of the more than 200,000 ethnic Iranians expelled from Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War have now settled permanently in Iran. Many were descended from Iranians who had settled in Iraq centuries before. Along with Iraqi Shiites who fled Saddam's Iraq, Iran resettled them all, despite the war-torn economy.

Since the revolution of 1979, there has been a steady emigration of educated Iranians abroad. Estimates of the number vary from 750,000 to 1.5 million. Most have settled in Western Europe, North America and, to a lesser extent, Australia and Turkey. Some of these early Iranian emigrants were members of the prerevolutionary political elite who succeeded in transferring much of their wealth out of Iran.

Other émigrés included members of religious minorities, especially Baha'is and Jews; intellectuals who had opposed the old regime, which they accused of suppressing free thought and who found the Islamic Republic no better; political opponents of the government in Tehran; and young men who deserted from the military or sought to avoid conscription.

MEDIA

The struggle for influence and power is increasingly played out in Iran's media. The relative freedom of the press, an achievement of President Khatami's government, saw a blossoming of ideas and opinions that challenged the official line. During the late 1990s dozens of proreform newspapers were opened. Many, however, were soon shut down and reformist writers and editors were jailed.

Officially, the constitution provides for freedom of the press as long as published material accords with Islamic principles. The publisher is required by law to have a valid publishing licence and those perceived as being anti-Islamic are not granted a licence. In practice, the criteria for being anti-Islamic have been broadly interpreted to encompass all materials that include anti-regime sentiment.

During his high-profile visit to New York in September 2007, President Ahmadinejad described Iranian people as 'the freest in the world'. As Paris-based NGO Reporters Sans Frontiers responded in an open letter to Mr Ahmadinejad, in the year prior to this statement 73 journalists had been arrested and 10 remained in prison when he made the claim. Two of these, magazine journalists working in Kordestan, had been sentenced to death by a revolutionary tribunal for conducting 'subversive activities against national security' and peddling 'separatist propaganda'.

Broadcast Media

In the broadcast media, satellite TV has provided many Iranians with a welcome window on the world. Although still officially banned, stand on the roof of any building in Tehran and you'll see a forest of dishes pointing skyward. For many, access to foreign broadcasters is almost unlimited. One Tehrani told us 'I just got rid of 200 stations, so now I only have about 800'. More than a dozen opposition TV stations beam Persian-language broadcasts into Iran, mostly from the USA. Arab and

IRAN'S BIG BRAIN DRAIN

Iran suffers from what has been described as the worst 'brain drain' in the world. The country's lack of internationally recognised educational facilities, high unemployment and restrictions on personal freedom mean many of its educated young people feel forced to leave. Economists reckon Iran needs to create more than a million jobs a year just to keep pace with its growing population. In reality, though, less than half this number is added. Unemployment is generally believed to be about 25% and much higher for young people – the government's own figures put unemployment among 25- to 29-year-olds, many of them recent graduates, at almost 50%. Hidden in the statistics is massive underemployment, with graduates forced to take jobs below their qualifications.

Faced with such prospects, and a long-held government attitude that anyone who doesn't like life in Iran 'should just leave', every year more than 150,000 educated young people leave Iran for countries such as the UK, Australia, the USA and Canada, where Iranians are the most educated group of immigrants. Among these are many of the country's brightest minds. Foreign embassies in Tehran keep a keen eye out for graduates of the best universities, and we have even heard of bidding wars between countries for top students. Estimates put the economic loss to Iran at tens of billions of dollars a year.

At least four million Iranians now live abroad. Few of these will ever return, though on this research trip we did meet some who had come home after living more than 10 years in the US or Europe. But the more common message was summed up by one man we met in Tehran: 'I came back to see whether I'd be able to live here again, but I can't do it. Going from the freedom I have had in London for the last two years to the restrictions here would just be too hard.'

Turkish stations are also picked up as are some news channels, such as BBC and Euronews. Indeed, the BBC thinks the Iranian market is important enough that it will launch a Persian-speaking satellite channel in 2008. As with the liberal newspapers, there are periodic clampdowns when uniformed men armed with hacksaws confiscate satellite dishes.

Photojournalist Kaveh Golestan's documentary on the plight of Iranian intellectuals, *Recording the Truth*, made for British television, led to his two-year house arrest. He joined the BBC in 1999 and was killed in 2003 in Iraq. See some of his images at www.kavehgolestan.com.

Of course, not everyone can afford satellite TV. Those going without are limited to five or six pretty dire state-run channels; four national networks and one or two provincial channels run by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) service. On these you'll see constant reminders of the Iran–Iraq War, martyrs, political propaganda, prayer, preaching mullahs, football (local and European), news, and lots of jarring reminders of the social conventions, such as women-only game shows and soap operas in which women wear hejab in bed. All up, more than 80% of the population watches TV from one source or another.

IRIB's main radio channel broadcasts around the clock. IRIB also operates a parliamentary network and Radio Koran. Many foreign broadcasters target listeners in Iran. The BBC World's Persian service is universally popular and easily picked up throughout the country.

Internet

Internet access is easy to arrange and affordable for middle-class Iranians, about 15% of whom have regular access. As such, the web has become the main medium for circumventing the barriers of censorship. Farsi is one of the most used languages in the blogosphere, with bloggers both inside and outside Iran being widely read. Some of these voices were captured in Nasrin Alavi's 2005 book *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs*.

However, life for bloggers contains many of the risks faced by regular Iranian journalists, without any of the financial rewards. In 2004 at least 20 bloggers were jailed and had their sites banned. These are among the '10 million' websites the government claims to have blocked, ranging from porn to anti-Islamic sites, via some foreign media. However, Iran is also home to some talented hackers, and codes to break the blocks are quickly developed, some even appearing as graffiti on public transport.

RELIGION

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the only Shiite Muslim regime in the world, distinguishing it from its Sunni neighbours. Ninety-nine percent of the population are Muslim, made up of around 89% Shiites and 10% Sunnis. There are other religions followed in Iran, with Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Baha'is making up the numbers. Although freedom of worship is guaranteed in the constitution (apart from the open practice of the Baha'i religion, which is outlawed), it is safe to assume that the minorities number more than the official statistics allow because calling yourself a Shiite Muslim, even if you're not, means you'll probably face fewer hurdles when dealing with Iran's huge and potentially tricky bureaucracy.

Aryana Farshad's lovely documentary, *Mystic Iran: The Unseen World,* claims to journey to the heart of spiritual Iran, but is most remarkable for its unique footage of the sacred trance dances of dervishes in Kordestan.

Iranians will happily accept that visitors are Christians, but in certain circumstances it may be best not to admit to being Jewish. Even among better educated Iranians, admitting to being atheist or agnostic can result in blank-faced incomprehension.

Islam

Muslims accept that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed was his final prophet. These two precepts form the first pillar of Islam, the *shahada*. The other four pillars, which a Muslim must try to follow, are *salat* (*namaz;* praying five times a day, though Shiites only pray three times), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (*ruzeh;* fasting during Ramazan) and *haj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca that those able should perform at a given time).

All Muslims, regardless of whether Sunni or Shiite, are forbidden to drink alcohol or eat anything containing pork, blood or any meat that died in any way other than being slaughtered in the prescribed manner (halal).

Every town of any size has a Jameh Mosque (Masjed-e Jameh), which literally means Congregational Mosque. It serves as the local centre of worship and Islamic discussion and was traditionally a centre of much social interaction as well; for more on Jameh Mosques, see p316.

Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet second only to Mohammed. The concept that he is the son of God is considered heretical.

SHIISM

When the Prophet Mohammed died in AD 632, there was disagreement over his successor. The majority backed Abu Bakr, the prophet's father-in-law and friend. He became Caliph. However, there were those who backed the claim of the prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali bin Abi Taleb, one of the first converts. Ali was passed over a total of three times before eventually becoming the fourth Caliph in 656, only to be assassinated five years later. The Muslim community was by now divided into two factions, the Sunnis, who followed the Umayyad Caliphate, and the Shiite (from 'Shiat Ali', meaning 'Partisans of Ali' or 'followers of Ali'). When Ali's second son Hossein and his supporters were slaughtered by the Caliph's troops at the Battle of Karbala in 680, the division became permanent.

A popular part of Shiism is the representation of its imams. You will see pictures of Imam Hossein everywhere.

Shiism reached its greatest influence in Iran. Iranian converts to Islam were attracted by the idea of the imam as a divinely appointed leader possibly because the Iranians possessed a long heritage of government by a divinely appointed monarch. For more on the history and structure of Shiism, see The 12 Imams, p56.

