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A white "PDF" text on a red, curled corner graphic in the top right corner of the cover.

PDF

Iran

PDF ebook

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PLAN YOUR TRIP

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Photos, itineraries, lists and suggestions to help you put together your perfect trip

Welcome to Iran 2

Map 4

16 Top Experiences 6

Need to Know 14

If You Like 16

Month by Month 18

Itineraries 20

Visas & Planning 24

Travelling in Iran 28

Regions at a Glance 30



UNDERSTAND IRAN

GET MORE FROM YOUR TRIP

Learn about the big picture, so you can make sense of what you see

Iran Today 266

History 269

People 286

Daily Life 289

Iranian Cuisine 296

Faith in Iran 301

Architecture 304

Carpets, Art & Crafts 308

Literature, Music & Cinema 313

Natural Environments 318





Safe Travel	324
Directory A–Z	325
Transport	342
Health	352
Language	356
Index	366
How to Use This Book	375



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welcome to Iran



In the Footsteps of Empire

Before you come to Iran, you might be thinking the main reasons to visit the Islamic Republic are because it's a bit adventurous and there's a lot to see from the years when Persia was a great world power. At some levels you'd be right. Walking around the sublime, turquoise-tiled domes and minarets of Esfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square, the awesome power and beauty of the Achaemenid's ancient capital at Persepolis, the mud-brick alleys and rooftops in Yazd, and the wonderfully immense Elamite ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil will put you in the footsteps of some of history's most outstand-

ing figures. And certainly you won't find yourself crowded out of any sights. Which is fun.

These highlights, together with the atmospheric teahouses, bustling bazaars, deserts punctuated by historic oases and rugged mountain ranges, gives Iran more than its fair share of fantastic places to see. But to think of Iran only in terms of 'sights' is to miss the real story.

Redefining Hospitality

If you like people, you'll like Iran. The Iranians, a nation made up of numerous ethnic groups and influenced over thousands of years by Greek, Arab, Turkic and Mongol occupiers, are endlessly welcom-

If travel is most rewarding when it surprises, then Iran might just be the most rewarding destination on Earth. If you fancy travelling somewhere neither East nor West, and exotic and fascinating yet perfectly comfortable, read on...

(left) A Qashqa'i nomad girl looks out from her family's tent, Zagros Mountains (below) The skyline of Yazd.



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ing. For those who have grown up on an endless diet of images depicting Iran as a dark, dangerous place full of fundamentalist fanatics, discovering the real Iran is the most wonderful surprise. Before long you're asking yourself: how can somewhere supposedly so bad be so good?

Beyond the stereotypes is a country desperate to be seen for what it is, rather than what it is depicted to be. Sure, not every Iranian you meet is going to invite you around to dinner. But if you're open to the idea, you probably will be, and through it experience the ancient and sophisticated Iranian culture first-hand. It's these experiences that will live longest in the memory.

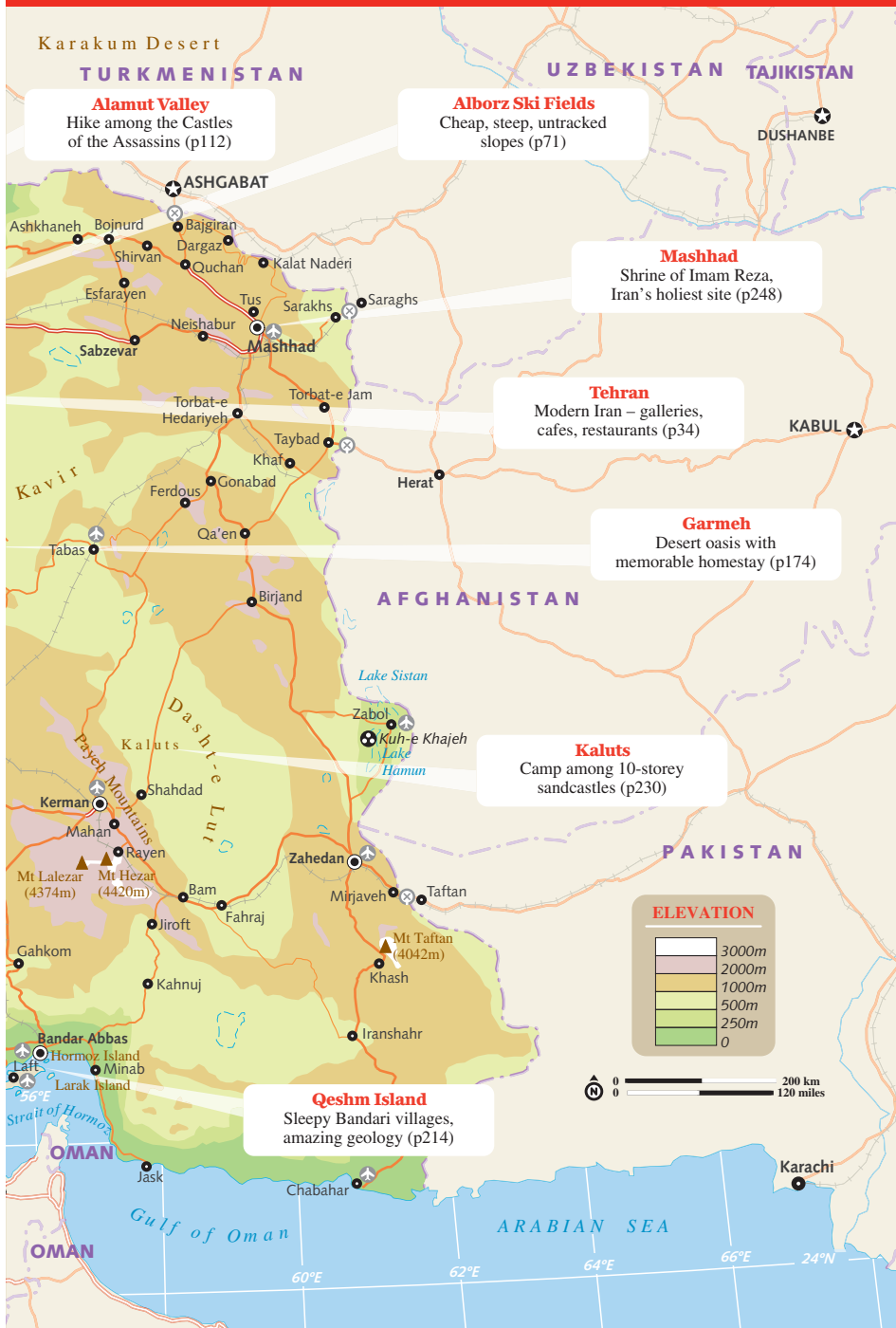
Politics & Safety – Should You Go?

If you make your travel decisions based on what your friends and family say, you'll probably never make it to Iran. This is a country whose politics are impossible to escape. For most travellers that will mean little more than some pre-departure questions about their sanity, but it can make getting a visa a challenge. Except for Americans, who must be accompanied, once in Iran independent travel is easy and, through the people you meet, rewarding and sometimes sobering. However you chose to plan your travel, a journey in Iran will change the way you see this part of the world.

Iran



Top Experiences >



16 TOP EXPERIENCES

Meet the People

1 From watching the TV you could be forgiven for thinking Iranians are scary. America-hating fundamentalists bent on destroying the world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, it's the people that leave the most lasting impressions from any journey to Iran. You will regularly be asked 'What do you think of Iran?', and be bought tea and food with intonations that 'You are our guest'. The people (p289) are, quite simply, the best experience in Iran. Shopkeeper, Shiraz



Esfahan, Half of the World

2 There are moments in travel that will long stay with you, and your first sight of Esfahan's majestic Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square (p157) is one of them. For this square is home to arguably the most majestic collection of buildings in the Islamic world: the perfectly proportioned blue-tiled dome of the Masjed-e Shah, the supremely elegant Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah and the indulgent and lavishly decorated Ali Qapu Palace. Robert Byron ranked '...Esfahan among those rarer places, like Athens or Rome, which are the common refreshment of humanity'. Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah, Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square

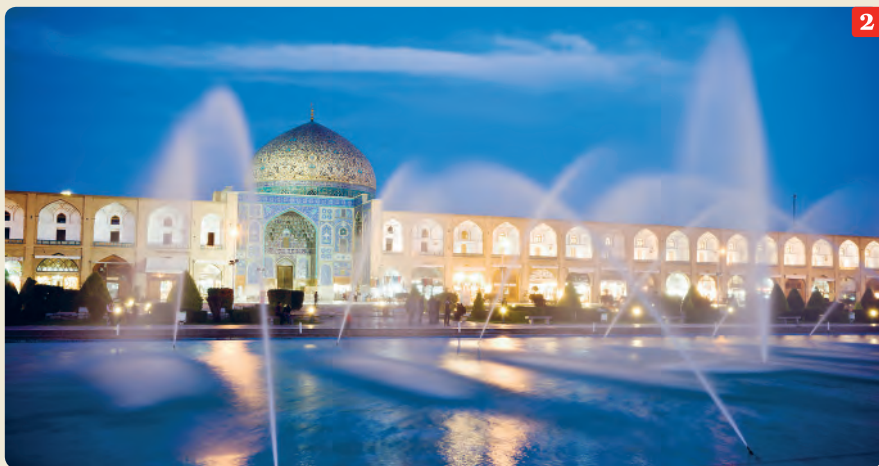
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Yazd

3 Few places have adapted to their environment as well as the desert city of Yazd (p175). It's a gem of winding lanes, blue-tiled domes, soaring minarets, covered bazaars, and fine old courtyard homes topped by *badgirs* (windtowers) and watered by ingenious *qanats* (underground water channels). Several of these homes have been restored and converted into marvelously evocative traditional hotels. Rooftops, Yazd

More than Kabab

4 Like peeling the layers of the ubiquitous lunch-time raw onion (which tastes pretty good and keeps nasty bugs at bay), Iranian food is one delicious surprise after another (see p296). Once you've tried several varieties of kabab, *khoresh* (stew), *ash* (soup) and flat bread, ask for *fesenjun* (chicken in walnut and pomegranate sauce) or anything with *bademjan* (eggplant). Then you can try the *shirini* (sweets)... And if you get invited to eat in someone's home, say yes. Iranian treats

Ancient Persepolis

5 The artistic harmony of the monumental staircases, imposing gateways and exquisite reliefs leaves you in little doubt that in its prime Persepolis (p198) was at the centre of the known world. Built by kings Darius and Xerxes as the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid empire, a visit to the World Heritage-listed ruins of the city also testifies to Alexander the Great's merciless destruction of that empire. Don't miss the monolithic tombs at nearby Naqsh-e Rostam (p201). Birds of Homa Statue, Persepolis



Nomads of the Zagros

6 About 2 million Iranians from several different ethnic groups still live a nomadic existence, travelling with their goats in spring and autumn in search of pasture. Qashqa'i and Bakhtiari nomads spend the summer months in the Zagros Mountains, before heading down to the coast for the winter. You can get a taste of nomad life on a day trip from Shiraz (p193), or stay with the Khamseh (and eat their delicious hand-made yoghurt) in the hills above Bavanat (p202). Qashqa'i wedding ceremony





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IVAN VOONIN/TTL/PHOTOSHOT ©



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The Islamic Republic

7 Iran is an Islamic Republic and while most travelers find Islam is not nearly as all-pervasive as they had expected, the Shiite faith remains an important part of Iranian life. It is at its most obvious in the passionate devotion seen at monuments such as the huge Haram-e Razavi in Mashhad (p249). The main draw there is the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, the only Shiite imam buried in Iran. Mullah and Holy Quran, Esfahan

Choqa Zanbil

8 Even if you don't like ancient ruins, the great bulk, semidesert isolation and fascinating back story make the Choqa Zanbil ziggurat (p138) one of the most impressive historical sites in a region full of them. Built by the Elamites in the 13th century BC, it was 'lost' under the sands in the 7th century BC and only rediscovered during a 1935 aerial survey by a British oil company. Now excavated, some of the bricks look as if they came out of the kiln last week.

Skiing the Alborz Mountains

9 Think Iran and you're unlikely to think skiing, but there are more than 20 ski fields in the country. Most of the action is conveniently concentrated around Tehran. The Dizin and Shemshak resorts are the pick, with steep downhill and plenty of untracked powder to keep skiers of all levels interested. Chalets and ski passes are inexpensive compared with Western countries, and the slopes are more gender-equal than most of Iran – expect to see exposed female hair. Skiers in Shemshak

Desert Homestays

10 The welcome is rarely warmer than in the vast, empty silence of Iran's two great deserts. Garmeh (p174) is the oasis village of your dreams, with a crumbling castle, swaying date palms and the sound of spring water. It's the sort of place you come for one night and stay four. Nearby Farahzad (p178) and tiny Toudeshk Cho (p173), between Esfahan and Na'in, also offer memorable desert-style family homestays; think beds on the floor, basic bathrooms and fresh, delicious home-cooked food. Garmeh landscape

Tehran Cafes & Galleries

11 Bustling Tehran can be intimidating but it does have its appeal. Beyond the museums and palaces are a range of hip cafes (p60) and contemporary art galleries (p49) that provide an entree into a side of life you otherwise only hear about. Sit over coffee for a while and you'll end up in conversation, or wander through the galleries and theatre in and around Park-e Honar Mandan (Artist's Park). Traditional Iranian restaurant, Tehran



10

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11

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Hiking among the Castles of the Assassins

12 The fabled Alamut Valley (p112) offers a tempting invitation to hike, explore and reflect among the fabled Castles of the Assassins. Nestled on widely spread rocky knolls and pinnacles lie the shattered remnants of more than 50 ruined fortresses that were once home to the medieval world's most feared religious cult. Choose a day hike from Qazvin or more extensive wanderings from Gazor Khan – a full, mule-accompanied trans-Alborz crossing to the Caspian hinterland. Ruins of Alamut Castle, near Qazvin

Carpet the Art Market

13 Iran's bazaars are home to a dizzying array of arts and crafts, from fine miniatures, marquetry, ceramics and glasswork and, of course, the most famous of all Iranian arts, a huge array of Persian carpets and kilims (p308). Carpet shops are everywhere but the bazaars in Esfahan, Shiraz and Tehran are the most enjoyable and memorable places to bargain for rugs. Weaving carpets, Esfahan

12



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13



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14

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15

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16

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Just Say 'Yes'

14 The key to experiencing the best of what Iran has to offer is to open yourself to it. When you are invited into the home of a near-total stranger, just say 'yes! Like us, you'll find your photographs will be the ultimate answer to those friends at home who exclaimed: 'Iran! But isn't it dangerous?' Children enjoying looking at an instant photo given to them, Qareh Kalisa area

The Poets of Shiraz

15 Iranians like to say that even in the poorest home you'll find two books: a Quran and the poetry of Hafez. It's appropriate for a country whose most celebrated sons are poets, and where almost every person can quote their favourite millennium-old man of words. In Shiraz, the city of nightingales and gardens, the tombs of Hafez and Sa'di (p192) draw pilgrims from around the country. Join them as they linger over tea, reciting the works of their heroes. Aramgah-e (Tomb of) Hafez, Shiraz

Bazaar Shopping

16 In the age of the superstore, most Iranians continue to rely on these mazes of covered lanes, *madrasehs* and caravanserais for much of their shopping. Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Kashan all have atmospheric bazaars where you can browse beneath domed ceilings, dodge motorcycles and stop in tiny teahouses for a hot brew and qalyan (water pipe). But perhaps the greatest bazaar is the World Heritage-listed Bazar-e Tabriz (p85), the world's largest covered bazaar and once among the most important trading centres on the Silk Road. Bazar-e Bozorg, Esfahan

need to know

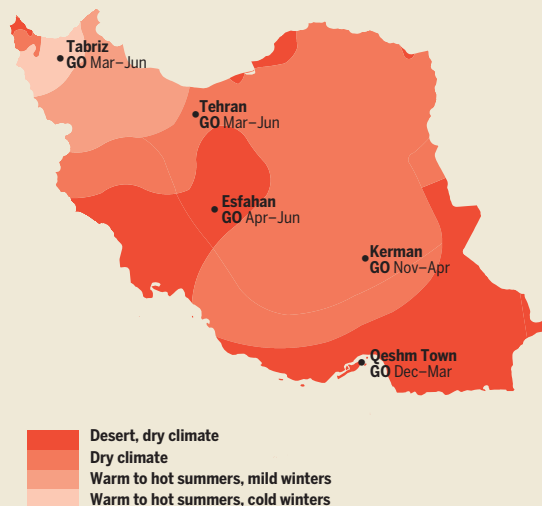
Currency

» Iranian rial (IR), though Central Bank of Iran is considering revaluing and/or changing the currency. In this book, we use US dollars (US\$).

Language

» Farsi (Persian) and ethnic languages, primarily Azari Turkish.

When to Go



High Season (Mar–May)

- » Ideal temperatures in most of Iran.
- » Prices are highest and crowds biggest during No Ruz (21 March to 3 April), especially at Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd and the Persian Gulf coast.
- » Prices in hotels go up in April.

Shoulder Season (Jun–Oct)

- » Warmer weather in June means fewer travellers.
- » September and especially October temperatures more moderate than summer and prices slightly lower than March to May.

Low Season (Nov–Feb)

- » Extreme cold, especially in the northeast and west, during winter (November to February). Mountain roads can be impassable.
- » Hotel prices are discounted by 10% to 50%.

Your Daily Budget

Budget less than **US\$60**

- » One-way bus Tehran–Esfahan: US\$8
- » Entrance fees to most sights: less than US\$0.60
- » Dorm bed or basic room with bathroom: US\$8–40
- » Meal in local restaurant: US\$4–8

Midrange

US\$60–175

- » One-way flight Shiraz–Tehran: US\$67
- » Half-day trip from Shiraz to Persepolis by taxi/driver-cum-guide: US\$35/45
- » Double room with bathroom: US\$40–120

Top end more than

US\$175

- » Four-star hotel in Tehran or Esfahan: US\$150 plus
- » Main meal in top Tehran restaurant: US\$30

Money

» Bring cash in US dollars or euro. You cannot use credit or debit cards, travellers cheques or ATMs. Repeat, bring all you'll need in cash.

Visas

» Valid Iranian visa required. To be safe, start process at least two months before you plan to arrive.

Mobile Phones

» You will need a local SIM card for cheap local and pricey international calls. Your home SIM will not work.

Transport

» Buses are cheap, comfortable, frequent and fast. Trains are cheap and comfortable, but infrequent. Flights are useful for longer distances.

Websites

» **Easypersian** (www.easypersian.com) Learn some Farsi.

» **Iran Chamber Society** (www.iranchamber.com) Historical and cultural essays.

» **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com/iran) Destination info plus travellers forum on Thorn Tree.

» **Tehran Times** (www.tehrantimes.com) Newspaper.

» **Iran Review** (www.iranreview.org) Political and social essays, and reviews of new books about Iran.

» **Iran Meteorological Organisation** (www.weather.ir/english/) Weather updates.

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	IR11,740
Canada	C\$1	IR11,340
Euro zone	€1	IR14,890
Japan	¥100	IR14,090
New Zealand	NZ\$1	IR920
Turkey	1TKL	IR6310
UK	UK£1	IR18,020
USA	US\$1	IR11,335

For official exchange rates, see Central Bank of Iran (www.cbi.ir).

Important Numbers

Drop the 0 when dialling an area code from abroad.

Ambulance	☎ 115
Fire	☎ 125
Police	☎ 110
Iran country code	☎ 98
International access code	☎ 00
Local directory	☎ 118

Arriving in Iran

» **Imam Khomeini International Airport, Tehran**

Fixed price taxi into town: US\$25-35, depending on vehicle type; rip-offs are unusual if you use the official taxi queue
Bus to Metro station: US\$2, plus US\$0.20 for Metro ticket to city centre

» **Shiraz International Airport**

Taxi into town: US\$5

» **Turkish border at Bazargan**

Taxi to Maku: US\$10
Onward bus to Tabriz: US\$2

Don't Leave Home Without...Reading These First

At a minimum, it's a good idea to read these sections before you arrive in Iran:

- » **Visas** How do I get a visa and how long can I stay? (p24)
- » **Money** Credit cards and travellers cheques don't work. Bring cash (p336).
- » **Currency** This money is confusing. Rials or toman? (p337)
- » **Inflation** Prices will be higher than what we have in this book (see p29).
- » **The welcome** How do Iranians think? Will I be welcome? (p289).
- » **Etiquette** Is he really giving me that for free? No, it's *ta'arof* (p290).
- » **Women travellers** As a woman, what can I expect and what should I wear? (p339)

And don't forget to get a *Farsi* phrasebook and pack some pictures of your family to better communicate with your new Iranian friends.

if you like...



Architectural Treasures

More than 3000 years of history and empire has left Iran with an array of architectural treasures that include towers, great domes and adobe cities as well as mosques. The first three listed here are World Heritage Sites; the others are awaiting listing.

Oljeitu Mausoleum This vast 14th-century mausoleum with the world's tallest brick dome is the most magnificent surviving Mongol structure in Iran, and probably the world (p116)

Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square The lasting glory of the Safavids is enshrined in the exquisite mosques and palace that front Esfahan's unforgettable square (p157)

Arg-e Bam The world's largest mud-brick structure, the Arg-e Bam is slowly being restored and is still worth the visit despite being badly damaged by a 2003 earthquake (p231)

Mil-e Gonbad A soaring, almost unfeasibly bold 11th-century brick tower (p249)

Jameh Mosque Esfahan's Masjed-e Jameh (Congregational Mosque) is the finest remaining Seljuk building and an encyclopaedia of architectural styles (p154)

Cultural Encounters

Listening to impromptu poetry recitals, joining pilgrims at a Shiite shrine or locals for a picnic, sipping tea at a carpet shop or smoking qalyan to traditional music, are parts of the Iranian experience.

Picnic with the locals Iranians might well be the world champions of picnic, and a walk along the mountain trails of Darband in north Tehran will likely see you invited to join them (p52)

Impromptu poetry Iran's famous poets are as relevant today as they were 1000 years ago. Listen to recitals while visiting the poets' tombs with local 'pilgrims' in Shiraz (p191)

Religious pilgrimage The reverence for Shiite Islam is nowhere more passionately displayed than at the major holy shrines, particularly the huge shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad (p249)

Traditional music Settle in for tea, dates and qalyan at a traditional teahouse, such as the Sofrakhane Sonati Darvish in Gorgan (p240)

Zoroastrian experience Get a taste of how adherents of one of the world's oldest religions live by attending a Zoroastrian temple, festival or ceremony in Yazd (p179)

Food & Sweets

There's more to Iranian cuisine than kabab. Let your tastebuds begin their exploration in the following restaurants, teahouses and sweet shops.

Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad With truly excellent food served in a superb medieval former-*hammam* (bathhouse), this place is by itself reason enough to visit Ardabil (p98)

Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse Fabulous food, a memorable teahouse setting and live music make this the top choice for Mashhadis (residents of Mashhad; p255)

Haj Kalifeh Ali Rahbar On Yazd's picturesque Amir Chakhmaq Sq, the mind- and taste-bud-blowing array of Iranian *shirini* (sweets) is universally regarded as the best in town (p183)

Fereneh Hafez Fereneh is a classic Iranian dessert and this Esfahan institution is so popular people eat it for breakfast (p167)

Eat in a local's home When someone asks you to eat with them in their home, say yes – the food and the experience will be memorable.



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► A shepherd takes a break from herding goats, Zagros Mountains (p171), near Firuz Abad

Ancient Civilisations

From the Elamites to the Sassanians via the Achaemenids, Iran has hosted some of the ancient world's greatest civilisations. What's left of them must have been well built. The first four are World Heritage Sites.

Choqa Zanbil The Elamites built this huge, 12th-century BC brick ziggurat in honour of their chief god and it survives largely because it was lost under the sands until 1935 (p138)

Persepolis The full glory of the Achaemenid period in one magnificent former summer capital (p198)

Shushtar The Sassanian-era structures here include water-mills, a 45-span bridge and a cliff-top castle. Captive Roman legionnaires are thought to have built the first two, while their leader Emperor Valerian is said to have died in the third (p139)

Takht-e Soleiman History's foremost Zoroastrian fire-temple complex is set in a high, lonely bowl of mountains beside a crater lake (p118)

Ardashir's Palace South of Shiraz, Ardashir's monumental palace was one of the earliest Sassanian architectural triumphs, and the most impressive of what's left (p202)

Village Life

If you fancy the simple life – that's sleeping in homestays and eating delicious home-cooked food in a village that's barely changed in centuries – head off the beaten track to one of these.

Garmeh This classic mid-desert oasis village of mud-brick homes and date palms is home to Maziar's place, Ateshooni, one of Iran's original and best homestays (p174)

Toudeshk Experience desert family life with Mohammad and his family in their atmospheric courtyard home (p174)

Fahraj Stop in this friendly, easy-to-reach village south of Yazd and find possibly the oldest purpose-built mosque in Iran and good, cheap accommodation in Favardin Desert Inn (p186)

Qeshm Island Experience the fast-disappearing Bandari Arab way of life in the coastal villages of Tabl or Shibderaz (p216)

Yuj Stop in one of Yuj's rustic homestays while hiking among the ghosts of the Assassins in the Alamut Valley (p113)

Adventurous Activities

Iran might not be known for its outdoor activities but with time and a little effort there is plenty to get the heart racing. All of the following can be done on your own, or contact one of the experienced local adventure agencies, p328.

Skiing Race down the long downhill at Dizin, the most established of Iran's 20-plus ski fields (p72)

Mountain climbing Take the three-day trek to the summit of Fuji-esque Mt Damavand, the Middle East's highest mountain (p73)

Desert trekking Venture into the sands by camel or foot from the desert villages of Farahzad (p178) or Mesr (p174)

Rock climbing Tackle one of the region's classic climbing challenges at Farhad Tarash, in the shadow of the historic Bisotun rock inscriptions (p128)

Social trekking Wander up into the Alborz from Darband in north Tehran on a Friday and soon find yourself adopted by local trekkers (p52)

month by month

Islamic events (marked here with an *) are based on the lunar calendar and dates move forward 10 or 11 days each year. See p334 for details.

January

You'll see few travellers in mid-winter. Much of western Iran will be under snow and mountain roads can be cut. Desert nights are very cold, but days are pleasant and sunny.



Skiing the Alborz Mountains

January and February are the ideal months for skiing. There are more than 20 ski fields in Iran but the best are Dizin and Shemshak, near Tehran. The snow is great and skiing is cheap; see p71.



Martyrdom of Imam Reza*

The anniversary of Imam Reza's death is a huge deal in Mashhad, with Shiite pilgrims flocking from around the region to pay their respects at the vast Haram-e Razavi. It's in January and December in coming years, see p333 for exact dates.

February

February 1 to 11 is known as Dahe-ye Fajr (the 10 Days of Dawn), a celebration of the days in 1979 between Ayatollah Khomeini returning to Iran and the fall the Shah's government. It is also when Iranian artistic societies hold their annual festivals.



Fajr Film Festival

Held from 1 to 11 February, Iran's premier film festival features Iranian and international films and red-carpet events in more than 20 cinemas across Tehran; see www.fajrfestival.ir.



International Fajr Theatre Festival

The highlight of the Iranian theatre year centres around Teatre Shahr (City Theatre) and Iranshahr Theatre in Tehran; see www.fadjrtheatrefestival.com and p62.

Top Events

- 1** **Chahar shanbe-soori**, March
- 2** **No Ruz**, March
- 3** **Sizdah Bedah**, April
- 4** **Ashura**, July
- 5** **Eid al-Fitr**, August



Magnificent Victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran

Dahe-ye Fajr culminates on 11 February with a national holiday marking the day the royal regime finally collapsed in 1979. Expect speeches and nationalist demonstrations across the country.

March

The whole country hits the road for No Ruz, the Iranian New Year, which is also the start of spring. For two weeks Iran virtually shuts down. Hotels are packed and travelling is tricky.



Chahar shanbe-soori

The Tuesday night before the last Wednesday of the Iranian year sees Iranians sing, dance and jump over fires to burn off bad luck as part of the controversial 'pagan' tradition of *Chahar shanbe-soori* (see p294).



No Ruz

The pre-Islamic celebration of No Ruz (see p294) falls on the spring equinox on 21 March. It's a huge family celebration on a par with Christmas in the West and many people take two weeks off. Tehran is empty at this time.

April

It's spring, the temperatures rise, flowers bloom, Iranians return to work and weather-wise it's the best time to visit. April and May is peak season for foreign travellers; book ahead for rooms and flights.



Islamic Republic Day

1 April is a public holiday for the anniversary of the referendum that officially established the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. It's marked by rallies, speeches and military parades.



Sizdah be Dah

Sizdah be Dar ('13th day of the year', 2 April) is a public holiday when the entire population heads to the countryside for a picnic. It's a pre-Islamic tradition that symbolises making a fresh start.

June

It's late spring and it's getting warmer and more humid, but as it's not crazy hot and few are travelling, this is still a good time to travel.



Heart-Rending Departure of the Great Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran

This public holiday on 4 June commemorates the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. About 500,000 Iranians flock to Tehran, and thousands more to Qom (where he trained and lived) and the village of Khomein (where he was born). The next day is the Anniversary of the Arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1963; the two-day combo means a lot of Iranians are travelling.

July

High summer is here and aside from the mountains it's very hot everywhere. In Tehran pollution is severe and at the worst times a holiday is announced at short notice. In coming years, part of Ramazan falls in July.



Ramazan (Ramadan)*

During the month of Ramazan, Muslims are expected to perform a dawn-to-dusk fast that includes abstaining from all drinks (including water) and from smoking. Tempters can be shorter, but life goes on; see p334 for exact dates.

August

A good time to visit the mountains of western Iran, if not the desert, where temperatures can hit 50°C. On the coast and in the desert shops close for five-hour siestas

and evening is the most pleasant time.



Eid al-Fitr*

The Festival of the Breaking of the Fast marks the end of Ramazan and, after sunset, is celebrated with huge meals across the country. In coming years it falls in August then July, for exact dates see p334.

October

With moderate temperatures and no snow to block roads, October is a pleasant time to travel, and many Iranians take a break.



Nomadic migration

With summer over, nomads are on the move, heading downhill to warmer climes. The hills and back roads of the Zagros mountains around Shiraz are a good place to find them.

November

Winter is coming and with it the cold and snow. Travel in the mountains of western Iran can be tough, but the desert, coast and cities of central Iran can be quite pleasant.



Ashura*

Ashura marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and is the most intense, passionate date on the Shia Muslim calendar. It is celebrated with religious theatre and sombre parades in which men self-flagellate. In coming years it falls in November, for exact dates see p334.

itineraries

Whether you've got five days or are aiming, with an extension, for 50, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travellers.



Two Weeks, Tehran to Shiraz Classic Iran

In two weeks it's possible to see the jewels of Iran's rich history. Start in **Tehran** and spend two days seeing the major sights, including the Golestan Palace, National Jewels Museum and Tehran Bazaar. Take a bus to **Kashan**, where you can explore the bazaar, check out the Qajar-era traditional houses and chill out in the Fin Garden.

Stop for a couple of hours to check out the mosque and tomb in **Natanz** en route to architecturally magnificent **Esfahan** and spend three days exploring the blue-tiled mosques of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square, the bustling Bazar-e Bozorg, the sublime bridges across the Zayandeh River and the Armenian community at Jolfa.

Head to the desert trading city of **Yazd** for a couple of days wandering the maze of lanes, gazing at the Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) and climbing to the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence. For a change of pace, stop in the desert village of **Fahraj** for two nights before spending a day visiting ancient **Pasargadae** and **Persepolis** on the way to Shiraz. Spend two days in **Shiraz**, where you can see the Zand-era gardens and bazaar, and wander the old city. Fly back to Tehran.



One Month, Maku to Mirjaveh Turkey to Pakistan

Travellers with an adventurous bent have been following this 4420km overland route from Europe to subcontinental Asia for centuries. It's doable in less time, but you'll need a month to really appreciate Iran's diversity without feeling you're constantly on the move. The journey is serviced by regular buses and some trains.

With its soaring canyon, **Maku** makes a pleasant introduction before spending three days in **Tabriz**, which has a fine bazaar, then checking out **Jolfa** and the troglodyte homes at **Kandovan**, before heading via Zanzan for a look at the remarkable Oljeitu Mausoleum at **Soltaniyeh**. Continuing east, historic **Qazvin** is the staging point for excursions into the spectacular Alamut Valleys to walk among the ruined **Castles of the Assassins**. Head north via Rasht to lush **Masuleh**, a charming village ideal for chilling out before dashing along the Caspian Coast to reach **Kelardasht** in a beautiful setting, then zigzag up through the dramatic Alborz Mountains to Tehran.

Spend three days in **Tehran** seeing the museums, galleries and taking in the hustle and bustle, then head south for a couple of days to **Kashan** with its World Heritage-listed Fin Garden. Bus it to **Esfahan** where you'll need three or four days to soak up the sights of the Safavid-era capital, and then head east for a village homestay in **Farahzad** or **Garmeh** in the vast Dasht-e Kavir desert. From the desert head south to the Silk Road trading city of **Yazd**, stopping in the spectacular Zoroastrian pilgrimage site at **Chak Chak** en route.

Plan to spend three days exploring the narrow lanes and desert architecture of Yazd before heading to Shiraz via **Pasargadae** and **Persepolis**. Spend two days in **Shiraz** taking in the bazaar, gardens and poet's shrines, and another on a day trip to **Bishapur** or **Firuz Abad**. Continue to **Kerman**, stopping for a night with nomads in **Bavanat** (during spring or autumn) or in a cave at **Meymand**. Using Kerman as a base, plan for three days exploring **Mahan**, **Rayen** and the desert stars in the **Kaluts**. Stop in **Bam** to see what remains of the Arg and just rest a while in this ancient oasis town. Then blast through **Zahedan** to the Pakistan border at **Mirjaveh** before your visa expires.



18 days, Tehran to Shushtar Go West

This intriguing meander west is ideal for those who've seen the main desert city sites or are confident in navigating through areas often unaccustomed to foreigners. The route over mountains and valleys boasts eight of Iran's 13 World Heritage Sites (denoted here with an *), but should be just as memorable for the people you'll meet on the journey. The remotest sections will require charter taxis, but rides cost only about US\$10 per hour. Note that in winter, mountain roads can be cut by snow.

Starting in **Tehran**, head west to **Qazvin** and spend the afternoon exploring the historic city, before driving into the **Alamut Valley** to hike among the fabled Castles of the Assassins. From Qazvin go over the Alborz Mountains to **Rasht**, and on through paddy fields and forests to the stepped village of **Masuleh**. Spend a day exploring the village and surrounding hills, or hiking up to **Qal-eh Rudkhan**. Hire a taxi and, forsaking the dull coast, spend a memorable day climbing through nomad country to Ardabil via **Khal Khal**. In **Ardabil** visit the magnificent Sheikh Saft-od-Din Mausoleum* before settling in bustling **Tabriz** for a few days. Explore the brilliant covered bazaar* and the contrasting Valiasr District, do your laundry, and allow a day for an excursion to the quaint troglodyte village of **Kandovan**, and maybe another for **Jolfa** and the ancient **Church of St Stephanos***

Refreshed, head southeast and use **Zanjan** as a base to see the magnificent Mongol-era Oljeitu Mausoleum* at **Soltaniyeh**. From Zanjan, take the starkly beautiful mountain road to lonely **Takht-e Soleiman***, once the world's greatest Zoroastrian fire-temple complex. Sleep in **Bijar** and continue to hospitable **Sanandaj**, capital of Iranian Kordistan. Spend a day exploring the city and another for a trip to **Palangan** or, for adventurers, a taxi ride through the endless hair-pins of the **Howraman Valley**. Either way, finish the day in **Kermanshah** and spend the following day visiting the Achaemenid-era stone carvings of **Taq-e Bostan** and **Bisotun***

Hop south for a quick stop in the charming Lurish capital of **Khorramabad**, with its picturesque hilltop fortress, before continuing to **Shushtar**, with its mesmerising, Roman-built hydraulic irrigation complex*. Base yourself here for visits to the ruins of ancient **Shush** and **Choqa Zanbil***, a magnificent 3000-year-old Elamite ziggurat.



10 Days, Tehran to Mashhad Mashhad Pilgrimage

Take the train or bus from **Tehran** to **Gorgan**, nestled attractively in the Alborz mountains. Gorgan makes a great base for visiting the Turkmen steppe and the remote **Mil-e Radkan** tower. If you're impressed by this tower, you'll want to visit the incredible 1000-year-old tomb-tower of Mil-e Gonbad, in **Gonbad-e Kavus**, before visiting the forested mountains of **Golestan National Park**, perhaps staying at The Turkmen Ecologde.

Next up, travel to Iran's holiest city of **Mashhad**, where you can revel in the ecstasy of pilgrims in the stunning and massive Haram-e Razavi complex and visit the beautifully proportioned Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi mausoleum. Mashhad is a great base for exploring the hinterlands by foot, bicycle or horseback. Nearby **Kang** is a photogenic stepped village of stacked mud-brick homes. The mausoleum of 11th-century poet, Ferdosi is found in **Tus**, while Omar Khayyam has his tomb in **Neishabur**. The impressive mountain cliffs of **Kalat Naderi** lie to the north, or you can take tea with the Afghans at **Torbat-e Jam**.

Mashhad is a gateway to Central Asia; otherwise fly back to Tehran or continue south by bus or train into the desert.

10-12 Days, Esfahan to Kerman Desert Detour

If you've ever dreamt of the oasis towns of the 1001 Nights or are drawn to hospitable homestays, this trip is for you. It's doable by taking infrequent buses, but the odd taxi *dar baste* can reduce waiting time. Avoid the summer heat by travelling between October and April.

Start in **Esfahan** and take a bus to **Toudeshk** for a night and a morning in the shifting sands of the Varzaneh Desert, before continuing to see the traditional houses of **Na'in**. From Na'in take the bus east to Khur, where you get a taxi to **Farahzad** and/or **Garmeh** for desert homestays that redefine hospitality; plan for three days all up.

Continue to **Yazd** via **Chak Chak**, and check into an atmospheric traditional hotel in the old town. Spend two days exploring the old city, the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence and a *qanat*, the underground water veins that keep these desert cities alive and if you're fit perhaps a trek into the desert. Heading south stop in **Fahraj** or the restored **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** for one night, before moving on to **Kerman**, from where you can take a tour to the remarkable 'sand castles' of the **Kaluts**.



Visas & Planning

Who Needs a Visa?

If you're not Iranian, you need a visa.

What Type of Visa?

Tourist visa Issued for up to 30 days and extendable. Must be obtained before coming to Iran and valid to enter for 90 days from the issue date. This is the surest option.

Tourist visa on arrival (VOA) Issued for 15 days on arrival at any Iranian international airport. Convenient but relatively risky, as you may be denied entry.

Transit visa Issued for five to seven days, this is the last resort. You must enter and exit via different countries, and have a visa or a ticket to an onward country. Transit visas are not available to US passport holders. To most other nationalities, the visas can be obtained in one or two days and no authorisation number is required.

How Do I Do It?

Do It Yourself Deal with an Iranian consulate directly.

Agency Pay an agency to obtain a visa authorisation number, which is sent to an embassy where you pay for and pick up the visa. Recommended.

VOA Turn up to Iran and hope, or get an authorisation number in advance.

Getting a Visa

One reason so few people visit Iran is that getting a visa can be difficult. The process is slow, somewhat unpredictable and rules seem to change without warning. But the vast majority of people do get a visa within two or three weeks and, once they've been to Iran, believe the hassle was worth it. But start the process early..

Note that all applications stall over the No Ruz holiday period; submit before 8 March to be sure.

Who Needs a Visa?

Passport-holders from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovenia and Turkey get a three-month tourist visa on arrival. Everyone else needs to arrange a visa in advance or take a risk on getting a 15-day visa on arrival at an airport. Contrary to popular misconception, US citizens are welcome, but need to pre-arrange a tour or private guide, or be sponsored by a friend or relative in Iran, who will take legal responsibility for them.

Israeli passport holders, and anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport, will not get a visa.

Which Visa? Pros & Cons

First, it's important to understand the process. Except with transit visas, all visa applicants must be 'approved' by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Tehran. This in-

GETTING THE PAPERWORK RIGHT

While we don't advocate lying on your application form, try to avoid unnecessary complications. Tricky questions:

- » **Email** If asked for one, opt for something generic and avoid .gov accounts.
- » **Itinerary** If you want a 30-day visa, write a 30-day itinerary. Keep controversial places such as Bushehr, Natanz and border regions off your agenda. Once in Iran you can go where you want.
- » **Occupation** Teachers, nurses and data-entry clerks are more welcome than unloved journalists, military personnel or, according to one reader, anything to do with fashion (very dangerous!). Be aware that the MFA might Google your name.
- » **Purpose of your visit** Tourism. One guy, applying for a visa on arrival, wrote 'to see Iranian girlfriend'. He was deported.
- » **Photographs** Women will probably need to have their hair covered (any scarf will do) in their visa-application photo. Check embassy websites.

cludes those seeking a visa on arrival, who can be approved either in advance or, with a longer wait, on arrival.

If you're approved, the MFA sends an authorisation number to the consulate, which takes your application form, passport photos and fee and issues the visa. Fees vary depending on your country of origin; see the Iran embassy website or iranianvisa.com, which has a comprehensive list.

Tourist visas are only fractionally cheaper than tourist visas and, while they don't require authorisation from Tehran, only give you up to seven days. The choice, then, is whether to get a tourist visa in advance or on arrival.

Tourist Visa

There are two ways to get a tourist visa.

» **Do It Yourself** You can go directly through a consulate, which saves an agency fee but takes at least three weeks and often longer. In theory, you download and fill out the application form from the Iran consulate in your home country; take or send the forms and your passport, photos, money and proof of your travel insurance to the embassy, and they will send your details to Tehran for approval. Several weeks later you might, if you're lucky, be contacted with the result. Otherwise you'll need to contact them, which is not always easy. If all goes to plan, you will eventually either pick up the visa in person (some embassies require women to cover their hair), or have your passport returned in a registered-mail envelope. Exceptions abound. In rare cases this method can take just a few days. However, we've also heard of cases where weeks after submission the consul has directed applicants to a visa agency to get the visa authorisation number. With so much uncertainty, if

you choose this option, give yourself six weeks or longer to be sure.

» **Use an Agency** Visa agencies charge from €30 to UK£120 to get you an authorisation number. In most cases you fill out an electronic form with details of your itinerary and where you'd like to collect your visa, attach digital copies of photo and passport, and the agency sends this to Tehran. The MFA claims that for most nationalities it takes between five and 10 working days to assess the application. When it does take longer, the visa agency often won't know why, which might explain (if not excuse) the agency being slow to reply to your follow-up emails. There is no refund if your application fails, but few are rejected. Once the authorisation number is received, the agency will forward it to you and your nominated Iranian embassy/consulate. You then need to go through the application process as a formality, and in most consulates the visa is issued on the spot – in Canberra it took us 25 minutes.

If you're British or American, expect both methods to be slower, more costly and more arduous. When it's open, the Iranian Embassy in London will often request an interview and requires fingerprints from British applicants. For US citizens, allow three months to be safe.

Tourist Visa on Arrival

Iran usually issues 15-day tourist visas on arrival (Airport Visa) to people from about 65 countries, including most European, ASEAN, Gulf Arab and Central Asian countries, several South American countries, Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. Two notable absentees are Britain and the USA.

In theory, tourist visas are available on arrival at all international airports and all you need is your passport and the name of an Iranian qualified to sponsor you – for example a hotel manager or travel agency principal. You supply the name and phone number and the immigration officer calls to confirm you are a tourist. In practice, however, a disturbingly high number of people have been sent back on the next flight when their expected visa did not materialise, even though they seemed to meet all the requirements. As we went to press there was talk that to minimise such problems these visas would in future require an authorisation code, just as normal tourist visas do.

Extensions to these visas are also harder, with another 15 days usually the maximum.

Entry Visa (Business Visa)

To get a 30-day (extendable) business visa you must obtain an invitation letter from the company or organisation you plan to visit. The process is otherwise the same as getting a tourist visa (DIY or using an agency). People coming for a conference or to play in a sporting event need an 'entry visa'.

Sponsors & Visa Agencies

Any Iranian can sponsor your application, which in effect means they submit the paperwork for an authorisation code. But in most cases it's easier to use a travel agency or one of the following specialist visa agencies, which have been recommended by readers and/or used by this book's authors. Keep in mind, though, that even with an agency there are no guarantees.

Iranianvisa.com (www.iranianvisa.com);
Tehran)

Persian Voyages (www.persianvoyages.com);
UK)

Pasargad Tours (www.pasargad-tours.com);
Tehran)

Touran Zamin (www.touranzamin.com);
Tehran)

Before You Go

One of the main considerations when planning a trip to Iran is whether to travel independently, take a tour or do a bit of both.

To Tour or Not to Tour Independent Travel

Travelling independently in Iran has more ups than downs. It's easier as a man or as part of a couple than as a woman (see p339), but is eminently doable regardless of your sex. Air, rail and bus transport is efficient and safe, sights are cheap and enough people speak English, or are willing to help, that it's hard to get into too much trouble. To top it all, as a visitor most Iranians consider you a 'gift from God' and you will be bowled over by the kindness of strangers.

Private Guides & Drivers

Freelance drivers and guides are a cheaper, more flexible alternative to group tours and plenty of readers have written to recommend this way of travelling – some for a month or more. In this book, drivers and guides are listed under the relevant destinations, particularly Tehran, Shiraz, Esfahan and Yazd.

Group

Most organised tours start and finish in Tehran, with a quick look around the capital before concentrating on the must-sees: Shiraz and Persepolis, Esfahan and Yazd, with a couple of short diversions thrown in. There are plenty of other itineraries, and agencies will happily build a trip to suit your interests. Costs depend on length, mode of transport, type of accommodation and the exchange rate. Expect to pay in dollars or euros.

Iranian tour guides are generally very good so you can expect comprehensive explanations of sights and cultural happenings, and answers to all your questions. And best, they act as a translator when you meet locals. However, you are less likely to meet locals on a tour, which is a big downside in a country where interactions are so rewarding.

Iranian tour operators also act as local handlers for foreign-based agencies selling tours to Iran, so booking direct should give you the same tour (without the foreign tour leader) for less money. The few listed here have been recommended by readers. See also the boxed text (p328) for specialist adventure agencies.

Iranian Operators

Abgin Cultural Tours of Persia (www.abgintours.com; Tehran) Fixed itinerary tours plus flexible, personalised trips. Respected.

MORE TIME, PLEASE – VISA EXTENSIONS

First the good news: there is *usually* little difficulty in extending a 30-day tourist visa to 60 days. It's possible, but harder, to extend again, up to a maximum of 90 days. The following summary of how the extension process works is notoriously prone to change. Check the **Thorn Tree** (lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) or with a specialist visa agency for the latest.

Choose Your City

If you want a long extension it's worth planning your itinerary to be somewhere friendly when the extension is needed. In general, cities familiar with tourists are best: Shiraz has for years been the city of choice, with Esfahan also getting positive reports. Second-string options include Kerman, Yazd and Tabriz, but these don't always issue the full 30-day extension. Tehran, Mashhad and other cities are less reliable. Check the **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) for recent reports.

The Process

Head for the Police Department of Aliens Affairs (*edareh gozanneh*), in the relevant destination chapters. Note that the office might have changed name to the Passport & Immigration Police by the time you arrive. You'll need:

- your passport and two or three mug shots
- two photocopies of the picture page of your passport, your current visa, entry stamp and any other extensions you've had (most offices have a photocopy service)
- IR300,000 (at the time of research; check this) for the extension, plus small notes for forms.

Pay for two copies of the appropriate forms. You'll then be directed to a Bank Melli branch to deposit the cash – just say 'visa' and the bank staff will in fill the forms for you. Return with your bank receipt and the visa extension will be issued within an hour or two, though in some cases (hello Tehran) it can take several days.

Timing & Overstaying

In theory, you can only apply for an extension two or three days before your existing visa is due to expire, and your extension starts on the day it's issued, not the end of your original visa. Cross-check the Persian calendar dates so you know exactly when your visa expires.

If things go awry, a doctor's note on official stationery stating you were unwell might act as a quasi-extension at the border, or be used for a short extension in the nearest Aliens Bureau. But don't rely on this.

If you do overstay, even by a few hours, expect to be detained.

Caravan Sahra (www.caravansahra.com;
Tehran) Big organisation with wide range of tours.

Pars Tourist Agency (www.key2persia.com;
Shiraz) Dozens of inexpensive tours specialising in areas around Shiraz.

Up Persia (www.upperpersia.com; Kerman) Young company, good feedback.

Foreign Operators

Bestway Tours & Safaris (www.bestway.com; Canada) Upmarket trips, some combining nearby 'stans.

Clio (www.clio.fr; France) French operator of cultural tours.

Distant Horizons (www.distant-horizons.com;
USA) Small groups accompanied by a scholar.

Geographic Expeditions (www.geoex.com;
USA) Includes nomad and bespoke tours.

Iranian Tours (www.iraniantours.com; UK &
Iran) Iranian operator with offices in UK.

Magic Carpet Travel (www.magic-carpet-travel.com;
UK) Iranian-owned with a good reputation.

Pars Travel (www.parstravel.net; Germany) In Frankfurt, Iranian specialist.

Passport Travel (www.travelcentre.com.au;
Australia) Includes a carpet-themed tour.

Persian Voyages (www.persianvoyages.com;
UK) Iran specialist with a range of tours.

Silk Road Tours (www.silkroadtours.com;
Canada) Iran specialist.



Travelling in Iran

Money

Iran is a cash economy, so bring as much cash as you'll need plus a bit more for that must-have Persian rug. Credit cards and travellers cheques are not accepted; see p336 for details.

Phone & Internet

Occasional politically motivated crackdowns notwithstanding, Iran is well connected. Prepaid SIM cards are cheap and easy to find. Internet is widely available but many sites are blocked; consider getting a VPN program loaded before you leave home; see p335 and p338.

Getting Around

Iran has a cheap, very efficient and comprehensive bus system, a perfectly functional rail schedule and a well-developed network of domestic flights. Add to this share taxis, expanding Metro systems and informed private guides and drivers, and you'll have no trouble getting around. For more, see p345.

Questions & Misconceptions

Perceptions of Iran as a land of religious extremists and downtrodden women mean that when you tell people in your home country you're planning to go you'll probably face a volley of concerns. So let's dispel a few misconceptions.

Is it Safe?

The most commonly asked question about travel in Iran is the easiest to answer. Yes. Assuming that you avoid protests and don't go snooping around nuclear facilities, Iran is very safe because Iranians are so keen that nothing untoward happens to you. While not unheard of, assaults and robberies are rare. We have hitchhiked across deserts, stayed in the homes of strangers and left bags in restaurants and cafes without any problem.

For women travellers, like anywhere it pays to be cautious and avoid situations where you are alone with a man you don't know. Foreign women will attract unwanted suggestions and, in crowded bazaars and Metro carriages, the odd grope.

Some paranoia does exist, and over the years we have been arrested and held until it became apparent we weren't spies; see p336 for what to do if you are arrested. The biggest dangers are actually driving and crossing the street. For an idea of how fellow travellers found Iran, see A Brit in Iran, p29, and the **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree). See also p324.

Aren't They All Extremists?

The idea that Iranians are flag-burning religious extremists is the greatest of all the misconceptions. In reality, your encounters with Iranians will probably redefine your understanding of hospitality. Particularly if you are travelling independent of a group, you will likely be invited into Iranian homes and if you say 'yes', you'll find the vast majority of Iranians are motivated by the same things as people everywhere – security, employment, adequate health and education for their families.

Will You Have to Wear a Sheet?

You mean a '*chador*'? No. A lot of Iranian women do wear the *chador* (which means tent in Farsi) but it's not mandatory. Like all females aged nine and older, women travellers will need to wear hejab while in Iran. That means covering hair, arms and legs and wearing clothes that disguise your body shape when in public.

This may be uncomfortable, especially during warmer months. Bring something long and loose from home and if you want to look less like a tourist, shop for a *man-teau* (an overcoat that covers your bottom, at least) once you arrive. Ditto for scarves, which will require constant attention lest you expose too much hair. Fortunately, while hejab will certainly keep you occupied most Iranians couldn't care less if you have a bit of neck or hair showing, and as a foreigner you will be allowed more licence than a local. If this still seems daunting, take comfort in the fact that thousands of women travellers come to Iran every year and, unlike local women, we've yet to hear of any being hauled off the streets for bad hejab.

A BRIT IN IRAN JOS STRATFORD

If you travel in Iran, you will very soon forget there is any political instability. I have just returned from three weeks and am British (so a citizen of the country whose embassy was stormed just prior to my trip). Without a single exception, Iranians welcomed me like a long-lost friend, genuinely happy to be meeting a British person and, if the issue of the embassy came into discussion, the persons usually shook their head and joked that it was nutters who [stormed the embassy], or otherwise expressed shame that this happened in their country. The reality is if you get into Iran, it is not the country the media portrays – it is a fantastic country of welcome.

For a full rundown on dealing with the practical challenges facing women travellers (silk scarf or cotton?), see p339.

As for men, the main dress restrictions are that you shouldn't wear shorts, or singlets showing your shoulders.

What About the Sanctions?

Sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program have had a real impact on the economy. At the time of writing Iran's banking system was effectively cut off from most of the rest of the world. For travellers, the most noticeable effects will be in constantly rising local-currency prices, volatile exchange rates and the challenge of getting the best exchange rate; see p337 for details.

WHAT INFLATION MEANS FOR YOU

The combination of foreign-imposed sanctions, government mismanagement and the dismantling of a 30-year-old system of fuel subsidies means inflation is running at dangerous levels in Iran. The reality for Iranians – and for travellers – is that prices are rising steadily. Expect transport, hotel and food prices to cost more before this book has been published – treat prices as a guide, not gospel.

The good news is that costs in Iran are very reasonable by Western standards, so rises shouldn't break the bank. And with the Iranian rial having lost more than half its value (on the black market) against most other currencies in early 2012, 25% inflation shouldn't mean a full 25% rise in dollar/euro/pound costs.

Prices will rise. Accepting and expecting it will make your journey more enjoyable.

regions at a glance

Iran is a big country and while cheap, efficient transport means nowhere is beyond reach, few people make it to all corners in a single trip. Almost everyone spends time in Tehran, the bustling capital, en route to or from the historic cities of Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd in central Iran. These cities, and the mountain and desert towns around them, are the main attractions of Iran.

Western Iran is also popular, with mountains in the north ideal for trekking and a spread of ancient sites and ethnic groups keeping things interesting. More remote and less travelled are the Persian Gulf coast, with its Arabian feel, and the deserts and Silk Route trading cities of southeastern Iran and northeastern Iran.



Tehran

Culture ✓✓
Museums ✓✓✓
Action ✓✓

First Impressions

Let modern Iran trump perceptions by sipping tea with students, seeing fine contemporary art, joining pilgrims at the shrine of Ayatollah Khomeini and walkers on a trail from Darband.

Windows on the Past

Highlights include the National Museum, the last shah's Niyavaran Palace, the Qajars' Golestan Palace and the National Jewels Museum, where diamonds (and rubies, emeralds etc) are indeed forever.

Action

Within easy reach of Tehran are the ski fields of Dizin and Shemshak, the rock climbing of Band-e Yakhchal and the summit of Mt Damavand, the Middle East's highest. Or just try crossing the street.

p34



Western Iran

History ✓✓✓
Culture ✓✓✓
Mountains ✓✓

History

This region was the cradle of many civilisations. See the Elamites' Choqa Zambil, the Achaemenid legacy at Shush and Hamadan, the Sassanian water mills at Shushtar and the massive Mongol mausoleum at Soltaniyeh.

Ethnic Culture

Azari Turks, Kords, Lors, Assyrians and nomad groups share western Iran with the Persians. Feel Turkish nationalism at Babak Castle, visit Kurdish villages in the Howraman Valley, and drop in on Bakhtiari nomads in north Khuzestan.

Peaks & Valleys

Amid the mountains are the stepped village of Masuleh, the Castles of the Assassins in the Alborz and Kordistan's scenic road to Howraman-e Takht.

p74



Central Iran

History ✓✓✓
Architecture ✓✓✓
Deserts ✓✓✓

Footsteps of Empire

Empires have bloomed and withered here. Top sights are the Achaemenid capitol of Persepolis, the Sassanian centre at Firuz Abad, Safavid glories in Esfahan and the preserved desert city of Yazd.

Architecture

Architectural gems include: Esfahan's wondrous Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square, the Jameh Mosque and bridges; Kashan boasts extravagant Qajar mansions; and in Yazd there are courtyard homes-turned hotels.

Desert Hospitality

Experience desert hospitality: Garmeh is a classic oasis, Zein-o-din a restored caravan-serai and Fahraj a somnolent town, or stay with a family in Farahzad.

p142



Persian Gulf

Qeshm ✓✓
Environment ✓✓
Activities ✓✓

Qeshm Island

Dolphin-shaped Qeshm is home to 60 Bandari villages, including photographic Laft with its wind towers and minarets, and homestays in Tabl and Shibderaz.

Geology & Wildlife

Qeshm's geology is so exotic it's recognised as a Unesco Geopark, and in season you can spot hawksbill and green turtles at Shibderaz village and migrating birds in the Harra Sea Forest. Go to Hengham Island for dolphins and gazelles.

Island Adventures

Up the heart rate by diving the reefs around Larak, taking a boat tour through the Harra Sea Forest, cycling around Kish and taking a speedboat to Hormoz.

p204



Southeastern Iran

History ✓✓✓
Deserts ✓✓
Adventure ✓✓

History

Ancient Silk Route cities of Kerman and Bam are the main draws. Kerman's bazaar, with its teahouse and caravan-serai, evokes millennia of trade, while Bam's huge citadel remains breathtaking despite earthquake damage.

Deserts

The whole southeast is desert or semi-desert. Highlights include the huge natural 'sandcastles' of the Kaluts, nearby desert campsites and Mahan's famous gardens at Bagh-e Shahzde.

Off-the-track Travel

This is frontier territory and it's easy to get off the beaten track. Stay in a centuries old cave village at Meymand or take the road from Bam to Bandar Abbas via ancient Jiroft.

p220



Northeastern Iran

Architecture ✓✓✓
Adventure ✓✓
Poets ✓✓

Architecture

The Haram-e Razavi shrine is a litany of architectural styles, the 1000-year-old brick tower at Gonbad-e Kavus is magnificent, and Mil-e Radkan is probably an ingenious early astronomical observatory.

Journeys

In Iran, getting there is often half the fun. Take a 4WD over mountain roads to the 'secret valley' hiding Mil-e Radkan or hike over the Binalud mountains to the stepped village of Kang.

Poetic Pilgrimages

Tus is linked with epic poet Ab-ulqasim Ferdosi, while Neishabur is the birthplace of poet and mathematician Omar Khayyam. At their tombs expect Iranian pilgrims to recite poems of their heroes.

p236

➤ **Every listing is recommended by our authors, and their favourite places are listed first.**

➤ **Look out for these icons:**



Our author's top recommendation



A green or sustainable option



No payment required

TEHRAN.....34

AROUND TEHRAN..... 70

Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini
70

Behesht-e Zahra..... 71

Rey 71

Alborz Ski Resorts 71

Mt Damavand 73

WESTERN IRAN 74

Bazargan 75

Maku 75

Around Maku..... 78

Orumiyeh..... 79

Lake Orumiyeh 82

Maraqeh..... 83

Around Maraqeh..... 83

Tabriz 84

Around Tabriz 93

Jolfa 93

Aras River Valley..... 94

Kaleybar & Babak

Castle 95

Ardabil 96

Astara..... 99

Astara to Rasht..... 100

Rasht 100

Around Rasht 105

Masuleh 106

Ramsar..... 106

Chalus & Noshahr 107

Around Chalus 107

On the Road

Qazvin	108	Persepolis	198	Gonbad-e Kavus	245
Alamut Valley	112	Naqsh-e Rostam & Naqsh-e Rajab	201	Around Gonbad-e Kavus	246
Soltaniyeh	115	Pasargadae	202	Bajgiran	247
Zanjan	116	Bavanat	202	Mashhad	248
Takht-e Soleiman	118	Firuz Abad	202	Around Mashhad	259
Sanandaj	119	Kazerun & Bishapur	203	Mashhad to Sarakhs	261
Palangan	123	PERSIAN GULF	204	Sarakhs	261
Howraman	123	Kish Island	205	Kalat (Kalat Naderi)	262
Paveh	124	Bandar e-Lengeh	210	The Road to Afghanistan	262
Kermanshah	124	Bandar Abbas	211		
Bisotun	128	Qeshm Island	214		
Hamadan	128	Hormoz Island	218		
Around Hamadan	134	SOUTHEASTERN			
Dorud & Lake Gahar	134	IRAN	220		
The Dorud-Andimeshk Railway	135	Meymand	222		
Andimeshk	135	Kerman	222		
Shush	136	Around Kerman	229		
Choqa Zanbil & Haft Tappeh	137	Rayen	231		
Shushtar	138	Bam	231		
Ahvaz	140	Zahedan	233		
CENTRAL IRAN	142	Mirjaveh	235		
Qom	143	NORTHEASTERN			
Kashan	146	IRAN	236		
Around Kashan	152	Tehran to Gorgan	237		
Esfahan	153	Gorgan	237		
The Zagros Mountains . . .	171	Around Gorgan	242		
Dasht-e Kavir	173	Semnan	242		
Yazd	175	Around Semnan	244		
Around Yazd	185	Damghan	244		
Shiraz	187	Around Damghan	245		



Tehran تهران

📍 021 / POP 15 MILLION / ELEV 1184M

Includes »

Tehran	34
Around Tehran	70
Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini	70
Behesht-e Zahra	71
Rey	71
Alborz Ski Resorts	71
Mt Damavand	73

Best Places to Eat

- » Azari Traditional Teahouse (p59)
- » Khoshbin Restaurant (p58)
- » Monsoon (p59)
- » Cingari (p59)
- » Akbar Mashti Bastani (p60)

Best Places to Stay

- » Firouzeh Hotel (p55)
- » Espinas Hotel (p57)
- » Ferdossi Grand Hotel (p55)
- » Media Hotel Apartment (p57)
- » Roudaki Hotel (p56)

Why Go?

With its relatively short history, ugly mask of concrete, sometimes choking smog and manic streets flowing hot with machines, many travellers and no small number of Tehranis will tell you there's no reason to hang around in the capital. But to take their advice is to miss out. For while Esfahan or Persepolis has a convincing case for being the soul of Iran, Tehran is indisputably its big, ugly, chaotic and dynamic beating heart.

Packed onto the lower slopes of the Alborz Mountains, this is Iran's most secular and liberal city and it attracts students from across the country. Expect relatively bold fashion statements, a range of ethnic and international restaurants, chic cafes and plenty of art galleries. And while Tehran lacks history, it makes up for it with impressive museums. But to get inside the real Tehran you need to get beyond the museums and into the cafes and teahouses and onto the walking trails. That's where you'll connect with Tehranis.

When to Go

The best time to visit Tehran is during the two-week No Ruz (Iranian New Year) holiday from March 21. Given more than 60% of Tehranis come from somewhere else and head for home for the holiday, the usual traffic chaos is replaced by relative calm.

During April and May and September to early November the weather is relatively mild. Summer is hot and can be very humid, and while winter isn't as cold as some places, air pollution tends to be at its worst during December and January.

History

Apart from 11th-century AD records suggesting the village produced high-quality pomegranates, little was written about Tehran until the 13th century. In his book *Mo'jamol Boldan*, writer Yaqoot Hamavi described Tehran as a village of Rey, then the major urban centre in the region, where 'rebellious inhabitants' lived in underground dwellings.

In 1220 the Mongols sacked Rey as they swept across Persia (see p275), executing thousands in the process. Most who escaped wound up in Tehran and the future capital's first population explosion turned the village into a prosperous trading centre.

In the mid-16th century Tehran's natural setting, many trees, clear rivers and good hunting brought it to the attention of the early Safavid king, Tahmasp I. Under his patronage, gardens were laid out, brick houses and caravanserais built and the town fortified by a wall with 114 towers. As Tehran continued to grow under later Safavid kings, European visitors wrote of the town's many enchanting vineyards and gardens.

Threatened by the encroaching Qajars, regent Karim Khan Zand moved his army from Shiraz to Tehran in 1758. At the same time he refortified the city and began constructing a royal residence. Perhaps he had intended to move his capital here, but when Qajar chieftain Mohammed Hasan Khan was killed and his young son Agha Mohammed Khan taken hostage, Karim Khan decided the threat was over and abandoned the unfinished palace to return to Shiraz.

But things didn't work out quite as Karim Khan would have liked. By 1795 he was long dead and his one-time prisoner, Agha Mohammed Khan, was shah. The new shah declared this dusty town of 15,000 his capital.

As the centre of Qajar Persia, Tehran steadily expanded. By 1900 it had grown to 250,000 people, and in the 20th century it became one of the most populous cities on earth. Iran's capital has fomented and hosted two revolutions, two coups d'état and much intrigue. As the setting for the CIA's first coup in 1953 (p46), it had a profound impact on post-WWII world politics. And as pronouncements from Tehran have been the driving force behind the growth of radical Islam since 1979, that influence has not waned.

Today it is fascinating to walk in the footsteps of that modern history: you can see the

White Palace at Sa'd Abad (p49), where the last shah hosted the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt as they plotted the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh; walk past the former US embassy now called the US Den of Espionage (p47); gaze up at Azadi Tower (p54), where hundreds of thousands of people gathered to mark the 1979 revolution and, more recently, to protest against the regime the revolution delivered; or visit the haunting Behesht-e Zahra cemetery (p71), where the faces of soldiers who died in the Iran-Iraq War stare out from endless fields of glass boxes.

Sights

Tehran is vast and many neighbourhoods are never visited by other Tehranis, let alone foreign travellers. Most sights and hotels are found either side of Valiasr Ave, the 17km-long street that runs from Tehran train station in the south to Tajrish in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains.

As you move around, the huge social and economic gaps between northern and southern Tehran are plain to see. The south is older, poorer, more congested and generally less appealing. However, as it was the centre of the city until the mid-20th century, the area south of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave is home to many of Tehran's best museums, including the National Museum of Iran and the glittering National Jewels Museum, as well as the Golestan Palace complex and Tehran Bazar. A little north of here is the area loosely referred to as central Tehran, on the edge of which is Park-e Laleh - home to the Carpet Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Most locals think of anywhere north of Valiasr Sq as northern Tehran. Much of this area was semirural until about 1970, but frenetic expansion has spread apartment buildings further into the Alborz foothills, engulfing the last shah's opulent Sa'd-Abad and Niyavaran palaces in the process.

Most streets have signs in English but getting lost is still easy. It's worth remembering the Alborz Mountains are known locally as the North Star of Tehran because they are, yes, in the north. And as the whole city slopes down from these mountains, if you're walking uphill that usually means you're going north.

For more detailed maps of Tehran and elsewhere in Iran, head to government map-makers Gita Shenasi (p63).



Tehran Highlights

- 1 Gaze in wonder at the 51,366-gem Globe of Jewels in the Treasury of **National Jewels Museum** (p45)
- 2 Relax, eat and meet the locals on a mountain walk around the lower slopes of **Darband** (p52)
- 3 Take in the over-the-top opulence of the **Golestan**

Palace, a monument to Qajar excess (p37)

- 4 Go downhill fast on the ski slopes of **Dizin** (p72) and **Shemshak** (p72)
- 5 See how the last Shah lived at **Niyavaran Palace** (p52)
- 6 See first-hand Tehran's vital contemporary art scene in one of the **galleries** (p49)

7 Navigate your way through vast, vibrant **Tehran Bazar** (p62)

8 Drink coffee with hip young Tehranis in one of numerous cafes at **Gandhi Shopping Centre** (p60)

9 Choose your meal from a kabab-free menu at **Monsoon** (p59)

TEHRAN IN...


Two Days

With two days, start early in the **Tehran Bazar** watching the hustling, bustling and hag-gling in the country's biggest market. Stop in **Imam Khomeini Mosque** at prayer time to quietly watch Islam in action, then walk up to **Park-e Shahr** for some head space and lunch at the **Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag**. Spend the afternoon looking at the ancient wonders of the **National Museum of Iran**, then take a shuttle taxi down to Rah Ahan Sq and the **Azari Traditional Teahouse** for some well-earned *chay* (tea) and *dizi* (stew). On day two, check out the **Golestan Palace**, then after a coffee with the paper at **Cafe Naderi**, head down for the 2pm viewing of the **National Jewels Museum**. Round the day out with coffee and alternative cuisine at the **Gandhi Shopping Centre** in north Tehran.

Four Days

Follow the two-day plan, then head north to check out the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex**, have lunch in **Darband** and hike across the side of the mountain to **Park-e Jamshidiyeh**. Use your last day to take in the relaxed **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art** and **Park-e Laleh**, perhaps take in an **art gallery** to meet young Tehranis and chill out in the **House of the Artists** in vibrant 'Artists' Park'.

CENTRAL & SOUTHERN TEHRAN

Tehran Bazar بازار تهران BAZAAR
(Map p40; main entrance 15 Khordad Ave;  Panzdah-e Khordad; ☀7am-5pm Sat-Wed, 7am-noon Thu) The maze of bustling alleys and the *bazaris* (shopkeepers) that fill them make a fascinating, if somewhat daunting, place to explore. Traders have been hawking their wares on this site for nearly 1000 years, but most of what you see today is less than 200 years old and is no architectural jewel. The *bazaris* are a conservative bunch (see p62) and there will be far more chadors than bleached hair here.


The bazaar's covered stores line more than 10km of lanes and there are several entrances, but it's worth using the main entrance, in a square opposite Bank Mellī. The warren of people and goods is a city within a city and includes guesthouses, banks, a church, a fire station and several mosques, most notably the big, busy but relatively unadorned **Imam Khomeini Mosque** (Map p40), which is a good place to quietly watch Islam in action. Most lanes specialise in a particular commodity: copper, paper, gold, spices and carpets, among others.

You'll also find tobacconists, shoemakers, tailors, broadcloth sellers, bookbinders, flag sellers, haberdashers, saddlers, tinsmiths, knife-makers and carpenters. The carpet, nut and spice bazaars might be the most photogenic, but the lane of stores selling fake designer labels (literally labels, not clothes) also catches the eye.

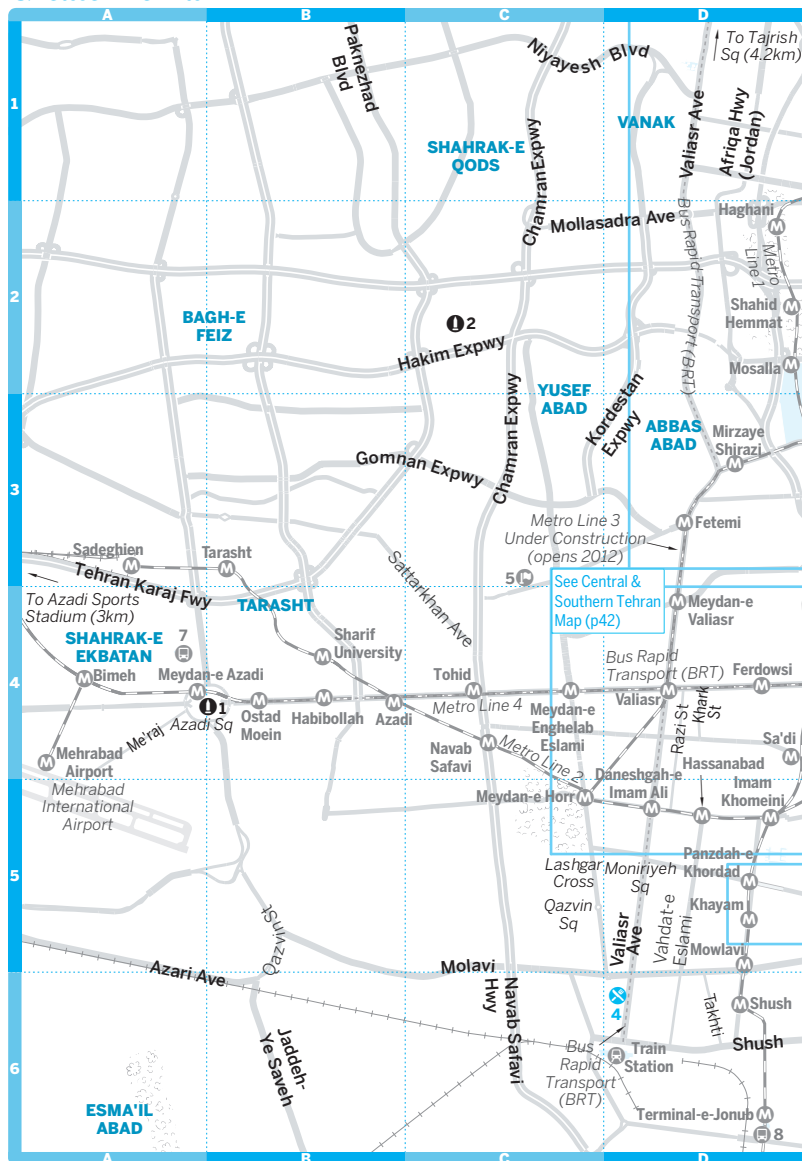
In our experience there are two ways to visit the bazaar, a place that cartographers seem never to have fully conquered. One is to simply wander the labyrinth of streets and alleys, taking whichever direction you fancy and just going with the flow. You'll almost certainly get lost but will soon enough be found by a helpful local; remember to walk uphill to the main exit.

The other is to allow yourself to be befriended by one of the carpet salesmen. Tell them what sections of the bazaar you'd like to see (the gold bazaar, spices bazaar, the mosque etc), and they will lead you. When you're done, they will expect you to visit their carpet shop, drink some tea and view a few rugs – which in itself is quite fun (carpet prices here are probably the best in Iran).

Try and visit in the morning, when business is brisk but not yet frantic, as it becomes at lunchtime when the chance of being run over by a piece of fast-moving haulage equipment is high.

Golestan Palace کاخ گلستان PALACE
(Map p40; ☏3311 3335-8; www.golestanpalace.ir; Ark Sq; individual tickets US\$0.20-0.50 each;  Panzdah-e Khordad; ☀9am-4pm) In what was once the heart of Tehran is this monument to the glories and excesses of the Qajar rulers. Between Imam Khomeini Sq and the bazaar, the **Golestan Palace complex** is made up of several grand buildings set around a carefully manicured garden. You must buy a separate ticket for each building.

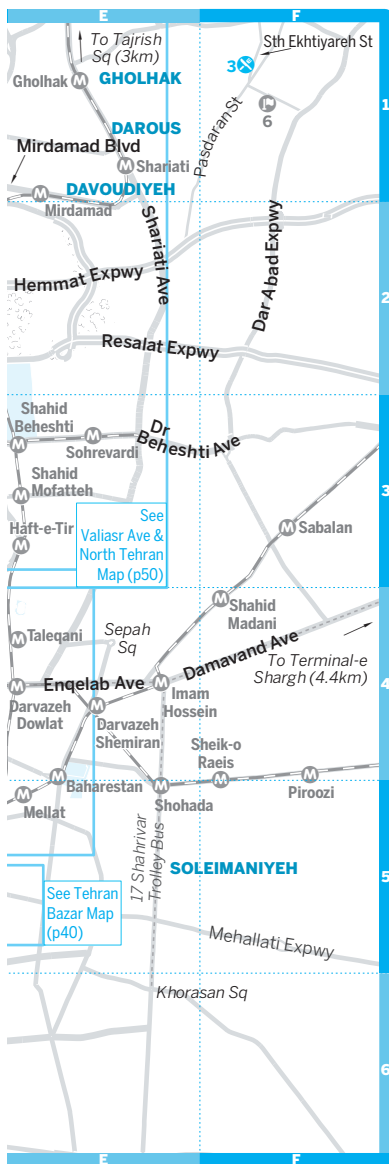
Greater Tehran



Although there was a Safavid-era citadel on this site, it was Nasser al-Din Shah (r 1848–96), impressed by what he'd seen of European palaces, who built it into the 'Palace of Flowers' you see today. Originally it was much bigger, with inner and outer

sections to encompass offices, ministries and private living quarters, but several surrounding buildings were pulled down under the Pahlavis.

The following description assumes you start your visit at the Ivan-e Takht-e Mar-



mar, then continue in a clockwise direction around the courtyard.

Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar

AUDIENCE HALL

From the ticket office, walk along the long pool to the **Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar** (Marble

Greater Tehran

Sights

- 1 Azadi Tower (Borj-e Azadi)B4
- 2 Milad Tower (Borj-e Milad)C2

Eating

- 3 Ananda Vegetarian Restaurant & Coffee ShopF1
- 4 Azari Traditional TeahouseD6

Information

- 5 Pakistan EmbassyC3
- 6 US Interests Section of Swiss Embassy.....F1

Transport

- 7 Terminal-e Gharb (Western Bus Terminal)A4
- 8 Terminal-e Jonub (Southern Bus Terminal)D6

Throne Verandah), a mirrored, open-fronted audience hall dominated by a magnificent throne. The throne is supported by human figures and constructed from 65 pieces of yellow alabaster mined in Yazd. It was made in the early 1800s for Fath Ali Shah (r 1797–1834), a monarch who managed a staggering (and quite likely very tiring) 200-odd wives and 170 offspring. This hall was used on ceremonial occasions, including the Napoleon-style self-coronation of Reza Shah in 1925.

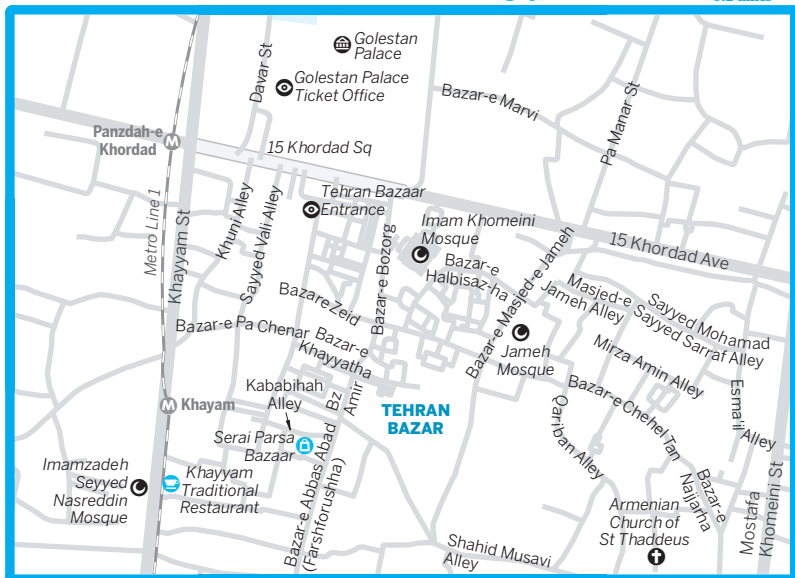
After leaving the Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar you'll come to an open-sided corner known as **Khalvat-e Karim Khani** (Karim Khan Nook), all that remains of a 1759 building that served as Karim Khan Zand's (r 1750–79) Tehran residence. But it was Nasser al-Din Shah who enjoyed this elevated terrace most, smoking qalyan (water pipe) and perhaps contemplating his next asset sale as *qanat* (underground channel) water bubbled out of the marble fountain nearby. His marble tombstone now stands on the terrace.

Negar Khane

ART MUSEUM

Continuing, you'll come to the **Negar Khane** (Art Gallery), which displays a fine collection of Qajar-era art. It was the brainchild of Nasser al-Din Shah, who had been particularly captivated by European museums. Especially interesting are the portraits of the shahs wearing the jewels and crowns you can see in the National Jewels Museum, and pictures of everyday life in 19th-century Iran by Kamal ol-Molk and Mehdi.

Tehran Bazar



Talar-e Ayaheh

MUSEUM

After being closed for almost 30 years the dazzling **Talar-e Ayaheh** (Hall of Mirrors) is now open to the public. Built between 1874 and 1877 the hall was dedicated to the Peacock Throne (see p45) before it was moved to the National Jewels Museum. More recently it was used for the coronation of Mohammad Reza Shah in 1967 (25 years after he came to power) and royal weddings. Today it and two adjoining halls house gifts including a large green malachite vase from Russia and 13 huge chandeliers.

Other Buildings

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Further east is the **Howze Khaneh** (Pool Room), named for the small pool and fountain in its centre. It houses a collection of paintings and sculptures of 19th-century European royalty – generously given to their Qajar counterparts by the same European monarchs.

At the east end of the garden, the imposing **Shams-AI Emarat** (Edifice of the Sun) blends European and Persian architectural traditions. Born of Nasser al-Din Shah's desire to have a palace that afforded him a panoramic view of the city, it was designed by master architect Moayer al-Mamalek and built between 1865 and 1867. Inside, a sequence of mirrored and tiled rooms house a collection of photographs, together with

yet more furniture and vases gifted by European monarchs.

Next door you'll see four soaring *badgirs* (windtowers, used for air-con; see p175), rising above the recently restored **Emarat-e Badgir**, first erected in the reign of Fath Ali Shah. The interior has typically ostentatious mirror work and is worth a quick look. In the basement the **Aks Khaneh** (Historic Photograph Gallery) exhibits a fascinating collection of photographs depicting Qajar court life; look particularly for the picture showing the inside of a Zoroastrian tower of silence, with bodies in varying states of decay, and the shot of 'freaks and dwarfs'.

Next up, the tiny **Talar-e Almas** (Diamond Hall) displays a range of decorative arts – especially 18th- and 19th-century French ceramics – in a room with red walls and a tiled floor. The attractive **teahouse** underneath might well be more appealing.

After wandering back through the gardens you'll come to the **Ethnographical Museum** near the main entrance, featuring a range of mannequins in traditional ethnic costumes.

Park-e Shahr

پارک شهر

PARK

(Map p42) If you're staying in southern Tehran and need a break from the traffic, head straight for Park-e Shahr where you can go ice skating (when it's cold enough), take a

boat trip on the tiny lake (in summer) and enjoy tea or qalyan year-round at the laid-back Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag (p58) teahouse. Or just sit and relax watching Tehranis relaxing.

National Museum of Iran

موزه ملی ایران (موزه ایران باستان) MUSEUM
This modest **museum** (Iran Bastan Museum; Map p42; ☎6670 2061-6; www.nationalmuseumofiran.ir; Si Tir St; admission US\$1; ☀9am-5pm Tue-Sun; 🕌Imam Khomeini) is no Louvre, but it is chock-full of Iran's rich history. Designed by French architect André Godard and completed in 1928, it's one of the more attractive modern buildings in Tehran, blending Sassanian principles such as the grand *ivan*-style entrance with art deco-style brickwork. Inside is a collection including ceramics, pottery, stone figures and carvings, mostly taken from excavations at Persepolis, Ismail Abad (near Qazvin), Shush, Rey and Turang Tappeh. Unfortunately, the presentation of these treasures is less than inspired and

the lack of useful explanations particularly underwhelming (ask for an English 'brochure' when buying the ticket, you might get lucky). There is some English labelling, and English-speaking guides are available, though you'll probably need to wait for one.

Among the finds from **Shush**, there's a stone capital of a winged lion, some delightful pitchers and vessels in animal shapes, and colourful glazed bricks decorated with double-winged mythical creatures. A copy of the diarite stele detailing the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, found at Shush in 1901, is also displayed – the original being in Paris.

Exhibits from **Persepolis** include a magnificent human-headed capital; a cuneiform inscription proclaiming the might and godly affinity of Xerxes; and a striking frieze of glazed tiles from the central hall of the Apadana Palace. Also on display are a famous trilingual inscription from the time of Darius I; a bull-headed capital and carved staircase; a statue of a sitting dog that looks

A REVOLUTION IN STREET NAMES

Across Iran you'll find streets named after the same few martyrs of the revolution, historical figures (often poets) and revolutionary buzzwords. In many places the government has conveniently painted a huge mural or erected a mosaic likeness of the person beside the street that bears his (it's almost always a man) name. So who are these men?

Ayatollah Beheshti Founded the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) in 1979. He took part in the negotiations over the US embassy hostages but was killed a year later by a bomb planted in IRP headquarters by the Mojahedin Khalq Organisation (MKO).

Ayatollah Taleqani A much-admired cleric who was repeatedly exiled and later tortured by the last shah. He led the first Friday prayers after the revolution but died soon afterwards.

Amir Kabir This was the nickname of Mirza Taghi Khan, a reformist prime minister (from 1848 to 1851) who was executed on the orders of his jealous shah in Fin Gardens near Kashan.

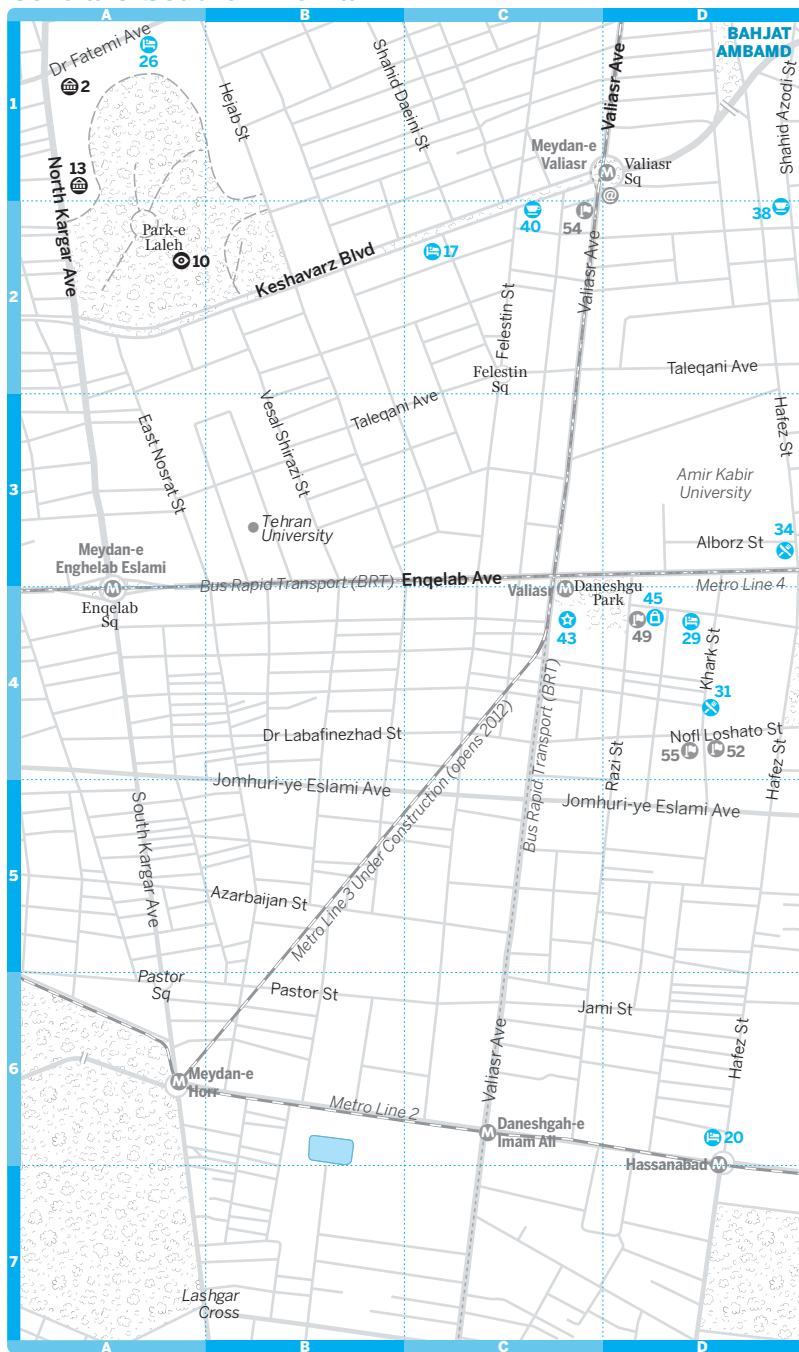
Dr Ali Shariati Returned to Iran from France in 1964 with a doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne. He combined radical political thought with socially conscious traditionalism and became an inspiration to many women. Barred from teaching, he went to England in 1977, but was found dead in his apartment three weeks later – allegedly a victim of the shah's secret police.

Ayatollah Morteza Motahari Was a close confidant of Ayatollah Khomeini who railed against communism and the effect it would have on Islam. He became president of the Constitutional Council after the revolution, but was assassinated by a rival Islamic group in May 1979.

Streets named for revolutionaries and Islamic phrases include Valiasr, which means 'Prince of this Time' and is a nickname for Mahdi, the 12th imam; Azadi, which translates to 'freedom'; Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which means 'Islamic Republic'; and Enqelab, Farsi for 'revolution'. For more on these and other Iranian figures, see www.iranchamber.com and follow the links through History to Historic Personalities.

Central & Southern Tehran

TEHRAN



Central & Southern Tehran

📍 Sights

- 1 Assar Art Gallery.....F2
- 2 Carpet Museum of Iran.....A1
- 3 Glass & Ceramics Museum.....E5
- 4 House of the Artists.....F2
- 5 Iran Ebrat Museum.....F6
- 6 Madraseh va Masjed-e Sepahsalar.....H6
- 7 Museum of the Islamic Period.....E6
- 8 National Jewels Museum.....F5
- 9 National Museum of Iran.....E6
- 10 Park-e Laleh.....A2
- 11 Park-e Shahr.....E7
- 12 Shohada Museum.....F2
- 13 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.....A1
- 14 US Den of Espionage.....F2

🛏 Sleeping

- 15 Atlas Hotel.....E2
- 16 Escan Hotel.....F3
- 17 Espinas International Hotel.....C2
- 18 Ferdosi Grand Hotel.....F6
- 19 Firozesh Hotel.....G6
- 20 Golestan Hotel.....D6
- 21 Hafez Hotel.....E6
- 22 Hotel Khazar Sea.....G6
- 23 Hotel Naderi.....E5
- 24 Iran Central Hotel.....F5
- 25 Iranshahr Hotel.....F3
- 26 Laleh International Hotel.....A1
- 27 Mashhad Hotel.....G6
- 28 Parasto Hotel.....E5
- 29 Roudaki Hotel.....D4
- 30 Safir Hotel.....F2

🍴 Eating

- 31 Armenian Club.....D4

- Coffee Shop & Veggie Restaurant of Iranian Artists' Forum.....(see 4)
- 32 Istanbul-No Restaurant.....E5
- 33 Khoshbin Restaurant.....F4
- 34 Pasta Charmy's.....D3
- 35 Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag.....E7
- 36 Sofreh Khane Ayyaran.....E3
- Tandoor Restaurant.....(see 30)
- 37 Tarighat Restaurant.....G7

☕ Drinking

- Cafe Gallery.....(see 42)
- 38 Café Hafta-do Hasht.....D2
- Cafe Naderi.....(see 23)
- 39 Gol-e Rezaieh.....E5
- 40 Iranian Traditional Restaurant.....C2
- 41 Mastan.....G5

🎭 Entertainment

- 42 Iranshahr Theatre.....F2
- 43 Teatre Shahr.....C4

🛍 Shopping

- 44 Berlan Alley.....F5
- 45 Gita Shenasi.....D4
- 46 Jameh Bazaar.....F5
- 47 Moses Baba.....F4
- 48 Varzesh Kooh.....F3

📍 Information

- 49 Armenian Embassy.....D4
- 50 Bank Mellī Central Branch.....F5
- 51 British Embassy.....F4
- 52 French Embassy.....D4
- 53 German Embassy.....F5
- 54 Iraq Embassy.....C2
- 55 Italian Embassy.....D4
- 56 Main Post Office.....F7
- 57 Turkish Embassy.....F5

like it was carved just weeks ago; and four foundation tablets inscribed in cuneiform.

One of the more startling exhibits is the **Salt Man** from Zanjan. He's thought to have been a miner who died in the 3rd or 4th century AD, but whose white-bearded head, leg in a leather boot and tools were preserved by the salt in which he was buried. More comical is a **bronze statue Parthian prince 'Shami'** found in Khuzestan, whose cheesy moustache looks out from a head obviously made separately from the much larger body. Look also for the impressive selection of **Lorestan bronzes**, dating back to the 8th century BC.

There's a small **cafe** (☺9am-5pm) in a courtyard behind the museum.

Museum of the Islamic

Period موزه دوره اسلامی MUSEUM
(Map p42; ☎6670 2061; Si Tir St; ☺9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Next door to the National Museum and part of the same complex, this museum had been closed for several years when we passed and had a small but worthwhile exhibit of Silk Road artefacts in its place; staff assured us the main museum would reopen 'soon, *inshAllah*'. When it does you'll find two floors exhibiting arts and antiquities from throughout the Islamic period. In the

past, these included calligraphy, carpets, ceramics, woodcarving, sculpture, miniatures, brickwork and textiles. The collection includes silks and stuccowork from Rey, portraits from the Mongol period, a collection of Sassanian coins and gorgeous 14th-century wooden doors and windows. Look also for the beautiful **Paradise Door**, a 14th-century lustre-painted mihrab (niche in a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca) from Qom, and a 19th-century inlaid door from Esfahan.

Iran Ebrat

Museum موزه عبرت ایران MUSEUM

(Map p42; www.ebratmuseum.net; off Sabt St; admission US\$3.50; ☉tours 10am & 2pm daily; 🕌Mam Khomeini) There is nothing subtle about the **Iran Ebrat Museum**, a one-time prison of the shah's brutal secret police that now exhibits that brutality with an equal measure of prorevolution propaganda. The prison is an incongruously attractive building, with wings radiating from a circular courtyard. But what went on here was not attractive at all.

During the 1970s, hundreds of political prisoners – including several prominent clerics and postrevolutionary figures whose names you will recognise from street signs – were held in tiny cells and, in many cases, tortured by the Anti Sabotage Joint Committee, a branch of the despised Savak (National Intelligence and Security Organisation). The various functions of the prison are dramatically re-created with waxwork dummies and liberal doses of red paint. The shah's henchmen are depicted wearing neckties (a pro-Western symbol in modern Iran) and looking brutish (check the eyebrows). The propaganda element is emphasised with numerous photos of the former royal family – just in case you forget who was responsible.

Propaganda aside, this prison was undoubtedly a terrible place to end up and the people running it guilty of brutality on a grand scale. It's just a pity that the abhorrence of torture and politically motivated incarceration expressed here is not shared by the current ruling regime; stories from Tehran's notorious Evin Prison are just as horrifying.

All visitors must follow the 1¼-hour tour, conducted in Farsi by a former prisoner. Some exhibits have brief explanations in English, though little interpretation is required. The tour includes a film that's not suitable for children.

National Jewels

Museum موزه جواهرات ملی MUSEUM

(Map p42; ☎6646 3785; Ferdosi St; admission US\$2.50, child under 12 not permitted; ☉2-4.30pm Sat-Tue). Owned by the Central Bank and accessed through its front doors, the cavernous vault that houses what is commonly known as the 'Jewels Museum' is probably Tehran's biggest tourist drawcard. If you've already visited the art gallery at the Golestan Palace, you will have seen paintings and photos showing the incredible jewellery with which the Safavid and Qajar monarchs adorned themselves. Come here to gawp at the real things.

Most of the collection dates back to Safavid times, when the shahs scoured Europe, India and the lands of the Ottoman Empire for booty with which to decorate their capital, Esfahan. But as the Safavid empire crumbled, the jewels became a high profile spoil of war. When Mahmud Afghan invaded Iran in 1722, he plundered the treasury and sent its contents to India. On ascending the throne in 1736, Nader Shah Afshar despatched courtiers to ask for the return of

THE PEACOCK THRONE

When Fath Ali Shah ordered a new throne in 1798 his artists didn't hold back. Taking a daybed-style *takht* (table in a teahouse) they adorned it with 26,733 gems including an extravagant carved sun, studded with precious stones. Before long it became known as the Sun Throne. Later Fath Ali married Tavous Tajodoleh, nicknamed Tavous Khanoum or Lady Peacock, and the throne became known as the Peacock Throne in her honour. Today this throne sits outside the vault door at the National Jewels Museum.

Fath Ali certainly had a taste for gems, but one of his predecessors, Nader Shah, liked the finer things too. So much, in fact, that he invaded India in order to recover the Kule Nur diamond. During the expedition he also bagged the Moghuls' famous Peacock Throne. But during the haul back to Persia, this piece of booty fell into the hands of rebellious soldiers, who hacked it up to spread the wealth among themselves. In the intervening years the stories of the Peacock Thrones have become muddled, so you might still hear people say (erroneously) that Tehran's Peacock Throne originally came from India.

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'état. 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, *bazaris* 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. Mossadegh spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

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

the jewels. When their powers of persuasion proved unequal to the task, he sent an army to prove that he was serious. To get the soldiers off his back, Mohammed Shah of India was forced to hand over the Darya-ye Nur and Kuh-e Nur diamonds, a Peacock Throne (though not the one you'll see here) and assorted other treasures. After Nader Shah's murder in 1747, Ahmed Beg plundered the treasury and dispersed the jewels. The Kuh-e Nur, the world's largest cut diamond, found its way into the sticky fingers of the colonial British and has been locked up in the Tower of London since. The Qajar and Pahlavi rulers enthusiastically added to the jewels collection, which grew to be so valuable that in the 1930s it was transferred to the National Bank of Iran (now the Central Bank of Iran) as a reserve for the national currency.

You can pick up a guidebook (stocks permitting) at the shop as you enter, or take one of the regular and professional tours in English, French, German or Arabic – it's included in the ticket price and worth waiting for as there are few descriptions in English.

Make sure you don't miss the **Darya-ye Nur** (Sea of Light), a pink diamond weighing 182 carats and said to be the largest

uncut diamond in the world; the **Peacock (Naderi) Throne** outside the vault door (see p45); the tall **Kiani Crown** made for Fath Ali Shah in 1797; the crowns worn by the last shah and his wife, Farah; and the incredible 34kg **Globe of Jewels**, made in 1869 using 51,366 precious stones – the seas are made from emeralds and the land from rubies except Iran, Britain and France, which are set in diamonds.

Cameras, phones, bags and even this book must be left at reception. Be careful not to touch *anything* or you'll set off ear-piercing alarms.

Glass & Ceramics Museum

موزه آبیگینه و سرامیک

MUSEUM

(Musee Abghineh; Map p42; ☎6670 8153; Si Tir St; www.glasswaremuseum.ir; admission US\$0.50; ☀9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun, to 6pm summer; 🕌Imam Khomeini) Housed in a beautiful Qajar-era building a short walk north of the National Museum of Iran, the Glass & Ceramics Museum is, like many of its exhibits, small but perfectly formed.

Built as a private residence for a prominent Persian family, it later housed the Egyptian embassy and was converted into a museum in 1976. Unusually for its time, the

building successfully blends features of Eastern and Western styles. The graceful wooden staircase and classical stucco mouldings are particularly delightful, and there are many delicate carvings and decorative flourishes.

The well-designed museum stands out in a country where detailed explanations are hard to find. It has hundreds of exhibits, mainly from Neishabur, Kashan, Rey and Gorgan, dating from the 2nd millennium BC to the modern day. The galleries walk you chronologically through the ages, with detailed, lucid explanations in English that chart the history of the country and the region through the lovingly displayed glass and ceramics that remain.

Madraseh va Masjed-e Sepahsalar

مدرسه و مسجد سپهسالار MUSEUM
(Masjed-e Motahari; Map p42; Mostafa Khomeini St, off Baharestan Sq; ☺with guide; 🚶Baharestan) Just south of the Iranian *majlis* (parliament), the Madraseh va Masjed-e Sepahsalar is arguably the most noteworthy example of Persian architecture of the Qajar period, as well as one of the largest. Built between 1878 and 1890, it is famed for its multiple minarets, high domes and *iwans*, and poetry inscribed in several ancient scripts in the tiling. It still operates as an Islamic college and as such is closed to the public; however, some local guides (see p55) can talk their way in on Friday mornings (male guests only). Outside, a ban on photography is, as we found, vigorously enforced.

US Den of Espionage

لانه جاسوسی آمریکا HISTORIC BUILDING
(Map p42; Taleqani Ave; 🚶Taleqani; ☺1-10 Feb only) More than any other single building in Iran, the former US embassy in Tehran and the events emanating from it have had a dramatic and profound influence on the recent history of the country. From a bunker beneath the embassy building, CIA operatives orchestrated a coup d'état in 1953 that brought down the government of Mohammad Mossadegh (see p46).

For the next 25 years, US support for and influence over Mohammad Reza Shah was implemented largely from this building. When the shah was finally pushed out, students who feared a repeat of the 1953 coup stormed the embassy and held 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days (see p282). The rest – the birth of the Islamic Republic and the rise of fundamentalism throughout the region – is history.

Today, the former embassy is known as the **US Den of Espionage** and is used by the Sepah militia, a hardline group dedicated to defending the revolution. The interior of the chancery is preserved as a museum, with exhibits including incriminating documents that were painstakingly pieced back together after being shredded as the embassy was being taken over. Unfortunately, it's rarely open to the public – usually only from 1 to 10 February.

Despite this, the embassy's colourful history and more colourful murals along the front wall mean most travellers come for a look. The murals pronounce the evil of the 'Great Satan' (the USA) and Israel, including one in which the face of the Statue of Liberty is rendered as a skull. There's no sign saying you can't take pictures of these highly photogenic walls but be discreet. We've photographed the wall several times without trouble, but on one occasion we were briefly apprehended before persuading our half-hearted captors that we were just dumb tourists.

The **Shohada Museum** (Martyrs' Museum; Map p42; cnr Taleqani Ave & Forsat St; ☺9am-4pm Sat-Thu; 🚶Taleqani), diagonally opposite the US Den of Espionage, exhibits memorabilia and accompanying stories of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq War.

پارک لاله PARK
(Map p42; Keshavarz Blvd) Near the centre of Tehran, **Park-e Laleh** is one of those places that is more than the sum of its parts – a well-designed green space that because of its location amid so much traffic becomes an urban oasis. As you wander through, perhaps on your way to the adjoining Carpet Museum or Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, keep an eye out for young Tehranis refining their flirting techniques over soft-serve ice creams. It's a great place for people-watching.

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

موزه هنرهای معاصر تهران ART MUSEUM
(Map p42; ☎8896 5411; www.tmoa.com; Kargar Ave; admission US\$0.60; ☺10am-5.30pm Sat-Thu) On the western side of Park-e Laleh, the **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art** is in a striking concrete modernist building constructed during the shah's rush to build modern landmarks in the 1970s. Progressive Queen Farah Diba was the driving force behind the museum (her cousin Kamran Diba was the architect) and by the time it opened in 1977

its nine major galleries in their distinctive, Guggenheim-esque spiral layout were home to a remarkable collection of Western and Iranian art. The museum boasts works by Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, Miró, Dalí, Bacon, Pollock, Monet, Munch, Moore and Warhol, among many others. On the open market, the collection is estimated to be worth between US\$2 billion and US\$5 billion.

Laying eyes on it, however, is not easy. During the Ahmadinejad years the collection has been locked away in the museum vaults, deemed to be symbolic of a Western liberalism that is out of favour among the ruling classes. Indeed, when we visited on this trip the whole museum was closed and we were told it only opens for special exhibitions of Iranian artists. You might have more luck under another president.

When it's open TMOCA is a good place to meet arty Tehranis, especially in the ground-floor cafe.

Carpet Museum Of

Iran موزه فرش ایران MUSEUM
(Map p42; ☎8896 7707; <http://carpetmuseum.ir>; cnr Fatemi & Kargar Aves; admission US\$0.50; ☀9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Just north of the Museum of Contemporary Art, the **Carpet Museum** houses more than 100 pieces dating from the 17th century to the present day. It's a great place to see the full range of regional patterns and styles found in Iran, plus a few unique carpets such as the Tree of Life with Kings and Notables. The permanent collection is downstairs while upstairs is for temporary exhibitions.

The museum itself was designed by Queen Farah Diba and mixes classic '70s style with carpet-inspired function – the exterior is meant to resemble threads on a loom, which cool down the main building by casting shadows on its walls. Flash photography is not allowed.

VALIASR AVE & NORTH TEHRAN

Almost everything along Valiasr Ave and the surrounding parts of northern Tehran has been built in the last 50 years, so aside from the two palaces there are few historic 'sights'. Instead, this is modern Tehran, home to hip coffee shops, fancy restaurants and embassies.

Given the diabolical nature of traffic in northern Tehran, come by Metro if you can. Line 1 (red) goes to Tajrish, while Line 3 (light blue) is being tunnelled north along Valiasr Ave. The other option is the Bus Rapid Transport, which runs in both directions the full length of Valiasr.

Sarkis Cathedral کلیسای سرکیس CHURCH
(Map p50; ☎8889 7980; cnr Nejatollahi & Karim Khan-e Zand Sts; ☀9am-6pm Mon-Sat). Built between 1964 and 1970 and paid for by benefactor Markar Sarkissian, the white, twin-spired church is interesting less for its beauty than its place as the centre of Christianity in the Islamic Republic. It sits at the edge of the Armenian quarter to the south.

Although most of the Christians in Iran are Armenians, there's also a sprinkling of Protestants, Assyrians, Catholics and Orthodox Christians, all of whom have churches in Tehran, most behind large walls in the same district as Sarkis Cathedral.

Park-e Mellat پارک ملت PARK
(Mellat Park; Map p50; Valiasr Ave) Many Tehranis say **Park-e Mellat** is their favourite in-town getaway, and if you're here around dusk on any spring or summer afternoon you'll find plenty of people enjoying the shaded areas around a small lake. On weekend nights you'll find just as many young people cruising up and down Valiasr Ave, several to a car, eyeing each other off and swapping phone numbers through car windows.

Reza

Abbasi Museum موزه رضا عباسی MUSEUM
(Map p50; ☎8851 3002; www.rezaabbasimuseum.ir; 892 Shariati Ave; admission US\$0.50; ☀9am-4.30pm Tue-Sat) Named after one of the great artists of the Safavid period, the **Reza Abbasi Museum** showcases Iranian art from ancient times and the Safavid-era paintings of Abbasi himself. If you like Iranian art, it's one of the best and most professionally run museums in the country. The exhibits are organised chronologically starting with the top-floor Pre-Islamic Gallery, where you'll find Achaemenid gold bowls, drinking vessels, armlets and decorative pieces, often with exquisite carvings of bulls and rams. Here, too, you'll find fine examples of **Lorestan bronzes** (see p134). The middle-floor Islamic Gallery exhibits ceramics, fabrics and brassware, while the ground-floor Painting Gallery shows samples of fine calligraphy from ancient Qurans and illustrated manuscripts, particularly copies of Ferdosi's *Shahnamah* and Sa'di's *Golestan*.

To reach the museum take Metro Line 1 to Shahid Hemmat and then a shuttle taxi down the Resalat Expressway to the junction with Shariati Ave.

GALLERIES

Iran's vibrant contemporary art scene and the growing local and international profile of Iranian contemporary art has spawned dozens of galleries, largely around the Honar-e Mandan in central Tehran and in the vicinity of Afriqa Hwy. The following is a small selection; look for the bi-monthly *Gallery Guide* for others and their current exhibits and visiting hours (often 4pm to 8pm).

House of the Artists (Khaneh Honar Mandan; Map p42; ☎8831 0457; www.iranartists.org; Park-e Honar, Baroroushan St, off Iranshahr Ave; ☀10am-8pm Sun-Wed, 2-8pm Thu & Fri, closed Sat; 🗺Taleqani) The House of the Artists is something of an art hub in Tehran, with eight gallery spaces over two levels exhibiting works in all media on a monthly rotation (use Google translate on the website to see upcoming shows). There are also three good shops, including one selling music, a vegetarian restaurant (p58) and a cafe.

Seyhoun Art Gallery (Map p50; ☎8871 1305; www.seyhounartgallery.com; No 6, 4th St, off Khaled Eslamboli; ☀10am-6pm) In its fourth decade as a sponsor of young Iranian artists, Seyhoun has regular exhibitions of painting, photography, sculpture and graphic art in its distinctive, black-fronted gallery.

Assar Art Gallery (Map p42; ☎8832 6689; www.assarartgallery.com; 16 Barforoushan Alley, off Iranshahr Ave; ☀Sat-Thu 11am-8pm) Assar has a reputation for supporting young contemporary artists and has a busy program of exhibitions at its expanding central Tehran space.

GREATER TEHRAN

For sights in Tehran's far north, head first to Tajrish by Metro, from where it's a walk to the Film Museum of Iran, and shuttle taxis leave almost continuously for the Sa'd Abad and Niyavaran Palaces, the popular walking trails at Darband and Darakeh, the cable car to Tochal at Velenjak, and Park-e Jamshidiyeh.

Film Museum of Iran موزه فیلم ایران MUSEUM (Map p53; ☎2271 9001; www.cinemamuseum.ir; Bagh-e Ferdows, off Valiasr Ave; admission US\$1.50; ☀9am-5pm Sat-Thu, 2-5pm Fri) Housed in a Qajar-era mansion that includes Iran's first cinema, the **film museum** has well-displayed and explained (in English) exhibits of equipment, photos and posters from Iran's century-old movie industry. It's interesting, even if you are not well-versed in Iranian film, and the building and accompanying cafe-restaurants (p60) are great places to meet educated, English-speaking Tehranis.

The highlight is an ornate 121-seat cinema with moulded plaster ceilings. New and classic Iranian films are screened here (usually without subtitles) at 3pm, 5pm, 7pm (US\$3) and 9pm (US\$4) daily; get a Farsi-speaker to call ☎2272 3535 to see what's on. A shop also sells hard-to-find Iranian films on DVD (US\$3).

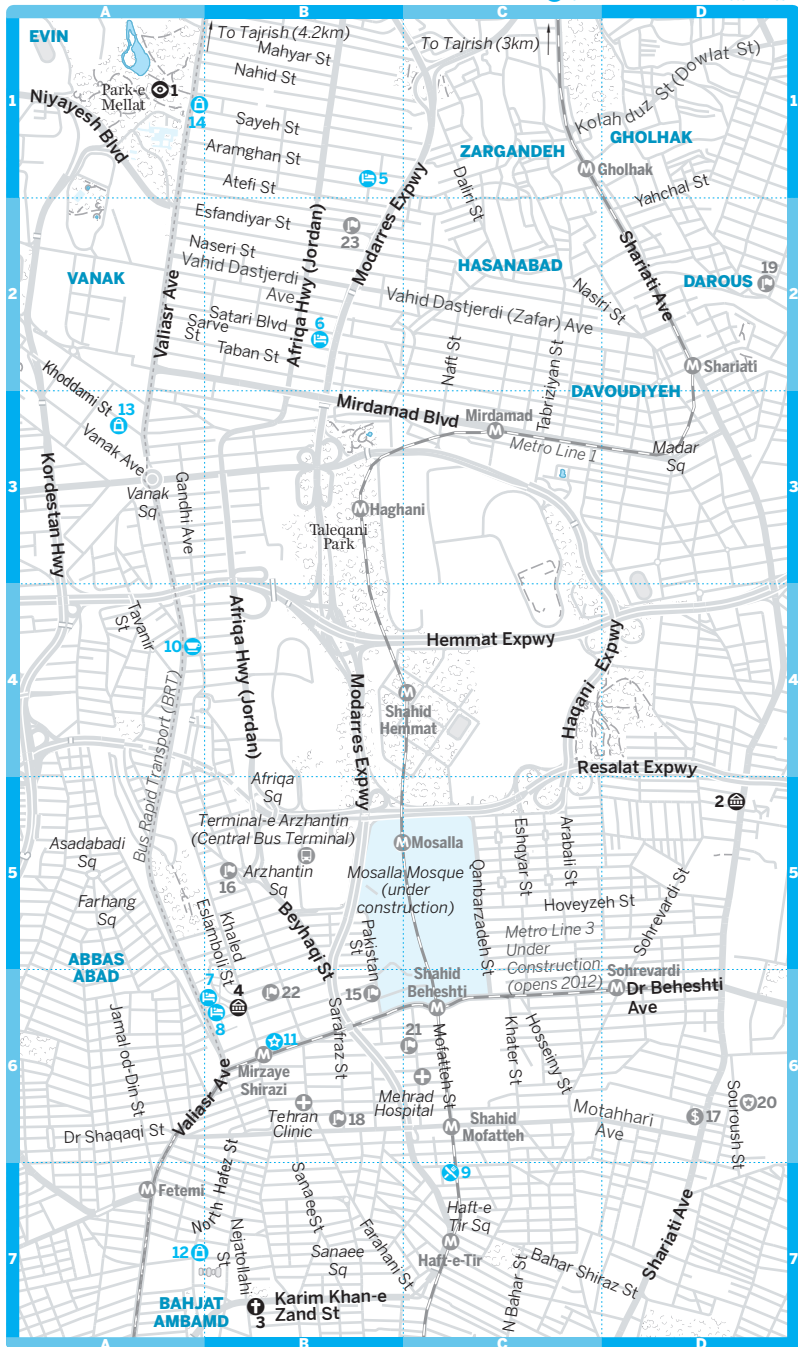
From Valiasr Ave, look for the street with a garden down the middle and a sign to Bahonar Library.

Sa'd Abad Museum

Complex مجموعه موزه سعد آباد PALACE (Map p53; ☎2275 2031; www.sadmu.com; www.saadabadpalace.org; Valiasr Ave, Taheri St; admission by individual tickets US\$0.20-0.40 each; ☀9am-4pm) Set on 104 hectares of spectacular mountainside parkland, the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex** was a royal summer home during the Pahlavi period. The site's 18 buildings house museums dedicated to subjects as diverse as the royal dishware, royal automobiles and miniature paintings. To see everything you'll need at least three hours. Having lunch at Darband and then entering from the north entrance makes sense and your thighs will thank you.

All tickets must be bought at either the front gate or the northern entrance from Darband, so you'll need to decide in advance what you want to visit. For example, be sure to buy a ticket for the Nation's Art Museum or you won't be able to see the basement of the White Palace. Ask also for the English map and 'brochure'. If you start at the front gate, take the free minibus from outside the White Palace up to the Green Palace (the two highlights), then walk down. Following are a selection of the museums.

Valiasr Ave & North Tehran

 0 1 km
0 0.5 miles


Valiasr Ave & North Tehran

📍 Sights

- 1 Park-e Mellat A1
- 2 Reza Abbasi Museum D5
- 3 Sarkis Cathedral B7
- 4 Seyhoun Art Gallery B6

🏠 Sleeping

- 5 Media Hotel Apartment B1
- 6 Pariz Hotel B2
- 7 Raamtin Residence Hotel B6
- 8 Simorgh Hotel B6

🍴 Eating

- Bistango (see 7)
- Bix (see 10)
- 9 Cingari Indian C7
- Monsoon (see 10)

🍷 Drinking

- 10 Gandhi Shopping Centre A4

🎬 Entertainment

- 11 Azadi Cinema Center B6

🛍 Shopping

- Ara (see 10)
- 12 Book City Hafez Store A7
- 13 Di Rouz Em Rouz Ancien Livres A3
- 14 Dusto-e A1

📍 Information

- 15 Afghanistan Embassy B6
- 16 Australian Embassy B5
- 17 Bank Melli D6
- 18 Canadian Embassy B6
- 19 Dutch Embassy D2
- 20 Foreign Intelligence Office
(Visa Extensions) D6
- 21 Indian Embassy C6
- 22 Japanese Embassy B6
- 23 Syrian Embassy B2

There are two appealing **cafes** on the grounds. To get to the front gate, walk or take a taxi (US\$2 *dar baste*) 1.5km north-west from Tajrish Sq, beginning on Ja'fari St and turning left and right (ask anyone for 'Musee Sa'd Abad'). Or go to Darband and enter from there.

White Palace

PALACE

(Palace of the Nation) What is now called the **White Palace** was built between 1931 and 1937 and served as the Pahlavi summer residence. The two bronze boots outside are all that remain of a giant statue of Reza Shah – he got the chop after the revolution. Most of what you see in the 5000-sq-metre, 54-room palace dates from Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1942–79) and little has changed since the revolution. The modern building is filled with a hodge-podge of extravagant furnishings, paintings, a tiger pelt and immense made-to-measure carpets. It was the height of luxury in its day, with discreet air-conditioning units that fold away into the walls. In the upstairs **Ceremony Hall** is a 143-sq-metre carpet that is said to be one of the largest ever woven in Iran. The nearby **Dining Hall** contains a similar carpet, and it is here that the shah, convinced the palace was bugged, dragged a table into the middle of the room and insisted both he and the American general he was entertaining climb on top before they spoke. Don't

miss the trippy stainless-steel staircases at the back of the ground floor, which spiral down to the **Nation's Art Museum** in the basement.

Green Palace

PALACE

(Shahvand Palace) At the uphill end of the complex, the more classical-looking **Green Palace** was built at the end of the Qajar era and extensively remodelled by the Pahlavis. Reza Shah lived here for only a year and apparently found the bed, if not the mirror stalactites on the ceiling, a little too soft – he slept on the floor instead. It was later used as a private reception hall (upstairs) and residence (downstairs) for special guests. The design is over-the-top opulent, with wall-to-wall mirrors in the appropriately named Mirror Hall and the bedroom. Be sure to take in the view from the back.

Other Museums & Galleries

ART GALLERY, MUSEUM

The most interesting of the remaining museums include: the **Royal Automobile Museum**, with its Rolls Royce, Cadillac and a 'unique' armoured Mercedes Benz 600; the expansive **Museum of Fine Arts** in a building near the front gate that served as the royal court between 1968 and 1979 and now exhibits furniture and paintings by modern and older Iranian artists, plus Western painters including Salvador Dali; the **Royal Dishware Museum** as much for the faux-French architecture as the ornate

plates; and the **Military Museum** set inside and around another palace that belonged to the shah's nephew Shahram – just look for the helicopter.

Niyavaran Palace

Museum موزه کاخ نیلوران PALACE
(Map p53; ☎2228 2050; www.niyavaranpalace.ir; Niyavaran Ave, off Shahid Bahonar Sq, Niyavaran; admission US\$0.20 plus individual tickets US\$0.20-0.40; ☀8am-4.30pm winter, 9am-5.30pm summer) East of Tajrish in the Alborz foothills is the palace where Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his family spent most of the last 10 years of royal rule. It's set in 5 hectares of landscaped gardens and has five separate museums – tickets must be bought individually at the main gate.

Sahebqaraniéh

MUSEUM (King's Special Office) With tickets in hand we recommend going first to **Sahebqaraniéh**, which was built during the Qajar period and used as Nasser-al Din Shah's harem before later being transformed into Mohammad Reza Shah's office. It contains a fine collection of paintings and other furnishings, including several colourful Qajar-era works Queen Farah Diba rescued from Shiraz (look for them in the ceilings).

But Sahebqaraniéh is most interesting for the insight it affords into the shah's daily life. Rooms include a basement teahouse, private dental surgery and a bar decorated with Shirazi painted beams. Keep an eye out for the shah's golden phone and gold-coloured pistols, and for photos displayed in the Ambassador's Waiting Room; the mixed bunch sees Mao Zedong share space with Pope Paul VI, while Hitler, Queen Elizabeth II, Richard Nixon, Kemal Atatürk and Dwight Eisenhower (who was a guest at the shah's last wedding), stare out from the past nearby. The custodians will make you join a guided tour – it's well worth waiting for an English-speaking guide.

Adjoining Sahebqaraniéh is the **Jahan-Nama Museum & Gallery** (Queen's Private Museum). Two main rooms here are filled with a small but well-displayed example of the eclectic collection of modern and ancient art gathered by Farah Diba, mainly during the 1970s. Works by Warhol, Picasso and Joan Miró share space with Iranian archaeological artefacts and finds from sites in Mexico and Egypt, and rotating exhibits of contemporary Iranian art.

Niyavaran Palace

PALACE

Up the hill beyond a garden cafe is the remarkable **Niyavaran Palace**. Built between 1958 and 1968 the palace has a decidedly '60s look – clean-lined functionality on the outside contrasting with opulent, European-royal style furniture and enormous, intricately woven carpets inside. Highlights include the magnificent Kerman carpet showing Iranian kings right back to the Achaemenids as well as some European sovereigns, including Napoleon Bonaparte; the shah's walk-in wardrobe full of dozens of uniforms; a selection of Farah Diba's very stylish gowns; and the retractable roof that opened the centre of the palace to the sky. Adjoining to the east is a private cinema and tennis courts, and in front of the palace, the modest family swimming pool.

Immediately west of Niyavaran Palace is the **Ahmad Shahi Pavilion**, an attractive two-storey kiosk dating from the late Qajar period (early 20th century), which was last used as the residence of the crown prince Reza. The prince's white leather-themed living quarters are a time-warp to the 1970s. Reza's belongings range from childhood drawings to model planes (he was a pilot), a rock collection (with a moon rock gifted by Richard Nixon) to a polar-bear skin (a gift of the Canadian government).

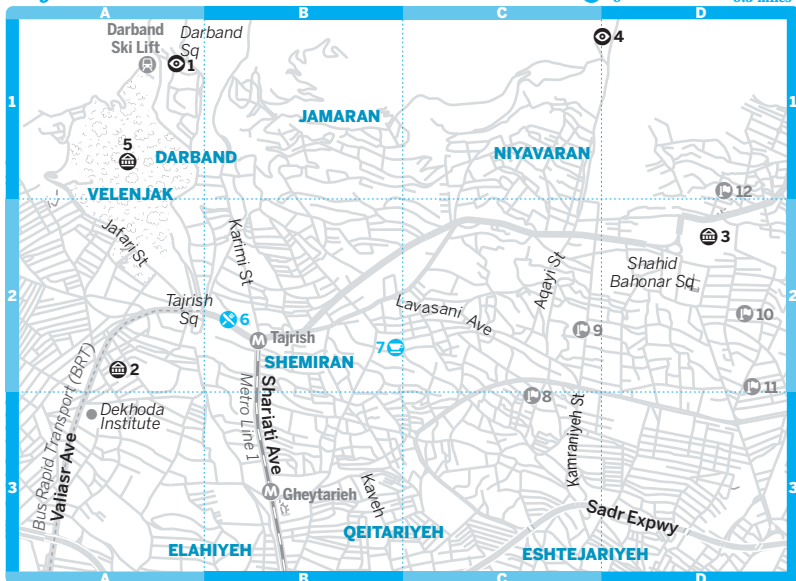
To get here, take a shuttle taxi east of Tajrish Sq, and ask to be dropped at Shahid Bahonar Sq, near the museum entrance.

Darakeh & Darband درکه و دربند OUTDOORS

On a sunny or smoggy day few things could be nicer than fleeing the traffic fumes for the foothills of the Alborz Mountains and the **walking trails** of Darakeh and Darband. The trails pass waterfalls and cross streams as they head up into the hills. They are crowded on Thursday afternoon and Friday and make a great place to meet Tehranis in a relaxed, social atmosphere.

The lower reaches of both trails are lined with teahouses and stalls selling food and drinks, which are hugely popular in the evenings – some close midweek and in winter. A dish of *dizi* (stew), a kabab or two, a cold drink or a huff and a puff on a qalyan by the stream will soon help you forget the Tehran traffic. Among other tasty treats to sample on the way up are dates, apricots, pickled walnuts, *lavashak* (sheets of pressed dried fruit), fresh mulberries and steamed lima beans.

Tajrish & Around



Darband also has a **ski lift** (Map p53; ☀7am-4.30pm Sat-Thu, to 7pm summer), with tickets costing US\$1.50/3 one way/return.

The starting point for getting to either trail is the northern side of Tajrish Sq. For Darband, either walk 2.5km uphill along Fana Khosrow St (or take a shuttle taxi), or leave the grounds of Sa'd Abad Palace from the rear, cross Meydan-e Darband and continue uphill to where you see the ski lift on the left. The walking trail starts where the road ends. A visit to Darband can easily be combined with a visit to Sa'd Abad, or you can walk all the way to Jamshidiyeh Park from a trail starting further east.

To get to Darakeh take a shuttle taxi from Tajrish Sq. At the end of Darakeh St you'll be dropped in a square; the trail leads off from the northeastern corner.

Park-e Jamshidiyeh پارک جمشیدییه PARK (Map p53; ☀7am-midnight) Also known as Stone Garden, **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** climbs steeply up the lower reaches of the Alborz Mountains and offers a clean and relatively quiet atmosphere in which to enjoy the views and escape the smog. It's the sort of place you could happily while away an entire afternoon sipping tea, chatting with random Tehranis and watching the lights of this huge city slowly come to life – though the food prices (p60) might give you indigestion.

Tajrish & Around

📍 Sights

- 1 Darband Ski Lift A1
- 2 Film Museum of Iran A2
- Green Palace (see 5)
- 3 Niyavarán Palace Museum D2
- 4 Park-e Jamshidiyeh D1
- 5 Sa'd Abad Museum Complex A1
- Sahebqaraniyeh (see 3)
- White Palace (see 5)

🍴 Eating

- 6 Akbar Mashti Bastani B2
- Khaneh Azarbajian (see 4)
- Markazi Jamshidiyeh
Restaurant (see 4)
- Roka (see 1)

🍷 Drinking

- 7 Chai Bar B2
- Viuna Café (see 2)

📍 Information

- 8 Azerbaijan Embassy C3
- 9 Irish Embassy C2
- 10 New Zealand Embassy D2
- 11 Sweden Embassy D2
- 12 Tajikistan Embassy D1
- Turkmenistan Embassy (see 8)
- Uzbek Consulate (see 10)

If you're feeling energetic, a steep trail leads from the northwest corner of the park (beyond the Turkomen restaurant) along the side of the mountain for about 5km to Darband, making a thigh-burning but enjoyable and relatively pollution-free hike.

Tochal Telecabın تله کابین توجال CABLE CAR (Velenjak Telecabın; Map p36; ☎2240 4001-5; www.tochal.org; Velenjak Ave, Velenjak; ☀going up 8.30am-12.30pm, coming down till 3.30pm Tue-Sat) Popular Tochal Telecabın runs 7.5km up Mt Tochal (3957m) to the fourth-highest ski field on earth where you'll find snow for between six and eight months a year. The telecabın is busy on Fridays when the slopes are packed with well-off young Tehranis here as much for the socialising as the skiing (or hiking during the summer months). But it's virtually empty other days. Note that the operating hours and days listed here tend to vary for reasons we cannot fathom, and the telecabın doesn't run in windy weather; it's worth calling ahead.

The telecabın stops twice en route to the top and you can buy one-way/return tickets to whichever station you want. The first stop is **Station 2** (US\$4/7 one way/return), then **Station 5** (US\$6/11), where there is an easy ski run, and it finishes at freezing **Station 7** (US\$18 return), from where a

chairlift links it to Tochal Hotel. From there, a T-bar works the short runs and a Doppel Mayr lift goes to the mountain summit. It's possible to ski down from Station 7 to Station 5, if there is enough snow. Skis can be rented at Station 7. Ski passes are US\$18 per day, sold at Station 1.

While the telecabın runs limited hours, you can choose to torture your legs and climb the mountain at any time, as locals like to do on Fridays.

The **Tochal Hotel** (☎2240 4001-5; www.tochal.org; r US\$40-120; ☀closed Mon during summer) is accessed via the Tochal Telecabın.

To get here, ask for a shuttle taxi to Tochal Telecabın stop from the north side of Tajrish Sq. From the entrance you can walk (10 minutes) or catch a bus to the telecabın itself.

Azadi Tower

(Borj-e Azadi) برج آزادی MONUMENT (Freedom Tower; Map p38; Azadi Sq; admission US\$2.50; ☀9am-noon & 1.30pm-5pm Sun-Fri; ☒Meydan-e Azadi) Way out west at the end of Azadi Ave is the inverted Y-shaped **Azadi Tower**, built in 1971 to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the first Persian empire. After being closed for years, the tower reopened in 2006.

Like the City Theatre, Carpet Museum and Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art,

NATION OF NOSE JOBS ANDREW BURKE

I was at dinner in Esfahan when the conversation turned to nose jobs. After prattling on about how many people I'd seen in Tehran wearing a tell-tale plaster across the bridge of their nose, I asked my friend Behzad whether he knew anyone who had actually had a nose job.

'When he looked at me like I had, well, two noses, I should have known. 'She has,' he said, pointing across the table to his sister.

'Oh. Right,' said I, embarrassed that I hadn't noticed the change, before desperately trying to recover with: 'I never would have known.' Mahnaz, to her credit, dealt with it like someone who has had the nose job conversation a thousand times before. Barely skipping a beat, she began explaining that while I might never have known, she didn't really like her new nose. She was hoping to get it done again.

'It's not a big deal,' she explained. Plenty of people have nose jobs in Iran.

But I had to know: 'How much does it cost?' Well, the cheapest nose jobs could be had for less than US\$1000, she said, but that was a bit risky because it might turn out badly. A decent surgeon would cost more, and they were cheaper in Esfahan than in Tehran. 'But the best surgeons are in Tehran, and they cost about US\$4000.'

Despite Iran being a country where the average yearly wage is far less than that, Tehran is arguably the plastic surgery capital of the universe. Surgeons report that more than 90,000 noses are remodelled in Iran every year. Tehran alone has about 3000 plastic surgeons, and their clients are not just women looking for a cutesy ski jump. A growing number of men are also spending big on taking the bump out of their proboscis.

The contrast with the West, where people disappear on 'holiday' for weeks so they can be remodelled without anyone knowing, is stark. In Tehran, the nose job has become such a status symbol that some people have taken to wearing plasters on their noses just so they can look like they've had the job done. Which might be taking it just a little too far...

the 50m-high structure is a mix of '60s modern architecture with traditional Iranian influences, most notably the *ivan*-style of the arch. The exterior is clad with more than 8000 cut stones, while inside you can see the complex structural engineering in concrete that forms the bones of architect Hossein Amanat's design. The park surrounding the monument is a relative oasis compared with the maelstrom of traffic beyond. It was the scene of much protest during the 1979 revolution and remains a focal point for demonstrations today, including some huge demonstrations during the post-election crisis in 2009.

You can reach the top by stairs or lift, and will probably be accompanied. To get here, take Metro line 4 (light blue) to Meydan-e Azadi (don't confuse it with the other Azadi station).

Milad Tower

(Borj-e Milad)

برج میلاد

TOWER

(Map p38; ☎8436 1094; www.tehranmiladtower.ir; admission from US\$8; ☀9am-9pm, last entry 8pm) Totally dominating the low-rise skyline of Tehran's western suburbs, **Milad Tower** finally opened in 2008 after 13 on-again-off-again years of construction. Standing 435m high, including 120m of antenna, in 2012 it was the world's sixth-tallest freestanding tower. The tower bears a striking resemblance to Toronto's CN Tower, with the octagonal concrete shaft tapering slightly up to a pod with 12 floors. The pod is home to an observation deck, a revolving restaurant, a 'sky dome' and various TV, radio and traffic control functions. Authorities insist the tower is built to withstand a large earthquake. For us, whether you come to the tower or not depends largely on the weather; on a rare clear day the views are worth it, but otherwise probably not. You need a taxi to get here.

👉 Tours

For personalised tours or advice from private operators, the following options are recommended:

Ali Taheri

GUIDE

(☎0912 134 9345; ali@Iran-TehranTourist.com) Ali speaks English and knows Tehran (and much of its history) well. He and his air-conditioned Peugeot will cost you €70 a day depending on where you go; he regularly takes tours around Iran.

Ali Reza Javaheri

GUIDE

(☎0912 335 1830; alirezajavaheri@gmail.com) Speaks extremely good English and Spanish.

Houman Najafi

ECOTOURS

(☎0912 202 3017; houman.najafi@gmail.com) Houman is well connected with local environmental groups and specialises in arranging a variety of local and national tours into the outdoors, especially desert star-gazing and Qeshm Island tours.

🛏 Sleeping

Tehran's accommodation largely follows the city's social breakdown, so budget places are in the poorer south and the options get more expensive as you go north; rates are generally higher than elsewhere in Iran. Listings are broken down by area and then order of preference.

SOUTHERN TEHRAN

Because it's near most of the major sights, southern Tehran is a good place to stay. Several hotels are in neighbourhoods that are typically busy for Tehran with local stores selling groceries and myriad other goods. However, many of the better budget hotels are on or near Amir Kabir St (east of Iman Khmeni Sq), where dozens of shops selling car paraphernalia and five lanes of cacophonous traffic create a terrible din. The Amir Kabir area has few restaurants and little action after dark, but a lack of decent sleeping options means many people stay here.



Ferdossi Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p42; ☎6671 9991-3; www.ferdowsihotel.com; 24 Sabt St, off Ferdosi St; s/d/ste from US\$104/150/260; 🅗🅘🅙🅚🅛🅜🅝🅞🅟🅠🅡🅢🅣🅤🅥🅦🅧🅨🅩🅪🅫🅬🅭🅮🅯🅰🅱🅲🅳🅴🅵🅶🅷🅸🅹🅺🅻🅼🅽🅾🅿🄀🄁🄂🄃🄄🄅🄆🄇🄈🄉🄊🄋🄌🄍🄎🄏🄐🄑🄒🄓🄔🄕🄖🄗🄘🄙🄚🄛🄜🄝🄞🄟🄠🄡🄢🄣🄤🄥🄦🄧🄨🄩🄪🄫🄬🄭🄮🄯🄰🄱🄲🄳🄴🄵🄶🄷🄸🄹🄺🄻🄼🄽🄾🄿🄀🄁🄂🄃🄄🄅🄆🄇🄈🄉🄊🄋🄌🄍🄎🄏🄐🄑🄒🄓🄔🄕🄖🄗🄘🄙🄚🄛🄜🄝🄞🄟🄠🄡🄢🄣🄤🄥🄦🄧🄨🄩🄪🄫🄬🄭🄮🄯🄰🄱🄲🄳🄴🄵🄶🄷🄸🄹🄺🄻🄼🄽🄾🄿) The 224-room Ferdossi is the only international-standard hotel within an easy walk of the museums, Golestan Palace and bazaar, and as such is popular with tour groups. The quiet, mostly spacious rooms are well equipped and fair value (ask for a renovated room). Service is professional and facilities include free wi-fi and a men-only pool. Adjoining rooms and suites are suitable for families, while the 6th-floor rooms will appeal to those with more adventurous tastes in style.



Firouzeh Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☎3311 3508; www.firouzehhotel.com; Dowlat Abad Alley, off Amir Kabir St; s/tw US\$24/36; 🅗🅘🅙🅚🅛🅜🅝🅞🅟🅠🅡🅢🅣🅤🅥🅦🅧🅨🅩🅪🅫🅬🅭🅮🅯🅰🅱🅲🅳🅴🅵🅶🅷🅸🅹🅺🅻🅼🅽🅾🅿🄀🄁🄂🄃🄄🄅🄆🄇🄈🄉🄊🄋🄌🄍🄎🄏🄐🄑🄒🄓🄔🄕🄖🄗🄘🄙🄚🄛🄜🄝🄞🄟🄠🄡🄢🄣🄤🄥🄦🄧🄨🄩🄪🄫🄬🄭🄮🄯🄰🄱🄲🄳🄴🄵🄶🄷🄸🄹🄺🄻🄼🄽🄾🄿) If ever there was a hotel whose atmosphere revolved around one man, this is it. Mr Mousavi is the personification of

Persian hospitality and his enthusiasm, useful information and help with bookings (including day trips to the ski fields) make an otherwise unremarkable little hotel in an unlovely part of town into the city's backpacker centre. The small rooms come with cable TV, fridge and bathrooms with shower and basin; toilets are shared. Recommended.

Golestan Hotel

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☑6671 1417/8; www.golestanhotel.com; 14 Hafez St, Hassan Abad Sq; s/d US\$26/39; ☎; 🚻Hassanabad) Among a bevy of furniture stores on a quiet section of Hafez St, the 36-room Golestan is in an area around historic Hassan Abad Sq that is bright, open and more social than Amir Kabir St. Rooms are compact but clean and though management speaks little English and there's no internet, it's good value. Don't confuse this with ultra-basic Golestan Guesthouse on Amir Kabir St.

Hafez Hotel

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☑6670 9063; hafez_hotel@yahoo.com; Bank Alley, off Ferdosi St; s/d US\$24/34; ☎@; 🚻Imam Khomeini) In a lane beside the big Bank Mellī, the rooms here are quiet, clean and have fridges, fans and pokey bathrooms (some squats, some thrones). Management speaks English and there's a decent if unremarkable restaurant that's open for lunch and dinner. With its convenient location and congenial English-speaking management, this is a fair-value budget option.

Hotel Khazar Sea

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☑3311 3860; Ohadi Alley, off Amir Kabir St; s/tw/tr without bathroom or breakfast US\$10/12/13; 🚻Mellat) If you don't mind a short walk to the bathroom and catering your own breakfast, this popular ultra-budget place set around a sunny courtyard is welcoming, relatively quiet and good value. Cheery manager Mr Rahmani speaks some English and is happy for guests to use the kitchen and store bicycles.

Mashhad Hotel

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☑3311 3062; mashhadhostel@yahoo.com; 388 Amir Kabir St; dm/s/tw/tr without bathroom or breakfast US\$8/10/15/20; ☎@🚻; 🚻Mellat) The rooms and shared bathrooms are tiny, there's only one shower and the front rooms are horrendously noisy, but the generally helpful English-speaking management and backpacker vibe mean it appeals to those on ultra-tight budgets, particularly Koreans and Japanese. Don't confuse this Mashhad with the midrange Mashhad Hotel, near the former US embassy.

Hotel Naderi

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Map p42; ☑6670 1872; 520 Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d US\$22/32; ☎) Built in 1929 and listed as a historical monument, the Naderi was once *the* place to party in Tehran (look for the bandstand and dance floor in the overgrown back yard). Alas, those days are long gone and one of Tehran's oldest hotels is looking its age. The charm of high-ceilinged rooms, '50s-era Bakelite telephones, a manual switchboard and decades-old furnishings is offset by dripping taps, grubby floors and, apart from Davoud, grumpy service. Still, the price is low and the location, above adjoining Cafe Naderi, is good. If you do stay, be sure to ask for a rear room (room numbers 107 to 112 or 207 to 212), because the front rooms are crazy noisy.

Iran Central Hotel

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(Hotel Markazi; Map p42; ☑3391 4798; www.irancentralhotel.com; cnr Lalehzar & Zavaireian Sts; s/tw without breakfast US\$23/33; 🚻Sa'di) Small, clean rooms in a lively street. Toilets are squats.

CENTRAL TEHRAN

Near the business district, between Enqelab Ave and Keshavarz Blvd, but within striking distance of the museums and bazaar, this area has loads of midrange hotels that are comfortable if unremarkable.

TOP CHOICE Roudaki Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p42; ☑6670 9421; www.roudaki-hotel.com; 25 Ostad Shahriar Ave; s/d US\$80/100; ☎@🚻; 🚻Valiasr) In a quiet part of the Armenian quarter, the 20 recently renovated rooms here are good for families because most are very big and come with a kitchenette (though without a burner).

Atlas Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p42; ☑8890 6058; www.atlas-hotel.com; 206 Taleqani Ave, near Qarani Crossroads; s/d US\$65/90; ☎@🚻) The big, quiet and comfortable rooms in the main building (away from the street) are good value. Some overlook a colourful courtyard and the combination of space, decent service and facilities make it an oasis to come home to. There's a decent Indian-Pakistani-Iranian restaurant.

Escan Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p42; ☑8834 7385; www.escanhotel.com; 29 Mousavi St, off Enqelab Ave; s/d US\$100/145; ☎@🚻; 🚻Ferdowsi) The completely refurbished Escan has 42 sizeable, well-equipped, very clean and quiet rooms that remind of modern three-star hotels elsewhere but are

unusually well finished by Iranian standards. Service is professional.

Safir Hotel

HOTEL \$\$
(Map p42; ☎8830 0873; www.indianhotelsafir.com; 10 Ardalan St, off Mofatteh Ave; d US\$80; ☎@; ☑Taleqani) Located behind the old US embassy grounds, the Safir is better known for its subterranean Indian tandoor restaurant (p58). But the reliably clean, compact three-star standard rooms won't disappoint and nor will the service.

Iranshahr Hotel

HOTEL \$\$
(Map p42; ☎8883 4976; www.hotel-iranshahr.com; 81 Iranshahr Ave; s/d US\$70/95; ☎☎@☎; ☑Ferdowsi) Reliable. That sums up the Iranshahr, where the 48 small but comfortable rooms are clean and the service is professional. It's on four floors but there's no lift.

Parasto Hotel

HOTEL \$\$
(Map p42; ☎6670 2422; Mohammad Buyk Alley, off Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d US\$46/69; ☎☎@☎) The Parasto is a compact, no-frills but clean and welcoming lower-midrange choice in a quiet street. There's a modest restaurant but no lift.

VALIASR AVE & NORTHERN TEHRAN

After years of stagnation, several new hotels and apartment hotels have opened in recent years. Most are in this part of town where all accommodation falls into the midrange, business and luxury categories. If you stay here it's too far to walk to the museums and bazaar, so you'll need to take the Metro or brave the traffic. But you will be closer to decent restaurants and cafes.



Espinash International Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p42; ☎8384 5000; www.espinashotels.com; 126 Keshavarz Blvd; s/d US\$130/170; ☎☎@☎☎; ☑Meydan-e Valiasr) Opened in 2010, the Espinash is probably the closest you'll come to an international-standard five-star hotel in Iran. The 224 rooms and suites combine modern comforts with an understated dash of Iranian style in the decor. There's a gym, sauna and pool (all sex-segregated of course) and we found the service to be professional and eager to please.

Media Hotel Apartment

APARTMENT HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p50; ☎2620 1610; www.hotelmediaap.com; 58 East Aramgah St, off Afrika Ave; d US\$220; ☎@☎) The Media is among the best of numerous new apartment hotels in northern Tehran. Tucked away in a dead-end street

it's not convenient to any sights, but 18 spacious, 'lavishly furnished' one-bedroom apartments with fully equipped kitchens set it apart. Service is good and there's a cafe (serving Illy coffee) and decent restaurant on the ground floor, and a roof garden with amazing city and mountain views.

Raamtin Residence Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p50; ☎8872 2786; www.raamtinhotel.com; 1081 Valiasr Ave; s/d US\$145/160; ☎@☎; ☑Mirzaye Shirazi) White leather couches might not be your thing, but the Raamtin's 55 spacious rooms are otherwise reasonably well equipped and double-glazed, which cuts most of the noise of Tehran's main commercial strip. Hotel service is efficient and the location ideal for business, though attention from wait-staff in the upmarket Bistango restaurant can be selective.

Simorgh Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p50; ☎8871 9911; www.simorghhotel.com; 1069 Valiasr Ave; s/d from US\$120/200; ☎@☎☎; ☑Mirzaye Shirazi) Virtually next door to the Raamtin, this 99-room hotel is popular with business visitors for its stylish, well-fitted but dimly lit rooms (free wi-fi and internet) and well-trained staff to go with facilities including gym, Jacuzzi, pool and meeting rooms.

Pariz Hotel

HOTEL \$\$
(Map p50; ☎8867 5612-18; www.parizhotels.com; 20 Mina St, off Afrika Ave; r from US\$75; ☎@☎☎) Far from most sights but near to the trendy Afrika and Jordan areas, the Pariz's 40 rooms – some with kitchenettes – are not as sharp as some but are good value.

Laleh International Hotel

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$
(Map p42; ☎8896 5021; www.lalehhotel.com; cnr Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave & Hejab St; s/d US\$145/180; ☎☎@☎☎) The ex-InterContinental is the best choice among the fading prerevolution luxury hotels because it is so well located north of Park-e Laleh. The 375 rooms and suites offer fine park or mountain views and while the decor and service are both a bit tired, all up it's fair value.



Eating

Tehran is far from being an international culinary capital, but its growing range of foreign cuisines make a refreshing change from the Iranian staples. Like the city itself, Tehran's food scene is split along socio-economic lines: southern Tehran is dominated by Iranian cuisine in teahouses or

nondescript restaurants; the wealthier north has more international flavours served in highly designed spaces by sharply dressed, English-speaking waiters. Not surprisingly such restaurants are relatively expensive by Iranian standards. But they're popular, try to book on weekend nights.

For fast food, you won't need 20/20 vision to find a cheap *kababi* (kabab shop) or other burger/pizza/sandwich joints around the major squares. Note that most of the places listed under Drinking (p60) also serve food.

One excellent source of independent, English-language reviews of new restaurants and old favourites is **The Gumboo** (www.thegumboo.com).

SOUTHERN & CENTRAL TEHRAN

Many Iranian restaurants are hidden away underground, so be on the lookout for anonymous-looking stairwells.

TOP CHOICE **Khoshbin Restaurant** GILANI \$
(Hassan Rashti; Map p42; ☎3390 2194; 510 Nth Sa'di St; meals US\$4-7; ☀11.30am-3.30pm; 🍴Sa'di) Tiny, no-frills Khoshbin is an institution among Tehranis, who cram onto the fast-turnover tables for an authentic Gilaki (food from the Gilan region) lunch. Usually known as Hassan Rashti, after the restaurant founder, highlights include *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg, served with bread or rice), *kuli* (carp roe), *zeytoun parvardeh* (green olives marinated in pomegranate molasses, walnuts and herbs) and particularly the fish (including trout, sturgeon and smoked salmon) – basically, anything on the menu. Look for the small orange sign, and the queue.

Pasta Charmy's VEGETARIAN, PASTA \$\$
(Map p42; ☎6646 0839; www.charmizpasta.com; 2 Alborz St, off Hafez St; meals US\$8; ☀noon-4pm & 7.30-10.30pm Sat-Thur; 🍴Ferdowsi) Cosy little Charmy's squeezes seats for about 30 into a room with a very open kitchen, and dishes up simple but delicious creamy vegetarian pastas, salads, soups and drinks. It's vegan-friendly.

Coffee Shop & Veggie Restaurant of Iranian Artists' Forum VEGETARIAN \$\$
(Map p42; ☎8830 3266; www.govinda-veg.ir; Park-e Honar Mandan, Baroroushan St, off Iranshahr Ave; meals US\$3-10; ☀11am-10.30pm; 🍴Taleqani) This dedicated vegetarian restaurant is a good place to meet young, educated and artistic Tehranis in an informal setting. It forms part

of the Iran Artists' Forum (p49), an attractive brick building at the southern edge of Park-e Honar Mandan (Artists' Park); the park was once a military depot. The food is decent without being mind-blowing, but the owners promise the produce is brought fresh each day and the kitchen is completely meat-free, so there will be no unwanted surprises in the salads (less than US\$3), pizza (US\$5 to US\$8) or *khoresht* (meaty stew; US\$4).

Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag TEAHOUSE \$\$
(Map p42; ☎6673 1075; Park-e Shah; meals US\$7-12; ☀9am-11pm; 🍴Panzdah-e Khorad) If you're visiting the museums or Golestan Palace consider stopping here for lunch. A laid-back, lazy ambience is created by the park setting coupled with a relatively quiet space embellished with antique photographs. *Dizi* and the *bademjan* (eggplant) dishes are recommended. Musicians sometimes play between noon and 3pm. Beware extra charges for everything put in front of you.

Khayyam Traditional Restaurant TEAHOUSE \$\$
(Map p40; ☎5580 0760; Khayyam St; meals US\$9; ☀lunch & dinner; 🍴Khayyam) Opposite the Imamzadeh Seyyed Nasreddin Mosque (look for the dome), this 300-year-old building was originally part of the mosque before being separated when Khayyam St intervened. It was restored in 2002. The Iranian fare (mainly kabab, chicken and fish) is well prepared and plentiful, though service is hit and miss. Still, for tea, qalyan and sweets (US\$2.50) after an outing in the bazaar, it's hard to beat.

Tandoor Restaurant INDIAN \$\$\$
(Map p42; ☎8830 0873; Ardalan St, off Mofateh Ave; meals from US\$13; ☀noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Under the Safir Hotel, the Tandoor has been popular in Tehran since before the revolution and is the most convenient place in the south to find a decent curry, though if you want it hot, ask. There are a few vegetarian dishes for about US\$7.

Sofreh Khane Ayyaran TEAHOUSE \$\$
(Map p42; ☎6676 0376; Enqelab Ave, off Ferdosi Sq; meals from US\$8; ☀noon-midnight) This subterranean *chaykhaneh* (teahouse) makes an appealing escape from the fumes of Ferdosi Sq. The large Iranian menu has some hard-to-find dishes and a couple that you might not expect in your standard Tehran basement, such as 'Submissive'. Apparently it's eggplant, master.

Istanbul-No Restaurant

IRANIAN \$

(Map p42; off Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; meals US\$2-4; ☉noon-4pm) Tucked away 20m down a lane near Hotel Naderi, this tiny, unpretentious lunchtime place serves a surprising range of Iranian dishes with Turkish fare thrown in. Kababs share space with huge pots of *khoresht*, *ghorme sabzi* (stewed beans, greens and mince) and *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg).

Tarighat Restaurant

IRANIAN \$

(Map p42; Amir Kabir St; meals US\$3-5; ☉noon-4pm Sat-Thu; ☒Mellat) Handy to the budget accommodation, this lunchtime place serves reliably good interpretations of the standard kababs, *khoresht* and *zereshk polo ba morgh* (roast chicken served with rice and barberry).

Armenian Club

IRANIAN \$\$\$

(Map p42; ☐6670 0521-2; 68 Khark St, cnr France Ave; meals US\$6-17; ☉7.30-11.30pm daily, noon-3pm Fri; ☒Valiasr) The Armenian Club is almost a one-off in Tehran. Because it's a Christian establishment, women can legally eat or just hang out sans hejab (clothes that cover hair, arms and legs and disguise your body shape). Which is more of a reason to come than for the food and cheesy one-man-band (think *All of Me*) alone; the barbecued sturgeon (US\$17), chicken Kiev (US\$7) and beef stroganoff (US\$11) are expensive given the quality. There's nothing here that's Armenian. The club doesn't advertise its existence – look for a yellow awning and a tiny buzzer – but welcomes guests as long as you're not Muslim (by government order).

VALIASR AVE & NORTHERN TEHRAN**Monsoon**

ASIAN \$\$\$

(Map p50; ☐8879 1982; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; meals from US\$13; ☉lunch & dinner Sat-Thu, dinner Fri) Long-running Monsoon still has a well-deserved reputation for the city's best modern Asian food. The fare ranges from Thai curries to Chinese noodle dishes, though the sushi isn't so hot. It's smart, sophisticated, relatively expensive and very 'new Tehran' – menus only come in English. Book ahead.

**Cingari**

INDIAN \$\$\$

(Map p50; ☐8832 7075; 6 Zohreh St, off Mofatteh Ave; meals from US\$13; ☉noon-3pm & 7-11pm; ☒Shahid Mofatteh) Cingari is the pick of the Indian restaurants because it gets the Mugh-

lai cuisine just right, the drinks list is exotic nonalcoholic and the slick setting and service would be at home in Sydney or London. There are plenty of vegetarian options. Book on Thursdays and Fridays.

Bistango

INTERNATIONAL \$\$\$

(Map p50; ☐8855 4409; www.bistangorestaurant.com; Raamtin Residence Hotel, 1081 Valiasr Ave; meals about US\$40; ☉noon-3pm & 7-11pm Sat-Thu) Reputed as Tehran's best restaurant, Bistango's air of sophistication and relatively adventurous international cuisine keep Tehranis coming. Service can be a little exclusive if you're not in a suit, but the food is very good; think braised chicken on vegetable rice with an Egyptian cinnamon sauce. Deals are available at lunch.

Bix

CALIFORNIAN \$\$\$

(Map p50; ☐8878 8272; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; meals US\$13-20; ☉noon-4pm & 7pm-midnight Sat-Thu, 7pm-midnight Fri) Bix calls itself a Californian Cuisine eatery and that means organic salads, sandwiches (eggplant panini with roasted peppers and caramelised onion), grilled jumbo shrimp with lemon coriander sauce and gourmet pizzas (spicy buffalo chicken with julienne vegetables, coriander and crème fraiche). The indoor-outdoor setting has a lounge feel and the waiters are well trained.

GREATER TEHRAN

On balmy evenings in summer, Tehranis head for Darband and Darakeh, where the walking trails are lined with cafes and restaurants serving everything from full kabab meals to generous helpings of *dizi*, *ash* (yoghurt and barley soup) or just snacks.

**Azari Traditional Teahouse**

TEAHOUSE \$\$\$

(Azari Coffeehouse; Map p38; ☐5537 6702; Valiasr Ave, north of Rah-Ahan Sq; meals US\$4-10; ☉6am-midnight) About 250m north of the train station, which is on Rah-Ahan Sq, and on the west side of Valiasr, this restored 'coffeehouse' in south Tehran is wonderfully atmospheric because it remains popular with locals, who use it as an unofficial community centre. The *dizi* (US\$6 all up) and *kashk-e bademjan* (eggplant fried and mashed and served with thick whey and mint; US\$3.50) are rightly popular. A traditional band plays most evenings when the boisterous atmosphere is best enjoyed with a group, and bookings are recommended.

Roka

MEXICAN \$\$\$

(Map p53; ☎2275 3980; www.roka-restaurant.com; Sarband Sq, Darband; meals US\$20; ☀11am-11pm, meals at lunch & dinner) Literally hanging from the cliff above Darband village, Roka has a sort of James Bond feel to it, minus the martinis. The creation of Iranian-British who once operated restaurants in London, it's accessed via the creaky elevator to the Darband ski lift. Once there, you'll see a modern, glass and steel space with vistas across the village, mountain and city and an outdoor deck from which to enjoy them. The cuisine is Mexican and Italian and we found the fajitas (from US\$12) and tacos (US\$9) enjoyable if not fantastic. The coffee was good and we'd happily come back for another virgin mojito (US\$3).

Park-e Jamshidiyeh

IRANIAN \$\$

(Map p53; Feizieh Ave, Niyavaran St, Tajrish; ☀all restaurants about 10am-midnight) This popular in-town escape stretches ever-more-steeply up the mountainside at Tehran's northern edge and is home to four 'ethnic' teahouses. The setting is stunning and the further you climb the better the views of Tehran's skyline – it's great at dusk, but freezing cold for much of the year. All restaurants serve Iranian food at tourist prices and are known for (you guessed it) their kababs. For our money, the pick are (conveniently) the first two as you head uphill.

Markazi Jamshidiyeh Restaurant

IRANIAN \$\$

The first place you'll see as you head uphill is also the busiest, and that turnover might be the reason it has some of the best food. Prices are also relatively reasonable.

Khaneh Azarbaijan

AZARI \$\$

The next one is more atmospheric, with a small cabin and outdoor tables with amazing views. The *ash-e reshte* (US\$2), and *dizi* (US\$6) are fair value if you don't add too many extras.

Ananda Vegetarian Restaurant & Coffee Shop

VEGETARIAN \$\$

(Map p38; ☎2255 6767; South Ekhtiyarieh St, off 10th Behestan St, off Pasdaran St; meals US\$10-18; ☀noon-3.30pm & 6-11pm) Up in north Tehran, the Ananda is a gem if you're a vegetarian, and delightful even if you're not. It's run in association with the **Iranian Society of Vegetarians** (www.iranvegetarians.ir), so you won't find any rogue meat here. We can recommend the Ananda lasagne and Ananda calzone, the freshly made salad (no plastic

wrap!) and the service and setting. Come by taxi and ask for Pasdaran PTT (post office) – it's just next door.

Akbar Mashti Bastani

ICE CREAM \$

(Map p53; Shahid Bahonar Ave; ☀9am-midnight) Akbar Mashti became famous for his ice cream in the 1950s and today his son continues to sell what he modestly describes as 'the most famous ice cream in Iran and the world'. Try the pistachio *bastani* (US\$1.50) and you'll probably agree. It's next to Bank Melli, about 150m east of Tajrish Sq.

Self-catering

Small grocery stores are easy to find in Tehran. Bigger supermarkets are becoming more popular in northern Tehran, particularly around Tajrish Sq and along Valiasr Ave.

Drinking

Almost all Iranian *chaykhaneh* also serve food. In this chapter teahouses that are food destinations in their own right are listed under Eating. Those listed here are more about the tea, dates and qalyan experience.

Over the past decade Tehran has developed a vibrant cafe scene. Like teahouses, they all serve food but most cafes are modern places serving relatively sophisticated Tehranis who look for influences from Europe more than the Middle East. Which makes them fun places to hang out and meet people.

Gandhi Ave is one of Tehran's cafe capitals, thanks largely to one complex full of cafes...

Gandhi Shopping Centre

CAFES \$\$

(Map p50; cnr Gandhi Ave & 4th St; ☀10am-11pm) Home to several cool, cosy little cafes peopled largely by young and fairly liberal Tehranis, this is your one-stop cafe-society stop. It's a fun place to hang out in the afternoon and evening; just choose a cafe you like, settle in and then perhaps eat in one of the centre's upscale restaurants.

Viuna Café

CAFE \$\$\$

(Map p53; ☎2274 2558-9; www.cafe-viuna.com; Bagh-e Ferdows, off Valiasr Ave) In the lovely gardens of the Film Museum of Iran (p49), this chic cafe serves a wide range of expensive but very drinkable Italian coffees and light meals (for pasta see Gallery Cafe in the same grounds). It's an artsy, trendy and international scene. Bookings needed for the evenings.

Café Hafta-do Hasht

CAFE \$\$

(78; Map p42; ☎8891 9862-3; www.cafe78.com; 78 South Aban St [Shahid Azodi St], off Karim Khan Zand Ave; ☎4-11pm) A good place to get in touch with Tehran's hip young artistic community is this cafe near Park-e Honar Mandan and other galleries. The coffee, wide range of teas, snacks, service and conversation are all good.

Iranian Traditional Restaurant

TEAHOUSE \$\$

(Agha Bozorg; Map p42; 28 Keshavarz Blvd; meals from US\$6; ☎7am-midnight; 🚶Meydan-e Valiasr) This underground place is modern Iranian social interaction in microcosm, full of young Iranians flirting, drinking tea, smoking and eating (in that order) under attractive vaulted and tiled ceilings. The *dizi* (US\$4) and kababs are reliably good and well priced for this location, though at busy times you won't be allowed to linger. It's tucked away down an ornately tiled staircase.

Cafe Naderi

CAFE \$\$

(Map p42; 520 Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; ☎10am-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Underneath the Hotel Naderi, this historic if somewhat tired cafe has long been a favourite of intellectuals and artists – think sculpted beards and berets in a setting that is circa 1950s Paris (unrenovated). The cafe fare is limited to Turkish and French coffee and perhaps a pastry or two, but the adjoining restaurant has a full menu and is known by generations of Tehranis for its cha-teaubriand. Don't expect much service (or change) from the grumpy-grandad waiters.

Chai Bar

CAFE \$\$\$

(Map p53; ☎2221 0313; 145 Nth Salimi Ave, near Andarzgoo Blvd, Farmanieh; meals from US\$7; ☎10am-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri) Occupying the garden and library pavilion of a 100-year old mansion in posh northern Tehran, Chai Bar blends traditional Iranian style with a superb garden location (heated in winter). It's ideal for summer afternoons and evenings beneath the trees sipping the wide range of teas and Illy coffee; it also sells salads, soup and sandwiches.

Gol-e Rezaieh

CAFE \$\$

(Map p37; ☎6670 7290; Si Tir St, off Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; meals from US\$8; ☎7.30am-3pm) At more than 75 years old, the very compact Gol-e Rezaieh is one of Tehran's oldest cafes and, until the revolution, was a favorite of intellectuals, journalists, writers and artists, some of whom still hang out here. It's a good place for coffee after the nearby museums, and is known for its hard-to-find 'home-made' *khoresht*.

Cafe Gallery

CAFE \$\$\$

(Map p42; ☎8834 9366; Park-e Honar Mandan, Baroroushan St, off Iranshahr Ave; meals US\$4-10; ☎10am-11pm) Located above beautiful Iranshahr Theatre in the middle of the Artists' Park, Cafe Gallery is hard to beat in Tehran as a place to sit and soak up the scene. You can soak up some art (it's a functioning gallery) and some sun, too, if you get a seat on the balcony. The cafe fare includes pastas, salads, burgers and toasted sandwiches that satisfy without stunning.

★ Entertainment

Live music, theatre and cinema are all tightly controlled in Iran and public performances can be difficult to find. The one time there is a lot of organised entertainment is over the 10 Days of Dawn (1 to 11 February), when you will be able to attend plays, films and concerts of traditional Iranian and, perhaps, foreign music (see p18).

Cinema

Old-style movie halls are all over town, particularly along southern Lalehzar St or eastern Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, in southern Tehran. Films screen about every two hours between 10am and 8.30pm, for about US\$1.50 a show. All films will be in Farsi or dubbed into Farsi, and don't expect anything remotely controversial.

For something different, the Film Museum of Iran (p49) has four films a day in Iran's oldest cinema.

Azadi Cinema Center

CINEMA

(Map p50; ☎8871 1305; cnr Dr Beheshti St & Khaled Eslamboli; ☎10am-9pm) Burnt down in 1997, the classic Azadi has been rebuilt and its seven screens are the most watched in town.

Music

There is still much debate in Iran about the religious eligibility of organised public performances of modern music, so getting approval for a rock concert, for example, is prohibitively hard. They do sometimes happen but it's tough to find out where or when. Traditional and classical music is easier to find, though again dates are infrequent and not widely advertised in the English media. Your best bet is to ask in the music store at House of the Artists (see p49) or call Teatre Shahr (p62).

Nightclubs

Dream on.

Theatre

Iranshahr Theatre

THEATRE

(Tamashakhane Iranshahr; Map p42; www.tamashakhaneh.ir; ☎8881 4115/6; Park-e Honar Mandan, Baroroushan St, off Iranshahr Ave; 🚗Taleqani) One of Tehran's oldest theatres, this beautiful building in peaceful Park-e Honar Mandan always has something (or several things) performing. Use Google translate to see which plays are coming up.

Teatre Shahr

THEATRE

(City Theatre; Map p42; ☎6646 0595; cnr Valiasr & Enqelab Aves) The huge, circular Tezatre Shahr, opened in 1968, is Tehran's biggest and most impressive theatre and the place you're most likely to see Iranian stage actors at work – performing in Farsi, of course. Some booking staff speak English so call to find out what's coming up. Performances are normally at 6.30pm or 7.30pm and cost about US\$4.

Sports

Iran's favourite sport is football (soccer), which is played at several smaller stadiums and the 100,000-capacity **Azadi Sports Stadium** (off Map p38; Karaj Hwy; 🚗Azadi Stadium). Matches are normally played on Thursday and Friday but to find out where, your best bet is to ask a man working in your hotel. If the big Tehran derby between Esteqlal

and Persepolis is on, go – assuming you are not a woman, as only men are allowed in.

The Azadi complex also stages wrestling and even motor racing – though for the latter you could save your time and just sit in the middle of any Tehran traffic circle. Most other sports are played behind high walls in small stadia around the city.



Shopping

Souvenir shopping in Tehran is not as enjoyable as working your way through the atmospheric bazaars of Esfahan and Shiraz. However, the range is bigger and the prices usually smaller. It's well worth giving yourself a half-day to wander through the **Tehran Bazar** (p37 and p62), where if you can't find what you're looking for, a carpet salesman will almost certainly find it for you.

Books & Maps

The Book City chain is your best option for English-language books.

Book City Hafez Store

BOOKS

(Map p50; ☎8880 5735; 743 Nth Hafez St) The biggest Book City, with a decent range of fiction and nonfiction in English, and plenty of pictorials on Iran.

Di Rouz Em Rouz Ancien Livres

BOOKS

(Map p50; ☎8888 8844; Khoddami St, off Valiasr Ave; ☺'by appointment or by chance') Old books

TEHRAN'S BAZARIS

In Iran a bazaar is more than just a place to stock up on a few essential shopping items. For centuries the *bazaris*, who run the businesses in the bazaar, have held enormous economic and political power. They are usually conservative, religious people who have a long history of standing against authority. In an attempt to weaken their power the last shah bulldozed new roads through parts of the bazaar, gave subsidised credit to competing supermarkets and set up state purchasing bodies to handle sugar, meat and wheat. Not surprisingly, the Tehran *bazaris* hit back during the Islamic Revolution when the closure of the bazaar wrought havoc on the economy. They were equally influential in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the coup that ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 (for details, see p46).

While international-style shopping centres are appearing in major cities, most Iranians still shop in a bazaar or a smaller store that buys wholesale from a bazaar. It has been estimated Tehran Bazar controls one-third of Iran's entire retail and trade sector. Prices here set the standard for prices across the country and competition is intense – there are, for example, more than 4000 carpet merchants in 60 passages. For an idea of how lucrative a Tehran Bazar storefront can be, consider that in 2011 a carpet dealer sold his 4m x 6m store on one of the major passages for US\$1 million. The buyer, an importer of fifty-cent undergarments from China, expected to sell US\$2 million in knickers in his first year.

However, the power of the *bazaris* is waning. Competition from new supermarkets and the time it takes for most Tehranis to reach the bazaar is inevitably bleeding money away from this traditional market, and with it the power of its merchants.

in English, French, German and Italian and rare works on Iran. Worldly Mr Afshar is stimulating conversation.

Gita Shenasi

MAPS

(Map p42; ☎6670 9335; www.gitashenasi.com; 20 Ostad Shahriar St, Valiasr Crossroads, Enqelab-e Eslami Ave; ☎8am-6pm Sat-Wed & 8am-1pm Thu; ☑Valiasr) Sheets in Farsi and English on cities and regions across Iran.

Carpets

There are carpet stores all over Tehran but nowhere is the experience as memorable, and the price as negotiable, as in the bazaar. There are more than 4000 merchants to choose from and there's a good chance at least one will find you soon after you arrive. Go with it, remembering you are under no obligation to buy. For general info on carpets, see p308.

One merchant we can recommend from personal experience is **Hossein Hosseini** (Map p40; ☎0912 388 5994, 5580 1801; 2nd fl, 45-46 Saraye Mahmoudieh, Bazar Abbas Abad), a highly knowledgeable and well-travelled young man from a family of carpet *bazaris*. Hossein is straight up and offers fair prices for and excellent explanations about his wide range of (mainly nomadic) carpets. Ask for directions to Bazar Abbas Abad and Kababihah Alley, or call ahead to be met by Hossein (beware of false Hosseins).

Women's Clothes

Women travellers needing a *manteau* (overcoat) or scarf have plenty of options both in terms of style and store. If you just want something cheap and it doesn't matter if it's a bit frumpy, head to Berlan Alley/Mehran Alley (different names from different ends), a pedestrian mall running between Ferdosi St and Sa'di St just south of Jomhuri-ye Eslami (and near Sa'di Metro station).

For something more glam head north to the boutiques of Gandhi Ave (or any north Tehran shopping centre). One option is **Ara** (Map p50; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; ☎10am-10pm), which specialises in more attractive *manteaus*, which start at about US\$70. Or check out the microboutiques at Ghaem Shopping Centre at Tajrish Sq.

Souvenirs

Dedicated souvenir-shop strips include Ferdosi St around Ferdosi Sq and Taleqani Ave (opposite the US Den of Espionage). Prices are 'fixed' but fall fast if you show any bargaining form.

Dusto-e

SOUVENIRS

(Map p50; ☎2205 0071; cnr Valiasr Ave & Sayeh St; ☎9am-1.30pm & 3-9pm) The mother of all souvenir stores is Dusto-e, where the range is huge, prices high and quality probably better than average.

Jameh Bazar

BAZAAR

(Map p42; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; ☎Friday morning) A car park and adjoining shopping centre near the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St is where hawkers from across Iran and Central Asia lay out their rugs to sell whatever they can on Friday mornings. It's a lively, social scene that one reader compared with Portobello in London. The higher floors of the car park can hide the best bargains.

Moses Baba

CRAFTS

(Map p42; cnr Manucheri St & Ferdosi St; ☎10am-5pm; ☑Ferdosi) A member of Tehran's small Jewish community, talkative Moses Baba has been presiding over this wonderfully chaotic treasure trove of antiques and curiosities for 50 years. Expect lacquer work, coins, jewellery, enamels, porcelain and pottery (though some may be younger than what Moses might suggest).

Trekking & Climbing Gear

Varzesh Kooch (Map p42; ☎8881 1542; 1st fl, 665 Enqelab Ave, near Ferdosi Sq) is located behind an unmarked door above a furniture store. Finding this place is worth it for the equipment and the experienced (they helped plan and build huts on Damavand), English-speaking climbers who run the shop and can put you in touch with guides and the climbing community.

i Information

Dangers & Annoyances

TRAFFIC

Even for the experienced Asia hand, the chaotic traffic in Tehran is likely to come as quite a shock. While the Metro has taken a lot of cars off the road, it's still normal to see motorcycles weaving between pedestrians on the footpath in an attempt to escape the gridlock; Paykans reversing at speed along an expressway to reach that missed exit; and all manner of cars and buses hurtling towards each other in a Darwinian game of chicken.

The sheer volume of traffic can be overwhelming and makes crossing the street seem like Russian roulette. As a pedestrian, the best way to ensure a safe crossing is to do what the locals do. Safety in numbers is the usual tactic – wait for one or two other road-crossers to appear

BAD DRIVING? IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

The physical danger notwithstanding, the main problem you face as a visitor on Tehran's streets is mental: how to deal with this manic mass of metal. After much testing, we believe the following attitudinal adjustments will not only free you of some of the traffic-induced anxiety, but make your Tehran experience all the more memorable.

First, try not to think of Tehrani drivers as 'hopeless', 'crazy' or 'stupid'; it will just make you more scared. Instead, look at all the tiny gaps your taxi driver is negotiating without recourse to the brakes, the countless sticky situations from which he extricates himself, and you start to realise these guys are actually *good* drivers.

Watch your driver closely: he almost never uses his mirrors (if he has any); he drapes his seatbelt across his chest only when driving onto an expressway, where he can be fined; he rarely indicates; and he happily makes U-turns in the middle of major roads – all without raising his heartbeat. Then think of how well you'd have to drive to get through this nightmarish traffic unscathed. That's right, don't fight it, you know these guys are actually *very good!*

Finally, embrace the chaos! Head to the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St and engage a motorbike taxi for a trip across town. Tell him you're in a hurry, and hold on. At Disneyland you'd pay good money for this kind of white-knuckle ride; in Tehran it's just part of life.

and, with them between you and the traffic, step boldly out into the flow. Be aware of contra-flow bus lanes, which turn relatively harmless one-way streets into a more dangerous street-crossing challenge.

Visitors are often surprised there are not more accidents. You might feel as if you've had three near-death experiences in the course of a single cab ride, but in reality drivers are adept at getting you near to death without actually killing you.

It is, however, reassuring to remember that no matter how 'crazy' a driver appears to be, he will do everything he can to avoid running you over simply because doing so is just too much hassle.

POLLUTION

Tehran is one of the most polluted cities on earth. And according to the government, 80% of the smog that covers Tehran for about 200 days a year comes straight out of the exhaust pipes of the city's four million cars, trucks and motorbikes. There are other cities with more cars, but few with as many crap cars. If Tehran's chief of traffic police is to be believed, the city's cars are so run down they emit, on average, 12 times more pollution than 'standard' cars. In fairness, poor fuel quality is also a contributor.

When pollution levels reach crisis point – often during winter – schools are closed and radio warns the old and unwell to stay indoors. Even so, local media reports that more than 5000 people die every year as a consequence of the air quality.

A 10-year plan to curb pollution has seen traffic restrictions introduced and billions pumped into the Metro network, but has not had an impact on air quality. More than 2000 new cars are

registered every day in Tehran, so expect clean air to remain a long way off. When the pollution really starts to hurt your throat, head for the hills and relative purity of Darband or Park-e Jamshidiyeh.

Emergency

If your emergency is not life threatening, ask your hotel's front desk for the most appropriate hospital or police station and help with translation. If that is impossible or the situation is urgent, call:

Ambulance (☎115)

Fire Brigade (☎125)

Police (☎110)

Internet Access

Many hotels offer internet, but not always wi-fi. Otherwise, there are hundreds of internet cafes, called *coffeenets*, which open and close at a remarkable rate – and that's even before the regular government crackdowns. The following places have been around for years. For other *coffeenets* look around major squares, usually upstairs, where the rent is cheaper.

Ferdowsi Coffeenet (Map p42; Ferdosi Sq, Enqelab Ave; per hr US\$1.50; ☎9am-9.30pm) Southwest corner of the square.

Pars Internet (Map p42; 369 Ferdosi St; per hr US\$1.50; ☎9am-8pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the British embassy; also has international calls at US\$0.15 a minute.

Valiasr Commercial Centre (Map p42; Valiasr Sq; per hr US\$1.50; ☎9am-9pm) Several small, fast *coffeenets* and tech stores on lower ground floor. Good for meeting tech-savvy young Tehranis.

Left Luggage

Most hotels are happy to hold luggage at no cost. Alternatively, there are reasonably priced left-luggage offices at Mehrabad and Imam Khomeini International Airports (US\$4 a day).

Media

English-language newspapers are available from newsstands on major thoroughfares across Tehran. One option is the **Tehran Times** (www.tehrantimes.com).

Medical Services

HOSPITALS The quality of care in Tehran's hospitals is reasonably high by international standards. Many doctors are Western trained, with English, French and German-speakers among them. Embassies and hotels can recommend a doctor or hospital. Alternatively, the following are accessible, clean and reputable:

Mehrad Hospital (Map p50; ☎8874 7401; Miremad St, off Motahhari Ave)

Tehran Clinic (Map p50; ☎8871 2931; Fara-hani St) Recommended.

PHARMACIES Tehran is well stocked with pharmacies, and medications (often generic brands) are cheap. For the nearest 24-hour pharmacy ask your hotel to phone **pharmacy line** (☎191), or head for **Ramin Drug Store** (Map p42; ☎6673 8080; southeast of Ferdosi Sq; ☎24hr).

Money

Tehran has perhaps the greatest concentration of bank branches of any city on earth; along a 1.5km stretch of Enqelab Ave there are more than 20! Unfortunately, the rates of exchange (the Central Bank rates) are usually poor.

Instead, the easiest and most common way of changing money is in an official moneychanging shop on Ferdosi St south of Ferdosi Sq. They won't smile, but neither (usually) will they rip you off and it's all done in about 30 seconds.

Black-market moneychangers will probably ask you to 'change' on the street before you reach an official shop. See p337 for a warning on the black market.

Bank Melli Central Branch (Bank Melli Markazi; Map p42; Ferdosi St) The big one.

Post

Main post office (Map p42; Sa'di St; ☎8am-7pm) About 100m south of Amir Kabir St. Post packages here before 1.30pm.

Telephone

SIM cards are widely available and recharging is even easier. Unreliable public telephones are conveniently dotted along streets where traffic noise is loudest; cards can be bought at newsstands. Telephone offices are surprisingly hard to find in Tehran, but *coffeenets* with VoIP

make up for that; **Pars Internet** (369 Ferdosi St; international calls per min US\$0.15; ☎9am-8pm Sat-Thu) is one option. See p338 for more on telephones.

Travel Agencies

Travel agencies abound, with several on Nejatollahi St in central Tehran. For domestic and international ticketing, reliable agencies with English-speaking staff include the following:

Asia 2000 Travel Agency (Map p42; ☎8889 6949; asia2000_travel@yahoo.com; Nejatollahi St)

Simorgh Parvaz Travel Agency (Map p42; ☎3397 1525; Baharestan Sq) On the north side of Baharestan Sq, handy to budget accommodation.

Universities

At the centre of political change in Iran, **Tehran University** (Map p42; Enqelab Ave) is a fascinating place to wander around. There is, however, a ban on foreign nonstudents entering alone. To find a companion, hang around the front gate (the entrance is on Enqelab Ave) until you're 'adopted' by someone keen to practise their English. All visitors must be off campus by 3pm.

Visa Extensions

Try not to extend your visa in Tehran unless you cannot avoid it. While some travellers have recently reported a smooth, two-hour process, things in Tehran tend to get more difficult whenever there is an international relations issue. If you must, head for the **Foreign Intelligence Office** (Map p50; cnr Soroush St & Hamid Alley, near Shariati Ave; ☎7.45am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.45am-noon Thu), go through the gate and get your forms from the building on the left, and make photocopies if necessary (see p27 for details). Pay the fee at the **Bank Melli** (Map p50; Shariati Ave) five minutes away down Hamid Alley and across Shariati Ave. Return for security check and, *insh'Allah*, the extension.

i Getting There & Away

Tehran is Iran's transport hub and every town and city of any size is directly linked to the capital – always by bus, usually by air and increasingly by train too. Tickets from Tehran can sell fast so book ahead if you can.

Air

Tehran has two civilian airports: the newer **Imam Khomeini International Airport** (IKIA; Map p36; www.ikia.ir), 35km south of the city for international flights, and old **Mehrabad Airport** (Map p38; <http://mehrabadairport.ir>) south of Azadi Sq in the west for domestic flights. For information about international routes and carriers, see p342.

Every day there are flights between Tehran and almost every provincial capital in Iran. **Iran Air** (Timetable and price information ☎4467 2200; ☎8am-midnight) flies most routes and is complemented by a growing number of smaller airlines. Domestic flight prices are fixed by the government so with no price differential between airlines, it's best to buy tickets from travel agencies where you'll have more options.

INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS

Customs and immigration procedures at IKIA are slow but generally hassle-free if your papers are in order. Bags are X-rayed as you leave the baggage hall, but tourists are seldom hassled.

You'll need cash to leave the airport and several banks in the arrivals hall can change money at poor rates. However, it will get you an official exchange receipt, which is worth having.

Mobile phone operator MTN has two offices selling Irancell SIM cards more cheaply than you'll get them in town, and with less hassle (they can register the SIM while you wait). The tourist information counter was little help to us. All these services are open 24 hours (in theory). For transport to the airport, see p67.

INTERNATIONAL DEPARTURES

The hardest part about leaving Tehran is getting to the airport on time. Unless your flight is very early or very late (as many are), give yourself well over an hour to get to IKIA from central Tehran, then an hour to get through customs and immigration. If you have changed money legally at a bank, and have a receipt, you can in theory convert unused rials into cash euros. However some travellers have reported being unable to do this.

Bus

Thousands of buses link Tehran to just about every city and town in the country. Tehran has four bus terminals so you need to work out which station you're arriving at or which one is best for your destination if you're leaving.

Tickets are usually bought at the bus terminal, and with services to major destinations leaving

so frequently you usually won't need to book ahead (peak holiday periods such as No Ruz being the exception). However, Iran's largest bus company **Iran Peyma** (Taavoni 1; Map p42; ☎6671 9857; Ferdosi St; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu; ☒Ferdowsi) does have a convenient office just south of Ferdosi Sq.

See the tables showing bus services to major destinations on direct buses from Tehran. Where only one price is listed it will be for a standard bus; two prices are for VIP/*mahmooly* unless otherwise stated (see p346 for info on the difference).

TERMINAL-E ARZHANTIN (CENTRAL TERMINAL)

Terminal-e Arzhantin (Central or Beyhaqi terminal; Map p50; Arzhantin Sq; ☒Mosalla) is in northern Tehran and is accessible by taxi, shuttle taxi and local bus, or Metro to Mosalla and a short taxi ride from there. Many VIP services start and finish here, and prices are usually a little higher than other terminals.

TERMINAL-E SHARGH (EASTERN TERMINAL)

Terminal-Shargh (Eastern Terminal; off Map p38; Damavand Rd) has buses to Khorasan province and the Caspian region. To get there, take the BRT (Bus Rapid Transport; see p68) east from Enqelab Ave to Tehran Pars, or hire a private taxi (US\$10 from central Tehran). Iran Peyma and Taavonis 14 and 15 have the most services from this terminal. Destinations include the following:

GONBAD-E KAVUS (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$14/9, nine hours) Hourly 7am to 7pm, 9pm, 11pm.

GORGAN (US\$7, seven to eight hours) Three per day.

MASHHAD (US\$23/14, 12 to 14 hours) Hourly 7am to 7pm.

SARI (US\$5, five hours) Hourly 6am to 7pm.

TERMINAL-E JONUB (SOUTHERN TERMINAL)

The huge, round **Terminal-e Jonub** (Southern Terminal; Map p38) has buses heading to all points south and southeast. To get here take Metro Line 1 to Terminal-e Jonub then walk about 300m through a tunnel, or grab a taxi

BUSES FROM TERMINAL-E ARZHANTIN

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Esfahan	US\$12/7	5½-7hr	hourly
Kerman	US\$16 VIP	15hr	6.30pm, 8.30pm
Mashhad	US\$23 VIP	13-14hr	4.30-7.30pm, 9pm
Shiraz	US\$20/15	12-15hr	3-11pm
Tabriz	US\$16 VIP	8-10hr	9am, 8.30-11pm
Yazd	US\$15 VIP	9-10hr	6.30-10pm

BUSES FROM TERMINAL-E JONUB

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Ahvaz	US\$14.50 <i>mahmooly</i>	15hr	2-9pm
Bandar Abbas	US\$20 <i>mahmooly</i>	14-20hr	every 2hr 7.30am-6pm
Esfahan	US\$11.80/6.70	6-7hr	hourly 6am-midnight
Kashan	US\$4.90/4	3½hr	frequent
Kerman	US\$15 <i>mahmooly</i>	14-16hr	3-9pm
Qom	US\$2.50/2.20	1½hr	every 30min
Shiraz	US\$20/14.20	12-14hr	hourly 2-9pm
Yazd	US\$14.20/8.90	8-9hr	10am, 11am, 4-10pm
Zahedan	US\$21 <i>mahmooly</i>	9-11hr	every 2hr 8am-6pm

heading south. Departure times in the table are the minimum you can expect.

TERMINAL-E GHARB (TERMINAL-E AZADI OR WESTERN TERMINAL)

Terminal-e Gharb (Terminal-e Azadi; Map p38; ☎4465 9672 ext 233) is the city's busiest terminal, catering for the Caspian region and western Iran, as well as international destinations including Ankara and Istanbul (in Turkey), Baku (in Azerbaijan) and Damascus (Syria). See the table, p68, for destinations in Iran.

To get here either take Metro Line 4 to Meydan-e Azadi and walk the last 250m, or ask any westbound shuttle taxi 'Meydan-e Azadi?', then walk north.

Savari

Most towns within three to four hours' drive of Tehran are linked by savari, including Amol, Sari, Kashan, Qom, Qazvin, Zanjan, Rasht and anywhere along the way. Savaris leave from designated areas at the appropriate bus terminals. For example, for Kashan (US\$11.50/9 front/back seat) and even Esfahan (US\$18/16) they leave from near the southern entrance to Terminal-e Jonub (southern bus station); savaris to Sari and Amol leave from outside the eastern terminal; and anything west to Qazvin or Zanjan from the western (Azadi) terminal. Just say your destination and 'savari' and you'll be pointed in the right direction.

Train

Tehran is Iran's rail hub and many services start and finish at the impressive **train station** (Rah Ahan; Map p38; Rah-Ahan Sq) at the south end of Valiasr Ave. Destinations and arrival and departure times are listed in English, and staff at **tourist information** (☎139 or ☎09639) are walking timetables. Departures are punctual.

The train station is easy to reach in a shuttle taxi heading west from Imam Khomeini Sq, just

ask for 'Rah Ahan', or by BRT buses south along Valiasr Ave, which terminate 200m before the station. During the life of this book Rah Ahan will get its own Metro station on Line 3 (light blue).

BUYING TICKETS

You can buy tickets a month in advance at a travel agency. At the station you can only buy tickets for travel on the same day.

SCHEDULES

The prices and days of departure in the timetable listed are liable to change; in particular, daily services in summer usually become less frequent in winter. For the latest schedules, see the Train Schedules PDF at www.raja.ir.

There are many services along the dual tracks between Tehran and Mashhad. They range from the Noor, with 4-bed 1st-class berths and food (US\$37), to the slow, all seat bus train (US\$5). Services often arrive at their destinations in the middle of the night – check before you book.

Prices here cover the range of seats available on all trains on the route. It is also possible to buy tickets to intermediary stops, such as Yazd, on the Bandar Abbas or Kerman trains. For services to Istanbul and Ankara, see p344.

Getting Around To/From the Airport

IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (IKIA)

Most people take a taxi from IKIA for a set price of US\$25 to US\$35 depending on vehicle type. Going to IKIA you'll probably pay US\$30 from northern Tehran but from the south it should cost less. There are plans to extend Metro Line 1 (red) to IKIA.

A bus links IKIA with Mehrabad Airport at least once an hour, 24 hours a day. Assuming the Metro is running (6am to 11pm), this bus stops at Haram-e Motahar Metro station on Line 1, before continuing to Azadi Sq, from where it's a

shortish walk to Meydan-e Azadi Metro station on dark blue Line 2 or Terminal-e Gharb for west-bound buses.

MEHRABAD AIRPORT

The domestic airport is nearer to town and better served by public transport. During the life of this book the Metro should reach Mehrabad via two stops at the end of Line 4 (yellow).

Until then taking a private taxi is easiest. Fares are fixed and the taxi dispatcher in the booth will connect you with a driver. At the time of research, a taxi to southern or central Tehran costs about US\$8, rising to about US\$12 to northern and eastern Tehran. If it's peak hour, the price will be higher, which is fair considering the trip will probably take twice as long.

Cheaper options for more confident travellers include shuttle taxi – tell a taxi driver *na dar baste* (no closed door) and he will look for other passengers going the same way – or public buses to Enqelab and Vanak Sqs.

Car & Motorcycle

Motorcycle taxis loiter on corners all over town and make an adrenalin-inducing way to get across town in a hurry. They cost as much as taxis but take half the time. Find them on the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St if you're heading north. Good luck!

CAR RENTAL

Few travellers bother to rent self-drive cars in Tehran largely because you can get a car and English-speaking driver for not much more. If you want to drive yourself, **Europcar** (☎5567 8316; www.europcar.ir) at IKIA rents out cars from about US\$50/320 per day/week. But check out the boxed text, p64, first.

For private car hire the cost depends on vehicle type, how far you're going and whether you want an English-speaking driver who can double

as a guide. Reckon on paying between US\$70 and US\$100 a day. One highly recommended English-speaking driver and guide is **Ali Taheri** (p55).

Just about any taxi (indeed, any car) in Tehran is available for hire (known locally as *taxi service*, *agence* or *dar baste*). For a driver who speaks no English expect to pay about US\$50 for the day, depending on your bargaining skills and how far you plan to go.

Public Transport

BUS

Tehran has an extensive local bus network but given they are crowded and slow compared with the Metro and there are relatively cheap taxis, few travellers bother. If you do, you'll find buses run from roughly 6am until 10pm or 11pm, finishing earlier on Friday and public holidays. Tickets cost slightly more than nothing and you buy them from ticket booths near bus stops or at bus terminals, and then give them to the driver when you board the bus; see the boxed text, p347, for bus travel etiquette. Buses never show their destinations in English; ask your hotel for route details or anyone at the bus stop.

BUS RAPID TRANSPORT

More useful is this system of rapid buses along four routes with dedicated lanes. The BRT carries about 1.8 million people a day and on most routes buses depart every two or three minutes. Tickets cost US\$0.10. Two lines will be particularly useful to travellers:

RAH-AHAN (TRAIN STATION) TO TAJRISH:

Good for hops along Valiasr, but the traffic lights and bus bank ups at major stops mean it's less than rapid.

AZADI TO TEHRAN PARS: Links the centre of town with Azadi Sq in the west and, most usefully, Terminal-e Shargh (eastern bus terminal).

BUSES FROM TERMINAL-E GHARB

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Ardabil	US\$11/8	9-10hr	hourly 7am-11pm
Astara	US\$10/8	8hr	Ardabil bus
Chalus	US\$8/5	5-6hr	every 15min 6am-11pm
Hamadan	US\$8/5	5-6hr	every 30min 6am-11pm
Kermanshah	US\$14/9	9hr	every 30min 6am-10pm
Orumiyeh	US\$15/10	12hr	7am, hourly 1-9pm
Qazvin	US\$3 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	2-2½hr	frequent
Rasht	US\$9/6	5½-6hr	every 30min 6am-11pm
Sanandaj	US\$14/9	8hr	3-11pm Seiro Safari
Tabriz	US\$14/10	9-11hr	hourly 7am-11pm

TRAINS FROM TEHRAN

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bandar Abbas	US\$21-36	19hr	noon & 1.40pm daily
Esfahan	US\$11/6.50 1st/2nd	7½hr	11pm
Gorgan	US\$7/3.50 1st/2nd	10hr	daily evenings
Kerman	US\$14 1st class	11-12hr	daily Zahedan train
Mashhad	US\$5-37	8-13hr	16 daily 6.35am-11.25pm
Qom	US\$0.70 2nd class	2½hr	Thu 3pm
Sari	US\$1.50 2nd class	7hr	8.10am daily
Tabriz	US\$5.50-18	13hr	2 daily late afternoon
Yazd	US\$6.60-12.70	6-8hr	6.15am, 4.35pm, 10pm daily
Zahedan (change at Kerman)	US\$16-25	25hr	1 daily, late afternoon

METRO

Tehran's fast-expanding **Tehran Metro** (www.tehranmetro.com) is transforming the way the city moves and cutting journey times by up to an hour on some cross-town trips. The plan is for nine Metro lines to eventually criss-cross the entire city. At the time of writing five lines were at least partially complete and another under construction.

Tickets cost US\$0.20 per single trip journey, or US\$0.35 if you need to change lines. Ten-trip (US\$1.40), one-day (US\$4), three-day (US\$8) and seven- and 30-day contactless cards are also available. Trains start at about 6am (7am on Fridays and holidays) and stop by 11pm. Services are most frequent and crowded during peak hours. The first and last carriages of every service are for women only, though women are free to travel in any other carriage. Station announcements are in Farsi only, so keep an eye on the English maps inside the trains.

LINE 1 (RED)

Line 1 is the most useful for travellers. It runs between Kahrizak, just beyond Imam Khomeini's tomb in the far south, and Tajrish in the far north, via a main junction of Imam Khomeini Sq. Tajrish in the north is the jumping-off point for Darband, Tochal and the Sad Abad and Niyavaran palaces. Heading south, Line 1 stops at Terminal-e Jonub, Rey and Haram-e Motahar for both the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini and the Behesht-e Zahra martyrs cemetery, though does not yet run as far as Imam Khomeini International Airport.

LINE 2 (DARK BLUE)

Line 2 runs between Tehran (Sadeghieh) in the west (where it connects with Line 5 to Karaj), and Tehran Pars in the suburbs of the east. It connects to Line 1 at Imam Khomeini Sq, and is handy to the Amir Kabir St cheap hotels (Mellat station).

LINE 3 (LIGHT BLUE)

Line 3 is under construction and the first stations around Meydan-e Valiasr should be open when you read this. Running from satellite town Islamshahr in the south to the far northeastern suburbs, Line 3 will link Tehran train station (Rah Ahan) with the rest of the Metro, and have a section beneath mega-crowded Valiasr Ave.

LINE 4 (YELLOW)

This primarily east-west line runs between Mehrabad airport in the west and Shahid Kholadouz in the southeastern suburbs. It should be completed by the time you read this and be most useful as a link between central Tehran and Mehrabad airport, Meydan-e Azadi and Terminal-e Gharb (Azadi or Western terminal) in the west. Note that the stop for Azadi Square and Terminal-e Gharb is Meydan-e Azadi, not the Azadi stop on Line 2.

LINE 5 (GREEN)

The completed Line 5 is largely above ground and is, in effect, an extension of Line 2. It runs from Tehran (Sadeghieh) to the west passing via Karaj to Golshahr.

Taxi

Taxi fares in Tehran are higher than elsewhere in Iran. Meter taxis do exist, but we've yet to see a meter actually working.

PRIVATE TAXI

Yellow and green taxis are supposed to be private taxis, but any empty car will usually take you *dar baste* if you ask. The alternative is to get your hotel to call a **'wireless taxi'** (☎133), which cost a little more. You could also call the **Women's Taxi Company** (☎1821), whose green taxis are driven by women, for women passengers only.

TEHRAN METRO: A CITY'S SAVIOUR

It's no overstatement to say the Tehran Metro is the only hope of salvation for a city literally choking to death on chronic pollution and endless traffic jams.

Tehran's Metro was first proposed in 1974 and French companies had begun work when the revolutionary government cancelled the contracts in 1981, with just 2km of tunnel completed. It wasn't until 1999 that the first line (Line 5) was eventually opened. By then everyone agreed Tehran's congestion and pollution problems had begun to affect all aspects of life. With four-hour commutes for trips of less than 15km not uncommon, expanding the Metro became a top priority.

When the first underground sections opened, a shortage of carriages soon made peak hours a Tokyo-style squeeze and, inside the carriages, a *frotteur's* paradise. It's only marginally better today. Since then, progress has been slow but steady, with more than 70 stations operating on five lines, a number scheduled to grow by at least 20 by 2015 when it is hoped half of all journeys in Tehran will be by Metro. The full nine-line network is forecast to be completed by 2031 when a staggering 370km of tunnel will make it longer than the New York subway.

Already more than 2.5 million people ride the Metro each day and the benefits are plain to see. Countless millions are saved on fuel, stress and pollution-related health costs (though this is relative, of course, to how terrible it would be if all these people were on the roads), not to mention the increased productivity.

Unless you're familiar with the going taxi rates, agree to a price before getting in the vehicle. Most drivers won't go anywhere for less than US\$2, and will push prices up in lots of US\$0.40 to US\$0.70 for longer trips. Negotiation is encouraged.

Sample fares include the following: Imam Khomeini Sq to Valiasr Sq (about US\$3/5 in off-peak/peak hour); and Imam Khomeini Sq to Tajrish Sq (about US\$7/13). Around town you can charter a taxi for about US\$10 an hour. To get from southern Tehran to the north, even in a private taxi, takes a minimum of half an hour, much longer in peak hour when prices rise accordingly.

SHUTTLE TAXI

The minimum fare is about US\$30 for one or two *meydāns* (squares) of travel, climbing to about US\$3 for the longest trips. Watch what other passengers are paying and you'll soon get an idea of the going rate.

Shuttle taxis ply main thoroughfares between major *meydāns* and the best way to use them is to learn the names of the *meydāns* and know which one you want to go to. *Meydāns* such as Imam Khomeini, Vanak, Valiasr, Tajrish, Arzhan-tin, Azadi, Ferdosi, Enqelab, Haft-e Tir, Rah-Ahan and Imam Hossein are major shuttle-taxi hubs. However, even these may have several mini-stations for shuttle taxis heading in different directions. For longer trips you will usually need to change shuttles.

For more on shuttle taxis and where to sit, see p347.

AROUND TEHRAN

Away from the hyperactive streets of the capital are several easily accessible day trips and ski slopes, and the highest mountain in the Middle East.

Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini

حرم امام خمینی

When future generations look back, the early years of the Islamic Republic will be remembered as a time of great endeavour on the building front. This, the resting place of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (known as His Holiness Imam Khomeini in death), is the grandest of those endeavours. But while the scale of the **Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini** (Map p36; ☺24hr; 🕌 Haram-e Motahar) is quite enormous, the detail often falls short of historic shrines elsewhere in Iran.