SUNNISM

Sunni comes from the word *sonnat,* which means tradition and refers to the fact that the Sunnis follow the traditional line of succession after the Prophet Mohammad. Sunnism has developed into the orthodox branch of Islam and most of the world's Muslims are Sunni, except in Iran.

SUFISM

A mystical aspect of Islam that is particularly close to Iranian hearts, *tassawof* (mysticism) is a discovery made by Iranians within Islam, and derived from the Quranic verses. According to Sufis, God must be felt as a light that shines in the believer's heart and the heart must be pure enough to receive the light. The two are the same, but separated: man's soul is in exile from the Creator and longs to return 'home' to lose himself again in Him. Sufism has various orders and throughout Iran you can find *khaneqas* (prayer and meditation houses) where people go to worship. Sufism in no way conflicts with Shiism or Sunnism.

Ayatollah Khomeini was a published Sufi poet.

Some of Iran's greatest thinkers, poets and scholars have had Sufi mystic tendencies, including Sohrevardi, Ghazali, Attar, Rumi, Hafez and Sa'di (p74).

Other Religions

Throughout history Iranians have shown tolerance towards other people's religious beliefs (with the exception of Baha'is), and since the adoption of Islam they have been particularly tolerant of Christians and Jews, who are 'People of the Book'. Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians are all officially recognised and exempt from military service, and have guaranteed seats in the Majlis (parliament). The Islamic theocracy is happy to tolerate, if

not indulge, most of these minorities, though that tolerance falls far short of encouragement – minorities are free to convert to Islam, but conversion from Islam to another faith is punishable by death.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrians, the followers of Iran's pre-Islamic religion, are based mainly around Yazd with its fire temple (where the fire is said to have been burning for 4000 years) and the Chak Chak (p266) pilgrimage site in its desert mountain setting. Sizable communities also live in Tehran. Estimates as to the number of Zoroastrians in Iran vary, anywhere from 30,000 to 100,000. Zoroastrianism is the world's first monotheistic religion and has influenced those who have followed religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Several traditions and ceremonies dating from Zoroastrian times are important in modern Iranian culture. The Iranian New Year, No Ruz, is Iran's main festival celebrated on the spring equinox, and is descended directly from a Zoroastrian festival, as is Chaharshanbe Soori, which takes place on the Wednesday before New Year and involves people jumping over a series of small bonfires. Shab-e yalda, celebrated on the winter solstice, is another Zoroastrian festival still observed by Iranians.

Religious Minorities in Iran, by Eliz Sanasarian, is drawn from a large number of interviews. This useful book explores the relationship between Iran's religious minorities and the state from the beginning of the Islamic Republic to the present day.

CHRISTIANITY

The Christian community in Iran consists mainly of Armenians who settled, historically, at Jolfa, in the north of Iran, and were then moved to New Jolfa in Esfahan in Safavid times. Many also live around the northwestern city of Orumiyeh (p140). Christians were present in Iran before the arrival of Islam and some Christian saints were martyred here.

Today, Iran's 250,000 Christians also include Roman Catholics, Adventists, Protestants and Chaldeans as well as about 20,000 Assyrians. There are churches in most large towns. Christians are allowed to consume alcohol and hold mixed-sex parties with dancing, just as long as no Muslims can see the revelry, let alone partake. They also have a nonsegregated sports centre in Tehran, where women can play sports unencumbered by hejab.

JUDAISM

Iran has been home to a healthy population of Jews since about the 8th century BC – even before Cyrus the Great famously liberated the Jews who had been enslaved at Babylon (p28). Today Iran is home to about 25,000 Jews, the second-largest Jewish population in the Middle East, after Israel.

More than 50,000 Jews left Iran when life became more difficult following the revolution – the majority migrating to the USA. In 2007 Israel tried to prompt a mass migration of those remaining in Iran by offering cash incentives of up to US$60,000 per family. However, the Society of Iranian Jews snubbed the offer, saying the 'identity of Iranian Jews is not tradable for any amount of money'.

Traditionally active in the bazaars and jewellery trade, Iranian Jews tend to live in the large cities such as Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz. About 30 synagogues remain in Iran, but they are not easy to find.

Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews, by Houman Sarshar, is a comprehensive history of Iran's Jews from the Achaemenid Empire to the community that remains following the revolution of 1979.

BAHA'ISM

The most persecuted religious minority in Iran, Baha'is suffered greatly after the revolution. Today, it remains illegal to practise the religion in public and Baha'is are routinely discriminated against when it comes to jobs and education. Of the world's five million Baha'is, around 300,000 remain in Iran – they form the country's largest religious minority. Most Baha'is are urban, but there are some Baha'i villages, especially in Fars and Mazandaran provinces.

Baha'ism originated in Iran during the 1840s as a Shia Islamic reform movement. Iran's political and religious authorities were not impressed and tried to suppress the movement, massacring followers and executing

The website www.bahai.org is a comprehensive site for and about the Baha'i religion and community.

THE 12 IMAMS

Shiism has several sub-branches but the Twelvers are by far the largest group, and make up the vast majority in Iran. Twelvers believe that following the death of Mohammed the rightful spiritual leadership of the Islamic faith passed to 12 successive descendants of the prophet. These were known as imams ('leaders' or more loosely, 'saints') and apart from Ali, the first imam, they weren't recognised by the caliphate.

The most devout Shia Muslims might celebrate the death days of all 12 imams, but in Iran the majority concentrate on the first, Ali, the third, Hossein, and the eighth, Reza (p353) – the only one of the 12 who is buried in Iran, in the lavish Haram-e Razavi (p354) in Mashhad.

The defining episode in the schism between Sunni and Shia is the death of the third imam, Hossein. On the first day of the month of Moharram in 661 Imam Hossein and 72 followers set up camp at Karbala, in present-day Iraq. They were besieged for nine days, and on the 10th Hossein and most of his followers were killed. Hossein's martyrdom is commemorated in a 10-day anniversary that culminates on Ashura – the final day. It's during Ashura that the Iranian culture of martyrdom is most evident. It's not unusual to see men walking through the streets flailing themselves with chains, and others crying genuine tears for their lost hero.

Almost as important is the 12th Imam, known as the Mahdi or Valiasr (Leader of Our Time). Mahdi is the Hidden Imam, believed to have disappeared into a cave under a mosque at Samarra in 874 AD. He is believed to live on in occultation, continuing as Valiasr, the leader of the Shia in the present time. It is believed Mahdi will eventually return when, with the prophet Jesus by his side, he will guide the world to peace and righteousness. The Shia militia of Muqtadr al Sadr in Iraq, known as the Mehdi Army, is named after the 12th Imam.

Shias believe only the imams can interpret the Quran and the clergy act as their representatives until the Hidden Imam returns. Ayatollah Khomeini was given the honorary title imam after his death, and when you hear people talking about 'the Imam' today it's usually a reference to him.

Exactly how much the martyrdom of the 12 Imams, allegedly at the hands of Sunni supporters of the caliphate, is responsible for modern Iranian cultural traits is impossible to say. What is more certain is that the culture of martyrdom remains a powerful motivator in Iran. During the Iran–Iraq War (p39) thousands of men and boys quite literally sacrificed their lives (some chose to clear mine fields by walking through them) in the name of country and/or religion.

The 12 Imams, their commonly understood names in Iran, birth and death years, and where they are buried:

1. Imam Ali (600–661) Buried in Najaf, Iraq
2. Imam Hasan (625–669) Medina, Saudi Arabia
3. Imam Hossein (626–680) Karbala, Iraq
4. Imam Sajjad (658–713) Medina, Saudi Arabia
5. Imam Mohammad Bagher (676–743) Medina, Saudi Arabia
6. Imam Jafar Sadegh (703–765) Medina, Saudi Arabia
7. Imam Musaye Kazem (745–799) Baghdad, Iraq
8. Imam Reza (765–818) Mashhad, Iran
9. Imam Javad (810–835) Baghdad, Iraq
10. Imam Hadi (827–868) Samarra, Iraq
11. Imam Hasan Askari (846–874) Samarra, Iraq
12. Imam Mahdi (868–?) In occultation

the founding prophet The Bab in Tabriz in 1850. Hostility to Baha'ism has remained intense ever since. Baha'i doctrines are strictly egalitarian, teaching the complete equality of men and women and the unity of all humanity. The headquarters of the Baha'i are in Haifa, Israel.

MANDAEISM

The sites www.mandaeanworld.com and www.iranmanda.com are good sites for those interested in finding out more about Mandaeism.