The shrine is located between Tehran, the town that launched the 1979 revolution, and Qom, where the great man underwent his theological training. It's flanked by four 91m-high towers symbolising Khomeini's age when he died. The huge gold central dome is adorned with 72 tulips, which symbolise the 72 martyrs who fought and died with Imam Hossein in Karbala.

The shrine itself is inside a stainless steel *zarih*, a cage-like casing through which pilgrims pay their respects and no small

number of bank notes. Men and women must approach from different sides. The ayatollah wanted his shrine to be a public place where people could enjoy themselves, rather than a mosque where they must behave with reverence, and but for the megalomaniacal architecture, his wishes have largely been met.

i Getting There & Away

To get to the holy shrine, take the Tehran Metro Line 1 (red) to Haram-e Motahar. Behesht-e Zahra cemetery is also close by.

Behesht-e Zahra بهشت زهرا

Behesht-e Zahra is Tehran's biggest cemetery and is interesting primarily because it's the main resting place for those who died in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). For some visitors, the roughly 200,000 glass boxes will be familiar from 1980s TV and newspaper images showing hysterical mourners surrounded by countless portraits of the dead. Like windows into another time, these small, glass boxes on stilts contain a watch, a knife, maybe a letter that belonged to the lost father/son/husband staring out from a yellowed photograph. The pine trees have grown since then, but the faces remain. The sheer scale of the death represented here makes it a haunting experience that brings home the horrific cost of war.

Right at the heart of the cemetery is a shrine to Iranian pilgrims killed during the annual hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), when Saudi Arabian soldiers opened fire on a crowd during the mid-1980s. Elsewhere, the graves of ordinary people stretch on for kilometres.

A visit is usually combined with a trip to the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini; take

Metro Line 1 to Haram-e Motahar (and *not* Behesht-e Zahra station).

Rey ری

In the 11th and 12th centuries Rey was a major centre that was much larger than Tehran, but it was devastated when the Mongols swept through. These days it has been swallowed up by the urban sprawl of the capital, but retains enough history to give it a different sensibility – one best experienced by just wandering around on foot.

The main attraction is the **Imamzadeh Shah-e Abdal-Azim**, built for a descendant of Imam Hossein. This mausoleum has elaborate tilework, a golden dome, a pool in the courtyard, a 14th-century sarcophagus with intricate carvings, constructed from betel wood, and enough mirror tiles to make you dizzy. In the same complex is a shrine to Imam Hamzeh (brother of Imam Reza). Women need to wear a chador, available at the entrance.

Rey's other attractions include the remains of the Sassanid **Qal'-e Tabarak**, a fortress on a nearby hill; the 12th-century **Gonbad-e Toghoral**, the 20m-high tomb tower of a Seljuk king in the town centre; and the **Cheshmeh Ali** mineral springs, with some Qajar-period **carvings** nearby.

i Getting There & Away

Shahr-e Rey (City of Rey) station is on Metro Line 1. Taxis can be hired in Rey for a negotiable US\$8 per hour, or ask your hotel about a tour.

Alborz Ski Resorts

Skiing in the Alborz Mountains above Tehran can be one of the most unexpected pleasures of a trip to Iran. There are four

THE FUNERAL OF AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI

In 1989, the Islamic Republic's final send-off for its founder and inspiration, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, culminated in the largest funeral ever held in the world – a crush of 10 million inconsolable mourners. It was a chaotic scene. As the hearse tried to move towards the cemetery it was stopped repeatedly before the crowd eventually took the coffin and started passing it over their heads. By the time a helicopter was summoned it was too late and even the armed Komiteh guards couldn't stop the body falling out of the coffin, and the crowd trying to tear pieces off the shroud to keep as holy relics.

Unless you thrive on chaos, you're advised not to come here on or around 4 June, the anniversary of the ayatollah's death, when hundreds of thousands of mourners visit the shrine.

resorts within a day-trip distance, all offering equipment for hire. **Darbansar** (day pass US\$15; ☀8.30am-3.30pm Jan-Mar), near Shemshak, has three easy slopes and is best for beginners; while the slopes at **Tochal** (day pass US\$18; ☀8.30am-12.30pm Mon-Sat, also closed Mon during summer) are accessed via the Tochal Telecabin (see p54) in northern Tehran. The pick of the bunch, however, are Shemshak and Dizin.

SHEMESHAK

☎021 / ELEV 2450M

Just up the valley from Darbansar, **Shemshak Resort** (day pass US\$17; ☀8.30am-3.30pm Jan-Mar) has the slopes that will get hardcore skiers most excited. There are six lifts, the longest being about 1450m with a vertical descent of about 500m (some of it at an adrenalin-inducing 45-degree angle) and plenty of moguls. Snowboards are welcome. Boots, skis and poles can be hired for about US\$35 a day.

Shemshak is, in effect, a series of villages in a steep-sided valley. It has a lively cafe scene and lodging is usually in an **apartment** (summer/winter US\$50/70), which can be rented from local agents, or for more from agents in Tehran. Midweek is cheaper.

Another accommodation option is **Shemshak Tourist Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎2652 6912; s/tw US\$52/78), a midranger about 600m downhill from ski lifts. It's not special but it is good value; the two singles, twins and a few suites are comfortable and clean. Best to book ahead.

The après-ski scene here has been described as 'out-of-control and even mind-boggling', but this is Iran so you'll need to know someone, or meet someone on the slopes, to be invited to these private parties. That said, the atmosphere under the new **Sierra building** (www.sierrashemshak.com; ☀7am-midnight) is said to be pretty warm, with a well-stocked supermarket, fast food and the **Balcony** cafe-restaurant, which is the place to be seen off-slopes. Private, short-term rentals of the building's apartments can be arranged – ask around in the foyer or the Balcony.

DIZIN

☎0261/ELEV 2700M

The largest field in Iran and home to Iranian skiing, **Dizin Resort** (www.dizinskiresort.com; day pass US\$30; ☀8.30am-4pm Nov-Apr) has more lifts than Shemshak but the runs aren't as difficult. Still, with a vertical drop of about 900m it should appeal to anyone

شمشک



























feeling the need for speed. With base camp at about 2700m and the upper slopes about 3500m, skiing is usually possible from December until April. Pistes are sometimes groomed and there is plenty of scope for off-piste if you get a fresh snowfall. Apart from Friday, waiting for the antique gondolas, Poma and chair lifts is not really an issue. Hiring skis can be a lottery, with prices theoretically reflecting quality. Skiers we met paid about US\$35 for battered skis or snowboards, poles and clothes (but not hats, which are not rented). If you hire a guide they should help you get decent skis.

Dizin also boasts summer activities such as grass-skiing, hiking, horse riding and tennis, mainly on weekends.

Sleeping & Eating

Dizin Tourist Hotel

RESORT \$\$

(Hotel Jahangardi; ☎521 2978-9; d/tr/villa US\$90/106/215;                           This is one of only two hotels in Dizin itself – right at the bottom of the hill. The rooms aren't bad and those in the main building have better views. Four- and five-bed villas are also available. Prices are very negotiable in low season.

Gajereh Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎521 2232; <http://gajereh.ir>; d/tr/villa from US\$78/100/120;                           About 2km down the road to Tehran, the Gajereh is one of several functional if unstylish resort-style places serving Dizin. In summer, call ahead to make sure it's open.

Getting There & Away

Local travel agencies sell one-, two- and three-day trips that include transport, accommodation and lift passes. Look for trips advertised in English-language newspapers, or ask at your hotel; Mr Mousavi at the Firouzeh Hotel (p55) can help with budget trips.

Shemshak and Dizin are linked by an unsealed mountain road that is closed for most of the time between late November and May. At those times you'll need to go north via the Chalus road, turning off it for Dizin, a trip of 123km or roughly 2½ hours' drive from Tehran. In winter you'll need chains or a 4WD for the last 10km or so. A day-return taxi to Dizin should cost about US\$100. The cheapest way to reach Dizin is on a Chalus bus from Terminal-e Gharb; ask the driver to drop you at the Dizin turn-off and hitch a ride from there.

Shemshak and Darbansar are about 55km north of Tehran on Shemshak Rd (which links to Dizin via the aforementioned summer road). Savaris and minibuses serve Shemshak from Tehran's eastern bus terminal. However, most

دیزین

people take a taxi for about US\$80 same-day return. A one-way trip should cost about US\$30 to Shemshak – it's cheaper for the return trip.

Mt Damavand کوه دماوند

Shaped like Mt Fuji, **Mt Damavand** (5671m), northeast of Tehran, is the highest mountain in the Middle East. Damavand has many mythological tales associated with it but in reality it is a dormant volcano that still belches out sulphuric fumes strong enough to kill unfortunate stray sheep. Its image is one of the most recognisable icons in Iran, appearing on the IR10,000 note, on bottles of Damavand spring water and numerous other commercial items.

Most people who go to Damavand do so to climb the peak, and start by heading to the large, comfortable Polour Camp (2270m), built by the Iran Mountaineering Federation and the best place to acclimatise before attempting the south and west face routes. The climbing season is from June to September, or May to October for experienced climbers.

Two excellent sources of information on all things Damavand:

<http://damavandmt.blogspot.com>

www.damavand.de

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

There are 16 routes up Damavand, but the vast majority of people take the classic southern route. Brief details of the southern route follow. For information on the northern route, talk to the English-speaking owners of Varzesh Kooch (p63) who are happy to share their knowledge and put you in touch with guides.

From a technical point of view, Damavand is basically a walk-up. Climbing so far so quickly is its most dangerous aspect, with altitude sickness (watch for dizziness, headaches, nausea and swollen fingers) killing people every year. Most first-timers use a guide and you can expect to pay about US\$550 for an all-inclusive (transport,

food, lodgings, donkey, guide etc) three-day tour from Tehran. This includes the US\$50 mountain fee foreigners must pay, during summer, at Gusfand Sara or Base Camp. A guide for a two-day climb will cost about US\$200. See p327 for reliable guides and companies.

Damavand is best climbed in three days, starting at Polour Camp and going 11km by road to Camp 2, then trekking from there to Camp 3 or Base Camp before making the ascent. The Damavand websites have maps and details of the various routes. There's no water en route and no way of booking the hut; on Thursday nights and holidays it is packed with students from Tehran. Bringing a tent, sleeping bag and perhaps a stove (and leaving it in camp during the final ascent) is recommended, though one reader reported hiring a tent at the shelter. Even in July, nights are freezing and it can be -10°C at the summit. A reader recommends filling water bottles in the evening since the water will be frozen when you get up.

In August you should be able to climb to the peak without special equipment. The summit doesn't require any technical gear but it does require fitness, warm clothes and hiking boots for the loose rocks. Bear in mind that the weather can change suddenly and snowfalls are a possibility, even in summer. Most people return from the summit to Tehran in one day.

HOT SPRINGS

After expending all that energy climbing Mt Damavand, you'll be pleased to know that just 4km east of Reyneh, at **Ab Karm**, several hotels have been built around hot springs. You can rent a room for the night for around US\$25, including breakfast, tea and a dip in one of the baths.

i Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Polour village and on to the camp is by taxi *dar baste* (US\$50, two hours, 80km). Alternatively, take a savari or bus from Terminal-e Shargh and get off at Polour village, then take a local taxi to the camp.



Western Iran

ایران غربی

Includes »

Tabriz.....	84
Kaleybar & Babak Castle.....	95
Ardabil.....	96
Qazvin.....	108
Alamut Valley.....	112
Soltaniyeh.....	115
Sanandaj.....	119
Howruman.....	123
Bisotun.....	128
Hamadan.....	128
Shush.....	136
Choqa Zanbil.....	137
Shushtar.....	138

Best Places to Eat

- » Bijan's (p103)
- » Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad (p98)
- » Haji Dadash (p117)
- » Khansalar (p122)

Best Places to Stay

- » Darya Guesthouse (p89)
- » Hotel Malek (p107)
- » Kadus Hotel (p102)
- » Mehran Hotel (p106)

Why Go?

From paddy fields to blizzards to the original Garden of Eden, this region will shatter your preconceptions of Iran. Standing at the frontiers with Mesopotamia and Turkey, western Iran has witnessed many of civilisation's great empires, with fortunes oscillating between trading glories and military decimation. The deeply hospitable region lacks the iconic gem-city sites of central Iran so it's often skipped by first-time Western visitors. But that makes it all the more appealing for those who relish delving a little deeper.

Western Iran is a linguistic and cultural patchwork: Kurds predominate in Kordistan and Kermanshah provinces; Lors in Ilam and Lorestan; Arabs inhabit southern Khuzestan; Tالش and Gilaki are the traditional languages of Gilan (the southwest Caspian hinterland); and Azaris whose language is more Turkish than Persian, predominate in the rest of the northwest. In remote regions, and in Kurdish towns, traditional dress is still worn.

When to Go

The craggy peaks of the Zagros from Hamadan northwards see snow arrive early and leave late (about November to March), while the sweltering lowlands around Shush begin to boil in June.

To make the most of western Iran, try visiting for the spring flower blooms in April/May, or the autumn harvest of juicy grapes and delicious mulberries in September/early October.

Bazargan

بازرگان

📍0462 / POP 10,000 / ELEV 1417M

Car repair yards, shops and nine cheap hotels line Bazargan's Imam St, a gun-barrel straight strip fired towards the striking silhouette of Mt Ararat.

About 2km short of the immigration posts, the village ends at the outer border gate. Here the taxi/savari stand faces the basic **Hotel Jafapoor** (📍337 2058; Imam St; dm/tw US\$4/6) whose owner is excited to show off his modest English skills and changes money. **Hotel Hamid** (📍337 2435; Imam St; tw US\$15), 300m further east, is somewhat better and has bathrooms with squat toilets.

Locals pay US\$2 to head on to Maku but taxis ask way more from foreigners.

Maku

ماکو

📍0462 / POP 39,600 / ELEV 1293M

Boxed into a soaring rocky canyon, central Maku has a handful of minor sights and makes a sensible base for visiting the old Armenian church of Qareh Kalisa (p78). Long a key fortress guarding the Ottoman-Persian frontier, Maku was one of many Azerbaijani khanates that gained semi-independence in the chaotic period following the death of Nader Shah in 1749. Although rejoining Iran in 1829, the khanate was only finally abolished a century later. Shops and all hotels are within 500m of little Chahara Sq on central Imam St. The bus terminal is 3km southeast.

For internet, try **Coffeenet Dade Pardan** (Imam St; per hr US\$1; ☎️10am-last customer), almost opposite the Makoo Tourist Inn, 400m west of the main square.

👁️ Sights

The sad, crumbling remnants of Old Maku's former **citadel** lead up to the **Abu Fazl Mosque** and a series of degraded brick **fortifications** cupped beneath an impressively huge cliff overhang. Fine views justify the sweaty 25-minute hike on steps and footpaths directly north from Chahara Sq.

The celebrated but empty **Kola Ferangi** is a century-old mansion with filigree wrap-around balconies, hidden away in a ruined garden accessed through the unmarked grey gates of a clinic on Taleqani St, just north of Chahara Sq.

Baqcheh Juq Palace Museum MUSEUM

(📍324 3719; admission US\$1; ☎️9am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun) This attractive mansion was originally built for the *sardar* (military governor) of Qajar Shah Muzaffar al-Din (r 1896-1907). Eclectically furnished rooms with colourful, quaintly tacky fruit murals are set around a wonderfully over-the-top mirror-tiled atrium. It's set in a walled orchard at the base of appealing, tree-dappled Baqcheh Juq village whose timeless hay-topped mud houses are backed by a rugged chasm. It's 2km off the main Bazargan road, about 7km west of Chahara Sq from which yellow savaris charge US\$1 one way.

CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT BAZARGAN

Travelling solo, crossing here usually takes under an hour. The hill-top **immigration posts** (🕒24hr) are 2km above Bazargan village, US\$1 (plus US\$1 for bags) by shared taxi/minibus. The posts are just 600m from **Gürbulak** in Turkey (no facilities). The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km east in Doğubayazıt, famous for its 1784 Işak Paşa palace.

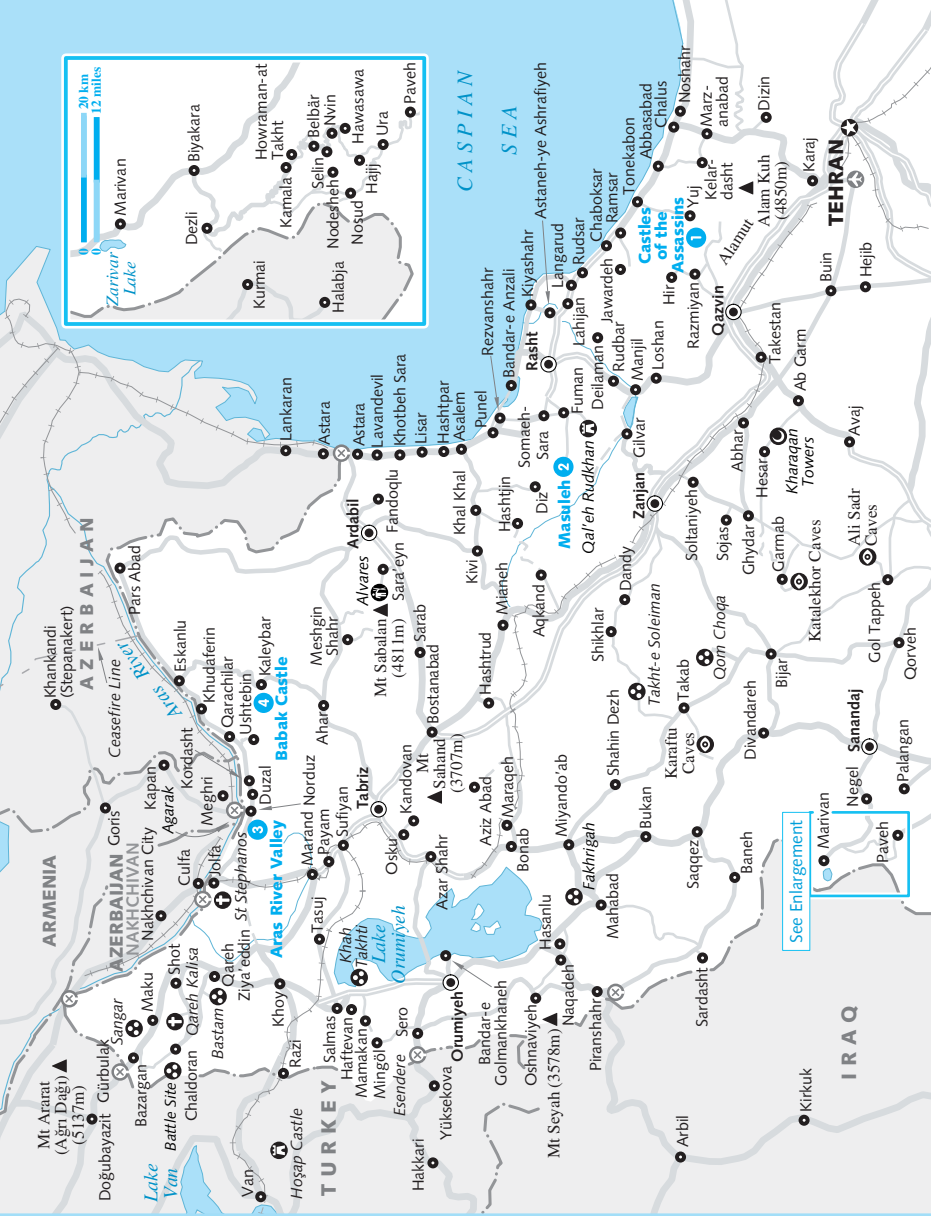
Eastbound from Doğubayazıt to Gürbulak take a dolmuş (minibus; 3YTL, 25 minutes, last service 5pm) from the junction of Ağrı and Sehiltik Sts, 100m east of the Karahan Petrol Ofisi station (where Ağrı dolmuşlar wait). That's about five minutes' walk from Doğubayazıt's little bus terminal and cheap hotels. Westbound buses go from Doğubayazıt.

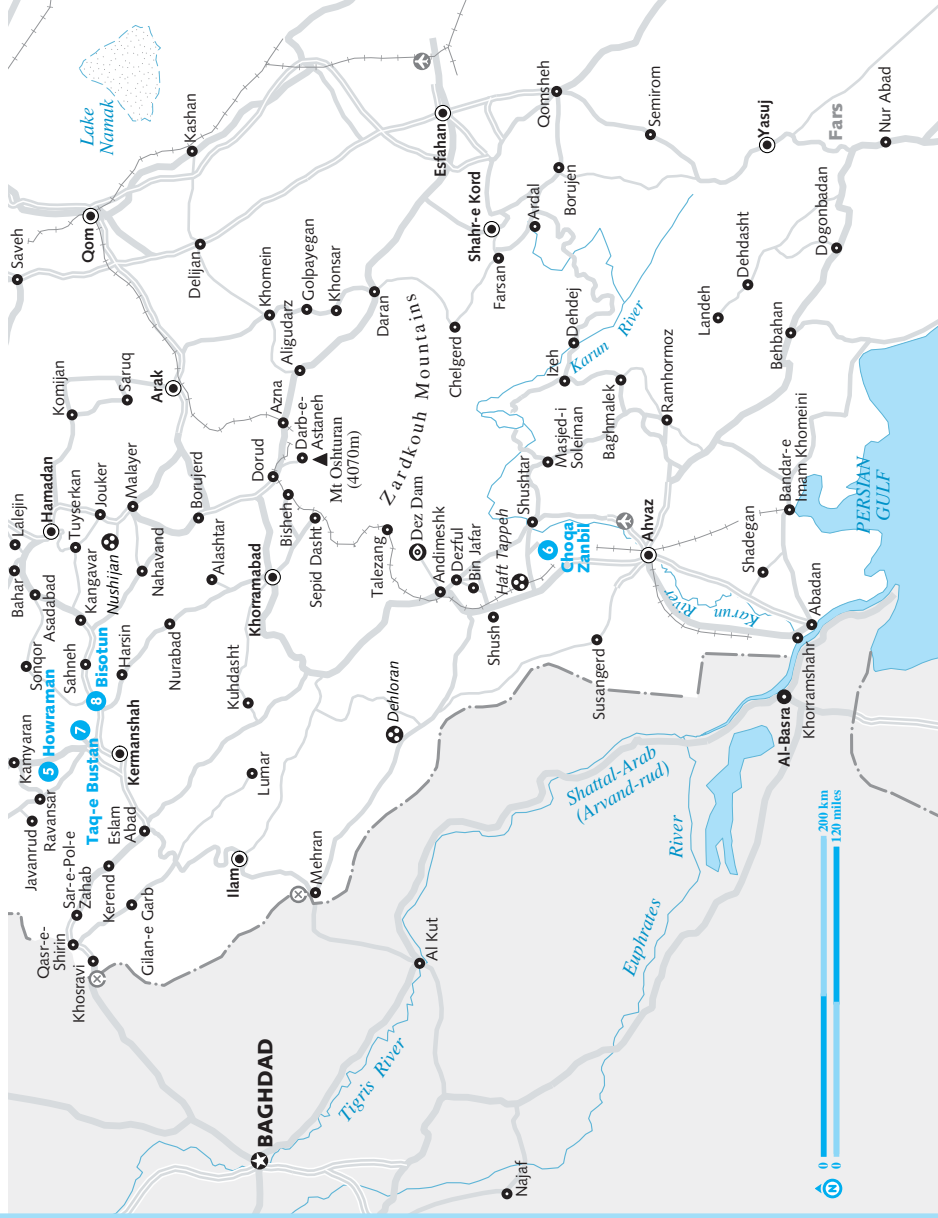
Arriving in Iran during office hours you're likely to be welcomed by a charming Iranian tourist officer. The bank within the Iran-side customs building offers full rial rates for US dollars and euros. They won't change UK pounds nor Turkish lira for which you'll have to risk the scam-a-lot guys outside or, more safely, ask hoteliers in Bazargan village. Beware that anywhere else in Iran, except Orumiyeh, Turkish lira are effectively worthless.

Well-connected Tabriz guide-fixer **Hossein Ravaniyar** (www.iranoverland.com; p89) is experienced at sorting out motorists' border formality problems.

Western Iran Highlights

- 1** Hike between flower-filled valleys and snow-capped peaks amid the ruined 12th-century **Castles of the Assassins** (p.113)
- 2** Challenge Iran's desert image in the paddy fields and forests of Gilan that lead to the delightful stepped village of **Masuleh** (p.105)
- 3** Explore ancient churches, mud-walled castles and grand canyons along the biblical **Aras River Valley** (p.94) near Jofa
- 4** Stagger up to **Babak Castle** (p.95) the dramatic emotional heart of Azarbaijan





- 5** Venture into **Howraman** (p123) a magical, rarely visited valley of traditional Kurdish villages
- 6** Be awed by lonely **Choqa Zanbil** (p138), a massive, brick ziggurat which somehow managed to get 'lost' for 2500 years
- 7** Commune with long dead Sassanian kings at **Taq-e Bustan** (p125) and enjoy an ice cream while doing it
- 8** Come face to face with a ruler of the world at Darius the Great's dramatic rock cut inscription at **Bisotun** (p128)

Sleeping & Eating

Makoo Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎322 3212; fax 322 3184; tw/stc US\$35/45, winter US\$25/35; ♿) Appealingly quiet, the Tourist Inn is a green three-storey block set well back off Imam St. Despite a little peeling paint the rooms are by far Maku's classiest option, with hot shower, squat toilet and towels. Decent if haphazard restaurant.

Hotel Alvand

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎322 3491; Imam St; s/tw US\$6/10) Just west of Chahara Sq, the Alvand is the most inviting of Maku's several cheap offerings. The rooms are well kept and management understands a little English, but the one shower has limited availability and upstairs shared toilets are often out of action according to some unfortunate guests.

Getting There & Away

From the main terminal buses run to Tehran (US\$4, three daily), Tabriz (US\$2, four hours, six daily, last at 1.30pm), and Orumiye (US\$1, 4½ hours, hourly) via Khoy (US\$1). Rare savaris to Bazargan (US\$0.50) depart from Taleqani St at Chahara Sq.

Around Maku

To conveniently visit Qareh Kalisa, the site of the battle of Chaldoran and also the village of Bastam with some 2700-year-old steps and reconstructed ruins, consider chartering a taxi from Maku then jumping out at Qareh Ziya'eddin for public transport to Khoy.

QAREH KALISA

قره کلیسا

Splendid outside, though plain within, **Qareh Kalisa** (Black Church; admission US\$1; ☎24hr) is the best maintained of all Iran's medieval churches. It's alternatively known as Kalisa-ye Tadi (Church of St Thaddaeus) for St Thaddaeus (aka Tatavoos) who supposedly founded a church here in AD 43. Some say he came with apostle St Bartholomew, others that he *was* St Bartholomew. Whatever the case, Thaddaeus' preaching proved a little too successful and the jealous Armenian king reacted by killing him and massacring his 3000 converts in AD 66. In a curious twist, Armenia later became the world's first Christian nation (AD 301). Thaddaeus' memory was revived with a chapel built here at his supposed grave in AD 371.

Mostly rebuilt after an earthquake, the smaller black-and-white-striped chapel section dates from 1319–29. The church was much restored and enlarged in 1810 when the main beige-white stone section was added. This is richly carved with saints, angels, kings and crosses, best observed from the chunky fortress-style walls that surround the church site. Ring the bell to the left of the main door if it's locked. The only Christian services are held during a brilliant three-day summer pilgrimage; dates vary and are announced shortly beforehand through the **Armenian Prelacy Office** (☎0411-555 3532; archtab@itm.co.ir) in Tabriz.

Qareh Kalisa is tucked behind a photogenically low-rise Kurdish village, 8km off the quiet Shot-Chaldoran road. This road crosses rolling arid hills that turn into bright green flower-filled meadows in

CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT SERO

This **border post** (☎8am–10.30pm, Iran time), called **Esendere** in Turkey, consists of just a few lonely buildings on a pretty mountain road. Procedures are relatively easy for individuals but it's wise to cross early to ensure transport connections. Freelance moneychangers offer poor rates for Turkish lira and worse ones for US dollars. Get better rates in Orumiye or (for euros or dollars) or at the bank within the Iran-side customs building.

The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km away in Yüsekova. **Van Erçiş** (☎0438-351 4193) operates a regular Yüsekova–Esendere dolmuş (minibus; YTL5, 45 minutes) till around 6pm: ignore the blatant denials of taxi drivers. Vangölü Turizm run Yüsekova–Van buses (YTL10, 3½ hours) roughly hourly, passing the magnificent ruins of Hoşap Castle in Güzelsu village (64km before Van). In central Van, **Vangölü Turizm** (☎0432-216 3073; cnr Maraş & Cumhuriyet Sts) also offers a 9.30am direct bus to Orumiye. Turkish time is 1½ hours earlier than Iran's, half an hour in summer.

In Iran, **Sero** is a tiny village with a fine mountain backdrop. Taxis run from here to Orumiye (45 minutes); the taxi drivers charge like wounded bulls.

SHAMS TABRIZI

If you find Khomeini-style Islam a little stony faced, don't be put off. Iran has produced other inspirational Muslim thinkers. One such was dervish-philosopher Shams Tabrizi whose brief relationship (1244 to 1246) with Rumi was arguably as significant to Sufi history as Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist was to Christianity. Bravely and often with humour Shams was keen to point out that religion is not an end in itself, merely the first step in a personal journey of spiritual discovery. His *Khatesevom* is generally translated as *The Third Line*. But *The Third Path* might be more accurate, echoing the middle way of the Buddha.

spring. There's no public transport. Taxis from Maku ask US\$15 return from Maku via Shot including waiting time.

Orumiyeh

ارومیه

☎0441 / POP 623,000 / ELEV 1327M

Known as Reza'eh during the Pahlavi era, Orumiyeh (Urmia, Urumiyeh) is a logical stop en route to southeastern Turkey. It's a large, very historic city but offers no must-see sights.

History

Bountiful orchards made Orumiyeh the historically prosperous 'Garden of Persia'. For centuries various Christian groups (Chaldeans, Armenians, Assyrians and Nestorians) lived harmoniously here alongside local Azari Muslims and a thriving Jewish community. However, in the 19th century overzealous Protestant and Catholic foreign missionary activities resulted in a harsh backlash against all non-Muslims. This was initially led by Kurdish groups fearing the possible loss of territory should a Christian-Armenian state be declared.

In 1880 the Persian army stormed Orumiyeh to counterattack Kurdish nationalist leader Sheikh Ubayd Allah. Christians were massacred by both sides and orchards were devastated. In 1918 most of the Christian population fled from Orumiyeh, Salmas and Khoy, wisely fearing that invading Ottoman Turks could repeat the butchery that they had perpetrated on the Armenians of east-

ern Turkey. Most of those who stayed were slaughtered.

Some escapee Christians returned when the Turks retreated and today six different Christian faiths remain active. However, with a continual exodus of emigrants to the US and Scandinavia, the total non-Muslim population has dwindled to an estimated 4000.

The main commercial streets Imam Ave and Kashani St form a 'T' at attractive Enqelab Sq. Beheshti St, unanimously known as Daneshkadeh St, continues west to Pole-Qoyum junction around 3km beyond the museum.

👁 Sights

AROUND ENQELAB SQUARE

Unfortunately, the police aggressively dissuade photography of the 1932 European-style **civic hall** (Enqelab Sq).

St Mary's

CHURCH

(Kalisa Neneh Mariyam; off Kalisa Lane; ☎8am-4pm or on request) According to local Assyrian Orthodox Christians, St Mary's was founded by St Thomas on the gravesite of one of the Biblical magi, the pre-Islamic Persian priests who trotted across to Bethlehem to greet the infant Jesus, inventing Christmas presents in the process. This, the Assyrian Christians claim, makes it the world's oldest still-standing church. In fact the structure you'll see doesn't really feel that old. It still contains four antique tombstones including that of the supposed magus but his mummified body was apparently 'kidnapped' by Soviet troops during WWII and taken to Kiev.

Other Churches

CHURCH

Don't confuse old St Mary's with the new St Mary's in the same courtyard or with the Assyrian Protestant church that's visible from nearby **Khayyam St** where Orumiyeh's youth make their nightly *passeggiata* (nightly stroll).

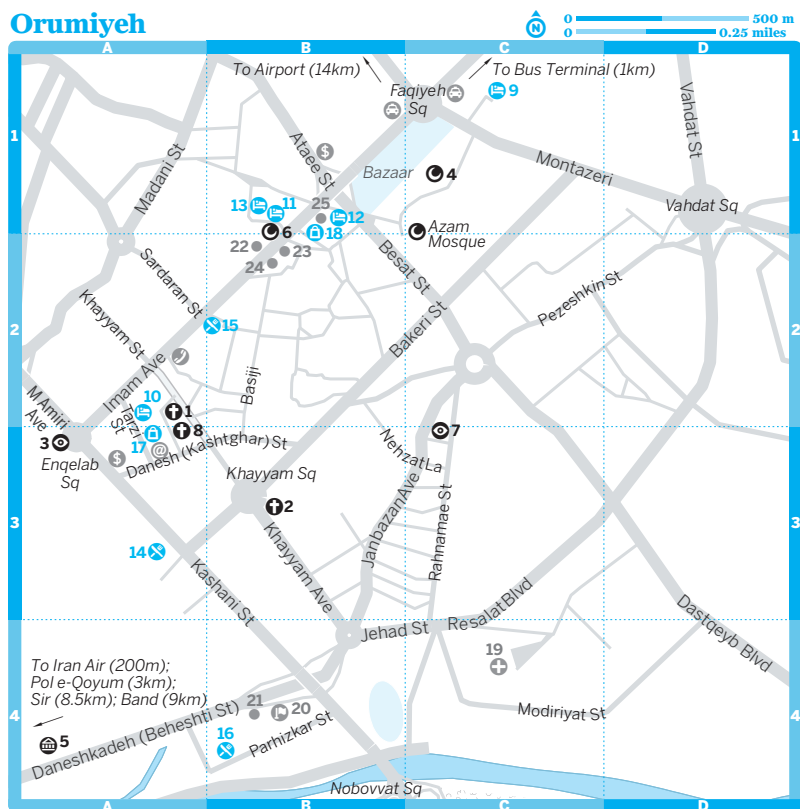
OTHER LOCATIONS

Orumiyeh Museum

MUSEUM

(☎224 6520; Daneshkadeh St; admission US\$1; ☎9am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) Fronted by two stone rams, this small but richly endowed museum displays fabulously ancient pottery and fine cuneiform inscription stones. Its most eye-catching exhibit is a replica of a priceless golden chalice beautifully embellished with charioteers.

Orumiyeh

**Marsarjis Church**

CHURCH

More atmospheric than the churches in Orumiyeh is the Assyrian Orthodox **Marsarjis Church** in the tiny hillside hamlet of **Sir** (5.6km west of Pol-e-Qoyum). Despite a somewhat heavy-handed 1987 renovation, the bare stone walls of its twin cave-like chambers feel genuinely ancient. Ask for key-holder Wilson at the delightfully simple **shop-teahouse** (tea US\$0.50; ☎4-8pm Sun-Thu, 8am-8pm Fri) beside the church.

Jameh & Sardar Mosques

RELIGIOUS, SHRINE

Dominating the interesting **bazaar**, the large brick-domed Friday-prayer **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; ☎by request) is partly Seljuk-era but heavily restored. The less religiously significant but architecturally fanciful **Sardar Mosque** (Imam Ave) has a Qajar-style tri-lobed cornice, a beautifully brick-vaulted interior and clock-tower minaret surmounted by what looks like a giant perfume bottle-stopper.

Seh Gonbad

TOWER

Tucked away in a quiet mini-park, the two-storey AD 1115 tomb tower may, like many Iranian Islamic religious buildings, have actually started out as a Sassanian fire temple.

Shahrchay Dam

DAM

A popular local weekend excursion is to this dam (19km west of the museum), combined with *chay* (tea) at one of the riverside tea-houses in **Band** (9km from Orumiyeh).

Sleeping**Reza Hotel**

HOTEL \$

(☎222 6580; Besat St; s/tw/tr US\$15/18/21; ☎) Large and outwardly somewhat dowdy, the Reza is nonetheless a pretty good deal and Karim, the gregarious owner, speaks great English. Neat if sometimes noisy rooms have Western loos and good hot showers with soap and towels. Recommended traveller favourite.

Orumiyeh

📍 Sights

- 1 Armenian Protestant Church.....A2
- 2 Assyrian ChurchB3
- 3 City Hall.....A3
- 4 Jameh Mosque.....C1
- 5 Orumiyeh Museum.....A4
- 6 Sardar Mosque.....B1
- 7 Seh Gonbad.....C3
- 8 St Mary's Church.....A3

🏠 Sleeping

- 9 Ark Hotel.....C1
- 10 Darya Hotel.....A2
- 11 Khorram Hotel.....B1
- 12 Reza Hotel.....B1
- 13 Tak Setareh.....B1

🍴 Eating

- 14 Flamingo.....A3
- 15 Noghli Torabi.....B2
- Pizza 69.....(see 14)
- 16 Shemaran Restaurant.....B4

🛍 Shopping

- 17 Nashreruz.....A3
- 18 Pasargad Antiques.....B1

ℹ Information

- Miras Ferhangi.....(see 5)
- 19 Motahhari Hospital.....C4
- 20 Turkish Consulate.....B4

🚗 Transport

- 21 Espoota Travel.....B4
- 22 Hamsafar.....B2
- 23 Iran Peyma.....B2
- 24 Seiro Safar.....B2
- 25 TBT.....B1

Darya Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎222 9562; fax 222 3451; Tarzi [Chamran] St; s/d US\$30/40) Pleasant, central and quiet, the nearly smart rooms have minibar, plastic-wooden wall-cladding and only limited wear and tear. There's birdsong and a banana palm in the welcoming foyer.

Khorram Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎222 5444; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw US\$15/20) A vaguely cosy reception area decked with plastic foliage leads to somewhat small but neatly tiled rooms with shower and toilet. Peaceful yet central.

Tak Setareh

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎223 1861; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw US\$9/14, with TV US\$11/17, tr with toilet US\$20) Quiet,

relatively well-kept *mosaferkhaneh* (basic lodging house) where you can play *nard* (a local form of backgammon) in the little lobby area.

Ark Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎235 6051; off Montazeri St; s/tw US\$15/30) The vivid yellow-and-brown colour scheme clashes with the pink towels in the renovated rooms with bathrooms. Many cheaper *mosaferkhanehs* nearby will refuse to take foreigners.



Eating

Flamingo

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎346 1177; Kashani St; meals US\$5-7; ☉noon-3pm & 7-10pm) Justifiably considered the best city-centre restaurant, the kababs here are succulent and the salad bar is well stocked if a little pricey (US\$1 per plateful). Decor is restrained, with solid wooden benches, lanterns and flower arrangements. Head downstairs two doors away from excellent, co-owned **Pizza 69** (pizzas US\$4-7; ☉noon-3pm & 7-10pm), which has a sign in English.

Shemaran Restaurant

TEAHOUSE \$

(Parhizkar St; ☉8am-11pm) Predominantly visited for tea and *qalyan* (water pipe; US\$1), this gently atmospheric *sonati*-style traditional restaurant is immensely popular for great lunchtime *dizi* (stew made with lentils, potatoes and tomato paste) and also serves limited dinners (\$pm).

Noghli, west Azarbayjan's speciality confectionery, is made by laboriously coating nuts or fruits in layers of icing sugar using a vessel that looks like a copper cement mixer. Buy it from **Noghli Torabi** (Imam Ave; ☉8am-10pm), which also sells fabulous carrot-and-walnut halva.

Baked potatoes (US\$0.50) are sold from carts around the bazaar's northeast entrance. Cake, sandwich and juice shops are dotted along Imam Ave.



Shopping

Of the three city shops along Imam Ave, **Pasargad Antiques** (☎223 1860; ☉8am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu) is the most intriguing. **Nashreruz** (Tarzi St; ☉8am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-noon Fri) is a small bookshop stocking excellent city maps (US\$1).

i Information

Aynet (Tarzi St; internet per hr US\$1; ☎9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 10am-1pm & 4.30-8pm Fri) Good internet connection here, some English spoken.

Bank Melli (Kashani St)

Jahan Moneychanger (☎222 2255; Ataee St; ☎9.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Sun-Thu) Near the bazaar; it exchanges many currencies including Turkish lira.

Miras Ferhangi (☎340 7040; Daneshkadeh St; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) West Azarbayjan's keen English-speaking tourist information office is beside the museum.

Telephone office (Imam Ave; ☎7am-7pm)

Turkish Consulate (☎222 8970; Daneshkadeh St; ☎9am-noon Sun-Thu) Very security-conscious.

i Getting There & Away

Air

Iran Air (☎344 0520; Daneshkadeh St) flies four times daily to Tehran (US\$40) and twice weekly to Mashhad (US\$75). **Espoota Travel** (☎345 5555; espoota@espootatravel.com; Daneshkadeh St; ☎8am-8pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) sells air and train tickets ex-Tabriz.

Bus, Minibus & Savaris

All long-distance buses leave from the **terminal** (Haft-e Tir Blvd). **TBT** (☎222 2844), **Seiro Safar** (☎222 8399), **Hamsafar** (☎224 4562) and **Iran Peyma** (☎222 2954) have central booking offices on Imam Ave. **Hamsafar** and **Vangölu** (☎233 1333) both operate 9am services to Van, Turkey (US\$25) taking around eight hours (expect long border waits).

Savaris and taxis to Tabriz go over the newly complete bridge over the lake.

Some useful domestic services appear in the table below.

From the **Sero terminal** (Mirza Shirazi St), 3km northwest of Faqiyeh Sq, minibuses run to villages of the Gonbadchay Valley, strung along the loop road that leads up to the dam reservoir and beyond, turning north 6km before the border. Taxis to Sero cost US\$5 from outside.

i Getting Around

The airport is 13km up the Salmas highway (taxi US\$4, 20 minutes). The most useful shuttle-taxi routes run from Faqiyeh Sq, either along Imam Ave then along Modarres Ave or up Taleqani St to the terminal. Savaris to lakeside Bandar-e Golmankhaneh (US\$1, 20 minutes) leave from the corner of Valiasr and Haft-e Tir Bldvs, a little south of the bus terminal, on summer weekends.

Lake Orumiyeh

Like the Dead Sea, huge Lake Orumiyeh (6000 sq km) is so super-salty that you just can't sink. A Unesco Biosphere Reserve since 1976, it's becoming increasingly shallow (maximum seasonal depth 16m) now that the Zarinarud, a major feeder river, has been diverted to slake Tabriz's growing thirst. Some worry that the lake will soon be as dead as the Aral Sea. Currently the only life-form it supports directly is the very primitive, virtually transparent artimesia worm. But that's enough to attract plenty of seasonal migratory birds, notably flamingos (spring). And the worms are commercially harvested for fish-meal.

Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan and founder of Iran's Ilkhanid Mongol dynasty, had his treasury on **Kabudi Island** in the middle of the lake. His burial there in 1265 was accompanied by the wholesale sacrifice of virgins, as demanded by the custom of the day. Tourist access is limited to occasional one-off Friday excursions organised by ALP Tours in Tabriz (p88).

The lake's hard-to-access **eastern coastline** is starkly barren; the vivid blue waters contrast with jagged, sun-blasted rocks and parched mud-flat islands. The western coast is greener but orchards stop well short of the shore.

The stylish **Bari** (☎0433-322 2960; www.bari.ir; s/d US\$110/160; ☎☎☎), where water is

BUSES FROM ORUMIYEH

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Ardabil	US\$2.50 VIP	4hr	twice hourly, 5am-6pm
Esfahan	US\$20 VIP	19hr	3.30pm, several companies
Kermanshah	US\$6 VIP	11hr	6pm, 7pm TBT
Maku	US\$2	4½hr	several Taavoni 9
Tehran (western terminal)	US\$16/10	12hr	10am, 6-9pm several
Tehran (Arzhantini Sq)	US\$17.50 VIP	12hr	6-9pm Taavoni 6 or 8

CROSSING THE IRAN-IRAQ BORDER

Much of Iraq is still deadly, with visitors risking kidnap or worse. However, conditions are less dire in the northernmost area of Iraqi Kurdistan, which has been virtually independent from Baghdad since the early 1990s. The Haj Omran border post near **Piranshahr**, southwest of Naqadeh, has twice been declared open (and later closed), so check with your embassy in Iran or Lonely Planet's **ThornTree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thornTree) before taking this route.

Further south, borders at **Mehran** (accessed via 11am) and **Khosravi** (via the oasis town of Qasr-e-Shirin) remain popular with bomb-dodging Iranian pilgrim buses heading for the great Shiite shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf. Both are open to locals only. Our advice is avoid all three border areas as a number of foreigners have been taken into custody by twitchy Iranian border guards, even near the Piranshahr crossing.

deep enough for floating, is one of the few lakeside 'resorts'. Boat rides here cost from US\$10. The Bari is 2km from Qushchu village; the taxi drivers know how to find it. More accessible **Bandar-e Golmankhaneh** is a 2km strip of mud flats 17km east of Orumiyyeh where local boy-racers burn Paykan rubber showing off to a crowd of summer weekenders. It's eerily lonely and atmospheric on a stormy winter's day.

Maraqeh

مراغه

☎0421 / POP 173,000 / ELEV 1440M

While briefly capital of Ilkhanid Iran (from 1255), Maraqeh (Maragheh, Maraga) once boasted the medieval world's greatest observatory. Here brilliant mathematician Nasruddin Tusi (Nasir al-Tusi) accurately calculated the diameter of the earth, centuries before the Western world even guessed it was round. On a windswept hill 3km northwest of town, a modern **observatory** (rasad-khana; ☹closed to public) occupies the site where the original was destroyed during Tamerlane's ravages.

👁 Sights

Gonbad-e Sorkh

MAUSOLEUM

Of several fine tomb towers scattered around town this is the most interesting form, with a square-plan topped by a squinch-pinched octagon. An upper window-hole is positioned such that sunlight shines directly onto the inner doorway at spring equinox.

In nearby gardens, is **Gonbad-e Arqala** (Arg-tomb; Khayyam St; admission free; ☀8am-2pm & 4-6pm, till 7.30pm summer) an attractive, domed, stone building housing a fine collection of gravestones and pre-Islamic totems.

Gonbad-e Kabul

MAUSOLEUM

The lovely **Gonbad-e Kabul** (Dark Dome) is thought to be the tomb of Hulagu Khan's mum. It's attractively dotted with blue-tiled inlay but let down by its backdrop of school buildings and a shopping centre.

The squat, ugly sister of the tomb-towers, **Gonbad-e Qaffariyeh** (Dezhban St) sits forlornly in a riverside garden with a tacky trio of concrete dolphins for company.

🛏 Sleeping

Mosaferkhaneh Tehran Noh

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

☎222 7368; Taleqani St; dm/tw/tr US\$4/7/9, showers US\$1) This *mosaferkhaneh* is basic but survivable with hospital-style beds and bare light bulbs.

Darya Hotel

HOTEL \$

☎325 0304; www.darya-hotel.com, in Farsi; Shekari Blvd; s/d/ste US\$35/45/65) Great free maps are available to guests at the comfortable if outwardly very 1970s hotel, two minutes' walk west of the bus terminal.

📍 Getting There & Away

To reach Tabriz choose from savari (US\$4, 1½ hours), bus (US\$2, 2½ hours, twice hourly) or train. For Takht-e Soleiman, savari-hop via Bonab (US\$0.20, 25 minutes) or Miyando'ab (US\$2, 1½ hours).

Around Maraqeh

BONAB

بناب

☎0412 / POP 72,000 / ELEV 1290M

Bonab is known for bicycles and atomic research (most definitely don't go snooping around its northern 'nuclear' suburbs).

For tourists the main attraction is Bonab's active **Mehrabad Mosque** (Motahhari St; ☀dawn-9pm) near the junction of Bahonar

and Ghom Sts. The exterior is modest but inside are splendid wooden support columns sporting coloured, faceted capitals dated 1083.

Just behind, an attractive former *hammam* (bathhouse) houses the appealing **Museum of Anthropology** (☎723 1033; admission free; ☉8am-2pm & 4-6pm, till 8pm summer), which has some engaging mannequin representations of Azari life.

The surprisingly comfortable **Laleh Hotel** (☎726 0386; ring road; s/d/tr US\$35/40/45) is a provincial hotel with a facade like an upmarket Chinese restaurant. Rooms have leather seats, mirror-fronted desks and plenty of marble. But the highlight is a basement **bath complex** (admission US\$1; ☉3-9pm for men) of saunas, drop pools and two 10m swimming pools. The complex is open daytime for women by negotiation.

Savaris to Miyando'ab and Maraḡeh leave from Mo'allem Sq, marked by a conspicuous copper-coloured statue of Ohadie-e Maraḡehi, that's where the Maraḡeh road meets the ring road 900m east of the Mehrabad Mosque.

MIYANDO'AB

☎0481 / POP 138,000 / ELEV 1338M

میان‌دوآب

Miyando'ab is a potentially useful overnight stop en route to Takht-e Soleiman (via Shahin Dezh, then Takab). The historic **Mirza Rasoul Bridge** sits at the southern city limits and is visible if you arrive in town from Mahabad. The oldest mosque is **Masjid Tag** (alley off Shahrivar St). In the one-room **museum** (☎222 4917; Imam St Park; admission US\$0.50; ☉7.30am-3pm Sat-Thu, 9.30am-1pm Fri), look for the ancient little fertility goddess fondling her own breasts.

Nearby **Hotel Berenjjan** (☎222 4975; fax 222 7870; Imam St; s/tw/tr US\$25/35/45) is well equipped and very central above a decent restaurant with English menus. Walk five minutes left then around the corner to find the appealing teahouse **Molana** (Shohoda St; qalyan US\$0.50; ☉9am-8.30pm) and helpful internet cafe **AsooNet** (Shohoda St; per hr US\$0.50; ☉10am-10.30pm).

Minibuses for Shahin Dezh (US\$0.50, 1¼ hours), Mahabad (US\$0.50, 35 minutes) and Maraḡeh (US\$0.50, one hour) use the new terminal out in the northeastern city limits. Savaris to Maraḡeh (US\$1) use a more central departure point beside the bright-green 'pincer' clock tower, 1km up Imam St from Hotel Berenjjan. Shuttle taxis to the terminal cost US\$1 from that clock tower.

Tabriz

تبریز

☎0411 / POP 1.46 MILLION / ELEV 1397M

A fascinating bazaar, a deeply human heart and passionately helpful freelance guides make this gigantic, sprawling city a surprisingly positive introduction to Iran. It had a spell as the Iranian capital and has proven extremely influential in the country's recent history. Sometimes stiflingly smoggy and hot in summer, it can be freezing cold in winter, but the Azari welcome is generally very warm any time of year. Don't miss an excursion to Kandovan, Iran's 'Cappadocia'.

History

Biblical clues point to the Ajichay River flowing out of the Garden of Eden, which places Tabriz at the gates of paradise! More historically verifiable, Tabriz was a Sassanian-period trade hub and came to eclipse Maraḡeh as a later Mongol Ilkhanid capital of Azerbaijan. It recovered remarkably rapidly from Tamerlane's 1392 ravages and, while the rest of Iran was vassal to the Timurids, Tabriz became the capital of a local Turkmen Qareh Koyunlu (Black Sheep) dynasty. That dynasty's greatest monarch was Jahan Shah (no, *not* the Taj Mahal's Shah Jahan), under whose rule (1439-67) the city saw a remarkable flowering of arts and architecture culminating in the fabulous Blue Mosque.

Shah Ismail, the first Safavid ruler, briefly made Tabriz Persia's national capital. However, after the battle of Chaldoran against the advancing Ottomans, Tabriz suddenly seemed far too vulnerable to Ottoman attack, so Ismail's successor, Tahmasp (1524-75), moved his capital to safer Qazvin. Fought over by Persians, Ottomans and (later) Russians, Tabriz went into a lengthy decline exacerbated by disease and one of the world's worst-ever earthquakes that killed 77,000 Tabrizis in November 1727.

The city recovered its prosperity during the 19th century. Shahgoli (now Elgoli) on Tabriz' southeast outskirts became the residence of the Qajar crown prince, but heavy-handed Qajar attempts to Persianise the Azari region caused resentment. The 1906 constitutional revolution briefly allowed Azari Turkish speakers to regain their linguistic rights (schools, newspapers etc) and Tabriz held out valiantly in 1908 when the liberal constitution was promptly revoked again. For its pains it was brutally besieged by Russian troops.

Russians popped up again during both world wars and built a railway line to Jolfa (then the Soviet border) before withdrawing in 1945. This left Tabriz as capital of Pishaveri's short-lived Provincial Government (autonomous south Azerbaijan) which tried to barter threats of secession for better Azari rights within Iran. The Provincial Government was crushed in December 1946 and far from encouraging the Azaris, the shah did the opposite, restricting the use of their mother tongue. Reaction against this discrimination put Tabriz in the forefront of the 1979 revolution well before the anti-shah struggle was railroaded by more fundamentalist Muslim clerics.

👁️ Sights

BAZAAR

The magnificent, labyrinthine **covered bazaar** covers some 7 sq km with 24 separate caravanserais and 22 impressive *timchehs* (domed halls). Construction began over a millennium ago, though much of the fine brick vaulting is 15th century. Upon entering one feels like a launched pinball, bouncing around through an extraordinary colourful maze, only emerging when chance or carelessness dictates. It is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

There are several **carpet** sections, according to knot-size and type. The spice bazaar has a few shops still selling **herbal remedies** and **natural perfumes**. A couple of **hat shops** (Bazaar Kolahdozan) sell traditional *papakh* (Azari hats, from US\$12) made of tight-curved astrakhan wool. The better the quality, the younger the lamb sacrificed to the milliner's art. Other quarters specialise in gold, shoes and general household goods.

For such a huge construction, the bazaar is surprisingly easy to miss. A useful entrance is the second narrow passage east of the tourist information office. This takes you into the jewellery section.

AROUND THE BAZAAR

At the bazaar's western end an exit passage hidden by a curtain leads to Tabriz's **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque) with a magnificent brick-vaulted interior. Beyond, an alley between two multistage new minarets emerges at Motahhari St opposite the heavy wooden door (no English sign) of the 1868 **Constitution House** (Mashrutiyyat Museum; ☎521 6454; Motahhari St; admission US\$0.50; ☀8am-5pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri). This charming Qajar-era courtyard house is historically significant as a headquarters during the 1906-11 constitutional revolution, but although many labels are in English the numerous photos and documents are unlikely to excite nonspecialist tourists.

At the bazaar's northeast corner, the well-proportioned former Saheb Ul-Amr Mosque now houses a **Quran Museum** (☎527 2733; Madani St; admission US\$1; ☀8am-6.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri). Its most intriguing exhibit is the scripture-covered under-shirt worn by Qajar monarchs during coronations.

Tabriz has had a Christian community almost as long as there've been Christians. **St Mary's** (Kalisa-ye Maryam-e Moqaddas) is a 12th-century church mentioned by Marco Polo and was once the seat of the regional archbishop.

CENTRAL TABRIZ

Kabud (Blue) Mosque

MOSQUES

(Imam Khomeini St; admission US\$1; ☀9am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri, earlier in winter) When it

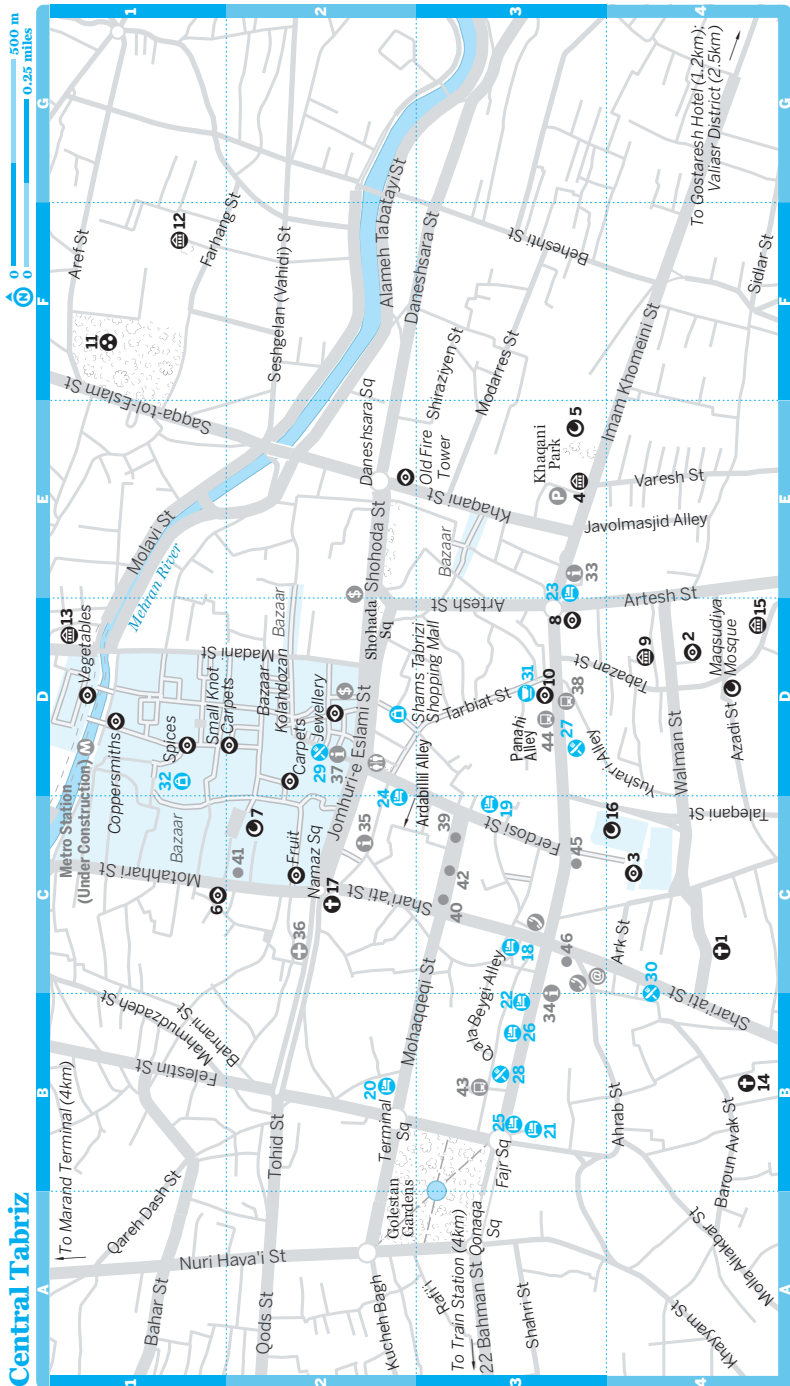
AZARIS, AZERIS, AZERBAIJAN & AZƏRBAYCAN

Although there's an independent republic of Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan), the majority of Azerbaijanis actually live in Iran, where they make up at least 25% of the population. Iranian Azerbaijanis (called Azaris) live mostly in the northwest where two provinces use the name Azarbayjan. Commonly called 'Turks' because of their Turkic dialect, Azaris are Shiite unlike the (predominantly Sunni) Turks of neighbouring Turkey.

Despite spoil-sport attempts of Western intelligence agencies to stir up Azari separatist feelings, Azaris are very well integrated into Iranian society. Many Azari Iranians are prominent in Farsi literature, politics and the clerical world. The Safavid shahs were Azaris from Ardabil and current supreme leader Ali Khamenei is an ethnic Azari. Azaris are famously active in commerce, so bazaars nationwide ring with their voluble voices.

Iranian taxi drivers are often Azari so it's always worth having an Azari greeting (*kefez yakhtsede?* or *nijasan?*) up your sleeve to impress. Answer *yakhtse* (good) in Tabriz, *yakhshi* in Ardabil. Thank you (very much) is (*chokh*) *saghol*.

Central Tabriz



Central Tabriz

📍 Sights

- 1 Anglican Church..... C4
- 2 Architecture Faculty, Islamic Arts University D4
- 3 Arg-e Tabriz..... C4
- 4 Azarbayjan Museum E3
- 5 Blue Kabud Mosque E3
- 6 Constitution House..... C1
- 7 Jameh Mosque..... C2
- 8 Municipal Hall..... D3
- 9 Museum of Measurement D4
- 10 Nobar Hammam D3
- 11 Poets' Mausoleum..... F1
- 12 Qajar Museum..... F1
- 13 Quarar Museum D1
- 14 Sarkis Church..... B4
- 15 Shahriyar House Museum..... D4
- 16 Site of New Jameh Mosque..... C4
- 17 St Mary's Church..... C2

🏠 Sleeping

- 18 Azarbayjan Hotel..... C3
- 19 Bagh Guesthouse C3
- 20 Darya Guesthouse..... B2
- 21 Hotel Sina..... B3
- 22 Kosar Hotel..... B3
- 23 Mamoodi Mehmanpazir..... E3
- 24 Mashhad Hotel..... C2
- 25 Morvarid Hotel..... B3
- 26 Park Hotel B3

🍴 Eating

- 27 Honarmandam..... D3

- 28 Modern Tabriz Restaurant..... B3
- 29 Rahnama Dairy D2
- 30 Restaurant Tatly..... C4

🍷 Drinking

- 31 Kahveteria Sonati Tarbiyat D3

🛍 Shopping

- 32 Bazaar D1

📍 Information

- 33 Afagh Gasht Travel..... E3
- 34 Jahan Seyer Travel Agency C3
- 35 Mahnavard Travel..... C2
- 36 Pardis Clinic C2
- 37 Tourist Information Office..... D2

🚗 Transport

- 38 Aram Safar D3
- 39 City Bus 110 to Valiasr C3
- 40 City Bus 111, 132 C3
- 41 City Bus 136 to Airport C2
- 42 City Bus 160 to Bus Terminal..... C3
- Khoshrah (see 44)
- 43 Khosrowshahr Terminal (for Osku)..... B3
- 44 Mihan Safar D3
- 45 Seiro Safar..... C3
- Shuttle Taxis to Abaresan Crossing..... (see 45)
- Shuttle Taxis to Abaresan Crossing..... (see 33)
- 46 Shuttle Taxis to Bus Terminal C3

was constructed in 1465, the **Blue Mosque** was among the most glorious buildings of its era. Once built, artists took a further 25 years to cover every surface with the blue majolica tiles and intricate calligraphy for which it's nicknamed. It survived one of history's worst-ever earthquakes (1727), but collapsed in a later quake (1773). Devastated Tabriz had better things to do than mend it and it lay as a pile of rubble till 1951, when reconstruction finally started. The brick superstructure is now complete, but only on the rear (main) entrance portal (which survived 1773) is there any hint of the original blue exterior. Inside is also blue with missing patterns laboriously painted onto many lower sections around the few remaining patches of original tiles.

A smaller domed chamber further from the entrance once served as a pri-

vate mosque for the Qareh Koyunlu shahs. Steps lead down towards Jahan Shah's tomb chamber but access would require some minor gymnastics.

The **Khaqani garden** outside, honouring 12th-century Azari-Persian poet Shirvani Khaqani, is a good place to meet English-speaking students.

Azarbayjan Museum

MUSEUM

(Imam Khomeini St; admission US\$1; ☉8am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu summer, 8am-12.30pm Fri, 8am-5pm winter) This museum is 50m west of the Blue Mosque. Enter through a great brick portal with big wooden doors guarded by two stone rams. Ground-floor exhibits include finds from Hasanlu (an Iron Age town that developed into a citadel over 4000 years), a superb 3000-year-old copper helmet and curious stone 'handbags' from the

3rd millennium BC. Found near Kerman these were supposedly symbols of wealth once carried by provincial treasurers. The basement features Ahad Hossein's powerful if disturbing sculptural allegories of life and war. The top floor displays a re-weave of the famous 'Ardebil' carpet, reckoned to be one of the best ever made; the original is beautifully displayed in London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

Arg-e Tabriz

ARCHITECTURE

This huge brick **edifice** (off Imam Khomeini St), an unmissable landmark, is a chunky remnant of Tabriz's early-14th-century citadel (known as 'the Ark'). Criminals were once executed by being hurled from the top of the citadel walls. Far-fetched local legend tells of one woman so punished who was miraculously saved by the parachute-like effect of her chador.

Ongoing construction of a stadium-sized **Mosallah Mosque** next door is reportedly undermining the Arg's foundations and access is usually impossible.

Other Attractions

Behind high gates, the curious **Anglican Church** (Walman St) has a tower of four diminishing cylinders. The relatively central **Kalisa-ye Sarkis-e Moqaddas** (Sarkis Church; Kalisa Alley) serves the Armenian community. It's hidden in a basketball court behind high white gates.

The 19th-century bathhouse, **Nobar Hamam** (Imam Khomeini St), is usually locked but worth double-checking. Almost opposite, the German-designed **Municipal Hall** (Shahrdari Sq) is a century-old Tabriz icon. It's only open to the public during occasional exhibitions. Follow Tabazan St down its western flank then take the second lane to the left to find the **Museum of Measurement** (Sanjesh Muze; ☎554 2459; admission US\$1; ☉8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) hidden amid very ordinary apartment blocks. The brilliantly restored 160-year-old Qajar mansion is more interesting than its display of rococo German clocks and commercial scales. Two blocks further south a trio of impressive 230-year-old mansions with two-story colonnades and decorative ponds now comprise the Architecture Faculty of the **Islamic Arts University**. Two more blocks further is the **house museum** of much-loved Tabrizi poet Ostad Shahriyar exhibiting the loveably ordinary settee and TV set that he used till his death in 1987. Shahriyar is now com-

memorated much more ostentatiously with the strikingly modernist **Poets' Mausoleum** (Maghbarat al-Shoara, Maqbar al-Shoara; Seyid Hamzeh St). Its angular interlocking concrete arches are best viewed across the reflecting pool from the south. The complex also commemorates over 400 other scholars whose tombs have been lost in the city's various earthquakes. Take bus 116.

Around 350m southeast of the Poets' Monument (but with no direct road between them) is the elegant **Qajar Museum** (Amir Nezam House; ☎523 6568; Farhang St, Sheshgelan; admission US\$1; ☉8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) within the palatial 1881 Amir Nezam House, Tabriz's most impressive Qajar mansion with a split-level facade. It's oddly hidden between a school and a children's hospital.

OUTER TABRIZ

About 4km east of Abaesan Crossing is the wealthy if architecturally neutral **Valiasr District**. While hardly SoHo, it's the nearest Tabriz comes to an entertainment district. The city's gilded youth sip espressos around Valiasr's Karimkhan (Bozorg) Sq and make a nightly *passaggiata* along pedestrianised Shahriyar St, misleadingly nicknamed Champs Elysées.

Elgoli (Shahgoli) Park, 8km southeast of the centre, is popular with summer strollers and courting couples. Its fairground surrounds an artificial lake, in the middle of which a photogenic restaurant-pavilion occupies the reconstruction of a Qajar-era palace.

Activities

When there are sufficiently large groups, **ALP Tours & Travel Agency** (☎331 0340; fax 331 0825; Karimkhan Sq; ☉Dec-Apr) can organise Friday skiing excursions to Mt Sahand. The cost for transport is US\$6, lift pass (US\$5) and ski rental (US\$17 to US\$19) are extra. ALP can also arrange climbing guides for Mt Sabalan.

Tours

ALP Tours & Travel Agency TOUR
(☎331 0340; fax 331 0825; Karimkhan Sq) Offers a varying choice of Friday trips (from US\$8) whether sightseeing (Jolfa, Kaleybar or Kabudi Island) or winter sports.

The following are private individuals with other occupations so they're not always available at short notice.

Davoud Faraji

(☎0914-414 7955; www.alb.ir) Great value driving tours around Azarbayjan. Davoud is lively, energetic and very sensitive to tourists' varying tastes.

GUIDE

Hossein Ravaniyar

(☎385 9776, 0914-413 8096; www.iranoverland.com) Hossein is captivatingly eccentric. His mind-blowing mixture of outrageous commentary, jokes and conspiracy theories compensate for his driving style and he has a wealth of experience in helping overlanders with their vehicle paperwork.

GUIDE

Nasser Khan

(☎553 6594, 0914-116 0149; amicodeimondo@yahoo.com) Legendary multilingual pillar of the tourist information office, Nasser often takes small groups on people-watching trips and cultural experiences. He can often get you into officially closed buildings (churches, zurkhaneh etc).

GUIDE

 **Sleeping**

Summer camping is possible at designated sites, such as in Elgoli Park and near Tabriz University.

CENTRAL AREA**Azarbayjan Hotel**

(☎555 9051; fax 553 7477; Shari'ati St; s/d/tr US18/26/31; 🚽) A fine, central option with consistently friendly service and unpretentious but regularly renovated rooms with excellent hot showers and towels. Double-glazing reduces traffic noise.

HOTEL \$

Darya Guesthouse

(☎554 0008; Mohaqeqi St; s/tw without bathroom from US\$7/9, with bathroom US\$13/16) This friendly family guesthouse has well-tended rooms in a sensibly graded variety of qualities. The tirelessly helpful owner looks uncannily like Louis de Funes and delights in retelling tales of his 1970s trips to Europe. There's a useful travellers' tip book.

GUESTHOUSE \$

Mahmoodi Mehmanpazir

(☎554 1744; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr from US\$6/9/12) The cheaper rooms are simple but quiet off a rear courtyard mini-garden with free communal shower. Rooms with private shower are better-painted but poorer value and suffer from road noise. Handy for the museum.

HOTEL \$

Park Hotel

(☎555 1852; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr US\$10/12/15) This offers slight old-world

HOTEL \$

charm and there's a vine-trained rear courtyard garden. Large rooms have washbasins but somewhat tatty carpets.

Morvarid Hotel

(☎553 3336; Fajr Sq; s/tw US\$13/18) This long-term favourite remains reasonable value and is blessed with decent bathrooms. Jebel speaks good English and doubles as driver-guide.

HOTEL \$

Kosar Hotel

(☎553 7691; fax 554 1570; info@kosarhotel.com; Imam Khomeini St; d US\$20; 🚽) Professionally upgraded historic building with well-furnished, tile-floored rooms that include satellite TV (Euronews) and fridge. Some have Western toilets and double beds. Traffic rumbles all night.

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

Hotel Sina

(☎556 6211; Fajr Sq; s/tw US\$24/35; 📺🚽) Calm yet central, this relatively plush midrange option has bright corridors with strip carpets over clean tiled floors. Rooms are neat and fully equipped. Enter from Felestin St. Parking is limited.

HOTEL \$\$

Mashhad Hotel

(☎555 8255; Ferdosi St; dm/s/tw/tr/q US\$2/4/5/8/10; shower US\$1) Possibly the only *mosaferkhaneh* allowing foreigners to use (five-bed) dorms.

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

Bagh Guesthouse

(☎555 2762; Ferdosi St; s/d/tr US\$4/7/9) Brighter and cleaner than most *mosaferkhanehs*, rooms here are fairly small but five of the 12 have double beds, unusual at this price range.

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

OTHER LOCATIONS**Shahryar Hotel**

(☎329 1420; fax 333 7812; www.shahryar-hotel.com; First Road Elgoli; s/d from US\$120/180) Tabriz's new glamour-puss hotel, catering to an international business crowd. Very friendly staff, a (working!) pool, a website in English and lots and lots of shiny suited *biznizmen* from the former Soviet Caucasus.

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

Gostaresh Hotel

(☎334 5021; fax 334 6778; Abaresan Crossing; s/tw/tr/ste US\$54/67/87/108; 🚽) 'Standard' rooms are stylishly redesigned semi-suites with breast-height dividing walls between the bed and a slightly sparse sitting area. Most have a kitchenette. Although several kilometres from the bazaar, the location is handy for public transport to both Valiasr and the centre.

APARTMENT \$\$\$

Hotel Elgoli

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(Tabriz Pars; ☎380 7820; fax 380 8555; www.pars-hotels.com; Elgoli Park; s/d/ste US\$73/106/202; 🍷) Three convex walls of gleaming blue glass overlook the city's favourite park, 8km from the centre. It has everything you'd expect from a top business hotel except for alcohol in the minibar beers. The atrium is airy and there's a revolving restaurant on top.

**Eating & Drinking**

On winter evenings, *labu* (beets) are sold roasted or boiled from carts along Imam Khomeini St. Or try *baghla* (boiled broad beans) eaten as a snack with vinegar and paprika at open-air cafes around Elgoli Park.

CENTRAL AREA

There are several decent dining options around Coffeenet Deniz and nearby Shari'ati St has good juice bars. The tourist information office folks like to show you cheap local eateries nearby including part-vegetarian **Arzhintin Restaurant** (☺lunch only) and the delightful little **Ferdosi Restaurant**, a subterranean one-room vaulted cavern that's great for *dizi* or a puff on the qalyan.

Rahnama Dairy

SWEETS \$

(Ferdosi St; snacks US\$1; ☺7am-9pm Sat-Thu, 7am-2pm Fri) This simple dairy-cafe serves unbeatable breakfasts of *must-asal* (yoghurt and honey) or *khame-asal* (cream and honeycomb).

Restaurant Tatly

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(☎555 0505; Shari'ati St; pizzas US\$1-5; ☺noon-11pm) Ceilings soar to five-pointed star lamps in this renovated older building. Pizzas are typically Iranian but the *ash* (thick vegetable and noodle soup) is most hearty and excellent value (US\$1).

Hornamandan

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Place of Artists; ☎553 4594; Imam Khomeini St; meals US\$1-5; ☺8am-10pm) Vaulted underground eatery with an amusing if tacky 'sculpted' centrepiece water-feature and a choice of tables or carpeted sitting platforms. Decent kababs and rich *dizi* (US\$2).

Modern Tabriz Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Imam Khomeini St; meals US\$3-5; ☺11am-11pm) This good-value favourite serves great kababs and excellent fried trout in a large, basement dining hall that somehow finds a successful blend of olde-world charm, 1960s retro and idiosyncratic kitsch. Meal

prices include 'service', ie salad, soft drink and delicious barley-and-barberry soup.

Kahveteria Sonati Tarbiat

TEAHOUSE \$

(Tarbiat St; coffee US\$1; ☺9am-9pm) Cosy, gently romantic brick-vaulted cafe for tea and dates (US\$1) served on porcelain featuring Qajar royalty. Women can smoke a qalyan here without incurring the stares of 40 be-mused grey-beards.

ABARESAN CROSSING & VALIASR AREA

En route to Valiasr or Elgoli you'll usually need to change shared taxi at Abaresan Crossing, but there are several fairly nice little pizza parlours here of which **Abdi** (☎336 6245; 29 Bahman St; pizza US\$3-4; ☺5-10.30pm) remains the most noteworthy, with black decor and real flames over the doorway. Across the busy junction, **Sadaf** (☎334 5346; 29 Bahman St; meals US\$3-6; ☺noon-10pm) is an elegant family kabab restaurant serving decent *chelo morgh*.

In Valiasr District, although there's the functional **Al Mahdi teahouse** (Amir Kabir St) and the relatively upmarket **Pars Restaurant** (☎333 0048; Homam-Tabrizi St; kabab meals US\$4-6; ☺noon-4pm & 6.30-10pm) the speciality here is pizza and people-watching from coffee shops around Karimkhan Sq.

Pizza Fanoos

FAST FOOD \$

(☎332 4700; Karimkhan Sq; pizzas US\$3; ☺11am-midnight) Typically small but with attractive framed glass-art and a good view-window upstairs.

Mosbat Cafe

TEAHOUSE \$

(☎330 2977; Karimkhan Sq; espresso US\$1; ☺9am-midnight) Marginally the best of Valiasr's trendy coffee shops thanks to its stylish downstairs triangular tables and wooden 'bar' seating. Upstairs is less appealing. Look for the big red-on-yellow 'Café' sign beside Haida Sandwich.

Good, similar alternatives to Mosbat include **Sharshab** (☎330 7741; espresso US\$1) just south of Karimkhan Sq and **Orkideh** (☎331 1146; Mokhaberat St; coffee US\$1) a block east.

ELGOLI**TOP CHOICE Baliq**

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎385 9294; Golshahr St; meals US\$3-8) Fish, fish, fish. Fresh whole fish, fish kababs, fish köfte balls in the US\$3 salad bar, fishing nets on the ceiling, little aquariums between the tables and even fish-shaped souvenir pens.

Standards are excellent, the enticing decor includes log-and-rope chairs and a cave-wall trickling with water. Get off a Rahnamae-Golshahr savari (US\$0.50) on 35m Sina St.

Talar Bozorg Elgoli TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$ (☎380 5263; Elgoli Park; meals US\$5) Within Elgoli's mock Qajar palace, this busy, surprisingly unpretentious family restaurant serves *Tabrizi köfte*, a local home-cooking speciality like a giant Scotch egg. Order ahead in winter.

Revolving Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$\$ (☎380 7820; Hotel Elgoli, 11th fl, Elgoli Park; meals US\$7-15; ☎7.30-11pm) A Plexiglas elevator fires you through the Hotel Elgoli's atrium like at Willy Wonka's chocolate factory for predictably great views. The basic charge of US\$7 entitles you to raid the soup-n-salad bar. Then add main courses including steaks, sturgeon kababs and fried shrimp.

i Information

Consulates

Azerbaijan (☎333 4802; Mokhaberat St, Valiasr; ☎9am-noon Sun-Thu) Tourist visas available in five days without invitation or hotel booking. Bring two photocopies of passport and two photos.

Turkey (☎330 0958; Homafar Sq, Valiasr)

Emergency

Pardis Clinic (☎526 2307; Jomhuri-e Eslami St) Blue building accessed up stairway beside sign saying 'Kalagostare Nazary'.

Internet Access

Blue Coffeenet (above Sadaf Restaurant, Abaresan Crossing; per hr US\$1; ☎8am-11pm) Astonishingly elegant for an internet cafe.

Deniz Coffeenet (Maghazeh Haye Sanqi Alley off Shari'ati St; per hr US\$1; ☎9am-10pm) New computers, fast connection, speech facilities and traditional Azarbayjani *mugam* music.

Money

Bank Melli (Shohoda Sq; ☎9.15am-1pm Sat-Thu) Upstairs for exchange. Allow half an hour.

Mahmud Abidan Exchange (☎523 1077; Saraye Amir, Timche Amirno 11; ☎9am-6pm Sat-Wed, 9am-3pm Thu) This exchange has good rates and there's no queue, but it's unsigned and hard to find in a mini mall off the southeast corner of the bazaar's largest caravanserai courtyard. The tourist information office can show you its location.

Post

Main Post Office (Artesh St) Helpful for shipping parcels.

Telephone

International telephone office (east Miyar Miyar Alley; ☎8am-9pm) There's another branch opposite Deniz Coffeenet.

Tourist Information

Tourist information office (☎525 2501; off Jomhuri-e Eslami St; ☎9am-2pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) Excellent free maps, lots of help with organising trips around Azarbayjan, and a mine of information that will transform your appreciation of this city. It's upstairs in a curious building that straddles the main bazaar entrance.

Travel Agencies

The following have English-speaking staff and offer train and plane bookings:

Afagh Gasht Travel (☎555 2250; Imam Khomeini St; ☎8.30am-8.30pm Sat-Thu)

Jahan Seyer Travel Agency (☎555 6004; fax 553 2331; Imam Khomeini St)

Mahnavaand Travel (☎553 9444; Tarbiat St; ☎8.30am-6.30pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-4.40pm Thu) Efficient, well-staffed, new travel and tour agency.

Visa Extensions

Passport Office (☎477 6666; Saeb St; ☎7.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-11.30pm Thu) Helpful for visa extensions.

i Getting There & Away Air

Iran Air (☎334 9038) has direct flights twice weekly to Istanbul (one way/return US\$205/275). Kish Air and Caspian Airlines both fly weekly to Dubai (US\$135). Six flights weekly to Mashhad (US\$115) use Eram Air (Sunday, Wednesday), Caspian (Monday, Thursday) and Iran Air (Tuesday, Friday). For other domestic destinations connect via Tehran (US\$65, several daily).

Bus, Minibus & Savari

A couple of bus companies including **Seiro Safar** (☎555 7797; ☎8.30am-midnight) have offices on Imam Khomeini St. Agency **Mihan Safar** (☎555 4908; Imam Khomeini St; ☎9am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) pre-sells tickets for many domestic long-distance bus companies.

Most long-distance buses depart from the huge, modern **main bus terminal** (☎479 6091), 3km south of the centre. Between the bus lanes there's a handy **information office** (☎7am-8pm). Services include the table, p92 (* signifies VIP): Between 10pm and midnight cheaper buses to Tehran (US\$8) leave from near the train station.

Savaris to most destinations (but not Ahar or Marand) depart from the terminal's northwest corner. Prepay at one of two ticket booths.

BUSES FROM TABRIZ

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Ahvaz	US\$15	15hr	1.30pm, 4pm Kejave
Ardabil	US\$2.50*	4hr	twice hourly, 5am-6pm
Esfahan	US\$16	1hr	4-5.30pm
Kermanshah	US\$13	12hr	6pm
Maku	US\$1	4hr	daily
Mashhad	US\$22	24hr	2pm, 3pm & 5pm
Qazvin	US\$8	8hr	use Tehran bus
Rasht	US\$8.50	8hr	8.30pm Gilan Tabar
Shiraz	US\$18.25	22hr	1.30-2pm
Tehran (west)	US\$10	9hr	frequent till 10pm
Tehran (south)	US\$10	9½hr	Taavoni 9
Zanjan	US\$4*	5hr	3pm Seiro Safar

OTHER TERMINALS

Use the **Khosrowshahr terminal** (off Felestin St) for Osku and thence Kandovan. Out towards the airport, the **Marand terminal** (Azerbaijan Sq) serves Marand and Hadiyshahr (for Jolfa). Buses to Ahar (US\$7, 1½ hours) and Kaleybar (rare) use the **Ahar terminal** (29 Bahman St) with savaris (US\$1) waiting across the road.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Bus services to Yerevan, Armenia (US\$48, 20 hours), İstanbul (US\$50, 30 hours) and Baku, Azerbaijan (US\$24, 13 to 17 hours) all typically leave around 10pm from outside the relevant ticket offices on Imam Khomeini Ave.

Aram Safar (☎556 0597) For Baku.

Khoshras (☎556 4451)

Seiro Safar (☎555 7797)

Services sometimes leave from the train station concourse, so double check.

Train

Overnight trains to Tehran (13 hours) depart 5.30pm (from US\$14) and 7.30pm (from US\$5) running via Maraqeh (2¼ hours), Zanjan (nine hours, arriving antisocially early) and Qazvin. The **train station** (☎444 4419; Rahohan Sq) is 5km west of central Tabriz. Shuttle taxis and city bus 111 drop off at the junction of Mellat Blvd and 22 Bahman St.

The 9am local train to Jolfa (US\$2, 3½ hours) operates Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday only.

Weekly international trains:

DAMASCUS (from US\$75, 60 hours) 7.30am Monday; change trains in Tatvan

ISTANBUL (from US\$82, three days) 8.30am Friday

VAN, Turkey (US\$33, nine hours) 10.56pm Thursday, returns from Van 6.35am Friday

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

Airport bus 136 runs from Motahhari St every 40 minutes. Taxis (with blue stripe) should cost US\$1.

Bus & Minibus

City buses are relatively infrequent. Pre-buy US\$0.50 tickets. Useful routes from the major city-bus terminal include bus 160 to the bus terminal and bus 110 to Valiasr. Several services run the length of 22 Bahman St (for the train station) including bus 111. Buses 136 (airport) and 115 (Marand terminal) leave from the west side of the bazaar. Bus 101 runs to Elgoli from near Saat Sq.

Shuttle Taxi

A key route runs along Imam Khomeini St from Fajr Sq to Abaresan Crossing (US\$1), but on returning diverts onto Jomhuri-e Eslami St passing the bazaar. At Abaresan Crossing, walk under the flyover to continue to Valiasr district (US\$0.50) or to Rahnamae (US\$0.50) where you'll change again for Elgoli (US\$0.50). For the train station start from Qonaga Sq (US\$0.50). To the bus terminal, shuttle taxis take Shari'ati St southbound returning via Taleqani St.

Tram/Metro

A comprehensive four-line city metro is due in 2013, *insh'Allah*, and will link the city's sprawling districts in a roughly north-south and east-west web of stations; the north-south Line 4 is intended to loop around the old core of Tabriz and

should prove a useful alternative to spluttering taxis. It looks likely that the metro will only partially be open by the due date.

Around Tabriz

KANDOVAN

☎0412 / POP 680 / ELEV 1575M

کندوان

Reminiscent of Cappadocia (in Turkey), remarkable **Kandovan** (Chandovan; village admission US\$1) is a photogenic settlement of troglodyte homes and storage barns carved out of curiously eroded rocks. These sit above a newer lower village like a conference of stone ice-cream cones. Scrambling along steep, narrow paths between them gives you ample idea of the place within a few minutes. However, staying overnight allows you to 'feel' the village without its crowds of local tourists.

Beyond Kandovan, smooth steep foothills mask a full view of **Mt Sahand** whose hidden volcanic summit rises to 3707m. David Rohl's book *Legend* suggests that Sahand was the Bible's 'Mountain of God'. If true that would place Kandovan slap bang in the original Garden of Eden. But today it's honey rather than apples that tempt a tasting.

Sleeping & Eating

In Kandovan, several of the discordantly ordinary homes and shops at the village base offer very basic **rooms to rent** (r US\$4) mostly from May to September only. You'll usually get an unfurnished room with carpeted floor, so consider bringing a sleeping bag. Standards vary. **Kafe Gazakhuri Daiya** (r US\$4) is easiest to find (across the bridge from the Dairyman four-table shop-restaurant), but like most it has outside toilets and no real shower. Homestay **Jamshid** (☎323 0016; r US\$4) has slightly tattier rooms,

but offers hot-water shower and indoor squat toilet.

Like traditional Kandovan homes, the **Kandovan Laleh Rock Hotel** (☎323 0191; fax 323 0190; tw/tr/ste US\$340/390/440) has 10 remarkable rooms that have been carved out of 'fairy chimney' rock knolls. But inside they are luxurious affairs with stylish lighting, oriental-style futon-beds, underfloor heating and (in many) deep-stepped Jacuzzis as well as fully equipped bathrooms.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses from central Tabriz run regularly to Osku (US\$0.50, 50 minutes) till around 6pm. From Osku to Kandovan (25km) taxis cost US\$6 return plus US\$1 per hour waiting. Minibuses are extremely rare. Direct car-tours from Tabriz to Kandovan cost from around US\$13 return per person.

Jolfa

☎0492 / POP 14,000 / ELEV 708M

جولفا

The original Jolfa was once a major Armenian settlement famous for its skilled artisans. So skilled, in fact, that in 1604 Shah Abbas kidnapped the entire population, whisking them off to build him a new capital at Esfahan where their descendants still live. Original Jolfa is now a busy little border town focused on Ashura Sq, a sizable roundabout directly south of the Azerbaijan immigration post.

Nearby you'll find freelance money-changers and **No Avaran Internet Club** (Vilaete-Fagih St off Ashura Sq; per hr US\$1; ☺9am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu).

The town has little to see in itself, but makes a good low-budget base for visiting the Church of St Stephanos (p94), exploring the fascinating and scenic Aras River Valley or crossing into Nakhchivan or Armenia.

CROSSING THE AZERBAIJAN (NAKHCHIVAN) BORDER AT JOLFA

Culfa, in Azerbaijan's disconnected Nakhchivan enclave, is a short walk across the Aras River from central Jolfa. Use up your rials or exchange them for Azerbaijani Manats (AZN1=US\$1.30) before leaving Iran. Note that in Azerbaijan 'one Shirvan' confusingly means AZN2.

Beware that Culfa's paranoid police assume that all foreigners are spies. Jump quickly into a taxi (AZN6, 35 minutes) or minibus (AZN2) to Nakhchivan city, which is contrastingly relaxed and cosmopolitan. From Nakhchivan city there are direct buses to İstanbul (AZN35 plus border bribes, five daily) taking around 30 hours via İğdir (AZN9).

The enclave is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by aggressively closed Armenian borders. You'd have to fly to reach Baku (US\$120, six daily) or Gence (US\$70, four weekly) but air tickets often sell out a week ahead.

Sleeping & Eating

Jolfa Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎302 4824; fax 302 4825; Eslam St; tw with/without bathroom US\$40/30) Jolfa's smartest option is 1km from the centre. Walk a block south from Ashura Sq then 10 minutes diagonally right at the T-junction, passing the train station en route. Some English is spoken.

Hotel Durna

HOTEL \$

(☎302 3812; Vilaete-Faghi St; tw/tr/q with shared bathroom US\$8/9/10) Unsophisticated but neat, well-kept and spotlessly clean rooms share decent squat toilets and hot showers. Signed in Cyrillic, 400m east of Ashura Sq, it's a step up in quality from the similarly priced Hotel Azerbaijan almost next door.

Yemekhana Hatâm

HOMESTAY \$

(☎302 2828; Ashura Sq; s/tw US\$5/7, tw with shower US\$8) Survivable rooms are available here at the back of a popular restaurant that serves up a splendid *zerezhk polo ba morgh* (chicken with rice and barberries) dinner for US\$1.50, including soup and drink.

Getting There & Away

Savaris gather just north of Ashura Sq for Marand (US\$1, one hour), Hadiyshahr (Alamdar; US\$0.50, 15 minutes) and occasionally Tabriz (US\$5, 2½ hours). Minibuses to Marand (US\$3, 1½ hours) run from Hadiyshahr, but not from Jolfa itself. The road to Khoy, shown on most maps, is partly mud track across almost uninhabited wilderness. It can be very hard to follow in places, but it's possible in a Paykan (US\$30, 2¼ hours). You'll need a full-day taxi charter to do justice to the scenic Aras River road to Kaleybar.

Aras River Valley

WEST OF JOLFA

Jolfa's main tourist drawcard is the very attractive Armenian **Church of St Stephanos** (Kalisa Darreh Sham; admission US\$0.50; ☉dawn-dusk), a Unesco World Heritage Site. The earliest surviving part of the building is from the 14th century. However, St Bartholomew first founded a church on the site around AD 62. The well-preserved exterior reliefs include Armenian crosses, saints and angels. The bell tower is under reconstruction.

Tucked into a wooded glade, access to the church is with a five minutes' stroll from the car park passing an ancient stone arch

and 'mill' cascade. The church is 17km west of central Jolfa along the Aras valley. It's a wonderfully scenic drive especially in the golden pre-sunset light, but be careful with your camera as the river constitutes a potentially sensitive international border.

On the Azerbaijani riverbank 7km west of Jolfa, a truncated **tomb stub** and **broken bridge** are all that mark the original site of ancient Jolfa (view it across the Aras from near a police 'fort'). About 1km further west, as you enter a spectacular **red-rock canyon**, there's a ruined **caravanserai** (north of the road) and, 400m beyond, a cute, minuscule **Shepherd's Chapel** (south).

Getting There & Away

A taxi from Jolfa (25 minutes each way) to St Stephanos costs around US\$10 return with stops. A car with an English-speaking driver from Tabriz costs around US\$60 return.

EAST OF JOLFA

The **Aras River** is the Bible's River Gihon. For millennia its valley formed a major thoroughfare for traders, armies and holy men. Only with the treaties of 1813 and 1828 did Russia and Persia turn it into a border line. Several mud fortifications remain from the 18th-century conflicts that led to its division. But today the tension is east-west, not north-south. Clearly visible on the Aras' north bank are ruined villages, sad signs of the still unresolved 1989-94 Armenia-Azerbaijan war. What a difference 50m makes. It's fine to drive along the south (ie Iranian) riverbank as a casual tourist (though taking photos isn't advised). Yet travelling the parallel north bank's now-severed train line would be unthinkable folly. That route crosses two globally forgotten 'front lines': from Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan) to mortal enemy Armenia, on through Karabagh (Armenian-occupied Azeri territory), then back through minefields to Azerbaijan again. There hasn't been active fighting for over a decade, but the guard posts, bombed-out trains and barricaded tunnels add a considerable geopolitical frisson to the Aras River Valley's great natural beauty.

JOLFA TO NORDUZ

Leaving Jolfa, the horizon is a gateau of red-and-white cliffs backed by snow-streaked Armenian peaks. In the middle distance is the cleft rocky peak of Nakhchivan's abrupt **Ilan Dağ** (Snake Mountain), through which Noah's Ark supposedly crashed en route to Ararat. Just beyond attractive **Marazakand**,

the sinuous mud wall of **Javer Castle** rises on a rocky shoulder. Four kilometres further, the main road bypasses **Ahmadabad** village: it's worth a five-minute, 500m detour to admire its cubist array of mud-and-stone homes on a small riverside knoll. Another side road 2.5km further east leads steeply up to the popular, if somewhat overrated, **Asiyab Khurabe** spring and picnic area. The side trip is justified mainly by the valley views as you drive back down.

Siyah Rud is hardly attractive, but its farmers produce the raw silk for Khanemu's spinners and weavers in Osku. Locals are happy to show you the cocoon-extraction process if you're passing through during May or June. Further east the road passes through canyons with glimpses of spiky crested ridges leading up to **Kuh-e Kamtal** (Chantal Dagh, Tiger Mountain).

Sixty kilometres from Jolfa, the canyon widens slightly at **Norduz**, the modern Iran-Armenian border posts (see below).

NORDUZ TO KALEYBAR

Four kilometres east of Norduz, picturesque **Duzal** village rises on a hillock dominated by a distinctive **octagonal tomb tower** and Imamzadeh (shrine or mausoleum to a descendant of an imam). Behind the next rocky bluff the road passes through the gate towers and sturdy mud-topped stone walls of the once huge **Abu Mirza** fortress (Kordasht Castle). When viewed from the east, the walls frame an impressive spire of eroded rock on the Armenian side. One kilometre further east is a large, lovingly renovated **historic hammam** (Kordasht village; ☺by request) with newly marbled floors and attractive ceiling patterns. Two kilometres further east, at the end of Kordasht village,

look west for a particularly inspiring view of saw-toothed craggy ridges.

After another 25km, a side road rises steeply to the south beside a police post. This leads to **Ushtebin** (Oshtabin, Oshtobeyin) village after 5km (the last 2km un-asphalted and muddy when wet). Ushtebin has been touted by local tourist information offices as a 'new Masuleh', yet virtually no travellers have discovered its charms. Despite a few issues with rubbish collection, the hamlet is a very picturesque huddle of stone and mud homes rising steeply in a fold of 'secret' valley famous for its white pomegranates.

The main road continues via the photo-genically stepped village of **Qarachilar** (7km from Ushtebin junction) to Eskanlu (88km) where you could cut inland through nomad summer pastures to Kaleybar (p95).

Kaleybar & Babak Castle

کلایر و بک قلعه

☎0427 / POP 17,000 / ELEV 1314M

Set attractively in a wide, steep-sided mountain valley, unassuming Kaleybar town makes a great starting point for random hikes and visiting nomad camps en route to the upper Aras River Valley. But by far its biggest draw is the extensive crag-top ruin of **Babak Castle** (Qal'eh Babak; admission US\$2). Known to some as Bazz Galasi, the castle has a unique emotional resonance for Azari people as the lair of their 9th-century AD national hero Babak Khorramdin. Occupying a cultural position somewhere between King Arthur, Robin Hood and Yasser Arafat, Babak is celebrated for harrying the anti-Shiite Abbasid-Arab regime between 815 and 837. Beware of visiting Kaleybar during Babak's

CROSSING THE ARMENIAN BORDER AT NORDUZ

On the Iran side, the Norduz customs yards occupy an otherwise unpopulated sweep of rural valley. Moneychangers on the Iran side buy and sell Armenian dram (US\$1 = 390 dram) as well as dollars and rials for around 5% below bank rates. One or two taxis usually wait outside the Iranian border compound asking US\$8 to Jolfa. From within the compound you'd pay US\$4 more.

Walking-distance away from customs on the Armenian side is Agarak village. Armenian 14-day tourist visas (US\$50) or three-day transit visas (US\$40) are available at the border, but the application might take a while – annoying if you're on one of the through buses (Yerevan–Tehran via Tabriz). Hopefully, the bus driver will wait for you. On the Armenian side **Aries Travel** (☎374-1-220138; www.bedandbreakfast.am) coordinates pleasant homestays in **Meghri**, a 15-minute, 4000-dram taxi ride away. From Hotel Meghri near central Meghri there's a 9am minibus to Yerevan (9000 dram, nine to 11 hours) and a 7.30am bus to Kapan (2000 dram, two hours).

controversial 'birthday celebrations' (last week of June). While culturally fascinating, all accommodation will be packed full and authorities might suspect you of being involved in stirring up political unrest among the higher-spirited Azari nationalists.

There are several access paths to the castle. The most popular route starts behind the seasonal Babak Hotel and takes two fairly strenuous hours with part of the route up dizzyingly steep stairways with fabulous views. Stronger vehicles can drive up an unsurfaced track to a summer nomad camp reducing the walk to under an hour. But in winter and spring, snow and fog can render any route hazardous or completely impossible.

Sleeping & Eating

Kaleybar Grand Hotel


HOTEL \$

(☎422 2048; fax 422 4666; Shahrdari Sq; s/tw/tr without bathroom US\$7/13/18, ste with bathroom US\$33) Pleasant enough rooms share decent washing facilities and squat toilets, while the comparatively upmarket suites have bathrooms. There's a kitchen and communal sitting area with good views. The friendly manager speaks some English. It's on the top floor of a yellow-brick shopping centre surveying upper Mo'alleh St. Use the middle stairway.

The right-hand stairs lead up one floor to the unmarked **Kabir (Chabizh) Restaurant** (☎422 4676; meals US\$4-5; ☺12.30-4pm).