An ancient gnostic religion, the exact origin of Mandaeism is unknown. Because they speak a form of Aramaic, some credence is given to the Mandaeans' claim that they are descended from followers of John the Baptist; others believe they may be descended from the Essene sect. They practise weekly baptisms as a sacrament, and claim to follow the teachings of John the Baptist. They are considered by Muslims to be 'People of the Book' and identified as the Sabeans of Quranic legend. The small community of around 10,000 is centred on the Shatt al Arab in Khuzestan.

WOMEN IN IRAN

When Samira Makhmalbaf's first film *The Apple* (1998) made waves in the West, people were confused. How could Iran – the land of female oppression and Sharia law – produce an 18-year-old female film-maker of such vision? Samira Makhmalbaf's answer was simple: 'Iran is a country where these two contrasts coexist'.

Nowhere are the contradictions in Iranian society more apparent than in the position of women. Historically, women in Iran have lived in a progressive society and enjoyed more equality and freedom than their neighbours. In Iran women are able to sit in parliament, to drive, to vote, to buy property and to work.

The One Million Signatures Campaign, headed by well-known women activists such as Shirin Ebadi, aims to educate Iranian women in their rights under the law as well as collecting signatures demanding equal rights.

There is a long precedence for this. In pre-Islamic Iran, archaeological evidence suggests that ordinary women were able to work, own, sell and lease property and that they paid taxes. Women managers were mentioned at work sites and women were also known to have held high level military positions. By the Sassanian period, though, women's rights were not formally enshrined.

The Prophet Mohammed was the first to specifically address women's rights, recognising men and women as having different (rather than unequal) rights and responsibilities. Men are expected to provide financially, therefore women are not seen as needing legal rights as men are there to protect and maintain them.

In reality, for Iranian women, the arrival of Islam after the Arab conquest saw a decline in their position at every level. Most of their rights evaporated, the Islamic dress code was imposed, polygamy was practised and family laws were exclusively to the advantage of the male.

Reza Shah started legislating for women when in 1931 the Majlis approved a bill that gave women the right to seek divorce. The marriage age was raised to 15 for girls. In 1936, a system of education was formed for boys and girls equally and in the same year, controversial legislation was passed to abolish the veil, a move that polarised opinion among women. Reza Shah also encouraged women to work outside the home.

Nine Parts of Desire, by Geraldine Brooks, is an insightful look into Muslim women's lives. The author interviews women throughout the Middle East, including, in Iran, Faeze Rafsanjani and Khomeini's widow.

The last shah gave women the vote in 1962 and six years later the Family Protection Law, the most progressive family law in the Middle East, was ratified. Divorce laws became stringent and polygamy was discouraged. The marriage age was raised to 18.

Many Iranian women were active in the revolution that overthrew the shah, but it's safe to say that few foresaw how the adoption of a version of Sharia law and the Islamic Republic would affect their rights.

Within a couple of years of the revolution women were back in the hejab (veil) – and this time it was compulsory. The legal age of marriage for girls had plummeted to nine (15 for boys), and society was strictly segregated. Women were not allowed to appear in public with a man who was not a husband or a direct relation, and they could be flogged for displaying 'incorrect' hejab or showing strands of hair or scraps of make-up. Travel was not possible without a husband or father's permission and a woman could be stoned to death for adultery, which, incidentally, included being raped. Family law again fell under the jurisdiction of the religious courts and it became almost impossible for a woman to divorce her husband without his agreement, and in any case of divorce she was almost certain to lose custody of her children. Women holding high positions – such as Shirin Ebadi, who became a judge in 1979 and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 – lost their jobs and many gave up promising careers.

Daughter of Persia, by Sattareh Farman Farmaian, is an engaging memoir by the daughter of a Qajar prince who introduced social work to Iran. It covers much of Iran's modern history and illustrates the changing roles of women.

However, women did not disappear behind a curtain this time. Iranian women had tasted emancipation, and they resisted a total return to the home. There were many rights that women did not lose – such as the right to vote and the right to hold property and financial independence in marriage. In fact, the rates of education and literacy for women have shot up since the revolution for the simple reason that many traditional families finally felt safe sending their daughters to school once Iran had adopted the veil. Women make up about two-thirds of all university entrants, though their subsequent employment rate is well below 20%. Although women's importance in the workforce is acknowledged – maternity leave, for example, is given for three months at 67% of salary – there is still widespread discrimination.

The website www.badjens.com is an Iranian feminist online magazine mainly addressing readers outside Iran.

In 1997 Reformist president Khatami was voted in by mostly women and young people, promising change. By 2001, there were 14 women in the Majlis and calls to improve women's rights became louder. Among the most prolific Islamic feminists is Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of the ex-president, who herself was a member of parliament, a magazine proprietor, an academic, a mother and an Olympic horse rider.

The Khatami period brought a series of hard-fought minor victories. The Reformists managed to win the right for single women to study abroad, to raise the legal age for marriage from nine to 13 for girls (though they had proposed 15), to defeat an attempt to limit the percentage of female students entering university and to improve custody provisions for divorced mothers. However, a woman's testimony is still only worth half that of a man in court and in the case of the blood money that a murderer's family is obliged to pay to the family of the victim, females are estimated at half the value of a male. *Sigheh* (the Islamic practice of temporary marriage) is seen by many as a sort of legalised prostitution.

In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami and Erica Friedl, explores issues such as temporary marriage, education and the strategies used by women to gain control.

On the street, especially in Tehran, you will see that superficially the dress code has eased and the sea of black chadors is offset by shorter, tighter, brightly coloured coats and headscarves worn far back on elaborate hairstyles. Young girls have lost the fear of being seen outside the home with unrelated men, and many defy the regular clampdowns. Activists such as Shirin Ebadi, who works as a lawyer and champions human rights, are insistent that within Islam are enshrined all human rights and that all that is needed is more intelligent interpretation.

Any visit to an Iranian home will leave you in no doubt as to who is really in charge of family life – which is the most important institution in Iran. Iranian women are feisty and powerful and they continue to educate themselves. Most women in Iran will tell you that the hejab is the least of their worries; what is more important is to change the institutional

discrimination inherent in Iranian society and the law. As ex-Reformist MP Elaheh Koulaie says: 'We have to change the perceptions that Iranians have of themselves, the perception of the role of men and women'.

Through its portrayal of Behnaz Jafari, an ambitious young Tehran actress, Pirooz Kalantari's 1999 film *Alone in Tehran* shows the difficulty of being an independent woman in Iran.

After conservatives regained control of the Majlis in 2004 (p40), and hardline Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005, many feared the recently won reforms would be rescinded. For two years nothing much changed. But in mid-2007 the government began acting on restrictive laws that hadn't been enforced for years. In Tehran women wearing too much make-up and not enough scarf were arrested; across the country female university students were told to start wearing a *maqneh* or stop coming to class. It was part of a broader crackdown that also targeted satellite TV dishes and opposition media.

These sort of crackdowns happen periodically in Iran, often as a means to divert the public focus from other domestic political issues (this one coincided with a deeply unpopular petrol price rise). But by late 2007 it seemed there had been a lasting tightening of official attitudes.

For women, the immediate future looks much less optimistic than it was a few years ago. However, no matter how Iran's political landscape changes, it seems certain Iranian women will continue to assert their rights and slowly chip away at the repressive system, be it with a defiant splash of red lipstick, making visionary movies or becoming expert at interpreting the law and winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

Food & Drink

The ancient Persians believed eating walnuts in place of red meat made a person gentler, and that memory could be improved by eating dried red grapes before breakfast.

Far more than simply the fuel of empires, food in Iran has as long a story as the country itself. The dishes you eat today have evolved over three millennia, influenced by culture and environment.

Food plays a central role in honouring guests and celebrating special events, such as No Ruz (see p385). The way food is served draws on the ideas of ancient physicians, who carefully combined food and drink to maintain strength in both body and mind. Long before Weight Watchers, these wise Persians concluded that a good diet did not involve an excess of fats, red meats, starch or alcohol – these transformed men into wicked, selfish brutes. Instead, fruit, vegetables, chicken and fish were encouraged as the food of gentler, more respectable people. In practice, this philosophy is governed by a classification of foods dating back to Achaemenid times; see Persian Food Philosophy: It's 'Hot' & 'Cold' (below).

Despite this, outside Tehran most restaurant menus are dominated by kababs (see opposite) and fast food. To enjoy the best cooking you really need to be invited into an Iranian home. Fortunately there's a good chance that will happen. When it does, just say 'yes'. As a guest you will be a 'gift of God' and the fabulous food and humbling hospitality should make for a meal you'll remember for a lifetime. (Make sure you have a read up on etiquette; see p83.)