Araz Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎422 2290; dm/tw without bathroom US\$5/8; ) Kaleybar's cheapest option has six rooms, mostly stuffed with four or five comfy beds sharing one shower and toilet. To find it take the second alley east of the petrol station, 300m down Mo'alleh St from the Kaleybar Grand. It looks like a private house, but hides a long banquetting hall downstairs. Staff seem curiously ill-informed and speak little Azari, let alone English.

Sitting on a lonely hill above Shoza-Abad hamlet, 6km from town, the basic summer-only **Babak Hotel** is ideally located for climbing the castle and has sweeping views from its cafe-restaurant.

Getting There & Away

There are direct buses to Tabriz (US\$2, three hours) at 8am and 11.30pm. Taxis want US\$1 to US\$6 to the castle access paths depending on which route you choose. A taxi to Jolfa along the Aras River will cost around US\$46.

Ardabil

اردبیل

☎0451 / POP 421,000 / ELEV 1354M

Ardabil is a logical stopping point between Tabriz and the upper Caspian coast. Ardabil's magnificent Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum is by far its greatest attraction but there's a fair scattering of other minor sights and a truly superb teahouse restaurant. When the chilly smog clears, Mt Sabalan's snow-topped peak is dramatically visible from Ardabil's Shurabil lake.

Ardabil sits on a high plateau. The weather is pleasantly cool in summer, but terrifies brass monkeys in winter. Snow is probable from November.

History

A military outpost for millennia, Ardabil was the capital of the Sajid dynasty Azarbayjan from AD 871 to 929, and saw independence as a khanate from 1747 to 1808. However, Ardabil is best remembered for spawning two great leaders: the Safavid patriarch and great dervish-Sufi mystic Sheikh Safi-od-Din (1253-1354), plus a descendant Ismail Safavi. The latter expanded the clan domains so successfully that by 1502 Ismail had become shah of all Persia. His glorious Safavid dynasty was to rule Iran for over two centuries.

Sights

Driving to the Alvares ski-slope from the nearby hot-springs resort of Sara'eyn gets you well up Mt Sabalan's slopes for some lovely summer trekking.

Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum MAUSOLEUM

Though relatively compact, the **Safi-od-Din Mausoleum Complex** (Sheikh Safi St; admission US\$1; ☺8am-5pm winter, 8am-noon & 3.30-7pm summer, closed Mon) is western Iran's most dazzling Safavid monument and a World Heritage Site. The patriarch is buried with lesser notables in an iconic 1334 **Allah-Allah tower**, so named because the apparently geometrical motif in blue-glazed brick is actually the endlessly repeated name of God. To see the beautiful wooden sarcophagi enter through a splendid little courtyard of turquoise tiling, then the **Ghandil Khaneh** (lantern house) where the intensity of gold and indigo decoration is very striking. To the left, the glorious 1612 **Chini Khaneh** (china room) is honeycombed with 'stalactite'-vaulted gilt niches originally designed to display the royal porcelain collec-

tion. Most of that was carted off to the Hermitage (St Petersburg) when Russia invaded in 1828, saving the mausoleum's staff a lot of dusting.

Much of the area around the complex is being excavated and an attractive walled garden (free entrance, access from courtyard) makes a peaceful reading refuge.

Other Sights

The **covered bazaar** is extensive and attractive, though sliced brutally in half by Imam Khomeini St.

Sheik Jebra'il Shrine

MAUSOLEUM

(admission by donation) Sheikh Jebra'il, Sheikh Safi-od-Din's father, is buried underneath a mildly attractive 16th-century structure at Khalkhoran, a village-suburb 3km north-east of the centre. It's an active shrine; remove your shoes before inspecting the murals and multifaceted ceiling.

Safavid bridges

BRIDGES

Ardabil has at least five restored bridges across the Baliqli Chay (Fishy River). Nicknamed Yeddi Göz (Seven Eyes), the seven-

span **Pol-e Jajim** is the most famous, but the cute, three-arch **Pol-e Ebrahimabad** is more appealing.

Haji Fakr & Mirza Ali Akbar

Mosques

MOSQUE

Stroll the back alleys to find the handsome little Haji Fakr mosque with its squat, Bukharan-style peppermill minaret. Nearby, the attractively brick-vaulted **Mirza Ali Akbar Mosque** (Sa'at-Noh Sq) has a blue Kufic-tiled exterior frieze and lighthouse-style minaret.

Jameh Mosque (Masjed-e Jameh)

مسجد جامع

MOSQUE

(Shahid Madani St) The Mongol Ilkhanid Congregational Mosque was once a truly gigantic brick edifice and like the Seh Gonbad in Orumiyeh (p80) built on the site of a Sassanian fire temple.

Maryam Church

CHURCH

Found just off Taleqani St, this former church has an unusual old stone pyramid as its central dome and now hosts a *zurkhaneh* (house of strength; see p292).

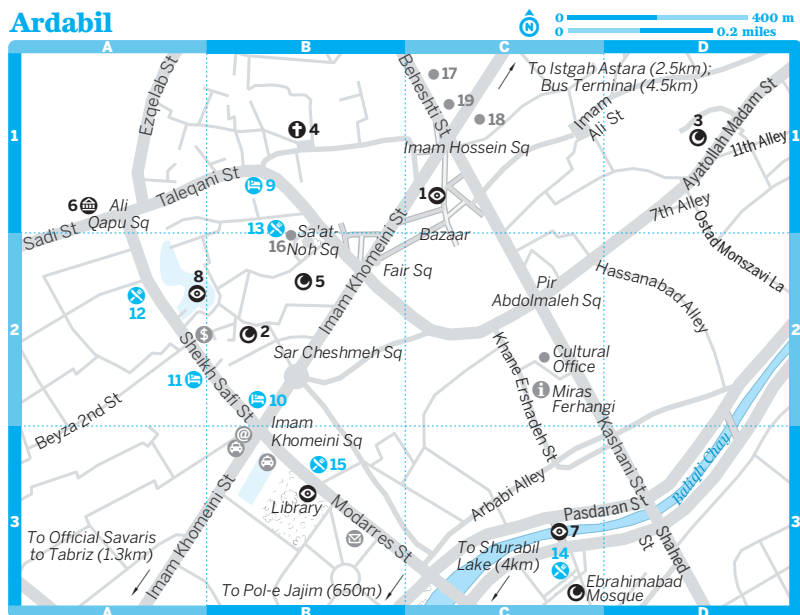
THE MIGHTY CASPIAN SEA

At 370,000 sq km the Caspian (Darya-ye Khazar) is five times the size of Lake Superior. That makes it by far the world's largest lake. Or does it? Its littoral states (Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) can't decide if the Caspian's a lake at all. Perhaps it's a 'sea'. That's more than petty semantics. In international legal terms, each nation deserves its own territorial slice of any 'sea' it borders. But with a 'lake', resources below it must be shared equally among all littoral states. So the exact definition has vast economic implications given the Caspian's immensely valuable offshore oilfields. The debate continues.

The Caspian has many environmental worries (see www.caspianenvironment.org). Under-sea mud volcanoes and oil vents add to the murk of industrial effluent flowing in through its tributary rivers, notably the Volga. And at 26.5m below sea level, there's no outlet from which pollution can escape. Pollution along with climate change are given as reasons for increasingly severe algal blooms, the vast annual growth of surface waterweeds which, in summer 2005, covered an astonishing 20,000 sq km of the Caspian. Scientists are also worried by the appearance of *Mnemiopsis Leydyi* (a comb jellyfish) whose explosive 1990's reproduction in the Black Sea had threatened fish stocks there. All this, along with heavy over-fishing, is a particular worry for the slow-growing Caspian sturgeon, which produces 95% of the world's caviar, but is now facing possible extinction.

To Westerners brought up reading CS Lewis novels, the name 'Caspian' sounds romantic. Sadly the reality isn't very beautiful. Between 1977 and 1994 Caspian Sea levels rose an astonishing 15cm to 20cm per year. Those beaches that survived are mostly grey and ugly, but local holidaymakers don't seem to mind too much. After all, swimming in full chador isn't much fun. When Iranians tell you how wonderful the coast is, they might mean because of all the lovely rain. Rasht incorporates rain drops into the calligraphy of its welcome sign. There are even seaside restaurants named Barun (Rain). For people from the desert plateau, the Caspian coast's regular downpours must seem exotic. But few foreigners share their enthusiasm.

Ardabil

**People Museum**

MUSEUM

(☎444 5885; Ali Qapu; admission US\$1; ⌚8am-8pm Thu-Tue) The local museum has rather lacklustre ethnographic displays in the partly restored Merdum Shenasi *hammam*; the **Ebrahimabad Hammam** (see Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad restaurant) is much more impressive.

Sleeping**Hotel Shorabil**

HOTEL \$\$

(☎551 3096; fax 551 3097; Shurabil Lakeside; s/d/tr US\$18/30/38) This relaxingly quiet place is 4km south of the centre but all a-twitter with birdsong in rose gardens that lead down to an attractive recreational lake. Light-suffused rooms have good hot showers and pleasant red fabrics.

Sabalan Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎223 2910; fax 223 2877; Sheikh Safi St; d & tr/ste US\$65/80) This old travellers favourite has been reborn and offers bright communal rooms in an unbeatable location.

Mosaferkhaneh Safavi

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎224 0616; Sheikh Safi St; s/d/tr US\$6/9/11) The freshest of several rock-bottom cheapies close to Imam Khomeini Sq. Some recently repainted rooms have a tap but beds are rock hard and there's no shower or English sign.

Hotel Negin

HOSTEL \$\$

(☎223 5671; fax 223 5674; Taleqani St; tw US\$45) Beyond a somewhat disinterested reception (no English spoken), almost-smart corridors lead to very good rooms with full Western facilities.

**Eating & Drinking****Sofrakhane Sonati****Ebrahimabad**

TEAHOUSE \$

(☎224 9588; Moadi St; mains US\$4-8, tea US\$1, qalyan US\$1.50) This hidden, fabulously renovated 640-year-old former *hammam* oozes atmosphere with three domed chambers each more magnificent than the last. Local speciality *pichag qeimeh* (tender lamb, diced almonds, caramelised onions and soft-boiled egg stranded with saffron) is cooked with finesse and packed with flavour, albeit in small portions. After dining retire to the central tea-chamber. Manager Sheikhlovan speaks English. It's highly recommended.

Teahouse

TEAHOUSE \$

(Modarres St; breakfast US\$1; ⌚7am-3pm) This is an unnamed, all-male teahouse almost opposite the library that does fabulous curds-and-honeycomb breakfasts.

Ardabil

📍 Sights

- 1 Bazaar C1
Ebrahimabad Hammam (see 14)
- 2 Haji Fakr Mosque B2
- 3 Jameh Mosque D1
- 4 Maryam Church/Zurkhaneh B1
- 5 Mirza Ali Akba Mosque B2
- 6 People Museum A1
- 7 Pol-e-Ebrahimabad C3
- 8 Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum A2

🏨 Sleeping

- 9 Hotel Negin B1
- 10 Mosaferkhaneh Safavi B2
- 11 Sabalan Hotel A2

🍽️ Eating

- 12 Confectionery Shops A2
- 13 Hajkhalim Chaykhaneh B1
- 14 Sofrakhane Sonati
Ebrahimabad C3
- 15 Teahouse B3

🚗 Transport

- 16 Homai Travel B2
- 17 Minibuses to Khalkoran C1
- 18 Shuttle Taxi to Bus Terminal C1
- 19 Shuttle Taxi to Meshginshahr
Terminal/Moghan Sq. C1

Hajkhalim Chaykhaneh

TEAHOUSE \$

(Qunchi Meydan Alley; dizi US\$1, tea US\$0.10, qalyan from US\$0.50; ☎6.30am-11pm) Equally daunting for women, this place offers a very cheap, thoroughly 'real' local teahouse experience. Expect stares.

Numerous **confectionery shops** facing the Safi-od-Din Mausoleum sell *helva siyah* (black halva or 'pest'), a rich local speciality vaguely reminiscent of Christmas pudding. It costs around US\$4 per kilogram but a small plateful sprinkled with coconut, grated nuts and cinnamon is plenty (US\$0.20). Ardabil's famous honey is sold throughout the city.

📍 Information

Aryana Currency Exchange (☎223 8747; Sheikh Safi St; ☎9am-2pm & 4-8pm) It exchanges many currencies including Azerbaijani manats.

Coffeenet Mohsen (Imam Khomeini Sq; per hr US\$1; ☎8am-midnight) Downstairs. The best connection of five internet places within 50m.

Miras Ferhangi (☎225 2708; Khane Ershadeh St; ☎7.30am-2pm Sat-Thu) Excellent free maps of Ardabil, Sara'eyn and the region from a charming little brick courtyard house.

📍 Getting There & Away

Flights to Tehran (US\$40) leave three times daily with **Iran Air** (☎223 8600) and daily with Iran Aseman. Helpful **Homai Travel** (☎223 3233; Sa'at-Noh Sq; ☎8.30am-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) sells air tickets and train tickets ex-Tabriz.

Bus, Minibus & Savari

From the **main terminal** (Moqaddas-e-Ardabili St), 5km northeast of the centre, Tehran buses (US\$8 to US\$11, 10 hours) leave hourly (7am to 11pm) via Astara (US\$0.50 to US\$1, two hours), Rasht (US\$2 to US\$4, five hours) and Qazvin (US\$6 to US\$12, eight hours). Buses run to Tabriz (US\$2 to US\$4, four hours) via Sarab hourly till 3.30pm.

Savaris to Astara (back/front/whole car US\$1/US\$2/US\$10, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Astara** (☎882 0876; Jam'e-Jam St), a small yard with a green sign 100m northeast of Jahad Sq.

📍 Getting Around

The airport is 1km off the Astara road, 11km northeast of Ardabil (US\$6 by taxi). From Imam Khomeini Sq shuttle taxis run to Bahonar Sq (for Sara'eyn minibuses) and to Besat Sq. Khalkhoran minibuses start near Imam Hossein Sq.

Astara

آستارا

☎0182 / POP 35,000 / ELEV -25M

Astara has a wide but litter-strewn **beach** (Sahel Darya) and could make a base to visit the forested Taleh mountain hinterlands, but most travellers head straight on to Ardabil, Rasht or Azerbaijan.

🏨 Sleeping

Belal Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎521 5586; Mo'alleh Sq; s/d/tr US\$17/25/34) If arriving from Azerbaijan walk directly south (150m) from the border post to find Hakim Nezami St for midrange accommodation, such as this hotel with an English-speaking manager and relatively pleasant rooms (with en suite) off somewhat scrappy corridors.

Mehmanpazir Aseman

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎522 2300; off Shahrdrari Sq; tw with/without shower US\$10/8) Walk 400m west of the Belal to Shahrdrari Sq for a bearable if typically male-dominated *mosaferkhaneh* with shared toilets. Marked as 'Asiman Mehmanxanasi';

it's accessed via a clothing *passaj* beside Bank Melli (with no exchange).

Espinash Hotel

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎525 2700; www.espinashotel.com; Rasht Hwy; s/d/ste US\$120/140/190; 📞☎) This international-standard hotel, 6km south of town, sits beside an attractive mountain-backed lake where you can rent jet skis.

i Getting There & Away

The Espinash Hotel is 5km beyond the **terminal** (Imam Khomeini St) where buses go to Tehran (US\$10), Tabriz (US\$8, six hours, 3pm), Rasht (US\$8, 10am and 1pm) and Qazvin (US\$10, 4pm). More frequent through buses plus convenient savaris to Rasht (US\$8, 2½ hours) and Ardabil (US\$4, 1½ hours) pick up around massive Laleh (Shohoda Qomran) Sq, 200m further south.

Astara to Rasht

Between Astara and Rezvanshahr several relatively unspoilt sections of Caspian hinterland offer attractive views of rice paddies (notably at **Lavandevil**, **Khotbeh Sara** and **Sust**). There's some lovely woodland behind **Asalem** and the most accessible of the region's castle ruins is the cute little **Dezhe Sasal Fortress** (Qal'eh Lisar; Salsal St), which crowns a petite wooded knoll at the southern end of **Lisar** town, five minutes' walk off the main highway. Its gate arch is intact and offers sea views, although the rest of the site is fenced off.

Little **Hashtpar** is often referred to as 'Talesh', somewhat confusing as Talesh is also the name of the region and its people. Behind Hashtpar's charioteer statue in the central square is an attractive Qajar-era octagonal pavilion, but since it's used by revolutionary guards, photography is unwise.

Rasht

رشت

☎0131 / POP 618,000 / ELEV 4M

Rapidly expanding Rasht is the capital of Gilan province and by far the largest city of the Shomal (Caspian littoral) region. Gilan has had extended periods of independence and the lispily local Gilaki dialect remains noticeably distinct from Farsi, its reversed adjective-noun order causing much amusement for other Iranians.

Although 15km inland, Rasht is a popular weekend and holiday destination for Tehranis, for whom the greatest attraction is its 'refreshing' climate (ie lots of rain). It's mildly amusing to watch local tourists driving with arms outstretched to feel the drops. But year-round downpours and steaming summer humidity don't otherwise appeal to most foreign tourists.

The city has precious little in the way of historical buildings, but is a useful transport hub from which to visit the lush mountain forests, rice paddies and thatched-house villages of the emerald-green Gilan hinterland, most famously at Masuleh. It's also a great place to taste the garlic-stoked, vegetable-rich Gilan cuisine (p101).

CROSSING THE AZERBAIJAN BORDER AT ASTARA

A narrow river divides Astara (Iran) from Astara (Azerbaijan). By Caucasus standards the pedestrian border here is quick and straightforward with neither fees nor bribes to pay. Things are contrastingly slow for vehicles. International Baku–Tehran buses wait between three and seven hours while the whole bus is checked. Visas are *not* available on arrival. The pedestrian **crossing point** (Mosaferi Gümrük; ☎7.30am–noon & 1.30–4.30pm) is easy to miss up a small lane north of Hakim Nezami St. On the Azerbaijan side, the unmarked metal border gate is 500m along Heydar Əliyev küçəsi from the excellent-value Hotel Şindan.

Freelance moneychangers at the Iran-side border-gate offer passable rates. Get rid of rials here if heading north. Leave bigger exchanges till Ardabil or Rasht if heading south. Near Hotel Şindan on the Azerbaijan side, Kapital Bank has an ATM cash machine.

Confusingly many Azeris count in 'shirvans' rather than New Azeri manats (AZN, US\$1=AZN0.80). One shirvan means AZN2.

Decrepit night buses to Baku (AZN5) and daytime minivans to Lənkəran (AZN2) start 100m north of Hotel Şindan.

An overnight sleeper train to Baku (AZN2.70, 11 hours) leaves Astara around 7pm, but the station is 3km from the border and tickets often sell out.

CUT THE CAVIAR – GILAN CUISINE

The Caspian Sea produces 95% of the world's caviar. But don't count on seeing any. Iran's caviar is virtually all for export. In fact, Gilan's cuisine largely ignores the sea and focuses on the local wealth of fruit, nuts, olives and vegetables. Typical dishes are packed with garlic and turmeric, rather shocking for the sensitive taste buds of central Iranian tourists. *Sirabi* is essentially fried garlic leaves with egg, *shami Rashti* are deep-fried lentil-and-meat patties, *baghilah qotoq* are dill-and-garlic-flavoured broad beans, while *anarbij* (meatballs in walnut and pomegranate sauce) is a variant of *fesenjun* (chicken with walnuts). Easier to find than any of the above is *mirza ghasemi*, a vegetarian marvel of mashed aubergine, squash, garlic and egg. Although often listed as a starter it makes a delicious meal of its own when served with rice.

History

Rasht (previously Resht) developed in the 14th century, but the population was massacred in 1668 by the forces of Cossack brigand Stepan 'Stenka' Razin who also sank Persia's entire Caspian navy. The Russians, a constant factor in the region thereafter, were back in 1723 clearing spaces in the then-impenetrable forest to allow Resht's growth. In 1899 a Russian company cut the road to Qazvin, diminishing Gilan's isolation from the rest of Iran. By WWI the town boasted 60,000 inhabitants and four international consulates.

From 1917 it was the centre of Kuchuk Khan's Jangali ('Forest') Movement, an Islamic, Robin Hood-style rebellion. Among their grievances with collapsing Qajar Iran was the shah's perceived sell-out to oil-hungry Britain. Courting the Bolsheviks who'd just taken control of Russia, Kuchuk Khan joined forces with communist agitators and, on 4 June 1920, set up Gilan as the 'Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran'. However, radical-leftists and land-owning Muslim nationalists made very prickly bedfellows. Once Kuchuk Khan had ejected the infidel communists from his 'government', his Russian backers slipped away leaving Gilan prey to the efficient new regime of Reza Khan (later Shah Reza Pahlavi) who'd taken over Persia in a February 1921 coup. Reza Khan first dealt with temporarily independent Tabriz/Azarbayjan, then attacked Gilan. Most of Rasht's pretty wooden houses were burnt, Kuchuk Khan was executed and his severed head was brought to Tehran for public display.

These days any enemy of the Pahlavis has become a friend of the current Islamic Republic. Thus Kuchuk Khan has ridden back into favour on many a horseback statue across Gilan.

Sights

Shahrdari

MONUMENT

(Municipality Bldg; Shahrdari Sq) Rasht's most identifiable landmark, the Shahrdari's colonial style is tempered by a token mini-dome topping a distinctive whitewashed tower. It looks great when floodlit at night. Palm trees admire the interplay of fountains in the square opposite.

Kuchuk Khan

statue & mausoleum

MONUMENT, MAUSOLEUM

The central **horseman statue** (Shohada Sq) is Kuchuk Khan, the Jangali leader of 'Soviet Iran'. A steady flow of well-wishers also visit his **tomb** (Manzariyeh St), 2km southwest of Shohoda Sq (also known as Shahrdari Sq), sheltered by a contemporary brick gazebo with intricate wooden roof.

Rasht Museum

MUSEUM

(Taleqani St; admission US\$1; ☎8am-5.30pm Tue-Sun, 9am-1pm Fri) While small, this museum is well presented in a 1930s house. Its mannequin displays illustrate Gilaki lifestyle, amid a selection of 3000-year-old terracotta *riton* drinking horns in the shape of bulls, rams and deer. Supping from such vessels supposedly endowed the drinker with the powers and skills of the animal depicted.

Gilani cottages

HISTORICAL COTTAGE

Supposedly 'typical' thatched-roof with upper wooden balustrades are shown in many brochures, but are very rare in situ. One such has been dismantled and moved to a traffic island in Shahid Ansari Blvd (behind a drive-in burger takeaway) and is now used as a tourist information outpost.

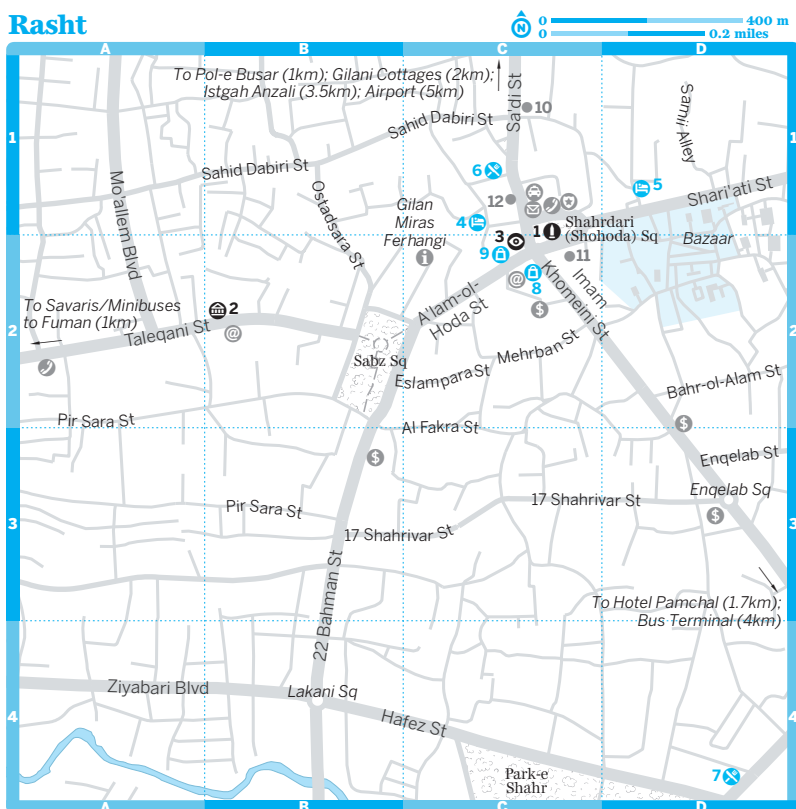
Gilan Rural Heritage Museum

MUSEUM

(☎323 9490; admission US\$1; ☎9am-dusk Thu-Fri) Many more traditional Gilani cottages have been reassembled in the grounds

Rasht

WESTERN IRAN RASHT



of this excellent museum 18km south of Rasht (2km off the Qazvin highway). Six full homesteads complete with rice barns are already 'active' in 150 hectares of woodland. On open days, local crafts (thatching, mat-making, cloth-weaving) are displayed and there are tightrope-walking mini-shows. Houses display local tools left lying around as though the owners had just nipped out to the pub.

Tours

Hassan Mohit

GUIDE



(0911-136 7796; www.aryantour.com) This delightful and personable English-speaking driver-guide has a refreshingly easy-going manner. Daily rates range from US\$150/80 with/without car. Hassan can provide scrumptious family meals and homestay beds at Titi ('blossom') Cottage in the semi rural village of Ebrahim Sara (25km east of Rasht).

Sleeping

There are many options, but occupancy is high in peak summer season (May to September) when overwhelming humidity makes air-con virtually essential.

Kadus Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(0322 3075; cadus_hotel@yahoo.com; Azadi Blvd; s/d/tr/ste US\$80/104/120/146;  ) A full-blown refit has cleverly used contemporary-retro touches to bring alive the Kadus' 1970s architecture. Rooms have trendy faux-antique basins, Western loos and brightly tasteful decor. It's about 2.5km south of Shohoda Sq.

Hotel Pamchal

HOTEL \$\$

(0666 3822; Mosalla Sq; d/ste US\$56/75; ) It has attractively rebuilt rooms with designer armchairs and pot plants. The orange globe-lamps are stylish and the big bathrooms have Western toilets.

Rasht

📍 Sights

- 1 Kuchuk Khan Horseman Statue C1
- 2 Rasht Museum B2
- 3 Shahr-dari C2

🛏 Sleeping

- 4 Hotel Ordibesht C1
- 5 Mehmanpazir Kenareh D1

🍴 Eating

- 6 Kourosh C1
- 7 Kumeh D4

🛍 Shopping

- Cadeau (see 8)
- 8 Farahmand C2
- 9 Ta'ati Bookshop C2

🚗 Transport

- 10 Savaris to Bandar-e Anzali C1
- 11 Shuttle Taxis to Lahijan Terminal C2
- 12 TBT C1

Hotel Ordibesht

HOTEL \$

(☎222 9210; fax 222 2221; s/d US\$45/50; 📺📶) The Ordibesht has delightful staff and loveably dated decor behind concrete Corinthian columns. Set well back off Shohoda Sq, it manages to be splendidly central yet very quiet.

Mehmanpazir Kenareh

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎222 2412; Ferdosi Alley off Shari'ati St; s/tw/tr US\$9/14/17) By far the most appealing of the central cheapies, this relatively new place has sparkling white-tiled floors, reliably changed sheets and its off-road location means it's reasonably quiet. No English sign.



Eating & Drinking

For cheap desserts, nuts and snacks there are stalls around the bazaar. Many cheap kabab barbecues appear at night on Imam Khomeini St and Toshiba Sq.



Bijan's

ITALIAN \$\$

(☎424 5260, 0911-131 2588; bijanabi@yahoo.com; Gaz Sq, Namju Blvd; meals US\$7-12; ☎dusk-11pm Sat-Thu) Soft Mediterranean music, sepia photos and displays of olive-oil bottles create a delightful atmosphere in this very un-Iranian Italian bistro where talented chef Bijan (trained in Sheffield rather than Sorrento) turns out scrumptious pastas served

with huge bowls of Parmesan. It's south of Park-e Shahr.

Kumeh

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎322 6579; Hafez St; kababs US\$2-3; ☎11am-2pm & 5.30-11pm) The most interesting of a huddle of restaurants in the Park-e-Shahr area, Kumeh has Irano-Hawaiian covered dining platforms outside. Inside is more standard but sharing a post-prandial qalyan here is an ideal way to meet some friendly regulars.

Saeed Coffee Shop

TEAHOUSE \$\$

(☎323 4298; Azadi Blvd; sandwiches US\$4-5, coffees US\$2; ☎11am-11pm) Gently stylish cafe, south of the centre, serving good strong espressos. There's a billiard hall and decent **pizzeria** in the same block.

Kourosh

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎222 8299; Gilantur Lane; meals US\$6-10; ☎11am-4pm & 6.30-11pm) Kourosh wins no prizes for decor but offers numerous typical Gilani dishes including dill-rich *bagilah qotoq*, *zeitun parvarden* (olives in walnut paste) and garlic mast. On a good day the *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg, served with bread or rice) can be superb but the *fesenjun* (chicken with walnuts) is rather tart.

Restaurant Tak

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎323 2147; Azadi Blvd; meals US\$7-13; ☎11.30am-4pm & 7-10.30pm) Three floors of comparatively upmarket dining with Gilani options including *torshe tareh*, a citrusy dish of local sorrel and egg.

Pizza Pizza

PIZZERIA \$\$

(Gilan Blvd at 149th St; pizzas US\$6-9; ☎6.30pm-midnight) Comparatively pricey but unusual in having female wait-staff and a children's play area. Order downstairs; the menu is in English. It's 3km north of Shohoda Sq.

Babak

TEAHOUSE \$

(Golsar Ave at 102nd St; cappuccino US\$1.50; ☎10am-midnight) A stylish green, cream and chrome coffee-bar, 2km north of Shohoda Sq, serving sundaes and shakes.



Shopping

Farahmand

SOUVENIRS

(Imam Khomeini Blvd; ☎9.30am-9pm Sat-Thu) Souvenirs ranging from Gilaki wooden spoons to amusing wicker frogs are sold here.

Cadeau

(Imam Khomeini Blvd; ☎10am-12.30pm & 6.30-9.30pm Sat-Thu) Nearby Cadeau sells plenty of canework and the odd briar pipe.

Ta'ati Bookshop

(☎222 2627; A'lam-ol Hoda St; ☎9am-1.30pm & 4-9pm) Sells brilliant city maps (US\$1).

Nafis

(☎772 7308; Bastani Shoar Sq; ☎9am-1.30pm & 4-10pm) If you're looking for more upmarket inlay boxes Nafis, 2km north of Shohoda Sq, is the place to go.

i Information**Internet Access**

Ghamoos Rayane Coffeenet (☎223 5970; Passaj Nefis, A'lam-ol Hoda St; per hr US\$1; ☎9am-9pm Sat-Thu) Fast connection, friendly people but hidden away on the 4th floor (take the lift from the *pasazh* beside Bank Tejarat).

PM Coffeenet (Taleqani St; per hr US\$1; ☎10am-9pm) Graffiti-cool interior with separate women's room.

Money

Mehrpouya Currency Exchange (☎222 7826; Sa'di Ally; ☎9am-1.30pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) Near Shohoda Sq.

Vase Exchange (☎224 0597; Moravid Close, 1st fl; ☎9.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Sat-Wed, 9.30am-1.30pm Thu) Free chockies while you change money. Good rates.

Post

There's a central post office on Shohoda Sq but for parcel service use the main post office (Bentolhoda St) just off Golsar Ave in Golsar.

Telephone

Central telephone office (Shohoda Sq; ☎8am-8pm) Domestic calls only.

SOUVENIRS

International telephone office (Taleqani St; ☎8am-9pm Sat-Thu)

Tourist Information

Gilan Miras Ferhangi (☎775 4664; Ehtesab Alley off Sabz Sq; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Historic brick building and attractive garden hosts the tourist information office.

Visa Extensions

Police headquarters (☎218 3481; room 8, 1st fl, Shohada Sq; ☎8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) To extend your visa, apply before 10am. Pay IR300,000 to the specific Bank Melli (either cnr 22 Bahman or 17 Shahrivar Sts), return with the receipt and pay a further US\$1 to a uniformed officer. Processing takes about three hours.

i Getting There & Away**Air**

Iran Air (☎772 4444; Golsar Ave; ☎7.30am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) flies twice weekly to Mashhad (US\$70). **Iran Aseman** (☎775 9594; Rasht airport) flies to Shiraz (US\$80, Saturday) and Bandar Abbas (US\$100, twice weekly). Both airlines fly at least daily to Tehran (US\$50).

Bus, Minibus & Savari

The main bus terminal is 2km south of 'Toshiba' (Mosallah) Sq. Several bus companies have handy central booking offices. **TBT** (☎222 3520; Sa'di St) serves most destinations (*mahmooly* unless otherwise stated), see the table, p105.

Savaris to Tehran leave from five different points along Imam Khomeini St. Informal Tehran and Qazvin savaris pick up at Toshiba and Gil Sqs, southeast of the city centre.

Many buses to Ardabil (US\$5 to US\$7, five hours) via Astara start from Tehran and pick up at **Istgah Anzali** (Valiasr Sq).

Savaris to Astara (US\$8, 2½ hours) and Asalem (change for Khal Khal) start at **Pol-e Busar** (Sa'di St).

For Fuman, and thence Masuleh, savaris/minibuses (US\$0.50/1) depart from Yakhshazi Sq (Shohaday Gomnam Sq).

Informal Lahijan savaris pick up on Shari'ati St, but the official Lahijan terminal is 500m east of Janbazan Sq hidden opposite a Saipa showroom. Durations vary widely according to traffic conditions, but prices for minibuses/savaris are Lahijan US\$1/1.50 and Chalus US\$1/5.

i Getting Around

Many shuttle-taxi routes run the length of Imam Khomeini Blvd from Shohoda Sq, or along Shohoda St to the Lahijan terminal. Northbound, many shuttle taxis go up Sa'di St via Shahid Ansari Sq, where some swing left up to Golsar, others continuing to Valiasr Sq (Istgah Anzali). These return southbound down Takhti St.

ROOTS OF THAT CUPPA

Gilan province produces 90% of Iran's tea. The deep green, manicured tea-bushes are now so emblematic that it's hard to believe they were introduced only a century ago. In fact, tea didn't reach Persia until the 17th century, when it became an expensive luxury. Qajar-period attempts to grow the stuff were unsuccessful until Kashef-ol-Saltaneh, an Iranian consul in India, managed to learn the secret art. Around 1900 he slipped home to Lahijan with some 4000 tea plants and the rest is history.

BUSES FROM RASHT

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Ahvaz	US\$8	18hr	11am, 2.30pm
Esfahan	US\$14	12hr	6pm
Gorgan	US\$8/4	8hr	hourly 7am-2pm & 7-10pm
Hamadan	US\$4 (Merc)	9hr	9am, 11am, 6pm
Mashhad	US\$18/14	16hr	2.30pm
Tabriz	US\$11	10hr	4-8pm
Tehran	US\$9/6	5hr	frequent

Around Rasht

FUMAN

📍0132 / POP 36,000 / ELEV 34M

فومن

Gilan's main attractions are wooded hinterland villages accessed via Fuman. Once the capital of Gilan, Fuman is a leafy junction town, its boulevards lined with date palms, plane trees and numerous tacky plaster-cast statues. The mountains on its south-west horizon stay snow-topped well into April, though it's often too hazy to see them.

Fuman is the most famous place to buy *klucheh fuman*, typical Gilan cookies filled with walnut paste, available hot from the oven at several bakeries around town. Savaris to Rasht leave from a bizarrely hidden yard at the northeastern edge of town. West of the bazaar at Velayet Faghi Sq, the roads to Masuleh (Blvd Imamzadeh Mirza) and to Qal'eh Rudkhan divide; savaris to either leave from 400m up each respective road.

QAL'EH RUDKHAN

ELEV 593M

قلعه رودخان

This very impressive Seljuk-era **mountain fortress** (admission US\$1; ☀️8am-5pm) covers the top of an idyllic wooded butte ringed by a curl of forested mountain. The ruins of the brick ramparts are relatively complete, with many photogenic towers, arches and wall sections calcified white with age or tufted with wild flowers. Access requires a steep, sweaty but gorgeous 50-minute walk starting out along a streamside full of mossy rocks then climbing pebble-studded concrete steps to the chorus of birdsong and tapping woodpeckers. The trailhead is beyond a pair of teahouses at **Qal'eh Daneh** hamlet. That's 7km (US\$1 by motorbike taxi) from Qal'eh Rudkhan village to which five-in-a-Paykan savaris from Fuman cost US\$1 per person.

Even if you don't make the climb, the 25-minute drive from Fuman to Qal'eh Daneh is delightful, crossing rice paddies and skirting hills with neat green-tea haircuts. If cloud and rain make climbing impractical, a scale model of the castle in Rasht Museum (p101) shows what you missed.

LAHIJAN & AROUND

📍0141 / POP 61,000 / ELEV 5M

لاهیجان و اطراف

Famed for its tea, Lahijan is one of Gilan's oldest towns with some tree-lined charm to its main streets.

Several minor sights are ranged around central Vahdat Sq. These include the **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; pierced by a blue-tipped brick minaret) and a charmingly run-down old men-only domed **hammam** (shower/massage US\$3; ☀️6am-7pm). Across the square is the tile-roofed **Chahar Padeshah Mosque**. Some of its famed carved wooden doors have been removed to Tehran's National Museum, but there are attractive pseudo-medieval-styled murals on the front wall.

Alleyways around Vahdat Sq hide a few old buildings with mossy, tiled roofs, notably the intriguing **Akbariyeh Mosque** (4th West Kashef Alley).

A kilometre further east, the austere, grey **Mausoleum of Kashef-ol-Saltaneh** (📍224 1003; East Kashef St; admission US\$1; ☀️8am-6pm Tue-Sun) entombs the man who is credited with introducing tea cultivation to Iran (see boxed text, p104). It houses a slightly underwhelming museum of tea paraphernalia.

The easternmost 800m of Kashef St climbs **Sheitan Kuh** (Satan's Mountain), a tree-covered ridge fringed with tea gardens. It's crowded on Friday with local tourists enjoying fine views over Lahijan's rectangular lake. A **cab-car** (10 min ride return US\$6; ☀️9am-dusk) whisks sightseers across to another neighbouring hilltop that's slightly higher.



The blue, pyramidal roof of the distinctive wooden **Sheikh Zahed Mausoleum** (Boq'eh Sheikh Zahed; admission by donation) is Lahijan's architectural icon. The holy man buried here supposedly lived to the ripe old age of 116 (1218–1334). The present mausoleum was rebuilt after a devastating 1913 fire. It's in a quiet, rural setting 2.3km east of the artificial lakeside cascade at the base of Sheitan Kuh. Take the small tea-field lane that parallels the main Ramsar road (from which the mausoleum can also be glimpsed).

Of several attractive villages in the appealing semi-alpine mountain hinterland, the best known is **Deilaman** (60km).

Sleeping & Eating


Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎223 3051; off Sepah Sq; tw US\$45;  ) Comfortable, well-equipped rooms with a perfect central location and a restaurant that overlooks the western edge of the lake.

Chaharfasi Mehmankhaneh

HOTEL \$

(☎222 3222; Shohada Sq; tw/tr without bathroom US\$9/10; ) Well-kept if basic rooms with fridge and TV share separate bathrooms up steps marked 'Drawing Room'. Some rooms are windowless.

Several snack bars and *kababis* lie along Karimi St that links Shohada and Vahdat Sqs perpendicular to Kashef St.

Getting There & Away

Savaris from Rasht (US\$1, 45 minutes) arrive at Vahdat Sq and leave (unofficially) from near Shohoda Sq. Minibuses (US\$0.50) and official savaris use Entezam Sq about 1.5km further west. For Ramsar and Chalus transport leaves from near Basij Sq, a junction 200m northeast of the Tourist Inn.

Masuleh

ماسوله

☎0132 / POP 1500 / ELEV 969M

At least a millennium old, Masuleh is one of Iran's most beautiful villages. Rising through mist-draped forests, earth-coloured houses climb a cupped mountainside so steeply that the roof of one forms the pathway for the next. In summer, day-tripping local tourists merrily fill its appealing tea-terraces, seek out its two minuscule museums and peruse the tiny bazaar's trinket and halva shops. To avoid the coach-tour hordes, stay overnight, hike the surrounding mountains or visit in winter when few tourists visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Many villagers rent out **rooms** (d from US\$15), which makes for a great way to experience rural Gilan.

Mehran Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Mehran Suites; ☎757 2096; apt US\$17-27) At the back of the village, rooms here are great value with bathrooms, kitchenettes, up to six beds and terraces with photo-perfect village views.

Mehmanpazir Navid

HOTEL \$\$

(☎757 2288, 0911-239 6459; apt US\$25-35) Nearer the bazaar, this place has surprisingly sizable studio apartments with fold-out couches and a kitchenette.

Monfared Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎757 2050; s/d US\$17/28) At the base of the village where savaris arrive, this older hotel has 26 timber-walled rooms with bathroom and tiled floors. Mr Nabizadeh speaks some English.

On sunny days, the best places for delicious *mirza ghasemi* are the terraces at **Khaneh Mo'alllem Restaurant** (☎757 2122; meals US\$4-6; ☎12.30-3.30pm & 7.30-9.30pm), behind the Monfared Hotel, and especially the Mehran Hotel's superbly situated cafe balcony.



Getting There & Away

From Fuman, minibuses/savaris (US\$0.50/1, 45 minutes) are regular in summer, but rare in winter. The forest scenery en route is charming and around halfway there's a brilliant traditional thatched Gilani house at the western edge of Makhlayan (Makelun) village, now the backdrop for a roadside teahouse.

Ramsar

رامسر

ELEV -15M

The tiresome Caspian coast road offers barely a glimpse of beach, but at **Ramsar** mountains and sea conjoin fairly attractively. A grand avenue of palmyra palms sweeps up from the tatty seafront to the wonderful **Ramsar Grand Hotel** (☎522 3592; old wing s/d/ste US\$55/70/100;  ). Its 'old wing' lobby oozes neocolonial charm and the manicured rear gardens are impressive. Rooms are somewhat less luxurious but fair value, especially if you opt for a more spacious suite. Avoid the new wing, a drearily ordinary 1970s concrete-box appendage (20% cheaper). Just five minutes' walk west,

the **Caspian Museum** (☎522 5374; Motahhari St; admission US\$1; ☀8am-3pm winter, 8am-1pm & 4-8pm summer) is housed in the 1937 summer palace of Reza Shah. In between, a (male-only) *hammam* is ideal for relaxing the muscles after the trek from Alamut (p115).

Westbound savaris use Imam Khomeini Sq. Eastbound (from Basij Sq) you'll usually have to change savaris in Tonekabon (aka Shahsavari) for Chalus via Abbasabad where a forest road short-cuts to Kelardasht.

Chalus & Noshahr

چالوس و نوشهر

☎0191 / POP 83,000 / ELEV -15M

Of these twin towns, Noshahr (Nowshahr) is the more attractive, with palm trees, manicured gardens and a neat little bazaar around central Azadi Sq. The main reason to come is to use the spectacular Chalus-Karaj road that starts at Mo'alleh Sq in Chalus (marked by a tall telephone mast). From this square, 17 Shahrvivar St leads west across a bridge into central Chalus while Noshahr Blvd leads east passing the Malek and Kourosh Hotels (2km) and airport (4km) before reaching central Noshahr (6km) at Jameh Mosque Sq. Azadi Sq is a block further.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Malek

HOTEL \$\$

(☎222 4107; Oshahr Blvd, Chalus; s/d/tr/ste US\$20/30/40/80; 📞📺📺) Stylish rooms have pleasing decor, bathrooms and good-sized double beds. Suites have playful modernist furniture. The outdoor pool operates summer only. The hip **restaurant** (☀noon-3.30pm, 8-11pm) has a fine menu (in English) ranging from steaks and fish dishes (US\$5 to US\$7) to *mirza ghasemi* (US\$2).

Shahlizar Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎325 0001; fax 323 2090; Azadi Sq, Noshahr; tw US\$18-30; 📞) Comfortable, cosy rooms have cutesy straw bows decorating their doors. Manager Maziyar speaks some English and is keen to show guests the beautiful views (to mountains and port) from the 5th-floor rooftop (no lift). It's conveniently positioned right at the heart of Noshahr.

Kourosh Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎222 3940; fax 222 4174; Noshahr Blvd, Chalus; tw US\$25-50; 📞📺📺) Across the road from the Malek, rooms here have pine-fresh interiors, there's a courtyard cafe, trendy coffee shop, fitness room, sauna and small pool.

📍 Getting There & Around

Iran Aseman (☎322 5217; Karimi St, Noshahr; ☀7am-4pm) has twice weekly flights to both Tehran (US\$28) and Mashhad (US\$50).

To Tehran, buses (US\$8) and more frequent savaris (US\$9) leave from a small terminal on the Karaj road, 1.5km south of Mo'alleh Sq. Savaris to Kelardasht (US\$1, one hour) leave from an adjacent yard.

Around Chalus

NAMAK ABRUD

نمک آبرود

For extraordinary Caspian views take the long **Namak Abrud cable car** (telecabine; ☎0192-246 2012; admission US\$6; ☀10am-3pm), up 1050m Mt Medovin. The ropeway station is 2km off the main Rasht highway, 14km west of Chalus. Dress up warmly and expect the unexpected from notoriously antisocial clouds.

KELARDASHT

کلاردشت

☎0192 / POP 23,100 / ELEV 1248M

Cupped between towering, broad-shouldered peaks, Kelardasht is nicknamed the 'Paradise of Iran'. It's probably the most popular Caspian-area getaway for nature-loving Tehranis. Surrounding areas offer trout fishing, cross-country skiing, trekking, mountain climbing and plenty of cool fresh summer air. The mountain panorama approaching Kelardasht from Marzanabad is particularly impressive with several spectacular views of snow-toothed Alam Kuh soaring behind the town. At **Kaleno** an 11km part-paved road leads up to much-vaunted **Valasht Mountain Lake**.

Kelardasht's commercial centre is **Hasankeif** where most of the shops, banks and an internet cafe are clustered close to Hasankeif Sq. More traditional **Rudbarak** starts around 5km south of Hasankeif. It's closer to the mountains and the starting point for most hikes, though with fewer direct views. Here, amid the holiday homes, you can still find a few old **log-framed barns** and houses with slate or wood-slat roofs anchored down with rocks.

🧭 Activities

The Alborz offers climbers a selection of 4000m peaks, including **Alam Kuh** (Mt Alam), which at 4850m is Iran's third tallest and most technical. An 800m near-vertical granite **wall** makes the mountain's north face a special challenge for climbers, though there are much easier alternative routes to the top. Ascents start 20km from Rudbarak

(which is just south of Kelardasht). Before starting you should sign in (and pay US\$30 peak fees) at the **Mountaineering Federation** (Federasion-e-Kuh Navardi; ☎264 2626; Tohid St, Rudbarak; ☎call ahead), 7.4km from Hasankeif Sq. Staff here can help arrange mules and guides, can show you climbing maps and sell a great set of postcards with suggested climbing routes marked onto photos of various peaks.

For Alam Kuh, it takes at least a day to trek to one of two base-camp huts. Hesarchal offers the easier summit approach. For the wall, use the climbers' hut at Sarchal (3900m) and continue to a cwm called Alamchal (4150m). Climbing the wall itself is a very serious undertaking even for highly experienced mountaineers.

From Sarchal it's also possible to climb **Mt Takht-e Soleiman**, at the other end of the main knife-edge ridge, but there's a lot of bolder-jumping on the glacier and plenty of slippery scree. Note: this *is* the peak that Freya Stark wandered up almost by mistake in her book *Castles of the Assassins*. However, it is *not* the Takht-e Soleiman citadel near Takab (p118).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Azarbayjan HOSTEL \$\$
(☎262 2678; Mahestan 3rd lane off Nasiri St, Hasankeif; tr US\$25-50) Cheap by Kelardasht standards, this overgrown homestay is just 500m from Hasankeif Sq via Modarres St (fork left then right). Rooms have gas stove, fridge, bathroom and three squeezed-in beds. Those with sitting rooms cost US\$10 extra. The communal dining terrace is good for meeting other guests.

Hotel Park Chaman HOTEL \$\$
(☎264 3159; Park Chaman, Rudbarak; small/large ste US\$30/55, bungalows US\$60) Almost 7km from Hasankeif Sq, 700m before the Mountaineering Federation, look for the obvious blue-roofed modernist restaurant across the river. While not entirely tasteful, the suites are well-equipped with bathtub, choice of toilets and a balcony (no mountain views). The peaceful location is a good starting point for hikes.

Arash Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(☎262 8312; Hasankeif Sq; meals US\$3-7; ☉11am-3.30pm & 7.30-10pm) This is a bright, clean pine-ceilinged restaurant offering Iranian and Caspian favourites right on Hasankeif Sq.

Getting There & Around

Savaris to Chalus (US\$1, one hour) and Tehran (back/front US\$9/11, 3½ hours) leave from a stand 400m north of the square. Buses (US\$6, five hours) to Tehran's western terminal leave from the tiny Rahat Safar/Talay Safar office in Zibardast, 3km east of Hasankeif departing at 8am and 2pm in either direction.

Transport within Kelardasht usually requires chartering a **taxi** (☎262 9191) at US\$7 per hour.

Qazvin

قزوین

☎0281 / POP 342,000 / ELEV 1301M

Qazvin is famed for carpets and seedless grapes. The city was once capital of all Iran and has a considerable sprinkling of minor sights, but for most Western travellers its foremost role is as a launch point for excursions to the famous Castles of the Assassins in the marvellous Alamut Valley.

History

Founded by the Sassanian king Shapur I in the 3rd century AD, Qazvin prospered under the Seljuk rulers, who erected many fine buildings. It had a second, much later burst of prominence when the second Safavid shah, Tahmasp I (r 1524-76), transferred the Persian capital here from Tabriz. A great patron of the arts, his ambitious architectural plan for Qazvin proved to be only a dress rehearsal for Esfahan, where his successor, Shah Abbas I, set up court in 1598. The city centre is Azadi Sq, widely known as Sabz Meydan. The bazaar and alleys to its southeast are the most atmospheric areas for random strolling.

Sights

AROUND AZADI SQUARE & THE BAZAAR

Chehel Sotun چهلستون PALACE
When Qazvin took its turn as Iran's capital, this attractive, colonnaded cube was Shah Tahmasp's **royal palace**. Built in 1510, it was greatly remodelled in the Qajar era. Set in the town's little central park it looks especially photogenic at night, with its delicate balustrades floodlit and its back-lit coloured-glass windows glowing through the foliage. Inside is a **calligraphy museum** (☎223 3320; admission US\$0.50; ☉9am-1pm & 5-8.30pm).

Qazvin Museum MUSEUM
(☎223 4935; Helel-e-Ahmar St; admission US\$1; ☉9am-12.30pm & 4-6.30pm winter, 9am-12.30pm

& 5-7.30pm summer, closed Mon) This spacious modern museum predominantly features 19th-century decorative arts but the bottom floor has some 3000-year-old bronzes and ceramics from the Alamut Valley.

Bazaar & Craft workshops

BAZAAR

The fascinating covered bazaar amply repays idle wandering. At the east end of the fine Bazaar-e Vazim, **Saroye Vazir** is stacked high with bundled old carpets. It's one of several wonderfully down-at-heel caravanserais between which you'll still find the odd door-maker and metal workshop. A **cushion maker** reveals his craft in an alley off Molavi St and, further south-east, there's a **traditional shoemaker** near Shohada Sq.

The very appealing Qajar-era **Nabi (Shah) Mosque** with its Mogul-style topknots also has an impressively expansive courtyard. The 20th-century **Kantur Church** (Borj-e-Naghous) has a blue-brick belfry dome and sits in a tiny Russian graveyard.

OTHER LOCATIONS

Built in 1115, but extensively remodelled in the early 17th century, the **Masjed-e Jameh**

(Jameh Mosque) has huge *iwans* and a fine marble mihrab.

Aminiha Hosseiniyeh

TRADITIONAL HOUSE

(Molavi St at Amin Deadend; admission US\$1; ☉9am-1pm & 5-8pm). Tucked away in a walled rose garden is the well-preserved 1773 Aminiha Hosseiniyeh. It's a private mansion that doesn't look much from the outside, but has a splendidly gaudy wood, glass and mirror interior and a refreshingly cool, brick vaulted basement. A great place to unwind and write up your diary in peace.

Imamzadeh-ye Hossein

IMAMZADEH

This large, well-proportioned **shrine** has a Qajar facade, a 16th-century blue dome and plenty of new mirror tiling. It commemorates a son of Imam Reza and is convivially set in a big fountain courtyard surrounded by coloured-brick alcoves. Behind is a martyrs' graveyard and an aged fighter plane on a pole.

Cisterns

ARCHITECTURE

Qazvin has some of Iran's best-preserved domed cisterns where water was stored underground and cooled by wind towers. Sadly getting in is rarely possible so don't make a special trip, but if you're passing the most

CASTLES OF THE ASSASSINS

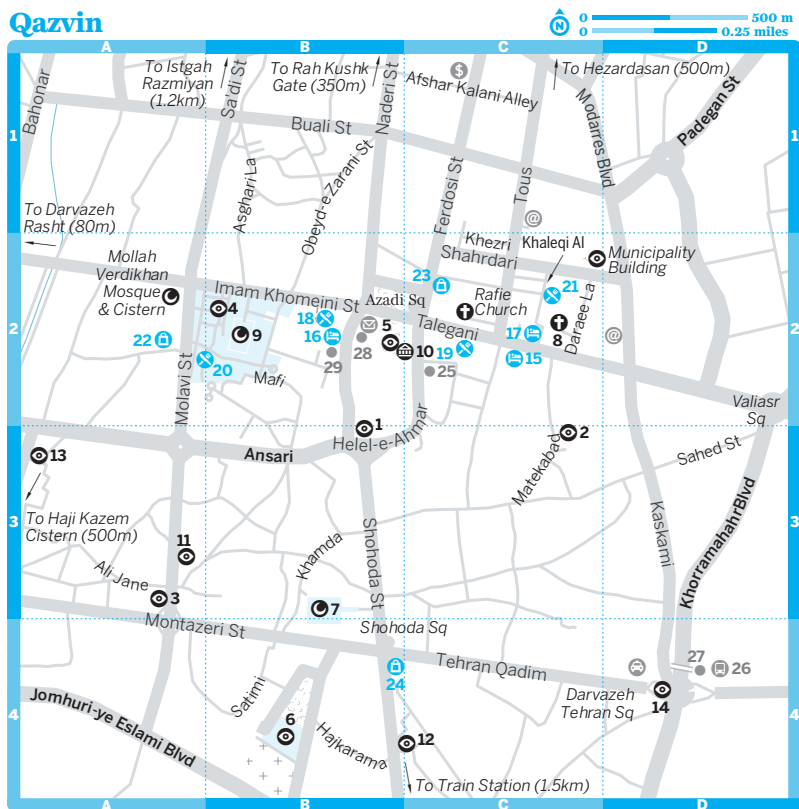
In the 12th century, a network of incredibly well fortified Alborz mountain castles sheltered the followers of Hasan-e Sabbah (1070–1124), spiritual leader of Islam's heretical Ismaili sect. In popular myth, Sabbah led a bizarre, much-feared mercenary organisation whose members were dispatched to murder or kidnap leading political and religious figures of the day. They believed that their actions would transport them to paradise. Supposedly Sabbah cunningly cultivated such beliefs by showing them beautiful secret gardens filled with enticing young maidens while unwittingly stoned on hashish. This gave them their popular name 'Hashish-iyun', root of the modern English term 'assassin'. Or so the story goes. Peter Willey's book, *Eagle's Nest*, gives an altogether more sympathetic version portraying Hasan Sabbah as a champion of the free-thinking, pro-science Islamic tradition and suggesting that the hashish tales were fabricated exaggerations designed to denigrate Ismaili Islam.

Whatever the truth, most of the impregnable Ismaili castles were captured by Hulagu Khan in 1256 using diplomatic trickery, having earlier forced the surrender of the Ismailis' spiritual leader (Sabbah's successor). Only two fortresses, Girdkuh and Lamiasar, decided to put up a fight. Thanks to their sophisticated water cisterns and vast food reserves they could hold out for years, 17 years in the case of Girdkuh! Before moving on, the Mongols systematically destroyed the castles' fortifications to avoid future difficulties. That means today it's history and brilliant scenery more than the scanty rubble that draws the few travellers that make it here.

The crushing of Alamut Castle was effectively the end of the Ismailis for generations though believers resurfaced centuries later and now Ismaili Islam is the predominant faith in parts of Tajikistan and northern Pakistan (though not at all in Iran).

The castles were forgotten and only returned to public consciousness with the publication of Dame Freya Stark's 1930s travel diary *Valleys of the Assassins*. A copy of that recently reprinted volume makes a great companion for the trip.

Qazvin



impressive from outside are the **Sardar cisterns** and the **Haji Kazem Cistern** with its well-preserved wind tower.

Gates

ARCHITECTURE

Tehran Gate (Darvazeh-e-Qadim-e-Tehran) and **Rah Kushk Gate** (Darbe Kousht; Naderi St) are two dinky little Qajar decorative remnants of Qazvin's once-vast city walls. The much more massive **Ali Qapu** (Helel-e-Ahmar St) was originally a 16th-century gateway to the royal precinct, a kind of forbidden inner city. Today it's a police post so don't take photographs.

Tourist maps mark dozens of other historic buildings, but few are at all visually exciting. Even the colourfully domed 14th-century **Amineh Khatun shrine**, with its fine blue conical spire and Kufic script, seems forlornly lost in the warren of banal modern backstreets. The **Safa Hammam** (Molavi St at Taqavi Alley; bath US\$1; ☎7am-7pm Sat-Thu, 7am-

2pm Fri) is the best known of Qazvin's traditional subterranean bathhouses to remain active. The domed central rest area is attractive. Men only.

Activities

Qazvin is a good place to prepare for hikes in the Alamut area. **Mehdi Babayi** (☎0912-682 3228) is an experienced trekking and climbing guide who pays attention to key safety details, even though his organisation can seem somewhat haphazard.

Sleeping

Hotel Iran

HOTEL \$

(☎222 8877; Peyghambarieh St; s/tw US\$40/55) This popular traveller favourite manages to be simultaneously quiet yet eminently central. The pleasant, decently furnished rooms are great value with good bathrooms and central air-con - if they turn it on! Owner Karim Noruzi speaks good English,

Qazvin

📍 Sights

- 1 Ali Qapu.....B3
- 2 Amineh Khatun Shrine.....C3
- 3 Aminiha Hosseiniyeh.....A3
- 4 BazaarB2
Calligraphy Museum (see 5)
- 5 Chehel Sotun.....B2
- 6 Imamzadeh-ye Hossein.....B4
- 7 Jameh Mosque.....B3
- 8 Kantur Church.....C2
- 9 Nabi (Shah) Mosque.....B2
- 10 Qazvin MuseumC2
- 11 Safa Hammam.....A3
- 12 Sardar Big CisternC4
- 13 Sardar Smaller Cistern.....A3
- 14 Tehran Gate.....D4

🛏 Sleeping

- 15 Alborz Hotel.....C2
- 16 Hotel IranB2
- 17 Khaksar Hotel.....C2

🍴 Eating

- 18 Chaykhaneh AqaqiaB2
- 19 Eghbali.....C2
- 20 NobaharA2
- 21 YasC2

🛍 Shopping

- 22 Cushion-Maker.....A2
- 23 Nakhajir Camping Shop.....C2
- 24 Traditional Shoemaker.....B4

🚗 Transport

- 25 Arash Safar.....C2
- 26 Main Bus Terminal.....D4
- 27 Shuttle Taxis to Valiasr SqD4
- 28 Shuttle Taxis to Valiasr SqB2
- 29 Shuttle Taxis via Ali Qapu to
Takestan Minibus Stand.....B2

but compare options before signing up to his Alamut trips.

Alborz Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎/fax 222 6631; www.alborzhotel.com; Taleqani Blvd; s/tw US\$41/66; 📶📶) This appealing mid-range option has small but fully equipped modern rooms with golden bedcovers, towels and BBC World TV. Staff are very helpful and the lobby coffee shop makes a pleasantly low-key meeting point.

Khaksar Hotel

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎222 4239; Khaleqi Alley; s/d/tr US\$12/15/18) Neat, spacious rooms with shared bath-

rooms. Better than most other Qazvin *mosaferkhanehs*.

🍴 Eating & Drinking

Qazvin's local speciality is *qimeh nasar* (also spelt *gheymeh nasser*), a tangy lamb stew made with diced pistachios.

Nobahar

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Bazar Dimaj; mains US\$1-5; ☎10am-4pm Sat-Thu) This is a fairly large, comparatively low-stress bazaar eatery that serves stews (including *qimeh nasar*), which you can choose by pointing at the relevant kitchen cauldron.

Hezardasan

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(☎335 0100; Hafezi Alley, off Khayyam St; meals US\$3-5; ☎11.30am-3.30pm & 7-11pm) At the upmarket northern end of Khayyam St, Hezardasan makes a valiant attempt at giving its cellar room that *sofrakhane sonati* (old-style teahouse) feel, but the overall effect is a little too neat to be memorable. Its delicious *qimeh nasar* comes mounded into barberry rice.

Eghbali

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎223 3347; Taleqani St; mains US\$4-10; ☎11am-4pm & 7-10pm) Prices are high and despite the odd fake stone frieze there isn't much atmosphere. Nonetheless it's popular with travellers for its English menu and reliable food.

The convivially crowded **Yas**, (off Taleqani Blvd) in a dead-end alley opposite Alborz Hotel, is cheap. There are several similar restaurants on Ayatollah Khamenei Blvd east of Valiasr Sq.

Chaykhaneh Aqaqia

TEAHOUSE \$

(off Imam Khomeini St; tea US\$0.20; ☎8am-10pm Sat-Thu) This wonderfully unpretentious, cheap and down-market all-male teahouse has chess and *nard* to play. Easily missed, the entrance is on the left off a covered access-way to the workaday Sadd Sultani caravanserai.

Shopping

The **Nakhajir Camping Shop** (☎222 4551; Ferdosi St; ☎8am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu) sells great-value camping gear including head torches (from US\$6), sprung hiking sticks (US\$9) and 1:300,000 Farsi maps of the Alborz (US\$1).

i Information

Internet Access

All charge US\$1 per hour.

Parsee Coffeenet (☎223 0119; Tous Deadend, off Khayyam St; ☉9am-midnight)

Shahbda Coffeenet (☎223 9093; Modarres Blvd; ☉9.30am-10pm Sat-Thu, 10am-11pm Fri)

Money

Sharifi Exchange (Ferdosi St; ☉9am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu)

Tourist Information

Tourist information booth (☎335 4708; www.qazvintourism.com; Naderi St; ☉8am-12.30pm & 5-7pm Sat-Thu) Facing the historic Rah Kushk Gate, this is one of Iran's most professional tourist information offices, offering great free maps and useful brochures (partly in English). It can arrange guides to get you into normally closed architectural curiosities and has masses more detailed information available.

Travel Agents

Arash Safar Travel (☎222 2260; Helel-e-Ahmar St; ☉8am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu) Can book train tickets for you and sells air tickets ex-Tehran.

i Getting There & Away

Bus, Minibus & Savari

Handy services from the **main bus terminal** (Darvazeh Sq) are included in the boxed text, above.

Official Tehran savaris leave from outside (US\$3). Unofficial ones pick up at Valiasr Sq.

Cranky buses run to Hir (via Razmiyan) around 11am and to Mo'alleh Kalayeh (US\$1, 2½ hours) around 1.30pm (not Friday). However, for these Alamut Valley destinations, savaris are vastly better. Mo'alleh Kalayeh savaris (US\$5, 1¾ hours) depart from gigantic Qaribqosh Sq,

2km east of Valiasr Sq. Razmiyan savaris (per person/car US\$2/10, 1¼ hours) depart very occasionally from **Istgah Razmiyan** (Helalabad Sq off Sa'di St): to get there take a shuttle taxi up Naderi St to Sardaran Sq, walk a block west along Beheshti St then 300m southwest down Shahid Fayazbakhsh St.

For Rasht, savaris depart from **Darvazeh Rasht** (Enqelab Sq) where some through buses also pick up/drop off.

Train

The best-timed trains to Tehran (US\$2.50, two hours) depart at 8.30am and 10.35am. For Zanjan (2½ hours) handy trains leave at 8am and 5.40pm. There are useful sleeper trains to Tabriz at 9.10pm (US\$6, 11 hours) and to Mashhad at 8.45pm, but tickets can be in short supply.

i Getting Around

City buses run both ways along the main drag (Imam Khomeini St/Taleqani Blvd), but cars and shuttle taxis can only use it eastbound, returning from Valiasr Sq to central Azadi Sq (Sabz Meydan) via Shahrdari or Buali Sts. From the centre to the bus terminal change at Valiasr Sq. From the terminal to Azadi Sq loop around via the bazaar.

Alamut Valley

الموت

ELEV 1400M

Few places in Iran offer a more tempting invitation to hike, explore and reflect than the fabled Alamut and Shahrud Valleys. Beneath soaring Alborz peaks, the landscapes are inspirational and delightfully varied, with scenic suggestions of Patagonia, Switzerland, central Australia and Syria all spiced by a uniquely fascinating medieval

BUSES FROM QAZVIN

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Esfahan	US\$14	6hr	1pm Talayi, Taavoni 6
Hamadan	US\$5	3½hr	7am Seiro Safar
Hamadan (VIP)	US\$8	3½hr	2pm Seiro Safar
Kermanshah	US\$7	7hr	7.45am, 2.30pm Seiro Safar
Mashhad	US\$11	18hr	2pm, 2.30pm Talayi
Rasht	US\$2	3hr	7.45am, 2.45pm Alborz 7.30am, 3pm TBT
Tehran	US\$3	2½hr	frequent

history. Nestled almost invisibly on widely spread rocky knolls and pinnacles lie the shattered remnants of over 50 ruined fortresses. Shrouded in fabulous myths, they were the heavily fortified lairs of the medieval world's most feared religious cult and are collectively known as the **Castles of the Assassins** (see boxed text, p109). The most interesting are at Gazor Khan (Alamut Castle) and Razmiyan (Lamiasar Castle). Beware that Alamut Castle is NOT in Alamut town (aka Mo'Allem Kalayeh).

Using a mix of savaris and taxis it's possible to visit both Razmiyan (65km) and Gazor Khan (110km) in a long day trip from Qazvin. But it's much more fun to take your time, sleeping a night or three at Gazor Khan to do some trekking. If you can manage enough Farsi to charter a taxi there's no real reason to take a guide, though a knowledgeable historian could help bring to life the castles' bare stones.

A guide (or at least a bag-carrying mule and mule-driver) is wise, however, if you're planning a multiday, cross-Alborz trek into the Caspian hinterland.

RAZMIYAN &

LAMIASAR CASTLE رازمیان و کاخ لامیاسر

☞0272 / POP 1800 / ELEV 1684M

The winding descent into Razmiyan from Qazvin passes some timeless mud hamlets and gives wonderful views over the Shahrud Valley's rice terraces.

Central Razmiyan itself is a strangely soulless place but a handily central **taxi agency** (☞322 2828) makes it easy to arrange onward transport if you've arrived by savari. A taxi costs US\$4 up to the Lamiasar Castle access path (2.5km towards Hir). From there it's an obvious 20-minute stroll to the top edge of the castle where a remnant hint of round bastion and some other wall chunks remain. The castle site sweeps down from here to outer-wall remnants that drop vertically into the valley below. Allow at least an hour to seek out the various degraded fortifications, enjoy the birdsong and meet the lizards. Bring a hat and sunscreen as there's minimal shade.

There's no formal accommodation in Razmiyan. A taxi to Mo'Allem Kalayeh costs US\$12, or US\$15 if you tack on an 8km detour to **Evan Lake** en route. With its powerful mountain backdrop, the tiny lake would be stunningly beautiful if it weren't for nearby power lines and muddy car-washing spots.

MO'ALLEM KALAYEH

& ANDEJ

☞0282 / POP 4700 / ELEV 1817M

معلم کلايه و اندج

Sometimes called Alamut town, Mo'Allem Kalayeh is the Alamut Valley's one-street district centre. It's a useful transport staging post for the region but not a sight in itself. If you get stuck here, **Haddodi Restaurant** (☞321 6362; 2-/6-bed r US\$11/16) rents two very simple rooms. It's on the main street 50m east of the eagle statue. The town centre, where rare buses and savaris loiter, is 600m further east. Savaris to Qazvin (US\$5) are an hour quicker than the dreadfully slow bus (US\$1, daily except Friday) that departs once feeder buses from outlying villages have arrived. For Gazor Khan taxi charters cost US\$6, or US\$11 including a side trip to Andej en route. Or take the returning school bus around 11.45am.

The 8km road-spur to **Andej** (elev 1587m) passes beside three truly awesome red-rock side-canyons, somewhat reminiscent of the Olgas (in central Australia). The turnoff is just northwest of **Shahrak**, which has a prominent (but not Assassin-related) castle ruin.

GAZOR KHAN &

ALAMUT CASTLE

☞0282 / ELEV 2062M

گازرخان و قلعه الموت

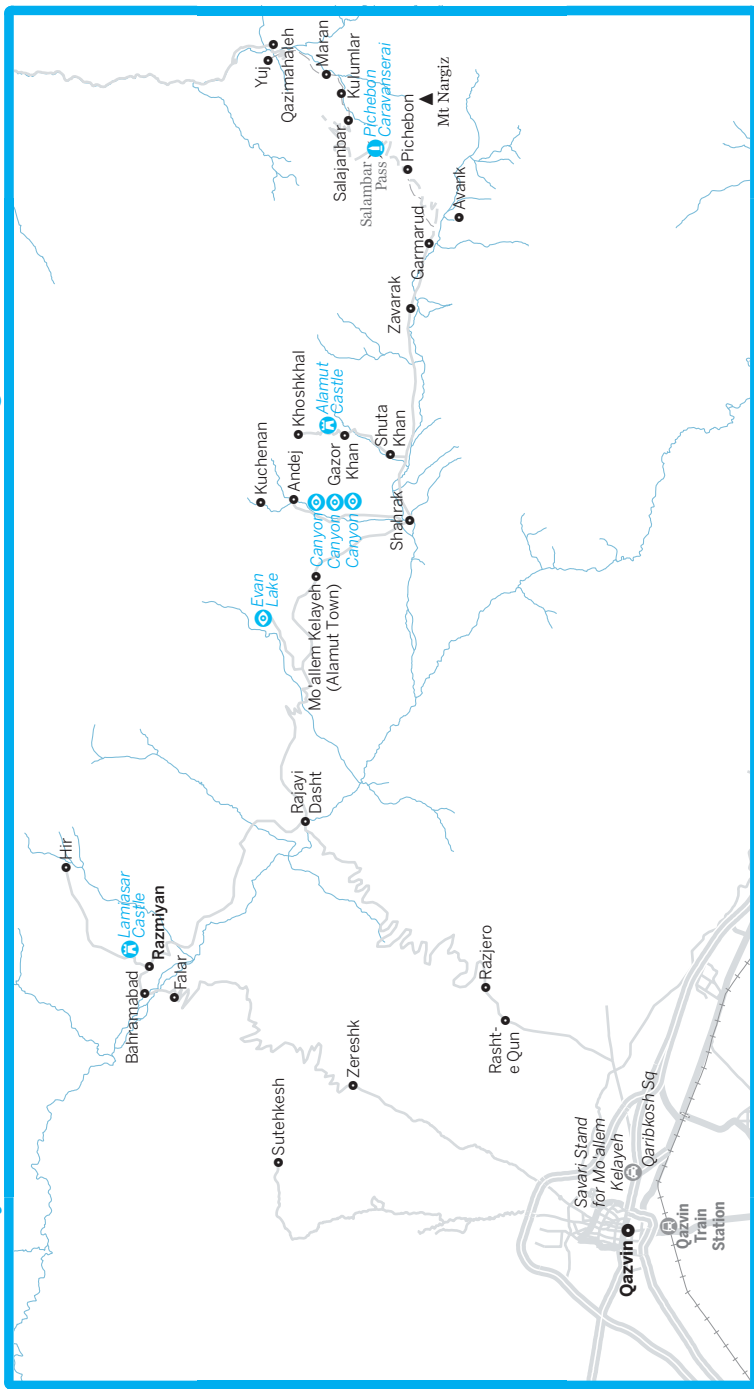
The region's greatest attraction is the fabled ruin of **Alamut Castle** (admission US\$1; ☺dawn-dusk), Hasan-e Sabbah's famous fortress site. The site is a dramatic crag rising abruptly above the pleasant, unpretentious little cherry-growing village of Gazor Khan. The access path starts about 700m beyond the village square and requires a steep, sweaty 25-minute climb via an obvious stairway. On top, archaeological workings are shielded by unsightly corrugated metal sheeting. But the phenomenal views from the ramparts are unmissable.

Several tempting mountain hikes start in Gazor Khan or Khoshkchal village, a steep, 15-minute 4WD ride beyond. Route suggestions are extensively described in a helpful travellers' tip book at the charming **Hotel Koosaran** (☞377 3377; dm US\$6) in Gazor Khan. That's effectively just the guest room in Ali Samie's family home. It can sleep up to five, curled up on cotton mattresses on the floor. Simple but tasty meals are available (US\$2) if you ask ahead and the flat roof facing Gazor Khan's village square makes a great people-watching perch.

Managed by a Grimm's fairy-tale crone, the **Golestan Inn** (☞377 3312; r/ste' US\$15/18)

Alamut Valley

0 10 miles 20 km



offers rather tatty accommodation amid trees on the slight rise that directly overlooks the stairway to Alamut Rock. The 'rooms' share a decent kitchen and a grotty squat toilet. The 'suites' are a pair of semidetached concrete houselets with run-down balcony seats amid overgrown foliage. Kabab meals cost US\$4 (by pre-arrangement).

Hotel Farhangian (☎377 3446; tr US\$6) is a converted former school whose former classrooms now form reasonably well equipped though not luxurious 'suites' with kitchen and bathroom. Beware that the place gets locked up when the receptionist (a small boy) goes home for his meals! Bring your own food. There's no English sign, but it's tucked behind the Alamut Research Centre, up a short driveway that heads south from the castle trailhead. Don't rush to believe locals who tell you it's closed.

Savaris usually run to Qazvin at around 7am (US\$5, 2½ hours). At the same time there's a bus to Mo'alleh Kalayeh (school days, US\$0.5, 45 minutes). Both leave from the village square outside Hotel Koosaran.

TREKKING TOWARDS THE CASPIAN: GARMARUD TO YUJ

Crossing the Alborz on foot from the Alamut Valley to the Caspian hinterland is geographically compelling, scenically stunning and culturally fascinating. You'll be one of just a handful of foreigners since Freya Stark (in the 1930s) to make such a trip, but hurry: road builders are slowly extending tracks further and further into the isolated mountain villages and a whole way of life revolving around donkey transport will soon be a thing of the past.

The route described here isn't especially arduous, though a guide and/or mule-driver is recommended to avoid difficulties at a few awkward spots, especially if you attempt the walk before June, when you'll be tramping through treacherous snows on the highest sections. It's most pleasant to allow three days, though two days or even less is quite possible if you're in some inexplicable hurry. (In midsummer you could shorten the walk by arranging a 4WD to take you as far as **Salajanbar**.)

The hike starts in pretty, canyon-framed **Garmarud** village, 18km east of the Gazor Khan turning, where the Alamut Valley road's asphalt ends. Whether you walk or drive, the route goes via picturesque **Pichebon hamlet** and across the 3200m **Salambar Pass** beside the small, partly

renovated (but deserted) **Pichebon Caravanserai**. There are fabulous views here. On foot from Garmarud it took us 5½ hours to that caravanserai (with a guide, short-cutting through flower-filled meadows and beneath a waterfall). From the caravanserai it's another three hours to Salajanbar, descending very slowly through pretty thorn shrubs and fields of yellow iris. If you follow the 4WD track instead of the walking path, take the right-hand fork an hour beyond the pass.

Wonderfully picturesque **Maran** is the last village en route with no semblance of a road. Walking there from Salajanbar takes three hours and requires fording a stream twice. While not that hard, it's potentially dangerous when the water's high: slip and you'll be washed over a waterfall to certain doom.

Another three hours' downhill hike from Maran brings you to an un-asphalted road below pretty **Yuj** village set in flower-filled meadows.

Sleeping

Homestays make Garmarud a great base for shorter hikes – ask at Mr Sardeghi's tiny **Grocery Shop** (☎379 4008, 0912-682 8991); he can also help you arrange *qotr* (mules) to carry your bags.

At Pichebon, grassy meadows are great for camping – ask permission in the village.

In Maran village, **Nematullah Mansukhi** (☎0912-282 140; r per person US\$10, meals around US\$4) can provide a simple homestay with great home-cooked meals. By pre-arrangement he can also organise mules from Yuj (around US\$12) or even Garmarud (around US\$30). The village has a tiny, super-rustic *hammam*.

Getting There & Away

To reach Garmarud, a *dar baste* (closed door) savari costs US\$10 from Qazvin or US\$5 from Mo'alleh Kalayeh. From the end of the hike in Yuj, a savari to Tonekabon supposedly departs at 8am (US\$2, two hours). Otherwise get someone to phone the savari driver **Shabani** (☎0911-394 836) from Yuj's village telephone. Hopefully he'll arrive to pick you up within a few hours. Yuj has an informal baker but no shops so keep some snacks in reserve for the wait.

Soltaniyeh

سلطانیه

☎0242 / POP 8700 / ELEV 1787M

Little Soltaniyeh ('Town of the Sultans') was purpose-built by the Ilkhanid Mongols

as their Persian capital from 1302. But less than a century later in 1384 it was largely destroyed by Tamerlane. Fortunately three fine monuments survived.

👁 Sights

Oljeitu Mausoleum

MAUSOLEUM

(Gonbad-e Soltaniyeh; admission US\$1; 🕒8am-5pm) By far the most dramatic of the three monuments is the magnificent mausoleum built for this Mongol sultan, now a Unesco World Heritage site. Almost 25m in diameter and 48m high it's the world's tallest brick dome. Inside, renovators' scaffolding can't hide the enormity of the enclosed space. A ground-floor exhibition illustrates the ongoing restoration process. Spiral stairs within the hugely thick walls lead up two floors to a terrace with panoramic views and fine stucco-work vaulting.

The building is named for its sponsor, Oljeitu Khodabandeh. Oljeitu changed religions as often as a film star changes spouses. During his Shiite phase, egged on by a favourite concubine, he had planned for the mausoleum to re-house the remains of Imam Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. That would have made it Shiite Islam's holiest pilgrimage site outside Mecca (instead of Najaf, Iraq). However, Oljeitu couldn't persuade the Najaf *ulema* to give him Ali's relics and eventually he was buried here himself in 1317.

Other Buildings

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

The mausoleum approach crosses partly rebuilt stubs of Soltaniyeh's **citadel wall** and some **archaeological excavations** (admission free) of the Mongol-era townscape.

Some 500m southwest of the main complex, the 1330 **Khanegah Dervish Monastery** (Hamadan Hwy; admission free; 🕒8am-5pm) has restored cells around a courtyard leading to the **Boq'eh Chelabi-oglu Mausoleum** behind the mihrab of a shattered-sided former mosque.

From the Oljeitu Mausoleum's upper terrace, it's easy to spot the lonely blue-domed **Mullah Hasan Kashi tomb** (admission free) in semi-desert, 1.5km south towards the mountain skyline. It was built by Safavid Shah Tahmasp to honour Hasan Kashi, a 14th-century mystic whose recasting of Islam's historical sagas as Persian-language poetic epics unwittingly had a vast influence over Shia Islam's future direction.

📍 Getting There & Away

Soltaniyeh is 5km south of the old Zanjan-Qazvin road, but *not* accessible from the parallel motorway. By public transport it's easiest to visit as a day trip from Zanjan. Direct savaris (US\$1, 30 minutes) and very irregular minibuses (US\$0.50, 50 minutes) from Zanjan's Honar-estan Sq drop you an obvious 10-minute walk north of the mausoleum.

Zanjan

زنجان

📍0241 / POP 367,000 / ELEV 1653M

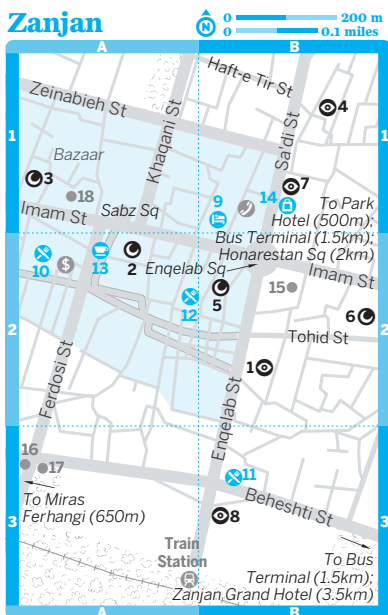
Hidden in tiny alleys behind its modern facade, Zanjan retains some attractive mosques, a fantastic bazaar, a plethora of knife-grinders and some delightful teahouse restaurants. The city is a logical base for visiting the impressive Soltaniyeh mausoleum and a good staging point to reach Takht-e Soleiman via the scenic Dandy road.

Zanjan city's moment of infamy came in 1851 with a bloody siege ordered by Persian prime minister Amir Kabir. The resulting massacre was part of the relatively successful campaign to crush the nascent Baha'i religion. Baha'i-ism had only broken away from Islam three years before, but was spreading much too rapidly for Tehran's liking.

👁 Sights

Built in 1926 but looking considerably older, the unique, unmarked **Rakhatshor-Khaneh** (Rakhatshorkhaneh Alley; admission US\$1; 🕒8am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is a dome-and-column subterranean hall whose water channels were originally constructed as a public laundry-place. It's dotted with wax washerwomen to remind you how life was before Electrolux and Zanussi. There's also a calm garden courtyard.

The long, narrow, mostly brick-vaulted **bazaar** is inspiring and surrounding alleys hide half-a-dozen historic mosques. Entered between copper shops off Enqelab St at the bazaar's ungentrified eastern end is the delightfully decrepit yet still-active **Dokhtar Caravanserai**. Grandly tiled, the dome and minarets of the **Rasul-Ullah (Sai-ini) Mosque** peep above central Enqelab Sq. Madrased cells line the inner courtyard of the sizable 1826 **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque), accessed through a spired portal on Imam St. **Seyid Ibrahim (Imamzadeh) Mosque** is similarly extensive. The dinky **Khanum (Women's) Mosque** has a commonly photographed pair of squat pepper-



pot minarets but its 1940s architecture is of little artistic merit.

The 1851 Baha'i massacres were perpetrated in lanes behind where you now see philosopher **Soravardi's bust** (Sa'di St) on a library wall. **Pol-e-Sardar**, an attractive Safavid bridge to the southwest of the town centre, is visible west of the Bijar road.

Sleeping

Park Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎332 2228; fax 332 6798; Imam St; s/tw US\$20/28; ♿) Upgrades are complete at this reliable option near Azadi Sq. The manager speaks some English.

Zanjan Grand Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(Hotel Bozorg Zanjan; ☎728 8190; Basij Sq; s/tw/ste US\$92/104/139; ♿♿) By far Zanjan's top option, the stylishly sparse, international tandar rooms are spacious, with impeccable bathrooms, a slight niggle being the ill-conceived light-switching system. Staff try hard to please. However, the noisy location is inconvenient if you're not driving.

Hotel Sa'di MOSAFERKHANEH \$
(☎322 2528; Imam St; s/tw/tr without bathroom US\$6/8/10) This sensibly priced *mosaferkhaneh* is relatively well kept but the windowless singles are truly minuscule.

Zanjan

Sights

- 1 Dokhtar Caravanserai.....B2
- 2 Jameh Mosque.....A2
- 3 Khanum (Women's) Mosque.....A1
- 4 Rakhatshor-KhanehB1
- 5 Rasul-Ullah (Sai-ini) MosqueB2
- 6 Seyid Ibrahim (Imamzadeh) Mosque.....B2
- 7 Soravardi BustB1
- 8 Station Gateway.....B3

Sleeping

- 9 Hotel Sa'di.....B1

Eating

- 10 Haji Dadashi.....A2
- 11 Karavansara SangiB3
- 12 Sofrakhane Sonati Abache.....A2

Drinking

- 13 Elogulu TeahouseA2

Shopping

- 14 Bookshop.....B1

Transport

- 15 Eastbound Shuttle Taxis.....B2
- 16 Rare Minibuses to Bijar & DandyA3
- 17 Savaris to Tehran, Qazvin & Tabriz.....A3
- 18 Westbound Shuttle TaxisA1

Eating & Drinking

In addition to the traditionally styled places listed below there are numerous standard *kababis* along Imam St.

Sofrakhane Sonati Abache TEAHOUSE \$

(Bostani Bashkah; ☎323 7250; Bashkah Alley; dizi US\$2, qalyan US\$1; ☎8.30am-10pm) Good for bread-and-honey breakfasts, this former *zurkhaneh* chamber is an octagonal domed cellar eccentrically decorated with old samovars, portraits and peacock feathers. Tea (US\$0.50) comes with dates and a swizzle-stick of crystal sugar. At night it's popular with (male) university students. Look for the black door with brass knobs and knockers.

Haji Dadash TEAHOUSE \$

(☎322 2020; bazaar; meals US\$1-5; ☎10am-11pm) This family-oriented tea-cavern overflows with character, especially in its carpet-draped front cellar. The good *dizi sangi* (peasants' stew of lamb, chickpeas and

THRONE OF SOLEIMAN

A great way to visit **Takht-e Soleiman** (see below) is by chartering a taxi for a day from Zanjan (around US\$40, full day with stops) travelling on afterwards via Takab to be dropped off in Bijar. The route passes some fabulously timeless villages, particularly once you've passed the unexotic mining town of Dandy. **Shikhlar**, 20km west of Dandy is dramatically backed by the pyramidal peak of **Tozcludagh** (Dusty Mountain). **Qara-volkhana**, 20km further (10km before Takht-e Soleiman), has particularly picturesque mud-block homes rising between spindly trees and a lurid, metallic-green igloo-shaped mini-shrine at its southern end. Bucolic meadowland behind offers great hikes and the possible ascent of **Mt Belqeis**, topped by fragmentary ruins of a Sassanid line-of-sight fortress.

If you take the daily Zanjan-Dandy minibus (around 9am), use Dandy's **taxi stand** (☎0242 352 2566) to charter a ride for the last 50km to Takht-e Soleiman.

potato) comes with a plate of fresh herbs to fine-tune the flavour but tea and qalyan for four costs a hefty US\$6. Enter opposite the portal of Mirza Mehdi mosque within the main bazaar.

Karavansara Sangi TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(☎326 1266; Beheshti St; meals US\$2.50-5; ☉11am-4pm & 6-11pm) Atmospheric if a little over-lit, this 400-year-old stone building is an L-shaped remnant of a caravanserai with 10 carpet-decked vaulted alcoves facing a long row of tables. Try the *kashki bademjun* (eggplant paste, US\$1.50).

Eloğlu Teahouse TEAHOUSE \$
(Ferdosi St; tea US\$0.50, qalyan US\$1; ☉8am-9.30pm) Yet another appealing subterranean teahouse; the Eloğlu is in a modern basement beautified with Rajasthani textiles.

i Information

Export Development Bank (Ferdosi St; ☉9am-noon) exchanges money. **Rayanet** (Sa'di St; per hr US\$1; ☉8am-midnight) has excellent internet connection and friendly staff. Farsi-only city maps are sometimes sold from bookshops opposite the **telephone office** (Sa'di St; ☉7am-10.30pm) and are available free from room 25. **Miras Ferhangi** (☎323 9007; miras_zanjan@hotmail.com; Khayyam St; ☉8am-2pm).

i Getting There & Away

Buses to Esfahan (US\$6, 6.30pm), Rasht (US\$3, 8.30am) and Tehran (fairly frequent) use the big but eerily empty terminal, five minutes' walk south of Shilat Sq.

Savaris and some buses for Tehran, Qazvin and Tabriz pick up at the Beheshti (Khayyam)/Ferdosi St junction. If arriving on a Tehran-Tabriz bus that's bypassing Zanjan on the motorway, get off at the junction marked 'Bijar'

(an easy, obvious 2km walk from central Zanjan) NOT at the 'Zanjan' exit, which is around 10km out to the east.

Savaris and occasional minibuses to Soltaniyeh (US\$1) leave from Honarestan Sq.

The train station is beyond a Dali-esque gateway of winged wheels. Best-timed departures for Tehran (US\$2 to US\$4.50, four hours) via Qazvin (two hours) are at 6.14am and 8.24am. Tickets are hard to find for the 9.45pm and 11.10pm sleepers to Tabriz (US\$7, 8½ hours) via Maraqeh (five hours).

i Getting Around

Useful shuttle-taxis run from Enqelab Sq to Honarestan Sq passing near the terminal. Others go from Sabz Sq to Esteqlal Sq.

Takht-e Soleiman

تخت سلیمان

ELEV 2152M

THE MAIN RUINS

Sitting in a high, lonely bowl of mountains ringed by 1500-year-old fortress walls, this **Unesco World Heritage Site** (☎0482-563 3311; admission US\$1; ☉8am-sunset) is one of the most memorable sights of western Iran. In the 3rd century AD the state religion of Sassanian Persia was Zoroastrianism (see p164) and Takht-e Soleiman (then called Azergoshaasb) was its spiritual centre. The site was perfect. Zoroastrianism had by this stage incorporated many Magi-inspired elements, including the veneration of earth, wind (plenty here), water and fire. Water (albeit undrinkably poisonous) was provided in abundance by the limpidly beautiful 'bottomless' **crater lake** that still forms the centre of the site. This lake pours forth 90L

per second and would have been channelled through an Anahita-style water temple. The fire was provided thanks to a natural volcanic gas channelled through ceramic pipes to sustain an 'eternal flame' in the *ateshkadeh* (fire temple).

Today only relatively fragmentary ruins remain and you shouldn't expect Persepolis-style carvings. Nonetheless, the sheer age and magnificent setting here are attractions enough.

Takht-e Soleiman's name (Throne of Solomon) is not based on real historical links to Old Testament King Solomon. It was in fact a cunning 7th-century invention by the temple's Persian guardians in the face of the Arab invasion. Realising Islam's reverence for biblical prophets they entirely fabricated a tale of Solomon's one-time residence to avert the site's certain destruction. The ruse worked, the complex survived and the name stuck.

In the 13th century, Takht-e Soleiman became a summer retreat for the Mongol Ilkhanid khans. The remnants of their hunting palace is now covered with a discordant modern roof forming a store-room (often locked) for amphora, unlabelled column fragments, photos and a couple of ceramic sections of those ancient gas pipes.

A guide is often available at the site gate and can help you make sense of all the piles of stone if you share enough language. Alternatively, navigate yourself using a glossy bilingual Farsi/English map/brochure (US\$1), which are sold at the ticket booth but not displayed. Ask.

Takht-e Soleiman is 2km from **Nosratabad**. Archaeologists believe that beneath that mud-and-haystack village is the site of Shiz, once a Nestorian-Christian centre of Graeco-Persian learning. Nosratabad has a minuscule kabab window, but the nearest accommodation is 42km away in Takab.

ZENDAN-E SOLEIMAN

This dramatic 97m conical peak dominates the valley landscape for miles around. Though it's now bare of all construction, the cone was once enclosed by fortified walls and topped by a religious sanctuary that archaeologists suggest dated back to 900 BC. Zendan-e Soleiman means Solomon's Prison, though anyone jailed within the central crater wouldn't have lasted long given the noxious sulphurous fumes. Peering gingerly into its dizzying void can be suffocating enough. Assuming you're reasonably fit,

climbing to the crater's edge should take under 15 minutes. The path is muddy but obvious, zig-zagging up from the Takab road about 4km south of the main Takht-e Soleiman ruins.

i Getting There & Away

Unless you charter a ride from Zanjan or Dandy, the approach is from Takab. From a small taxi stand on the western edge of Takab town, taxis ask US\$7 return including enough time to quickly run around the site and to dash up Zendan-e Soleiman. Add US\$2 per hour if you hang around. Savaris and minibuses only run to Nosratabad once or twice a day and leave you 2km short of Takht-e Soleiman. Traffic is often very thin making hitchhiking awkward.

Sanandaj

سندج

0871 / POP 358,000 / ELEV 1502M

Even by Iran's super-hospitable standards, Sanandaj is a remarkably friendly city. It's the capital of Kordestan province, a good base for visits to Palangan and a great place to learn more about Kurdish history and culture. You'll see plenty of men wearing traditional cummerbunds and baggy Kurdish trousers. Yet it's a modern, noticeably prosperous city with a large, fashionable population of students ever anxious to try out their English. In Sanandaj's Sorani-Kurdish *ju-an* means beautiful and *deso hoshbe* means thank you.

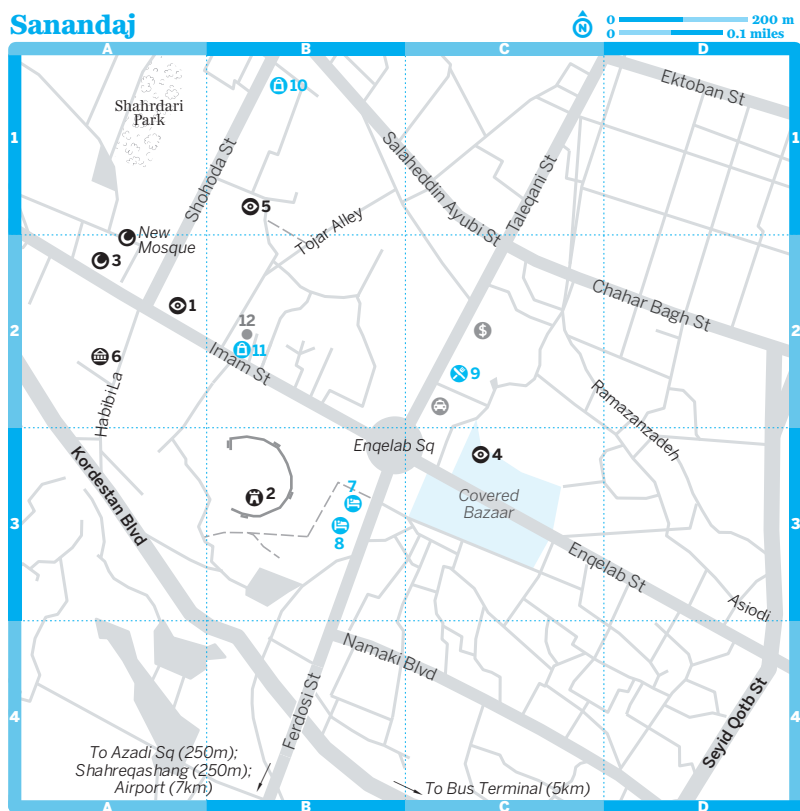
History

Originally known as Senna (as it still is to local Kurds), the city was of major importance in the Middle Ages but withered to nothing in the chaotic post-Chaldoran era. A *dej* (fortress) was built here in the early 18th century and Senna-dej slowly developed into Sanandaj. From here the powerful Ardalans emirs came to rule the last autonomous principality of Iranian Kurdistan up until 1867. Under the Ardalans the town developed many fine 19th-century buildings, though most have since been lost to rapacious 20th-century development. Busily commercial Ferdosi St links the twin centres Enqelab and Azadi Sqs. From the latter, Abidar St slopes up into the folds of a rocky ridge that was the city's historic defence and is today the pleasant **Abidar mountain park**.

i Sights

The **fortress** (Imam St) is firmly closed for military use, though a tea bazaar huddles at its eastern edge.

Sanandaj



Over the road, the **covered bazaar** is cruelly bisected by Enqelab St but within is the unusual 1805 **Khan Hamam** (admission US\$1; ☉9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun). The interior has considerably restored grey-and-white floral and bird motifs, attractive tiling and remarkably lifelike 'bathers' enjoying the historic bathhouse. The easily missed door has a brass 'fist' knocker: walk one mini-block into the bazaar beside Mehmanpazir Jahan, then one block right and the museum is on your left.

Lotfolla Sheik-al Islam Mansion MUSEUM (Habibi Lane; admission US\$2; ☉9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm) The well-renovated Lotfolla Sheikh-al-Islam Mansion houses the **Regional Museum** whose multicoloured windows (*orosi*) were designed for practicality as well as beauty: supposedly they disorientate mosquitoes. Exhibits include some extraordinarily old pottery and metalwork treasures but sadly the acoustically

engineered fountain-cellar is generally kept locked.

Asef Mansion MUSEUM (Asif Diwan; Imam St; admission US\$1; ☉8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Tue-Sun) This is another attractively restored Qajar building that's now a museum of Kurdish life. Mannequins are dressed in various distinctive tribal costumes that are still commonly worn in valleys around Kordestan. One room features Sanandaj's speciality wood-inlay crafts. A side courtyard just within the mansion's entrance leads through to a vaulted **gallery** (admission free) that has sporadic art exhibitions.

Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) مسجد جامع MOSQUE, MUSEUM (Darolesan Mosque; Imam St) In 1813 Amonulla Khan sponsored this fine construction, with tiled twin minarets and 32 interior domes. He was so pleased with the result that he re-

Sanandaj

📍 Sights

- 1 Asef Mansion.....A2
Cultural Heritage Organisation
of Kordestan.....(see 6)
- 2 Fortress Site.....B3
- 3 Jameh (Darolesan) Mosque.....A2
- 4 Khan Hamam.....C3
- 5 Moshir Divan.....B1
- 6 Regional Museum.....A2

🏠 Sleeping

- 7 Mehmanpazir Kaj.....B3
- 8 Nehro Hotel.....B3

🍴 Eating

- 9 Jahannama.....C2

🍷 Drinking

- Unnamed Teahouse.....(see 7)

🛍 Shopping

- 10 Khaledi.....B1
- 11 Stationery Shop.....B2

🚗 Transport

- 12 Kia Parvaz.....B2

putedly had the architect blinded to prevent its repetition for any other patron. The punishment would have been more appropriate for whoever built the ugly new mosque directly behind.

Moshir Divan

HISTORIC HOUSE

(Shohoda St) Several other historic buildings in town are only partially repaired. This trefoil-topped iconic mansion is still in dire need of renovation. It's hidden in a walled garden off Shohoda St: ring the speaker phone and hope.

Khosroabad Mansion

HISTORIC HOUSE

(Khosroabad St; admission free; ☀️10am-dusk) This formerly grand mansion has an impressive central courtyard with reflecting pools and was once the palace of Ardalan emir Amonulla Khan but is now in a fairly parlous state. It's two blocks up a quiet boulevard of plane trees from Sahar Kaveh St.

🏠 Sleeping

Shadi Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️662 5112; Pasdaran St extension; tw/tr US\$35/55; 📞☎️) By far the best accommodation in Sanandaj, this very professional hotel deserves at least three of its four self-awarded stars. A choice of restaurants lead off a spacious lobby that wraps around a big copper fireplace. The staff speak English. The hotel's main drawback is its out-of-town position beyond Mellat Park but shuttle taxis from Azadi Sq pass outside (very fast!).

Nehro Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️225 5170; Ferdosi St; tw/tr US\$8/10) This great-value place has clean, well-kept rooms above a small shopping centre. All have shower and squat toilet.

THE KURDS

Just as many Westerners have the misguided impression that Iran is somehow 'dangerous', so Iranians are similarly misinformed about Kurdish areas of their own country. In fact Kurdish hospitality often trumps even that of mainstream Persians.

Kurds comprise nearly 10% of Iran's population. But there are several different Kurdish sub-groups speaking languages that are almost mutually unintelligible. Kurds around Howraman and Paveh are the most traditional and speak poetic Hurami. Those in Sanandaj usually speak Sorani. Both groups are typically Sunni. However, some Kurds around Kermanshah are Shiite. Kermanji, the language of most Kurds in Turkey, isn't widely spoken, though Kermanji satellite TV stations, some openly glorifying PKK leader Abdulla Öcalan, are starting to change this. Curiously there are pockets of native Kermanji speakers around Kalat in northeastern Iran. They were originally sent there by the Safavids to defend Iran's 17th-century borders, and never left.

There are variations between tribes, but a common element in traditional dress for most Iranian Kurdish men is the slightly tasselled headscarf (*mezare*) and the distinctive *kawa pantol* suit with heavily pleated baggy trousers. These are typically belted by a wide cummerbund (*biben*) which, when dancing, men pull off and whirl above their heads. Women wear colourful long dresses over baggy trousers and rarely resort to chador. At celebrations the real finery comes out, notably caps covered in gold coins over cascading stitched tulle scarves.

Mehmanpazir Kaj

HOTEL \$

(☎323 1162; Ferdosi St; s/tw from US\$7/10) The Kaj is unusually presentable for a cheap guesthouse with corridors that have renovated old wall-mouldings. The simple rooms have nicely tiled bathrooms with squeaky clean squat toilets and gushingly powerful showers. Unsigned in English, it's four doors along from the bridge that crosses Kordestan Blvd.

**Eating & Drinking**

Typical *kababis* and fruit-juice squeezers are scattered along Ferdosi St, especially around Enqelab and Azadi Sqs where **Shahreqashang** (☎322 7706; ☎7.30-2.30am) serves ice creams and snacks till very late. An unnamed, unexotic teahouse near Hotel Hedayat is good for fried egg breakfasts or *dizi*.

JimJim

TEAHOUSE \$

(Abidar St; coffee US\$1-2, pizzas from US\$2; ☎10am-2pm & 4pm-midnight) Gold tables, swirly wrought-iron seats and friendly staff make this little cafe a pleasant place for refreshment if walking between Abidar Park and the Khosroabad Building, west of Azadi Sq.

In Abidar Park itself and beyond Kuhnavar Sq there several places for ice cream, kababs and snacks.

Khansalar

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎662 351; Pasdaran St; meals US\$3-7; ☎11.30am-3pm & 5.30-10pm) Sanandaj's most interesting restaurant has waiters in Kurdish costume, plays Kurdish music and has some Kurdish menu options including *dokhwa* (tinglingly tart barley soup) and various types of *köfte* (meatballs). There's also *kashka bademjun* (mashed eggplant with yoghurt) for vegetarians (US\$1.50). Take a shuttle taxi from Azadi Sq, alighting opposite the university just before EN Bank.

Jahannama

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎226 4212; Taleqani St; meals US\$6-8; ☎8am-4pm & 7-10pm) Descend a glittery stairway into a weird stylistic mish-mash of OTT opulence, middle-class kitsch and genuine local artefacts including antique qalyans and samovars. The food is excellent and sensibly priced. Try the delicately flavoured *khoresht sabzi* (vegetable, meat and bean stew), succulent *juje pofaki* (marinated chicken morsels) or curious *tahchin agusht* (meat, raisins and barberries arranged like a gateau between layers of saffron rice).

**Shopping**

Several workshops around the Asef Mansion create and sell Sanandaj's famous woodcrafts, notably inlaid *nard* sets.

Khaledi (☎225 5680; Shohoda St; ☎8am-1pm & 3-8pm) sells traditional musical instruments including beautiful *setars* (long-necked local lutes).

A little one-window **stationery shop** (Imam St) sells city maps that are very accurate for back alleys but dangerously outdated for main streets (many being newly constructed).

**Information**

The website www.sanandaj.com has city photos to send as e-postcards.

Ashyanneh Coffeenet (☎323 6187; Seyid Qotb St; per hr US\$1.50; ☎8am-11pm) For internet. Internet access is also available in the plush Tejari Kordestan shopping mall on Pasdaran St.

Bank Melli (Taleqani St) To change money use this branch, but not the big branch on Azadi Sq.

Cultural Heritage Organisation of Kordestan (☎225 5440; www.kurdistanmiras.ir; Habibi Lane; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) This delightfully helpful, multilingual tourist office offers beautiful brochures and basic, up-to-date maps. Its in an inner section of the lovely mansion that houses the Regional Museum.

**Getting There & Away**

Travel agency **Kia Parvaz** (☎222 7770; alley off Imam St) sells tickets for Iran Aseman's daily Sanandaj-Tehran flight on a Fokker 100.

Savaris to Kamyaran (US\$2, one hour), Kermanshah (US\$5, two hours), Qorveh (US\$2) and Hamadan (US\$6) wait in neat, well-organised queues in the main bus terminal area, 4km east of the centre. Minibuses leave from behind and long-distance buses from a half-hidden section to the left. Several bus companies have handy central ticket offices around Enqelab Sq. Bus services are shown in the table, p123.

**Getting Around**

Fast-filling shuttle taxis (US\$0.50 per standard hop) from Enqelab Sq run east to the main terminal and north along Taleqani Sq to the Marivan terminal. From Azadi Sq they run down Pasdaran St and up Abidar St.

For Abidar mountain park things are made complicated by the one-way system: some cars up Keshavarz St divert and continue up Abidar St past Jim Jim leaving you to walk the last 15 minutes or so. A taxi *dar baste* to the upper hair-pin sections of Abidar Park costs around US\$3.

BUSES FROM SANANDAJ

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Ahvaz	US\$14	13hr	6pm Seiro Safar, Taavoni 7
Esfahan	US\$9	9hr	8pm Taavoni 5
Orumiyeh	US\$8	9hr	9am Taavoni 5, 7.45pm Taavoni 15
Rasht	US\$7	7hr	6pm Taavoni 15
Tabriz	US\$7	9hr	8pm Taavoni 5
Tehran	US\$5-13	6hr	various

Palangan

POP 850 / ELEV 1005M

Brilliant Palangan is one of Iran's most picturesque villages. Its earth-coloured **stone houses** climb steeply up both sides of a rocky chasm while traditionally dressed villagers shoe horses in the narrow pathways or simply stand gazing from their flat rooftops. Wobbly old bridges cross the gushing river at either end of town. Unlike Howraman, though, this is not an 'undiscovered' gem. Local tourists come in considerable numbers at weekends to picnic in the local orchards. However, because many come dressed up in Kurdish Friday-best costumes this adds further photogenic colour to the scene.

To get here, start in dreary Kamyaran, halfway between Hamadan and Sanandaj. Savaris for Palangan start from Salahaddin St (2km southeast of Kamyaran's main terminal), but you'll probably need to pay *dar baste* (US\$10 return plus waiting time). The asphalted road (45km) passes some other interesting mud-and-stone Kurdish villages en route. Vehicles arrive at a car park outside Palangan's big, rather ugly fish farm. Don't be dismayed. The old village is hidden around the corner, a 15-minute stroll along a covered watercourse.

Howraman

ELEV 1536M

Caught at the intersection of powerful empires, the Kurds had their homes destroyed so regularly in medieval history that, by the 18th century, a sizable part of society had foregone villages altogether and resorted to nomadism and brigandry. An impor-

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tant exception, thanks to its impenetrable mountain-hemmed position, was the Howraman (Orumanat) valley. This remains one of Iran's least known and most spectacular areas. In colder months you'll still see Howraman men wearing *kolobal*, brown-felt jackets with distinctive shoulder 'horns'. There is plenty of age-old stone terracing and the villages are stacked Masuleh-style, one house's roof forming the next one's yard.

The Hurami Kurdish language is quite distinct from Sorani Kurdish, which replaced it in Sanandaj, though Hurami was once the dialect of choice for regional Kurdish poets. Knowing even a few words will flabbergast and delight locals you meet. *Fere-washa* and *zarif* mean beautiful, *wazhmaze* means delicious, *deset wazhbu* (literally 'hand good') means thank you to which one replies *sarat wazhbu* ('head good' ie you're welcome).

From **Biyakara**, 17km east of Marivan, an asphalted road leads up through a narrow canyon, transits the extensive village of **Dezli**, and climbs a high pass where it divides. Two roads from here lead to Paveh, both breathtakingly beautiful. What appears to be the smaller branch wiggles along the Iraqi border at **Dalani** (don't take photos there), bypasses **Nodesheh** and continues via **Nosud**. This is now asphalted and is so much easier than the alternative, but classic, route via picturesque **Kamala** (basic kabab shops) and austere **Howraman-at-Takht** (Oruman-Takht) where the asphalt ends. Howraman-at-Takht is a particularly impressive and steep array of rock-and-mud bungalows viewed most photogenically from the diminutive **Pir Shaliar shrine**, 600m beyond. Although there's now a green-domed Muslim prayer-room here, that shrine's real interest lies in the animistic rocks and trees,

هورامان

behind, which are draped with votive rag-strips Buddhist-style. A Mithraic midwinter festival is reportedly still held here on the Friday nearest to 4 February. Some suggest that this is a cultural relic from preZoroastrian 'angel' worship, albeit with an Islamic overlay.

The slippery mud road from Howraman-at-Takht to Paveh (72km, 4½ hours) is 90% hairpins: marvellously scenic but spine-jarringly exhausting, and impossible if wet or snowy (ie most of the winter). The most appealing villages en-route are **Belbär**, cupped in a deep mountain hollow, and **Selin** where brightly attired women sit at the roadside crocheting classic Howraman slippers (*giveh*). The best views are around **Hawasawa** (visible but inaccessible from the 'road') with grandeur reminiscent of the Karakoram Highway. Asphalt returns at Ura, 21km northwest of Paveh.

Sleeping

There's no formal accommodation en route, but if you are invited to stay you might find hospitality so overwhelming that a polite quick 'escape' is hard to arrange.


Getting There & Away

Snow allowing, Howraman-at-Takht makes a relatively easy taxi day-trip from Marivan (or even Sanandaj). There are also shared 4WDs between Biyakara and Howraman-at-Takht (US\$5, 1¾ hours, 50km), but you can't be sure of finding a ride back again the same day. A great idea is to engage a taxi or 4WD at Biyakara or Marivan and continue all the way to Paveh. *Dar baste* expect to pay US\$45 via Nosud, or US\$75 via Belbär. Sharing a ride, prices will vary enormously according to vehicle, driver and what other co-passengers you can find for intermediate points.


Paveh


 0832 / POP 13,700 / ELEV 1520M

The rapidly developing Hurami-speaking town of Paveh (sometimes pronounced 'Pawa') makes an accessible introduction and gateway to Howraman. It's a phenomenally hospitable place with a fine setting, high up a fold of mountainside valley. Views of Paveh's most characteristic stepped area are best from the Ferris wheel in Kazemi Park.

At the back of the park you'll find the **Ateshgah Suites** (/fax 722 1732, 0918-888 3059; r US\$18), where six concrete box-rooms with bathroom and kitchenette are carpeted

and have blankets but no beds. It's named Ateshgah for what was once Sassanian Persia's second-greatest Zoroastrian temple complex (after Takht-e Soleiman) on a pronounced rocky knob on the mountain-top opposite. The site is very distantly visible from rooms 1 and 2 across a deep valley. Locals claim somewhat optimistically that they can walk there and back in a long day.

There's cheaper accommodation, in little dorms at the **Ostad Khanim Mo'alem** (Female-teachers' Hostel; 722 5574; dm US\$5) if they allow you to stay. It's supposedly for women only, but the caretaker (who speaks no English) might accept foreign men if they're suitably polite. Access is down steps marked with a restaurant sign featuring a chicken (beside the Pirayshfoad barber shop).

By far the nicest dining option in Paveh is **Kapur** (722 1112; Shohoda Sq; meals US\$1-5; ☉8am-10pm) at the top of the town's little blue-glass shopping centre.

Getting There & Away

From the main terminal 3km east of central Paveh, Kermanshah minibuses (US\$1) and savaris (US\$3, 1¾ hours) fill slowly. It might prove quicker to go in hops via Javanrud (US\$1, 45 minutes) or Ravansar (US\$1, one hour).

For Marivan and Howraman shared Toyota (pronounced 'tweeter') pick-ups gather outside a trio of orange container huts, 1km west of Shohoda Sq. Departure times are highly unpredictable, typically before dawn to Howraman-at-Takht (US\$10, five hours) if at all. To allow plenty of photo stops consider renting a taxi *dar baste* to Marivan from the delightful folks at **Kurd Taxi Agency** (722 777; Blvd Janbazan) either via Nosud (US\$35) or in perfect dry weather via Howraman-at-Takht (US\$80, a very rough road).

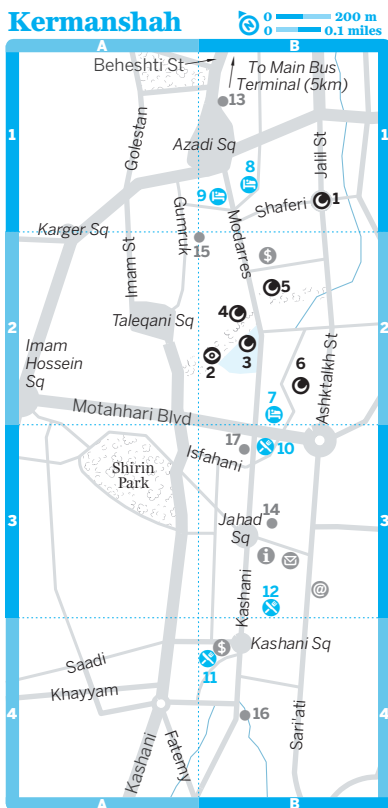
پاوه

Kermanshah

کرمانشاه

 0831 / POP 765,000 / ELEV 1330M

Gateway to the sweltering cities of the Iraqi plains, Kermanshah developed in the 4th century AD under the patronage of Sassanian kings and squats astride the former Royal Road to Baghdad – such strategic positioning has brought both prosperity and attack, and Kermanshah suffered brutal damage during the Iran-Iraq War. Briefly renamed Bakhtaran in the 1980s, the city is a melting pot of Kurds, Lori and other Iranians, many on pilgrimage west to the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala. Though not a yet a major tourist draw, the backdrop of glowing red-rock



Kermanshah

Sights

- 1 Ashikhade Mosque B1
- 2 Covered Bazaar B2
- 3 Ehmah Dohla Mosque B2
- Ethnographic Museum (see 6)
- 4 Jameh Mosque B2
- 5 Takieh Biglar Begi B2
- 6 Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk B2

Sleeping

- 7 Hotel-Apartment Lizhan B2
- 8 Meraj Hotel B1
- 9 Mosaferkhaneh Nabovat B1

Eating

- 10 Chelokababi Tavakol B3
- 11 Eram Restaurant B4
- 12 Homa B3

Transport

- 13 Bus 2 to Bus Terminal & Savaris to 15 Khordad Sq B1
- 14 Iran Peyma B3
- Pars Peyma (see 9)
- 15 Savaris for Paveh B2
- 16 Setareh Soheil B4
- 17 Taavoni 7 B3

mountains is impressive enough and Taq-e Bustan stands as one of the most peculiar monuments in all of Iran.

Kermanshah is bewilderingly vast. The main street changes names (Kashani-Modarres-Beheshti-Sheikh Shiroodi) as it stretches over 10km from the busy commercial centre (the southern third) to the foot of the magnificent rocky Parom Mountain massif. Here the Taq-e Bustan carvings, ringed by parks and outdoor restaurants, form the city's foremost attraction.

Sights

The extensive, much restored **covered bazaar** slopes up from Modarres St. It's well worth exploring with its couple of dilapidated old caravanserai courtyards at the western end. Within the bazaar, **Ehmah Dohla Mosque** (Jewellery Bazaar), entered through an attractive tiled portal, has a Qajar-era clock tower.

The once interesting area of older houses around the blue-domed, 20th-century **Ashikhade Mosque** (Jalil St) has now been largely bulldozed, but some curiosities remain if you poke about in the back alleys.

Taq-e Bustan

MUSEUM, HISTORIC SITE

Tucked into a towering cliff are inscribed some extraordinary Sassanian bas reliefs, set in and around a pair of carved alcoves. Originally the site of an earlier Parthian royal hunting garden, the Sassanians added their own regal stamp. The biggest alcove features elephant-backed hunting scenes on the side walls and highlights the coronation of Khosrow II (r AD 590–628) beneath which the king rides off in full armour and chain mail resembling the Black Prince (albeit half a millennium before European knights had 'invented' such armour). The second niche shows kings Shapur III and his Roman-stomping grandfather Shapur II. To the right of the niches is a fine tableau again showing Shah Shapur II (r AD 379–383) trampling over the defeated Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (who he'd beaten in AD 363). Shapur II receives a crown of blessing from Zoroastrian god

Mithras. Surrounding open-air restaurants remain popular late into the evening. Even after the reliefs-complex closes, sympathetic lighting means that a golden glow emanates warmly from the alcoves, making the reliefs attractively half-visible through trees across a boating pond.

Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk HOSSEINIEH, SHRINE
(Hadad Abil St; admission US\$1; ☉10am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Distinctively Shiite, Hosseinieh are shrines where plays are acted out during the Islamic month of Moharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at Karbala (AD 680). The finest of these theatres cum religious buildings, is the Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk.

Enter down stairs, through a courtyard and domed central chamber decorated with grizzly scenes from the Karbala battle. The shrine remains very much active, with pilgrims kissing the doors and being genuinely moved by the footprint of Ali on the wall of the second courtyard. This is set amid tiles depicting a wacky gamut of images from Quranic scenes, to pre-Islamic motifs including Shahnameh kings, European villages and local notables in 19th-century costumes. A lovely building to the right is now an **Ethnographic Museum** displaying regional costumes.

Takieh Biglar Begi HOSSEINIEH, MUSEUM
(☎827 6597; admission free; ☉8am-7pm Sat-Thu) The lesser known **Takieh Biglar Begi** houses a fairly cursory calligraphy museum, but is worth visiting for its dazzling mirror-tiled central dome-room. To find it take the lane opposite the fine **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; Modarres St), which has a beautiful Yazd-styled twin minaret. Then take the first alley left.

Shapur Atae (☎0918-856 6220; shapura.atae@yahoo.com; per day plus tips US\$25) is an extremely learned and interesting guide with good English and decent French.

Sleeping

A gaggle of cheapies lie handily close to Azadi Sq, many marked only in Farsi and almost all above shop fronts via stairways that are sometimes hard to spot.

Jamshid Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎429 9666; www.hotel-jamshid.ir; Kuhnnavand Sq; s/d/tw/tr/ste US\$86/106/126/146/193) Easily the best of Kermanshah's top-end hotels,

the Jamshid has an eccentric white-stone 'castle' facade, but interior decor and service are elegantly international and restrained. Rooms have all the usual extras down to minibar, kettle and logo-ed slippers. It's just south of Taq-e Bustan.

Meraj Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎823 3288; Modarres St; s/tw US\$16/26) The Meraj has *Mosaferkhaneh*-style rooms albeit with small shower booths and squat toilets. Access is upstairs guarded by a stuffed goat.

Mosaferkhaneh Nabovat MOSAFERKHANEH \$
(☎823 1018; Modarres St; s/tw/tr US\$6/12/16, without shower US\$5/9/14) The friendly Nabovat has sensibly priced, no-frills rooms whose sheets are clean and whose showers are powerful and stay hot for a reasonable while.

Hotel-Apartment Lizhan APARTMENT \$\$
(☎721 0102; fax 727 6666; Motahhari Blvd; apt US\$65; ☎) Self-contained apartments with full kitchens sleep up to six in two bedrooms, which might have a 1970's Cindy Doll feel but are 110% clean, comfy and new. The perfumed entranceway features Leonardo's 'Last Supper'; well, not the original obviously.

Eating

Around Azadi Sq and on Motahhari Blvd at the junction of Kaangar Blvd there are snack stalls and confectioners selling Kermanshah's archetypal *nan berenji* cookies (literally 'bread-rice'; a round semi-sweet confection that's usually yellow and flavoured with saffron). There's a great concentration of kabab cafes and open-air teahouses near the Taq-e Bustan carvings and several restaurants around Kashani Sq.

Chelokababi

Tavakol TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(☎722 7184; Modarres St; meals US\$2-4) This would be the backpacker meeting place, if there were any backpackers. Excellent-value Iranian food is served in an atmospheric once-grand old *hammam* that's slightly gone-to-seed. Charming owner Ali Rahban looks somewhat like Dudley Moore, speaks good English and can rustle up eggplant delights for vegetarians. Head downstairs through white-framed doors with coloured-glass panels.

Eram Restaurant

(☎727 8506; Bahmany Bldg, Shahid Ashrafi St; meals US\$3-5) Beneath the same fake 1920's-style tower building as Borj Pizza, Eram's staff are as eccentric as its wavy brickwork interior, which culminates in green-bronze framed copies of the Bisotun reliefs. It serves mainly kababs, but does *fesenjun* (chicken cooked in a pomegranate and walnut sauce) at lunchtime.

Homa

(☎723 4246; Kashani/Dabir Azam Sts; meals US\$4-7) Combining the atmosphere of a teahouse with the calm elegance of an upmarket restaurant, Homa has embroidered tablecloths and blue-brick dining niches ranged around a gently trickling fountain. Though not a patch on homemade equivalents, the semi-sweet *fesenjun* (US\$4) is ideally complemented by their acidic *dugh* (churned sour milk or yoghurt mixed with water).

Jamshid Restaurant

(☎424 4185; basement, Jamshid Hotel; meals \$5-10; ☉noon-3pm & 8-9.30pm, longer in summer) Surveyed by a gigantic bronze eagle and huge samovar, this unusual dining room is divided by an artificial 'stream'. Try the local speciality *khoresh khalol* (lamb stewed with almonds) rather than the three-skewer *dandeh kabab* (US\$7), which is famous more for its huge size than for its flavour.

i Information**Internet Access**

Hesabgarnet (☎723 1309; Shari'ati St; per hr US\$1; ☉10am-9pm)

Money

Sepehr Exchange Co (Bank Sepah Bldg, Kashani Sq) Changes money, unlike the big Bank Melli on Azadi Sq.

Tourist Information**Cultural Heritage Office of Kermanshah**

(☎836 7403; off Beheshti St; ☉7.30am-

2.30pm Sun-Wed, 7.30am-1pm Thu) Lavish free brochures and decent if undetailed map. It's north of the centre.

Khadivi House (☎721 2696; Ma'adem St;

☉8am-3pm Sat-Thu) The Cultural Heritage Office operates a more convenient outlet at a beautifully restored Qajar mansion and garden used as occasional exhibition place.

i Getting There & Away**Air**

Flights to Tehran (US\$55) leave thrice daily on **Iran Air** (☎824 8610; Beheshti St; ☉7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu, 7.30am-1pm Fri), plus four times weekly on Iran Aseman. Tickets are sold by **Tagh Bostan Travel** (☎824 6222; Vila St; ☉8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 10am-1pm Fri), **Setareh Soheil** (☎727 1115; Kashani St; ☉9.30am-7pm Sat-Thu) and other travel agencies.

Bus, Minibus & Savari

The huge main bus and minibus terminals are side by side about 7km northeast of Azadi Sq. Get there by savaris or bus 2 from Azadi Sq. Several offices sell advance tickets including **Iran Peyma** (Javad Sq), **Taavoni 7** (Modarres St) and very handy **Pars Peyma** (Modarres St) beside Hotel Nobovat, which offers tickets to almost anywhere. Useful options are shown in the table below.

For Khorramabad, Taavoni 7 has an 8.30am bus via Eslam Abad (US\$7, 4½ hours), but it's generally much quicker in hops. Start with a minibus to Harsin (US\$1, 45 minutes), a sizeable town in an agricultural valley surrounded by moorland bluffs reminiscent of a drought-stricken Scotland. Cross town by shuttle taxi (US\$2, 3.5km) and continue by savari to Nurabad (per person/car US\$1/5, 40 minutes) from which there are minibuses/savaris (US\$1/1.50, 1¼ hours) to Khorramabad.

For Hamadan there are direct minibuses (US\$1, 2½ hours) and savaris (US\$4).

Savaris to Paveh (back/front US\$3/4) depart from Gumruk St close to Azadi Sq.

Savaris to Bisotun (US\$0.50, 25 minutes) start from the southeast slip-road of the intimidating 15 Khordad (Labab) overpass.

BUSES FROM KERMANSHAH

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Ahvaz	US\$14	9hr	8am, 9pm via Andimeshk
Esfahan	US\$9	9hr	5pm Pars Peyma
Orumiyeh	US\$15	12hr	5pm Iran Peyma
Tabriz	US\$14	8hr	6am, 6pm-10pm
Tehran (western)	US\$9/14	9hr	frequent

Train

A new railway is planned linking Tehran to Baghdad (Iraq) via Kermanshah and Qasr-e-Shirin, but construction will take years.

i Getting Around

Bisotun-bound shuttle taxis from 15 Khordad Sq pass the airport gates. Shuttle taxis from Azadi Sq head in all directions, most usefully to the terminals and to Mo'allef Sq for Taq-e Bustan. On Modarres St, city buses usefully drive the 'wrong way' (northbound), but northbound shuttle taxis have to wind around the one-way system until 8.30pm.

In September 2011 the government announced a shiny new monorail system for the city, but don't hold your breath; completion is not due till 2015.

Bisotun

☏0832 / ELEV 1690M

Awesome dry cliffs line the north flank of the busy, partly industrialised Kermanshah-Hamadan road, looking especially majestic when approaching Bisotun from Sahneh.

BAS-RELIEF CARVINGS

At Bisotun the cliffs are inscribed with a series of world-famous **bas-relief carvings** dating from 521 BC. They were awarded Unesco recognition in 2006. The key feature is a well-preserved Darius receiving chained supplicants while a *farohar* (winged Zoroastrian 'angel' denoting purity) hovers overhead. Though hard to make out from ground level, the scene is surrounded by cuneiform inscriptions expounding upon Darius' greatness in three 'lost' languages (Elamite, Akkadian and Old Persian).

In 1835, eccentric British army officer Henry Rawlinson bemused locals by dangling for months over the abyss to make papier-mâché casts of these texts. It's hard to know how his superiors gave him the time off to attempt so life-threatening an eccentricity, nor why Rawlinson didn't just tootle up to Ganjnameh (p134) and copy those inscriptions instead. Nonetheless, his transcriptions later allowed the deciphering of the cuneiform scripts, a thrilling breakthrough that renders Bisotun as significant to Persia-philias as the Rosetta Stone is to Egyptologists.

To reach the carvings, jump out of a savari from Kermanshah where the road entering Bisotun's swings 90 degrees right

(east). Then walk through a large car park following the mighty cliffs west. You'll pass a club-wielding little **Hercules statue** from 148 BC (albeit with recently replaced head) sitting on a rocky ledge. A little further is a very eroded **Parthian relief of Mithrades II**, partly overwritten by a 17th-century Arabic inscription by Sheikh Alikhan. The main reliefs face east, high above this, requiring a good zoom lens and early-morning sunlight for decent photos.

FARHAD TARASH

Some 200m beyond the main bas-relief site is the huge, smooth **Farhad Tarash** rock face, popular with climbers who consider it among Iran's greatest challenges. In fact it was artificially smoothed in the 7th century AD for an inscription that Khosrow II never got around to scribbling. Walk 10 minutes' further west, crossing some lumpy archaeological diggings, to find a well-restored but unused 1685 **caravanserai**.

i Getting There & Away

The savari stop for Kermanshah and for Sahneh (and thence Hamadan) is a 10-minute walk east through Bisotun town, just beyond Bank Keshvari.

Hamadan

همدان

☏0811 / POP 528,000 / ELEV 1790M

Known in classical times as Ecbatana, Hamadan was once one of the ancient world's greatest cities. Pitifully little of antiquity remains, but significant parts of the city centre are given over to excavations and there is a scattering of historical curiosities. Sitting on a high plain, Hamadan is graciously cool in August, but snow-prone and freezing cold from December to March. In the summer the air is often hazy, but on a rare, clear spring day there are impressive glimpses of snow-capped **Mt Alvand** (3580m) preening itself above the ragged neocolonial cupolas of Imam Khomeini Sq. A popular summer retreat, Hamadan's main draw card for Iranian visitors is its proximity to the Ali Sadr Caves, but these are vastly over-rated.

History

According to ancient Greek historians, Median king Deiokes fortified a palace here in 728 BC, and over succeeding decades the Median capital of Ecbatana grew into an opulent city. Its massive walls were said to

have had seven layers, the inner two coated in gold and silver, the outer one as long as that of classical Athens. By 550 BC it had fallen to the Achaemenid Persians, and King Cyrus was using it for his summer court.

The Medes retook the city in 521 BC but were kicked out again within six months by Darius who was so pleased with himself that he recorded his achievements in stone beside the Royal Road at Bisotun (p128).

After centuries of pre-eminence and wealth under Parthian and Sassanian dynasties alike, Ecbatana/Hamadan faded somewhat after the Arab conquest in the mid-7th century AD, but it became the regional capital under the Seljuks for some 60 years in the late 12th century. Known as Hegmataneh (Meeting Place of Sufis) in Old Persian, Hamadan suffered the usual devastations by Mongols (1220) and again in 1386 (by Tamerlane), but only hit a major decline in the 18th century following a Turkish invasion.

The city began to recover in the mid-19th century and was totally redesigned to a modern city plan in 1929 by German engineer Karl Frisch; Frisch's master plan is a cartwheel design with six avenues radiating from Imam Khomeini Sq, widely referred to simply as 'meydan'. The wheel distorts to the northeast around the lumpy hill of Tappeh-ye Mosallah and the excavation site of Hegmataneh Hill.

Sights

Esther & Mordecai Tomb

استر و مردخای بقعه

RELIGIOUS, SHRINE

(Aramgah-e Ester va Mordekhay; 📍252 2285; 12 Zangeneh Lane; admission by donation, typically US\$1 & a per; 🕒8am-noon & 3-6pm Sun-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) This vaguely Tolkeinesque, 14th-century **tomb tower** was once Iran's most important Jewish pilgrimage site. These days visitors are few and far between and some of the Hebrew inscriptions have been repainted so often by those who evidently couldn't understand them, that they have become stylised beyond readability.

Traditionally this is considered to be the burial site of Esther (for whom a book in the Bible's Old Testament is named) and her cousin/guardian Mordecai. Jewish orphan Esther had married Xerxes I (Biblical King Ahasuerus) who'd ditched his first wife, Vashti, for being too much of an early feminist. Esther's better-honed feminine wiles are later said to have saved the Jews from a massacre planned by Xerxes' commander (and Mordecai's enemy) Haman. With names very reminiscent of Babylonian gods, Esther (Ishtar?) and Mordecai (Morduk?) might be purely allegorical. Some suggest that the tower actually commemorated Jewish queen, Shushan-Dokht, who persuaded her husband, Yazdgerd I (r AD 399–420) to sanction a renewed Jewish colony at Hamadan.

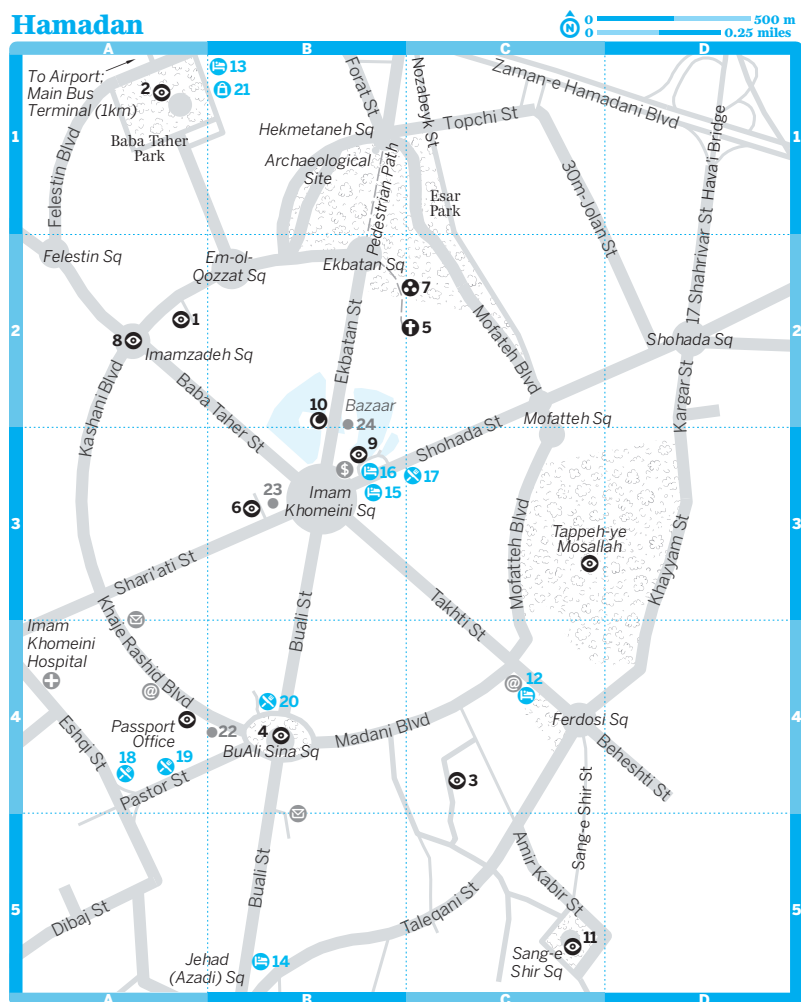
The tower is mostly hidden behind a high grey metal barrier – ring the door bell (no

BUALI SINA

Had you studied advanced medicine in 17th-century Europe, your 'text book' would have been the great medical encyclopaedia, *Canon Medicinæ*. Incredibly, this had been written 600 years earlier. Its author, remembered in the West as Avicenna, was in fact the great Iranian philosopher, physicist and poet Abu Ali Ibn Sina (AD 980–1037), 'BuAli' Sina for short. If you're a fan of aromatherapy you can thank BuAli for the development of steam distillation with which essential oils are extracted. His ideas on momentum and inertia were centuries ahead of Newton's. And (following al-Kindi and al-Farabi), his blending of Aristotle's ideas with Persian philosophy helped inspire a golden age of Islamic scholarship. However, this philosophy rapidly led to a polarisation of views about the man whose ego was reputedly as great as his intellect.

Born in what is today Uzbekistan, BuAli studied medicine in Bukhara where his sharp mind and photographic memory had him running rings around his teachers. Political intrigues in Bukhara meant BuAli fled westwards to Gonbad-e Kavus, p245 only to arrive as Qabus, his illustrious prospective sponsor, dropped dead. Initially BuAli proved luckier in Hamadan, where he successfully treated the ailments of the ruling emir and was promoted to vizier. However, when his patron died, Avicenna was thrown into prison for corresponding with Abu Jafar, a rival ruler based in Esfahan. Four months later the Esfahanis stormed Hamadan releasing BuAli who thereupon worked with Abu Jafar for the rest of his life, coincidentally dying while on a return trip to Hamadan some 14 years later.

Hamadan



English sign) and hopefully Rabbi Rajad will scurry out to greet you, opening the 400kg stone-slab door to the tower and telling you (in French or Farsi) to don a scull-cap (provided) before crawling into the inner tomb area. He's an avid collector of foreign pens, which thus make an ideal tip.

Other Mausolea & Tomb towers

MAUSOLEUM, MUSEUM
(Aramgah-e Buali Sina; ☑826 1008; admission US\$1; ☀8am-6pm summer, 8am-4pm winter)
Hamadan's icon is the **BuAli Sina (Avicenna) Mausoleum**, a 1954 tower that

looks something like a vast, unfinished concrete missile. It is loosely modelled on Qabus's 1000-year-old tower in Gonbad-e Kavus (p245), which BuAli probably saw inaugurated. Paying the entry fee (entry from west) allows you to see the single-room **museum** of Avicenna memorabilia, his tombstone, a small library and a display on medicinal herbs. But the tower itself is better observed from a distance.

Baba Taher Mausoleum

MAUSOLEUM
(Aramgah-e Baba Taher; admission US\$3; ☀8am-5.30pm) Of a similar era to the BuAli Sina

Hamadan

👁 Sights

- 1 Alaviyan DomeA2
- 2 Baba Taher Mausoleum..... A1
- 3 Borj-e Qorban..... C4
- 4 Bu'Ali Sina (Avecinna) Mausoleum.....B4
- 5 Churches.....C2
- 6 Esther & Mordecai Tomb.....B3
- 7 Hegmataneh Hill (Ecbatana Excavations).....C2
- 8 Imamzadeh-ye Abdollah.....A2
- 9 Imamzadeh-ye HosseinB3
- 10 Jameh Mosque.....B2
- 11 Sang-e ShirC5

🛏 Sleeping

- 12 Arian Hotel..... C4
- 13 Baba Taher Hotel..... B1
- 14 Bu'ali HotelB5
- 15 Farshchi Guest House.....B3
- 16 Ordibesht Hotel.....B3

🍴 Eating

- 17 Chaykhuneh Baharestan.....C3
- 18 Delta Sofrakhane Sonati.....A4
- 19 Kaghazi Pizza-CoffeeA4
- 20 KaktusB4

🛒 Shopping

- 21 Pottery Shops B1

📍 Information

- 22 Ali Sadr Travel Agency.....B4

🚗 Transport

- Asre Iran..... (see 10)
 Iran Alvand.....(see 24)
 Iran Peyma..... (see 16)
 Seiro Safar..... (see 16)
- 23 Shuttle Taxis to Ganjnameh.....B3
 - 24 Shuttle Taxis to the Bus & Minibus TerminalsB2

(Avecinna) Mausoleum but architecturally less successful is this heavily buttressed mausoleum. It looks like a failed prototype for Thunderbird 3. There's little reason to go inside unless you enjoy Persian calligraphy, inscribed here on some gently opalescent stone wall-slabs.

Alaviyan Dome

MAUSOLEUM

(Gonbad-e Alaviyan; Shahdad Lane; admission US\$1; ☀8am-7pm) The name is now a misnomer, as the 12th-century green dome, immortalised in a Khaqani reference, has

long since been removed. The dome-less brick tower remains famous for the whirling floral stucco added in the Ilkhanid era; this ornamentation enraptured Robert Byron in *Road to Oxiana*. In the crypt (narrow steps down from the interior at the back) is the plain-blue tiled Alaviyan family tomb covered with votive Islamic embroidery.

A useful landmark is the golden dome of the unfinished **Imamzadeh-ye Abdollah** (Imamzadeh Sq).

Hegmataneh Hill

تپه هگمتانه

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

(☞822 4005; admission US\$1; ☀8am-4pm Tue-Sun, 8am-noon Mon) In the mud beneath this scraggy low hill lies Hamadan's ancient Median and Achaemenid city site. Small sections of the total area have been fitfully excavated by several teams over the last century, most extensively in the 1990s. The most interesting of several shed-covered 'trenches' allows you to walk above the excavations of earthen walls using plank walkways on wobbly scaffolding. The walls' gold and silver coatings are long gone of course and it's hard to envisage the lumpy remnants as having once constituted one of the world's great cities. A nicely presented museum tries to fill the mental gap, showing some of the archaeological finds including large amphorae, Seljuk fountains, Achaemenid pillar-bases and Parthian coffins.

A few decades ago when the government relocated inhabitants from the hill and demolished their homes in the name of archaeology, they spared a pair of 19th-century **churches**, which remain at the southern edge of the site.

Other Buildings

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

More appealing than Imamzadeh-ye Abdollah is the 1883 **Imamzadeh-ye Hossein**, tucked behind Hotel Yass in a little courtyard with an ancient mulberry tree. The 13th-century **Borj-e Qorban** is a classic 12-sided, pointy-roofed tower tomb, but it looks sadly out of place in its dowdy housing-estate setting.

A vaulted passage of the **bazaar** leads into the courtyard of the large Qajar-era **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; admission free). The off-line south *ivan* leads into a hall (currently under restoration) over which there's an impressively large brick dome. The north *ivan* is lavished with patterned blue tilework that continues on four

of the mosque's six minarets. Some areas are restricted to men only.

Sang-e Shir is a walrus-sized lump of rock eroded beyond recognition by the rubbing of hands over 2300 years. Supposedly once a lion, you'd never look twice at were it not the only surviving 'monument' from the ancient city of Ecbatana whose gates it once guarded. Local legend attaches all manner of significance to this strangely unmoving lump; supposedly put up by Alexander the Great to commemorate the death of his lover Hephaisstion, bizarrely it now has supposed magic powers to make women pregnant!

Sleeping

Arian Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎826 1266; www.arianhotelhamadan.com; Takhti St; s/tw/tr US\$54/65/80) At this inviting mid-range hotel, each floor has a different, gently appealing style of decor with modernist lamps on the 3rd floor and a more opulent period look on the 4th. Check out the 2nd floor to see what they consider 'British style'. The lobby has a couple of gratuitous Persepolis-aping columns. Some English is spoken.

Farshchi Guest House MOSAFERKHANEH \$
(Mosaferkhaneh-ye Farsi; Shohada St; tw/tr/q/5-bed US\$6/8/10/13, showers US\$1) By *mosaferkhaneh* standards the Farshchi is a cosy, friendly place with something of a family atmosphere, with plastic flowers and samovars giving vague touches of humanity to the area of shared squat toilets and washbasins. Most rooms are four-bedded.

Ordibesht Hotel MOSAFERKHANEH \$
(☎252 2056; Shohada St; s/tw/tr/q without bathroom US\$10/15/18/20) Bright and unusually airy, this no-nonsense *mosaferkhaneh* is compulsively cleaned and Ali speaks some English. There are separate toilet facilities for men and women and 'free showers for foreigners'. Most rooms are quads (US\$15 for single occupancy).

Buali Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎825 0856; Buali St; s/d/tr/ste US\$84/99/135/212; ☎@☎) The standard rooms have fridge, BBC World on TV and floral pseudo-silk fabrics, but the bathrooms are very outdated. The suites are a considerable step up while the annexe rooms are quiet but a decorative throwback to the USSR.

Baba Taher Hotel HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎422 6517; Baba Taher Sq; s/tw US\$99/125; ☎☎) The mirror-tiled lobby and restaurant

offer a dazzlingly garish festival of Las Vegas kitsch while corridors test out the full palate of pastel colours. The reasonably well-appointed rooms are thankfully somewhat more subdued, but barely justify the discounted price (from US\$70) let alone rack-rates. English spoken.

Eating

Apart from Hezaroyek Shab, none of the following have menus in English. For that you'll have to resort to hotel restaurants of which the **BuAli** (meals US\$4-8) is about the best.



Delta Sofrakhaneh Sonati TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(☎826 1813; basement, Eshqi St; qalyan US\$1, meals US\$3-6; ☎6am-7pm) This delightful

neotraditional retreat lies beneath the unremarkable Delta restaurant using separate stairs from outside. Tea (US\$1) comes in ceramic Lalejin pots, women can smoke qalyan on carpeted bed-seats without undue attention and the chicken 'biriyani' comes on a flaming plate. Don't miss the scrumptious *kashka bademjan* (US\$1), eggplant paste with yoghurt, mint and roasted red peppers.

Chaykhuneh Baharestan TEAHOUSE \$
(Shohada St; dizi US\$2; ☎6am-7pm) This atmospheric, if decidedly down-market 100% male teahouse is charmingly adorned with metalwork, sepia photos and Quranic murals. It's ideal for a greasy fried-egg breakfast, cheap *abgusht* (aka *dizi*) lunch or a puff on the qalyan, and is populated by photogenically haggard old white-beards. To find it, head upstairs through a partly illustrated doorway opposite a small branch of Bank Maskan.

Kaghazi Pizza-Coffee FAST FOOD \$
(Pastor St; snack meals US\$2-4, coffee US\$1-2) Pine furniture and a few African masks bring some character to this gently stylish two-room cafe whose pizzas are refreshingly crispy and thin-crust.

Hezaroyek Shab TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(1001 Nights; ☎824 5217; Farhang St; local mains US\$2-3.50, European dishes US\$4-6; ☎noon-3pm & 7.30-11pm) This cosy if slightly garish restaurant is quite a trek south of the centre (US\$2 by *dar baste taxi*) but there's a wide Irano-European menu and owner Pari Baktiyari speaks fluent English. Call ahead.

Kaktus

KABABIS \$

(Buali Sina Sq; meals US\$4-9; ☎noon-3pm & 7-10.30pm) Down easy-to-miss stairs, Kaktus remains one of Hamadan's most popular middle-class kabab restaurants. It's tastefully lit if not imaginatively decorated.

**Shopping**

Hamadan region is famous for its leatherwork, wooden inlay, ceramics and carpets. Try contacting the **Union of Carpet Cooperatives** (☎252 8622) if you can't find what you want in the rather tatty carpet bazaar. Several **pottery shops** (Baba Taher Sq) sell colourful, locally famous pottery from Lalejin.

**Information****Internet access**

Coffeenet Rozhan (Takhti St; per hr US\$1; ☎9am-2pm & 4-9pm) Handy for the Arian Hotel.

Sib Coffeenet (Khaje Rashid Blvd; per hr US\$1; ☎9am-10pm) Good connection. Three other coffeenets are within a block.

Post

Main Post Office (off Buali St)

Sub Post Office (Khaje Rashid Blvd)

Telephone

Telephone office (Mahdihyeh St) Take a shuttle taxi down Shari'ati St.

Tourist Information

Ali Sadr Travel Agency (☎828 2011; Khaje Rashid Blvd; ☎9am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 10am-noon Fri) Although a commercial agency, the English-speaking staff are super-friendly and happy to answer general questions.

Hamadan Cultural Heritage Organisation

(Sazemane Jahangardi; ☎827 4771; www.hamedan.ichto.ir, in Farsi; Gagh-e Nazari, Aref Qazvini St; ☎8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat-Thu, 8-11am Fri) Staff speak minimal English but merrily load up visitors with beautiful books and pamphlets as though it were Christmas. It's located in a delightful Qajar mansion with gardens.

Visa Extensions

Passport Office (Edareh Gozanneh; ☎826 2025; 1st fl, Khaje Rashid Blvd; ☎8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) The austere concrete building looks forbidding behind high green railings and guarded by armed soldiers. But friendly staff assured us that applications for visa extensions are now granted routinely.

**Getting There & Away****Air**

Kish Air flies to Tehran (US\$22, twice weekly). Tickets are sold by Ali Sadr Travel Agency.

Bus

All long-distance bus services start from the **Tehran terminal** (Enqelab Blvd), but most companies have city-centre **ticket offices** (☎7am-noon & 3-7pm) near Imam Khomeini Sq. **Seiro Safar** (☎252 2860) and **Iran Peyma** (☎252 1213; ☎7am-noon & 2-7pm) are either side of the Ordibesht Hotel. **Asre Iran** (☎252 5376) and **Iran Alvand** (☎252 5763) face each other across Ekbatan St.

Useful bus departures are shown in the table below:

Tehran buses take either the expressway via Takestan or the more direct road via Saveh, but few go via Qazvin. Expect delays after fresh snow.

BUSES FROM HAMADAN

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Ahvaz	US\$18	11hr	6-7pm Seiro Safar, Asre Iran
Esfahan	US\$16	8hr	8am, 10.30am, 9pm, 10pm Iran Alvand
Mashhad	US\$25	21hr	9.30am Asre Iran
Orumiyeh	US\$10	9hr	1.30pm Iran Peyma
Qazvin	US\$8	3½hr	2.30pm Seiro Safar
Rasht	US\$6	6hr	9.15am Iran Peyma
Tehran	US\$10	6hr	7-10.30am, 2-4pm & 11.30pm
Zanjan	US\$6	4hr	3.30pm Taavoni 5

Minibus & Savari

There are two minibus terminals. Use the **Main Minibus Terminal** (Zaman-e Hamadani Blvd), northeast of the centre, for Kermanshah, Sanandaj (maybe changing in Qorveh), Bijar (at 11am and noon via Qorveh) and Ali Sadr (several daily). Use **Terminal Qadim** (Ekbatan St) for hourly minibuses to Tuyserkan, more frequent services to Malayer (and thence Nahavand or Borujerd and on to Khorramabad), and to Asadabad (for Kangavar). Savaris to Malayer wait outside.

Savaris to Kermanshah (US\$4), Sanandaj (US\$4) and Tehran (US\$13) leave from relevant points near Sepah Sq. The Tehran savaris are well-organised with a sign-up **booth** (☎423 8669).

i Getting Around

Shuttle taxis run along the spokes of Hamadan's cartographic wheel for US\$0.50 (one block), US\$1 (longer hop) or US\$1.50 (*dar baste*). Shuttle taxis to the bus and minibus terminals leave from Ekbatan St.

Around Hamadan

GANJNAMEH
ELEV 2170M

گنج نامه

Literally translated as 'Treasure Book', Ganjnameh is so named because for years its **cu-neiform rock carvings** were thought to be cryptic clues to help find caches of mythical Median treasure. Belatedly translated, the texts turn out instead to be a rather immodest thank you to the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda from the Achaemenid monarch Xerxes (r 486–466 BC) for making him such a

very, very good king. To emphasise the point the message is repeated in three languages (Old Persian, Elamite and neo-Babylonian) on rock faces some 2m high. A second panel similarly commemorates his dad, Darius.

The site is in a rural mountain valley at Hamadan's westernmost extremity, some 8km from the centre. From the parking area, the carvings are a very obvious two-minute stroll passing a row of tatty tea-houses, souvenir stalls and snack bars. Just beyond is a 9m-high waterfall that becomes a popular ice-climbing spot when frozen in winter. At weekends the site can get crowded and messy with rubbish but several long-distance paths lead directly up the peaceful fore-slopes of Mt Alvand making for relatively convenient yet bracing hikes.

A narrow lane continues 4km to the Tarik Dare **ski slopes** (☺Thu & Fri winter) and in summer a road winds on very attractively right across Mt Alvand's lower slopes to Oshoran near Tuyserkan).

i Getting There & Away

Shared taxis (US\$1) take about 20 minutes departing from Shari'ati St near the Esther and Mordecai Tomb. They're fairly frequent at weekends, but midweek you'll probably have to charter (from US\$4 each way). Finding a ride back can take a while.

Dorud & Lake Gahar دورود

☎0665 / POP 103,000 / ELEV 1448M

Dominated by a huge, satanic cement factory, **Dorud** is useful as a launching point for hiking to beautiful, mountain-ringed

THE LORS OF LORESTAN

Call them Lurish, Lori or Lor, these proud people (around 2% of Iran's population) are best known to Westerners for the magnificent bronze-crafts of their hazily documented Kassite forebears. Around 1800 BC, these polytheistic horse-breeding warriors were pushing forward the boundaries of metallurgical technology, casting exquisite bronzes whose fine decoration belies their often mundane purposes.

The Lurish golden age was destroyed by centuries of medieval wars that wiped out virtually all settled agriculture. Lorestan lapsed into lawless nomadic 'backwardness' such that the Lors, like many Kurds, remained predominantly semi-independent nomads until well into the 20th century. In 1931 the valiant Freya Stark considered Lorestan to be the 'wastes of civilisation' as she risked brigands, bandits and police ire seeking ancient gravesites from which to procure Lurish bronzes. Today admiring such bronzes is much easier thanks to Khorramabad's unmissable eight-towered fortress called **Falak-ol-Aflak**, or Tehran's **National Museum of Iran** (p41) and **Reza Abbasi Museum** (p48).

The Lori language is a dialect based on Old Persian with additions from Arabic and modern Farsi. A handy greeting is *damaqechaqi* (are you well?); 'delicious' is *tomdara*.

Lake Gahar, famed for its succulent *qizil arla* fish. The trailhead is **Haft Cheshmeh**, a lonely refuge hut, car park and drinking-water spring 23km from Dorud. In midsummer guides and ponies are usually available here. The trek skirts 4070m **Mt Oshaturan** taking around four hours out, less back. Bring your own food and tent. Even if you don't hike, great views justify the car journey as far as **Darb-e-Astaneh**, a mud-house village 18km from Dorud.

Very friendly but easy-to-miss, the basic **Mosaferkhaneh-e Baharestan** (☎422-2919; Shari'ati St; s US\$8) is upstairs opposite Dorud's cinema.

The porticoed **Mehmansara Shahrdari** (☎422 0020; Beheshti Blvd; tw/tr US\$18/27, summer US\$25/35) has spacious, very comfortable rooms and a decent restaurant featuring great photos of local beauty spots. It's in a park off Dorud's main through-street 1.5km west of the train station, and 2.5km east of the bus terminal where minibuses and scorchingly fast savaris run to Khorramabad and Borujerd. Esfahan-bound buses pick up passengers around midnight from Taavoni offices on Beheshti Blvd. Incoming trains are met at the station by savaris for both Khorramabad and Borujerd.

The Dorud-Andimeshk Railway

This super-scenic railway trundles through beautiful, remote and virtually roadless valleys skirting Lorestan's pointy peaks and passing through dozens of tunnels. Most trains run in the evenings but there's a day service departing Andimeshk at 5.30am, returning from Dorud at 2pm. It's timetabled to take 5½ hours but often takes nearer seven. Often overcrowded to the point of sheer mayhem, the journey is a cultural experience but also a test of endurance.

BISHEH WATERFALLS آبشار بیشه

The tiny village of **Bisheh** (Bishelpuran) hides one of Iran's prettiest **waterfalls**. It cascades in 30m chutes off a tree-topped gully then trickles in rivulets into the river below. In summer many local tourists make the scenic day trip from Dorud (train only at 2pm, 30 minutes) or Khorramabad (new road, no public transport). By autumn only their litter remains and you'll have the village to yourself, with the entire population of children following you Pied Piper-style.

The best waterfall views are from across the river using a new footbridge at the northern edge of the village. The day train offers fabulous glimpses of ziggurat-shaped **Mt Parvis** en route. You'll have an ample (if trains are on time) 4½ hours in Bisheh before the 7pm Tehran-bound train arrives to take you back to Dorud.

SEPID DASHT سپید دشت

The railway does a switchback at **Sepid Dasht**, the biggest village en route. Sepid Dasht itself isn't architecturally attractive but its mountain backdrop is spectacularly spiky. Rare savaris bump their way to Khorramabad on a scenic road that passes close to the **Gerit Falls**.

TALEZANG تله زنگ

Of anywhere along the line, isolated **Talezang** is the most tempting hop-off point for trekking into the mountain wilderness. This place is three hours north of Andimeshk. One hiking challenge is to make for **Shevi Waterfall**, which emerges directly as a spring from a cliff then falls around 100m in a wide sweep. The Shevi Waterfall is reportedly around five hours walk from Talezang with some climbing involved. You can camp here: bring food and tent.

Andimeshk اندیمشک

☎0642 / POP 174,000 / ELEV 147M

Flat, uninteresting Andimeshk has useful transport connections to Shush, Dezful and Shushtar. You'll need to sleep here if taking the scenic day-train to Dorud. **Hotel Rostan** (☎424 1818; Imam St; s/tw/tr US\$15/18/22) is handily central between Sa'at and Beheshti Sqs. Rooms have good bathrooms but the curiously patchy decor gives the impression that ambitious redecoration works stopped in mid-flow. Don't assume that the air-con actually works.

Just east of Azadegan Sq, the relatively upmarket **Hotel Bozorg Andimeshk** (Andimeshk Grand; ☎422 2100; Southern Bypass; s/d US\$64/91; ☐☒) is out of the centre but handy for the zoo-funfair and bus terminal. Rooms with balconies and decently equipped bathrooms are in a reasonable state of repair but seem vastly overpriced.

Many snack bars and small restaurants surround Beheshti Sq offering samosas, falafels, burgers, kababs and some particularly outstanding *dizi*.

i Getting There & Away

Bus, Minibus & Savari

Almost any service from Ahvaz can also be booked ex-Andimeshk at the new **main bus terminal** (Azadegan Sq), 1.5km south of Beheshti Sq on the southern ring road. Iran Peyma runs to Esfahan at 7.45am (US\$5), 10am (US\$4) and 8pm (US\$8, Volvo). They also have overnight Volvos to Tabriz (US\$10, 2.30pm) and Shiraz (US\$10, 4pm).

Savaris to Dezful (US\$0.50, 15 minutes) leave frequently from Sa'at Sq. Savaris for Ahvaz depart from Beheshti Sq. Minibuses for Shush (US\$0.50, 45 minutes) use a hidden yard off a lane directly west of Beheshti Sq.

For Khorramabad, minibuses (US\$1, 4½ hours) and more frequent savaris (US\$4, 3¾ hours) depart from Enqelab St around 2km north of the centre. They travel via **Pol-e-Dokhtar** (Virgin Bridge) a town that's named for a 3rd-century brick bridge (renovated up until the 10th century) of which only a single chunky brick arch remains, straddling the main road in a canyon further north.

Train

The **train station** (Taleqani St) is handily central, one short block west of Sa'at Sq (two blocks north then one west from Beheshti Sq). Arrive way before the 5.30am departure if you want a seat on the brilliantly scenic but appallingly overcrowded day train to Dorud via Bisheh (see p135). A 9pm train originating in Andimeshk runs overnight to Tehran (14 hours).

Shush

شوش

☎0642 / POP 44,000 / ELEV 72M

Shush (Susa) was once among the greatest cities of ancient Persia. Now it's a pleasantly small, relatively new town with a vast archaeological site, splendid castle, enigmatic Tomb of Daniel and bustling market.

Across the square from Hotel Nazr is **Paradise Coffeenet** (☎522 0780; Haft-e Tir Sq; internet per hr US\$1; ☺10am-midnight).

History

An important Elamite city from about the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, Susa was burnt by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal around 640 BC, but regained prominence in 521 BC when Darius I set it up as the Achaemenids' fortified winter capital. At that time it was probably similar in grandeur to Persepolis.

The palace survived the city's fall to Alexander the Great in 331 BC, and indeed Alexander married one of Darius III's daughters

here. Still prosperous in the Seleucid and Parthian eras, Susa re-emerged as a Sassanian capital. During Shapur II's long reign (AD 310–379) it regained renown as a Jewish pilgrimage site and became a centre of Nestorian Christian study. Evacuated in the face of Mongol raids, Shush disappeared into the sands of time, only re-emerging after 1852 when British archaeologist WK Loftus became the first to survey the site. His work was continued by the French Archaeological Service from 1891 more or less continuously until the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

i Sights

Ancient Shush

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

(admission US\$1; ☺8am-7pm, closes after heavy rain) Entered from YaZahra Sq on Khomeini Blvd, the **archaeological site** occupies the whole southern flank of modern Shush. To the right as you enter, the landscape is entirely dominated by the, sadly closed to the public, **Chateau de Morgan**. On the site of an Elamite acropolis, this crenellated masterpiece looks like an Omani desert fortress but was in fact built by the French Archaeological Service between 1897 and 1912 to defend researchers from raids by local Arab and Lurish tribesmen. Notice a cuneiform-inscribed brick incorporated into the castle's west doorway.

Turning left at the top of the site's main entry ramp, you can walk through the site of the 521 BC **Palace of Darius**. The site is now just a muddy rise on which a 30cm-high labyrinth of brick-and-wattle wall fragments marks the former room layout. At the northern rim are the massive stone bases of what was once an **apadana**, of six by six 22m-high columns topped with animal figures. A couple of double-horse capitals are partly preserved on the paved terrace.

To the east, beyond the partly paved **Royal Gate**, the **Royal City** is a misleading name for barren, lonely undulations stretching to the far horizon. It's more sensible to loop back towards the castle amid muddy gullies, pottery shards and thorn thickets alive with darting desert foxes. At the western side of the castle there's an earthen watchtower above ancient caves and niches.

Shush Museum

MUSEUM

(Susa Park, Khomeini St; admission US\$1; ☺7.30am-1pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Sun) Some tourists visit this bright new museum quite by

mistake, thinking that they've actually entered the archaeological site (whose access track is right beside it). The museum's five rooms display ancient stone- and pottery-work from archaeological sites in the region. Highlights include a giant bull-head capital from Shush's *apadana*, a lion-hugging Hercules statue from Masjid-i So-leiman and some spooky clay masks from Haft Tappeh.

Tomb of Daniel

IMAMZADEH

(Aramgah-e Danyal) As in a typical *imamzadeh*, Muslim pilgrims crowd the glittery interior of the **Tomb of Daniel**, kissing the zarieh grate around a green-draped grave slab. Here this behaviour is particularly intriguing given that Daniel has at best tangential relevance to Islam. In fact, he's a semi-mythical Jewish figure who supposedly served as a faithful *satarap* (administrator) to Darius I (r 522–486 BC). Dubiously recorded in the Bible as having 'tender love with the prince of the eunuchs' (Daniel 1, 9) he is best remembered for unenviable ordeals in lions' dens. These exploits were already over 300 years old when recorded in the Old Testament (Daniel 6, 16-23).

Whatever the real provenance of the Daniel relics, they brought Shush an extremely lucrative flow of Jewish pilgrims from across the Middle East. Great wealth accrued to the townsfolk living nearby, but those living across the river were missing out on the bonanza and wanted a share of the pilgrims' shekels. A compromise was arranged whereby Daniel's bones would spend alternate years on either riverbank, bringing prosperity to both communities. In the 12th century, travellers reported that an even more fanciful arrangement had left the holy remains dangling in a crystal coffin suspended from a metal bridge across the middle of the river.

What happened to them during the Mongol destruction is not recorded, but the present structure with its distinctive, pinecone faceted spire, so typical of Khuzestan tombs, was only built in 1871.

The tomb complex is easy to find in the bazaar area, two blocks from the museum. It remains open late into the evening.

Sleeping & Eating

Apadana Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎/fax 521 3131; s/tw US\$22/33; P☎) Comfortable and central above a good restaurant, the Apadana's rooms are fully equipped,

though the wallpaper is starting to look a little tatty and water pressure can be rather low in the upper rooms. Staff are friendly and some speak English.

Hotel Nazr

HOTEL \$

(☎522 9611; Haft-e Tir Sq; tw/q US\$25/30; ☎) Rooms have good bathrooms and are newer than the Apadana's, but the place lacks any atmosphere and is about 1km further from the historical sites. From the minibus yards, walk 300m up Shari'ati St. Prices are hazily defined so it's worth bargaining.

Plenty of snack bars and *kababis* are scattered near the museum and Haft-e Tir Sq.

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses en route to Ahvaz can often be persuaded to drop passengers off on the main highway, 2km east of town. Shuttle taxis head from this point into the centre, but not necessarily at 2am when many southbound buses go by. Heading out of Shush, you'll usually need to go first to Andimeshk or Ahvaz.

Minibuses to Ahvaz depart frequently from Khomeini Blvd, 800m northeast of the archaeological site. For Andimeshk (US\$1, 38km) and Dezful they use small, separate yards across the road. The Apadana Hotel can arrange sensibly priced agency taxis for Choqa Zanbil (US\$10 return) and Shushtar.

Choqa Zanbil & Haft Tappeh

HAFT TAPPEH

ELEV 76M

هفت تپه

Muddy Elamite-era mounds pimple this otherwise-flat oasis area. Several are thought to have been small ziggurats dating from around 1400 BC. However, none are mind-blowingly exciting, but recent archaeological work has rendered them a little more interesting. Beside the site, a Unesco-sponsored **museum** (admission US\$1; ☎8am-5pm Sat-Thu) is beautifully set amid bougainvillaea and soaring palms. It displays archaeological finds including a curious black sarcophagus. Photo-rich explanations detail the excavation, restoration and partial reconstruction of Choqa Zanbil (25km away).

The Haft Tappeh site is 3km off the Ahvaz-Andimeshk highway. Beyond the museum, after crossing the train tracks there's a 1km unpaved short cut south to the Choqa Zanbil road.

CHOQA ZANBIL

ELEV 81M

(admission US\$1; ☀7am-6pm, guarded 24hr) One of Iran's Unesco World Heritage sites, Choqa Zanbil's magnificent brick **ziggurat** is the best surviving example of Elamite architecture anywhere. Even if you're not a fan of ancient ruins, the great bulk and splendid semi-desert isolation of Choqa Zanbil can't fail to impress. Although close access is prevented after 6pm, the ziggurat arguably looks most appealing after dusk when the golden floodlighting emphasises the structure's form better than the hazy desert daylight.

History

The ancient inhabitants of proto-Iran attached great religious importance to mountains. Where they had no mountains, they made their own. This was the origin of distinctive pyramidal, tiered temples known as ziggurats. Choqa Zanbil's ziggurat was the *raison d'être* of the town of Dur Untash, founded by King Untash Gal in the mid-13th century BC. Dur Untash bloomed especially in the early 12th century BC when it had a large number of temples and priests. The town was eventually sacked by Ashurbanipal around 640 BC and, incredibly, remained 'lost' for more than 2500 years. It was accidentally rediscovered during a 1935 aerial survey by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the forerunner of BP.

The Ziggurat

The ziggurat was dedicated to Inshushinak, the chief god of the Elamite pantheon and patron of Shush. In those days the area was fertile and forested, and the ziggurat was built on a slightly raised base to guard against flooding. It has a square plan with sides measuring 105m. The original five storeys were erected vertically from the foundation level as a series of concentric towers, not one on top of another as was the custom in neighbouring Mesopotamia. At the summit (now lost) was a temple accessible only to the highest elite of Elamite society. Even now the taboo remains and you're not allowed to climb the remnant stairways that rise on each of the four sides.

The structure is made of red bricks so well-preserved that an observer could believe they're brand new. However, if you look very closely, a brick-wide strip at around eye-level is intricately inscribed in cuneiform, the world's spiky first alphabet

چغازنبیل

that looks like a spilt box of tin-tacks. The inscriptions are not easy to make out unless you cross the rope cordon. Permission to do so is the only apparent advantage of tipping the 'guide'. He speaks not a word of English, but gesticulates with gruesome clarity as to the purpose of the **sacrifice stones** (halfway along the northwest side). Easy to spot is an ancient **sun dial** (facing the southwest central stairway) and, beside it, a strangely moving **footprint** of an Elamite child, accidentally preserved for three millennia.

Around the Ziggurat

The ziggurat was surrounded by a paved courtyard protected by a wall. At the foot of the northeastern steps would once have been the **Gate of Untash Gal**, two rows of seven columns where supplicants would seek the pleasure of the king. Around the wall was originally a complex of **tomb chambers**, tunnels and **qanat** channels. Once the site's climate became drier, qanats brought water an incredible 45km from ancient rivers. Vestiges are still visible. Outside were the living quarters of the town and 11 temples dedicated to various Elamite gods and goddesses. Little of this remains.

Walk a couple of minutes east of the main asphalt access road towards an isolated lamppost to find some more, excavated **Elamite royal tombs**. There's little to see here, either, though steep ancient steps lead down into (unlabelled) **tomb number five**. Descending is unwise as the pit stinks of toiletry misdemeanours...especially bad when the temperature hits 45°C. Nonetheless, it's still worth strolling up the slight rise nearby to look back at the ziggurat from a particularly photogenic angle.

i Getting There & Away

There's no public transport. An ideal way to visit both sites is as side trips on a taxi-charter from Shush to Shushtar (US\$14). Visit Haft Tappeh first, as its museum is a good primer for Choqa Zanbil. In reverse you'd find Haft Tappeh's lumpy ziggurats somewhat of an anticlimax. Add US\$16 per hour waiting time.

Shushtar

0612 / POP 66,000 / ELEV 65M

The deeply historic city of Shushtar lies strategically where the last contoured red ridges of the expiring Zagros Mountains fade into the endless flat watermelon fields of southern Khuzestan. Beneath the initially unex-

شوشتر

THE ROMAN CONNECTION

Some of Shushtar's then state-of-the-art irrigation systems, now designated as a Unesco World Heritage Site, were built using Roman technology and labour: legionnaires defeated at the AD 259 battle of Edessa (today's Şanlıurfa in Turkey). Their leader, vanquished Valerian, became the only Roman Emperor ever to be captured alive.

Sassanian king Shahpur I was so proud of his victory over the Romans that he recorded the event with boastful carved reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam (p201) and Bishapur (p203). Stories vary as to Valerian's fate, but Shushtaris insist that he was imprisoned in Qal'eh Salosel (p139). In some versions he was systematically insulted then brutally killed by being forced-fed a 'soup' of molten gold.

citing surface of today's low-rise cityscape, there's lots to discover including a complex of artificial ancient 'watermills' and no less than 14 imamzadehs. The town centre is 17 Shahrivar Sq marked by Bank Mellī (no money exchange).

The very fast-connection **Persian Coffeehouse** (17 Shahrivar Sq; per hr US\$1; ☎8am-11pm) is across the square on the 2nd floor of a building that looks like a pair of mini glass Empire State Buildings.

In an alley behind the Shandhravan Bridge, the delightful little **Mostofi House** (admission free; ☎8am-2pm) hosts a small **tourist information office** (☎622 0850; www.shushtarcthb.ir) where you can get useful brochures and maps. While here peruse a small museum in their *shabestun* (a below-ground sitting room typical of traditional Khuzestani houses) and enjoy river views from the palm-tree courtyard.

👁 Sights

Watermills ARCHITECTURE
(Abshari Sika; Shari'ati St; admission US\$1; ☎8am-10pm). Shushtar's *raison d'être* for millennia was controlling the irrigation of the Khuzestan plains, and the town's most famous attraction is a set of ancient watermills. Actually, these aren't buildings at all but a powerful arc of cascading water chutes that are strangely mesmerising, especially when floodlit at night. They're especially impressive considering that the water is fed through ancient man-made feeder tunnels. One mill has been reconstructed so you can observe an old paddle-wheel device turning a millstone. Entrance is down steps beside an attractive blue-facaded building now home to souvenir and pickle shops. You can see the watermills site almost as well by simply peering over the parapet of the Shari'ati St bridge (one block south of 17 Shahrivar Sq), or even better by climbing the hill be-

hind: follow signs to the attractively renovated **Marashi House** (☎622 3484; Abdullah Banu St; admission free; ☎8am-9pm, variable).

Pol-e Shandhravan پل شاندروان ARCHITECTURE
About 400m west of the bus terminal are substantial ruined sections of this partly Sassanid **bridge cum weir**, also known as Band-i Qaisar or Valerian's Bridge. Along with the **Band-e-Mizan** weir, this raised the river level by 2m, providing the waters necessary for irrigation and mills. Considered a wonder of the world by 7th-century invading Arabs, the workers and architects were Roman captives (see boxed text, p139). The bridge originally had 45 arches and remained intact, albeit with many a renovation, until around a century ago. According to some Khuzestani historians, it was then deliberately dynamited by British agents. The idea was to break Shushtar's trade connections, thus encouraging locals to seek alternative work at the new (British-owned) oilfields of Masjid-i Soleiman. Less conspiratorial theories blame rebellions and floods for the bridge's deterioration.

Today the Pol-e Shandhravan ruins parallel to a newer Dezful Rd bridge. A park is being built to landscape the scene.

Qal'eh Salosel

قلعه سالوسل ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE
The historic heart of Shushtar was **Salosel Castle**, on a prominent cliff-hill overlooking the river. This is where Shapur I is said to have imprisoned Roman Emperor Valerian. It's also here that Persians held out for two years against the invading Arab-Muslim armies until secret tunnels were revealed to the attackers by a traitor. For centuries Khuzestan was governed from a palace ('Kushk') on this site and an impressive three-storey pyramidal building stood here until the 1920s. Sadly, above-ground, only a mound of rubble remains. However, the

castle's impressive Sassanian-era subterranean rooms and water channels have been rediscovered. As yet they are only open on special occasions such as No Ruz but at such times they are very imaginatively lit.

The site is one long block north of Shahrivar Sq then three minutes' walk to the east.

Imamzadeh Abdullah

IMAMZADEH, SHRINE

Visible from the minibus as you arrive from Ahvaz, this shrine has a white pinecone of a central tower reminiscent of Daniel's tomb in Shush. A gory local tale records a woman beheading her own son to swap his head for the skull of a long-dead holy man, which is now enshrined here as a sacred relic. Colourfully decked with strings of lights, the building resembles a cruise liner against the evening horizon. At its foot is the small but impressive 11-arched ancient **Lashgar Bridge**.

Other Sights

A short walk south of the bus terminal, the partly 9th-century **Masjid-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; Masjid Jameh Lane) has a truncated, gently leaning minaret and sits in a quiet tree-filled quadrangle of fruit-sellers.

Just beyond Hotel Jahangardi is a great viewpoint beside the octagonal **Kola Ferangi tower**, which looks like (and probably was) a stone lighthouse, though local lore relates that Shapur's slave driver would watch over the Roman prisoners from here surveying progress on the **Band-e Mizan** (Sassanid weir) that divided the river to provide water for the watermills.

Across the water you'll see the blue-domed **Seyid Mohammad Golabi Shrine** behind which rises an *ivan* of the vast new **Sheikh Alome Shushtari Shrine**. Currently in yellow brick, it entombs the 20th-century philosopher Mohammad Taq Shushtari and should eventually be covered in fabulous blue tiling, Esfahan style. About 1km further such tiling already graces the brilliant and considerably older **Saheb-al Zaman shrine** at which awed devotees have supposedly made sightings of the Mahdi (last imam), hence the 'empty seat' shrine box.

Sleeping & Eating

Mehmanpazir Shushtar


MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎622 3288; Sharafat St; s/d/tr US\$11/13/16) Rebuilt in 2006 with reasonably neat tiled floors, this upstairs place charges what it feels you'll pay, apparently irrespective of

whether you get a room with an OK bathroom or have to share the communal squat toilet. Mattresses and sheets are clean and new.

Hotel Jahangardi

HOTEL \$

(☎622 1690; Sarafat St; s/tw/tr US\$25/30/35; ) Right beside the river you can gaze across to the mausolea from this wonderful location that's peaceful until nocturnal tourists decide to crank up their party music. The clean, reasonably comfortable rooms have bathrooms.

Restaurant Abshar

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Shahrivar Sq; meals about US\$4; ☎7.30am-3pm & 5-10pm). There's a good selection of eateries around Shahrivar Sq of which this deceptively cavernous place makes a friendly choice and supplements kababs and *ghorme sabzi* (meat and vegetables with rice) with scrumptious spit-roast chicken (US\$5 for half-bird).

Several shops sell Shushtar's famous pickles and preserved fruits. Local *kolucho* (soft-centred biscuits with a hint of caraway) taste best when stuffed with dates.

Getting There & Away

Shushtar's single, handily central bus terminal is a block north and west from Shahrivar Sq, between Almas and Sheikh Sts. Very regular buses run to Ahvaz (US\$1, 1½ hours) and Dezful (US\$0.50, one hour), where you can transfer for Shush or Andimeshk. There's no public transport to Shush (90km), but a good asphalt road exists passing within 5km of Choqa Zanbil and emerging near Haft Tappeh.

Ahvaz

اهواز

☎0611 / POP 1 MILLION / ELEV 20M

Abu Nuwas ('Father of Curls') is perhaps the only Muslim poet celebrated for writing homoerotic drinking songs. He was born in AD 756 in Ahvaz, but got out as soon as he could. You'll probably want to do the same. But hopefully not (as Abu was) sold as a sex slave to a Yemeni drug dealer.

Using the well-served airport is the only likely reason you'd choose to transit this vast, featureless, industrial city where summer temperatures regularly top 50°C. Acceptable central accommodation options include the quiet if basic **Mehmanpazir Parknow** (☎222 2534; Imam Khomeini St, pedestrianised section; s/d US\$8/14) and the assidu-

ously cleaned **Iran Hotel** (☎221 7200; fax 221 7206; Shari'ati St; s/tw US\$25/35; 🏠). Before a flight, congenial modern rooms at the professionally run **Oxim Hotel** (☎447 4720; 7200; MiS Highway; s/tw/d US\$64/91/91; 🏠📞) are a sensible choice, being just 2km from the airport.

i Getting There & Away

Helpful **Tayareh Travel Agency** (☎222 9849; tayareh_travelagency@yahoo.com; Azadegan St; ☀8am-1pm & 5-9pm Sat-Thu) with English-speaking staff sells air tickets including to Tehran (US\$40, frequent), Esfahan (US\$35, daily),

Shiraz (US\$32, twice weekly), Kuwait (one way/return US\$70/110, weekly) and Dubai (one way/return US\$85/130, four weekly).

You can get to Shush (US\$1, two hours) and virtually anywhere else in Iran from the big main **bus terminal** (Andimeshk Rd), 5km west of centre up Enqelab St. Andimeshk savaris/minibuses (US\$2/1) depart from a hidden yard 200m further north. Dezfoul buses (US\$1, 1¾ hours) use a different yard 100m to the southeast of the main terminal across Enqelab St.

Buses for Shushtar (US\$0.50, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Shushtar** (Pasdaran Blvd) way across town, 4km northeast of centre (halfway to the airport). Call ☎447 2020 for a taxi.



Central Iran

ایران مرکزی

Includes »

Qom.....	143
Kashan.....	146
Esfahan.....	153
The Zagros Mountains.....	171
Dasht-e Kavir.....	173
Yazd.....	175
Shiraz.....	187
Persepolis.....	198
Pasargadae.....	202
Bavanat.....	202
Firuz Abad.....	202
Kazerun & Bishapur....	203

Why Go?

The expression ‘history resonates’ is banded about with gay abandon in guidebooks, but here in central Iran it really does apply. Ever since Cyrus the Great’s dramatic rise from provincial overlord to ruler of the largest empire on earth, this part of the country has been a showcase for the region’s greatest civilisations. The imperial majesty of Esfahan, the refined and understated elegance of Shiraz and the weathered desert ambience of Yazd stand in fascinating contrast, three points on a journey offering history, culture and challenges in abundance.

This is a region where it pays to stay moving. Nomadic people and trading caravans were common sights in the past, and modern travellers often follow in their footsteps, crossing mountains and deserts en route to towns, cities and villages that are as rich in history as they are in hospitality. It’s one of the great cultural pilgrimages of our time. Enjoy it.

Best Places to Eat

- » Abbasi Hotel Teahouse (p167)
- » Fereni Hafez (p167)
- » Restaurant Shahrzad (p167)
- » Sharzeh Traditional Restaurant (p195)
- » Shater Abbas 1 (p195)

Best Places to Stay

- » Ateshoooni (p175)
- » Barandaz Lodge (p178)
- » Manouchehri House (p150)
- » Niayesh Boutique Hotel (p194)
- » Silk Road Hotel (p181)

When to Go

The best times to visit are generally autumn (fall) and spring, although weather conditions do vary from province to province. Avoid travelling here in summer, particularly in the desert areas, as it can hit 50°C. At the other extreme, winter brings snow to the Zagros Mountains and freezing nights in the desert.

If you are keen to experience a local festival, Ashura (in July) is particularly fascinating (especially in Shiraz and Yazd), but we suggest staying away during No Ruz (Iranian New Year; 21 March to 3 April), when the entire region is swamped with Iranian holidaymakers.

Qom

☞ 0251 / POP 964,706 / ELEV 931M

Iran's second-holiest city after Mashhad, Qom (Ghom) is home to both the magnificent Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine and the headline clerics who have ruled the country since 1979. One of Iran's fastest-growing cities (the population has doubled since

the revolution), its skyline is being transformed by ugly new apartment blocks and there are more large infrastructure projects underway here than anywhere else in the country.

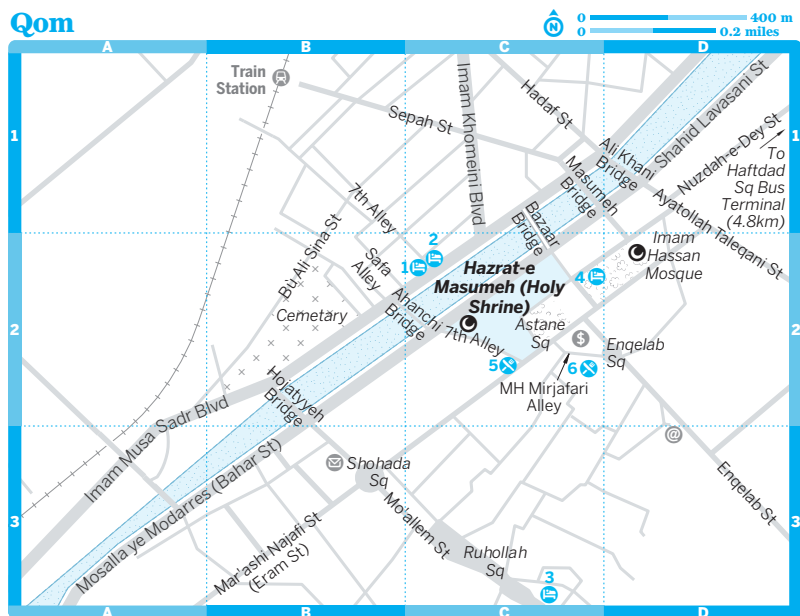
Despite these changes, Qom remains one of Iran's most religious and conservative cities. Shiite scholars and students come from across the world to study in



Central Iran Highlights

- 1 Kick back in the courtyard of a traditional hotel in **Yazd** (p181)
- 2 Admire a cluster of Qajari mansions in **Kashan** (p146)
- 3 Soak up the silent surrounds and star-filled skies of the **Dasht-e Kavir** (p173)
- 4 Lose yourself in the labyrinthine laneways of the Bazar-e Bozorg in **Esfahan** (p155)
- 5 Sample home-cooked meals and true Iranian hospitality in a guesthouse in the desert (p173)
- 6 Experience Iran's fast-disappearing nomadic culture at **Bavanat** (p202)
- 7 Follow in the footsteps of Darius I while wandering through **Persepolis** (p198)
- 8 Pay homage at the shrines of two Persian poets in **Shiraz** (p187)

Qom



Qom

📍 Top Sights

Hazrat-e Masumeh (Holy Shrine).....C2

🏨 Sleeping

- 1 Etminkan Hotel.....C2
 2 Negin Hotel.....C2
 3 Olympic Hotel.....C3
 4 Qom International Hotel.....C2

🍴 Eating

- 5 Fast-Food Stand.....C2
 6 Produce Market.....C2

its madrassahs (schools) and browse in its famous religious bookshops, plenty of pilgrims visit the shrine and locals are conspicuously pious – travellers should be discreet and dress conservatively, particularly around the Hazrat-e Masumeh. The city can be visited in an easy day trip from Tehran or en route to Kashan.

👁 Sights

Hazrat-e Masumeh حضرت معصومه SHRINE (Astane Sq; ☎24hr) This shrine is the physical and spiritual centre of Qom. The burial place of Imam Reza's sister Fatemeh, who died and was interred here in the 9th cen-

tury AD, it has two huge domes, various courtyards and exquisite tiled minarets. Much of what you see today was built under Shah Abbas I and the other Safavid kings, who were anxious to establish their Shiite credentials and provide a counterweight to the sect's shrines at Karbala and Najaf (in modern-day Iraq), at the time under Ottoman occupation. The magnificent golden cupola was an embellishment built by Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah, and today's 'shahs', the Ayatollahs of Qom, have embarked on a project to renovate and expand the complex, building a huge rear plaza and ensuring that scaffolding on the building is ubiquitous.

Non-Muslims are allowed into the grounds (women must wear a chador, available at entrance No 1), but not to see the shrine itself. The official policy is that non-Muslims should be in a group with a tour guide who has been approved by the shrine's stewards, but we have entered by ourselves on many occasions – just assure the guards that you will not take any photographs or enter the shrine itself.

Astane Square

SQUARE

The city's main square is fringed by souvenir shops and has an ugly modern fountain at its centre. Located on the northeast side of the shrine, it's a fantastic place to spend

an hour or two people-watching – particularly in the early evening, when it is busiest and most atmospheric. At this time of day the gold jewellery glittering in shop windows is as gaudy as the coloured lights adorning the shrine's minarets and dome, and the square has an almost carnivalesque feel. Many of the shops here sell *sohun*, a sinfully sweet brittle made with pistachio, almond, saffron and cardamom. Consider buying a small tin (US\$1.50) from one of the shops and a glass of tea (US\$0.25) from the square's tea stand so that you can enjoy them while watching the passing parade of pilgrims making their way to and from the shrine.

Sleeping

If you plan to stay overnight, try to find a place near the shrine. Most budget places are in or near 7th Alley (in the past this was known locally as Haramnema Lane), just north of the Ahanchi Bridge. There are also two good midrange options – one in a fantastic location between the shrine and the Imam Hassan Mosque and the other is in a characterless neighbourhood 2km south-east of the shrine. Note that during religious festivals and on Fridays Qom is packed – be sure to book ahead.

Qom International Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎783 1881; www.qomhotel.com; Helal Ahmar St; s/d/tr US\$55/95/125; 🍷🍷) The best sleeping option in town is located just around the corner from Astane Sq. It offers large and comfortable rooms, wi-fi in the lobby and a 15% discount if you stay midweek.

Etminan Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎660 9640, 0912 251 1127; cnr 7th Alley & Imam Musa Sadr Blvd; d US\$27; 🍷) Some of the small but functional rooms offer fine views of the holy shrine, and double-glazing keeps most of the noise out. There's a kitchen, and everything is very clean. It has squat toilets and no English is spoken.

Olympic Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎783 1881; info@hotelolympic.ir; Mo'alleh St; s/d/tr US\$50/90/100; 🍷🍷) This relatively new four-star hotel 2km southeast of the shrine is the sleeping option of choice for visiting dignitaries and has a tendency to turn foreigners away if important clerics are staying. Rooms are well set up and there's a restaurant and coffee shop in the foyer.

Negin Hotel HOTEL \$
(☎663 0246, 0912 151 8575; neginhotel2006@yahoo.com; 7th Alley; s/d US\$12/24; 🍷) Another good budget choice, with very similar amenities and service to the Etminan.

Eating

The dining options in Qom are extremely limited. Your best bet is to buy a felafel sandwich or a *sambusa* (deep-fried triangle of spicy meat or vegetables in pastry) from one of the fast-food stands on busy Mar'ashi Najafi St. The best of these is on the corner of the first alley down from the southwest corner of the shrine. There are a few simple restaurants serving roast chicken along this street, too.

To source picnic supplies, head to the produce market located in the arc-shaped MH Mirjafari Alley, opposite the shrine.

Information

Cafenet Saëid (cnr MR Sabori Alley & Enqelab St; per hr US\$0.90; ☀8am-11pm) Located near Astane Sq.

Money Exchange (Mar'ashi Najafi St; ☀9am-8pm Sat-Thu).

Getting There & Away

Transport to Qom is packed on Fridays and on any religious holiday.

Bus & Savari

Intercity buses and savaris leave from Haftdad Sq, a huge roundabout 5km north of the shrine. Savari touts pester potential passengers here as they wait for the dozens of buses passing through en route to or from Tehran. Buses to Tehran (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$2.50/2.30, 1½ to two hours) stop several times an hour. South-bound services to major destinations are frequent, including Kermanshah (US\$9, seven to eight hours), Yazd (US\$11.50, eight hours) and Shiraz (US\$11.50, 1½ to 14 hours). Note that competition for seats can be positively unholy and that there are no bus services to Esfahan.

To get to Kashan, take a bus (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$2.50/2.30, 1¼ hours) or savari (US\$4.50) from Haftdad Sq.

Train

Trains run from Tehran to Qom on Thursday afternoons, returning to Tehran (2nd class US\$0.70, 2½ hours) late Friday afternoon. Most people opt for a bus.

Getting Around

A taxi from Haftdad Sq or Terminal-e Kashan to Astane Sq costs US\$2.70.

Kashan

Q0361 / POP 253,509 / ELEV 935M

Many travellers opt to bypass Kashan on their journeys between Tehran, Esfahan and Yazd, but we counsel you not to do the same. In fact, this delightful oasis city on the edge of the Dasht-e Kavir gets our vote as one of the most alluring destinations in Iran, boasting a highly atmospheric covered bazaar, a cluster of architecturally significant 19th-century houses and three excellent accommodation options.

Shah Abbas I agreed with our assessment – he was so enamoured with Kashan that he insisted on being buried here rather than in Esfahan. Other historical figures of note who are associated with the town include Abu Musa al-Ashari, a soldier and companion of the Prophet Mohammed whose army took the town in the 7th century AD. Legend has it that his troops tossed thousands of scorpions from the surrounding desert over the city walls, causing the terrified Kashanis to capitulate.

During the Seljuk period (AD 1051–1220) the town became famous for its textiles, pottery and tiles. Today it is a major centre for the production of textiles, rugs and rose water, and a great place to stock up on qual-

کاشان

ity souvenirs. The most popular time of the year to visit is April, when the fields of rose bushes outside town are in full and fragrant bloom.

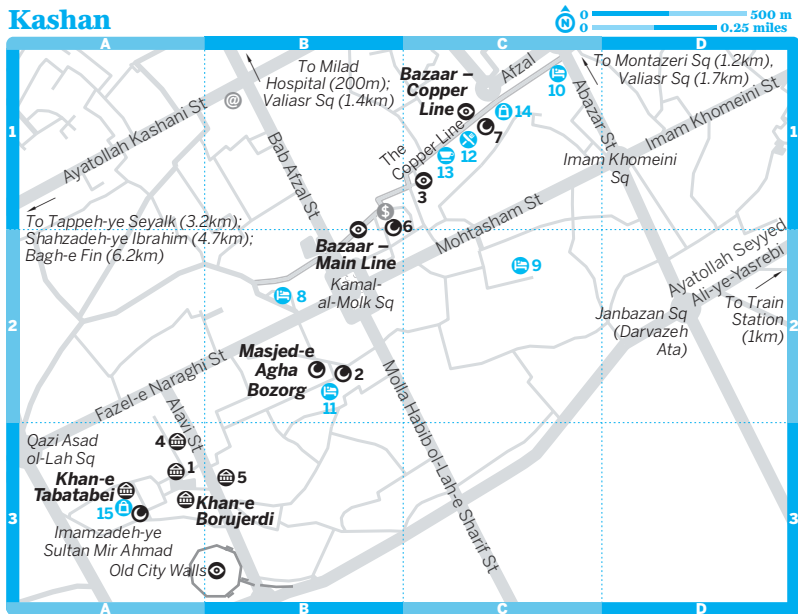
Sights

BAZAAR & AROUND THE BAZAAR

Bazaar بازار BAZAAR
Kashan's historic **bazaar** (☉9am-noon & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) is one of the best in Iran. Busy but not hectic, traditional but with a wide variety of goods, large enough to surprise but not to get lost in, it's a great place to wander for a couple of hours, especially in the late afternoon. The multidomed roof of the bazaar dates from the 19th century, but the site has been the centre of trade in Kashan for almost 800 years. If you step off the main thoroughfare, you'll discover caravanserais, madrasahs, mosques and *ham-mams* (public bathhouses).

When exploring, be sure to make your way to the magnificent **Khan Amin al-Dowleh Timche**, a caravanserai with a soaring, beautifully decorated dome. Dating from 1868, it's currently being restored by the Kashani Culture & Heritage Office. There's a tea stand at one of its entrances where you can sit and watch a steady stream of shoppers pass by. Alternatively, the 19th-

Kashan



century Hammam-e Khan (p151) is a popular spot for a tea and qalyan (water pipe) in the late afternoon. Other notable features in the bazaar include the Seljuk-era **Masjed-e Soltani** (Soltani Mosque), located on the main thoroughfare (known as 'The Main Line'), and the 800-year-old **Mir Amad Mosque**, located on a thoroughfare known as 'The Copper Line'. The latter is also where the most interesting shops are located.

For a delicious snack, purchase some Kashani biscuits from one of the bazaar's many patisseries – the *nargili* (coconut macarons) are particularly delicious.

FREE Masjed-e Agha Borzorg

مسجد و مدرسه آقا بزرگ MOSQUE COMPLEX
(Agha Borzorg Mosque & Madrasah; ☎8am-8pm)
This 19th-century mosque complex is famous for its symmetrical design. It comprises four storeys, including a large sunken courtyard with ablutions pool, an austere

dome, tiled minarets and unusually lofty *badgirs* (windtowers). The wooden front door is said to have as many studs as there are verses in the Quran, and the mud-brick walls are covered with Quranic inscriptions and mosaics. Inside, there's a fine portal and mihrab (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) on the right at the rear of the compound. The madrasah in the sunken courtyard is still in use (women should steer clear), though the mosque itself has been decommissioned. Entrance is usually free; the only exception is during April and No Ruz, when a charge of US\$0.50 per person is levied.

To the left of the mosque's entrance is the **Khajeh Taj ad-Din** (www.tajaddin.com; a donation requested; ☎8am-9pm), the tomb of Ghotbs Kashani, a famous mystic of the Qajar period.

ALAVI STREET & AROUND

Traditional Houses

خانه های سنتی HISTORIC BUILDINGS
Hiding behind the town's high mud-brick walls are hundreds of large traditional houses built by wealthy merchants, monuments to the importance of Kashan as a Qajar-era commercial hub. Built during the 19th century, most have long since been carved up or are literally turning to dust, but several have been restored and are open to the public. All are set around a series of interlinked courtyards and are embellished with fine stucco panels, ostentatious stained glass and lofty *badgirs*.

Khan-e Tabatabaei خانه طباطبایی
(off Alavi St; admission US\$1.80; ☎8am-sunset)
Built around 1880, Seyyed Jafar Tabatabaei's house is renowned for its intricate stone reliefs, fine stucco and wonderful mirror and stained-glass work. The house consists of three sections: the *andaruni* (internal area where family members lived), the *biruni* (external area used for entertaining and housing guests) and the *khadame* (servants' quarters). These are set around four courtyards, the largest of which boasts a fountain pool. From mid-afternoon (depending on the month), sunlight and stained glass combine to bathe some rooms in brilliant colour.

To get here, walk south past the Khan-e Borujerdi towards the blue conical tower of the Imamzadeh-ye Sultan Mir Ahmad and turn right – the entrance is on the left.

Kashan

📍 Top Sights

Bazaar – Copper Line.....	C1
Bazaar – Main Line.....	B2
Khan-e Borujerdi.....	A3
Khan-e Tabatabaei.....	A3
Masjed-e Agha Borzorg.....	B2

📍 Sights

1 Hammam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad.....	A3
2 Khajeh Taj ad-Din.....	B2
3 Khan Amin-al Dowleh Timche.....	C1
4 Khan-e Abbasian.....	A3
5 Khan-e Ameriha.....	B3
6 Masjed-e Soltani.....	B1
7 Mir Emad Mosque.....	C1

🛏 Sleeping

8 Khan-e Ehsan.....	B2
9 Manouchehri House.....	C2
10 Mosaferkhaneh-ye Gochariyan.....	C1
11 Noghli House.....	B2

🍴 Eating

Abbasi Teahouse & Traditional Restaurant.....	(see 4)
12 Nabatrie Ghanadilpati.....	C1

🍷 Drinking

13 Hammam-e Khan.....	C1
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🛍 Shopping

14 Kashani Traditional Millstone.....	C1
15 Mr Montashami's Shop.....	A3

WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?

As you wander around the narrow streets of Kashan, look carefully at the house doors. Most have two knockers: one round and fat, the other long and thin. These were designed to give off different sounds so that those in the house would be able to tell whether a man or woman was knocking and then decide who should go to the door – vital in a society where women lived in *purdah* (in seclusion or behind a veil). The round and fat knockers signalled a female guest, the long and thin a male.

There's an excellent handicraft shop (see p151) off the main courtyard.

Khan-e Boroujerdi خانه بروجردی ها
(off Alavi St; admission US\$0.50; ☉8am-sunset)
Legend has it that when Sayyed Jafar Natanzi, a carpet merchant known as Boroujerdi, met with fellow carpet merchant Sayyed Jafar Tabatabaei to discuss taking his daughter's hand in marriage, Mr Tabatabaei set one condition: his daughter must be able to live in a home at least as lovely as his own. The result – finished some 18 years later – was the Khan-e Boroujerdi.