PERSIAN FOOD PHILOSOPHY: IT'S 'HOT' & 'COLD'

The Persian philosophy of food is to eat a balance of 'hot' and 'cold' foods to maintain good health. It's not about the temperature a food is served at, but rather the 'heating' and/or 'cooling' effect food has on the body. As an ancient philosophy largely passed down by word of mouth, it's not known exactly where or why these ideas originated. But the general belief is that 'hot' foods 'thicken the blood' and speed metabolism, while 'cold' foods 'dilute the blood' and slow the metabolism.

The philosophy extends to personalities and weather, too. Like foods, people are believed to have 'hot' and 'cold' natures. People with 'hot' natures should eat more 'cold' foods, and vice versa. And on cold days it's best to eat 'hot' foods, and vice versa.

So what's 'hot' and what's not? Classifications vary across the country but it's generally agreed that animal fat, wheat, sugar, sweets, wine, all dried fruits and vegetables, fresh herbs including mint and saffron, and most meats are 'hot' (though beef and mutton are debated). 'Cold' foods include fish, yogurt and watermelon (all 'very cold'), rice, some fresh vegetables (particularly radishes) and fruits, beer and other nonwine alcohol. Some foods are hotter or colder than others, and some, such as onion and tomato, are fairly neutral.

As you travel, you'll see the balance in dishes such as *fesenjun* (sauce of grated pomegranate, walnuts, eggplant and cardamom served over roast chicken and rice), where the pomegranate (cold) is balanced by the walnuts (hot). You'll also see this balance on the table, where *mast* (yogurt), cheese, radishes and greens – all cold – are served with 'hot' kababs (opposite), chicken and sweets. Getting the balance right is what is most important. Too much 'cold' food is thought to be particularly unhealthy. We were told of one man in his 30s who, in an effort to lose weight, ate only yogurt for dinner for six months. When he ate watermelon after his yogurt one night he promptly died of a heart attack (yes, he might just have had a dicky ticker). 'Hot' foods are apparently not so dangerous: too much of 'hot' and you might end up with a cold sore, if you're prone to them.

So think twice before ordering *dugh* (churned sour milk or yogurt mixed with water) with your fish meal, unless the *dugh* comes with chopped herbs to balance it out. And be careful with that watermelon!

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

New Food of Life: Ancient Persian and Modern Iranian Cooking and Ceremonies, by Najmieh Khalili Batmanglij, is so good – clear, concise and accurate – it's on the gift table at almost every Iranian wedding in the US.

Almost every meal in Iran is accompanied by *nun* (bread) and/or *berenj* (rice). *Nun* is dirt cheap and usually fresh. There are four main varieties: *lavash* is common for breakfast and is flat and thin (it's mouthwatering when fresh but soon turns cardboard-like); *barbari* is crisp and salty and more like Turkish bread (and is often covered with sesame seeds); *sangak* is the elite of Iranian breads, long and thick and baked on a bed of stones to give it its characteristic dimpled appearance (check carefully for rogue chunks of gravel); and *taftun* is crisp with a ribbed surface.

Chelo (boiled or steamed rice) forms the base of many an Iranian meal, and especially at lunch is served in vast helpings. Rice cooked with other ingredients, such as nuts, spices or barberry (small, red berries), is called *polo* and is worth asking for specifically. Saffron *(za'feran)* is frequently used to add flavour and colour. If rice is served with a knob of butter on top, blend this in as the Iranians do. *Tahdig,* the crunchy, savoury crust at the bottom of the pan, sometimes served with slices of potato, is the favourite of almost every Iranian.

IRANIAN MEALS

STARTERS

A standard Iranian meal starts with a basic, prefabricated green salad, radioactive-pink dressing and *ash-e jo* (soup of pearl barley). Some places include these in a total set-meal price but usually they are charged separately.

MAINS

Even in a restaurant with a long menu, 90% of the main-dish options are likely to be kababs. These are served either on bread (preferably hot from the *tandir* clay oven) or as *chelo kabab* (on a mound of rice) with a pair of grilled tomatoes. Contrasting with the greasy doner kebabs inhaled after rough nights in the West, Iranian kababs are tasty, healthy and cooked shish-style over hot charcoals. The cheapest, standard version is *kubide* (literally, 'ground') kabab, made out of pressed, minced meat mixed with a variable proportion of breadcrumbs. *Kabab-e barg* (literally, 'leaf kabab') is thinner and more variable in quality, and *fille kabab* uses lamb fillet, while *juje kabab* are chunks of marinated chicken. Kababs are usually sprinkled with spicy *somaq* (sumac; dried extract from fruits of the rhus genus) and accompanied by raw onion and, for small extra fees, a bowl of *mast* (yogurt) and grilled tomato.

After a couple of weeks, many travellers start suffering from what could be called 'kabab shock'. However, it's not too hard to find treatment. Even when not on the menu it's worth asking for the common

GETTING DIZI

Known alternatively as *abgusht* (or as *piti* in Azerbaijan), *dizi* is a cheap soup-stew meal named for the earthenware pot in which it's served. It's considered by many Iranians as the food of the poor. But assuming you're neither a vegetarian nor obsessive about cholesterol, it's actually a delicious and filling dish. There is, however, an art to eating it. First, drain off the soupy broth into a bowl full of bread that you've previously ripped into bite-sized morsels. Eat this stew then turn to the main ingredients: chickpeas, potatoes, tomatoes and soft-boiled mutton. Grind these together using a provided metal pestle that looks disturbingly like a stylised toilet plunger. Do include the inevitable chunk of fat; it might look unappetising but adds taste and texture. Eat the resulting mush with a spoon or bread.

IRAN'S TOP TRADITIONAL RESTAURANTS

- **Malek-o Tojjar** (Yazd; p264) In a restored mansion in the middle of the bazaar, this place is romance on a stick, and the food's pretty good, too.
- **Haji Dadash** (Zanjan; p185) Cosy, characterful tea-cavern in Zanjan's brilliant bazaar.
- **Yord Cultural Complex** (Shiraz; p277) A Bakhtiari nomad restaurant in a giant tent, with delicious food served on dozens of carpets accompanied by traditional music.
- **Sofrekhane ye Sonnati Ebrahimabad** (Ardabil; p163) With truly excellent food served in a superb medieval former-*hammam* (bathhouse), this place is by itself reason enough to visit Ardabil.
- **Sofrekhane ye Sonnati Darvish** (Gorgan; p340) Great for traditional music.
- **Sofrekhane Sonnati** (Esfahan; p248) Not as traditional as some, but a vast menu of delicious dishes (plenty of *bademjan* – eggplant – options), Imam Sq location and value make it a must.
- **Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse** (Mashhad; p360) Fabulous if somewhat pricey.

stand-by *zereshk polo ba morgh* (chicken on rice made tangy with barberries), *ghorme sabzi* (a green mix of diced meat, beans and vegetables, served with rice) or various mouthwatering dishes made from *bademjan* (eggplant; see Vegetarians & Vegans p82).

But it doesn't end there. Certain (usually down-market) eateries and many *chaykhanehs* (teahouses) specialise in underrated *dizi* (see Getting Dizi, p79). Most restaurants will also serve one or another variety of *khoresht* (thick, usually meaty stew made with vegetables and chopped nuts, then served with rice and/or French fries). However, in some less popular restaurants *khoresht* has been known to live in big pots for days before reaching the plate, so if you have a suspect stomach think twice.

Dolme (vegetables, fruit or vine leaves stuffed with a meat-and-rice mixture) makes a tasty change. *Dolme bademjan* (stuffed eggplant) is especially delectable. The Persian classic *fesenjun* (sauce of grated pomegranate, walnuts, eggplant and cardamom served over roast chicken and rice) is rarely found in restaurants, but you might get lucky and be served *fesenjun* in an Iranian home, which is quite an honour.

'*Khosh ma-ze*' means 'delicious'. Even if your Farsi is terrible, being able to tell the cook/chef their food is *khosh ma-ze* will be fun for you and greatly appreciated by them.

In Western Iran and on the Persian Gulf coast *chelo mahi* (fried fish on rice) is quite common in season while on the Caspian coast it's relatively easy to find the heavenly *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg, served with bread or rice).

Dessert & Sweets

After-meal dessert is usually a bowl of delicious fruit. However, Iran produces a head-spinning array of freshly made *shirini* (sweets) with many places famous for a particular sweet: Esfahan (p248) is famed for its nougat-like *gaz*; Qom (p223) for *sohan* (a brittle concoction of pistachio and ginger); Orumiyeh (p143) for *noghl* (sugar-coated nuts); and Kerman (p318) for (our favourite) *colompe* (a soft, date-filled biscuit). Other sweets worth trying include refreshing *palude* or *falude* (a sorbet made of rice flour, grated fresh fruit and rose water) and *bastani,* Iranian ice cream.

DRINKS

Nonalcoholic Drinks

TEA

Socialising in Iran almost inevitably involves *chay* (tea). Whether you're in a *chaykhaneh*, carpet shop, someone's home, an office, a tent – actually, almost anywhere – chances are there will be a boiling kettle nearby. According to the rules of Iranian hospitality, a host is honour-bound to offer a guest at least one cup of tea before considering any sort of business, and the guest is expected to drink it.

Tea is always drunk black and the tea tray is usually set with a bowl of *ghand* (chunks of sugar), often crudely hacked from huge rocks of sugar. It is customary to dip the sugar into the glass of tea, then place it between the front teeth (or on the tongue) before sucking the brew through it.

Puffing on a qalyan (water pipe) over tea is an Iranian tradition that is now banned in several provinces, including Yazd and Esfahan, it's because it's unhealthy. When you do find a qalyan, know that flavoured tobacco is more deadly *and* more expensive than plain tobacco.

COFFEE

Traditional Iranian *ghahve* (coffee) is like Turkish coffee, served strong, sweet, black and booby-trapped with a sediment of grounds. However, there's a new urban fashion for coffee-houses that usually double as trendy ice-cream parlours. These places serve a variety of brews made on espresso-style machines. While this sounds hopeful for caffeine addicts, the coffee blends used are often lack-lustre, and the beans pre-ground and somewhat bitter. Usually in rural areas the only option will be instant coffee.

JUICES & SOFT DRINKS

You'll never be too far away from a delicious fresh fruit *ab* (juice) and fruit *shir* (milkshake). Both cost between IR5000 and IR12,000. Depending on the season, you'll find pomegranate (the dark-red *ab anar*), honeydew melon *(ab talebi)*, watermelon *(ab hendune),* orange *(ab porteghal),* apple *(ab sib)* and carrot *(ab havij)*. Popular shakes include banana *(shir moz),* pistachio *(shir peste)* and strawberry *(shir tut farangi)*. Shakes are often loaded with sugar.

Also widely available, *dugh (*churned sour milk or yogurt mixed with water) is a sour but highly refreshing drink. The best *dugh* is usually found in restaurants, comes with chopped herbs and is uncarbonated, unlike most prepacked bottles found in stores.

Tap water is drinkable almost everywhere, though Rasht and Zahedan are notable exceptions. Bottled water is widely available in cities. Despite the US embargo, Coca-Cola is still bottled under licence at a Mashhad plant, though it's worth asking for Zam Zam (cola), Parsi Cola or some other black or orange soft drink. Canned drinks can cost around five times more than the same drinks sold in reusable bottles.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

If anyone asks you to their home for dinner, accept the invitation! Eating in an Iranian home is where you're most likely to experience the real joys of Persian cuisine mixed with unbridled hospitality. At other times, your options will be fast-food/pizza joints, *kababis* (kabab shops), traditional restaurants and teahouses, hotel restaurants and the occasional place serving foreign slow food.

The Art of Persian Cooking, by Forough Hekmat, is the only English-language cookbook you'll find in bookstores in Iran. It's not the most complete book, but there are some good recipes and descriptions of the ceremonial role of food.

Many traditional restaurants are buried below street level and can be hard to find. Even if there is an English sign there's no guarantee there will be a menu in English. Fast-food joints and *kababis*, on the other hand, tend to be at street level near main squares and along main roads.

Quick Eats

The most ubiquitous fast-food joints are shops selling a range of bread-roll 'sandwiches' topped off with tomatoes and pickles for around IR5000. The most common fillings are frankfurter-style sausage *(sausis)*, liver *(jegar)*, hamburger-meat ('hamburger'), felafel, tongue *(zaban)* or brain *(maghz)*.

ISLAMIC BEER BUT NO SHIRAZ

Try to think of your trip to Iran as a cleansing experience, where your body can recover from all that overexposure to alcoholic toxins. Okay, so this might not work, but at least you'll feel better about not being able to get a drink. While alcohol is quietly tolerated in Christian communities, such as the Armenian areas of Tehran and Esfahan, it is strictly forbidden to Iranian Muslims. There is, of course, a black market – oddly enough often operated by green grocers – and you'll occasionally hear a man whisper 'whiskey' as you go by. But, believe us, the sickly sweet clear spirit you'll likely be sold is rocket fuel by any other name.

If you're desperate for a beer, there's always *ma'-osh-sha'ir* ('Islamic beer'). Actually, there are several brands of locally produced and imported beer proudly declaring '0.0% alcohol'. Russian-made Baltika tastes the most like beer. Delster, which comes in several fruit 'flavours', is the most popular local variety, mainly because it doesn't even pretend that it's trying to taste like beer. The lemon version is pleasantly refreshing.

Sadly, the chance of finding a glass of Shiraz (aka Syrah wine) in Shiraz is only marginally greater than seeing swimsuit models at Persepolis. There are various theories on the origin of this grape varietal, most involving cuttings being taken from vineyards in Shiraz back to the Rhone valley in France during the Crusades. Iranian vines were either ripped up after the 1979 revolution or now produce raisins. Today there are no (legal) wineries.

Simple *kababis* selling kabobs and cold drinks are popular, particularly around major *meydans* (squares); just follow your nose. These places are usually fairly clean, but remember that the popularity of the eatery is inversely proportional to your chances of spending the next 24 hours on the porcelain throne, so eat where the locals eat.

Some no-frills places serve *ash-e sabzi* (thick, green vegetable soup) all day. It makes a delicious, cheap breakfast or lunch; just look for the huge metal dish and mountains of bread.

The Iranian infatuation with 'pizza' seems to be out of control. In many cities it will be easier to find pizzas and burgers than kabab. Beware that Iranian pizza is rarely to Western tastes with a flabby base, tasteless cheese and a thick layer of anaemic (porkless) sausage. Tomato paste isn't part of the recipe, though locals slosh on tomatoe sauce (ketchup) to taste.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarianism is foreign to most Iranians. Sure, there are a lot of good vegetarian dishes in Iranian cuisine, but most restaurants don't make them. Even if there is an ostensibly meat-free dish on the menu, such as *ash-e reshte* (noodle soup with beans and vegetables), it will often come with 'bonus' pieces of mutton. Tehran was the only place we found dedicated vegetarian restaurants (two of them, see p119), but more should open in coming years, with the help of the Iranian Society of Vegetarians (www.iranvege tarians.com).

The *anar* (pomegranate) is native to the region around Iran and is eaten fresh and incorporated in a range of Persian dishes most famously in *fesenjun*, but also in *ash-e anar* (pomegranate soup) and in rich red *ab anar* (pomegranate juice).

Solace can be found, however, in the felafels, samosas and potatoes sold in street stalls, and in the Persian mastery of all things *bademjan*. In our opinion one of the highlights of Iranian cuisine is the meatless Caspian dish *mirza ghasemi* (see Cut the Caviar – Gilan Cuisine, p170). Meanwhile, the various *kuku* (thick omelette dishes) make great snacks, served hot or cold. Varieties include *kuku-ye sabzi* (with mixed herbs), *kuku-e-ye bademjan* (with eggplant) and *kuku-e-ye gol-e kalam* (with cauliflower).

Vegans will have a hard time finding anything completely free from animal products; even rice is often served with butter. Fortunately, fresh and dried fruit and varieties of nut and vegetables are widely available and are very good. Cheaper hotels will sometimes let you use their kitchen.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

In most Iranian homes and many hotels, breakfast is a simple affair, consisting of endless tea served with leftover (ie rather crisp) *lavash*, feta-style cheese and jam – often carrot-flavoured, which is better than it sounds. Most hotels usually throw in an egg. Lunch is the main meal of the day for Iranians and is generally eaten with mountains of rice between noon and 2pm. Dinner is from about 7pm onwards. Most restaurants, except those in hotels, close earlier on Friday. On religious holidays, almost everywhere selling food will shut, markets and bazaars included, for the morning at least. During Ramazan (p384) the majority of eateries will be closed from dawn until dusk. Some won't open at all during the month and many of those that open after dusk are full with pre-booked parties and then close early. However, because travellers don't have to fast, most hotel and bus terminal restaurants stay open throughout Ramazan, albeit hidden discreetly behind heavy blinds (and thus might look shut). Eating, drinking or smoking in public is bad form during Ramazan.

Fancy trying some food in an Iranian restaurant before leaving home (or upon your return)? Check the growing list at www.farsieats.com.

While your mother would probably have a heart attack if you sat down to lunch on her Persian rug, eating on the floor, or on a *takht* (a sort of day bed), is normal here. Remember to always remove your shoes before sitting around the plastic sheet that acts as the 'Iranian table'. Cutlery normally consists of a fork and spoon. If you need to eat with your hands, avoid putting your left hand into a communal dish; the left hand is used for something else altogether. Once the meal has arrived, conversation often dies as diners work through their meal in silence. Tea and conversation flow freely after dinner.