The home originally consisted of two sections, an *andaruni* and a *biruni*, but today only the *biruni* is open to the public (the *andaruni* houses the Kashani Culture & Heritage Office). What you see is an ornately decorated courtyard, laid out around an empty central fountain pool. At its far end is a two-storey *ivan* (open reception hall opening onto the courtyard) that is sumptuously decorated with splendid motifs above the entrance, intricate *muqarnas* (stalactite-type stone carving used to decorate doorways and window recesses), fine glass and mirror work, and frescoes painted by Kamal al-Molk, the foremost Iranian artist of the time. In one of the smaller adjoining rooms, a carpet design is carved on the ceiling.

If you ask nicely you might be allowed to climb to the roof for views over the courtyard and the distinctive six-sided, domed *badgirs*.

To get here, follow the signs from Alavi St up a small incline opposite the Khan-e

Khan-e Ameriha

خانه عامری ها

(Alavi St; admission US\$0.65; ☉9am-6pm) The largest and most impressive of the town's mansions, this complex was built at the end of the 18th century by Ebrahim Khalil Ameri, Kashan's governor and one of the country's wealthiest men. Ameri had made his money supplying the shah with arms and providing security along the trade route between Tehran and Kerman. When completed, his was the largest home in Persia, encompassing four mansions for different family members linked by seven courtyards over 9000 sq metres.

All of the buildings were fast returning to dust by the time restoration work began in 1999. So far, millions of euros have been spent and one by one the courtyards and surrounding buildings are being returned to their extravagant best (expect to see lots of scaffolding). Highlights include the mirrored reception rooms, two *hammams* (one of which was built specifically for local pregnant women) and the *naghb* (mask room), which leads to a secret escape tunnel. To see it, get chummy with the attendants...and ask to be let onto the roof.

Parts of the house will open as a top-end traditional hotel in the next few years.

Khan-e Abbasian

خانه عباسیان

(off Alavi St; admission US\$1.80; ☉8am-sunset)
Built by a fabulously wealthy glass merchant, this handsome complex of six buildings is spread over several levels. The numerous courtyards are designed to enhance the sense of space by becoming larger as they step up, culminating in an open courtyard on top. The high porticos and reception halls are decorated with the usual plaster reliefs and fine mirror work but also feature exceptionally beautiful and detailed stained-glass windows (as befits their original owner). The house's *khadame* has been converted into a restaurant and teahouse (see p151).

To find the house, walk down a lane parallel to Alavi St, starting opposite the Hammam Sultan Mir Ahmad.

Hamмам-e Sultan Mir Ahmad

حمام سلطان میراحمد

HISTORIC BUILDING

(off Alavi St; admission US\$1.80; ☉8am-5pm, to 7pm summer) A few metres from the entrance to the Khan-e Boroujerdi, this 500-year-old *hammam* is a superb example of an Iranian bathhouse. A recent restoration has stripped away 17 layers of plaster (look just inside the

second room to see them) to reveal the original *sarough*, a type of plaster made of milk, egg white, soy flour and lime that is said to be stronger than cement. Richly coloured tiles feature throughout. Make sure that you go onto the roof, from where you can admire a fabulous panorama of the town's roofs, minarets and *badgirs*.

ALONG THE FIN ROAD

There are a couple of sights worth a quick look on the road to Bagh-e Fin (Fin Garden; southwest of the centre). If you decide to walk, do so on your way back to town, as it's all downhill if you start at Fin. Otherwise, jump on and off buses or flag down a taxi.

FREE Shahzadeh-ye Ibrahim

شاهزاده ابراهیم SHRINE
(Amir Kabir Rd; ☀9am-sunset) Built in 1894, this shrine boasts European-style painted ceilings, colourful tiles, tall minarets and a pretty courtyard. The conical tiled roof is distinctive to this area and is clearly visible from the main road to Fin.

Tappeh-ye Seyalk (Sialk)

تپه سیلک ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE
(Seyalk/Sialk Mound; off Amir Kabir Rd; admission US\$0.50; ☀7.30am-sunset) One of the oldest and richest archaeological sites in central Iran, the Tappeh-ye Seyalk has yielded a plethora of interesting pottery pieces, metal tools and domestic implements made from stone, clay and bone (they date from as early as the 4th millennium BC). More significant, perhaps, is the structure itself – what is emerging from the dust is clearly a ziggurat (stepped pyramidal temple), and some Iranians are claiming that it predates those of the Mesopotamians.

This is still a (seasonal) working dig and, while visitors are welcomed, there are few facilities. Most finds have been moved to museums, including the small museum at Bagh-e Fin, the National Museum of Iran in Tehran (p41) and the Louvre in Paris.

Seyalk is halfway between Kashan and Fin – that's 4.5km from either – on the north side of the road.

Bagh-e Fin باغ تاریخی فین GARDENS
(Fin Garden; Amir Kabir Rd; admission US\$0.50; ☀9am-sunset) Designed for Shah Abbas I, this lush garden is renowned as being the very epitome of the Persian garden; it was recently added to the World Heritage Sites list (see the boxed text, p150). In the sur-

rounding areas, water is scarce; inside the garden it flows with superabundance, channelled from a natural spring through a series of turquoise-coloured pools and fountains and continuing on down the main road in *jubs* (canals, pronounced 'jooBs'). The cedar trees inside the garden are up to 500 years old, and the profusion of orange trees imparts a wonderful fragrance when the trees are in blossom.

At the centre of the garden is the shah's delightful **shotor gelou**, a two-storey pool house. At the rear is a **recreational pavilion** built in the Qajar period.

On one side of the garden is the **hammam complex**, famous as the place where Iranian nationalist hero Amir Kabir was murdered. Mirza Taqi Khan, known as Amir Kabir, served as prime minister under Nasir od-Din Shah from 1848 to 1851. He was a moderniser who instituted significant change, especially in the fields of education and administration. But his popularity was not appreciated in the royal court and the shah's mother eventually persuaded her son that he had to go. Amir Kabir was imprisoned in Fin Garden and eventually murdered in the bathhouse, though some say he slashed his own wrists. Inside, naff mannequins re-enact the drama.

On the opposite side of the garden is the modest **Kashani National Museum** (admission US\$0.50). Its exhibits include textiles, ceramics and calligraphy, but none are particularly impressive.

The gardens are in the village of Fin, 9km southwest of central Kashan at the end of Amir Kabir St. You can get here by shuttle taxi (US\$1.60) from Kamal al-Molk Sq or by taxi *dar baste* (closed door; US\$4.50), or you can hop on the green bus that travels from the corner of Ayatollah Kashani and Baba Afzani Sts in the centre of Kashan. The only problem with catching the bus is that officially, passengers should have a bus card and tickets aren't sold on board. The



MONEY SAVER

The Khan-e Tabatabaei, Khan-e Abbasian and Hammam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad can be visited on a combined ticket available at the ticket offices at each property. This costs US\$3.60, a saving of US\$1.80 on the cost of individual tickets.

PERSIAN GARDENS

In 2011 Unesco added a group of nine Iranian gardens to the World Heritage list, describing them as the best existing examples of the classic Persian Garden form. Traditionally conceived to symbolise Paradise, these gardens are all divided into four sectors symbolising the Zoroastrian elements of sky, earth, water and plants.

The gardens that are included in the listing date back to different periods since the 6th century BC and include five gardens in Central Iran that are easy to visit: the Bagh-e Fin (p149) in Kashan, the Bagh-e Chehel Sotun (p162) in Esfahan, the Bagh-e Dolat Abad in Yazd (p177), the Bagh-e Eram (p193) in Shiraz and the ancient garden of Pasargadae (p202) near Persepolis.

cards are purchased at the bus terminal for US\$1.60. That said, our experience suggests that the drivers aren't too concerned if you hitch a lift with them without a ticket.

Tours

Kashan is full of driver-guides who can take you to Abyaneh and back in half a day (usually about US\$65) or to Esfahan via Abyaneh and Natanz (US\$90). Ask your hotel to organise this for you. For a tour of the town or its immediate surrounds, try one of the following:

Hossein Moznebi

GUIDE

(☎09132642236; kashan_guide@yahoo.com; half-/full-day tour US\$25/40) Based at Tabatabaei House, Hossein has excellent English.

Leila Sabbaghi

GUIDE

(☎0913 260 8839; sabbaghil@yahoo.com; half-/full-day tour US\$25/40) An enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide with good English and basic French.

Sleeping

Manouchehri

House

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎424 2617; www.manouchehrihouse.com; 49 7th Emerat Alley, off Sabat Alley & Mohtasham St; r/ste US\$200/250; 🍷🍷🍷) It's not often that we award a hotel 10 out of 10 on our personal rating system, but in our opinion that's what this gorgeous boutique hotel deserves. Opened in 2011 after a three-year restoration, the traditional house the hotel occupies is in one of the oldest quarters of the town and really is a joy to behold, with a stunning central courtyard featuring an *ivan* overlooking a huge decorative pool. The nine rooms are comfortable and well equipped, amenities are excellent (restaurant, in-house cinema) and the service is nothing short of exemplary. The break-

fast includes fresh juice and good coffee (Nespresso).

Khan-e Ehsan

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎444 6833; www.ehsanhouse.com; off Fazel-e Navaghi St; dm/s/d US\$13.50/32/65, d without bathroom US\$45; 🍷🍷🍷) Mirrored stars twinkle on the vaulted roof of the four-bed dorm in this simple but atmospheric traditional hotel. Rooms come in many shapes and forms, but most are arranged around a pretty courtyard with a large decorative pool and plenty of seating – it's a great place to enjoy dinner (meals US\$3.50 to \$7.50). The hotel uses profits to help fund its NGO, which promotes the arts and is based in the house. Note that air-con is only available in rooms with bathroom and that US\$9 discounts are offered in the low season.

Noghli House

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎423 3324, 0913 276 5984; info@noghlihouse.com; bed & 3 meals US\$27; 🍷) Mr Rezvanian, who speaks English, and his charming family welcome travellers into their home, which is an old house located behind the Masjed-e Agha Bozorg. The small, cell-like rooms are arranged around two small courtyards and have very hard beds. Fortunately, both these and the shared bathrooms (one with sit-down flush toilet) are clean, and the delicious meals are served on a communal table (US\$6.50 if you're not staying here, but be sure to book ahead). Excellent value.

Mosaferkhaneh-ye

Golchariyan

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎444 5495; Abazar St; s/d without bathroom US\$9/14.50) Noisy rooms, hard beds and filthy bathrooms (for which you must pay US\$0.90 per shower) make this place worth considering only if you're stony broke. No breakfast and no English spoken.

Eating & Drinking

Decent eating options are thin on the ground, so it's fortunate that all three of the hotels that we recommend serve good food and welcome nonguests. The garden restaurants lining the road to Fin Garden are popular on summer evenings, but we are loath to vouch for their standards of hygiene.

Abbasi Teahouse & Traditional Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Khan-e Abbasian, off Alavi St; meals US\$5.50; ☺11am-midnight) Occupying the *khadame* of the Khan-e Abbasian, this atmospheric place is family-run (dad on the floor, one son on the cash register and another in the kitchen). Traditional seating is arranged around a fountain and the menu features equally traditional dishes, including kababs, *dizi* (lamb and vegetable stew pounded to a paste at the table), *turshi* (pickles) and delicious *kashke bademjan* (roasted and spiced eggplant topped with fermented cheese). Enter down the stairs opposite the ticket office.

Manouchehri House

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎424 2617; www.manouchehrihouse.com; 49 7th Emerat Alley, off Sabat Alley & Mohtasham St; meals US\$7-9) Nonguests are welcomed into this boutique hotel for tea and biscuits (US\$2.50) served by the pool. Alternatively, book ahead for a meal featuring Kashani specialities such as *gusht lubia* (lamb and kidney-bean stew) and *polo shevid* (rice with lima beans and dill).

Golshan Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Shahid Motahari Blvd; meals US\$7-16; ☺noon-3.30pm & 7.30-11pm) A favourite with Kashanis celebrating weddings, birthdays and other big occasions, this brightly lit place near Moalem Sq serves fish dishes, *zarreshk polo* (roast chicken with rice and barberries) and the full complement of kababs.

Hammam-e Khan

TEAHOUSE \$

(Bazaar; ☺9am-9pm) Down a few stairs from the bazaar's Copper Line (look for the sign), this old bathhouse now operates as a tea-house and is popular with young Kashanis. Go in the early evening for a tea and qalyan. A few doors down is **Nabatrie Ghanadil-pati**, one of the town's best patisseries.



Shopping

Mr Motashami's Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(Khan-e Tabatebei, off Alavi St; ☺8am-sunset) Located in a small room overlooking the courtyard in Khan-e Tabatabaei, this small shop sells a range of locally produced manteaus, scarves, blouses and dresses in cotton and silk. It's an excellent place for females to source locally appropriate clothing.

Kashani Traditional Millstone

SPICES

(Copper Line, Bazaar; ☺9am-noon & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) The huge millstone in this shop has been in use for over 300 years and still grinds spices for local cooks each day. The shop is located on the bazaar's 'Copper Line', and you can observe copper pots being decorated and pounded into shape at nearby stores.

KASHANI TEXTILES

Kashan has been an important centre for textile production since the Safavid era, but in recent decades the artisanal trade has suffered from a proliferation of cheap, factory-made textiles flooding the market. It is becoming increasingly hard to make a decent living producing traditional Kashani textiles such as embossed velvet and *zarbaft* (silk brocade) on hand looms, and as a result fewer and fewer young people are learning the trade.

Fortunately, the owners of the recently opened Manouchehri House traditional hotel have decided to act to prevent age-old skills being lost forever, and are supporting local artisans who produce these complex and extremely time-consuming handicrafts. If you're staying at the hotel, request a tour of the on-site weavers' workshops; you will meet Mr Yallah, a retired textile engineer who produces exquisite velvet; Mr Enayati, famous throughout Iran for his skill at weaving *zarbaft*; Mr Mirza, who has been weaving cotton and *sharbafi* (silk) for 71 years (he started aged seven), and Mr Taleh, who has been weaving and dyeing both of these for even longer.

Nonguests can pop into the hotel's shop, where it's possible to purchase hand-woven silk fabric (US\$20 to US\$80 per metre), cotton fabric (US\$10 per metre) or museum-grade *zarbaft* produced using patterns from the Cultural Heritage Foundation in Tehran (US\$6000 per metre); the shop can even organise for made-to-order clothes in your choice of fabric.

i Information

Amir Kabir Exchange (Zargara Passage, Bazaar; ☎8.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-8.30pm Sat-Thu) Conveniently located in a modern arcade off the bazaar's Main Line.

Milad Hospital (Dr Beheshti St)

Soroush Netcoffee (Ayatollah Kashani St; per hr US\$0.75; ☎8am-midnight) Fast connections.

i Getting There & Away

Bus

Arriving from Esfahan or Yazd, alight at Montazeri Sq. Arriving from Tehran, you can alight at Valiasr Sq (the one with the New Age ziggurat in the middle) or at Montazeri Sq.

Bus depart from the main bus terminal off Zojaji Sq, on the northern edge of the city. If you are going to Tehran, you can also get on the bus at Montazeri Sq but you'll need to buy a ticket on the bus, as there is no ticket office here.

There are regular services to Tehran (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$4.90/4, 3½ hours) via Qom (US\$2.50/2.30, 1¼ hours) and less-frequent services to Esfahan (*mahmooly* US\$3.30, three hours) via Natanz (US\$1.60, 1¼ hours). Other destinations include Shiraz (*mahmooly* US\$10.70, 10 hours) and Yazd (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$12.40/7.50, 4½ hours).

Savari

Savaris to Tehran charge US\$11.50 for the front passenger seat and US\$9 for a seat in the back of the car. These are sometimes direct but sometimes travel via Qom (US\$6/4.50). They leave from Valiasr Sq. Savaris to Esfahan leave from Montazeri Sq and cost US\$9.

Train

There are at least three trains a day between Kashan and Tehran (US\$2.70, 3½ hours), but they generally pass in the middle of the night. There are also daily trains to Esfahan (US\$3.60, four hours).

The train station is about 2km north of the city centre.

i Getting Around

A taxi *dar baste* within town usually costs US\$2.70. From the bus terminal you'll pay US\$4 (US\$4.50 at night).

Around Kashan

Several villages can be visited on day trips from Kashan. The most interesting is Abyaneh, though if you want to get off the track, **Niasar** (at 1710m above sea level) is also worth a visit. Its sights include a well-preserved Sassanian-era fire temple, a

Parthian-era cave built as a Mithraist temple and a waterfall. Other popular half-day trips from town include **Qamsar**, famous for its rose fields that bloom during April, and the underground city of **Nushabad**, 8km north of Kashan, which was used as a shelter during the Mongol invasion in Iran in the 13th century and remained in use as emergency shelter until the 1920s.

ABYANEH

آبیانه

☎0362 / POP – A FEW OLD LADIES / ELEV 2235M

Serenely situated at the foot of Mt Karkas (3899m), the ancient village of Abyaneh is a warren of steep, twisting lanes and crumbling red mud-brick houses with lattice windows and fragile wooden balconies. It's testament to both the age and isolation of Abyaneh that the elderly residents speak Middle Persian, an earlier incarnation of Farsi that largely disappeared some centuries ago.

The village is at least 1500 years old and faces east across a picturesque valley. It was built this way to maximise the sun it receives and minimise the effects of howling gales in winter. And if you come here in winter you'll understand why – it's freezing! In summer, however, it's refreshingly cool and Abyaneh is most lively, filled with residents returning from winter in Tehran and tourists haggling with colourfully clad, toothless old women over the price of dried apples.

Abyaneh is best appreciated by just wandering, but do look for the 14th-century **Imamzadeh-ye Yahya** with its conical, blue-tiled roof, and the **Zeyaratgah shrine** with its pool and views.

Looming over the village, the modern, multistorey **Abyaneh Hotel** (☎436 2223; www.hotelabyaneh.com, in Farsi: s/d/tr US\$46/81/101; ☐☒) offers clean and comfortable rooms, some of which have panoramic views. The family who runs it are friendly and the huge **restaurant** (☎noon-4pm & 8-10pm; meals US\$7) serves excellent food; we recommend both the *chelo fesenjun* (chicken cooked in a pomegranate and walnut sauce and served with rice) and the local trout.

The newly built **Viuna Hotel** (☎436 2820-23; http://viunahotel.ir; dm US\$17) complex off the road to the village isn't as comfortable or convenient as the Abyaneh, but it offers relatively cheap dorm beds, has a restaurant and will even let you pitch a tent for a small charge. Worth considering if you're on a tight budget.

NATANZ

If you are travelling between Kashan and Esfahan, consider making a brief detour into Natanz, on the lower slopes of Mt Karkas. This tree-lined town has two attractions, neither of which is the country's major underground uranium enrichment plant, which is several kilometres away (do not *under any circumstances* take photographs of this – even from a car or bus). These are the four-*iwan* **Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque)** and the adjoining **Imamzadeh-ye Abd al-Samad** (both ☉8am-4pm Tue-Sun). The tomb belongs to a renowned local Sufi mystic of the 11th century, while the mosque is one of the best preserved of all Ilkhanid-era buildings, dating from the early 14th century. The highlights are the imamzadeh's intricate *muqarnas* (stalactite-type stone carving) ceiling and tall portal with its exquisite turquoise and blue-and-white tiled calligraphy, and the intricately carved but very worn wooden door at the entrance to the mosque.

The complex is a good 2km walk (mainly downhill) from the roundabout on the main highway where buses stop; walk down the hill into the town, turn left at the roundabout and then continue along the tree-lined boulevard past the 17th Shahrivar and Emam Khomeini roundabouts. Regular *mahmooly* services between Kashan (US\$1.60, 1¼ hours) and Esfahan (US\$3.30, two hours) pass through Natanz.

i Getting There & Away

Abyaneh is 82km from Kashan and isn't serviced by any public transport. You'll need to hire a driver-guide or taxi to take you there, wait two or three hours while you explore and then return to Kashan or take you on to Esfahan. This costs about US\$50 to/from Kashan and US\$80 to Esfahan via Natanz.

Esfahan

اصفهان

☎0311 / POP 1,602,110 / ELEV 1574M

This is Iran's number-one tourist destination for good reason. Its profusion of tree-lined boulevards, Persian gardens and important Islamic buildings gives it a visual appeal unmatched by any other Iranian city, and the many artisans working here underpin its reputation as a living museum of traditional culture. Walking through the historic bazaar, over the picturesque bridges and across the Unesco-listed central square are sure to be highlights of your holiday.

Such is Esfahan's grandeur that it is easy to agree with the famous 16th-century half-rhyme '*Esfahan nesfe jahan*' (Esfahan is half the world). Robert Byron, author of the 1937 travelogue *The Road to Oxiana*, was slightly more geographically specific when he ranked 'Isfahan among those rarer places, like Athens or Rome, which are the common refreshment of humanity'.

There are, however, some less-than-refreshing elements to Esfahan. This is the country's third-largest city, and the outskirts are home to plenty of heavy industry, includ-

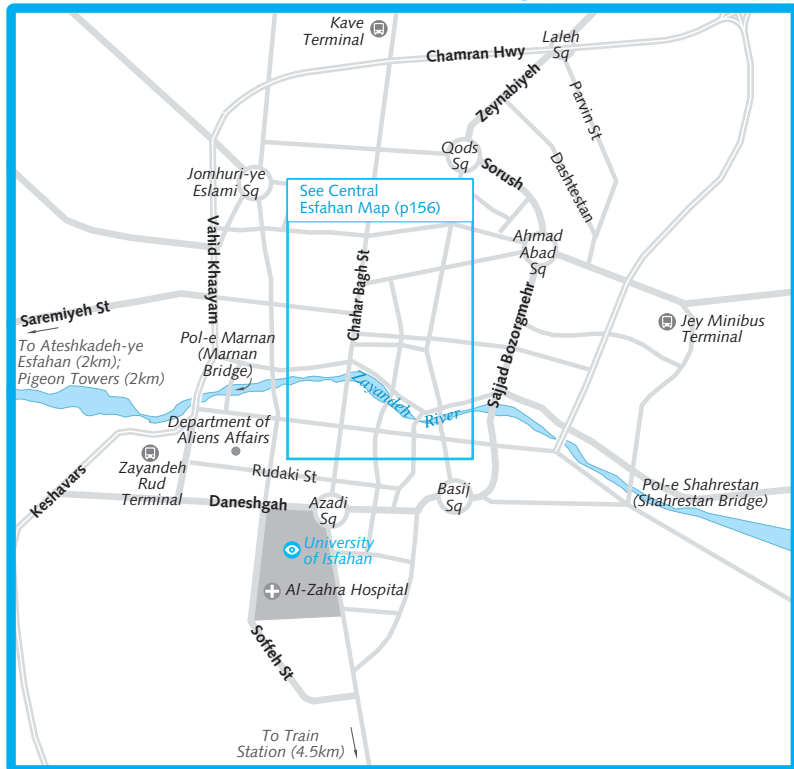
ing steel factories and a much-discussed nuclear facility. Traffic jams are also a regular occurrence.

History

Little is known of Esfahan's ancient history, but the Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan (Esfahan Fire Temple; p164) and pillars of the Shahrestan Bridge, both dating from the Sassanid period (224–636), attest to its longevity. The Buyid period saw an explosion of construction and by the late 10th century the walled city of Esfahan was home to dozens of mosques and hundreds of wealthy homes. In 1047 the Seljuks made Esfahan their capital and during the next 180 years it was adorned with their magnificently geometric style of architecture, several prominent examples of which remain.

The Mongols put an end to that, and it wasn't until the glorious reign of the Safavid Shah Abbas I (also known as Shah Abbas the Great), which began in 1587, that Esfahan once again became Iran's premier city. After moving the capital from Qazvin to Esfahan, Abbas set about transforming it into a city worthy of an empire at its peak. His legacies include the incomparable Naqsh-e Jahan Sq (Imam Sq; p157) and artistic advances – particularly in carpet weaving – that were celebrated and envied as far away as Europe. Subsequent Safavid rulers also contributed to Esfahan's skyline, but little more than a century after Abbas' death the dynasty was finished and the capital transferred first to Shiraz and later to Tehran.

Esfahan



Sights

Most sites are within easy walking distance of the main street, tree-lined Chahar Bagh (Four Gardens), which was built in 1597 and was once lined with many palaces and the four gardens after which it is named. Although it's over 5km long, most travellers base themselves along the middle section of the street, called Chahar Bagh Abbasi St, between Pol-e Si-o-Seh (Si-o-Seh Bridge) and Takhti Junction, close to the bazaar.

Esfahan's ambitious metro-building project has been underway for many years now and unfortunately shows no sign of being completed in the near future. This means that many parts of the central city, including Takhti Junction, are huge, muddy and chaotic construction sites.

Masjed-e Jameh مسجد جامع MOSQUE (Jameh Mosque; Map p156; Allameh Majlesi St; admission US\$0.50; ☎9-11am & 1-4pm) The Jameh complex is a veritable museum of Islamic ar-

chitecture but still functions as a busy place of worship. In a couple of hours you can see and compare 800 years of Islamic design, with each example near to the pinnacle of its age. The range is quite stunning – everything from the geometric elegance of the Seljuks through to the Mongol period and on to the refinements of the more baroque Safavid style. At more than 20,000 sq metres, it is also the biggest mosque in Iran.

Religious activity on this site is believed to date back to the Sassanid Zoroastrians, and the first sizeable mosque was built by the Seljuks in the 11th century. Of this, the two large domes above the north and south have survived intact, with most of the remainder destroyed by fire in the 12th century. The mosque was rebuilt in 1121, with later rulers making their own enhancements.

In the centre of the main courtyard, which is surrounded by four contrasting *iwans*, is an **ablutions fountain** designed to imitate

the Kaaba at Mecca; would-be hajji pilgrims once used it to practise the appropriate rituals. The two-storey porches around the courtyard's perimeter were constructed in the late 15th century.

The **south iwan** is very elaborate, with Mongol-era stalactite mouldings, some splendid 15th-century mosaics on the side walls, and two minarets. Behind it is the grand **Nezam al-Molk Dome**, which is flanked by Seljuk-era **prayer halls**.

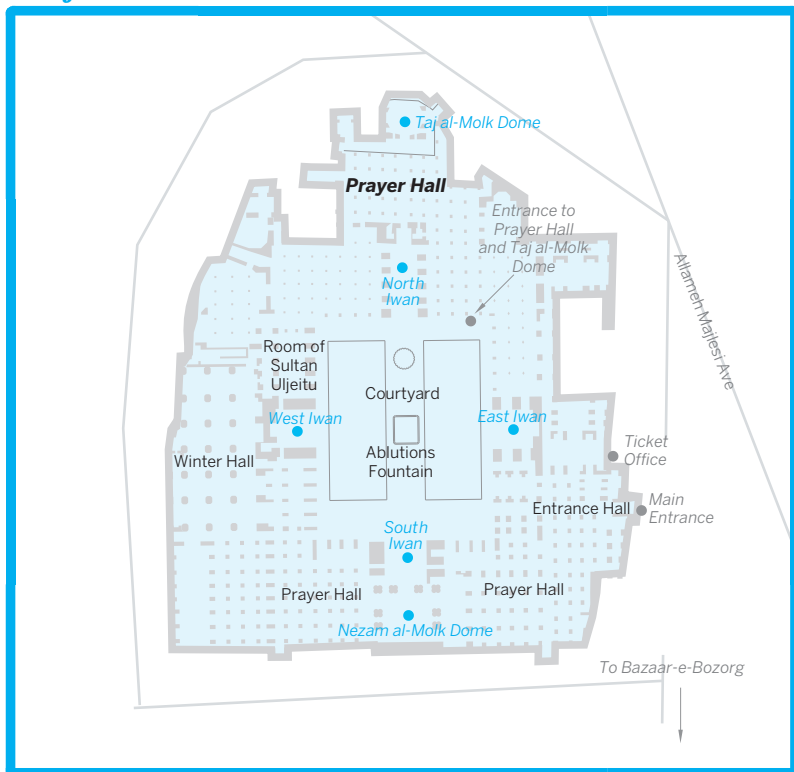
The **north iwan** has a wonderful monumental porch with the Seljuks' customary Kufic inscriptions and austere brick pillars in the sanctuary. Behind it (entered through a door next to the *iwan*) is a prayer hall featuring a forest of pillars. Walk to the rear and you will find the exquisite **Taj al-Molk Dome**, widely considered to be the finest brick dome ever built in Persia. While relatively small, it is said to be mathematically perfect, and has survived dozens of earthquakes with nary a blemish for more than 900 years.

The **west iwan** was originally built by the Seljuks but later decorated by the Safavids. It has mosaics that are more geometric than those of the southern hall. The courtyard is topped by a *maazeneh*, a small raised platform with a conical roof from where the faithful used to be called to prayer.

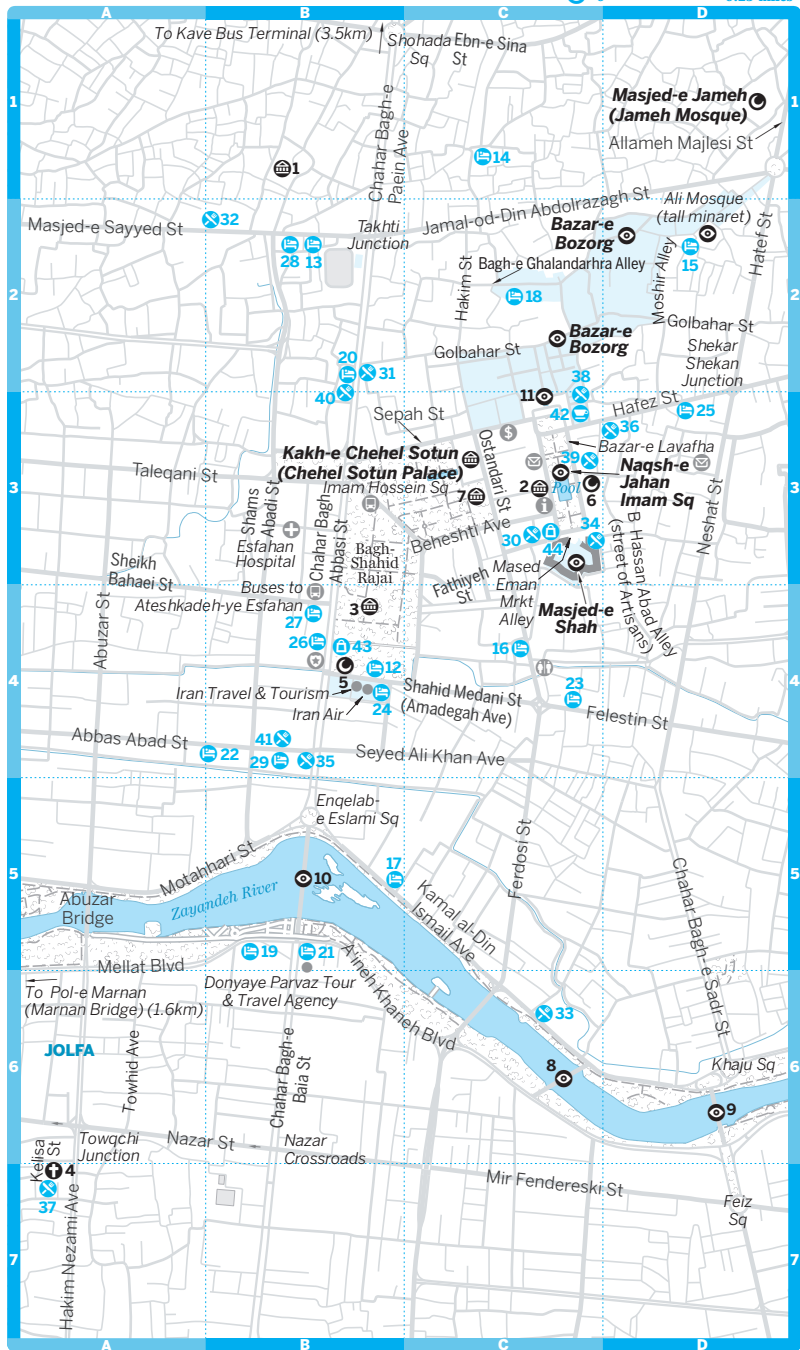
The **Room of Sultan Uljeitu** (a 14th-century Shiite convert) next to the west *iwan* is home to one of the mosque's greatest treasures – an exquisite stucco mihrab awash with dense Quranic inscriptions and floral designs. Next to this is the Timurid-era **Winter Hall** (Beit al-Shata), built in 1448 and lit by alabaster skylights. This was closed for restoration at the time of writing.

Bazar-e Bozorg بازار بزرگ BAZAAR (Great Bazaar; Map p156; ☉approximately 9am–8pm Sat–Thu) One of Iran's most historic and fascinating bazaars (other notable examples are in Tehran and Tabriz), this sprawling marketplace links Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq

Masjed-e Jameh



Central Esfahan



Central Esfahan

☉ Top Sights

Bazar-e Bozorg	C2
Bazar-e Bozorg	D2
Kakh-e Chehel Sotun (Chehel Sotun Palace)	C3
Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque)	D1
Masjed-e Shah	C3
Naqsh-e Jahan Imam Sq	C3

☉ Sights

1 Hammam-e Ali Gholi Agha	B1
2 Kakh-e Ali Qapu (Ali Qapu Palace)	C3
3 Kakh-e Hasht Behesht (Hasht Behesht Palace)	B4
4 Kelisa-ye Vank (Vank Cathedral)	A7
5 Madrased-ye Chahar Bagh	B4
6 Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah	C3
7 Muze-ye Honarha-ye Tazeini (Decorative Arts Museum)	C3
8 Pol-e Chubi (Chubi Bridge)	C6
9 Pol-e Khaju (Khaju Bridge)	D6
10 Pol-e Si-o-Seh (Si-o-Seh Bridge)	B5
11 Qeysarieh Portal	C3

☉ Sleeping

12 Abbasi Hotel	B4
13 Azady Hotel	B2
14 Bekhradi Historical Residence	C1
15 Dibai House	D2
16 Hasht Behesht Apartment Hotel	C4
17 Hotel Melal	B5
18 Isfahan Traditional Hotel	C2
19 Kowsar International Hotel	B5

20 Naghshe Jahan Hotel	B2
21 Parsian Azadi Hotel	B5
22 Saadi Hotel	B4
23 Safavi Hotel	C4
24 Safir Hotel	B4
25 Setarah Hotel	D3
26 Shad Hostel	B4
27 Sheykh Bahaei Hotel	B4
28 Totia Hotel	B2
29 Tourist Hotel	B4

☉ Eating

Abbasi Hotel Teahouse	(see 12)
30 Arshia Traditional Restaurant	C3
31 Azam Beryani	B2
32 Azam Beryani 2	B2
33 Azam Beryani 3	C6
34 Bastani Traditional Restaurant	C3
35 Fast-Food Shop	B4
36 Fereni Hafez	D3
37 Khan Gostar Restaurant	A7
38 Mikhak Restaurant	C3
Naghsh-e-e Jahan Cafeteria	(see 12)
39 Naghshe-e-Jahan Traditional Banquet Hall	C3
40 Nobahar Restaurant	B3
41 Restaurant Shahrzad	B4

☉ Drinking

42 Azadegan Teahouse	C3
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☉ Shopping

43 Bazar-e Honar	B4
44 Fellahi Miniatures	C3

with the Masjed-e Jameh, 1.7km northeast. The bazaar's arched passageways are topped by a series of small domes, each with an aperture at its apex spilling shafts of light onto the commerce below. While the oldest parts of the bazaar (those around the mosque), are more than a thousand years old, most of what you see today was built during Shah Abbas' aggressive expansions in the early 1600s.

The bazaar is a maze of lanes, *madrasesh*, *khans* (caravanserais) and *timchehs*, domed hall or arcaded centres of a single trade (eg carpet). It can be entered at dozens of points, but the main entrance is via the **Qeysarieh Portal** at the northern end of Naqsh-e Jahan Sq, which is decorated with beautiful tiles and recently restored frescoes by the great

Reza Abbasi depicting Shah Abbas' war with the Uzbeks as well as hunting and feasting scenes.

Industries tend to congregate in certain areas of the bazaar. Among the more prominent are the carpet sellers, off to the west. Trade is busiest in the mornings. See our walking tour on p159 for more information.

Naqsh-e Jahan Square

میدان امام (میدان نقش جهان) SQUARE
(Imam Sq; Map p156) Naqsh-e Jahan means 'pattern of the world', and it's a world that owes much to the vision of Shah Abbas the Great. Begun in 1602 as the centrepiece of Abbas' new capital, the square was designed as home to the finest jewels of the Safavid empire – the incomparable Masjed-e Shah,

ESFAHAN IN...

Two Days

Start by taking our walking tour of the **Bazar-e Bozorg** and its surrounds. After a lunch break, head to the **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque), one of Iran's most beautiful buildings. For dinner, join upmarket Esfahanis at **Restaurant Shahrzad** and, if you still have an appetite left after sampling its famous lamb cutlets, make your way through **Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq** to **Fereni Hafez** for a sweet finale. On your second day, visit the **Masjed-e Shah (Masjed-e Imam)**, **Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah** and **Kakh-e Ali Qapu**. After lunch at one of the nearby traditional restaurants, make your way to the **Kakh-e Chehel Sotun** with its Unesco-listed garden. In the late afternoon enjoy a tea and snack at the **Abbasi Teahouse**.

Four Days

On your third day, walk across the picturesque **Pol-e Si-o-Seh** (Si-o Seh Bridge) to the Armenian Quarter and admire the striking frescoes inside **Kelisa-ye Vank** (Vank Cathedral). Have lunch at **Khan Gostar Restaurant** and then take a taxi to the **Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan** (Esfahan Fire Temple).

On day four, take it easy. Read a book in the garden of the **Kakh-e Hasht Behesht** (Hasht Behesht Palace), revisit the Bazar-e Bozorg, explore the artisan-filled laneways off the southeastern corner of Naqsh-e Jahan Sq or make a leisurely progression criss-crossing the bridges over the Zayandeh River.

the supremely elegant Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah and the indulgent and lavishly decorated Kakh-e Ali Qapu and Qeysarieh Portal. At 512m long and 163m wide, this immense space is the second-largest square on earth – only Mao Zedong's severe Tiananmen Sq in Beijing is bigger. It is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

The square has changed little since it was built, and at each end you can still see the goal posts used in regular polo games 400 years ago (you'll see these polo matches depicted on miniatures for sale around the square). The only modern additions are the fountains, which were added by the Pahlavis, and the souvenir shops, which occupy the spaces on either side of the arched arcades but are relatively innocuous.

The square is best visited in the late afternoon and early evening, when local families flock in to promenade around the perimeter. This is also when the fountains are turned on, the light softens and the truly splendid architecture is illuminated.

Masjed-e Shah (Masjed-e Imam) مسجد امام (Royal Mosque, Imam Mosque; Map p160; admission US\$0.50; ☉9am-4pm winter, 9am-12.30am & 3-6.30pm summer, closed 9am-1pm Fri) The richness of this mosque's blue-tiled mosaic designs and its perfectly proportioned Safavid-era architecture form a visually

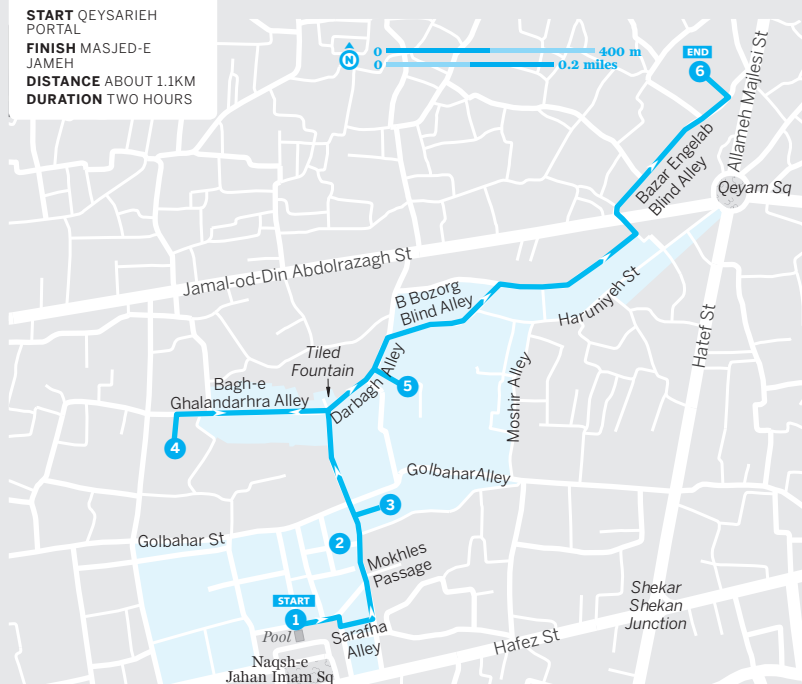
stunning monument to the imagination of Shah Abbas I and the ability of his architect.

Work started on the magnificent entrance portal in 1611, although it took four years to finish – look for mismatches in its apparent symmetry, intended to reflect the artist's humility in the face of Allah. It was not until 1629, the last year of the reign of Shah Abbas, that the high dome, and therefore the mosque, was completed. Little has changed since.

Although each of the mosque's parts is a masterpiece, it is the unity of the overall design that leaves a lasting impression. The original purpose of the much-photographed **entrance portal** had more to do with its location on the square than with the mosque's spiritual aims. Its function was primarily ornamental, providing a counterpoint to the Qeysarieh Portal at the entrance to the Bazar-e Bozorg. The foundation stones are of white marble from Ardestan and the portal itself, some 30m tall, is decorated with magnificent *moarraq kashi* (mosaics featuring geometric designs, floral motifs and calligraphy) by the most skilled artists of the age. The splendid niches contain complex stalactite mouldings in a honeycomb pattern; each panel has its own intricate design.

Although the portal was built to face the square, the mosque is oriented towards Mecca and a short, angled corridor neatly

START QEYSARIEH PORTAL
FINISH MASJED-E JAMEH
DISTANCE ABOUT 1.1KM
DURATION TWO HOURS



Walking Tour

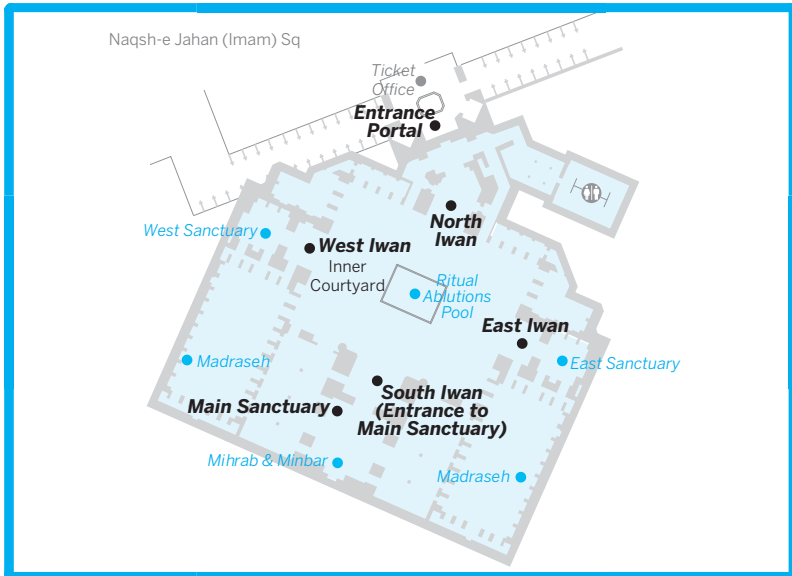
Bazar-e Bozorg

Visitors are often overwhelmed by the bazaar's labyrinthine layout, but if you start with this walking tour you'll soon get your bearings and be able to continue exploring independently.

Start at the ornamental pool in front of the imposing **1 Qeysarieh Portal** at the northern end of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq. Rather than walking through the portal, head into Sarafha Alley on the right (east) side of the pool and then turn left at the T-intersection at its end. Walk straight ahead, passing the spectacular **2 Malek Timcheh**, a Qajar-era building with three vaulted spaces, on the left and then the **3 M S Khan**, an old caravanserai, on the right. Continue on until you eventually come to a forked intersection with a pretty tiled fountain straight ahead. Veer into the left fork, Bagh Ghalandarha Alley, and walk down it until you reach the **4 Masjed-e Hakim** (Hakim Mosque) on your left. This is Esfahan's oldest mosque, but only the beautiful portal beside this northern entrance has survived from the Buyid-

dynasty structure built about 1000 years ago. Backtrack to the T-intersection and this time take the right (east) fork, which is signed as Darbagh Alley. A bit further along on the right, down some steps leading into a modern *khan* (caravanserai), is an unattractive but undeniably authentic **5 teahouse** full of *bazaris* (shopkeepers in the bazaar) enjoying tea, qalyans (water pipes) and cheap bowls of *dizi* (lamb and vegetable stew pounded to a paste at the table). To find the caravanserai look for the picture of a water pipe adorning a sign on Darbagh Alley. Back on the alley, continue walking and then veer right into B Bozorg Blind Alley, one of the bazaar's busiest and oldest thoroughfares. The vaulted ceiling along this stretch is magnificent, adorned with apertures shaped like stars and hexagons. Follow this serpentine alley all the way to your last stop on this tour, the magnificent **6 Masjed-e Jameh**, crossing one reasonably major street along the way. Note: be sure to get to the mosque well before it closes for lunch at 11am.

Masjed-e Shah (Masjed-e Imam)



connects the square and the **inner courtyard**, with its pool for ritual ablutions and four imposing **iwans**. The walls of the courtyard contain the most exquisite sunken porches, framed by *haft rangi* (painted tiles) of deep blue and yellow. Each *ivan* leads into a vaulted sanctuary. The **east** and **west sanctuaries** are covered with particularly fine floral motifs on a blue background.

The **main sanctuary** is entered via the **south ivan**. Find yourself a quiet corner in which to sit and contemplate the richness of the domed ceiling, with its golden rose pattern (the flower basket) surrounded by concentric circles of busy mosaics on a deep blue background. The interior ceiling is 36.3m high, but the exterior reaches up to 51m due to the double-layering used in construction. The hollow space in between is responsible for the loud echoes heard when you stamp your foot on the black paving stones under the centre of the dome. Although scientists have measured up to 49 echoes, only about 12 are audible to the human ear – more than enough for a speaker to be heard throughout the mosque. The marble **mihrab** and **minbar** (pulpit of a mosque) are also beautifully crafted.

The main sanctuary provides wonderful views back to the two turquoise **minarets**

above the entrance portal. Each is encircled by projecting balconies and white geometric calligraphy in which the names of Mohammed and Ali are picked out over and over again.

To the east and west of the main sanctuary are the courtyards of two madrasahs. Both provide good views of the main **dome** with its glorious profusion of turquoise-shaded tiles.

Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah مسجد شیخ لطف الل (Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque; Map p156; admission US\$0.40; ☉9am-4pm winter, 9am-12.30am & 3-6.30pm summer) A study in harmonious understatement, this mosque is the perfect complement to the overwhelming richness of the larger Masjed-e Shah. Built between 1602 and 1619 during the reign of Shah Abbas I, it is dedicated to the ruler's father-in-law, Sheikh Lotfollah, a revered Lebanese scholar of Islam who was invited to Esfahan to oversee the king's mosque (now the Masjed-e Shah) and theological school.

The dome makes extensive use of delicate cream-coloured tiles that change colour throughout the day from cream to pink (sunset is usually the best time to witness this). The signature blue-and-turquoise tiles of Esfahan are evident only around the dome's summit.

The pale tones of the cupola stand in contrast to those around the **portal**, where you'll find some of the best surviving Safavid-era mosaics. The exterior panels contain wonderful arabesques and other intricate floral designs; those displaying a vase framed by the tails of two peacocks are superb. The portal itself contains some particularly fine *muqarnas* with rich concentrations of blue and yellow motifs.

The mosque is unusual because it has neither a minaret nor a courtyard, and because steps lead up to the entrance. This was probably because the mosque was never intended for public use, but rather served as the worship place for the women of the shah's harem. The **sanctuary** or prayer hall is reached via a twisting **hallway** where the eyes become accustomed to the darkness as subtle shifts of light play across deep blue tilework. This hallway is integral to both the design and function of the mosque because it takes the worshipper from the grand square outside into a prayer hall facing Mecca, and thus on a completely different axis.

Inside the sanctuary you can marvel at the complexity of the mosaics that adorn the walls and the extraordinarily beautiful ceiling, with its shrinking, yellow motifs. The shafts of sunlight that filter in through the few high, latticed windows produce a constantly changing interplay of light and shadow.

The mihrab is one of the finest in Iran and has an unusually high niche; look for the calligraphic montage that names the architect and the date 1028 AH.

Photography is allowed but using a flash is not.

Kakh-e Ali Qapu

کاخ عالی قاپو
(Ali Qapu Palace; Map p156; admission US\$0.50; ☉9am-4pm winter, 9am-12.30am & 3-6.30pm summer) Built at the very end of the 16th century as a residence for Shah Abbas I, this six-storey palace also served as a monumental gateway to the royal palaces that lay in the parklands beyond (Ali Qapu means the 'Gate of Ali'). Named for Abbas' hero, the Imam Ali, it was built to make an impression, and at six storeys and 38m tall it certainly does this.

The highlight of the palace is its **elevated terrace**, which features 18 slender columns. The terrace affords a wonderful perspective over the square and one of the best views of the Masjed-e Shah. The attractive wooden ceiling with intricate inlay work and exposed beams is currently undergoing a heavy restoration.

Many of the valuable paintings and mosaics that once decorated the 52 small rooms, corridors and stairways were destroyed during the Qajar period and after the 1979 revolution. Fortunately, a few remain in the **throne room** off the terrace.

On the upper floor, the **music room** is definitely worth the climb. The stucco ceiling is riddled with the shapes of vases and other household utensils cut to enhance the acoustics. This distinctive craftsmanship, considered by some to be one of the finest examples of secular Persian art, extends to the walls.

Kakh-e Chehel Soton

کاخ چهلستون
PALACE
(Chehel Soton Palace; Map p156; Ostandari St; admission US\$0.90; ☉9am-4pm winter, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm summer) This, the only

SHAH IN A HURRY

When the Masjed-e Shah was begun, Shah Abbas the Great probably didn't think it would be 25 years before the last of the artisans left the building. He was already 52 when work began, and as he grew older he grew ever more impatient to see his greatest architectural endeavour completed.

Legend has it that the shah repeatedly demanded that corners be cut to hasten progress, even insisting work on the walls be started despite the foundations having not yet set. His architect, Ali Akbar Esfahani, was having none of it. He flatly defied his boss before making himself scarce until the shah calmed down (sensible, as Abbas was notoriously insecure and had killed two of his sons and blinded another). The architect eventually returned to the court where, because the wisdom of his decision had been demonstrated, he was welcomed back with a royal pardon.

Some of the time-saving techniques used were quite innovative: rather than covering the entire complex with millions of individual mosaic tiles, larger prefabricated patterned tiles called *haft rangi* were created – they've been standard ever since.

surviving palace on the royal precinct that stretched between Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq and Chahar Bagh Abbasi St, this Safavid-era complex was built as a pleasure pavilion and reception hall, using the Achaemenid-inspired *talar* (columnar porch) style. There are historical references to the palace dating from 1614; however, an inscription uncovered in 1949 says it was completed in 1647 under the watch of Shah Abbas II. Either way, what you see today was rebuilt after a fire in 1706.

The palace is entered via the elegant *talar* terrace that perfectly bridges the transition between the Persian love of gardens and interior splendour. Its 20 slender, ribbed wooden pillars rise to a superb wooden ceiling with crossbeams and exquisite inlay work. *Chehel Sotun* means '40 pillars' – the number reflected in the long pool in front of the palace.

The Great Hall (Throne Hall) contains a rich array of frescoes, miniatures and ceramics. The upper walls are dominated by historical frescoes on a grand scale, sumptuously portraying court life and some of the great battles of the Safavid era – the two middle frescoes (Nos 114 and 115) date from the Qajar period but the other four are original. From right to left, above the entrance door, the armies of Shah Ismail do battle with the Uzbeks; Nader Shah battles Sultan Mohammed (astride a white elephant) on an Indian battleground; and Shah Abbas II welcomes King Nader Khan of Turkestan with musicians and dancing girls.

On the wall opposite the door, also from right to left, Shah Abbas I presides over an ostentatious banquet; Shah Ismail battles the janissaries (infantrymen) of Sultan Selim; and Shah Tahmasp receives Humayun, the Indian prince who fled to Persia in 1543. These extraordinary works survived the 18th-century invasion by the Afghans, who whitewashed the paintings to show their disapproval of such extravagance. Other items, including Safavid forebear Safi od-Din's hat, are kept in a small museum.

The palace's garden, **Bagh-e Chehel Sotun**, is an excellent example of the classic Persian Garden form and was recently added to Unesco's World Heritage list.

Muze-ye Honarha-ye Tazeini MUSEUM
(Decorative Arts Museum of Iran; Map p156; Ostandari St; admission US\$0.50; ☉8.30am-1pm Sat-Thu) This recently renovated museum occupies

a building that once served as stables and warehouse to Safavid kings. Today it contains a fine collection from the Safavid and Qajar periods, including miniatures, glassware, lacquer work, ancient Qurans, calligraphy, ceramics, woodcarvings, traditional costumes and weapons.

Kakh-e Hasht Behesht

کاخ هشت بهشت PALACE
(Hasht Behesht Palace; Map p156; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; admission US\$0.50; ☉9am-4pm winter, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm summer) It was once the most luxuriously decorated secular building in Esfahan, but over the years the interior of this 17th-century palace has been extensively damaged. Nevertheless, it retains a seductive tranquillity, with the soaring wooden columns on its open-sided terrace seeming to mirror the trees in the surrounding garden.

Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh

مدرسه چهارباغ MADRASEH
(Madraseh-ye Mazadar-e Shah, Theological School of the Shah's Mother; Map p156; cnr Chahar Bagh Abbasi & Shahid Medani Sts) Built between 1704 and 1714 as part of an expansive complex that included a caravanserai (now the Abbasi Hotel) and the Bazar-e Honar, this madraseh is one of the most architecturally important buildings in Esfahan but is unfortunately closed to the public for most of the year (except during No Ruz). Entry for its students is through an imposing wood-and-silver door off Chahar Bagh Abbasi St and inside there's a tree-filled courtyard surrounded by two-storey porches leading to the students' rooms, a prayer hall with a superb mihrab, two of the finest Safavid-era minarets in Esfahan, some exquisite mosaics and an attractive dome.

Hamмам-e Ali Gholi Agha

حمام علیقلی آقا HISTORIC BUILDING
(Ali Gholi Agha Bathhouse; Map p156; Ali Gholi Agha Alley, off Masjed-e Sayyed St; admission US\$1.80; ☉9am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) Located in the historic district of Bid Abad, this well-maintained (but poorly signed) museum of *hammams* is worth a look, especially if you didn't visit the Hammam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad in Kashan.

To get here, walk west from Takhti Junction on Masjed-e Sayyed St, and turn right (north) down Ali Gholi Agha St, 50m beyond the junction with Tayab St. Walk about 250m, turn right inside a covered bazaar, and then left at the mosque.

Zayandeh River Bridges

پلهای زاینده رود

BRIDGES

There are few better ways to spend an afternoon than strolling along the Zayandeh River, crossing back and forth on the historic bridges. Such a stroll is especially pleasant at sunset and in the early evening when most of the bridges are illuminated. In total, 11 bridges (six are new) cross the Zayandeh. All but one of the historic Safavid-era crossings lie to the east of Chahar Bagh St – the exception is the shorter Pol-e Marnan (Marnan Bridge) – but most people satisfy themselves with the walk from Pol-e Si-o-Seh (Si-o-Seh Bridge) to Pol-e Khaju (Khaju Bridge), and back.

Traditionally, Esfahanis paused their perambulations to drink tea and enjoy a qalyan at one of the atmospheric teahouses on the Khaju, Chubi and Si-o-Seh bridges. Unfortunately, most of these have been closed in recent years, and only the Pol-e teahouse at the northern end of Pol-e Si-o-Seh remains open.

Various reasons have been offered for these closures. Some locals say that authorities have closed the teahouses due to heritage concerns (with fears being held that the large gas canisters used for heating water could explode and damage the bridges). Others are convinced the rise of religious conservatives in the provincial government is to blame and that the teahouses were closed because they were popular spots for young men and women to socialise.

Pol-e Si-o-Seh

سی و سه پل

(Si-o-Seh Bridge, Bridge of 33 Arches, Pol-e Allah-verdi; Map p156) The 298m-long Pol-e Si-o-Seh was built by Allahverdi Khan, a favourite general of Shah Abbas I, between 1599 and 1602. It served as both bridge and dam, and is still used to hold water today. Until recently there were teahouses at either end of the bridge, both accessed through the larger arches underneath, though only the northern one remains.

Pol-e Chubi

پل چوبی

(Chubi Bridge; Map p156) Nearly 150m long, and with 21 arches, Chubi Bridge was built by Shah Abbas II in 1665, primarily to help irrigate palace gardens in the area. The bridge and its two interior parlours were for the exclusive use of the shah and his courtiers.

Pol-e Khaju

پل خواجه

(Khaju Bridge; Map p156) Arguably the finest of Esfahan's bridges, Pol-e Khaju was built by

Shah Abbas II in about 1650. It also doubles as a dam, and has always been as much a meeting place as a bearer of traffic. A bridge is believed to have crossed the waters here since the time of Tamerlane.

Its 110m length has two levels of terraced arcades, the lower containing locks regulating water flow. If you look hard, you can still see original paintings and tiles, and the remains of stone seats built for Shah Abbas II to sit on and admire the views. In the centre, a pavilion was built exclusively for his pleasure.

Pol-e Shahrestan

پل شهرستان

(Map p154) This is the oldest of Esfahan's bridges. Most of its 11-arched stone and brick structure is believed to date from the 12th century, although the pillars themselves remain from a much earlier Sassanian bridge. Although it's almost 4km east of Khaju Bridge, it's a pleasant walk.

Jolfa: The Armenian Quarter

کلیسای ارمنه

NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Armenian quarter of Esfahan dates from the time of Shah Abbas I, who transported a colony of Christians from the town of Jolfa (now on Iran's northern border; see p93) en masse, and named the village 'New Jolfa'. Abbas sought their skills as merchants, entrepreneurs and artists and he ensured that their religious freedom was respected – albeit at a distance from the city's Islamic centre. At one time over 42,000 Armenian Christians lived here.

Today there are a number of Armenian churches and an old cemetery, serving a Christian community of approximately 5000. It's worth heading out here (it's not far, southwest of the centre) in the afternoon, seeing the sights and staying around to enjoy dinner in the relatively liberal village atmosphere.

Kelisa-ye Vank

کلیسای وانک

(Vank Cathedral, Church of Saint Joseph of Arimatea; Map p156; Kelisa St; admission US\$2.70; ☎8am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm, to 6.30pm summer, closed Fri morning & holidays) Built between 1648 and 1655 with the encouragement of the Safavid rulers, Kelisa-ye Vank is the historic focal point of the Armenian Church in Iran. The church's exterior is unexciting, but the interior is richly decorated and shows the curious mixture of styles – Islamic tiles and designs alongside Christian imagery – that characterises most churches in Iran. The

brightly coloured frescoes took 15 years to create and have recently been restored.

The attached cathedral museum was closed for renovation at the time of writing.

Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan

آتشکده اصفهان
FIRE TEMPLE
(Esfahan Fire Temple; off Map p154; Saremiyeh St; admission US\$0.50; ☀8.30am-5pm, to 6pm in summer) Dating from Sassanian times, the crumbling mud bricks of the Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan stare out over the Zayandeh River and the city from a low hill on its outskirts. The 20-minute scramble uphill is worth the effort on a clear day. Many buses (US\$0.90) travel west along Sheikh Bahaei St from near the corner of Chahar Bagh Abbasi St. A taxi *dar baste* will cost around US\$6.50.

Note that many tour guides will suggest that you visit the Manar Jomban (Shaking Minarets) nearby, but we suggest giving it a miss – they're just silly.

Pigeon Towers

کبوتر خانه
HISTORIC BUILDINGS
(off Map p154) For centuries Esfahan relied on pigeons to supply guano as fertiliser for the city's famous fields of watermelons. The guano was collected in almost 3000 squat, circular pigeon towers, each able to house about 14,000 birds. Today they are unused, made redundant by chemical fertiliser, but more than 700 of the mud-brick towers remain in the city's environs.

The best place to see them is along the Zayandeh River south of the *ateshkadeh*.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism was the main religion across the Iranian plateau until the Arab conquest brought Islam to the fore. Zoroastrians are followers of Zoroaster (Zartosht or Zarathustra), who was probably born between 1000 BC and 1500 BC, possibly near present-day Lake Urimiyeh or further north in Central Asia – no one knows for sure. Zoroastrianism was one of the first religions to postulate an omnipotent, invisible god. The supreme being, Ahura Mazda, has no symbol or icon, but he asked that followers pray to him in the direction of light. The only light the ancients controlled was fire, so they created fire temples to keep the flame burning eternally.

Very little of what Zoroaster wrote has survived, though the teachings in the Avesta (sometimes referred to as the Zoroastrian bible) are attributed to him. The core lesson is dualism: the eternal battle of good and evil. Zoroaster believed in two principles – Vohu Mano (Good Mind) and Ahem Nano (Bad Mind) – which were responsible for day and night, life and death. These two opposing 'minds' coexisted within the supreme being, Ahura Mazda, and in all living things.

Since Zoroastrians believe in the purity of the elements, they refuse to bury their dead (pollutes the earth) or cremate them (pollutes the atmosphere). Instead, the dead were exposed in 'towers of silence', where their bones were soon cleaned up by the vultures. Nowadays, deceased Zoroastrians are usually buried in graves lined with concrete to prevent 'contamination' of the earth.

Many Zoroastrian temples are adorned with bas-relief winged figures of a Fravashi (guardian spirit) that symbolise Fravahar, the part of the spirit that reaches Ahura Mazda after death. The Fravashi's head symbolises experience and wisdom, the right hand pointing upward symbolises admiration of god, the ring in the left hand symbolises unity, and the larger middle ring symbolises eternity and the reflection of a person's own actions. The three layers of feathers on the wings symbolise purity of thought, word and deed, and the semi-long tail in front represents evil thoughts, evil deeds and evil words that should be cast away. One of the strings represents goodness and the other represents dark and evil.

Of the 150,000 or more Zoroastrians in the world, 20,000 live in Iran, with 10,000 in Tehran and 4000 in Yazd. Zoroastrian women can be recognised by their patterned headscarves and embroidered dresses with predominant colours of white, cream or red. They never wear chadors, but do follow the strict hejab laws governing women's dress.

Zoroastrianism is also known as Mazdaism from the name of its supreme god, Ahura Mazda, and as Magism from the name of its ancient priests, the magi. The Three Wise Men of the Bible are believed to have been Zoroastrian magi, hence the Adoration of the Magi.

The 10km walk back into Esfahan makes a great afternoon, and you're also likely to see locally made cloth being laid out to dry.

Tours

The following guides are recommended for full- or half-day tours in Esfahan. They charge US\$50 per day for walking tours, \$US100 if they drive their own cars.

Several carpet shops offer trips into the Zagros Mountains to visit nomads. In our experience, however, none is worth recommending specifically.

Azade Kazemi

GUIDE

(☎0913 327 9626; azadekazemi@hotmail.com) Highly professional English- and Spanish-speaking guide.

Maryam Shafiei

GUIDE

(☎0913 326 6127; marie13572002@yahoo.fr) A French- and English-speaking guide.

Mohammad Shahsavandi

GUIDE

(☎0913 313 1974; Mohammad_Shahsavandi@yahoo.com) Highly knowledgeable, with excellent English.

Sleeping


Finding decent and affordable accommodation in Esfahan can be difficult, especially from mid-March until the end of August. There are only 2000 rooms available across the city, which is surprising considering that this is the country's most popular destination for both domestic and international tourists. As a result, you should book ahead. Off-season discounts of 20% are common.

BAGH-SHAHID RAJAI & AROUND



Abbasi Hotel

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p156; ☎222 6010; www.abbasihotel.ir; Shahid Medani St; s/d US\$110/160, deluxe d US\$215-280, ste US\$280-450; ) The Abbasi's main building was once the caravanserai of the Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh, and it has atmosphere in spades. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the characterless new building on the eastern side of the central garden courtyard. If you stay in one of the (utterly gorgeous) suites or in one of the deluxe doubles in the main building you'll be extremely happy, but if you are relegated to the new building you're likely to be disappointed. Facilities include a wonderful traditional teahouse,

a welcoming coffee shop, a business centre (internet US\$2.70 per hour; wi-fi US\$4.50 per 24 hours) and an indoor pool, sauna and gym. The restaurant, although splendid in appearance, serves overpriced and unimpressive food. No off-season discounts offered.


Hasht Behesht Apartment Hotel

APARTMENTS \$\$\$

(Map p156; ☎221 4868-9; www.hbahotel.com; Ostandari St; d/tr/q apt US\$54/\$71/86; ) It may be a bit short on style, but the family-run, centrally located Hasht Behesht is one of the best accommodation options in town, offering clean and well-maintained apartments with comfortable beds, equipped kitchenettes and satellite TV. Enter off Sh S G Aghili Alley. No breakfast.

Sheykh Bahaei Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p156; ☎220 7714-16; fax 222 1813; 4 Sheykh Bahaei St; s/d/tr US\$53/88/111; ) Set back from busy Sheykh Bahaei St right in the centre of town, this recently opened hotel has rapidly built a loyal business clientele, who are attracted by its quiet rooms with excellent bathrooms. The rooftop restaurant and teahouse (summer only) has views over town to the mountains

Safir Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p156; ☎222 2640; www.safirhotel.net; Shahid Medani St; s/d/tr US\$50/70/90; ) Owner-manager Mr Bagherian is extremely proud of his newly refurbished hotel, and no wonder. In an excellent location in the centre of town, its 60 new rooms have tiled floors, a decent amount of space, double-glazed windows and bathrooms with tub and sit-down toilet. Be sure to specify one of these rather than the extremely worn rooms in the old section. There's a top-floor restaurant and an internet cafe in the lobby.

Naghsh-e Jahan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p156; ☎/fax 221 9619; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s with shower US\$22, s without bathroom US\$19.50, d with/without bathroom US\$32/28) A reliable budget choice on Esfahan's major thoroughfare (request a room at the rear), the Naghsh-e Jahan offers simple rooms with hard beds and clean linen; those without a private bathroom have a handbasin. The shared bathrooms are extremely clean and some have sit-down toilets. There's no wi-fi, but you'll find plenty of *coffee nets* (internet cafes) nearby. No English is spoken.

Tourist Hotel

(Map p156; ☎220 4437; Abbas Abad St; s/d incl breakfast US\$29/44; 🏠📶🚰) Helpful English-speaking management has transformed this place into a reliable, if not exciting, lower midrange option. Rooms are cramped and have hard beds, but satellite TV is some compensation. Avoid the suite, which is smelly and unattractive. Wi-fi costs US\$1.40 per hour.

Saadi Hotel

(Map p156; ☎220 3881; esfahan_saadihotel@yahoo.com; Abbas Abad St; d/tr US\$33/41, without bathroom US\$28/36) A quiet location, friendly staff and keen prices make this place worth considering, although the hard beds, tiny bathrooms and lack of air-conditioning may well be off-putting to some. Wi-fi costs US\$1.40 per hour.

Shad Hotel

(Map p156; ☎221 8621; fax 220 4264; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/d/tr US\$20/29/36; 🏠) It's a cheap, central and secure option, so the hard beds, lack of wi-fi and squat toilets can almost be forgiven. One-, two- and three-bed rooms are basic and the front rooms are noisy – ask for one at the rear.

OTHER LOCATIONS**TOP CHOICE Totia Hotel**

(Map p156; ☎223 7525-35; www.totiahotel.com; Masjed-e Sayyed St; s & d US\$27, tr US\$36, q US\$45; 🏠📶) This impeccably run place offers three-star rooms at one-star prices. Rooms at the rear were renovated two years ago, are quiet and have Western toilets; those at the front overlook the busy street and have squat toilets. No prize for guessing which we prefer! All are extremely clean and comfortable.

Dibai House

(Map p156; ☎220 9787; www.dibaihouse.com; 1 Masjed Ali Alley, Harunieh; s/tw/tr €40/60/80) Hidden away off a narrow, vaulted alley deep in the Bazar-e Bozorg district, this painstakingly restored traditional house and the chilled, interesting and arty female owners set a paradoxically modern-yet-traditional Iranian tone. For pure facilities the 10 rooms are dreadfully overpriced – bathrooms are outside and there are few modern luxuries – but what you're paying for here is the ambience. It's hard to find: from the corner of Hafez and Halef Sts, head north along Halef, and turn left (west) into Golbahar St. Next, turn right into Moshir St (look for

HOTEL \$\$

the cultural centre sign) and continue until you reach Sh M Farhangi Alley off the right-hand side. Enter this, walk straight ahead and you'll come to the hotel.

Safavi Hotel

(Map p156; ☎220 8600; Felestin St; www.safavihotel.ir, in Farsi; s US\$50, d US\$64-82, tr US\$100; 🏠📶🚰) This well-run midrange option is in a fantastic location between Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq and the Zayandeh River. Rooms are comfortable, with satellite TV and good-sized bathrooms, and the hotel is set back from Felestin St, minimising noise. The rooftop teahouse is a wonderful place to relax in summer. Wi-fi costs US\$2.30 per hour.

Azady Hotel

(Map p156; ☎220 4011; fax 220 3713; Masjed-e Sayyed St; d/tr US\$64/82; 🏠📶) Well-run, clean and comfortable, the Azady is a good choice despite being located on one of Esfahan's busiest streets. Front rooms are double-glazed, but we suggest requesting one at the rear of the building to ensure a good night's sleep. No off-season discounts.

Kowsar International Hotel

(Map p156; ☎624 0230-39; www.hotelkowsar.com; Mellat Blvd; s/d/tr US\$97/197/220; 🏠📶🚰) Portraits of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei on the wall signal that this one-time Sheraton is now government-owned. Rooms are comfortable but characterless; the best have balconies overlooking the river. The hotel's restaurants have a good reputation but service in them and at the hotel's reception certainly doesn't match the hotel's five-star prices. Wi-fi costs US\$5 per 24 hours.

Setareh Hotel

(Map p156; ☎220 7060; www.setarehhotel.com; Hafez St; s/d/tr US\$53/89/112; 🏠📶🚰) Close proximity to Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, professional management and features such as satellite TV and squeaky-clean modern bathrooms make this an option worth considering, though rooms are dark and a bit depressing. The rooftop restaurant is delightful in summer.

Bekhradi Historical Residence

(Map p156; ☎448 2072; www.safavidinn.com; Sonbolestan Alley, off Ebn-e Sina St; s or d without bathroom US\$71, s/d with bathroom US\$98/125; 🏠📶) This quiet, modest-sized *khan-e sonnati*

HOTEL \$

HOTEL \$

HOTEL \$\$

HOTEL \$\$

HOTEL \$\$\$

HOTEL \$\$

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(traditional house) is the real Safavid-style deal; five fully restored rooms, some with bathrooms, some not. All are set around two garden courtyards. It's beside the Masjed-e Dawazeh-Noh.

Isfahan Traditional Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(Hotel Sonnati Isfahan; Map p156; ☎222 4080; www.isfahanhotel.com; Bagh-e Ghalandarhra Alley, off Hakim St; s/d US\$65/90; 📶📶📶) Winning the dubious award for Esfahan's most shambolic service, this place is set around two courtyards in adjoining Safavid- and Qajar-period homes. The 16 rooms are reasonably clean and comfortable, with satellite TV and attached modern bathrooms. Its location deep in the Bazar-e Bozorg area isn't great, because walking around here at night can be a bit dodgy. The restaurant here is a popular lunch spot.

Hotel Melal

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p156; ☎222 4532-4; Kamal al-Din Ismail Ave; s/d US\$45/66; 📶📶📶) Overlooking the river east of Pol-e Si-o-Seh, Melal is professionally managed but is looking a bit worn these days. Request a room overlooking the river or enjoy the view from the top-floor restaurant. Free wi-fi is available in the foyer.

Parsian Azadi Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p156; ☎667 4785-7; A'ineh Khuneh Blvd; d/tr US\$64/82; 📶📶📶) Half the 35 worn rooms sport balconies overlooking the Si-o-Seh Bridge and all have satellite TV, but that, alas, is where the good news stops. Standards of cleanliness leave something to be desired and bathrooms have a smelly squat toilet next to the Western version. Wi-fi costs US\$1.80 per hour.



Eating & Drinking

Esfahan has three local specialities: *beryani* (mutton meat and offal that is ground or minced and then cooked over coals before being sprinkled with cinnamon and served wrapped in flat bread), *khoresh-t-e mast* (a strange concoction of lamb, yoghurt, egg, saffron, sugar and orange peel; traditionally eaten as a side dish or dessert) and *gaz*, a delicious nougat usually mixed with saffron, chopped pistachios or almonds.

The best **fast-food joint** in town is on the corner of Chahar Bagh-e Abbasi and Abbas Abad Sts near the Pol-e Si-o-Seh. As well as the usual offerings, it serves a delicious *lafel* sandwich (US\$1.20).



Abbasi Hotel Teahouse

TEAHOUSE \$

(Map p156; Shahid Medani St; tea US\$1.40-3.20, snacks US\$1.80-2.50; ☎4-10pm) The setting at the rear of the hotel's courtyard is a delight, and while you might need to start singing to get a waiter's attention after 6pm, when locals flock here to eat *ash-e reshte* (noodle soup with beans and vegetables; US\$4.50), it's well worth the effort. Snacks include *halva* (a sweetmeat made of sesame seeds and honey), dates, warm beetroot and *fereni* (a sweet pudding made from rice flour, sugar and rosewater). Order and pay at the cash register and then give the docket to your waiter.



Fereni Hafez

SWEETS \$

(Map p156; Hafez St; bowl of *fereni* US\$0.50; ☎8am-midnight) You'll be in good company if you make your way here for an afternoon or after-dinner snack – locals flock to this place to get their regular fixes of *fereni*, with many taking containers of the sweet stuff home to make the family happy. One mouthful, and you'll immediately realise why. Look for the 'Icecream Hafez' sign and the people eating on the street.

Restaurant Shahrzad

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Map p156; ☎220 4490; Abbas Abad St; meals US\$7.50-16.50; ☎11.30am-10.30pm) Opulent Qajar-style wall paintings, stained-glass windows and battalions of black-suited waiters contribute to the Shahrzad's reputation as the best restaurant in Esfahan. House specialities include the lamb cutlets, the *khoresh-t-e mast* and the *chelo fesenjun*. At the end of the meal you'll be offered a complimentary piece of *gaz* flavoured with almond and rosewater.

Bastani Traditional

Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Map p156; Chaharsogh Maghsod Bazar, Naqsh-e Jahan Sq; meals US\$3.50-14; ☎11.30am-10pm) Esfahan's most atmospheric restaurant is located in the shadow of the Masjed-e Shah. Recently rebuilt and restored, its interior features an internal courtyard with fountain, tiled walls and painted vaulted ceilings with mirror inlay – truly gorgeous. Though a favourite with tour groups (not usually a good sign), the food is pretty good, with dishes such as *khoresh-e beh* (stewed lamb and quince) and *khoresh-e alu* (stewed chicken and plum) making seasonal appearances. When we last visited, work was underway to open a roof terrace with views

over the mosque's roof and minaret. There's a cover charge of US\$1.60 if you only order some tea.

Khan Gostar Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(Map p156; ground fl, Julfa Hotel, off Hakim Nezami Ave, Jolfa; meals US\$8-17; ☉noon-3.30pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Located in the city's Armenian quarter, this cafeteria-style restaurant serves enormous plates of rice, chicken, fish and kabab. There's a large self-service salad bar (US\$4.75 per plate) that is great for vegetarians, and all of the *tahchin* (crunchy rice) dishes are delicious – we're fans of the *tahchin barreh* (rice cake with slow-cooked lamb shank garnished with barberries and nuts). There's also a downstairs restaurant with traditional seating (same opening hours and prices).

Mikhak Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(Map p156; meals US\$4-9.50; ☉11am-4pm Sat-Thur) Just off the southeast end of the bazaar, the Mikhak serves quality Iranian comfort food including a moist and flavoursome 'special chicken' kabab and a tasty slow-cooked lamb shank. Vegetarians should head elsewhere.

Azam Beryani TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(Map p156; www.beryaniazam.com, in Farsi; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; beryani US\$3.50; ☉9am-3pm Sat-Thur) Famous for its *beryani* (which is served with a glass of *dugh*; churned sour milk or yoghurt mixed with water), Azam has three branches: this one near the bazaar, one in Masjed Seyyed St and one in Kamal-Esmaeil St.

Arshia Traditional Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(Map p156; cnr Ostandari St & Matbakh Alley; meals US\$3.50-8; ☉noon-3pm & 7.30-10pm) Though it lacks the atmosphere of the nearby Bastani, Arshia's location just off Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq and its friendly service make it worth considering. Seating is traditional, and the menu features all the usual suspects plus *beryani*. Vegetarians be warned: the vegetable stew isn't meat-free.

Naghsh-e Jahan Cafeteria CAFE \$\$
(Map p156; Abbasi Hotel, Shahid Medani St; sandwiches US\$7.50, burgers US\$8.50-9.50; ☉8am-11pm) A favourite meeting place for local businessmen, smart young couples and ladies on shopping expeditions, the coffee shop at Esfahan's best hotel serves up-market fast food (hamburgers, club sandwiches, pizza) but is best for a coffee (French cof-

fee US\$3, cappuccino US\$3.50, iced coffee US\$3.50). If the weather permits, ask to sit among the persimmon trees and fountains in the courtyard garden.

Nobahar Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(Map p156; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; meals US\$3-10; ☉11am-3pm & 6-10pm) This basement restaurant has been around forever because it serves reliably good, reasonably priced soup, kababs and rice dishes. Clean, modern and cheerful, it's a safe if unexciting choice.

Naghsh-e Jahan Traditional Banquet Hall TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(Map p156; Naqsh-e Jahan Sq; meals US\$6.50-14.50; ☉noon-3pm & 7-10.30pm) Just off Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, this restaurant uses stained glass, colourful tiles and *takhts* (daybeds) to create a Qajar-era ambience, and caters mainly for tourists (ie the food is overpriced and underwhelming). To get here, walk out the square north of the Lotfollah Mosque, turn left, left again, and up the stairs.

Azadegan Teahouse TEAHOUSE \$
(Chaykhaneh-ye Azadegan; Map p156; off Naqsh-e Jahan Sq; tea & qalyan for 2 US\$9; ☉7am-midnight) In a lane off the northeastern corner of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, this popular place sports an astonishing collection of teahouse-junk hanging from its walls and ceiling. The front space is the province of morose men, but the rear room is always full of chattering groups of young men and women drinking tea and sharing qalyans. Enter down the passageway lined with scooters, lamps and old radios.

Shopping

Esfahan has probably the widest selection of handicrafts in Iran. The best buys are carpets, hand-painted miniatures on camel bone, intricate metalwork and enamelware. Prices can be higher than elsewhere but there's more choice and it's certainly more pleasurable to shop here than in Tehran.

The Bazar-e Bozorg (Map p156) and the arcades around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq (Map p156) are literally full of shops. You will find postcards and tacky souvenirs for sale in one store, and expensive works of art in the next. Stores vary by price, quality and honesty, with competition among the carpet dealers particularly fierce (and sometimes nasty), so don't pay too much attention to

what one shop owner says about his competitor. To see artisans at work, head to B Hassan Abbad Alley, off the southeast corner of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, or wander into the many *khans* in the Bazar-e Bozorg – artisans still work in many of these.

For gold and silver, head directly to the **Bazar-e Honar** (Map p156; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎8.30am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu).

If you are short on time, head to Posht-Matbakh St off Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, which is home to top-quality carpet, enamel and miniature shops including Fallahi Miniatures, Photo Vat Miniatures and Unique Gallery (enamelware). Persian Art Gallery around the corner is also worth a visit.

Some places do employ high-pressure sales tactics, but most are friendly and willing to chat over a *chay* (tea) without twisting your arm too much. It can actually be quite enjoyable as long as you remember that you don't *have* to buy anything. Nevertheless, whatever you're shopping for, check prices in several stores and bargain hard (see the boxed text, p338).

Another popular souvenir is a box of *gaz*. Most locals think that the best brand is Kermani Gaz. You'll find it pretty much everywhere, but especially in confectionery shops along Chahar Bagh Abbasi St and around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq.

i Information

Emergency

Tourist police (Map p156; ☎221 5953; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎24hr) English-speaking officers can be found at this booth in the middle of the street outside the Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh.

Internet Access

There are plenty of *coffeenets* along Chahar Bagh Abbasi St, and several carpet shops around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq will let you check email for free in exchange for the opportunity to bend your ear about carpets.

Medical Services

Al-Zahra Hospital (Map p154; ☎668 4444; Soffeh St) Best hospital in Esfahan. English-speaking doctors.

Esfahan Hospital (Map p156; ☎223 0015; Shams Abadi St) Its convenient and also recommended.

Money

To change money, head straight to Sepah St off Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, where the Bank Melli and exchange shops compete for your forex.

Jahan-e Arz Money Changer (Map p156; Sepah St; ☎8.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) Offers good rates.

Tourist Information

Tourist Information Office (Map p156; ☎221 3840, 221 6831; Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq; ☎8.30am-5pm Sat-Wed) Under the Ali Qapu Palace; the English-speaking staff have maps and brochures about the city and province and can recommend tours.

Travel Agencies

Donyaye Parvaz Tour & Travel Agency (Map p156; ☎667 3101-4; donyayeparvaz@aol.com; 8 Chahar Bagh-e Bala St) Located at the southern end of the Pol-e Si-o-Seh, this professional outfit can arrange tours and visas, book accommodation and organise train, air and ferry tickets. Staff member Mr Morshedi speaks excellent English and is extremely helpful.

Iran Travel & Tourism (Map p156; ☎222 3010; irantravel1964@yahoo.com; Shahid Medani St) Opposite Abbasi Hotel; can book plane, train and even ferry tickets.

Visa Extensions

The **Department of Aliens Affairs** (Map p154; Rudaki St; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) is located in a large, drab-looking government building in the Rudeki neighbourhood and is the most bureaucratic office we encountered in central Iran. At the security check females will be given a chador, then pick up the paperwork at the office in the courtyard and follow pointed fingers from there. It normally takes one day to process an extension request. To get here, walk or take a shuttle taxi 1.7km south from the southern end of Pol-e Si-o-Seh (US\$0.50) to Shariati St, then take another shuttle taxi (US\$0.75) 3km west. The building is about 400m after the third major intersection and a slight bend right and left, on the right (north) side of the road. Alternatively, ask the Tourist Police on Chahar Bagh Abbasi St to help – they can put you on a bus that stops outside the office or give a taxi directions; very helpful! For more details on extending visas, see the boxed text, p27.

i Getting There & Away

Air

The office of **Iran Air** (Map p156; ☎222 8200; www.iranair.com; Shahid Medani St) is in the shopping complex opposite the Abbasi Hotel. See the table, p170, for domestic services:

Bus

Esfahan has a few bus terminals: Kave terminal (Map p154) in the north is the busiest and is the terminal you're most likely to use. Most passengers buy their tickets at the ticket desks inside

FLIGHTS FROM ESFAHAN

DESTINATION	FARE	FREQUENCY	CARRIER
Ahvaz	US\$35	daily	
Bandar Abbas	US\$75	2 daily	Iran Air, Aseman
Kish	US\$70	1-2 daily	Iran Air, Kish Airlines
Mashhad	US\$45	13 per week	Aria, Caspian, Eram, Taban
Shiraz	US\$50	daily	Iran Air, Aseman
Tehran	US\$25	several daily	several companies
Zahedan	US\$62	Fri only	Iran Air

the terminal building just before they depart, but during holiday periods it's wise to purchase your ticket one or two days ahead.

See the table, opposite, for routes from Kave. As there are no bus offices in town, it's a good idea to ask about departure times of buses when you first arrive in Esfahan.

To get to the terminal, take a bus (US\$0.40) or shuttle taxi (US\$0.75) north along Chahar Bagh St. A taxi *dar baste* from the centre of town should cost around US\$3.50.

Buses to destinations closer to Esfahan leave from two smaller terminals.

The Zayandeh Rud terminal (Map p154) has services to Shahr-e Kord (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$1.40/0.90), with departures every hour or so. To get to Zayandeh Rud terminal, take a shuttle taxi west from Nazar St (East), just south of Pol-e Si-o-Seh (US\$0.40).

From the Jey minibus terminal (Map p154), there are hourly departures to Yazd between 6am and 1am (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$6.70/4.50, six hours) and Na'in (minibus US\$1.60, *mahmooly* US\$1.80, three to four hours). To get to the Jey minibus terminal, take a shuttle taxi from Takhti Junction (US\$0.40).

Train

The **train station** (off Map p154) is way out to the south of the city. To get here, catch a bus from outside Kowsar International Hotel; ask for the '*istgah-e ghatah*' and you'll be put on the right bus. Be at the bus stop well over an hour before your train is due to depart. A taxi (US\$7) can cost more than the train ticket to Tehran.

You'll need to book well in advance for all train trips, particularly if you want to travel on weekends or in holiday periods – use a travel agent (both Iran Travel & Tourism and Donyaye Parvaz Tour & Travel Agency have dedicated train ticket desks). Note that it's very difficult to source tickets for the scenic Esfahan–Shiraz service.

i Getting Around

Always agree on a price before getting into a taxi, especially at the bus terminal and train station. From the airport most taxis use a meter; if yours doesn't, insist on setting a price.

To/From the Airport

The airport is about 25km northeast of town and there is no airport bus service. A taxi *dar baste* costs around US\$9.

TRAINS FROM ESFAHAN

DESTINATION	FARE (GHAZAL/NORMAL)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bandar Abbas	US\$15 (normal)	15½hr	1st week – Sun, Tue & Thu; 2nd week – Mon, Wed, Fri & Sat
Kashan	US\$3.60 (normal)	4hr	daily (Tehran service)
Mashhad	US\$36/21.50	18½hr	daily (<i>ghazal</i>), every 2nd day (normal)
Shiraz	US\$12.50 (<i>ghazal</i>)	9hr	daily
Tehran	US\$6.50 (normal)	7½hr	daily

BUSES FROM ESFAHAN (KAVE)

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bandar Abbas	US\$17/13	12hr	at least 3 daily, afternoons
Hamadan	US\$7.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	8hr	hourly 6am-8pm
Kashan	US\$3.30 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	3hr	very frequent (Tehran service)
Kermanshah	US\$9 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	9hr	1 daily in evening
Khorramabad	US\$6.70 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	8hr	frequent in morning, 1 in afternoon
Mashhad	US\$23.50/16.50	19hr	3 daily (2 in morning, 1 in afternoon)
Orumiyeh	US\$10.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	9hr	1 daily in afternoon
Sanandaj	US\$10.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	9hr	1 daily in evening
Shiraz	US\$10.70/6.70	7-8hr	6 daily
Tabriz	US\$14.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	17hr	1 daily
Tehran	US\$11.80/6.70	7hr	very frequent
Tehran Airport (Imam Khomeini International Airport)	US\$11.50	5hr	4 daily
Yazd	US\$7/5	5hr	4 daily
Zahedan	US\$15.80 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	19hr	2 daily in afternoon

Bus & Minibus

Local buses and minibuses leave the bus terminal near Chehel Sotun Palace every few minutes. Just ask – and keep asking – for one heading your way. Elsewhere in town ask at a bus stop and you will soon be pointed to the correct conveyance. Rides cost US\$0.40 to US\$0.90 and you buy books of tickets at booths along the routes.

Taxi

Depending on the distance – and your negotiating skills – a fare in a private taxi around inner Esfahan costs anything from US\$2.70 to US\$6.50. Avoid the taxi drivers hanging around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq and Kelisa-ye Vank (Vank Cathedral) as they can spot tourists a mile off and will adjust their charges upward accordingly.

The long Chahar Bagh St is the city's main thoroughfare, and every couple of seconds a shuttle taxi goes *mostaghim* (straight ahead) for about US\$0.10 per kilometre.

To outlying destinations such as the transport terminals, look for taxis heading in the right direction from the following places: Takhti Junction, Laleh, Qods and Ahmad Abad Sqs (for anywhere to the east); Imam Hossein and Shohada Sqs (for the north); and the southern end of Pol-e Si-o-Seh and Azadi Sq (for the south and west).

The Zagros Mountains

If the idea of a direct bus, train or air trip between Esfahan and Shiraz sounds like a missed opportunity, you may wish to consider an alternative jaunt through the Zagros Mountains. Here, the sharp folds of barren ridge and flowing valley stretch for 1500km from the Turkish border in northwestern Iran southeast to the Persian Gulf coast. The population is Persian, Lori and Kurdish mixed with a vast number of nomads, primarily Bakhtiari and Qashqa'i. The best time to travel here is from April to November, when the nomads are here; in winter they move to the valleys south of Shiraz.

As a travelling experience, this trip definitely qualifies as 'off the beaten track'. Few people speak English, public transport is infrequent or nonexistent, and accommodation is basic.

It will cost anything between US\$200 and US\$260 to hire a car and driver for the two-day trip (more if you organise a driver who is also a guide). Prices will be cheaper if you organise a driver directly rather than doing so through an agency. Note that with this option, you will also need to pay for the driver's meals and accommodation. To drive the route in one day should cost between

US\$150 and US\$200. Alternatively, you can make your way on public transport and by hitching. We don't suggest doing this in winter, though, when roads can be blocked and services cancelled.

SHAHR-E KORD

☑0381 / POP 131,612 / ELEV 2061M

شهر کرد

A 30-minute drive from Esfahan, the sleepy capital of Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari province is nestled between two mountain ranges and is a staging post rather than a destination. An agricultural town, its only tourist attraction is the newly opened **Shahr-e Kord Museum** (admission US\$0.30; ☉10am-4pm Sat-Thu) on Valiasr St just north of Valiasr Junction. The collection here is modest but the building itself, an old *hammam*, is lovely.

After visiting the museum, you may want to stop for a tea, qalyan or cheap meal at **Ferdosi Soffrehaneh** (Ferdosi Sq; ☉8am-10pm), an extremely atmospheric teahouse on the town's main square.

The bus and savari terminal is on the southern edge of town. Buses travel between here and Esfahan (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$1.40/0.90) and Tehran (VIP US\$1.10) reasonably frequently.

CHELGERD

چلگرد

Eighty kilometres (1¼ hours by car) from Shahr-e Kord, Chelgerd is the home of skiing in this part of the Zagros range and is also the ideal base for climbing some of the many surrounding peaks of just less than 4000m. The Koohrang Ski Resort has a single 800m-long T-bar running up a slope

near the Koohrang Tunnel; the snow is skiable between late December and late February and you'll often have the slopes to yourself on weekdays.

The government-owned **Hotel Koohrang** (☎0382-762 2301, 0912 114 4030; hotelkoohrang@parsonline.net; s & d US\$60, tr US\$83; ☹) is the best place to stay because it hires ski equipment (US\$6.50 per hour), offers guided horse riding outside the ski season (US\$7.50 per hour) and employs English-speaking managers who are an absolute mine of information about the whole region. Rooms are simple but comfortable, there's a restaurant (meals US\$4 to US\$8) and entertainment facilities include a billiard table.

Public transport in the mountains is relatively expensive. A minibus travels between Chelgerd and Shahr-e Kord (US\$4.50, 1½ hours) once per day most days of the week. Savaris go to and from Shahr-e Kord (US\$5.50 to US\$7), Tehran (US\$12), Shiraz (US\$13.50), Esfahan (US\$11) and Yasuj (US\$11), but only when there are enough passengers to fill the car. A taxi *dar baste* will cost US\$13.50 to/from Shahr-e Kord and US\$40 to/from Esfahan.

CHELGERD TO YASUJ

There is no tourist infrastructure whatsoever between Chelgerd and Yasuj, but the 380km road winds through villages, gorges and steep-sided valleys hosting fast-flowing rivers and is one of the most spectacular in the country. The drive takes approximately 4½ hours and the stretch between Chelgerd and Farsan is the most scenic.

IRAN'S NOMADS

The 20th century saw the Iranian government try repeatedly to settle Iran's many nomadic tribes. For all their efforts, however, there are still about a million people living as nomads in Iran. They are mostly Turkic Qashqa'i and Bakhtiari, but there are also nomadic Kurds, Lors, Baluchis and smaller groups such as the Khamseh of Bavanat.

The Bakhtiari are concentrated in an area extending southward from Lorestan province to Khuzestan province and westward from Esfahan to near the Iraqi border, moving their herds of sheep and goats between summer and winter pastures. They speak a dialect of Lori.

The Qashqa'i are based in central Iran, where they move between summer and winter pastures in Fars province. Their migration routes are among the longest and most difficult of all of Iran's pastoral tribes, as they are often on the road for 45 days. They have become famous for their production of simple rugs – *gabbeh*.

Nomadic women wear long, colourfully layered dresses with much jewellery and no chadors. The men sometimes wear tall hats with a rounded crown. To visit them it's best to go with a specialist guide. We have noted these for some destinations, including Shiraz (p193).

The large town of Yasuj (population 100,540) is surrounded by densely forested mountains, but there's nothing here to interest the traveller. If you must stay overnight, the only conceivable places to stay are the basic **Eram Hotel** (☎0741-422 4599; Janbazan Sq; s & d US\$38; 🏠), at the beginning of Motahari Ave, or the overpriced, rundown and characterless **Azadi Hotel** (☎0741-422 3471; www.parsiangrouphotels.com; Namaz Blvd; s & d US\$75; 🏠), on the hill overlooking town.

Savaris travel between Yasuj and Chelgerd (US\$11), and regular buses (*mahmooly* US\$1.80, two hours) and savaris (US\$7) link Yasuj with Shiraz. Both will stop at Sepidan on request.

SEPIDAN

سپیدان

The alpine village of Sepidan is a one-hour drive from Yasuj and is the jumping-off point for Pooladkaf, a ski slope about 15km uphill from the village. There are four lifts, one being 2100m long and climbing to 3400m. There is no public transport to Pooladkaf from Sepidan, but you should be able to negotiate a ride in a private car. There is a small chalet, and a larger hotel was under construction when we last visited.

Sepidan is a popular centre for outdoor activities. Mr Raeisi from Shiraz-based **Iran Sightseeing** (☎0711-235 5939, 0917 313 2926; www.iransightseeing.com) can arrange downhill and cross-country skiing in winter and trekking and mountain biking during the rest of the year. He also has excellent contacts with the nomads and can customise trips to visit and stay in their camps.

The drive between Sepidan and Shiraz takes one hour.

Dasht-e Kavir

'A great silence overcomes me, and I wonder why I ever thought to use language.'

The great Persian poet Rumi may never have been to the desert towns northeast of Esfahan, but this oft-repeated line could have been written specifically for them. The Dasht-e Kavir, one of two deserts dominating the landscape of eastern Iran, is a mix of sand and salt that is as blinding in its whiteness as the desert is deafening in its total, unimaginable silence. Within these desolate environs exist oases, and among these oases are some sweet spring villages.

Don't travel here in summer, as temperatures regularly reach 50°C and few places have air-conditioning.

TOUDESHK

تودشک

☎0312 / POP 3240 (TOUDESHK), 700 (TOUDESHK CHO)

To experience a taste of village life, consider breaking your trip between Esfahan and Yazd and visiting Toudeshk Cho, 95km from Esfahan. This classic desert village of mud-brick buildings, *badgirls* and hospitable locals has been hosting foreign cyclists for years and now has an excellent homestay open to all travellers. It's a short distance from the larger, more modern village of Toudeshk.

TOP CHOICE

Tak-Taku Guesthouse (☎637

2586, 0913 365 4420; crazyboyindesert@gmail.com; full board per person US\$20; @ 📞) Owner English-speaking Mohammad Jalali and his family are eager to offer guests a taste of the real Iran, and do so with great charm and warmth. Their traditional house has rooms set around a courtyard and guests eat and sleep the Iranian way (ie on the floor). Sister-in-law Fatima is a fabulous cook, and the food you will eat here will probably be the best you sample in Iran. The bargain-basement price includes three meals and an interesting walking tour around the village. You can also enjoy a visit to the local *hammam* (Thursday and Friday only) or a tour to the shifting sand dunes in the Varzaneh Desert or the nearby Gavkhuni wetlands; Mohammad can organize camping in the sand dunes for those who are interested.

Buses from Esfahan leave from Jey terminal. There is an occasional Toudeshk service (minibus, US\$0.90, 1¼ hours) but most of the time you'll need to take the bus to Na'in (minibus/*mahmooly* US\$1.60/\$1.80) and ask to get off at Toudeshk Cho.

There are four services daily to Yazd (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$6.50/4.50, 3½ hours) via Na'in (US\$2.30/1.80), and one daily service to Garmeh (US\$2.70).

A savari to Na'in costs US\$1.40 and taxis *dar baste* cost US\$9 to Na'in, US\$18 to Esfahan and US\$39 to Yazd.

NA'IN

نائین

☎0323 / POP 75,000 / ELEV 1557M

Long known for its handicrafts, the semi-somnolent town of Na'in is located at the start of the desert road to Tabas and Mashhad and has been an important crossroad on the trade routes across the province since Sassanid times. In the past it was

known for its ceramics and textiles; these days it is primarily known for its carpets and camel-wool cloaks, many of which are sold in Yazd.