EAT YOUR WORDS

You've read about Iranian food, now it's time to eat it. To make that easier, we've included the dishes you'll commonly see while on the road plus some of our favourites. It's worth asking for dishes specifically as menus are typically all in Farsi and are not necessarily comprehensive anyway. This being Iran, even if a restaurant doesn't have what you want, you'll probably be directed (maybe even escorted) to your food of choice. For pronunciation guidelines, see p423; for more Farsi food phraseology, get Lonely Planet's *Farsi Phrasebook*.

IRANIANS: WORLD CHAMPIONS OF PICNIC *Andrew Burke*

It's official. After an admittedly unscientific survey conducted during years of travel and more than 15 months in Iran, Mark and I have concluded that Iranians are in fact the world champions of picnicking. The evidence is overwhelming. Almost every Iranian vehicle with more than two wheels has a plastic basket in the boot filled with most or all of the following: a carpet or woven plastic sheet for sitting on, plastic 'Iranian table' for eating from, a thermos of hot water, tea, sugar, cutlery, a qalyan (water pipe), tobacco, lighter fluid, coals and a portable grill. And they are just the basics. Iranians who really take their picnicking seriously might add a large, collapsible tent and/or beach umbrella to the mix, plus a football, skipping rope and camera to record the fun.

So where do these picnics happen? The answer is anywhere a car can go (not much further, though, as no-one wants to carry all that gear too far). You'll often see picnickers camped out in places non-Iranians find, well, odd. Like beside motorways. Or even on the median strip of a motorway. For me, my oddest Iranian picnicking experience was on board a car ferry to Kish Island, when high winds and rough seas saw dozens of families haul out their tents to set up camp on the passenger deck. Tea was only minutes behind.

Probably the best time to see Iranian picnicking in full swing is during the No Ruz holiday period; in particular, the ancient tradition of Sizdah be Dar (p385) on the 13th day after No Ruz.

lonelyplanet.com

Useful Phrases

I'm a vegetarian.
من سبزیخوارم — *man sabzi khar am*

Does this dish have meat?
این غذا گوشت داره؟ — *in ghaza gusht dare?*

I can't eat dairy products.
من نمیتونم لبنیات بخورم — *man nemintunam labaniyyat bekhoram*

What do you recommend?
شما چی پیشنهاد می کنین؟ — *shoma chi pishnahad mikonin?*

I'll try what s/he's having.
من از غذایی که اون می خوره می خوام — *man az ghazayi ke un mikhore mikham*

Food Glossary

SOUPS & STARTERS

ash-e jo	آش جو	Very common pearl barley soup with cream, butter, parsley and pepper.
ash-e mast	آش ماست	hot yogurt soup with beans, lentils and vegetables
ash-e sabzi	آش سبزی	thick, dark green vegetable soup, sometimes with meat
ash-e reshte	آش رشته	noodle soup with beans and vegetables
kashk-e bademjan	کشک باد مجان	eggplant fried and mashed and served with *kashk* (thick whey) and mint
kuku-ye sabzi	کوکوي سبزي	thick vegetable omelette (with mixed herbs)
mast-o khiyar	ماست و خیار	yogurt dip with cucumber, onion, mint, salt and pepper
nun-o panir	نون و پنیر	thin bread and cheese; common for breakfast

MAIN COURSES

Kabab first, then everything else – like an Iranian menu.

Kabab

bakhtiyari kabab	کباب بختیاری	lamb and chicken
chelo kabab	چلو کباب	any kind of kabab in this list served with *chelo* (boiled or steamed rice); the default option will be *kubide* if you don't specify
file kebab	فیله کباب	meat strips
kubide kabab	کباب کوبید ه	mince, breadcrumbs and onion ground together and grilled
juje kabab	جوجه کباب	grilled chicken pieces with *somaq* (sumac)

Other dishes

abgusht	گوشت	see *dizi*
baghali polo	باقالي پلو	chicken with broad beans, steamed rice and vegetables
chelo mahi	چلو ماهی	fried fish served with steamed rice and vegetables
chelo morgh	چلو مرغ	chicken and rice, served with a light tomato sauce
dizi	دیزی	lamb stew made with lentils, potatoes and tomato paste, served with bread; see Getting Dizi (p79) for eating instructions
dolme bademjan	دلمه بادمجان	eggplant stuffed with meat, rice and (sometimes) raisins
fesenjun	فسنجان	sauce of grated pomegranate, walnuts, eggplant and cardamom served over roast chicken and rice
ghorme sabzi	قرمه سبزی	a green mix of diced meat, beans and vegetables, served with rice
khoresht	خورشت	any kind of meaty stew, usually made with lentils, dried lemon and served with rice and/or French fries
khoresht-e bademjan	خورشت باد مجان	stew of chicken or meat, eggplant and tomato paste, served with rice or bread
mirza ghasemi	میرزا قاسمی	mashed eggplant, tomato, egg and garlic, served with bread or rice
tahchin	ته چین	chicken or meat baked in rice with yogurt and eggs
zereshk polo ba morgh	زرشک پلو با مرغ	roast chicken served with rice and barberry

SWEETS & DESSERTS

baghlava	باقلوا	layers of pastry and crushed nuts soaked in syrup
bastani	بستنی	ice cream
fereni	فرنی	looks like yogurt but made with rice flour, sugar and rose water
halva	حلوا	various forms of wickedly delicious, gooey confectionery made of sesame flour and honey

ENGLISH-FARSI GLOSSARY

apple	*sib*	سیب
banana	*moz*	موز
beans	*lubiya*	لوبیا
beef	*gusht e goosale*	گوشت گوساله
bread	*nun*	نان
butter	*kare*	کره
cheese	*panir*	پنیر
chicken	*morgh*	مرغ
eggplant	*bademjan*	باد مجان
egg	*tokhm e morgh*	تخم مرغ
fish	*mahi*	ماهی
fruit	*mive*	میوه
kabab shop	*kababi*	کبابی
mandarin	*narengi*	نارنگی
meat	*gusht*	گوشت
milk	*shir*	شیر
orange	*portegal*	پرتقال
pomegranate	*anar*	انار
potato	*sib zamini*	سیب زمینی
prawns	*meygu*	میگو
rice	*berenj*	برنج
rice (boiled or steamed)	*chelo*	چلو
salt	*namak*	نمک
sugar	*shekar*	شکر
tea	*chay*	چای
teahouse	*chaykhaneh*	چایخانه
tongue	*zaban*	زبان
vegetables	*sabzijat*	سبزیجات
water	*ab*	آب
yogurt	*mast*	ماست

Environment

THE LAND

If you're flying into Iran, be sure to ask for a window seat – you might be surprised by what you see. Rather than the featureless desert wasteland many perceive, Iran is a diverse land where starkly beautiful mountains border vast desert plateaus and mountain villages contrast with tiny oases.

With an area of 1,648,000 sq km, Iran is more than three times larger than France; nearly one-fifth the size of the USA; and nearly as big as Queensland, Australia. Iran shares borders with seven countries: Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

More than half of Iran is covered by mountains and in the vast majority of places there will be a peak of some size looming at the end of the street. Four ranges are most prominent. The smaller, volcanic Sabalan and Talesh Ranges in the northwestern Azeri provinces provide fertile pastures for nomads. Nearby, the majestic Alborz Mountains skirt the Caspian Sea from the border of Azerbaijan as far as Turkmenistan, and are home to forests, ski fields and the snowcapped Mt Damavand (5671m; p131), the Middle East's tallest mountain. Sitting on the world's second-largest known reserve of natural gas, the immense Zagros Mountains stretch about 1500km from Turkey to the Persian Gulf, rising and falling like the ridged back of a great crocodile. There are several peaks reaching more than 4000m, though heights fall to an average of 1500m in the southern parts of the range.

All these mountains exist because Iran sits at the junction of three major tectonic plates – the Arabian, Eurasian and Indian – making the country highly susceptible to earthquakes (see Shaking Iran's Confidence, below).

East of the Zagros Mountains is the central plateau and its two vast deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir (more than 200,000 sq km) in the north and the Dasht-e Lut (more than 166,000 sq km) in the southeast. The deserts include occasional salt lakes and, in total, account for almost 25% of the country.

Think of Iran's mountain ranges as being the foundations and support for a vast central plateau. Everything but the narrow coastal regions of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and the Khuzestan plain near southern Iraq, is about 1000m above sea level or higher. This elevation, combined with the prevalence of mountains and the complete lack of major rivers, has had a huge effect on the development of Persian culture (see p45).

SHAKING IRAN'S CONFIDENCE

To say that Iranians are anxious about earthquakes is quite the understatement. The country sits on dozens of seismic fault lines and every year scores of tremors of varying size rattle homes and gnaw away at nerves. When a major quake strikes, as it did in Bam in 2003 at a cost of more than 31,000 lives (see the boxed text, p323), Iranians everywhere start speculating about who will be next.

Iran has had more than 20 major earthquakes (above 6 on the Richter scale) in the past century, and seismologists estimate that a large population centre will be hit by one every eight years. While the vast majority of seismic activity occurs along the Zagros Mountains, where the Eurasian and Arabian tectonic plates meet, it is in the desert regions of central Iran that the biggest movements are felt: Ferdows (1968; 7.3 on the Richter scale; up to 20,000 dead), Tabas (1978; 7.8; more than 1500 dead) and Bam (6.6) are all in this area.

However, the mountainous regions in the north are also susceptible, and Tehran reportedly has two major faults running directly beneath it. In the wake of the Bam disaster there was much speculation in Tehran about what kind of hell would be unleashed if – or as many people feel, when – a large quake rocks the capital. The citizenry are right to worry. Building standards in Iran are poor, and corruption among inspectors ensures even these standards are seldom met. A government report in 2004 stated that of the 15 million homes in Iran, 7.2 million are vulnerable to a major earthquake. As a visitor, all you can do is hope you don't get unlucky. See p377 for tips in case you do.

Unlike many ancient civilisations, such as those in Egypt and Mesopotamia, Persian settlements did not develop around major rivers. The longest and sole navigable river is the Karun (890km) in the southwest, and it's no Nile. Rather, settled areas are almost entirely confined to the foothills of mountains, where natural springs and melting snow provide sufficient water, with the melted snow often channelled through ingenious underground canals called *qanats* (p260).

Only about 11% of Iran is arable land: 8% is forest, 47% is natural (ie nonarable) pastures; and the remaining 34% is infertile land, including desert.

Without river connections, and prior to modern transport, these communities lived in relative isolation. In many cases a large town would be the focus of trade for hundreds of surrounding villages otherwise hemmed in by mountains or desert. Almost all further trade and communication was done by camel caravans, which linked these population basins to each other and the rest of the known world via the silk routes and the coasts.

In the north Iran's coast borders the Caspian Sea (Darya-ye Khazar), which, at 370,000 sq km, is the world's largest lake. (Or is it? See p174.) To the southeast, the coast along the Persian Gulf is 965km long. The Persian Gulf becomes the Gulf of Oman east of the strategic Strait of Hormuz. The gulf contains dozens of tiny islands, most of them uninhabited. Those that are, notably Qeshm (p303) and Kish (p292), are being developed, attracting investors and tourists from the Gulf States. Other islands are used as bases for oil prospecting.

Iran boasts an abundance of *cheshmeh* (hot- and cold-water mineral springs), usually found in mountainous regions and much loved by Iranians as picnic venues. The most developed is Sara'eyn (p163), near Ardabil, which is now a full-blown spa resort. In the desert more modest springs are the lifeblood of tiny oasis villages like Garmeh (p254).

WILDLIFE

Iran's diverse landscapes are home to a fascinating and sometimes exhilarating mix of wildlife. Seeing this fauna is not easy but with planning, patience and good guiding, you might get lucky.

Mammals

Iran is home to 158 species of mammal, about one-fifth of which are endemic. Large cats, including the Persian leopard and Asiatic cheetah (see p88), are the most glamorous, but a range of wild sheep, deer, gazelle and bears are just as interesting.

Indeed, Iran's seven species of wild sheep might well be the progenitors of the modern, garden variety sheep and goat. They include species such as the Transcaspian oreal, Laristan mouflon and Alborz red sheep, an ibex with a long black beard and curved horns.

THROUGH MARTIAN EYES

Iran's mountain and desert landscapes are often as spectacular to look at from space as they are in person. So if you have a couple of hours to kill, get on Google Earth and check out the following:

- The Kaluts (p321) N 30°38'34.63", E 58° 0'58.48"
- Qeshm Geological Park (p303) N 26°37'0.46", E 55°29'29.43"
- Zagros Mountains (p252) N 30°15'4.30", E 51°57'21.35"
- Dasht-e Kavir mountains N 33°50'47.00", E 52°34'53.26"
- Dasht-e Lut sand dunes N 30° 5'50.34", E 59°16'48.39"

THE ASIATIC CHEETAH

The Asiatic cheetah is one of the most endangered cats on earth. The 50 to 100 living on the edges of Iran's Dasht-e Kavir are all that remain of a population that once ranged from India to the Mediterranean. Cheetahs were prized by ancient Persian royalty, who trained them to hunt gazelles. It is this long history, and that Iran's population of Asiatic lion and Caspian tiger has been hunted into extinction, that has made the cheetah the poster-cat of the country's conservation movement.

With the support of the UN and the World Conservation Society, the government has designated land, mainly in Yazd and Semnan provinces, as parks and reserves, and has increased punishments for poaching. Tracking studies have been ongoing since 2001 and since early 2007 cheetahs and Persian leopards have been fitted with GPS collars. The Asiatic cheetah requires vast tracts of land to survive so the plan is to identify exactly where the cheetah roam and try to link the existing reserves to form a safe haven for the few remaining populations.

Unfortunately, severe habitat loss during the 1980s and the resultant loss of cheetah prey, traditionally jebeer and goitered gazelles, as well as wild sheep and goats, have forced the cats deeper into mountainous areas in search of more modest meals – such as hare and even lizards. In late 2007 one of the first two cheetahs fitted with a GPS collar was found dead in a mountain valley, killed by a Persian leopard as they hunted the same meal.

On the positive side, education programs have significantly reduced poaching and the creation of protected areas is expected to help other native species to recover. For more information visit www.wcs.org and go to the Iran Cheetah Project, or see www.iraniancheetah.org.

Notable other species of mammal include the spectacular Persian wild ass, goitered and Jebeer gazelles, maral, Asian black bear and brown bear. Wild dogs include wolves, jackals and hyenas, while Iran's unusually large wild boars are often targeted by hunters. The majority of these larger mammals are primarily found in the forests of the Alborz Mountains although large cats, wild dogs and gazelle are also found in the arid lands around the two major deserts.

Camels still roam the deserts of the eastern provinces of Kerman, Sistan va Baluchestan and Khorasan, and while they might look wild they almost certainly belong to nomadic or seminomadic communities.

Birds

About 500 species of bird have been sighted in Iran, but only one – Pleske's ground jay – is unique to the country. However, a small but growing number of birders are coming to Iran in search of montane or arid-land Middle East species that are hard or dangerous to find elsewhere. These include the Caucasian black grouse, Caspian snowcock, Radde's accentor and several species of wheatear.

Birds of the Middle East, by RF Porter, S Christensen and P Schiermacker-Hansen is the best book to buy if you're serious about birding in Iran.

Iran is home to 22 wetlands that are protected under the Ramsar Convention. These are ideal places to see migrating land and water birds in their natural habitat, while en route between Europe and Africa. The range of water birds, ducks in particular, is impressive. While the numbers are far fewer than reported a few decades ago, there are still thought to be more than one million resident (for at least part of the year) in Iran. Migratory water birds include the greater flamingo, once found in their thousands on Lake Orumiyeh in spring but less common now due to rising salination, as well as the glossy ibis and the Smyrna kingfisher.

Other relatively common species include black-and-white magpies, blue rollers, brown-and-green bee-eaters, and black-and-grey hooded crows. Less common are the golden eagle, found in the Caspian provinces; the tiny jiroft, found in Kerman province and along the Persian Gulf; the red-wattled lapwing; the yellow partridge; the delijeh and balaban falcon, found mainly in Hamadan province; and the black vulture and black kite, which live in the central plateau and deserts.

Marine Life

The Persian Gulf is home to a wide range of tropical fish, as well as swordfish, porpoises and sharks. The Caspian Sea has the Caspian seal, whose origin remains a mystery to science as it exists so far from the open sea. The Caspian also has large shoals of sturgeon (producing the world-famous caviar). Sturgeon numbers have fallen by 90% since the '70s due to pollution and overfishing, and in 2006 a UN body banned the export of caviar from four of the Caspian's five littoral states. The exception was Iran, which received an export quota for the caviar of only one species of sturgeon. For more on the Caspian, see p174.

Ancient Greek playwright Aechylus was killed when a tortoise landed on his bald head. This story was thought to be a myth until a bearded vulture was seen dropping a tortoise onto rocks to crack it open. It now seems a bearded vulture confused poor Aechylus' head for a stone.