Sights

Masjed-e Jameh

مسجد جامع

MOSQUE

(Jameh Mosque; admission US\$0.50; ☉8am-5pm, closed for Fri prayers in summer) There's only one truly compelling reason to visit Na'in – and that's to see this mosque. Constructed sometime in the 10th and 11th centuries, it was one of the very first mosques built in Iran and is unusual in that it wasn't built to the usual four-*ivan* plan of its time (eg the Masjed-e Jameh in Esfahan). The exterior facade and minaret are austere beautiful and many parts of the interior (including the mihrab) are decorated with finely detailed stuccowork. Don't miss the carved wooden minbar or underground prayer hall.

From the mosque entrance you can see the ruined **Narin Castle**, the town's oldest structure.

Tours



Enthusiastic computer-shop owner, amateur photographer and freelance guide **Mahmood Mohammadipour** (☎0939 863 6090; www.naeinsun.ir; half-day Na'in tours US\$15-17, half-day treks US\$23-45) can organise tours within town and into the surrounding area, as well as desert trekking, homestays and bicycle hire.

Sleeping & Eating

Campers can pitch their tents in the open ground near the *Hosseinieh* (building used during the rituals to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein), located close to the Masjed-e Jameh. The nearby public toilets are open 24 hours.

Naein Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Jahangardi Inn; ☎225 3088; fax 225 3665; Ahmar Shahid Rajaei St; d US\$64, extra bed US\$12.50;  ) Who would have thought that Na'in would have one of the best accommodation options in the province? Certainly not us. But the eight split-level suites arranged around an attractive courtyard at this Pahlavi-era hotel about 150m southwest of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq are as stylish as they are well equipped, and the hotel **restaurant** (meals US\$6) is a favourite with locals and tourists alike.

Mosaferkhaneh Gholami

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎0913 223 4667; Imam St; s/d US\$12.50/22.50) Mr Gholami's cheap and cheerful guest-house is about 300m east of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq above a bakery. The simple rooms have hard beds, the shared bathrooms (squat toilets only) are clean and there's a kitchen that guests can use. No breakfast and no English spoken.

Arshiya Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Naqsh-e Jahan Sq; meals US\$3-5; ☉11.30am-4pm & 7-11pm Sat-Thu, 11.30am-4pm Fri) Venture down the grey stairs off Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq and you'll find this basement restaurant, which has a modern interior and a menu including *fesenjun*, *khoresht sabzi* (meat and vegetable stew) and *chelo morgh* (chicken and rice).

Getting There & Away

Buses and minibuses run between Na'in and Esfahan's Jey terminal (minibus/*mahmooly* US\$1.80/2.20, two to 2½ hours) every hour between 9am and 5pm; you can also take the Yazd services from Jey (*mahmooly* US\$3.10) or Kave terminal (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$7/5) and ask to get off at Na'in. Savaris charge US\$5 for the trip going either way.

Three buses per day travel to Tehran (US\$8.90, six hours) via Kashan (US\$5.40, 2½ hours). Two of these travel between Na'in and Jonub and one between Na'in and Beihaghi (Arjantin).

There are regular services to/from Yazd (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$6.50/3.10, two hours).

GARMEH

گرمه

☎0324 / POP 260 PLUS 20 GOATS & 2 CAMELS / ELEV 857M

Close your eyes and imagine an ancient oasis in the middle of the desert. You will almost certainly have conjured up a place that looks exactly like Garmeh. Surrounded by date palms that spread out from a small spring, this 1500-year-old mud-brick village is a wonderfully relaxing place to soak up some desert ambience and experience Iranian hospitality at its best.

Activities

If you are keen to take a camel trek, **Iranian Deserts** (1-hour/1-day/3-day trek US\$14/55/145) is a highly regarded outfit run by Ali Saraban, a cameleer based in Mesr, one hour north of Garmeh. Ali has 15 camels and takes guided treks through the dunes in autumn and spring. He doesn't speak English, so it's best to arrange your booking through Ateshooni.

Sleeping & Eating

Ateshooni

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍) 443 2156, 0913 223 0874; www.ateshoooni.com; guesthouse per person US\$35, hostel per person US\$10, apt rates by request; (📧) Artist and musician Maziar Ale Davoud has almost single-handedly saved Garmeh from the fate meted out to many small desert communities, restoring a number of its mud-brick buildings as homes for members of his family and opening a guesthouse, backpacker hostel and 12-bed holiday apartment. In the process he has provided employment for locals and brought much-needed income and infrastructure to the village, which is now thriving rather than seeing most of its residents forced to relocate to Yazd and Tehran. Wonderful home cooking is served at the guesthouse, and both the hostel and apartment offer kitchen facilities (breakfast is also provided at the hostel). Sleeping and eating arrangements are traditional, but the shared bathrooms have Western toilets and the decor of each place is quite charming. Each has evaporative cooling.

When here, you can wander through the date palms, relax with a book or ask Maziar and his team of local guides to organise camel treks, hikes to hot-water springs and mountain villages or visits to moving sand dunes and a dry salt lake.

Ateshooni's popularity means you should book ahead, especially for weekends. You can stay at any time of year, but be warned that during summer it gets ridiculously hot.

Getting There & Away

Getting to Garmeh isn't easy. If you are coming on a Wednesday night or Thursday afternoon, Ateshoooni may be able to organise a lift for you – check this in advance.

From Tehran, buses to Tabas or Birjand leave from Terminal-e Jonub between 10am and 5pm and stop in Khor (Khur), 28km to the north of Garmeh on the Na'in to Tabas road, en route (VIP/*mahmooly* US\$18/13.50, nine/10 hours). These leave almost hourly, although only one service (at 3pm) is VIP.

From Esfahan, take a bus to Khor from the Kave terminal at 1pm (US\$5.50, seven hours). The return service departs Khor at 1pm.

A *mahmooly* service leaves Yazd for Khor at 2pm and returns to Yazd the next day at 7.30am (US\$6.50, five hours).

From Khor, a pickup to Garmeh will cost US\$5.50. Ask Ateshoooni to organise this for you. Be warned that when this book was being researched, a dodgy guesthouse in the town was sending staff to meet the bus and tell travellers that they were from Ateshoooni, taking them to their far-less-desirable place instead.

Alternatively, you can ask Ateshoooni to organise private transport for you. This will cost US\$80 from Esfahan, US\$65 from Yazd and US\$45 from Na'in.

Yazd

یزد

(📍) 0351 / POP 432.194 / ELEV 1213M

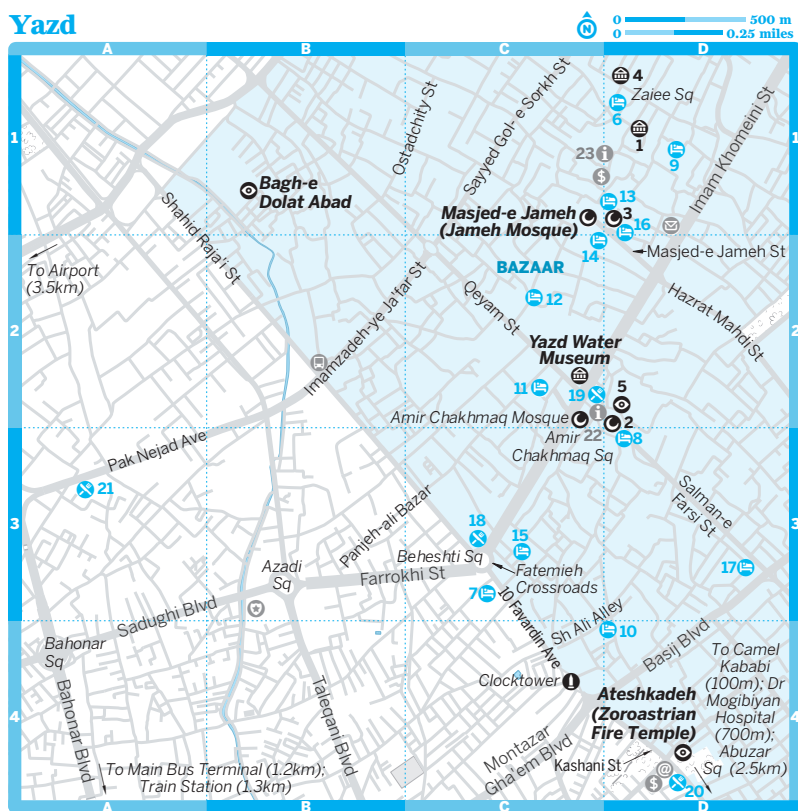
With its winding lanes, forest of *badgirs*, mud-brick old town and excellent range of accommodation options, Yazd is one of the highlights of any trip to Iran. Wedged between the northern Dasht-e Kavir and southern Dasht-e Lut, it doesn't have the big-ticket sights of Esfahan or Shiraz, but it's equally enchanting. This is a place to wander and get lost in the maze of historic streets and lanes, not to mention your imagination. It's also an ideal base for day trips to several evocative villages and towns.

THE BADGIRS OF YAZD

Any summer visitor to Yazd will understand immediately why the city's roovescape is a forest of *badgirs* (windtowers or wind catchers). These ancient systems of natural air-conditioning are designed to catch even the lightest breeze and direct it to the rooms below. To appreciate the effect, just stand beneath one.

Iranian *badgirs* are divided into three common types: Ardakani, which capture wind from only one direction; Kermani, which capture wind from two directions; and Yazdi, which capture wind from four directions. Other variations can capture wind from up to eight directions. All have a structure that contains the shafts, air shelves that are used to catch some of the hot air and stop it entering the house, flaps to redirect the circulation of the wind and a roof covering. The currents that enter the house often do so above a pool of cool water, thereby cooling the air, while the warm air continues its circular path, redirected upwards and out of the house through a different shaft. Genius!

Yazd



Yazd has been known for its silks and other fabrics since before Marco Polo passed through. It is also home to Iran's second-largest population of Zoroastrians (see the boxed text, p164).

The city can be quite cold in winter and is boiling hot in summer, though not humid.

History

Yazd has a long and important history as a trading post. When Marco Polo passed this way in the 13th century, he described Yazd as 'a very fine and splendid city and a centre of commerce'. It was spared destruction by Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, and flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, with silk, textile and carpet production the main home-grown industries. Like most of Iran, Yazd fell into decline when the Safavids were defeated and remained little more than a provincial outpost until the railway line from Tehran was extended here by the last shah.

Sights

OLD CITY

بافت قدیم

The city's historic centre emerges like a phoenix from the desert – a very old phoenix. Yazd's old city is one of the oldest towns on earth, according to Unesco, and is the perfect place to get a feel for the region's rich history. Just about everything here – including 2000 Qajar-era houses – is made from sun-dried mud bricks, and the resulting brown skyline is dominated by tall *bad-girs* on almost every rooftop. The residential quarters appear almost deserted because of the high walls, which shield the houses from the narrow and labyrinthine *kuches* (lanes) that criss-cross the town.

Follow our walking tour (p180) or just wander around; you'll discover covered walkways, simple courtyards, ornate wooden doors and some lovely adobe architecture. And be sure to get yourself to the

Yazd

📍 Top Sights

Ateshkadeh (Zoroastrian Fire Temple).....	D4
Bagh-e Dolat Abad.....	B1
Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque).....	C1
Yazd Water Museum.....	C2

📍 Sights

1 Alexander's Prison.....	D1
2 Amir Chakhmaq Complex.....	D2
3 Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin.....	D1
4 Khan-e Lari.....	D1
5 Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh.....	D2
Tomb of the 12 Imams.....	(see 1)

🏠 Sleeping

6 Fahadan Great Hotel.....	D1
7 Hotel Dad.....	C3
8 Hotel Sonnati.....	D3
9 Kohan Traditional Hotel.....	D1
10 Laleh Hotel.....	D4
11 Malek-o Tojjar.....	C2
12 Mehr Traditional Hotel.....	C2

13 Oasis Hotel.....	D1
14 Orient Hotel.....	C2
15 Rose Traditional Hotel.....	C3
16 Silk Road Hotel.....	D1
17 Soroosh Guesthouse.....	D3

🍴 Eating

18 Baharestan Restaurant.....	C3
19 Haj Khalifeh Ali Rahbar.....	C2
20 Kababi.....	D4
Malek-o Tojjar.....	(see 11)
21 Pizza Gole Sorkh.....	A3
Silk Road Hotel Restaurant.....	(see 16)

🍷 Drinking

Laleh Teahouse Restaurant.....	(see 10)
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📍 Information

Ama Safar Tour & Travel Agency..	(see 7)
Silk Road Travel.....	(see 14)
22 Tourist Information.....	C2
23 Tourist Information Office.....	D1

rooftops at some point for fine views over Yazd and into the vast brown expanses of the desert.

FREE Masjed-e Jameh

مسجد جامع MOSQUE
(Jameh Mosque; Masjed-e Jameh St) Dominating the old city, this magnificent building has a tiled entrance portal that is one of the tallest in Iran, flanked by two magnificent 48m-high minarets and adorned with an inscription from the 15th century. The exquisite mosaics on the dome and mihrab, and the tiles above the main western entrance to the courtyard are particularly stunning. The *gardoneh mehr* (swastika symbol) used on the tiles symbolises infinity, timelessness, birth and death and can be found on Iranian buildings dating back as early as 5000 BC.

Built for Sayyed Roknaddin in the 15th century, the mosque is on the site of a 12th-century building believed to have itself replaced an earlier fire temple. In the courtyard there is a stairwell leading down to part of the Zarch Qanat (closed to the public). Roof access is barred to everyone except Muslim women, who are allowed up on Fridays only.

Bagh-e Dolat Abad

باغ دولت آباد HISTORIC BUILDING, GARDENS
(admission US\$2.70; ☀️7.30am-5pm, to 10pm summer) Once a residence of Persian regent Karim Khan Zand, this small pavilion set amid Unesco-listed gardens was built about 1750. The interior of the pavilion is superb, with intricate latticework and exquisite stained-glass windows. It's also renowned for having Iran's loftiest *badgir*, standing over 33m, though this one was rebuilt after it collapsed in the 1960s. The entrance can be reached from the western end of Shahid Raja'i St.

FREE Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin

بقعه سيد ركن الدين SHRINE
(Mausoleum of Sayyed Roknaddin; off Masjed-e Jameh St; ☀️8am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 10am-noon Fri) The beautiful blue-tiled dome of the tomb of local Islamic notable Sayyed Roknaddin Mohammed Qazi is visible from any elevated point in the city. Built 700 years ago, the dome is fairly impressive but the deteriorating stucco inside and other decoration remain more so. The door is often closed but a knock should bring the caretaker.

DESERT NIGHTS

The tiny settlement of Farahzad, 425km from Esfahan, is an oasis located amid sand dunes in the Dasht-e Kavir, just outside the village of Mesr. Its residents, all members of one extended family, make a living from agriculture and by operating **Barandaz Lodge** (☎0324-434 2188, 0913 323 4188; www.mesr.info; full board per person US\$35, B&B US\$10), an 11-room guesthouse occupying two beautifully restored mud-brick houses. The atmosphere here is fantastic and the accommodation is excellent: simple but attractive rooms with traditional bedding, hydronic heating and gleaming bathrooms with Western toilets. Be sure to opt for the full-board option as all of the food is sourced locally and is absolutely delicious – this place even has its own bread oven and large pool where carp are sourced. While here, you can stargaze, ride the guesthouse's camels, take 4WD tours into the desert and generally soak up the seclusion. Highly recommended.

Khan-e Lari

خانه لاری

HISTORIC BUILDING

(admission US\$0.20; ☉7am-6pm, to 8pm summer) This 150-year-old building is one of the best-preserved Qajar-era houses in Yazd. The *badgirs*, traditional doors, stained-glass windows, elegant archways and alcoves mark it out as one of the city's grandest homes. The merchant family who built it have long gone, and it's now home to architecture students and cultural heritage officers. It's signposted west of Zaiee Sq; see the walking tour (p180) for directions.

Alexander's Prison

زندان اسکندر

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Zaiee Sq; admission US\$0.20; ☉8am-sunset, 8am-1pm & 4pm-sunset summer) This 15th-century domed school is known as Alexander's Prison because of a reference to this apparently dastardly place in a Hafez poem. Whether the deep well in the middle of its courtyard was in fact built by Alexander the Great and used as a dungeon seems doubtful, no matter what your guide tells you. The building itself is worth a look for the small display on the old city of Yazd, the clean toilets and the mercifully cool subterranean teahouse.

The early-11th-century brick **Tomb of the 12 Imams** is almost next door to Alexander's Prison. The once-fine (but now badly deteriorated) inscriptions inside bear the names of the Shiite Imams (see the boxed text, p302), though none are actually buried here.

Amir Chakhmaq Complex

مجموعه امیر چخماق

RELIGIOUS

(Amir Chakhmaq Sq; admission US\$0.30; ☉7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thur) The stunning three-storey facade of this Hosseinieh makes it one of the largest such structures in Iran. Its rows of perfectly proportioned sunken al-

coves are at their best, and most photogenic, around sunset when the light softens and the towering exterior is discreetly floodlit. Recent work has added arcades at the side to keep traffic away from the structure. You can climb to the 1st floor of the structure and look over the square, but higher levels are not accessible.

Underneath the complex is a **bazaar** where *kababis* specialise in *jigar* (grilled liver). In front of the Hosseinieh, look out for the huge wooden palm *nakhl*, an important centrepiece once used for the observance of the Shiites' passionate Ashura commemorations.

Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh

زور خانه صاحب الزمان

ZURKHANEH

(admission US\$1.80; ☉workouts 6am, 6pm & 8pm Sat-Thur) Just off the north side of Amir Chakhmaq Sq is the Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh, which is worth seeing both for its Iranian brand of body building and because it's a quite an amazing structure. The modern club is inside a cavernous *ab anbar* (water reservoir) built about 1580. Looking like a 29m-high standing egg from the inside, and crowned with five burly *badgirs*, the reservoir stored water for much of the town. The hour-long workouts in the Zurkhaneh are an interesting window on Iranian culture; see (p292). Note: only males are admitted.

ZOROASTRIAN SITES

اماکن زرتشتی

Ateshkadeh

آتشدکه

FIRE TEMPLE

(Sacred Eternal Flame; Kashani St; admission US\$0.90; ☉8am-noon & 3-6pm Sat-Thur) Zoroastrians come from around the world to see this *ateshkadeh*, often referred to as the Zoroastrian Fire Temple and said to have been burning since about AD 470. Visible through

a window from the entrance hall, the flame was transferred to Ardakan in 1174, then to Yazd in 1474 and to its present site in 1940. Above the entrance you can see the Fravahar symbol (see the boxed text, p164).

FREE Dakhmeh-ye Zartoshtiyun

برج خاموشی

HILL

(Towers of Silence; ☉24hr) These evocative Zoroastrian Towers of Silence are set on two lonely, barren hilltops on the southern outskirts of Yazd. They haven't been used since the 1960s. At the foot of the hills are several other disused Zoroastrian buildings, including a defunct well and a water cistern and two small *badgirs*. The modern Zoroastrian cemetery is nearby. The easiest way to get here is by taxi *dar baste* for about US\$7.50 return, including waiting time of 45 minutes or so while you climb to the top of the towers and back. One way will cost US\$2.70.

👉 Tours

Most hotels in town can arrange tours, but using an independent guide can be far more rewarding. The guides listed here all speak excellent English and are recommended.

Masoud Jaladat

ECO TOURS

(☎0913 352 4723; fravahar_m@yahoo.com) Masoud is the energy behind Fravahar Eco-Touring Group, an outfit specialising in desert and mountain trekking tours. Some options include a full-day hike in the Shirk-oo Mountains (US\$45 per person), a full-day camel ride (US\$50 per person) and an

overnight desert trekking and camping tour (US\$60 per person). Rates are based on groups of four persons. Contact Masoud for details and costs of longer trekking and camping tours, nomad tours and Mt Damanavad hikes.

Mohsen Hajisaeid

GUIDE

(☎0913 351 4460; www.iranpersiatour.com; full-day city tour with/without transport US\$90/60, full-day tour to Zein-o-Din, Faraj & Saryazd US\$100) Mohsen has the well-deserved reputation as being one of the best guides in Iran. Based here in Yazd, he's also an executive of the Yazd Tourism Associations Council. He is unparalleled as a fixer, and is a mine of cultural and practical knowledge. Check the website for a full list of his tours in Yazd and around the country.

Pegah Latifi

GUIDE

(☎0935 935 7079; traveltoyazd@gmail.com; half-/full-day city tour incl transportation US\$45/80) Pegah is a safe driver and enthusiastic guide who specialises in tours for women travellers, but is happy to guide anyone. She works in Yazd and the surrounding areas.

Siamak Kolahdouz

GUIDE

(☎0913 154 0887; seyamkk@yahoo.com; half-day city tour US\$40, full-day Zoroastrian Temple tour US\$100) Siamak specialises in Zoroastrian tours within and around the city and can take travellers to sites that many other guides aren't familiar with. He can also sometimes take travellers to festivals and special events organised by the local Zoroastrian community.

THE QANAT

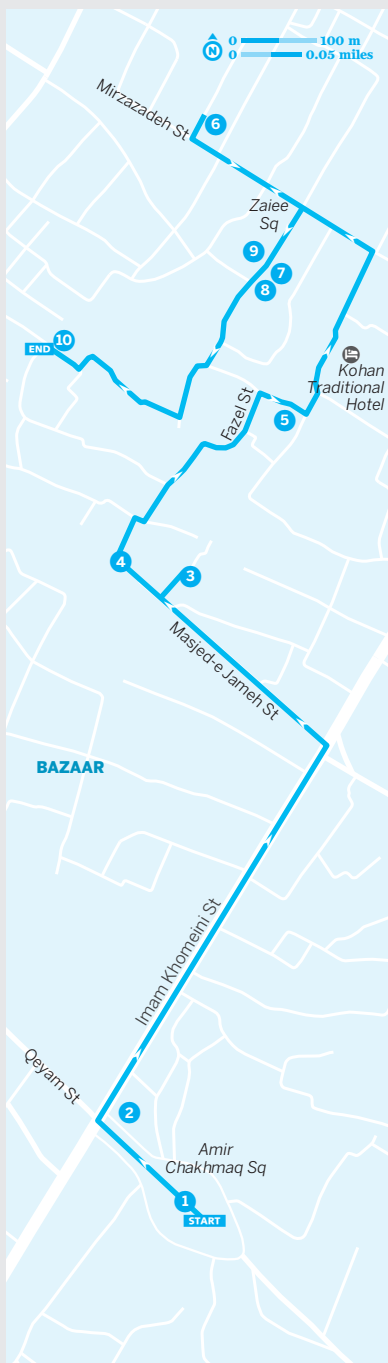
For at least 2000 years Iranians have been digging *qanats* (underground water channels) to irrigate crops and supply drinking water. To build a *qanat* it's necessary to first identify an underground water source. This source could be more than 100m deep, but as the whole system is reliant on gravity, it must be higher than the final destination. The next step is to dig a tunnel just wide and tall enough to crawl along, so that the water can flow across an extremely shallow gradient to its destination. The mounds of soil you'll see in long lines across the desert are the top of wells, dug to dispose of excavated soil and allow ventilation. Because of the hazards and expense of constructing a *qanat*, complex laws govern every aspect of their use and maintenance. Iran is thought to have more than 50,000 *qanats*. While modern irrigation projects now take priority, *qanats* and other traditional methods of supplying water are still very important. And as hundreds of towns and villages – including Bam, Kashan and Mahan – still rely on *qanats* for water, the highly skilled and well-paid *qanat* builders of Yazd won't be picking up redundancy cheques for many years yet.

For the low-down on *qanats*, head for the **Yazd Water Museum** (☎626 8340; Amir Chahmaq Sq; admission IRI0,000; ☉8am-7pm), located in a restored mansion that happens to have a *qanat* or two underneath. The displays are clear and mostly in English.

START AMIR CHAKHMAQ COMPLEX
FINISH MASJED-E JAMEH
DISTANCE ABOUT 4KM
DURATION TWO TO FOUR HOURS, DEPENDING ON HOW OFTEN YOU GET LOST!

Walking Tour The Old City

Start at the **1 Amir Chakhmaq Complex** and then pop into **2 Haj Khalifeh Ali Rahbar** on the northeast corner of Amir Chakhmaq Sq to admire its displays of traditional Yazdi sweets. Next, head up Imam Khomeini St and turn left up Masjed-e Jameh St. Before you reach the imposing mosque that gives this street its name, turn down a lane to the right to see the stunning portal of the turquoise-domed **3 Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin**. Continue into the **4 Masjed-e Jameh** and exit through the northeastern door (near the *qanat*). Turn right, then left, and keep straight for about 75m until you reach a junction with several arches and open ceilings. Turn left here and you'll reach an open space with a playground. Stay on the right (eastern) side and keep heading northeast. After about 250m on Fazel St a small lane leads off to the right, where an **5 ab anbar (water reservoir)** surrounded by four *badgirs* (windtowers) stands next to a park. Continue left (northeast), pass the Kohan Traditional Hotel and continue another 100m or so until you come to Mirzazadeh St. Heading left (northwest), walk past Ziaee Sq and keep straight for about 150m. Turn right down a small alley to the **6 Khan-e Lari**, a stunning traditional house. Head back to Ziaee Sq and turn right. Ahead is the dome of **7 Alexander's Prison** and just beyond is the **8 Tomb of the 12 Imams**. At this point you may wish to stop for a tea break – the **9 Fahadan Great Hotel** opposite has a lovely courtyard teahouse. After your tea, go back to the tomb, turn left and follow a sweeping bend until it eventually reaches a domed passage on the left (southwest). Continue along the passage for about 70m until you come to a square with the three-storey white facade of a **10 Hosseinieh** on the left. Carefully climb the stairs at the back of the facade to enjoy a great view. Continue southwest and you'll soon see the minarets of the Masjed-e Jameh, where the tour ends.



Sleeping

More than 10 *khan-e sonnati* (traditional houses) have now been transformed into hotels in Yazd. The result is 24-hour cultural immersion; you can see the sights of this historic city by day, and then sit on *takhts*, sip tea and eat local food as Iranians have for centuries. Alternatively, there are three excellent midrange choices that aren't housed in traditional buildings but offer characterful and comfortable accommodation. Not surprisingly, the old city is the most atmospheric area to stay in.

Almost all hotels offer day trips out of the city, and prices are in proportion to room rates – the Silk Road Hotel offers the cheapest in town and is consistently reliable.

In the off season, most midrange and top-end hotels offer a 30% discount.

Silk Road Hotel TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(Jada-e Abrisham; ☎625 2730, 0913 151 6361; www.silkroadhotelgroup.com; 5 Tal-e Khakestary Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh St; dm/s/d/tr US\$11/36/54/62; 📍📞📺📺) Two minutes' walk from the Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque), the Silk Road's mix of traditional courtyard setting, delicious food, laid-back vibe and fair prices attracts backpackers, flashpackers and even the odd ambassador. The rooms aren't the major draw here – though attractive, all have hard beds and noisy central heating, only a few have air-con and the 12-bed underground dorm has a smelly shared bathroom. But major compensation comes in the form of a delicious and wonderfully social breakfast, and a restaurant serving excellent Indian and Persian food. If you stay three nights, you'll be offered one free night's ac-

commodation at the hotel's guesthouse in Karanaq (see p185).

Safaiyeh Hotel HOTEL \$\$

(☎824 2812-5; www.safaiyeh.pih.ir, in Farsi, or www.parsiangrouphotels.com; Timsar Fallahey Ave; s/d/tr/ste US\$65/95/120/360; 📍📞📺📺) Located in the upmarket tree-lined area around the Azadegan Gardens, this huge government-run place has 195 rooms in two buildings: the older garden hotel and the much-more-desirable new front wing. Service, comfort and amenity levels are high and the modern Persian decor is truly stylish. Prices are excellent considering what's on offer.

Kohan Traditional Hotel TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(Kohan Kashaneh; ☎621 2485; www.kohanhotel.ir; dm/s/d/tr US\$7.50/24/34/43; 📍📞📺) Owner Taslim and his family have renovated their historic family home and endowed it with a relaxed, welcoming ambience. The 18 unadorned but comfortable rooms are set around a lush garden courtyard, while the 17-bed dorm (only one shower and one toilet) is upstairs above the entrance hall. A restaurant was poised to open when we researched this book. To find it, head north-east on Imam Khomeini St, past Masjed-e Jameh St, and follow the stencil signs along a lane on your left. Internet is free but wi-fi costs US\$0.90 per hour.

Malek-o Tojrar TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(☎622 4060; www.mehrhotel.ir; Panjeh-ali Bazar, Qeyam St; s/d/tr/ste US\$65/95/120/360; 📍📞📺) Down a narrow, lamp-lit passage from the Panjeh-ali Bazar is Yazd's original traditional hotel, where you'll soon be lying around drinking tea, eating local dishes and feeling

WARNING

Yazd and the surrounding desert areas are backpacker hubs, and there is a small number of dodgy tourism operators focussing on this segment of the tourism market. On our last trip we encountered a number of problems, including desperate and somewhat nasty competition between some tour guides (both accredited and unaccredited) and the increasingly erratic public behaviour of a guide once recommended in this book but subsequently deleted after a number of complaints by travellers. Be careful about what guide you use.

Also of concern is an outfit offering cheap but unlicensed (and therefore illegal) homestay accommodation in the area around Khor in the Dasht-e Kavir. These guys use other young travellers (some foreign) to drum up business by sending them into hostels in Tehran, Shiraz and Yazd, where they entice prospective guests with promises of dirt-cheap accommodation, alcohol and even drugs.

Needless to say, if you're in an illegal homestay where there is alcohol and/or drugs and the place is raided by police, you will be in serious trouble. Don't risk it.

transported to a different time. This Qajar-era home was converted, not completely renovated, which means everything is original. Rooms vary in size and level of amenities, some bathrooms are tiny, and noise from the central courtyard restaurant can be a problem. Still, the atmosphere makes it worth considering. Coming from Qeyam St, look for the sign and small doorway on the left.

Hotel Dad

HOTEL \$\$

(☎622 9400-7; www.hoteldadint.com; 214 10th Favardin Ave; s/d/tr US\$68/107/141; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Dad is not named for anyone's father, though as the brainchild of an 84-year-old patriarch it could be called 'great granddad'. The 54 spacious but slightly dark rooms are set around a central courtyard and offer comfortable beds, satellite TV and good bathrooms. Facilities are excellent – there's an in-house travel agency (p184) and a leisure centre with pool, spa, sauna and table tennis.

Orient Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎625 2730, 0913 151 6361; www.silkroadhotelgroup.com; 6th Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh St; dm/s/d/tr US\$11/36/54/62; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Owned and operated by the crew from the Silk Road Hotel, the Orient is set around two high-sided courtyards and offers a range of rooms (some with air-cond) with hard beds and an attractive six-bed dorm with shared bathroom (squat toilet only). The rooftop **Marco Polo Restaurant** (buffet dinner US\$11) has a great view over the Masjed-e Jameh but is only open when tour groups are staying at the hotel. The group's third hotel, the **Oasis** (☎625 2730, 0913 151 6361; www.silkroadhotelgroup.com; Seyyed Roknoddin Alley; r per person US\$15), is in a less-attractive building behind the Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin and offers cheap rooms with bathroom (Western sit-down toilet).

Fahadan Great Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(☎630 0600; www.mehrhotel.ir; Fahadan St opposite Alexander's Prison; s/d US\$65/94, ste US\$125-320; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Arranged around two courtyards, this well-run hotel is located at the heart of the Old City and offers a range of room types. All are clean and comfortable, and one even has its own *badgirs*. There's a popular teahouse in the main courtyard and a rooftop with spectacular views. The same owners run the Malek-o Tojjar and the nearby **Mehr Traditional Hotel** (☎622 7400;

www.mehrhotel.ir; Labe Khandaq Alley, off Qeyam St; s/d US\$65/94; 📍🚗🚶🚰).

Laleh Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(☎622 5048-9; www.yazdlelehhotel.com, in Farsi; opposite Ab Anbar Golshan, off Basij Blvd; s/d/ste US\$65/95/176; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Laleh is undoubtedly one of the most stunning of the restored homes, with 40 rooms set around three attractive courtyards. It also has helpful staff and an attractive restaurant and teahouse (p183). On the down side, the rooms are looking worn and the location isn't great.

Moshir-al-Mamalak

HOTEL \$\$

(Moshir Gardens; ☎523 9760-5; www.hotelgardenmoshir.com, in Farsi; Enqelab Ave; s/d/tr US\$75/110/145, ste US\$195-250; 📍🚗🚶🚰) The welcome at this faux-traditional place is warm, if a little unorthodox (you'll see what we mean when you get here). It's a great choice in summer, as rooms are set around an expansive, attractive garden with fountains and pools galore. Rooms are comfortable and well equipped, but the location (4km northwest of Amir Chahmaq Sq) is inconvenient and when we ate here, the food in the restaurant was inedible.

Hotel Sonnati

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$\$

(☎622 8500-9; www.yazdhotel.com; Amir Chahmaq Sq; s/d/tr US\$43/67/84; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Rooms at this 200-year-old mansion opposite the Amir Chahmaq Complex are set around a large courtyard and retain their odd shapes, stained glass and low doorways. They're dark, and in need of a sprucing up. Wi-fi costs US\$1.80 per hour.

Rose Traditional Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎622 5790-92; Farhang Alley, off Imam Khomeini St; s/d/tr US\$27/40/53; 📍🚗🚶🚰) Deep in the Old City, this unpretentious little place is in desperate need of refurbishment but is listed here due to its relatively low prices. Rooms are dark but have decent bathrooms with Western toilets. Don't be confused by the exterior signage, which says Kimia Hotel. No English is spoken.

Soroosh Guesthouse

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎626 5159; off Basij Ave; s/tw/tr US\$18/27/31; 📍) Popular with Iranian workers, this place is set in an attractive building and offers cheap rooms with hard beds and smelly bathrooms (squat toilet). It's only worth considering if you're on a tight budget and don't want to stay in a dorm.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the traditional hotels use their courtyards as restaurants. We're listing some of the better options here, but rest assured that if you're staying in a traditional hotel, food won't be too far away. Yazd is famous for its sweets (see the boxed text, below), so be sure to sample some. Also notable is the camel meat; the best place to try this is at the *kababi* opposite the mosque on Kashani St, which serves succulent camel kababs (US\$10). Tasty kababs made with other meats are grilled at the *kababi* opposite the *ateshkadeh* on Kashani St (US\$3.50 to US\$9).

Caesar ITALIAN \$\$
(☎826 5600; 140 Saderat Bank St, off Abuzar Sq; pizza US\$5.50-14.50, mains US\$4-7; ☎10am-midnight) Frighteningly fashionable Caesar is where cashed-up locals head for special occasions. If you can cope with saccharine versions of 'Yesterday' and other ballads being crooned by the pianist, the decent attempts at classic Italian dishes should make you happy. Choose from pizzas, pastas, soup, steak and good salads, and be sure to order a delicious fresh lemonade. The coffee here is the best in town. It's southeast of the *ateshkadeh*, off Abuzar Sq.

Silk Road Hotel Restaurant INDIAN \$
(www.silkroadhotelgroup.com; 5 Tal-e Khakestary Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh St; meals US\$3-8; ☎7am-10.30pm) While the Iranian food here is very good, the delicious (if not superhot) subcontinental curries are the most popular dishes

among travellers, particularly those who have suffered through weeks of kabab eating. There's a relaxed, social atmosphere and a wide choice of teas and fresh juices.

Baharestan Restaurant TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$
(Beheshti Sq; meals US\$3-5; ☎11.30am-5pm) Forget atmosphere and style - the Baharestan is about tasty staples at tasty prices; the *khoresht* is best.

Malek-o Tojjar TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$
(☎622 4060; www.mehrhotel.ir; Panjeh-ali Bazar, off Qeyam St; meals US\$10; ☎8am-10pm) The evocative surrounds and classic Iranian dishes are complemented with several regional variations, including *kufteh Yazdi* (Yazdi meatballs).

Pizza Gole Sorkh PIZZERIA \$
(Pak Nejad Blvd; medium pizzas US\$8-13, pasta US\$12; ☎6-11pm) After working for almost 30 years as a pizza chef in Australia, the owner returned home to open a modern, busy restaurant serving good (but very garlicky) pizzas and range of pastas. His serve of Aussie slang is pretty good, too.

Laleh Teahouse Restaurant TEAHOUSE \$
(www.yazdlalehhotel.com; opposite Abanbar Golshan, off Basij Ave) The Persian music on the sound system blends beautifully with the tinkling sound of the courtyard fountain at this tranquil teahouse restaurant. Sit in the courtyard or in the attractive main hall to enjoy a qalyan with tea and sweets (US\$9).

YAZDI SWEETS

Yazd is famous for its sweets, which can be purchased at hundreds of shops throughout the city. The best and most famous of these is **Haj Khalifeh Ali Rahbar** (www.hajkhalifehrahbar.com, cnr Amir Chakhmaq Sq & Imam Khomeini St), which specialises in the following:

- Almond louz* (sweet made with almond, pussy willow and sugar)
- Baghlava* (sweet made with ground almond, flour, sugar, pistachio and cardamom)
- Coconut louz* (sweet made with coconut powder, sugar and rose water)
- Cooki koloocheh* (biscuit made from rice flour, sugar, flour, egg and rose water)
- Ghottab* (sweet made with almond kernels, sugar, flour and cardamom)
- Hajji badam* (sweet made with almond, egg, sugar, cardamom, walnut and pea flour)
- Pashmak* (local version of fairy floss or cotton candy)

A medium-sized box of assorted sweets costs around US\$5; have a look at the samples on display, write down what you want on the form provided, take it to the counter where your choice will be boxed and weighed, take the receipt and pay at the cashier and then return to the counter to collect your sweets. And be warned: these sweets are really sugary!



Shopping

The old city bazaars are full of local handicrafts including *ejrami* (hand-woven cotton cloth), *termeh* (a textile made from silk, cotton and wool), *daraie* (a soft silk fabric) and *zilu* (light carpet).



Information

Emergency

Tourist Police Office (☎218 3867; Kashani St; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu) Close to Abuzar Sq.

Internet Access

Issatis.net (☎623 1425; www.issatis.net; Kashani St; ☎9am-1.30pm & 5-9.30pm) Opposite the *ateshkadeh*.

Medical Services

Dr Mogibiyan Hospital (☎624 0061; Kashani St) For urgent treatment.

Money

Kazemi & Partners Money Exchange (☎620 5822; Sarrafan Bazar; ☎9am-1pm & 4-6pm Sat-Thu) Not the best rates in town, but a very convenient location near the Masjed-e Jameh.

Yazd Exchange (☎624 7220; www.yazdexchange.com; Kashani St; ☎9.30am-3pm & 5-8pm Sat-Wed, 9.30am-4pm Thu) Opposite the Ateshkadeh, these guys offer an efficient service with good rates.

Tourist Information

For virtual tours of the city's main monuments, go to the website of the **Yazd Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization** (www.yazdcto.ir).

There are two privately operated tourism information offices in the Old City. Don't believe claims that one is more official than the other. Both have English-speaking staff.

Tourist Information Office (☎622 3005; www.iranpersiatour.com; Amir Chakhmaq Sq; ☎9.30am-noon & 3.30-5.30pm) Located in the Amir Chakhmaq Complex, it supplies maps and advice, makes hotel bookings, books desert tours and offers free wi-fi.

Yazd Tourist Information Office (☎621 6542; www.yazdtourist.com; Ziaee Sq; ☎9am-6pm, to 8pm summer) Stocks a few maps and brochures, but is mainly about selling tours.

Travel Agencies

Ama Safar Tour & Travel Agency (☎622 9440; www.amasafar.com; 189 10th Farvardin Ave; ☎7.30am-9pm Sat-Thu) Adjoining Hotel Dad, this professional outfit has helpful English-speaking staff. It can organise visas and will book air and train tickets.

Silk Road Travel (☎626 7783; www.silkroadhotelgroup.com; 6th Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh St) Located in the Orient Hotel; can book air, train and bus tickets and arrange ferry tickets through a partner agency in Bandar Abbas.

Visa Extensions

Yazd isn't the best place to extend a visa. The **Tourist Police Office** (☎218 3867; Kashani St, close to Abuzar Sq; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu) professes to process same-day applications, but anecdotal evidence would suggest that three days is the norm. At the time of research, the fee needed to be paid into Bank Melli Central Branch but there was talk of this changing – check with the office first. See the boxed text, p27, for further details.

BUSES FROM YAZD

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bam	US\$9 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	7-9hr	1 daily at 4.30pm
Bandar Abbas	US\$8.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	11hr	3 daily
Esfahan	US\$6.70-7/4.50-5	5hr	at least 4 daily
Kashan	US\$12.40/7.50	4½hr	frequent (Tehran service)
Kerman	US\$5.40 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	4-5hr	frequent
Mashhad	US\$13.30 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	13-15hr	at least 2 daily in late afternoon & evening
Shiraz	US\$11.10/6.70	6-7hr	9 daily
Tabriz	US\$16 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	16-19hr	1 daily at 7pm
Tehran	US\$14.20/8.90	8-9hr	frequent
Zahedan	US\$10.70 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	13-15hr	2 daily in afternoon

TRAINS FROM YAZD

DESTINATION	FARE (GHAZAL/NORMAL)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bandar Abbas	US\$21/15	9hr	frequent (Tehran service)
Kerman	US\$2.50 (normal)	5-6hr	6am daily
Mashhad	US\$25.50 (normal)	18½hr	5pm every 2nd day
Tehran via Kashan & Qom	US\$6.60-12.70	7½hr	frequent

i Getting There & Away

The airport is on the western fringe of the city. The main bus terminal is about 3 km southwest of the centre. The train station is next to the main bus terminal. Local buses (US\$0.50) travel between the terminal and the bus stand near the corner of Imamzadeh-ye Ja'far and Shahid Raja'i Sts near the Old City. A taxi *dar baste* will cost US\$2.70.

Air

Yazd airport is not the busiest in Iran. Iran Air flies to Tehran (US\$48, 70 minutes, twice daily) and Aseman flies to Bandar Abbas (US\$56, 80 minutes, twice weekly).

Bus

All buses leave from the **main bus terminal** (Rah Ahan Blvd).

For Garmeh and Khooor (Khur), see p175.

Train

Oddly, train tickets are much easier to buy from travel agencies (p184) than at the station.

i Getting Around

Taxis *dar baste* start at about US\$2.70 for short trips, and cost between US\$3.10 and US\$4 from the airport to the city centre and US\$2.70 and US\$3.60 from the terminals to the city centre (taxis are more expensive at night).

Around Yazd

There are two popular day trips from Yazd: the Kharanaq, Chak Chak and Meybod loop to the northeast of the city and the Zein-odin, Saryazd and Fahraj loop to the south-east. Both are best done in a tour or with a private driver/guide.

The first is a long day (about 7am to 6pm) but the second could be done in half a day.

KHARANAQ

خرانق

The virtually deserted and crumbling mud-brick village of Kharanaq (Kharanagh) is in a valley about 70km north of Yazd and is be-

lieved to be more than 1000 years old. The Qajar-era **mosque**, the 17th-century **shaking minaret** and the **caravanserai** on the edge of town have all been restored. You'll need a key to get into these, however, and you'll need a guide (or the folks at Silk Road Kharanaq) to arrange that.

Many of the buildings are falling down, so watch your step. Walk into the valley below to see an ancient aqueduct, built to irrigate the surrounding fields. Photographers will love it mid-afternoon.

Those wanting to extend their stay overnight can book into **Silk Road Kharanaq** (per person US\$24), which is run by the Silk Road crew in Yazd (p181). The modest adobe building has been extensively renovated but remains as simple – and appropriate – as you'd expect in a virtual ghost town. Rates include breakfast, lunch and dinner.

CHAK CHAK

چک چک

This isolated **Ateshkadeh** (admission US\$0.90; ☉8am-5pm), about 72km northwest of Yazd and deep in the desert, is Iran's most important Zoroastrian pilgrimage site. Legend has it that after the Arab invasion in AD 637, the Sassanian princess Nikbanuh fled to this site. Short of water, she threw her staff at the cliff and water began dripping out – *chak, chak* means 'drip, drip'. The steep, cliffside location is impressive even if most of the buildings are not. The exception is the **Pir-e-Sabz fire temple**, home to the drip, which has a brass door embossed with the likeness of Zoroaster. The dramatic views make it worth the steep climb.

Chak Chak attracts thousands of pilgrims for an annual festival held between 14 and 18 June.

MEYBOD

میبود

About 52km north of Yazd, Meybod is a sprawling mud-brick town that is at least 1800 years old. Of most interest is the crumbling **Narin castle** (admission US\$0.20; ☉9am-5pm, to 7pm summer) in the centre of

town. This dates from Sassanid times and may well be the oldest existing mud-brick structure in Iran. Climb to the top for fantastic views across Meybod's rooftops and into the desert.

There are also two sites of minor interest near each other in the west of town: a 300-year-old **post house** (admission US\$0.90; ☺9-5pm Sat-Thu winter, till 7pm summer) and a huge **caravanserai** where a few locals operate handicraft shops. In front of the caravanserai is a handsome *ab anbar* and opposite is a huge, conical-roofed Safavid-era **ice house** (*yakh dan*).

ZEIN-O-DIN

زين الدين

Blink and you could miss Zein-o-din, where the sole structure and *raison d'être* is a 400-year-old caravanserai built on the orders of Shah Abbas I. Located two days' camel ride south of Yazd (that's 60km) on the main road to Kerman, the caravanserai was part of a network of 999 such hostels built to promote trade. Of those, it's one of only two circular caravanserais (the other, near Esfahan, is largely destroyed).

Thankfully, this one was built to last and today **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** (☎0912 371 4296; fax 0351-824 3338; per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$70, per person B&B US\$55; 📍) gives a romantic taste of a caravan traders' life on the Silk Road. A three-year renovation, during which 13,000 pumice stones were used to scour centuries of grime from the walls, saw the simple accommodation restored to almost its original state: the raised rooms offer mattresses on top of carpets with just a curtain separating their occupants from the corridor. Where it differs is in the stylish and clean communal bathrooms, the service and the peaceful surrounds (no noisy caravans these days, just the faint sound of traffic on the highway). Advance booking is *essential*; prices are US\$10 cheaper in winter.

The caravanserai's location away from any towns means that at night, the starry sky is incredibly clear. Enthusiastic amateur astronomer Reza Tamehri conducts two-hour **astronomy sessions** (per person depending on numbers US\$25-35) on the caravanserai's roof. The price includes transportation from Yazd and guided use of equipment; if you would also like dinner there's an extra charge of US\$16 per person. Bookings are essential and should be made through **Mohsen Hajisaieid** (☎0913 351 4460; www.iranpersiatour.com) in Yazd. The skies are clearest in winter

but it can be absolutely freezing – take warm clothing.

SARYAZD

سريزد

Saryazd means 'head of Yazd' and its two recently restored caravanserais were the last stop before Yazd on the famous trade route from the east. About 6km east of the highway, the now-sleepy village is best known for its well-preserved **Sassanid Fortress** (admission US\$1.80), which was once used to protect grains, valuables and people from attackers. It has two main concentric walls and high towers, and is surrounded by a moat (now empty). Vahid the caretaker is here off and on – if you can't find him on-site, call him on ☎0913 968 6808 or call his father Yadullah ☎0913 858 738, who also has a key.

FAHRAJ

POP 1000 / ELEV 1274M

A gem in the Dasht-e Lut, this agricultural village 35km southeast of Yazd offers far more than immediately meets the eye. In the middle of its beautifully restored historic centre is what may well be the oldest purpose-built mosque in Iran, the **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque; admission free; ☺24hr). The mosque's internal courtyard, vaulted sanctuary and arcades date from the Sassanid period, although its cylindrical clay minaret is more recent – built as a lighthouse for caravans around 400 years ago. In the surrounding area is a ruined castle, a *hammam* and an *ab anbar* with four *badgirs*.

Owned and operated by Masoud Jaladat of Fravahar Eco-Touring Group (see p179), the recently opened **Farvardinn Desert Inn** (☎0351-838 7712, 0913 352 4723; www.far.desertinn.com; mat in courtyard/dm/B&B in private room US\$2/5/18; 📍🚰🚿🛏) is a perfect chill-out destination for those who need a respite from Iran's noisy cities. Accommodation options include a mat in the courtyard, a 10-bed dorm and private rooms (some with bathroom, some without). Bathrooms have both Western and squat toilets. You can eat home-cooked meals (breakfast US\$2 to US\$5, lunch US\$7, dinner US\$5) or use the kitchen to rustle up your own grub. Great stuff.

Local buses to Fahraj leave Yazd on the hour between 6am and 8pm from Abuzar Sq (US\$0.40, 50 minutes). A taxi *dar baste* costs US\$7.

Shiraz

☎0711 / POP 1,227,331 / ELEV 1531M

Celebrated as the heartland of Persian culture for more than 2000 years, Shiraz has become synonymous with education, nightingales, poetry and wine. It was one of the most important cities in the medieval Islamic world and was the Iranian capital during the Zand dynasty (AD 1747–79), when many of its most beautiful buildings were built or restored.

In his 1893 book *A Year Amongst the Persians*, Edward Browne described Shirazis as '...amongst all the Persians, the most subtle, the most ingenious, the most vivacious'. And even in Iran, where regional one-upmanship is common, everyone seems to like Shirazis.

A city of poets, Shiraz is home to the graves of Hafez and Sa'di, both major pilgrimage sites for Iranians. It's also home to splendid gardens, exquisite mosques and whispered echoes of ancient sophistication that reward those who linger longer than it takes to visit nearby Persepolis (p198), the area's major tourism drawcard.

There are the usual Iranian traffic issues, but the city's agreeable climate, set as it is in a fertile valley once famed for its vineyards, makes it a pleasant place to visit (except at the humid height of summer or the freezing depths of winter).

History

Shiraz is mentioned in Elamite inscriptions from around 2000 BC and was an important regional centre under the Sassanians. However, it did not become the provincial capital until about AD 693, following the Arab conquest of Estakhr, the last Sassanian capital (8km northeast of Persepolis, but now completely destroyed). By 1044 Shiraz was said to rival Baghdad in importance and it grew further under the Atabaks of Fars in the 12th century, when it became an important artistic centre.

The city was spared destruction by the rampaging Mongols and Tamerlane because the city's rulers wisely decided that paying tribute was preferable to mass slaughter. Having avoided calamity, Shiraz enjoyed the Mongol and Timurid periods, which became eras of development. The encouragement of enlightened rulers and the presence of Hafez, Sa'di and many other brilliant artists and scholars helped make it one of the greatest cities in the Islamic world throughout the 13th and 14th centuries.

شیراز

Shiraz remained a provincial capital during the Safavid period, when European traders settled here to export its famous wine. But by the mid-17th century it had entered a long period of decline. This was worsened by several earthquakes, the Afghan raids of the early 18th century, and an uprising led by Shiraz's governor in 1744, which was put down in typically ruthless fashion after a siege by Nader Shah.

At the time of Nader Shah's murder in 1747, Shiraz was squalid and its population had fallen to 50,000, a quarter of the number 200 years earlier. But the city soon returned to prosperity. The enlightened Karim Khan, the first ruler of the short-lived Zand dynasty, made Shiraz the national capital in 1750. Despite being master of virtually all of Persia, Karim Khan refused to take any higher title than *vakil* (regent) – hence the name of many of the city's monuments. He was determined to build Shiraz into a worthy capital, the equal of Esfahan under Shah Abbas I.

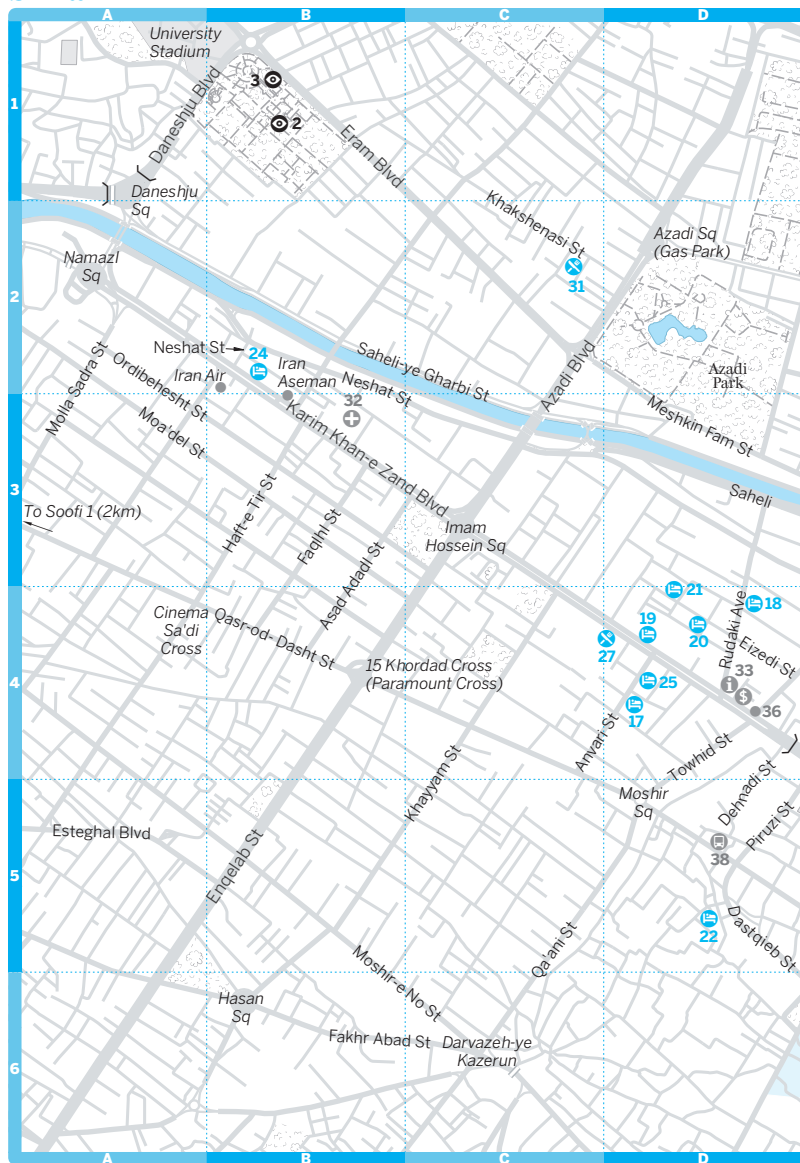
Karim Khan founded a royal district in the area of the Arg-e Karim Khan and commissioned many fine buildings, including what was the pre-eminent bazaar in Persia. But after his death, things fell apart. The Qajars, long-time enemies, attacked and destroyed the city's fortifications and by 1789 had moved the national capital – and the remains of Karim Khan – to Tehran.

Shiraz remained prosperous due to its position on the trade route to Bushehr, but this role was greatly diminished with the opening of the trans-Iranian railway in the 1930s. Much of the architectural inheritance of Shiraz, and especially the royal district of the Zands, was either neglected or destroyed as a result of irresponsible town planning under the Pahlavi dynasty. Lacking any great industrial, religious or strategic importance, the city is now largely an administrative centre, though one famous for its universities.

🗨 Sights

The old city is where you'll spend most of your time. The city centre is Shohada Sq (still widely known as Shahrdari Sq), which is within walking distance of most hotels, the bazaar and the major mosques and shrines. The square intersects the city's major thoroughfare, Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd (usually referred to as Zand Blvd). To the north is the Khoshk River, and north of that are the tombs of Hafez and Sa'di.

Shiraz



AROUND SHOHADEH SQUARE

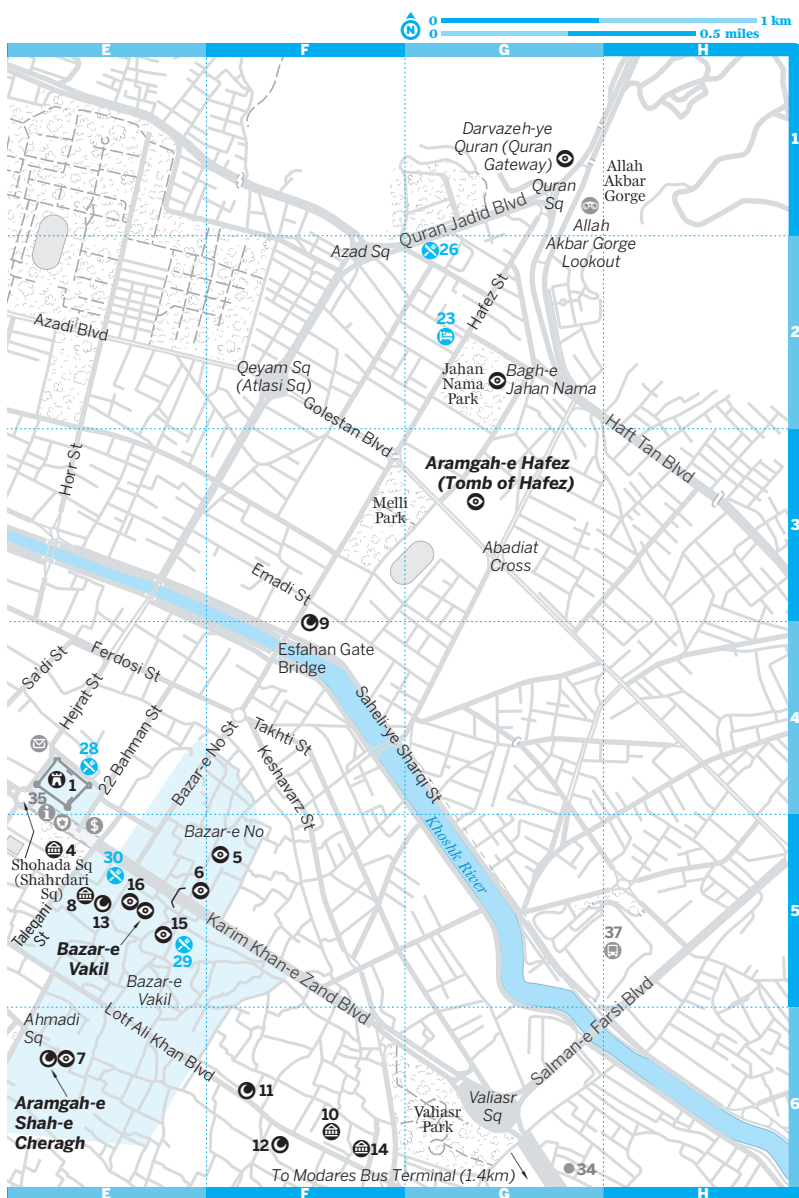
The Bazaars

بازار وکیل

BAZAAR

The city's ancient trading district is home to several bazaars dating from different periods. The finest and most famous of these

is the **Bazar-e Vakil** (Vakil Bazaar; ☉8am-dusk Sat-Thu), a cruciform structure commissioned by Karim Khan as part of his plan to make Shiraz into a great trading centre. The wide vaulted brick avenues are masterpieces of Zand architecture, with the design



ensuring the interior remains cool in summer and warm in winter. Today the bazaar is home to almost 200 stores selling carpets, handicrafts, spices and clothes and is best explored by wandering without concern for time or direction, soaking up the atmo-

sphere in the maze of lanes leading off the main thoroughfares.

Chances are you'll stumble across the **Seray-e Moshir** just off the main drag, Rouhollah Bazaar. This tastefully restored two-storey caravanserai is a pleasant place

Shiraz

📍 Top Sights

Aramgah-e Hafez (Tomb of Hafez).....	G3
Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh.....	E6
Bazar-e Vakil.....	E5

📍 Sights

1 Arg-e Karim Khan.....	E4
2 Bagh-e Eram.....	B1
3 Bagh-e Eram Ticket Booth.....	B1
4 Bagh-e Nazar & Pars Museum.....	E5
5 Bazar-e Nou.....	F5
6 Bazar-e Vakil (North).....	E5
7 Bogh'le-ye Sayyed Mir Mohammed.....	E6
8 Hammam-e Vakil.....	E5
9 Imamzadeh-ye Ali Ebn-e Hamze.....	F4
10 Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk.....	F6
11 Madrasah-ye Khan.....	F6
12 Masjed-e Nasir-al-Molk.....	F6
13 Masjed-e Vakil (Vakil Mosque).....	E5
14 Naranjestan.....	F6
15 Seray-e Moshir.....	E5
16 Shamshirgarha Bazaar.....	E5

🛏 Sleeping

17 Anvari Hotel.....	D4
18 Aryo Barzan Hotel.....	D4
19 Eram Hotel.....	D4
20 Jaam-e-Jam Apartment Hotel.....	D4

21 Kakh Apartment Hotel.....	D4
22 Niayesh Boutique Hotel.....	D5
23 Park Saadi Hotel.....	G2
24 Pars International Hotel.....	B2
25 Sasan Hotel.....	D4
Vila Hotel.....	(see 27)

🍴 Eating

26 Haft Khan.....	G2
27 Haji Baba Restaurant.....	D4
28 Mahdi Faludeh.....	E4
Niayesh Restaurant & Coffee Shop.....	(see 22)
29 Seray-e Mehr Teahouse & Restaurant.....	E5
30 Sharzeh Traditional Restaurant.....	E5
31 Shater Abbas 1.....	C2

📍 Information

32 Dr Faghi Hospital.....	B3
33 Pars Tourist Agency.....	D4
34 Police Department of Aliens Affairs (Visa Extensions).....	G6
35 Tourist Information Office.....	E4

🚗 Transport

36 Iran Peyma Office.....	D4
37 Karandish Bus Terminal.....	H5
38 Local Bus Terminal.....	D5

to gather your breath and do a bit of souvenir shopping. The nearby Seray-e Mehr Teahouse (p195) is a great choice for lunch or a tea. Also worth checking out is the **Shamshirgarha Bazaar**, an arcade where you'll find tribal handicrafts. It leads to the forecourt of the Masjed-e Vakil (Vakil Mosque).

On the other side of Zand Blvd are the **Bazar-e Vakil (North)** and the **Bazar-e Nou** (New Bazaar), both built during the Qajar era.

Arg-e Karim Khan

ارگ کریمخان FORTRESS
(Citadel of Karim Khan; Shohada Sq; admission US\$0.50; ☎8am-7:30pm) Dominating the city centre, this burly fortress was built in the early Zand period and formed part of the royal court that Karim Khan had hoped would develop to rival Esfahan. The high walls feature ornamental brickwork and are punctuated by four attractive 14m-high circular towers. The southeastern tower has

a noticeable lean, having subsided onto the underground cistern that served as the Arg's bathhouse.

Inside the Arg is a large, open courtyard filled with citrus trees and a pool. A dusty museum of the Zand period, with wax figures in traditional dress, occupies rooms off the northwest *ivan*.

Bagh-e Nazar & Pars Museum

باغ نظر و موزه پارس MUSEUM
(Eye-catching Garden; Zand Blvd; museum admission US\$0.50; ☎8am-noon & 2-5:30pm Tue-Sun) This formal garden and a delightfully decorated octagonal pavilion at its centre (now the Pars Museum) are other notable Zand-era additions. Karim Khan once received foreign dignitaries in the pavilion, which has a stunning interior; its *muqarnas* ceiling is a particular highlight. Exhibits include Karim Khan Zand's sword. Photography is not allowed.

Masjed-e Vakil

مسجد وکیل

MOSQUE

(Regent's Mosque; admission US\$1.40; ☉8am-8pm) Begun in Karim Khan's time, this mosque next to the Bazar-e Vakil has an impressive tiled portal, a recessed entrance decorated with tiles and *muqarnas*, two vast *iwans*, a magnificent inner courtyard surrounded by beautifully tiled alcoves and porches, and a pleasingly proportioned 75m-by-36m vaulted prayer hall supported by 48 carved columns. Inside the prayer hall are an impressive mihrab and 14-step marble minbar, carved from a monolith carried all the way from Azerbaijan. Much of the tiling, with its predominantly floral motifs and arabesques, was added in the early Qajar era. You'll find it near the exit from the Shamshirgarha Bazaar.

Hamмам-e Vakil

حمام وکیل

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Regent's Bath; off Talequani St; admission US\$0.50; ☉7.30am-5.30pm Sat-Thu) The vaulted and beautifully decorated central chamber of this Zand-era bathhouse now houses an interesting exhibition of Persian carpets. Once, Shirazis would have relaxed by its fountain after taking a bath in the handsome heat room, which has a vaulted ceiling, pillars and a small (empty) pool. Local artisans now work in a chamber between the two and offer their wares for sale.

AROUND AHMADI SQUARE

Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh

آرامگاه شاهچراغ

SHRINE

(Mausoleum of King of the Light; Ahmadi Sq; ☉variable, often 24hr) Sayyed Mir Ahmad, one of Imam Reza's 17 brothers, was hunted down and killed by the caliphate on this site in AD 835 and his remains are housed in this glittering shrine. A mausoleum was first erected over the grave during the 12th century but most of what you see dates from the late-Qajar period and the Islamic Republic.

The expansive courtyard is a great place to sit and take in the bulbous blue-tiled dome and dazzling gold-topped minarets while discreetly observing the pious at what is one of the holiest Shiite sites in Iran. In the shrine itself, countless minute mirror tiles reflect the passion within.

In theory, non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the shrine. Enforcement seems to be mixed, but if you are polite and in a small group you may be lucky. Women must enter through a dedicated entrance and wear

a chador; these can be hired from one of the old women hanging around the entrance – US\$0.50 is a fair fee. Cameras are forbidden.

A recently opened **museum** (admission US\$0.30; ☉variable) is housed in a new building off the northwestern corner of the courtyard (next to the shrine itself) and houses an interesting collection of shrine-related objects, including some highly prized old Qurans upstairs and an absolutely exquisite door decorated with silver, gold and lapis lazuli downstairs.

In the southeastern corner is the **Bogh'eye Sayyed Mir Mohammad** (Mausoleum of Sayyed Mir Mohammad; ☉variable, often 24hr), which houses the tombs of two brothers of Mir Ahmad. The shrine has the typical Shirazi bulbous dome, intricate mirror work and four slender wooden pillars, leading some to describe it as more beautiful than Shah-e Cheragh.

Madrasesh-ye Khan

مدرسه خان

MADRASEH

(Dastqeb St; ☉knock on the door) In 1615, Imam Gholi Khan, governor of Fars, founded this serene theological college for about 100 students. The original building has been extensively damaged by earthquakes and only the impressive portal at its entrance has survived; look for the unusual *muqarnas* inside the outer arch and some intricate mosaic tiling with much use of red. The college (still in use) has a fine stone-walled inner courtyard and garden.

The building can be reached via a lane off Lotf Ali Khan Blvd. The doors are usually closed but if you are lucky the caretaker will open it; a tip is appreciated. If you get in, ask to be shown to the roof for panoramic views over the bazaar.

Masjed-e Nasir-al-Molk

مسجد نصیرالملک

MOSQUE

(Nasir-al-Molk Mosque; off Lotf Ali Khan Blvd; admission US\$1.80; ☉8am-2pm & 3.30-7pm) Down the road from the Madrasesh-ye Khan is one of the most elegant and photographed mosques in southern Iran. Built at the end of the 19th century, its coloured tiling (an unusually deep shade of blue) is exquisite. There are some particularly fine *muqarnas* in the smallish outer portal and in the northern *ivan*, but the stained glass, carved pillars and polychrome faience of the winter prayer hall are the most eye-catching features. Photographers should come as early as possible in the morning for shots of the hall lit up

through the glass (you might have to tip the caretaker to open the curtains). A museum in the opposite prayer hall opens into the **Gav Cha** (Cow Well), in which cows walked downhill to raise the water. The structure has survived numerous earthquakes, due in part to its construction using flexible wood as struts within the walls – look for the wooden bricks in the *ivan* columns.

Don't rely on the mosque's official opening hours. Basically, it's open whenever the elderly caretakers are on-site. Mornings are best.

Naranjestan & Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk

باغ نارنجستان خانه زینت الملک HISTORIC BUILDING
A huge courtyard planted with rows of palm and orange trees, the **Bagh-e Naranjestan** (Citrus Garden; Lotf Ali Khan Blvd; admission US\$2.70; ☉8am-6.30pm) is the setting for the opulently decorated **Naranjestan-e Qavam** pavilion, built for the wealthy and powerful Mohammad Ali Khan Qavam al-Molk between 1879 and 1886 as the *buruni* (public reception area) of his family home. The Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk housed the family's *andaruni* (private quarters) and an underground passage (not open to the public) connected the two.

The pavilion's mirrored entrance hall opens onto rooms with painted walls and ceilings. The ceilings in the upstairs rooms are particularly interesting, with the beams painted with European-style motifs, including Alpine churches and busy German *fräuleins*. The downstairs museum houses an archaeological collection put together by Arthur Upham Pope, an American scholar who taught at the Asia Institute in Shiraz between 1969 and 1979.

Down a small street beside the garden is the **Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk** (Zinat-ol Molk Museum; admission US\$0.80; ☉8am-6pm), originally the Qavam ol-Molk family's gorgeous *andaruni*. Twenty rooms are embellished with paintings, stucco decoration and mirrors, and the mosaic floors were designed to resemble ornate Persian rugs. In the basement, the Fars Museum showcases wax figures of famous Shirazis. The museum is signposted from Lotf Ali Khan Blvd.

NORTH OF THE RIVER

Aramgah-e Hafez

آرامگاه حافظ MAUSOLEUM
(Tomb of Hafez; Golestan Blvd; admission US\$0.50; ☉8am-9.30pm) Iranians have a saying that every home must have two things: first the Quran, then a collection of the works

of Hafez (see p314). And in reality, many would reverse that order. Hafez the poet is an Iranian folk hero – loved, revered and as popular as many a modern pop star. Almost every Iranian can quote his work, bending it to whichever social or political persuasion they subscribe. And there is no better place to try to understand Hafez's eternal hold on Iran than here at his tomb.

Set in a charming garden with two pools, the whole scene is restful despite the ever-present traffic noise. The marble tombstone, engraved with a long verse from the poet, was placed here by Karim Khan in 1773. In 1935 an octagonal pavilion was put up over it, supported by eight stone columns beneath a tiled dome. Plan to spend a couple of hours sitting in a discreet corner of the grounds, at sunset if possible, to watch the way Iranians react to what is, for many, a pilgrimage site.

You might see people performing the *faal-e Hafez*, a popular ritual in which you seek insight into your future by opening a volume of Hafez – the future is apparent in his words. After sunset, with the tomb floodlit and sung poetry piped over the public-address system, it is difficult not to feel transported back to the magic of ancient Persia. There's a teahouse at the front of the garden where you can enjoy a tea, cheap bowl of *ash* (noodle soup) or *faludeh* (a frozen sorbet made with thin starch noodles and rosewater).

To get here from the centre of town you can walk (about 2km) or take a taxi *dar baste* (US\$2.70).

Aramgah-e Sa'di

آرامگاه سعدی MAUSOLEUM
(Tomb of Sa'di; Bustan Blvd; admission US\$0.50; ☉7.30am-8.30pm, to 9pm summer) While not as popular as Hafez's tomb, the Aramgah-e Sa'di and its generous surrounding gardens are appropriate for a man who wrote so extensively about gardens and roses. It's a tranquil place, with the tombstone housed in an open-sided stone colonnade built during the Pahlavi era. See p314 for more on Sa'di. Nearby is an overpriced underground teahouse set around a fish pond that is fed by a *qanat*.

It's easy to visit the tombs of both Hafez and Sa'di in a single afternoon. From Golestan Blvd, near the tomb of Hafez, take a shuttle taxi four squares southeast (US\$0.30) to Sa'di Sq, then walk about 1.3km uphill to the tomb.

Imamzadeh-ye Ali Ebn-e Hamze

امامزاده علی ابن حمزه
IMAMZADEH
(Hafez St, near Hamzeh Bridge; ☀️dawn-dusk)
This is the tomb of Emir Ali, a nephew of Shah Cheragh who also died here while en route to Khorasan to help Imam Reza. The existing shrine was built in the 19th century after earthquakes destroyed previous incarnations, and has separate areas for males and females. Highlights include the eye-catching bulbous Shirazi dome, dazzling Venetian mirror work, stained-glass windows and an intricate, ancient wooden door. The tombstones around the courtyard, for which families of the deceased paid a small fortune, are also interesting. Unlike some other shrines, the caretakers here are very welcoming of foreigners; women are supplied with a chador and photography is allowed.

Bagh-e Eram

باغ ارام
GARDENS
(Garden of Paradise; Eram Blvd; admission US\$3.60; ☀️8am-12.30pm & 3-5pm, to 7pm summer) Famous for its tall cypress trees, this Unesco-listed garden was laid out during the Qajar period but incorporates elements from an earlier Seljuk landscape. Social anthropologists will love it – the many hidden corners of the gardens are wildly popular with young Shirazis, who pay a fraction of the entrance fee that foreigners are charged. The garden is designed around a pretty pool beside a Qajar-era palace, the **Kakh-e Eram** (Eram Palace), which is not open to the public. The gardens are easy enough to reach by taking any shuttle taxi (US\$0.30) going along Zand, alighting at Namazi Sq and then walking north across the river.

👉 Tours

Most guides charge standard tour prices set by the local cultural heritage and tourism organisation. These are US\$25/40 for a half-/full-day city tour. Tours by car are more expensive. For prices of tours to Persepolis, Pasargadae, Firuz Abad, Kazerun and Bishapur, see those sections. Note that tours can also be arranged through almost every hotel in town.

Arash Sadeghzadeh

GUIDE
(☎️0917 317 1652; www.triptopersia.com) Young, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and highly organised guide, driver and fixer.

Azadeh Khademi

GUIDE
(☎️0917 105 2191; tbs-azadehkhademi@hotmail.com) Knowledgeable French- and English-speaking female guide.

Farkhondeh Zareie

GUIDE
(☎️0917 715 5850; farkhondeh_yas_zareie@yahoo.com) Experienced female guide and driver who specialises in food and nomad tours.

Hossein Soltani

GUIDE
(☎️0917 713 1517; h-soltani-n@hotmail.com) Experienced guide and driver who has worked in the hospitality and tourism industries for many years.

Iran Sightseeing Tours

ADVENTURE TOURS
(☎️235 5939; www.iransightseeing.com; 3 Alley, Sooratgar Ave, off Zand Blvd) Specialises in skiing, mountaineering, trekking, mountain-biking, rock-climbing and horse riding tours. It has its own horses, ski lodge and equipment. Also offers nomad tours.

Morteza Mehrparvar

DRIVING TOURS
(☎️0917 314 6124; morteza282001@yahoo.com) A driver rather than a tour guide, Morteza knows central Iran like the back of his hand, speaks good English and is a really nice guy. He's a great choice if you want to organise a journey between Yazd and Shiraz via Persepolis and Pasargadae or over the Zagros Mountains between Shiraz and Esfahan.

Pars Tours

ADVENTURE TOURS
(☎️222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd; ☀️9am-9pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri) Operated by the Pars Tourist Agency, this outfit has a stranglehold on tours in and around Shiraz and is both resented and admired by its competitors as a result. It offers a huge range of cultural tours, adventure tours and ecotours (check its website for details), including popular half-day group trips to Persepolis for US\$25 per person, leaving daily at 8am. It also runs 'Iran Life' tours into the countryside by savari (US\$40 per day). The Persepolis trip is great value and the 'Iran life' trip can be a great experience, but for private tours you may be better off using one of the other guides listed in this section.

🛏 Sleeping

Shiraz has a huge number of hotels, most located in streets leading off Karim Khane Zand Blvd and within a short walk of the main sights. Competition is keen so most managers will be happy to knock a fair few rials off the price out of season. Note that

when this book went to print, a new luxury hotel, the Shiraz Grand, was set to open near the Darvazeh-ye Quran (Quran Gateway) on the northeastern edge of town.



Niyesh Boutique

Hotel

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(☎223 3622; www.key2persia.com; 10 Shahzadeh Jamaili Ln; dm with/without breakfast US\$12/10, s/d/tr US\$30/50/70; 🍷🍷) The city's only traditional hotel is located in the heart of the old quarter and is a fantastic choice. You can sleep in the clean and comfortable dorm or in a private room – some are arranged around the central courtyard of the original house and others in a purpose-built annex at the front of the building. A tranquil restaurant and coffee shop is set in the courtyard and serves tea, espresso coffee, qalyans and a limited menu of home-style dishes (p196). The hotel can be difficult to find; head to the Imanzadeh Bibi Dokhtar and then follow the signs. The hotel is owned by the Pars Tourist Agency.



Chamran Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎626 2000; www.chamranhotel.com; Chamran Blvd; s/d/ste US\$120/190/280; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) The city views from the rooms and upper-floor restaurant of this recently opened five-star hotel are quite spectacular and the location next to the tree-lined Ghasr-e Dasht Gardens is nearly as impressive, making the hotel's distance from the main city sights forgivable (a taxi to Shohada Sq costs US\$6.50). Added incentive is offered by an impressive health club and close proximity to some of the city's best restaurants. Rooms are as attractive as they are comfortable and well-equipped, with good beds, tea-and-coffee-making facilities, satellite TV and excellent bathrooms. The pool is open to men and women at different times of day.

Aryo Barzan Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎224 7182-4; www.aryohotel.com; Rudaki Ave; s/d/ste US\$65/110/195; 🍷🍷🍷) The Aryo is a favourite among business travellers for its intelligent, smiling and extravagantly coiffed service, well-maintained surrounds and central location. The small but spotlessly clean rooms have small bathrooms and satellite TV. Wi-fi costs US\$1.40 per hour.

Eram Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎230 0814-6; www.eramhotel.com; Zand Blvd; s/d/tr US\$60/90/120; 🍷🍷🍷) Rooms in the new wing of this old-fashioned

place are large, quiet and reasonably well equipped; those in the original building are similar but not quite as nice. The guys at reception are helpful and there's a restaurant on the 1st floor.

Park Saadi Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎227 4901-9; www.parksaadihotel.com; Hafez St, s/d/ste/apt US\$45/65/110/150; 🍷🍷🍷) The Saadi is in a quiet location opposite lovely Bagh-e Jahan Nama. It's solid three-star through and through, with large, bright rooms (some with wi-fi), a decent restaurant and experienced management.

Anvari Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎233 7591; fax 233 4134; Anvari St; s US\$22, d/tr US\$27/32, without bathroom US\$20/24; 🍷🍷) There's nothing fancy about this four-storey place, but it's clean and comfortable enough for the money. Rooms have hard beds, satellite TV and noisy air-conditioning units. Private bathrooms have squat toilets, but there are a couple of Western versions in the shared bathrooms. Breakfast costs an extra US\$2.30.

Kakh Apartment Hotel

APARTMENTS \$\$

(☎234 0763-6; fax 234 6130; Dezhban (36) Alley, off Rudaki Ave; d/q US\$134/178; 🍷🍷🍷) Self-caterers will be very happy if they stay at this relatively new hotel, which offers quiet, good-sized apartments with well-equipped kitchen, satellite TV and bathroom with Western toilet. Wi-fi (lobby only) and internet cost US\$1.80 per hour.

Jaam-e-Jam Apartment Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎230 4002-3; www.jaamejamhotel.com; Eizedi St; s/d US\$66/110, 2-/4-person apt US\$153/230; 🍷🍷🍷) The apartments here aren't as good as those in the nearby Kakh Apartment Hotel, but the rooms in the Persepolis-inspired new wing are worth considering, particularly in winter when prices drop by up to 40%. The location is quiet, and management and service are professional. Wi-fi and internet cost US\$1.80 per hour.

Sasan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎230 2028; info@sasan-hotel.com; Anvari St; s/d/tr US\$28/41/53; 🍷) This is a friendly, clean and well-maintained place with a manager who likes to chat and organise tours in equal measure (often together). Some rooms have bathrooms with Western toilets, others with the squat variety – all are a bit too expensive for what's on offer. There's internet access (US\$1.40 per hour) but no wi-fi.

Pars International Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎233 2255; www.pars-international-hotel.com; Zand Blvd; s/d/ste US\$98/158/233; 📞📺📺📺) The owners of this four-star business hotel are politically conservative, so don't expect foreign stations on the TV or any relaxation of dress codes. Rooms are characterless but well equipped, and there are four restaurants, including the Acacia African Restaurant. Wi-fi and internet cost US\$2 per hour.

Vila Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎234 5645; essiano@gmail.com; Zand Blvd; s/d US\$25/30, without bathroom US\$20/25; 📺) Located on noisy Zand Blvd over the popular Haji Baba Restaurant, this place is only worth considering because of its prices, which are extremely reasonable. Most rooms have kitchenettes, hard beds, satellite TV and a small bathroom with squat toilet; a few cheaper versions are without kitchenette and share a bathroom – all could be cleaner. Request a room at the rear, as the front ones are noisy.

**Eating**

Shiraz is noted as a culinary capital but in recent years Shirazis have embraced Western-style fast food with an almost embarrassing relish. Sadly the world-famous Shiraz (Syrah) grape is no longer made into the wine that inspired Hafez to poetry.

The city's best fast food can be found in the places along Chamran Blvd in the up-market suburbs northwest of the city centre and on nearby Sattar Khan Blvd.

**Shater Abbas 1**

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎229 1440; Khakshenas St, off Azadi Blvd; meals US\$5.50-15.50; ☀11am-4pm & 6-11.30pm) The bustling open kitchen and hard-working waiters attest to the popularity of this long-standing favourite. Enter from the street, descend the stairs into the basement and claim one of the large tables clad in cheerful checked tablecloths – your reward will be the best kababs in the city. Start with the hot bread and cheese, and be sure to order the succulent *shandiz lary kabab* (spiced lamb) or the *kubideh* (minced lamb kabab), as both are delicious. There are fish dishes for non-meat eaters.

**Seray-e Mehr Teahouse****& Restaurant**

TEAHOUSE \$

(Seray-e Mehr, Bazar-e Vakil; meals US\$3.50-5.50, tea US\$0.90; ☀10am-8pm Sat-Thu) This is a

serendipitous place to find after wandering through the Bazar-e Vakil. Hidden away through a small door behind the Saray-e Moshir Bazar, the split-level teahouse has a small menu of tasty favourites (think *dizi*, *kubideh*, *zerezhk polo*) and a delightfully relaxed atmosphere in which to sit, eat and sip tea. It also has a clean Western toilet, a rarity in this part of town.

Sharzeh Traditional Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(☎224 1963; Vakil St, off Zand Ave; meals US\$5-19; ☀11am-3pm & 8-11pm) This place can be hard to find, but is worth the effort. Enter down an arcade off the western side of the small street leading from Zand Ave directly to the Masjed-e Vakil. The restaurant is in the basement of the arcade, accessed via stairs at the rear. It's best for lunch, when *bazaris* (shopkeepers) and local businesspeople flock here to sample local dishes such as *baghela mahicheh* (rice with broad beans, mutton and dill) and *kalam polo Shirazi* (beef meatballs with herbs, leek and cabbage). There's usually live music at both lunch and dinner.

Haft Khan

MODERN IRANIAN \$\$\$

(www.haftkhanco.com; 17th Alley, Quran Jadid Blvd; buffet US\$27, a la carte meals US\$11-20; ☀noon-midnight) Wildly popular with fashionable Shirazis, this enormous place near the Darvazeh-ye Quran (Quran Gateway) has four levels of restaurants: there's an all-you-can-eat buffet on the ground floor, a fast-food court on the 2nd floor, an a la carte restaurant on the 3rd floor serving Iranian and international dishes, and a teahouse on the roof. The best of these is the ground-floor buffet, which offers a huge array of traditional Iranian dishes including freshly baked bread with cheese and herbs, lots of salads and some unusual dips (great for vegetarians). The surrounds are modern but very elegant, and service is attentive. A taxi between here and Shohada Sq costs US\$2.70.

Soofi 1

MODERN IRANIAN \$\$

(☎627 5881; www.soofirestaurant.com; Sattar Khan St; meals US\$8.50-16; ☀noon-midnight) It's been around for almost as long as the revolution, but Soofi shows no sign of closing up shop any time soon (we guess the same could be said about the revolution). This is where middle-class Shirazi families come to celebrate big occasions, and it can be loads of fun on a Thursday or Friday night when live music is played and customers get into the celebratory swing of things. Kababs are

the things to order, particularly the famous 'Special Kabab', which is served in a very theatrical manner. A taxi between here and Shohada Sq costs US\$4.50.

Mahdi Faludeh

(Naser Khosrow St; per cup US\$0.50; ☺2-10pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the Arg-e Karim Khan, Mahdi is the most famous *faludeh* shop in Shiraz. It also sells delicious *bastani* (Persian ice cream).

Niayesh Restaurant & Coffee Shop

(10 Shahzadeh Jamali Ln; meals US\$3-12; ☺24hr) The tranquil internal courtyard of the Niayesh Boutique Hotel is a pleasant place to escape the crowds and relax over a tea, espresso coffee, qalyan or meal. There's a limited menu of tasty home-style dishes, all of which are well priced. The hotel can be difficult to find – head to the Imamzadeh Bibi Dokhtar and then follow the signs.

Haji Baba Restaurant

(Zand Blvd; meals US\$3-8; ☺10am-7pm) The waiters at this place certainly earn their wage, rushing up and down the stairs to serve a constant stream of customers. The *khoresht* and the fried white fish are better than the kababs, which can be disappointing. Men sit downstairs, women and families upstairs.

Shopping

Good buys in the Bazar-e Vakil include metalwork and printed cottons, especially tablecloths and rugs woven by Fars nomads.

Information

Emergency

Tourist Police booth (Zand Blvd) Outside the Arg-e Karim Khan but is rarely open outside peak season.

Internet Access

There are a number of *coffeenets* on Sa'adi St, off Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd.

Medical Services

Dena Hospital (☎628 0411-18; www.denahospital.com; Dena Alley, Motahari Blvd) Best in Shiraz. It's west of the centre.

Dr Faghihi Hospital (☎235 1091; Zand Blvd) The most central hospital; public.

Money

There are two excellent money exchanges on Zand Blvd. **Zand Exchange** (☎222 2854; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd; ☺8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Wed, 8am-1pm Thu) offers good rates and is very efficient. Ghasemi Fard Exchange, a few doors down, has similar hours and posts its daily rates up on a board.

Tourist Information

Tourist information office (☎224 1985; Zand Blvd; ☺8am-8pm Sat-Thu) Located in a booth outside the Arg-e Karim Khan. Reasonably helpful but staff seem to work to an unpredictable timetable. They can supply a free map and/or directions, and give updates on the opening hours and prices of all sights.

Travel Agencies

Pars Tourist Agency (☎222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd; ☺9am-9pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri; @) As well as organising tours, the multilingual team here do the usual travel agency jobs, including air, bus and train ticketing. In the event of an emergency, owner Massoud Nematollahi can be contacted to help sort things on ☎0917 111 8514.

Visa Extensions

Police Department of Aliens Affairs (off Valiasr Sq; ☺8am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, to 11.30am Thu) If it's your first extension, your request should be processed within one hour; second extensions will take a full day. To get here, take a shuttle taxi (about US\$1.80) east along Zand Blvd to Valiasr Sq, walk another 300m or so east, then take the third lane heading north at an angle. The build-

FLIGHTS FROM SHIRAZ

DESTINATION	FARE	FLIGHTS	CARRIER
Bandar Abbas	US\$49	5 weekly	Iran Air, Aseman
Bandar-e Lengeh	US\$50	4 weekly	Iran Air
Esfahan	US\$50	daily	Iran Air, Aseman
Kish	US\$50	5 weekly	Aseman, Kish Airlines
Mashhad	US\$85	daily	Aseman, Caspian Tabar, Iran Air, Zagros
Tehran	US\$67	several daily	Aseman, Iran Air, Kish Airlines, Mohan

BUSES FROM SHIRAZ

DESTINATION	FARE(VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bandar Abbas	US\$8.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	11hr	6 daily
Esfahan	US\$10.70/6.70	7-8hr	frequent
Hamadan	US\$13.40 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	14-16hr	2pm
Kashan	US\$10.70 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	10hr	7pm
Kerman	US\$10.70/7.10	9hr	7 daily
Kermanshah	US\$16 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	16hr	2pm
Mashhad	US\$32.80/17.80	20hr	2.30pm & 4pm
Rasht	US\$16 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	16hr	1.30pm & 2.30pm
Sanandaj	US\$17 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	18-19hr	1.30pm
Tabriz	US\$25/18.70	20hr	2 daily at 2pm
Tehran	US\$19.50-22.50/14.20	13hr	hourly 11am-10pm
Yazd	US\$11.10/6.70	6-7hr	8 daily
Zahedan	US\$13.40 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	15-16hr	2 daily in afternoon

ing is another 70m along, behind the light green door, and the office is on the 3rd floor. Your US\$26.50 cash must be deposited at Bank Melli Markazi (Shohada Sq), though here they will do it for you for a small fee (US\$1.80). For more on extending visas, see the boxed text, p27.

i Getting There & Away

Air

It's easy to start or finish a trip to Iran in Shiraz because several airlines operate between Shiraz, gulf cities and Istanbul. Iran Aseman and Iran Air fly between Shiraz and Dubai (one way US\$240 to US\$280), Turkish Airlines flies to Istanbul (one way US\$350 to US\$490), Arabian Air flies to Sharjah (one way US\$160 to US\$450) and Qatar Airways flies to Doha (one way US\$350 to US\$710). Check schedules with a travel agent.

Shiraz International Airport (<http://shiraz.airport.ir>) has a handy **flight information number** (☎199; ☎8am-9pm) and a hotel booking counter.

Domestic flights are shown, opposite.

Bus

Most long-distance buses operate from busy **Karandish bus terminal** (Terminal-e Bozorg; Salman-e Farsi Blvd).

If you're on a tight schedule it's worth booking ahead at the **Iran Peyma** (Taavoni 1; ☎222 3888; Zand Blvd; ☎7am-8pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) office near the corner of Sa'di St, or at nearby Pars Tourist Agency (p196).

Buses to towns west and southwest of Shiraz leave from Amir Kabir bus terminal on the southern outskirts. Buses for Kazerun (US\$2.70,

two to three hours, frequent) depart between 5.30am and 8.30pm.

Ramshackle minibuses leave the savari station at Karandish for Marvdasht (near Persepolis) and charge US\$0.70 (one hour).

Mahmooly services to Kazerun (US\$2.70, 2½ hours, frequent) leave from Amir Kabir terminal.

Savari

Savaris to Marvdasht leave from the southern edge of Karandish terminal on a semiregular basis and cost US\$1.80 (50 minutes). A taxi *dar baste* costs US\$10.70. Occasional services travel all the way to Persepolis (US\$2.70, 80 minutes).

Savaris to Kazerun (US\$4.50, 2¼ hours) leave from Amir Kabir. A taxi *dar baste* costs US\$19.60.

There are no savaris to Bishapur. A taxi *dar baste* costs US\$25; these also depart from Amir Kabir.

Train

There are three trains per week to Esfahan (*ghazal* US\$12.50, nine hours), but the service has a reputation as being accident-prone and most people prefer to take the bus.

i Getting Around

A taxi *dar baste* to/from the airport should cost about US\$5.

The **Shiraz Urban Railway** (www.shirazmetro.ir, in Farsi) is being built and will eventually include three lines, 40 stations and 47km of track. Line 1 will run from southeast to northwest, including a stretch along Zand Ave between Valiasr Sq (good for visa extensions) and Imam Hossein Sq.

Shuttle taxis ply the streets for US\$0.20 to US\$0.45 per trip. Taxis *dar baste* charge between US\$2.70 and US\$6.50 depending on the destination.

Persepolis

0728 / ELEV 1630M

Magnificent **Persepolis** (Takht-e Jamshid; admission US\$0.50; ☀8am-5pm Nov-Mar, to 7pm Apr-Oct) embodies the greatest successes of the ancient Achaemenid Empire...and also its final demise (see History, p270). The monumental staircases, exquisite reliefs and imposing gateways leave you in no doubt how grand this empire was, just as the broken and fallen columns attest that its end was both emphatic and merciless. It is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Some historians believe the site of Persepolis was chosen by Cambyses II, son of Cyrus the Great, but work did not begin until after Darius I (the Great) took the throne in 520 BC. It was added to by a host of subsequent kings, including Xerxes I and II, and Artaxerxes I, II and III, over a period of more than 150 years.

The ruins you see today are a mere shadow of Persepolis' former glory. But their very existence is due in part to the fact that the ancient city was lost for centuries, totally

covered by dust and sand. It wasn't until the 1930s that extensive excavations revealed its glories once again.

Note that there is little shade at Persepolis and from May until early October it can be sweltering, so bring a hat and water. If you have a backpack or a tripod with you, these will have to be left at the ticket office.

For computer illustrations of Persepolis in all its glory, see www.persepolis3D.com.

Sights

EXPLORING THE COMPLEX

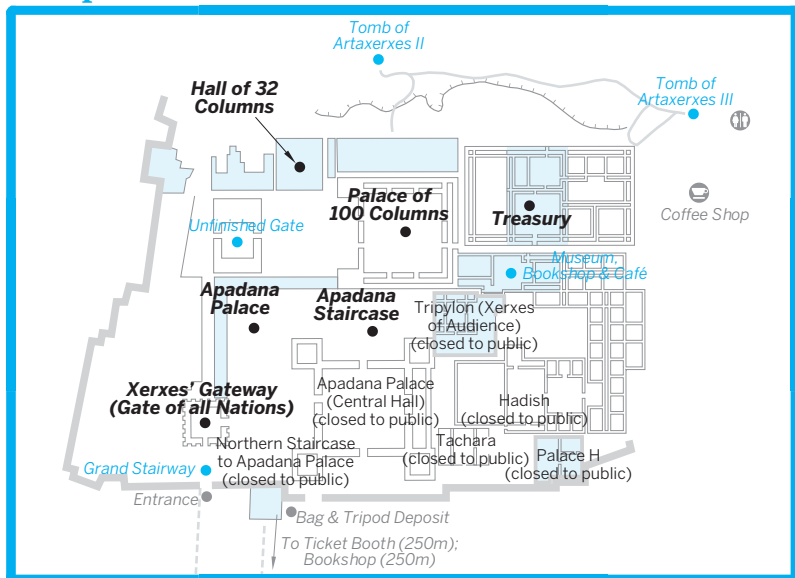
Heritage experts have recently determined that parts of Persepolis should be closed for conservation reasons. At the time of writing, these included the northern staircase and central hall of the Apadana Palace, the Tripylon, the Tachara, the Hadish and Palace H. As a result, you are sure to encounter scaffolding and barriers during your visit and may need to vary the path outlined below.

Grand Stairway & Xerxes' Gateway

GATEWAY

Entry to the complex is via the monumental **Grand Stairway** at the northwest corner of the site. The stairs were carved from massive blocks of stone, but each step was shallow so that Persians in long elegant robes could walk gracefully up into the palace.

Persepolis



PERSEPOLIS UNDER THE ACHAEMENIANS

In its heyday Persepolis spread over about 125 sq km and was one of four cities at the heart of an empire that spread from the Indus River to Ethiopia. Its original name was Parsa and the first known reference to it by its Greek name of Persepolis – meaning both City of Parsa (City of Persia) and Destroyer of Cities – came after its sacking by Alexander the Great's army in 330 BC. Oddly, however, Persepolis is rarely mentioned by any name in foreign records, fuelling speculation among some archaeologists that the existence of the city was kept a secret from the outside world. The few remaining records focus instead on other Achaemenid capitals, including Babylon, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) and Shush.

More certain is that Persepolis was built on the slopes of Mt Rahmat (the Mount of Mercy) as a showcase for the empire, designed to awe visitors with its scale and beauty. It served this purpose during the annual No Ruz (New Year) celebration, when subjects came from across the empire to climb up from the level of the surrounding plain and pay homage – and tribute – to their kings. It's quite possible that at other times the business of the empire returned to Shush.

Persepolis was burned to the ground during Alexander's visit in 330 BC. If you're wondering how a palace built almost entirely of stone could be burned to the ground, the explanation lies in the roof. The ceilings of most buildings are believed to have been made from huge timber beams, and as these burned they heated, then melted, the iron and lead clamps that held the structures together.

Whenever important foreign delegations arrived, their presence was heralded by trumpeters at the top of the staircase; fragments of one of these bronze trumpets are on display in the museum. Acolytes then led the dignitaries through **Xerxes' Gateway** (also known as the Gate of All Nations), which is still a wonderfully impressive monument.

Built during the time of Xerxes I, the gateway is guarded by bull-like figures that have a strong Assyrian character. Above these, look for a cuneiform inscription in Old Persian, Neo-Babylonian and Elamite languages. It declares, among other things, that 'King Xerxes says: by the favour of Ahuramazda this Gate of All Nations I built. Much else that is beautiful was built in this Parsa, which I built and my father built.' Centuries of graffiti artists have also left their mark, including explorer Henry Morton Stanley.

Apadana Palace & Staircase PALACE

Important Persian and Median notables were probably ushered to the **Apadana Palace** to the south. Constructed on a terrace of stone by Xerxes I, the palace was reached via another staircase. Although it can be difficult to picture the grandeur of the palace from what remains, the bas-reliefs along the northern wall evocatively depict the scenes of splendour that must have accompanied the arrival of delegations to meet with the king.