Endangered Species

According to a 2007 World Bank report, 21 mammals, 18 birds and one major plant species are highly endangered in Iran. Habitat loss is the main threat but the one million hunting licenses (each with free bullets from the state) issued each year do not help. As well as the high-profile Asiatic cheetah, the Persian fallow deer remains vulnerable but is nonetheless a rare Iranian conservation success story. Once common in light woodlands across the Middle East, hunting decimated the population so badly that by the 1950s the Persian fallow dear was thought to be extinct. However a small population was discovered in Khuzestan Province, and intensive breeding efforts saw numbers rise throughout the '60s and '70s. Today populations exist in Khuzestan, Mazandaran, the Arjan Protected Area and on an island in Lake Orumiyeh. In the mountains of northwestern Iran, the lammergeier (bearded vulture) has been shot and poisoned to the brink of extinction due to a misconception among farmers that they attack sheep. In fact, this fascinating bird usually eats only what other vultures have left behind, and often breaks bones by dropping them onto rocks from a great height. They apply the same method to the unfortunate Greek spur-thighed tortoises in the area. The Siberian white crane is another high-profile but endangered bird in Iran.

Plants

Despite its extensive deserts and unrestrained urban development, Iran harbours more than 8200 species of plants, about 2000 of them endemic. The northern slopes of the Alborz Mountains are densely covered to about 2500m with broad-leaved deciduous forest, which forms the largest area of vegetation in the country. Here you will find species similar to those in many European forests (oak, ash, pine, poplar, willow, walnut, maple and elm) and the less common Caucasian wing nut. The loveliest pockets of forest are around Masuleh (p171), in the Golestan National Park east of Minudasht, and, more accessibly, at Nahar Khoran (p338), just south of Gorgan.

WEBSITES FOR BIRDERS

Birding Pal (www.birdingpal.org/Iran) A list of professional and enthusiast birding guides in Iran.
Birdquest (www.birdquest.co.uk)
Oriental Bird Images (www.orientalbirdimages.org)
Ornithological Society of the Middle East (www.osme.org)
Wetlands (www.wetlands.org/RSOB/default.htm) List of 22 protected Iranian wetlands.

There are smaller, less dense forests of oak and juniper on the higher slopes of the central and northwest Zagros Mountains. By contrast, southern and eastern Iran are almost – but not entirely – bare. Particularly during spring, vibrant dashes of green, such as the 20km long 'walnut jungle' at Bavanat (p285), can be found hidden in valleys between barren brown hills. Palm trees grow on the southern coastal lowland, especially near the Strait of Hormuz, and nomadic herders travel up and down between the warmer coast and cooler mountains in search of seasonal pastures.

More than a thousand wetland sites around the world are protected under the framework of an agreement signed in 1971 in Ramsar, on the Caspian Sea coast. Known as the Ramsar Convention, birds and their wetland habitats are the greatest beneficiaries.

But it is the luxuriant oases dotted around the bone-dry barrenness of Iran's deserts that are most amazing. Here, where temperatures regularly top 50°C in summer, dozens of subtly different date palms thrive, often sharing space with hardy pomegranate trees and modest fields of cucumber and melon; Garmeh (p254) is a classic example.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

National parks, and the wildlife they are designed to protect, are luxuries that most Iranians don't have the time or money to be concerned with. As a result, most national parks are terribly underfunded and understaffed, and the most accessible zones tend to be rubbish-strewn picnic sites. Unauthorised hunting is an ongoing problem, as is illegal cultivation of protected areas. Attitudes are slowly changing in cities such as Tehran and Shiraz, but realistically, it could be decades before Iran's nature reserves have anything like the status of their Western counterparts.

So what does this mean for the visitor? About 5% of Iran is protected. But in the 16 officially mandated national parks and 137 other protected areas there are few fences, few, if any, rangers, no maps, no guides and no facilities. Even finding certain parks can be difficult, as they don't appear on maps, and there is no public transport and few signs. Other parks such as Sisingan on the Caspian suffer the opposite problem: they are small, overused and all too quickly overrun by weekenders.

Hardy souls might choose to strike out on their own, but unless time is no problem and you have at least basic Farsi, it will probably be a pretty frustrating experience. Your best bet is to employ a travel agency close to the park you want to visit; at least they should know how to get you there. Alternatively, use one of the specialist mountaineering and outdoor agencies, see the boxed text (p373) for details.

A selection of Iran's more accessible national parks and protected areas are listed below. Due to the limited facilities, there is little or no extra detail in the destination chapters.

But if you're keen, these are a start.

Arjan Protected Area Lake and wetland area near Shiraz. Home to masked tits, waterfowl and seasonal migratory birds, plus mammals including Persian fallow deer.

Bakhtegan National Park Incorporating Lakes Bakhtegan and Tashk, this park is about 80km east of Shiraz. Flamingos and other migratory birds loiter here during winter.

Bijar Protected Area About 15km north of Bijar town in Kordestan. Home to Alborz red sheep, hyenas and jackals. Best visited in spring and autumn.

Golestan National Park Forested mountains between Gorgan and the Caspian Sea. Home to wild boars, oreal rams, brown bears, wolves, leopards, goitered gazelles and assorted bird life. Best visited in spring. Permits are required. See also p343.

Lake Orumiyeh National Park An important wetland reserve, this park is home to rare deer and a multitude of birds migrating between Europe and Africa. Relatively accessible (from Tabriz, p146), though increasingly threatened.

Tandoureh National Park Rocky, mountainous terrain favoured by oreal rams, ibex and leopard, near Daragaz on the border with Turkmenistan.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Iran faces several serious environmental challenges, most of which can be summed up as habitat loss and desertification and pollution.

But it's not all bad news. Public awareness of the environment has risen significantly in recent years. While most attention has been focused on the nuclear power program, Iran has also opened two wind farms and is building a major solar power plant, due to begin operating in 2010.

Habitat Loss

When environmental historians look back at Iran, the 1980s will be seen as a disastrous decade. Upheaval following the revolution and during the Iran–Iraq War prompted rapid, uncontrolled expansion of grazing lands, often into sensitive semidesert areas, leading to overgrazing and, in some areas, desertification. Massive population growth during this time didn't help: with an extra 20 to 30 million people needing to be fed, crops were soon being sewn in areas unsuitable for intensive agriculture. The impacts have been dire. Estimates suggest that as much as 80% of the forest that existed in Iran during the 1970s is now gone, resulting in flooding, erosion and desertification. Wildlife has been pushed into ever-decreasing areas and, as numbers have fallen, competition for prey has become critical. These problems have been exacerbated by a land tenure act passed in the 1980s that changed millennia of land-use practice. Traditionally rangelands were grazed seasonally by nomadic tribes, but tenure over rangelands is now obtained by regular cultivation of land, regardless of its suitability. The government is aware of the problem and school children have planted millions of trees in a high-profile campaign in recent years. This explains the neat rows of spindly eucalypts emerging from the desert that you might see as you race by in your bus.

Following a disastrous drought in the late 1990s, Iran has built dozens of new dams, for both water storage and hydroelectricity.

Pollution

Chronic air pollution is the environmental problem you're most likely to notice while travelling in Iran. Tehran is one of the most polluted cities on earth (p99) and as industry and car ownership expand in regional cities, the air is becoming more poisonous across the country. In Tehran in 2005–06, as many as 10,000 people are thought to have died from illnesses relating to chronic pollution, which one senior official described as 'a collective suicide'. Iran's pollution problem is worse for having been ignored until it reached crisis point. Much of the air pollution is eminently preventable, with about 70% being emitted from vehicles, including millions of frighteningly inefficient Paykans (p414). The good news is that the Iranian government has taken several dramatic steps to force its people into realising the impact of this culture. The most important, and controversial, has been raising fuel prices (though whether the motivation was environmental or geopolitical is debatable). Iranians tend to believe that cheap fuel is their birthright, however raising the petrol price by 25% – to a whopping IR1000 a litre (or €0.08) – and rationing consumption has resulted in some Iranians taking their cars off the road. However, you do get the feeling that prices will need to rise further to persuade Iranians that there is value in pursuing efficiency. The same applies to natural gas, which Iran possesses in vast quantities – it's not uncommon to find gas burning under samovars all day. There are other problems. The Persian Gulf has been repeatedly contaminated by leaks from oil rigs and tankers, untreated sewage and overly rapid development on the islands of Kish (p292) and Qeshm (p303). Pollution in the Caspian Sea is a problem that now threatens the internationally recognised wetlands of the Anzali Lagoon (p171) at Bandar-e Anzali.