Most impressive of all, however, and among the most impressive historical sights in all of Iran, are the bas-reliefs of the **Apadana Staircase** on the eastern wall, which can also be reached from the Palace of 100 Columns. The northern panels recount the reception of the Persians in formal dress and the Medes in tied dress. The three tiers of figures are amazingly well preserved. Each tier contains representations of the most elite of the Persian nobles, the Imperial Guard and the Immortals. On the upper tier, they are followed by the royal procession, the royal valets and the horses of the king of chariots, while on the lower two tiers they precede the Persians with their feather headdresses and the Medes in their round caps. The stairs themselves are guarded by Persian soldiers. The central panel of the staircase depicts a ring with wings, flanked by two winged lions with human heads and guarded by four Persian and Median soldiers; the Persians are the ones carrying the indented shields. The panels at the southern end are the most interesting, showing 23 delegations bringing their gifts to the Achaemenid king. This rich record of the nations of the time ranges from the Ethiopians in the bottom left corner, through a climbing pantheon of, among various other peoples, Arabs, Thracians, Kashmiris, Parthians and Cappadocians, up to the Elamites, Egyptians and Medians at the top right.

THE LAST SHAH'S TENT CITY

Outside the entrance to Persepolis, through the pine trees behind the toilets, are the remains of a luxurious tent city built by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1971 to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy. The tents played host to a lavish and incredibly expensive party, attended by dignitaries including 60 monarchs or heads of state, but few Iranians. Food was flown in from Maxim's in Paris, and many of the VIPs were put up in luxury tented apartments, complete with marble bathrooms. They were arranged on five streets, each representing a geographical area (Europe, Oceania, Asia, Africa and America), which came together to form a five-pointed star.

The celebration had two main objectives: to promote Iran to the rest of the world, and nurture Iranian nationalistic pride and love of their monarch. The first was a huge success, but the second was a public relations disaster. Opponents quickly pointed to the unnecessary extravagance, and some believe the party was a turning point from which the shah never recovered. It has stood rusting, with canvas slowly decaying, ever since.

Today, the staircase is covered by a permanent shelter and the only direct sunlight is early in the morning, so it's worth heading straight here when the site opens.

The **Tripylon** ahead stands at the heart of the city but no one knows what its exact function was.

Private Palaces

PALACES

The southwestern corner of the site is dominated by palaces believed to have been constructed during the reigns of Darius and Xerxes. The **Tachara** is easily the most striking, with many of its monolithic doorjambes still standing and covered in bas-reliefs and cuneiform inscriptions. The stairs on the southern side bear highly skilled reliefs and are some of the most photogenic. The palace opens onto a royal courtyard flanked by two palaces. To the east is the **Hadish**, a palace completed by Xerxes and reached via another monumental staircase. Some scholars speculate that its wooden columns on stone bases might have served as kindling for Alexander's great fire – especially as it had been Xerxes who had put Athens to the torch. To the south of the square are the remains of an unfinished palace known as **Palace H**.

Persepolis Museum

MUSEUM

Scholars can't seem to agree about the original function of the building that now houses the site's **museum** (admission US\$0.50; ☺8am–4.30pm Nov–Mar, to 6.30pm Apr–Oct), which is accessed via stairs east of the Tripylon. Some believe it was a harem for the king's consorts and concubines, but others believe that it was a residence for visiting ambassadors (it has the same number of rooms as the number of subject nations). Restored in the 1930s, it now houses the museum and

administrative offices. The museum contains a stone foundation tablet and a range of artefacts discovered during excavations: alabaster vessels, cedar wood, lances and arrow tips. Note the highly polished walls; almost every wall in Persepolis was finished in this expensive, labour-intensive fashion.

Treasury & Tombs

RUINS, TOMB

The southeastern corner of the site is dominated by Darius' **Treasury**, one of the earliest structures at Persepolis. Archaeologists have found stone tablets in Elamite and Akkadian detailing the wages of thousands of workers. When Alexander looted the Treasury it's reported he needed 3000 camels to cart off the contents. The foundations of walls and the bases of 250 columns are all that remain. On the hill above the Treasury are the rock-hewn tombs of **Artaxerxes II** and **Artaxerxes III**. It's worth sitting on the hill for a while to get a feel for the enormous scale of Persepolis.

Palace of 100 Columns

PALACE

With an extravagant hall measuring almost 70m square and supported by 100 stone columns, the **Palace of 100 Columns** was the second-largest building at Persepolis, built during the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. Some scholars believe it was used to receive the military elite upon whom the empire's security rested. An impressive array of broken columns remains, and reliefs on the doorjambes at the back (south) of the building show a king, soldiers and representatives of 28 subject nations. Little remains of the **Hall of 32 Columns** in front of it, built at the end of the Achaemenid period. The arrival of Alexander and his armies stopped work on a larger version of the Gate of All

Nations, in the wide courtyard in front of the Palace of 100 Columns, where the **Unfinished Gate** now is.

Tours

Just about every hotel in Shiraz organises tours to Persepolis, and prices are usually based on the rates set by the local cultural heritage and tourism office; before signing up, check if you'll have an accredited guide who speaks your language (more expensive) rather than just a driver. For a list of recommended tour guides, see p193.

To get to Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab, a driver-guide usually charges US\$45 for a half-day tour. A full-day tour to those three sights plus Pasargadae will cost US\$75. These prices are based on groups of one to three people being transported in a sedan.

Pars Tours (p193) operates a daily half-day tour with guide for US\$25 per person.

Some travellers opt for a driver that speaks English to ferry them around for a half-day (US\$40) or full day (US\$60). The driver usually won't enter the site with you, so you'll have to rely on this book for context.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two coffee shops in the actual site – the one in the garden behind the Treasury has outdoor seating and is the most pleasant.

Apadana Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎4432636-8; www.hotel-apadana.com; s/d/tr US\$36/56/73; ☎) Built by the last shah in 1953, this atmospheric hotel immediately next to Persepolis is a wonderful place to stay overnight or enjoy a meal. Some of the 15 rooms overlook the site and all have slightly worn but clean original furnishings. Wi-fi costs US\$0.90 per hour and there are discounts of up to 50% during the low season.

The wonderfully old-fashioned **restaurant** (meals US\$10-18) overlooks a garden and serves food that is much better than is usually the case at tourist places (this recommendation may not apply at busy times such as No Ruz, when the sightseeing hoards descend en masse). It offers a varied salad buffet, locally farmed trout and exotic dishes such as quail, ostrich and partridge kababs.

A coffee shop operates in the hotel foyer during the cooler months but moves into the garden when the weather improves. A tea with dates or cake costs US\$1.80, as does a cappuccino.

Getting There & Away

Many travellers take tours or hire a driver, but it's also possible to get to Persepolis by public transport. From the southern edge of the Karandish Terminal in Shiraz, savaris occasionally travel all the way to Persepolis (US\$2.70, 80 minutes). At other times, you can take a minibus (US\$0.70) or savari (US\$1.80, 50 minutes) to Marvdasht, from where occasional savaris (US\$1.40, 30 minutes) run to Persepolis. A taxi *dar baste* from Marvdasht to Persepolis should cost US\$4.50, although local taxi drivers tend to charge foreigners a premium.

A taxi *dar baste* from Persepolis to Shiraz with quick stops at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab should cost US\$18.

Naqsh-e Rostam & Naqsh-e Rajab نقش رستم و نقش رجب

The rock tombs at **Naqsh-e Rostam** (admission US\$0.50; ☀8am-5pm winter, 8am-6.30pm summer) are definitely worth visiting as part of your trip to Persepolis. Hewn out of a cliff high above the ground, the four tombs are believed to be those of Darius II, Artaxerxes I, Darius I and Xerxes I (from left to right as you look at the cliff) although historians are still debating this. The tombs of the later Artaxerxes above Persepolis were modelled on these. The reliefs above the openings to the funerary chambers are similar to those at Persepolis, with the kings standing on thrones supported by figures representing the subject nations below.

The seven Sassanian stone reliefs cut into the cliff depict scenes of imperial conquests and royal ceremonies; there are detailed descriptions in front of the tombs and reliefs.

Facing the cliff is the Bun Khanak (Central Home). This was long thought to be an Achaemenid fire temple, but scholars now argue that it might have been a treasury. The walls are marked with inscriptions cataloguing later Sassanian victories.

Naqsh-e Rajab (admission US\$0.30; ☀8am-5pm winter, 8am-6.30pm summer) is directly opposite the turn-off to Naqsh-e Rostam on the old Shiraz-Esfahan road and is worth a quick look. Three fine Sassanian bas-reliefs are hidden from the road by the folds of a rocky hill and depict various scenes from the reigns of Ardashir I and Shapur the Great. A man called Rajab once had a teahouse here, hence the name.

Most tours to Persepolis also stop at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab. If you don't have a vehicle and it's winter,

you could walk the 6km from Persepolis to Naqsh-e Rostam, stopping off at Naqsh-e Rajab en route. In summer, this would be idiotic. Alternatively, a round trip in a taxi *dar base* from Persepolis will cost US\$9.

Pasargadae

ELEV 1847M

Begun under Cyrus the Great in about 546 BC, the city of Pasargadae was quickly superseded by Darius's magnificent palace at Persepolis. **Pasargadae** (admission US\$0.50; ☉8am-5pm winter, 8am-7pm summer) is about 50km north of Persepolis and some travellers have questioned whether it's worth the effort of getting there. The site is not nearly as well preserved as Persepolis, but is beautiful in a lonely, windswept way. The hard-to-discern remnants of **Darius' garden** have recently been added to the World Heritage list as part of a joint entry for Persian Gardens.

The austere and awesomely simple **Tomb of Cyrus** stands proudly on the Morghab Plain. It consists of six stone tiers with a modest rectangular burial chamber above, and its unique architecture combines elements of all the major civilisations Cyrus had conquered. During the Achaemenid period it was surrounded by gardens and protected, but was plundered by the armies of Alexander the Great, an act that greatly distressed the Macedonian conqueror.

About 1km north of the tomb begin the insubstantial remains of the early Achaemenid empire. **Cyrus's Private Palace** is first, notable for its unusual plan, central hall of 30 columns (the stumps of which remain), and wide verandahs front and back. About 250m southeast is the rectangular **Audience Palace**, which once had an 18m-high hypostyle hall surrounded by smaller balconies. One of the eight white limestone columns has been reconstructed on its uncommon black limestone plinth. In both the Audience Palace and in Cyrus's Private Palace there is a cuneiform inscription that reads: 'I am Cyrus, the Achaemenid King'.

Another 500m north of Cyrus's Private Palace are the remains of the **Prison of Solomon** (Zendan-e Soleiman), variously thought to be a fire temple, tomb, sun dial or store. On the hill beyond is the Tal e-Takht, which was actually a monumental 6000-sq-metre citadel used from Cyrus's time until the late Sassanian period. Local historians believe the references to Solomon date from

the Arab conquest, when the inhabitants of Pasargadae renamed the sites with Islamic names to prevent their destruction.

i Getting There & Away

By far the easiest way to get here is to charter a taxi from Shiraz for the round trip; this will cost about US\$54 with a one-hour stop. If you will be travelling between Shiraz and Yazd by car, it makes a lot of sense to stop here, at Persepolis, at Naqsh-e Rostam and at Naqsh-e Rajab on your way.

By public transport, follow the instructions for Persepolis (p201) and when you get to Marvdasht take another savari to Sa'adat Abad (US\$2.30, 45 minutes), and then a taxi *dar baste* to Pasargadae and back to Sa'adat Abad (US\$18).

Bavanat

بوانات

In a quiet valley 230km northeast of Shiraz, the Bavanat region is a 20km-long walnut forest in a lush valley between the Zagros Mountains in the south and deserts to the north. The main town is Suryan, aka Bavanat, but the real destination here is the village of **Shah Hamzeh Bazm** (or just Bazm) 18km further east. The mountains near Bazm are home to Khamseh nomads, a confederation of five groups of Arabic, Turkish and Farsi-speaking people. From about April until October they pitch their tents in the hills and survive with few of the 'luxuries' you might see in the tents of Qashqa'i nomads north of Shiraz.

Abbas Barzegar, himself part Khamseh, opens his family home in Bazm to visitors and runs one- and two-day **Bavanat Tours** (☎0752-326 2357, 0917 317 3597; irannomad@gmail.com) to stay with the nomads (in summer, of course). He's a lovely guy, though his very basic English is a problem for non-Farsi speakers. Alternatively, you could just hang out in his place (price negotiable). Tours cost US\$50 per person including a one-day tour, a night's accommodation and three meals.

From Yazd, there is a bus to Bazm at noon every day except Friday (US\$2.70, four hours). From Shiraz (US\$2.70, three hours), buses leave Karandish terminal at 7pm and 8pm daily.

Firuz Abad

فیروز آباد

☎0712 / POP 70,000 / ELEV 1330M

The monumental Sassanian-era sites around modern Firuz Abad are the remains

of structures originally built by the founder of the Sassanian empire, Ardashir Babakan, in the 3rd century BC. Firuz Abad was once an important stop on the Sassanid roadway between Shiraz and the ancient port of Shiraf. Today it's mainly a Qashqai'i farming town. Coming from Shiraz, the first site is **Qal'eh-e Doktor** (admission free; ☀sunrise-sunset), a three-tiered palace sitting atop a steep hill. You'll know you're there when you see a footbridge crossing the road. Take the bridge and it's a 20-minute climb. Made of rock and gypsum, this palace was Ardashir's first, and its position and fortification reflect the lingering Parthian threat of the time. While crumbling, it's not difficult to imagine the palace's original layout, and the views from the top are magnificent.

A 20-minute drive away, **Ardashir's Palace** (admission US\$0.30; ☀7.30am-sunset) is a much grander structure built beside a spring once Ardashir felt more secure. Given it is almost 1800 years old, its domes, high *iwans* and clean, stable lines – which set the tone for all Sassanian architecture – remain hugely impressive.

Beyond Ardashir's Palace once lay his city, **Gur** (N 28°51'2.66", E 52°31'58.52"), which in its current form is an archaeologist's dream, but requires plenty of imagination. With its perfectly circular plan, divided into equal sectors and separated by high walls, Gur was a hugely ambitious town-planning feat. The only existing building is the 30m-high 'minaret' that marked the centre of the circle. Gur is about 3km along the sealed road between Firuz Abad and Ardashir's Palace.

i Getting There & Away

Minibuses (US\$1.80, 2½ hours) and savaris (US\$6, 2¼ hours) run from Shiraz's Modars terminal (near the Visa Extension Office) to Firuz Abad. Returning, the last services leave in the early evening. For Qal'eh-e Doktor, ask to get off when you see the overhead footbridge. Returning by savari you'll need to start from Firuz Abad, as cars will be full when they pass Qal'eh-e Doktor.

A driver-guide from Shiraz will charge between US\$60 and US\$75 to bring you here and back in half a day.

Kazerun & Bishapur

کازرون و بیشاپور

Just off the ancient royal road between Shiraz and Bushehr are the small but fas-

cinating ruins of another two ancient cities: Kazerun and, about 25km to the west, Bishapur. At Kazerun there is a Sassanian-era **bas-relief** at the entrance to town.

Bishapur (admission US\$0.50; ☀7am-5pm winter, to 8pm summer), or 'Shapur's City', was the grand capital of possibly the greatest of the Sassanian kings, Shapur I. Shapur and his armies defeated the Romans three times, and much of Bishapur was built by Romans taken captive after their Emperor Valerian was defeated in AD 260; he lived his final years a captive at Bishapur. The site has been partly excavated, revealing the **Palace of Shapur** and the nearby **Anahita's Temple**, where a stairway leads underground to a pool around which the faithful once walked and prayed. Some fine Irano-Roman mosaics remain, but the best are now in the Louvre. A recently opened **museum** (☀8am-noon winter, 8am-noon & 2-6pm spring & summer) displays artefacts excavated at the site.

The city was originally approached along the Shapur River in the steep-sided **Chogan Gorge** (admission US\$0.50; ☀7am-5pm winter, to 8pm summer). A short walk from Bishapur, the rocky walls here are home to six large **bas-reliefs** carved out of limestone. These commemorate, among other historical moments, Shapur's investiture as king and his victory over Roman invaders. The deep groove running through the reliefs was caused by a powerful flood in the 1960s; the groove marks the high-water mark.

About 4km along the gorge is the **Tang-e Chogan** and its 7m-high **Statue of Shapur I**, one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Iran. Getting to the cave is easiest if you're in a car, but you could walk to it from the small village of Shapur, itself a 30-minute walk from the main road. The ascent to the cave is steep, so you'll need to wear good shoes, take water and start very early in summer. The round trip from the village to the cave takes at least three hours.

i Getting There & Away

The full-day trip to Bishapur is easiest with a driver-guide (US\$110 to US\$130), but public transport is viable if you make a very early start. Take a bus (*mahmooly* US\$3.60, 2½ hours, frequent) or savari (US\$4.50, 2¼ hours) to Kazerun from the Amir Kabir terminal in Shiraz and then walk or hitch a lift to Bishapur. From Shiraz, keep an eye out en route for the 15-arch **Karim Khan Bridge**, a Zand-era bridge about 40km west of Shiraz.



Persian Gulf

خليج فارس

Includes »

Kish Island.....	205
Bandar e-Lengeh.....	210
Bandar Abbas.....	211
Qeshm Island	214
Hormoz Island.....	218

Best Places to Eat

- » Ghaleh Restaurant (p217)
- » Payab Restaurant and Teahouse (p209)
- » Shandiz Safdari (p209)
- » Strawberry Restaurant (p213)

Best Places to Stay

- » Atilar Hotel (p212)
- » Mr Amini's House (p216)
- » Mrs Fattahi's House (p216)
- » Shayan Hotel (p208)

Why Go?

Few geographical descriptors are as evocative – and as controversial – as the Persian Gulf. Rich in oil, gas and mystique, this body of water and surrounding land is the heart of Arab consciousness and pride. No wonder, then, that Iran and her neighbours to the south have long argued over its name. The Gulf countries may call it the Arabian Gulf, but for all Iranians – including the proudly traditional Iranian Arabs (or Bandari) who live along its northern coastline – it could never be called anything but the *Khalij-e Fars* (Persian Gulf).

In the past, foreign interlopers headed here to establish trading posts. These days, there aren't many reasons for non-Iranians to visit. Those interested in eco- and cultural tourism will love Qeshm Island (we certainly do), but the resort island of Kish is overhyped and underwhelming, and the rest of the region offers little to the traveller other than long, hot journeys.

When to Go

The gulf is hotter than Hades between April and November, with temperatures averaging 35°C and occasionally climbing as high as 50°C. Not surprisingly, life adjusts accordingly – most businesses start early and then shut up shop from about noon to 5pm.

During No Ruz (Iranian New Year; 21 March to 3 April) the entire coast is inundated by swarms of domestic tourists – avoid travelling here at this time. Try to visit during winter, when the temperature averages between 18°C and 25°C, humidity is relatively low and crowds nonexistent.

Kish Island

جزیره کیش

0764 / POP 20,667

'Oh, but have you been to Kish? You absolutely must go.' Travelling in Iran you're likely to hear this more than once. And when you ask what is so special about Kish, you're told: 'But Kish is wonderful; everything works there. The beaches are clean, the buildings are modern and there's duty-free shopping. It's just like Dubai!'

And yes, all of this is true...to a degree. Since the 1970s, when the last shah tried to transform this desert island into a playground for the rich and famous, Kish has become the Iranian equivalent of Hawaii, the Costa del Sol or the Queensland Gold Coast – a beach resort where visitors can swim, shop and sample a laid-back and relatively liberated local lifestyle. Here, women let their headscarves slip back a bit, wear sandals, water ski (albeit in hejab-style

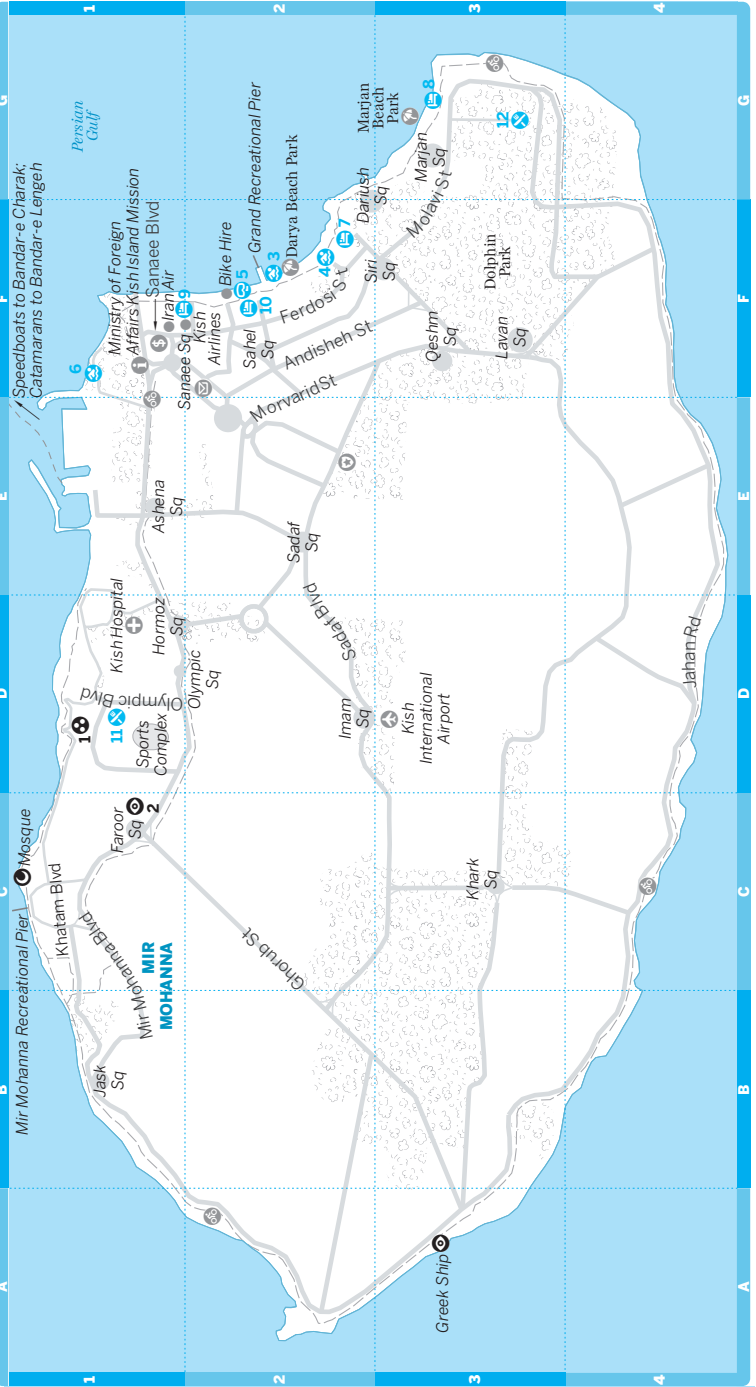


Persian Gulf Highlights

- 1 Spend a day cycling around **Kish Island** (p208)
- 2 Explore the biodiverse waters of the **Harra Sea Forest** (p215)
- 3 Marvel at the sculptural Chahkooh Canyon in Qeshm's extraordinary **Geopark** (p215)
- 4 Eat and sleep with the locals in a **homestay** (p216)
- 5 Watch endangered Hawksbill Turtles lay eggs on the beach at **Shibderaz village** (p216)
- 6 Take an early-morning speedboat to the former Portuguese outpost of **Hormoz Island** (p218)

PERSIAN GULF KISH ISLAND

Kish Island



Speedboats to Bandar-e Charak;
Catamarans to Bandar-e Lengeh

Kish Island

📍 Sights

- 1 Harireh D1
2 Kariz-e Kish C1

🏊 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 3 Aquacom Cable Park F2
4 Gentlemen's Beach & Beach
Volleyball Sports
Complex F2
5 Kish Diving Center F2
6 Ladies' Beach F1

🛏 Sleeping

- 7 Dariush Grand Hotel F2
8 Didaniha Hotel G3
9 Farabi Hotel F1
10 Shayan Hotel F2

🍴 Eating

- 11 Payab Restaurant & Teahouse D1
12 Shandiz Safdari G3

🍷 Drinking

- Superstar SFC (see 3)

wetsuits) and ride bicycles; men wear T-shirts and shorts, openly smoke qalyans (water pipes) and indulge their wives and children with ice cream and trips to the mall. It's all very different from life on the mainland.

As a result, Kish is booming. Hotels, apartment blocks and retail complexes dominate the once-deserted desert landscape, domestic tourist numbers are on the rise and the island also hosts a steady stream of Filipino workers from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who come here on so-called 'visa-change flights' to wait for their Emerati working visas to be extended.

However, there aren't any compelling reasons for Western tourists to join these throngs. Males and females can't swim or sunbathe together, the shopping is lacklustre (cheap products from China, India and Korea), there are few historical sights and the cost of living is considerably more expensive than elsewhere in the country. So if you're after an Arabian beach break, you're better off stopping in the UAE or Oman on your way home. But if you're after a taste of Iran – albeit Iran 'lite' – the fact that foreigners don't require a visa to visit Kish (14-day visas are available on entry but do not extend to the mainland) makes Kish a destination worth considering.

History

Kish Island is first recorded in the memoirs of Nearchus, the Greek sailor commissioned by Alexander the Great to explore the Persian Gulf in 325 BC. In the Middle Ages Kish became an important trading centre under its own powerful Arab dynasty and at one time supported a population of 40,000. The main town was Harireh, which is believed to be the town referred to by poet Sa'di in his famous work, *Golestan* (Rose Garden).

Kish was known for the quality of its pearls; when Marco Polo was visiting the imperial court in China, he remarked on the beauty of the pearls worn by one of the emperor's wives and was told they had come from Kish. In the 14th century Kish fell into decline and remained obscure until the 1970s, when it was developed as a semi-private retreat for the shah and his guests – complete with international airport, luxury hotels and a casino.

👁 Sights

FREE Harireh

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

(🕒24 hr) Artefacts found during excavation of this settlement indicate that it was established around AD 1000 AD, occupied 120 hectares and was abandoned around 1600. Its residents made their living mainly through fishing and pearl diving. The site – now referred to as Harireh Ancient City – comprises the remains of a large house with private *qanat* (underground water channel), a public *hammam* and a congregational mosque. It was originally positioned next to a busy commercial port; you can still see access stairs cut into the rocky cliff, as well as rock-cut wells and channels that were part of workshops producing date nectar, once one of the island's major exports.

Harireh is an easy bicycle ride west of the port; to get here by minibus alight at Olympic Sq and walk north.

Kariz-e-Kish

QANAT

(Kish Underground City; www.kariz-kish.ir, in Farsi; admission US\$9; 🕒8.30am-10.30pm) This recently opened tourist attraction located next to the tennis stadium is also known as the Kish Cultural and Tourist Complex. A subterranean network of stone passageways built around an historic *qanat*, it's a largely modern, commercially driven complex masquerading as a historical site and is definitely not worth the steep admission price that foreigners have to pay (Iranians pay a fraction of this).

Activities

Cycling

Kish is only 15km long and 8km wide, rising just 45m at its highest point. This means that cycling the flat, purpose-built bicycle path that follows the entire 40km of coastline is a popular way to spend a day. Bikes can be hired for around US\$3 per hour from the stands near the Marjan and Darya Beach Parks.

Cable Skiing

Aquacom Cable Park

WATER SPORTS

(<http://aquacom.ir/>; per 30min US\$27, per hr US\$36; ☀️11am-6pm) Located near the Grand Recreational Pier, Aquacom offers water ski and wakeboard rides on the main beach. The cableway is 860m long and 160m wide and operates at a speed of up to 62km/h (novices can request a slower speed of 28km/h). Both males and females can participate, but women must wear an Islamic-style wetsuit.

Diving

Though nearby reefs and islands are well stocked with fish, prevailing winds often mean that there is a limited choice of available dive sites off Kish. Also, hire equipment is old and well worn, and local instructors don't always speak English. If you're keen to dive despite all of this, there are a number of schools and centres located near the Grand Recreational Pier, including **Kish Diving Center** (☎️442 2757; www.kishdivingcenter.com, in Farsi; ☀️7am-sunset), which charges US\$65 for a one-hour dive including equipment hire, and US\$270 to US\$430 for PADI open-water courses.

Swimming

Kish is one of the very few places in Iran where swimming is actively encouraged. There are sandy, uncrowded beaches around most of the coast, but women must use the **Ladies' Beach** behind the Kish Free Trade Organization Building; there's also a women's swimming pool in Karaneh St behind the Goldis hotel. The official **Gentlemen's Beach and Beach Volleyball Sports Complex** is near Twins Park, though in reality men can swim anywhere other than at the Ladies' Beach. The men's swimming pool is in the Olympic Sport Complex.

Sleeping

There is a huge array of hotels and holiday apartments to choose from on Kish. Prices are significantly higher than elsewhere in

Iran, though still reasonable by Western standards, but can vary wildly by season; whatever you do, avoid visiting during No Ruz, when rates skyrocket. At nonpeak times the hotel desk at the airport offers good midrange deals.

Airport or port transfers are included in most midrange and top-end accommodation packages, and many of the hotels offer their guests discounts at in-house restaurants.

The only budget beds on the island are in the hostels packed full of migrant workers from the UAE who are in Kish renewing their visas; the Farabi is the best of these.

TOP CHOICE **Shayan Hotel** HOTEL \$\$
(☎️442 2771; info@shayanhotel.ir; Sahel Sq; d/tr US\$134/161; 🏠🚶) When it opened as the Shah's beachfront casino-hotel in 1973, this was the most glamorous shack on the Gulf. It hasn't changed much and the angular architecture, perspex furniture and sprayed concrete detailing are certainly retro cool. Rooms, most with balcony, are comfortable and have excellent bathrooms. When we last visited, a new annexe was being built – let's hope that the new rooms are endowed with the same generous sizing and funky decor. The restaurant here is also good (meals US\$7 to US\$18) and staff members are extremely helpful, although with limited English skills.

Farabi Hotel HOSTEL \$
(☎️445 5746; Sanaee Sq; kishairlines@yahoo.com; dm incl breakfast US\$12; 🏠🚶) This sprawling place is operated by Kish Airlines, which has its office next door. Female dorms sleep seven, male dorms sleep five; all are clean, have satellite TV and a bathroom. There's free wi-fi in the coffee shop. It's always packed, so book ahead.

Didaniha Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎️444 4531; www.didanihatravel.com, in Farsi; Jahan Rd, next to Marjan Mall; s/d/tr US\$67/76/85; 🏠🚶) Though desperately in need of refurbishment, the Didaniha is worth considering due to its relatively low prices, excellent location right next to the beach and tasty breakfast (including bread fresh from the oven). The 28 bungalows on offer are clean and reasonably comfortable, though satellite TV is one of the few frills. Wi-fi is only available in the reception building.

Dariush Grand Hotel LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$
(☎️444 4900-95; www.dariushgrandhotel.com; Dariush Sq; s US\$160, d US\$250-300, ste US\$590-

800; 📶📶📶) This Achaemenid-inspired monument in marble is often described as Iran's best hotel, though its Vegas-style ostentation won't please everyone. Rooms are extremely comfortable and well equipped, but their 12-year-old decor is starting to date. There's a good gym, an outdoor pool (men only), two restaurants and a coffee shop. Wi-fi costs US\$2 per hour. The hotel charges nonguests US\$10 per person to have a meal or drink here (usable as credit in the restaurants, but not at the coffee shop). Outrageous!

🍴 Eating & Drinking

Be sure to enjoy a tea, cold drink or ice cream at one of the beach cafes south of the Grand Recreational Pier – they're fabulous people-watching spots.

Payab Restaurant and Teahouse

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$\$

(☎0934 769 1213; Olympic Blvd; meals US\$18-30; ☀noon-4pm & 8pm-midnight) Set in a garden above an old *payab* (underground water reservoir), this is a tranquil spot for lunch and a very popular choice on warm nights, when there are live performances by local musicians. Serves of kababs and stews are large, bread comes hot from the oven and salad ingredients are sourced from the restaurant's own kitchen garden (the radishes are particularly delicious). It's possible to order tea and qalyan only, but there's a minimum charge of US\$9 and tea costs a whopping US\$4.50.

Shandiz Safdari

KABABI \$\$\$

(☎445 0020; meals US\$19-32; ☀noon-3pm & 9pm-midnight) This barn of a place is located near the Marjan Mall and is the venue of choice for cashed-up Iranian tourists. It offers a choice of traditional or Western seating and usually stages live music shows at night. The signature dish is the huge Shandiz Special Lamb Cutlet, made with meat

specially flown in from Mashhad – one is enough for two people to share. There's another branch near the Greek Ship.

Superstar SFC

CAFE

(near Darya Beach Park; fresh juice US\$4, cappuccino US\$5, qalyan US\$17; ☀9am-3am) Overlooking Aquacom Cable Park, this cafe and attached fast-food joint has seating on an outdoor terrace and on the roof – both are good spots to enjoy a coffee, fresh juice or qalyan while watching the antics taking place on the water.

📍 Information

Bank Melli (Sanaee Blvd; ☀7.30am-1.30pm) Changes money with less paperwork than normal.

Tourist Information (☎442 2434; www.kish.ir; Kish Free Zone Organization Bldg, Sanaee Blvd; ☀8am-3pm Sat-Thu) The helpful English-speaking PR staff at the Kish Free Zone Organization can help with tourist information including maps and brochures. Its office is on the building's ground floor and entry is via the rear of the building rather than the front staircase. The organisation also operates a tourism information desk at the airport that is open for all flight arrivals.

Kish Hospital (☎442 3711; Hormoz Sq)

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kish Island Mission (☎445 5639; Sanaee Blvd; ☀8am-4pm Sat-Thu) Kish is the only place in Iran that foreigners can visit without needing a visa. If you're arriving by air or boat from outside Iran, you get a free 14-day 'Kish visa' on arrival. Once on Kish, the ministry can supposedly issue normal tourist visas for those who want to continue into Iran, but in reality such applications are rarely successful – organise your Iranian visa before you arrive. If you decide to try your luck regardless, the office is located next to the Cultural and Social Deputy Building.

📍 Getting There & Away

Most people fly into Kish, but you can get there by boat; see Boat (p210) for details.

FLIGHTS FROM KISH ISLAND

DESTINATION	FARE (ONE WAY)	DURATION	FREQUENCY
Bandar Abbas	US\$50	40min	1 daily
Esfahan	US\$70	1hr	1-2 daily
Mashhad	US\$115	1¾hr	at least 2 weekly
Shiraz	US\$50	45min	at least 3 weekly
Tehran	US\$95	1½hr	at least 2 daily

Air

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS

Kish Airlines (☎445 5736; <http://kishairline.com/en/>; Sanaee Sq; ☀8am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri), **Iran Air** (☎442 2274; Sanaee Sq) and **Mahan** (www.mahan.aero) all fly in and out of Kish and charge similar prices.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Iran Air flies twice daily to Dubai (one way US\$150, 30 minutes).

Boat

Leaving Kish by boat can be ridiculously bureaucratic and services are unpredictable – flying is a much more attractive option.

In calm conditions, open speedboats travel to/from Bandar-e Charak (one way US\$11, 30 to 45 minutes); boats to Bandar-e Aftab were suspended at the time of writing. From Kish's port, these leave between 8am and 4pm depending on weather conditions and passenger numbers.

Valfajre-8 (☎442 1767; <http://valfajr.ir>; Kish Shipping Building, Sanaee St) operates catamarans linking Kish with Bandar-e Lengeh (one way US\$19, two hours) – but only when Kish is busy enough to warrant it. This means there can be as many as six packed boats (with families in tents on deck) per day during No Ruz, but no services at all just a few weeks later. When they operate, catamarans leave in the morning (returning from Lengeh at 1pm).

i Getting Around

Midrange and top-end hotels provide free airport transfers for their guests. Otherwise, a taxi from the airport to most parts of the island will cost US\$4.

Excellent air-con minibuses (short trip US\$0.35, longer trip US\$0.70) cruise the northern and eastern roads between Mir Mohanna and Marjan Mall; just flag one down, hop on and pay the driver when you get off. From the boat terminal, you can crowd onto a local minibus or take a private taxi. A short taxi trip costs US\$3.

Bandar-e Lengeh بندر لنگه

☎0762

There's only one good reason to come here, and that's to leave straight away (ie on a catamaran to Kish). We've supplied sleeping and eating options for those who get stuck in the town while waiting for a ferry.

Banks are on Pasdaran St and will usually change foreign currency.

i Sleeping & Eating

Diplomat Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎224 1320; Diplomat_Hotel@yahoo.com; Janbazan Blvd; s/d US\$35/54; ☎☎) Overlooking the Gulf, this family-run place is 1.8km west of town down a lonely side road. The clean rooms have sea views and bathrooms with Western toilets; wi-fi is only available in the foyer. To find it, look for the petrol station on the main highway – Janbazan Rd is directly opposite.

Hotel Amir

HOTEL \$

(☎224 2311; Enqelab St; per bed US\$8.50) A short walk north of the port, the Amir has very basic but reasonably clean rooms and shared bathrooms with squat toilets. No English is spoken.

Amir Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Enqelab St; meals US\$7; ☀noon-4pm & 6-11pm) Close to the hotel of the same name, this no-frills restaurant has two options on offer – fried fish or chicken kabab. Both are acceptable (but only just).

i Getting There & Away

Boat

Catamarans travel to and from Kish (one way US\$19, two hours) in season, though departure times vary and services are often cancelled due to lack of demand or rough seas. Tickets can be purchased at either of the travel agencies on the eastern side of Enqelab St near the port, or at the ticket office of **Valfajre-8** (☎222 0252; <http://valfajr.ir>; Imam Khomeini Blvd) on the eastern edge of the port.

Assuming that the seas aren't too rough, it is usually much quicker to take an open speedboat (one way US\$11, 30 to 45 minutes) from Bandar-e Charak (89km west of Lengeh) to Kish. To do this, take a savari (US\$4, 80 minutes) from Lengeh to Charak, where it will drop you at the beach from which the boats leave when full (10 passengers). Most people travel this route between about 6am and 10am. Services from Bandar e-Aftab, were suspended at the time of writing.

Valfajre-8 also operates catamaran services to Sharjah in the UAE. These usually leave on Saturdays, Mondays and Wednesdays; tickets cost US\$80/75 for 1st class/economy. Contact the office or an accredited ticket agency (see the company website) to book and purchase tickets.

Bus & Savari

Lengeh's bus terminal is about 2km east of town on the Gulf side of the main highway. Buses to/from Bandar Abbas (*mahmooly* US\$5,

three hours, three daily) stop here en route to/ from Bushehr (US\$8, 8½ hours) but only usually run in the afternoon. Savaris are a better option.

Savaris (US\$7.50, 2¼ hours) to Bandar Abbas leave regularly between 6am and 8pm from outside the bus terminal. Savaris to Charak leave from outside the petrol station situated about 1.8km west of the port. Beware the savari organisers, who have in the past tried to charge us more than the set fare; check the official rates that are posted (in Farsi) on a sign at the bus terminal.

Bandar Abbas

بندر عباس

☎0761 / POP 379,301

Though founded by and named for one of Persia's greatest kings, Shah Abbas I, the bustling 'Port of Abbas' is short on both historical features and charisma these days. Strategically positioned overlooking the Strait of Hormoz and the entrance to the Persian Gulf, the city, known to most Iranians simply as 'Bandar', is the capital of Hormozgan province and home to Iran's busiest port but doesn't have much to offer the foreign visitor – we only include it as a transport hub for Qeshm and Hormoz.

Smuggling is big business here – everything from cars to carpets circumnavigates the customs inspectors in these parts. Needless to say, if you're walking along the seafront at night and notice boxes being hurriedly unloaded from a dark-coloured speedboat, resist the temptation to offer to help with the haulage.

History

The rise, fall and rise again of Bandar Abbas over the last five centuries has been directly linked to the role of meddling European powers. Once a tiny fishing village called Gamerun, it was chosen as Persia's main southern port and naval dockyard after Shah Abbas I defeated the Portuguese on nearby Hormoz Island in 1622 (see the boxed text, p219). The British East India Company was granted a trading concession, as were Dutch and French traders, and by the 18th century Bandar had become the chief Persian port and main outlet for the trade in Kermani carpets.

The port went into decline following the end of the Safavid dynasty and the withdrawal in 1759 of the British East India Company. The Sultan of Oman took control of Bandar in 1793 and held sway until 1868. The city's role remained peripheral until the Iran-Iraq War, when Iran's established ports at Bushehr, Bandar-e Imam Khomeini and Khorramshahr were either captured or became too dangerous for regular shipping. With the help of road and railway links to Tehran and Central Asia, it hasn't looked back.

👁 Sights

Bandar isn't blessed with many must-see sights – truth be told, it has none – but it's not totally devoid of flavour. The lively **bazaar** (Taleqani Blvd) rambles its way across two blocks just back from the seafront, and is best visited in the early evening. A seafront promenade leads east and ends at the **fish market**, which does a brisk trade in the morning.

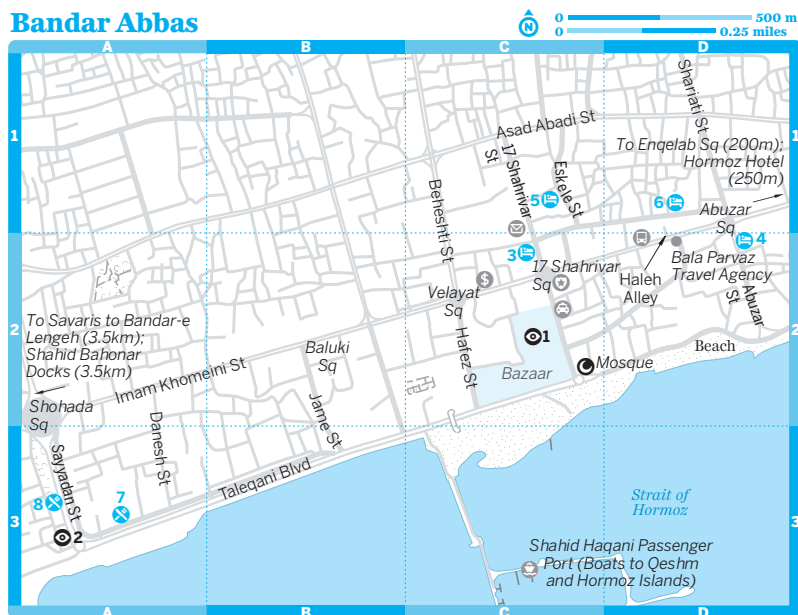
IRAN'S BANDARI

About 3% of Iranians are Arab and most of these live in Bushehr, Khuzestan and Hormozgan provinces, near or on the Persian Gulf coast. They have traditionally lived in the Gulf ports (known as *bandars*) and are often called *Bandari*. Arabs in Khuzestan are mostly Shiite, many having arrived from Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, while those along the Persian Gulf are mainly Sunni.

These Iranian Arabs speak a dialect of Arabic and usually have darker skin than other Iranians. They also dress differently – women's clothes are refreshingly colourful and some women wear the *burqa*, a sometimes-metal, sometimes-fabric mask that can differ in design from village to village, town to town. *Burqas* are not very common these days, but can still be seen in Bandar Abbas, on Qeshm Island and in the southeastern town of Minab. Men wear the *abba*, a long sleeveless tunic, usually in white, with sandals and perhaps an Arabic turban. Elsewhere you will see men in *dishdasha*, the traditional floor-length shirt-dress, with the long headscarf known as *gutra*.

Iranian Arabs have their own music, characterised by the *ney ammoon* (a sort of bagpipe) and a strong, fast beat often accompanied by a shimmying dance similar to belly dancing.

Bandar Abbas



Bandar Abbas

Sights

- 1 BazaarC2
2 Fish MarketA3

Sleeping

- 3 Atilar HotelC2
4 Bolvar InnD2
5 Hotel DaryaC1
6 Naz HotelD1

Eating

- 7 Fast Food KavookiA3
8 Strawberry RestaurantA3

Information

- Atilar Safar Tour & Travel
Agency (see 3)

Sleeping

Atilar Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎222 7420-25; www.hotelatilar.com; off 17 Shahrivar St; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$75/115/140; 🍴📺) Dominating the centre of town, this relatively new multistorey hotel has large, comfortable rooms, a restaurant and very helpful English-speaking staff.

Naz Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎222 3254; end of Haleh Alley, off Imam Khomeini St; s & d/tr US\$60/70; 🍴📺) Secreted in an alleyway off Imam Khomeini St (and therefore quiet), this newly opened hotel offers keenly priced, clean and comfortable rooms with satellite TV. No English is spoken.

Hotel Darya

HOTEL \$

(☎/fax 224 1942; Eskele St; s/d/tr without bathroom US\$25/32/39; 🍴📺) Set back from 17 Shahrivar St behind a car park, the Darya is probably the pick of the town's budget places. Though they don't live up to the promise of the swish foyer, rooms have comfortable beds and the shared bathrooms are clean (squat toilets only). Breakfast costs US\$2 and no English is spoken.

Hormoz Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎334 2201-5; http://hormozhotel.com/en; Enqelab Sq; s/d/ste US\$95/150/280; 🍴📺📺) This hulk near the sports stadium has the reputation as being Bandar's best hotel, but we're not convinced. Rooms are comfortable but worn, service is desultory, the location isn't great and the restaurants are overpriced. No discounts in the low season, either.

Bolvar Inn

HOTEL \$

(☎222 2625; Abuzar St; r without bathroom US\$17; ☎) The wheeze of old air-con units greets guests when they enter the central courtyard of this ultrabasic place. Rooms are clean, but the beds are dreadfully uncomfortable and the shared bathroom facilities are inadequate (a couple of squat toilets and only one shower). No breakfast and no English spoken.

**Eating**

Fast food and *kababis* (kabab shops) can be found on Imam Khomeini St around Abuzar Sq, along the waterfront and on Sayyadan St west of the centre. For an upmarket meal, head to the Hormoz Hotel.

Strawberry Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Sayyadan St; meals US\$6-12; ☎noon-8pm Sat-Thu) Seafood is the main event here, which is appropriate considering the restaurant's location close to Bandar's bustling fish market. The sleek modern interior is always full of locals, who are particularly enamoured of the fried fish with a slightly spicy dipping sauce.

Fast Food Kavooki

FAST FOOD \$

(next to 15 Moj Alley, Taleghani Blvd; meals US\$8; ☎5.30-11pm) A great location on the seaside promenade and offerings that are a cut above the competition make this wildly popular place worth a visit. The hamburgers and fried chicken are tasty and the fries are hot (something that can't be said about most Iranian fast-food joints). Eat inside the castlelike building or claim a table on the outdoor terrace, which overlooks the sea.

**Information**

The arcade in the Setareh-e Jonub Shopping Centre on Taleqani Blvd has several *coffeenets* (internet cafes).

FLIGHTS FROM BANDAR ABBAS

DESTINATION	FARE (ONE WAY)	FREQUENCY
Esfahan	US\$75	2 daily
Mashhad	US\$95	4 weekly
Shiraz	US\$50	2 daily
Tehran	US\$97	4-5 daily
Yazd	US\$56	2 weekly

Atilar Safar Tour & Travel Agency

(☎224

4033; atilar_safar@yahoo.com; Atilar Hotel, off 17 Shahrivar St; ☎8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to noon Fri) Located in the foyer of the Atilar Hotel, this extremely efficient agency can organise tours and book air, train and bus tickets.

Bala Parvaz Travel Agency

(☎222 4500;

Imam Khomeini St; ☎8am-8.30pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri) Can book ferry tickets to the UAE but isn't particularly helpful otherwise, so we recommend using Atilar Safar for all other travel arrangements.

Darya Money Exchange

(Imam Khomeini St;

☎8am-8pm Sat-Thu) Located in an arcade just west of 17 Shahrivar Sq, this place offers good rates. The Meftahi exchange, opposite, offers a similar service.

**Getting There & Away****Air**

If you need to purchase air tickets in Bandar, do so at the **Atilar Safar Tour & Travel Agency** (☎224 4033; atilar_safar@yahoo.com; Atilar Hotel, off 17 Shahrivar St; ☎8am-8pm Sat-Thu, to noon Fri).

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS

Iran Air, Aseman and Mahan all fly in and out of Bandar and charge similar prices; most flights leave in the evening.

TRAINS FROM BANDAR ABBAS

DESTINATION	FARE (GHAZAL/ NORMAL)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Esfahan	US\$15 (normal)	15½hr	1st week – Sat, Mon, Wed & Fri; 2nd week – Sun, Tue & Thu
Mashad	US\$38 (<i>ghazal</i>)	22hr	Sat, Mon, Wed & Fri
Sirjan	US\$12/7	5hr	daily (Tehran service)
Tehran	US\$36/21	19hr	daily
Yazd	US\$21/15	9hr	daily (Tehran service)

BUSES FROM BANDAR ABBAS

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bushehr	US\$13 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	8-12hr	3 daily, afternoons
Esfahan	US\$17/13	14-16hr	5 daily, afternoons
Kerman	US\$11/7.50	7-8hr	9 daily
Shiraz	US\$8.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	11hr	6 daily
Sirjan	US\$5.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	4½hr	9 daily (Kerman service)
Tehran	US\$16.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	14-17hr	frequent
Yazd	US\$8.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	11hr	1 daily, early evening
Zahedan	US\$8.50 (<i>mahmooly</i>)	17hr	1 daily, late afternoon

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

For the 30-minute hop to Dubai, you can choose to fly Aseman (Wednesday to Friday), Iran Air (Tuesday and Saturday) or Kish Air (Sunday and Wednesday). Flights cost between US\$170 and US\$200.

Boat

DOMESTIC SERVICES

Boats from Bandar to the nearby islands of Hormoz and Qeshm leave from the Shahid Haqani Passenger Port, near the bazaar. See p218 and p219 for details.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICES

Valfajre-8 (☎542 5120; <http://valfajr.ir>; IRISL Building, Eskeleh Shahid Bahonar Blvd, near Jahangardi Crossroads) operates catamaran services to Sharjah in the UAE. These usually leave on Mondays and Wednesdays, although schedules are notoriously changeable. A one-way ticket in economy class costs US\$75; contact the office or an accredited ticket agency (see the company website) to book and purchase your ticket.

Bus

Buses leave Bandar for almost every city in Iran. However, heavy truck traffic, poor facilities along the roads and punishing temperatures make for arduous journeys; try to fly or take the train wherever possible. There's a handy **bus office** (☎223 2917; Imam Khomeini St) in town.

Savari

Savaris for Bandar-e Lengeh (US\$7.50, 2¼ hours) leave from the northeastern corner of the huge roundabout outside the Shahid Bahonar docks, about 5km west of the centre.

Train

The train station is 8km northwest of the centre; a taxi into the centre of town costs US\$6.

You'll need to book well in advance for all train trips, particularly if you want to travel on weekends or in holiday periods – use a travel agent.

i Getting Around

It's easy enough to get around Bandar on foot, although taking taxis makes good sense in summer.

To/From the Airport

A taxi from the airport into the centre of town costs US\$6.50.

Taxi

Shuttle taxis are easy to find and cost between US\$0.75 and US\$1 depending on the distance. A trip within the city will cost US\$3 *dar baste*. Most locals don't differentiate between official taxis and private cars taking paying passengers – if you stand by the side of the road both will toot their horns to signal their availability. Prices are the same so the choice is yours.

Qeshm Island

جزیره قشم

☎0763 / POP 113,846

The largest island in the Persian Gulf, Qeshm (also known as Gheshm) is fringed with biologically diverse mangrove forests, attractive beaches and 60 Bandari villages. Its sun-scorched interior features geologically significant canyons, hills, caves and valleys, most of which are now protected as part of the Unesco-recognised Qeshm Island Geopark.

Qeshm is a duty-free zone – a sort of poor person's Kish – but in a Gulf increasingly full of gleaming skyscrapers it remains refreshingly attached to the age-old Bandari way of life. Here, locals wear traditional dress, live in houses cooled by *badgirs* (windtowers) and work in boat-building yards turning out

lenges, the large wooden cargo boats that have criss-crossed the Gulf for centuries.

The island has an abundance of wildlife, including birds, reptiles, dolphins and turtles. Local communities are heavily involved in projects to protect the environment, and there is some disquiet about the effect that the country's first heavy oil refinery, currently being constructed on the island's southern coast, might have on the hitherto pristine natural landscape. Construction of the refinery is scheduled for completion in 2013.

👁 Sights & Activities

QESHM TOWN

شهر قشم

There's nothing much to see in the island's main settlement; most Iranian visitors head to the extensive **Bazar-e Bozorg** (off Pasdaran Sq) and the newer but uninspiring duty-free malls along this strip, but these don't hold much allure for foreign visitors.

FREE Ghal'e-ye Portugaliha

CASTLE

(Portuguese Castle; 🕒24hr) This crumbling edifice is Qeshm Town's best-known sight, but once you've photographed the palm tree through a curved hole in the ramparts (as everyone does) it won't detain you for long.

LAFT

لافت

This **fishing village** on the northern coast of the island is the best place in Iran to encounter the fast-disappearing traditional culture of the Persian Gulf. Perched on a rocky slope overlooking the Khoran Strait, Laft's roofscape is a wonderfully photogenic forest of *badgirs* and minarets. Views are best from the hill near the ruins of the Portuguese-built Naderi Fort. From this vantage point

you'll also see dozens of ancient wells and a white-domed *ab anbar* (water cistern).

A few hundred metres north of Laft, on the road to the car-ferry dock, is one of Qeshm's many **leng**-building yards. These traditional cargo boats are still used to carry goods back and forth across the Gulf. Other yards are found along the north coast, most notably around Peiposht, Zeinabi and Bandar-e Guran.

HARRA SEA FOREST

حرا جنگل دریا

In the local dialect, *harra* is the word for grey mangrove, and this is the Persian Gulf's largest mangrove forest. During spring, more than 150 species of migrating birds can be found here, including the Great Egret and the Western Reef Heron. The finless porpoise, humpback dolphin, common dolphin and endangered green turtle are also regularly spotted.

Sea Forest Tours

BOAT TOUR

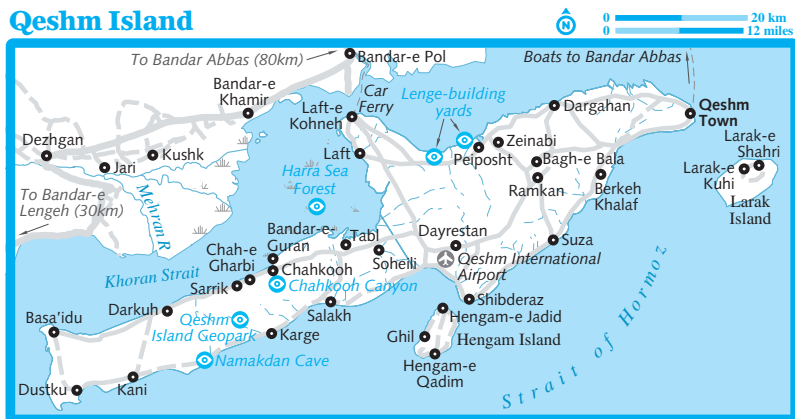
(charge per boat US\$18; 🕒7am-sunset Sat-Thu, to noon Fri) From the village of Tabl, south of Laft, local boatmen offer 40-minute tours of the sea forest in their motorised dinghies. Note that operation times can change with the season. Each boat can take six passengers.

QESHM ISLAND GEOPARK

پارک زمین شناسی قشم

In 2006 the 300-sq-km mountainous area on the western half of Qeshm Island was gazetted as the **Qeshm Island Geopark** (www.qeshmgeopark.org). Iran's first member of the Unesco-listed Global Geopark Network (to be a member, parks must have a geological heritage of international significance and must use that heritage to

Qeshm Island



promote the sustainable development of the local communities who live there). Whether you're driving through this area or looking at it on a Google Earth image, the geological significance is easy to see. Nature has carved steep-sided stone canyons, eroded flat-topped hills into sandy dunes and dramatic organ-pipe ridgelines, and dug deep into the island to form caves including **Namakdan Cave** (Khare Namaki), which at 6.8km is the longest known salt-cave system on earth.

The park is operated by a small but extremely motivated team that works with the Qeshm Free Zone Organization, Unesco, NGOs, ecotourism operators, Iranian naturalists and the local community to preserve the island's unique geology and heritage. Its programs include a project to create employment and socialisation opportunities for local women (see the boxed text, p217) and the construction of a visitors centre at the entrance to **Chahkooh Canyon**, the most spectacular of the park's eight geosites. Here, you can climb up to the intersection of two narrow vertical canyons and drink from a *chah* (well) that has been used by shepherds for centuries. The visitors centre was under construction when this book was being researched, but was expected to open in late 2012.

The onshore preservation of the hawksbill turtle through community participation is one of the many environmental projects overseen by the geopark team. Between 180 and 240 of these turtles lay their eggs on the beach at **Shibderaz village** near the airport between March and May each year; hatchings occur between April and July. Residents of Shibderaz work in shifts to protect the eggs from predators (including other locals, who have traditionally eaten them).

Other projects include the responsible aquaculture of pearls by the people of Berkeh Khalaf village and the propagation of native plants and mangroves by the people of Shibderaz and Dayrestan villages.

Island and Geopark Tours

ECOTOUR

(full-day tour per person US\$100, 2-day tour per person US\$180) If you don't have your own transport, the best way to explore the island is on a private 4WD tour organised by the Avaye Tabiate Paydar Institute (p217). You can tailor your tour to see the island's main sites, or concentrate on exploring the geopark. A full-day tour includes lunch, a guide and all transport. The two-day tour includes transport, all meals and accommodation in a local

homestay. The prices we have cited are based on a group of four people travelling; prices are higher for smaller groups.

LARAK & HENGAM ISLANDS

These two islands off the southern coast of Qeshm are surrounded by impressive soft coral reefs. Larak is the best for diving, but Hengham is known for its wildlife, including birds, gazelles and dolphins. The beaches are pristine, but only men are allowed to swim. The Avaye Tabiate Paydar Institute can organise diving trips to Hengham for US\$100 per person and to Larak for US\$130 per person (both based on a group of five). The price includes transfers to/from Qeshm Town, boat and diving-equipment hire and a dive instructor. It can also arrange a full-day ecotour of Hengham including transfer from Qeshm Town and lunch for US\$100 per person (four to eight people).

Sleeping

We recommend taking advantage of a homestay option on the island rather than staying in one of the characterless hotels in Qeshm Town. Both of the homestays mentioned here offer basic bedding and bathroom facilities but are impeccably clean, extend warm welcomes and serve delicious food. The owners speak Farsi only, so if this is a problem for you, ask the Avaye Tabiate Paydar Institute to arrange your booking.



Mr Amini's House

HOMESTAY \$

(☎0917 767 7601; Tabl; B&B US\$9) Mr Esmael Amini and his family welcome travellers into their home in Tabl near the Harra Sea Forest and are great hosts. Bedding is laid out on the floor at night and there are showers in rooms; shared (squat) toilets are off the courtyard. Meals costs between US\$8 and US\$9 depending on what is served (the fish dishes are delicious).



Mrs Fattahi's House

HOMESTAY \$

(☎0936 783 9692; Shibderaz; B&B US\$9) Mrs Leila Fattahi is one of the major contributors to the success of the Art for Conservation project (see the boxed text, p217) and will happily organise for you to watch local women making handicrafts or have them give you a Bandari henna tattoo. Her family's home is in Shibderaz village next to the beach where hawksbill and green turtles lay their eggs, so if you stay here between March and July you'll be able to watch the action at

ART FOR CONSERVATION

The women of Qeshm Island are known throughout Iran for their expertise in *golabtoun douzi*, the sewing of colourful designs onto fabric, sometimes as embroidery and sometimes as an appliqué of sequins and/or hand-woven piping. These designs often incorporate images of flowers or local marine life such as turtles and starfish.

Traditionally, women have worked on *golabtoun douzi* at home and rarely left their houses, leading to their social isolation and total economic dependence on males. All this changed in 2003, when a group of women from Shibderaz and Berkeh Khalaf villages were given assistance from the Small Grants Program of the United Nations and a Tehran-based ecotourism outfit, the Avaye Tabiate Paydar Institute, to gather together and produce clothing and accessories featuring *golabtoun douzi*. The project was called 'Art for Conservation' and the products were sold to tourists, with the profits shared between the women and local conservation projects.

The program has been so successful that the women have now opened three shops and significantly contributed to the funding of conservation efforts on the island. They now have the opportunity to become financially independent (with the collapse of the local fishing and boat-building industries many have become the main breadwinners in their households) and they also leave their homes for part of each day to work with other women and operate the shops, giving them a hitherto unimaginable freedom of movement as well as opportunities to socialise and communicate outside their immediate families.

One of the shops is located in a handicraft booth at the entrance to Shibderaz village and two are in Berkeh Khalaf village (one next to the Khalij supermarket and another at the entrance of the village near the school). All three are open from 9am to 8pm daily, though they usually close for a few hours over lunchtime. The shops sell hand-decorated shawls, bags, headbands, hairclips and clothes.

night (from a distance of course). Bedding is laid out in the lounge room in the evening, and there's one shared shower and squat toilet off the entrance hall. Meals cost between US\$7.50 and US\$9 and are very good.

Darya Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎522 1630-32; Eskele St; d/tr/q; US\$71/89/107; 📍📞📧) If you need to stay in Qeshm Town, the Darya, just east of the Eskele Sangi, is the best bet in terms of location, comfort and service. Rooms are spacious and come with kitchenettes; only the quad has a sea view. Staff speak English.



Eating

There are a number of restaurants in the shopping centres along Valiasr Blvd in Qeshm Town but none are memorable.

Ghaleh Restaurant

SEAFOOD \$\$

(meals US\$8-10; ☀noon-2pm & 6-11pm) This simple place on the waterfront opposite the *Ghal'e-ye Portoghaliha* (*Ghaleh* means 'castle' in Farsi) is run by Mr Ghafur and serves delicious Arabic seafood in the cool of evening. There's no printed menu – be sure to sample the famous spicy crab dish if it's on offer. The lunch menu is limited to one fish-and-rice dish.

i Information

Internet access is hard to come by and service is erratic; we suggest waiting until you're back in Bandar Abbas to connect. The same applies to changing money.

The **Avaye Tabiate Paydar Institute** (☎524 0785/6, 021-885 37496/7; info@tabiatpaydar.com; Roshd Centre, Golha Sq, Qeshm Town), a privately run Tehran-based ecotourism education institute run by the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Afsaneh Ehsani and Nima Azari, works with geopark management and local communities to promote Qeshm as an ecotourism destination. It can organise tours and accommodation and is highly recommended.

i Getting There & Away

Qeshm is accessible by air, speedboat and car ferry.

Air

Qeshm International Airport is in Dayrestan, about 43km southwest of Qeshm Town. Iran Air operates daily flights to/from Tehran Mehrabad (one way US\$101, 2¼ hours) leaving Tehran in the afternoon and Qeshm in the early evening. Mahan operates slightly more expensive flights during the high season.

Fars Air Qeshm sometimes operates charter flights in and out of Dubai – ask a travel agent to investigate.

Boat

There are three options for reaching the island by boat from Bandar Abbas: motorised speed-boats (US\$2.70, 35 minutes), small covered motorboats (US\$3.20, 40 minutes) and slightly larger 'cruise' boats (US\$3.60, 50 minutes). The 'cruise' boats are the safest and most comfortable. All run between Qeshm's Bahman Dock and Bandar Abbas' Shahid Haqani Passenger Port dock.

A car ferry (US\$16 return for one car and two passengers, seven minutes) crosses from Bandar-e Pol, 89km west of Bandar Abbas, to Laft-e Kohneh, near the village of Laft. The service operates 24 hours and ferries leave when full.

i Getting Around

This is one place where it really helps to have a car (particularly a 4WD), and we recommend that you consider hiring one at Bandar Abbas airport and bringing it to the island on the car ferry from Bandar-e Pol.

There is no public transport on Qeshm, and the only way of exploring or getting from one place to the next without private transportation is to hire a taxi for between US\$90 and US\$120 per day. Alternatively, you could try hitching (but remember not to use the thumbs-up sign, which is considered unforgivably rude in Iran).

Hormoz Island جزیره هرمز

☎ 0763 / POP 5677

A 30-minute boat ride from Bandar Abbas, sleepy Hormoz is a world away from the bustle of the regional capital. When your speedboat rounds the sea wall and the captain kills the motor you'll be engulfed by something almost completely unheard of in Bandar – silence.

The only settlement is tiny Hormoz Village, where a richly evocative Portuguese sea fort slowly erodes at its northern edge and an impoverished village nestles among palm trees, pale-stone mosques and dusty lane-ways rarely disturbed by traffic.

The rest of the 42-sq-km island is virtually uninhabited. The rugged interior is a barren land of forbidding peaks seared by centuries of fierce Persian Gulf sun. It's a popular destination for geology buffs, who come to see Rainbow Valley, with its spectacular landscape of different-coloured volcanic rocks and soils.

There is nowhere to stay or eat on the island. Small grocery stores in the town sell bottled water, soft drinks, biscuits and ice creams.

History

Until the 14th century this was called Jarun Island – Hormoz was the name of a long-established commercial town on the mainland. That changed when repeated bloody Mongol raids prompted the 15th Amir of Hormoz to seek a home where his head had a greater likelihood of remaining on his shoulders. He and many of his subjects moved first to Kish Island, but finally settled on Jarun.

Standing sentinel over the narrow entrance to the Persian Gulf, this new Hormoz soon became a grand emporium that attracted immigrants from the mainland and traders from as far away as India and Africa. Visitors to Hormoz described it as heavily fortified, bustling and opulent. European traders arrived and before long the Portuguese took over (see the boxed text, p219).

The Portuguese were eventually kicked out in the early 17th century and Shah Abbas I relocated the trading hub to the mainland fishing village of Gamerun, which he promptly named after himself (now Bandar Abbas). Without commerce the power of Hormoz was shattered and its people reverted to a traditional fishing lifestyle. These days the fishing industry on the is-

WARNING

The only way of reaching Hormoz is on an open speedboat. These can be difficult to get on and off, so if you're not physically agile you may wish to give the trip a miss. And if you can't swim, avoid the trip at all cost – the boats don't always carry lifejackets and when one flipped over recently 17 people drowned. Another big problem is that the winds around the island are notoriously changeable and boat services can be cancelled at any minute. This means that you could possibly be stranded on the island, which has no hotels or restaurants, overnight. Be sure to check a local weather forecast before you leave Bandar Abbas.

THE PORTUGUESE ON HORMOZ

In 1507 talented Portuguese admiral and empire builder Afonso de Albuquerque (also known as Afonso the Great) besieged and conquered Hormoz as part of his plan to expand Portuguese power into Asia. The sea fortress of Hormoz, which he ordered built in the same year, was completed in 1515.

With Hormoz Island as their fortified base, the Portuguese quickly became the major power on the waters of the Persian Gulf. Virtually all trade with India, the Far East, Muscat (Oman) and the Gulf ports was funnelled through Hormoz, to which the Portuguese, under an administration known for its justice and religious tolerance, brought great prosperity for over a century.

But Portugal's stranglehold over vital international trading routes could hardly fail to arouse the resentment of Persia and the other rising imperial powers. In 1550 Ottoman forces besieged the fortress of Hormoz for a month but failed to take the island. In the early 1600s Shah Abbas I granted the British East India Company trading rights with Persia through the mainland port of Jask, thus breaking the Portuguese monopoly. In 1622 the shah, who had no naval power with which to challenge the Portuguese, cunningly detained the company's silk purchase until the English agreed to send a force to help liberate Hormoz. The Portuguese put up a brave defence, but ultimately were forced off the island.

land has collapsed, and the local economy has been crippled as a result.

Sights

Ghal'e-ye Portughalihai

قلعه پرتغالیها

FORTRESS

Some 750m to the north of the harbour is the famous Portuguese Sea Fort, probably the most impressive and ambitious colonial fortress built in Iran. Centuries of neglect have seen much of the original structure crumble into the sea, but the thick, muscular-looking walls and rusting cannons give it a haunting beauty.

From the port, walk along the waterfront until you reach the fort's walls then continue to walk with them to your left. When they stop, turn left and walk past a row of abandoned ship-building structures until you come to the castle entrance on the tip of the cape.

The archway opens onto a wide courtyard facing the sea. On the right as you enter is the ancient armoury. In the middle of the courtyard is a subterranean church that has some splendid vaulted ceilings. Before following the path marked by stones up onto the ramparts, you can visit the ground-floor room of the watchtower if the door is open. Higher up is another door to the submerged 'water supply', a surprisingly deep and im-

pressive cistern circled by an elevated interior walkway. The crumbling upper levels of the castle offer fine views back over the village to the starkly beautiful mountains, all surrounded by the blue Gulf waters; it's a nice spot to sit, soak up the silence and let your mind wander back a few hundred years.

Officially there is an US\$0.20 entrance fee, but in four trips we've yet to find anyone to take our money. Beware the local urchins selling a motley array of souvenirs at the entrance – they've been known to throw stones at visitors who don't buy their wares.

Getting There & Around

The only way to get to Hormoz is by open speed-boat (one way US\$2.25, about 30 minutes) from the Shahid Haqani Passenger Port in Bandar Abbas. The island is usually witheringly hot and there isn't much shade, so start as early as possible. Boats leave when full – every 15 minutes or so in the morning and far less often later. The last boats usually return to Bandar about 4pm, but to be safe you should aim to return much earlier than this.

Your boat will probably be met by a motorised cart (the local equivalent of a Thai *tuk-tuk*) or one of the island's two taxis. You'll need to bargain with the *tuk-tuk* driver if you want him to take you to the castle – US\$2 would be a generous fare. The taxis charge US\$13.50 for a 90-minute tour of the island, including Rainbow Valley.



Southeastern Iran

ایران جنوب شرقی

Includes »

Meymand.....	222
Kerman.....	222
Around Kerman.....	229
Rayen.....	231
Bam.....	231
Zahedan.....	233
Mirjaveh.....	235

Best Places to Eat

- » Restaurant Ganjali Khan (p228)
- » Akhavan Hotel Restaurant (p228)
- » Hamam-e Vakil Chay-khaneh (p228)
- » Bagh-e Khannevadeh (p233)
- » Ghana-at Faludeh (p228)

Best Places to Stay

- » Akhavan Hotel (p227)
- » Akbar Tourist Guest House (p233)
- » 'Million-star hotel' (p230)
- » Meymand Guesthouse (p221)

Why Go?

Southeastern Iran is frontier territory. It combines harsh landscapes, periodic banditry and warm welcomes to form a unique and exotic travelling experience. There are some dangers; see the box, p233, before heading this way. The region stretches east across ancient Kerman province, through high deserts scarred by brown snow-capped mountain ranges and coloured by occasional oasis towns and seasonal lakes. Kerman, the main city, is, in effect, the cultural border separating the Persians and the more eastern-oriented Baluchis, whose dress and customs feel more Pakistani.

Following old caravan routes southeast across the edge of the forbidding Dasht-e Lut, most travellers will stop in historic Bam and, if heading to Pakistan, in Zahedan, where smugglers criss-cross the deserts and the rule of law is tenuous. Kerman city is the launch pad for the surrounding historic towns and incredible desert landscapes, including Mahan and the Kaluts.

When to Go

Much of southeastern Iran is desert or semidesert and the best time to avoid the heat is between around November and March. During these times daytime temperatures are often quite comfortable between about 10°C and 20°C, but overnight temperatures regularly fall to -10°C. This is particularly so in Kerman city, where the 1754m elevation tempers the heat.

Most of the places in this chapter are very dry and towns depend on *qanats* (underground water channels or canals) for their water supply. The hottest months are June to August.



Southeastern Iran Highlights

- 1 Shop and explore in Kerman's **Bazar-e Sartasari** (p223)
- 2 Watch the sunset over the **Kaluts** (p230), then bed down under a million stars
- 3 Lunch with traditional music in Kerman's **Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh** (p228)
- 4 Wander through the **Arg-e Bam** (p232), still a highlight despite the earthquake
- 5 Take a day trip to **Mahan Rayen** (p230), with its World Heritage-listed garden and monumental shrine
- 6 Sleep in a cave in **Meymand** (p221), the troglodyte village without a million tourists
- 7 Check out the 'new Arg' at picturesquely **Rayen** (p231)
- 8 Tuck into some world famous **Bami dates** and date-filled **colompeh** biscuits

Meymand

میمند

☑0392 / POP 60 (130 IN SUMMER) / ELEV 2240M

'This mosque is about 180 years old,' said the guide. 'It's the newest building in the village.' Welcome to Meymand, a troglodyte village about equidistant from Shiraz, Yazd and Kerman. Meymand has been continuously occupied for more than 3000 years (some say 10,000) and consists of 2560 rooms in 406 mostly uninhabited caves dug into the walls of a valley. It's similar to Cappadocia in Turkey, albeit smaller and without the tourists.

Meymand isn't exactly busy but it sees enough day-trippers that the elderly village women have taken to selling locally woven baskets, wild herbs and traditional nomad hats made of *namad* (wool soaked and pressed until it mats together). If you have someone to translate for you, the herbs are pretty interesting, too. A local woman, Salma, prescribed us herbs to treat diabetes and headache, and told us their medicinal use has been understood by her family for generations. Given her parents both lived to be 100, she might be onto something.

You can walk out into the surrounding hills and visit an interesting cave museum and also the restored village *hammam* (bathhouse).

Sleeping & Eating

Meymand Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☑439 2003; www.maymand.ir; dm US\$11) On the west side of the valley near the entrance to town, eight very old cave rooms have been converted into this guesthouse. With *namad* carpets on the floors, beds carved into the walls and warm lighting, it's easy to be transported to another time. Bathrooms are shared but clean, with steaming showers. The three meals (not included in the price) are prepared by village women and usually involve ingredients grown locally. All good, but given how quiet it is and that there is not always an English-speaker around, consider bringing a friend.

Getting There & Away

To get to Meymand you first have to get to Shahr-e Babak. Buses leave Shahr-e Babak every day for Yazd (US\$3.50, 4½ hours) at 6.30am and 7.30am, returning about 1pm and 2pm; savaris (US\$8, three hours) leave from Abuzar Sq in Yazd. Several buses leave every day from Shiraz and Kerman. Savaris from Kerman go first to

Rafsanjan (US\$3, 1½ hours) where you get another to Shahr-e Babak (US\$5, 2½ hours). A taxi *dar baste* (closed door, used to indicate you want private hire) is about US\$75 from Yazd, Shiraz or Kerman.

You'll probably need to hire a taxi *dar baste* (US\$6) for the 35km trip from Shahr-e Babak to Meymand.

Kerman

کرمان

☑0341 / POP 515,000 / ELEV 1754M

The desert trading city of Kerman has long been a staging point for travelling between Persia and the Indian subcontinent and today it remains the best place from which to explore southeastern Iran. The city has a mud-brick core centred around the historic and very lively bazaar. This is surrounded by ever-expanding low-rise, blond-brick suburbs punctuated by *qanat*-fed parks.

The city is something of a melting pot, blending Persians with the more subcontinental Baluchis who dominate areas east of here. This mix is most evident in the bazaar, which is a highlight. Sights in and around Kerman can keep you for two to four days.

History

Believed to have been founded in the early 3rd century AD by Sassanian dynasty progenitor Ardashir I, Kerman has a history full of prosperity and plunder. Always an important trade hub, from the 7th century Kerman was ruled in turn by the Arabs, Buyids, Seljuks, Turkmen and Mongols, and then until the Qajar dynasty by a further succession of invaders and regional despots. Kerman only gained security under the central government in Tehran during the 19th century.

Kerman's continuity was its commerce, the evidence of which can still be seen in the many caravanserais around the bazaar. As trade moved more to the sea in the 16th century, so Kerman relied more on the production of carpets, which remains important today.

Sights

Central Kerman's two main squares are Azadi Sq to the west and Shohada Sq to the east. Most important offices and sights are on or close to the road between these two squares, or in the bazaar near Shohada Sq.

Bazar-e Sartasari (End-to-End Bazaar)

بازار سرتاسري

MARKET

Stretching for 1200m from Tohid Sq north-east to Shohada Sq, Kerman's **Bazar-e Sartasari** (End-to-End Bazaar) is one of the oldest trading centres in Iran. This main thoroughfare is made up of four smaller bazaars, and a further 20 or so branch off to the north and south. It is, however, easy enough to navigate and has a vivacity that should keep you interested, especially in the morning and late afternoon.

Starting at Tohid Sq, the first section is the **Bazar-e Ganj Ali Khan**, built in the 17th century for local governor Ganj Ali Khan, which soon opens around the pretty **Ganj Ali Khan Square**. This courtyard is home to what was once Kerman's most important *hammam*, the **Hamam-e Ganj Ali Khan** (☎222 5577; Ganj Ali Khan Sq; admission US\$0.50; ☀9am-6pm), now restored and transformed into a museum. Wonderful frescoes adorn the walls and wax dummies illustrate the workings of a traditional bathhouse. The reception area, for example, was divided so men practising different trades could all disrobe together. At the east and west ends of the *hammam*, look for the 'time stones', translucent, 10cm-thick alabaster doorways through which bathers could get a rough idea of the time according to how light it was outside.

On the north side of the courtyard is the photogenic **Bazar-e Mesgari Shomali** (Coppersmith's Bazaar), and at the square's northeastern end is **Masjed-e Ganj Ali Khan** (admission free; ☀9am-6pm Tue-Sun), Ganj Ali Khan's lavishly decorated private mosque. Next door **Golshan Caravanserai** (☀9am-6pm) has recently been restored and is now home to a bunch of antique-cum-bric-a-brac stores and the Kerman Tour Guides Association (p227).

From the northeastern corner of the square, the **Bazar-e Zargaran** (Gold Bazaar) leads to a small square with an attractive portal into an old (and now closed) *madrash* (school). Follow the steps down to the **Hamam-e Ebrahim Khan**, which was being restored when we passed but, when complete, should be open for men to be rubbed, scrubbed and beaten.

From Ganj Ali Khan Sq the main bazaar continues east as **Bazar-e Ekhtiari** and passes the *Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh* (p228) before becoming the **Bazar-e Vakil**; both are about 150 years old. After about

600m the covered bazaar ends and the 700-year-old open-air **Bazar-e Mosafari** begins with vendors selling fruit and (when we visited) socks from tables and crowded storefronts. The *Masjed-e Jameh* (Jameh Mosque) can be entered from this bazaar, and you can then walk through to Shohada Sq.

Masjed-e Jameh مسجد جامع MOSQUE

(Jameh Mosque; off Shohada Sq) The **Masjed-e Jameh** is entered from both Shohada Sq and the bazaar. Well preserved, its four lofty *iwans* (rectangular halls opening onto a courtyard) and shimmering blue tiles date from 1349 but were extensively modernised during the Safavid period and later on. Interestingly, this mosque has no minaret. Instead there is a squat clock tower atop the main entrance (which is off Shohada Sq).

Museum of the Holy

Defence موزه دفاع مقدس MUSEUM

(☎271 7710; Felestin St; admission US\$0.50; ☀7am-12.30pm & 4.30-6pm) The **Museum of the Holy Defence** remembers the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Symbolism abounds, although much of it won't be obvious without an English-speaking guide. Inside is a gallery of gruesome photos, weapons, letters and documents from the war. Outside, along with a line-up of tanks and missile launchers, is a battlefield complete with bunkers, minefield and sound effects recorded from the actual war. Well worth a look.

JAMEH MOSQUES

Although every Iranian town has several mosques, the most important one is the *Masjed-e Jameh* (sometimes spelt *Jomeh* or *Jame'*), or Congregational Mosque. This is where men gather for prayers at noon every Friday and where they will listen to the Friday prayer leader preach. In small towns he may be a simple imam (prayer leader) but in bigger towns he might be an *hojattol-Eslam* or even an *ayatollah*, a religious expert who may have studied the Quran for 20 years or more. *Jameh* also means 'Friday' and Westerners often refer to the *Masjed-e Jameh* as the 'Friday Mosque'.

Kerman



Moshtari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah

مشتری مشتاق علی شاه

MAUSOLEUM

The attractive **Moshtari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah** (Shohada Sq; ☀8am-1pm & 4-6pm) is the mausoleum of Sufi mystic Moshtaq Ali Shah, and other Kerman notables. Moshtaq Ali Shah was renowned for his singing and is apparently responsible for adding the fourth string to the *setar* (which literally means 'three strings'). He eventually fell so far out of favour with the local religious community that he was stoned in the Masjed e-Jameh. Most of what you see, in-

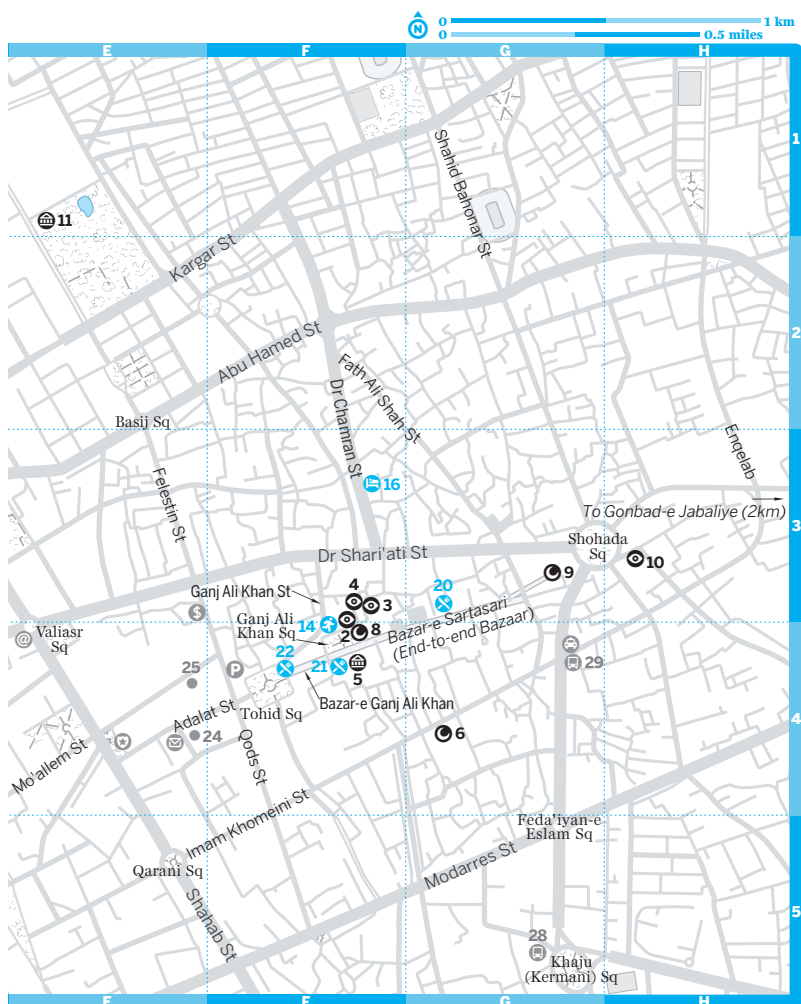
cluding the prominent blue-and-white-tiled roofs, dates from the late Qajar period.

Imam Mosque

مسجد امام

MOSQUE

The expansive **Imam Mosque** (Imam Khomeini St) is worth a look specifically if you're interested in the process of rehabilitating old buildings. Dating from the early Islamic period, restoration work has uncovered the remains of a fine mihrab (niche inside a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca) believed to date from the early Islamic period (in the southwest corner), and on the roof a series of three unusual mihrab-style



niches, the origins of which remain a mystery. To see them, ask the attendant nicely or come with a guide.

Sanati Museum of Contemporary Art

Art موزه صنعتی هنرهای معاصر **MUSEUM**
Occupying a former orphanage, this **art museum** (☎222 1882; Dr Shariati St; admission US\$0.50; ☎9am-12.30pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun, 5-7pm in summer) is a pleasant surprise in a town that can otherwise feel a long way from modern cultural pursuits. In a Qajar-era building set around an attractive courtyard, the museum houses paintings, sculptures and stone

inlays by famous local artist Sayyed Ali Akbar Sanati (1916–2006), who spent most of his childhood in the orphanage. It also exhibits works by younger Iranian artists and even a bronze hand by Auguste Rodin. Not surprisingly, it's a good place to meet open-minded young Kermanis.

Yakhchal Moayedi

HISTORIC BUILDING
The Safavid-era **Yakhchal Moayedi** (Moayedi Ice Pit; Abu Hamed St; ☎8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) is a well-preserved, conical adobe structure that was used to store ice. The ice store was, and

Kerman

📍 Sights

- Archaeology Museum (see 1)
- 1** Bagh-e Harandi D4
- 2** Bazar-e Mesgari Shomali F3
- 3** Bazar-e Zargaran F3
Golshan Caravanserai (see 8)
- 4** Hamam-e Ebrahim Khan F3
- 5** Hamam-e Ganj Ali Khan F4
- 6** Imam Mosque G4
- 7** Kerman National Library D3
- 8** Masjed-e Ganj Ali Khan F4
- 9** Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) G3
- 10** Moshtari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah H3
- 11** Museum of the Holy Defence E1
- 12** Sanati Museum of Contemporary Art D4
Traditional Musical Instruments Museum (see 1)
- 13** Yakhchal Moayedi D3

🚗 Activities, Courses & Tours

- Kerman Tour Guides Association (see 8)
- 14** Vatan Caravan Tours & Travel Agency F4

🛏 Sleeping

- 15** Akhavan Hotel B5
- 16** Amin Hotel F3
- 17** Jalal Guesthouse D1
- 18** Naz Hotel B5
- 19** Omid Guesthouse B4

🍴 Eating

- Akhavan Hotel Restaurant (see 15)
- 20** Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh G3
- 21** Qanat Faludeh F4
- 22** Restaurant Ganjali Khan F4

📄 Information

- 23** 24-Hour Pharmacy A4
- 24** Bank Mellī (Central Branch) E4
- 25** Management of Foreigners Affairs Office E4
- 26** Parse Owj B5
- 27** Seyed Shohada Hospital C5

🚗 Transport

- 28** Minibus & Savaris to Mahan G5
- 29** Minibuses to Shahdad G4
- 30** Savaris to Shahr-e Babak, Sirjan & Rafsanjan B4
- 31** Taavoni 7 & Seiro Safar B4

in some part still is, surrounded by gardens. The gardens would fill with water during winter, and when the water froze the ice would be slid into the *yakhchal* for use in warmer months. It is now a theatre space that doubles as a tourism office, with a few brochures.

Kerman National Library

کتابخانه ملی کرمان
The **Kerman National Library** (Shahid Qarani St; ☉7am-9pm Sat-Wed, to 8pm Thu, closed Fri) modestly bills itself as the 'greatest informatic research centre in the country', but for non-Farsi speakers it's the architecture – a forest of columns supporting vaulted ceilings – that is the real attraction. Built in 1929, the style is a harmonious variation on late-Qajar-era design that was purpose built as...a textile factory.

Bagh-e Harandi

MUSEUM
Hidden behind high walls just off the main Beheshti strip, the mansion in this peaceful garden was once the Kerman governor's residence and now houses the small but well explained **Archaeology Museum** and **Traditional Musical Instruments Museum**

(admission each US\$0.40; ☉9am-5pm Tue-Sun). Built in 1911, the building was later bought by progressive businessman Abol Ghasem Harandi, who brought electricity to Kerman. On his death Harandi bequeathed the garden to the city. The upstairs Archaeology Museum displays clay, glass and metal artefacts found near Jiroft and Shahdad, while downstairs is an impressive array of musical instruments.

Gonbad-e

Jabaliye گنبد جبلیه
HISTORIC BUILDING
At the edge of town is **Gonbad-e Jabaliye** (Mountain of Stone; admission US\$0.40; ☉8am-6pm Tue-Sun), an octagonal and very old structure of unknown provenance. Some scholars date it to the 2nd century AD and think it may have been an observatory. Others say it was a tomb. Whatever its function, it is remarkable because it is constructed of stone rather than the usual brick; though the double-layered dome, added 150 years ago, is brick. Today it houses a museum of old gravestones. Be careful not to photograph the neighbouring army base.

To get here, take a shuttle taxi from Shohada Sq or a taxi *dar baste*.

Tours

These guides can arrange tours within Kerman and to surrounding areas, including the Kaluts, Mahan and Rayen. They charge similar prices. The **Kerman Tour Guides Association** ([☎](tel:02232855)223 2855; Caravanserai off Ganj Ali Khan Sq) has many more male and female guides.

Jalal Mehdizadeh

GUIDE

([☎](tel:0271018509131423174)271 0185, 0913-142 3174; jalalguesthouse@yahoo.de) Jalal, who also owns Jalal Guesthouse (p227), has a car, speaks German and English and is well organised.

Vatan Caravan Tours & Travel Agency

GUIDE


([☎](tel:0271223759109133435265)/fax 223 7591, 0913-343 5265; vatan_caravan@yahoo.com; Ganj Ali Khan St) Hossein Vatani can arrange trips to nomad encampments and into the Kaluts to sleep in the 'million star hotel'. Costs depend on the transport you choose.

Sleeping

The rules of supply and demand, or a lack thereof, keep prices relatively low in Kerman.

Akhavan Hotel


HOTEL \$\$

([☎](tel:024414112)244 1411-2; akhavanhotel@yahoo.com; Ayatollah Saduqi St; s/d US\$40/60; ) The welcoming Akhavan brothers are a mine of information and their comfortable if slightly ageing rooms are good value even before the low-season discounts of up to 30%. The restaurant food is a reason to stay in itself and the brothers can help with information on visa renewals and organise day trips. Se-

cure parking is popular with overlanders, and costs US\$2 per person per day with use of the bathrooms.

Kerman Pars Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

([☎](tel:02211930132)211 9301-32; www.pars-hotels.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; s/d/ste US\$70/110/170; ) This 200-room behemoth on the edge of town is Kerman's most luxurious. Rooms are clean and well equipped and it feels like a business hotel from the foyer to the facilities – three restaurants, a gym, a sauna and a pool that's open to men and women, though not at the same time.

Jalal Guesthouse

HOMESTAY \$

([☎](tel:0271018509131423174)271 0185, 0913-142 3174; jalalguesthouse@yahoo.de; 11 Gharbi 3 St, off Varzesh St, near Ashura Sq; per person incl breakfast US\$20; ) North of the bazaar, local guide Jalal Mehdizadeh and his family open their home to foreign travellers. It has convenient luxuries like washing machine, internet and satellite TV, and is a good choice for lone women travellers and overlanders looking for safe parking. Jalal speaks English and German and prefers guests call ahead.


Amin Hotel

HOTEL \$

([☎](tel:02250954)225 0954; aminhotel@yahoo.com; Dr Chamran St; tw/q US\$35/70; ) Near the bazaar, the long-running and welcoming Amin has 16 large, simple rooms with soft beds and Western bathrooms. It has a quad with kitchen that's suitable for families, and a restaurant downstairs. Front rooms can be noisy.

Naz Hotel

HOTEL \$

([☎](tel:02446786)244 6786; Ayatollah Saduqi St; tw US\$35; ) The Naz has English-speaking management and 28 largish rooms that are clean, pink and fair value. It's opposite Akhavan.

BALUCHIS

Sistan va Baluchestan and, to a lesser extent, Kerman provinces are home to about 1.5 million Baluchis. They are part of a much greater population whose traditional lands cross the Baluchestan desert deep into Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Quetta is their regional capital. A significant minority are nomadic, living in tents and migrating in pursuit of seasonal pastures. They speak Baluchi, a language related to Pashtu, and the majority are Sunni Muslims.

Baluchis are easily recognisable for their darker skin and distinctive clothing, with women wearing colourful attire and men the *shalwar kameez*, a long loose shirt and baggy trousers. Baluchi arts, especially handiwork and embroidery, are also more similar to those found in Pakistan and India than elsewhere in Iran. Baluchis are famous for camel races, though you'll be very lucky to find one.

Given they look, dress and worship differently to most Iranians, Baluchis are widely distrusted in the rest of the country.

Omid Guesthouse

HOTEL \$

(☎244 7488; Esteghlal Ln No 2, off Esteghlal St, near Azadi Sq; s/tw/tr without bathroom US\$13/21/26; 📍) In a new location, the welcoming, family-run Omid has clean, simple rooms with fridge that attract ultrabudget backpackers and Iranian families with patients in the nearby hospital. Guests can use the kitchen, there is safe parking and the shared toilets are squats.

**Eating**

For cheap eats, there are *kababis* (kabab shops), ice-cream and fruit-shake places, and a pizza place or two on Dr Beheshti and Dr Shariati Sts, particularly around the squares, and several new eateries on Abu Hamed St between Basij Sq and the Yakhchal Moayedi. Restaurant prices are relatively low in Kerman.

Kerman has some fantastic sweets shops and you'll see the local speciality, *colompeh* (biscuits filled with dates), all over town.

Restaurant Ganjali Khan

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Tohid Sq; meals US\$3-6; ☎9am-9.30pm) This underground place near the bazaar entrance is not as charming as the Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh, but delicious, inexpensive food makes it a local favourite. The *ghorme sabzi* (diced meat, beans and vegetables, served with rice; US\$3) and *dizi* (lamb stew made with lentils, potatoes and tomato; US\$3) are both good, or just sit with tea and qalyan (water pipe; US\$3). There is no English sign.

Akhavan Hotel Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Ayatollah Saduqi St; meals from US\$4) What this place lacks in atmosphere (it looks like a hospital ward) is amply made up for with a delightfully varied menu and low prices. Skip lunch and try a bit of everything with the big buffet dinner (US\$7), or take the veggie option with *kashke bademjan* (eggplant, garlic, onion, mint and whey; US\$3). For a little more romance get it served in your room.

Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh

TEAHOUSE \$

(☎222 5989; Bazar-e Vakil; admission US\$0.30, meals from US\$4; ☎9am-6pm Sat-Thu, to 2pm Fri) Architecturally magnificent, this subterranean teahouse built in 1820 is easily the most atmospheric dining option in Kerman. It's best known for its elegant arches, vaulted ceilings and live music throughout the day, but the food isn't bad (lunch only from noon to 2.30pm); the specialities are

kashke bademjan (US\$2.50) and the Kermani *khoreshht bozghorme* (US\$3), a mixture of lamb and pickled garlic with whey, butter and walnuts.

Qanat Faludeh

DESSERTS \$

(Bazar-e Ganj Ali Khan; faludeh US\$0.60; ☎9am-7pm) This local institution serves *faludeh Kermani*, the regional version of the Iranian dessert, made from wheat starch, sugar, mint and ice. The texture is jelly rice.

**Shopping**

Kermani carpets have been famous for centuries and are renowned for being very large, soft and with designs featuring flowers, nuts and fruit as well as portraits. The bazaar is the place to find them and also Kermani *pate*, a brightly coloured square of cloth with intricate embroidered designs.

**Information****Dangers & Annoyances**

Kerman is reasonably safe but the number of drug addicts makes it worth taking extra care at night.

Emergency

24-Hour Pharmacy (☎245 760; Imam Jameh St)

Police headquarters (☎110, 211 3068; Adalat St)

Seyed Shohada Hospital (☎252 6280; Esteghlal St) For emergencies.

Internet Access

There are several *coffeenets* around in upper floors of the buildings around Valiasr Sq, and others on the road between Valiasr Sq and Azadi Sq.

Money

Bank Melli Central Branch (Adalat St) For exchange and visa payments.

Sharifi Exchange (Qods St; ☎9am-1pm & 3-6pm) The better of two exchange shops near the corner of Dr Shariati St.

Travel Agencies

Parse Owj (☎247 3300; parsehowsj@yahoo.com; 7 Ayatollah Saduqi St) Reliable agency selling air, train and bus tickets.

Visa Extensions

Management of Foreigners Affairs Office (☎218 3269; Mo'alleh St, off Qods St; ☎7am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) The office is efficient but usually only issues two-week extensions. The office is near Tohid Sq; look for the green gate. The Bank Melli Central Branch is just around the corner. The whole process should take less than an hour, *insh'Allah* (if God wills it). For more on visa extensions, see p27.

BUSES FROM KERMAN

DESTINATION	FARE (MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Bam	US\$5	3-4hr	frequent
Bandar Abbas	US\$7.50	7-8hr	8.30am, 8-10pm
Esfahan	US\$10	9-11hr	late evenings
Mashhad	US\$12	13-15hr	several 3.30-8.30pm
Shahr-e Babak	US\$3	3-4hr	8.30am, hourly noon-5pm
Shiraz	US\$14	15-16hr	6.15am, 7.15am, 8.30pm, 9.30pm
Tehran	US\$20/15 (VIP/mah-mooly)	14-16hr	hourly 2.30-10.30pm
Yazd	US\$5.50	4-5hr	regular 5am-4.30pm
Zahedan	US\$7	6-8hr	late evening

i Getting There & Away

Air

Either or both of Mahan Air and Iran Air fly to Tehran (one way US\$62, several daily), Esfahan (US\$47, Friday only), and Zahedan (US\$41, Friday only). Iran Aseman flies to Shiraz (US\$42, twice weekly).

Bus, Minibus & Savari

The bus terminal is in the southwest of Kerman but several bus companies have offices around Azadi Sq and Shohada Sq, including **Taavoni 7** (☀8am-8.30pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) and **Seiro Safar** (☀7.30am-9.30pm). These, and Taavoni 4, have most services from Kerman.

Minibuses to Mahan (US\$0.25) leave from around Khaju (Kermani) Sq. Savaris to Bam (US\$4.50) and Rayen (US\$3) leave from Sarasiyab Sq (about 5km east of Khaju Sq, ask for Meydan-e Bam). Savaris to Mahan (US\$1) leave from Khaju (Kermani) Sq. Savaris to Rafsanjan, for Shahr-e Babak, leave Azadi Sq.

If you hire a savari *dar baste* or guide it makes sense to see Rayen, Mahan and Bagh-e Shahzde as a day trip from Kerman, or en route to and from Bam.

Train

The daily train to Tehran (US\$15, 15 hours) leaves at 5.15am and stops at Yazd, Kashan and Qom, but not Esfahan. A 2nd-class train runs daily to Bam (US\$1, about two hours, 8.20am) and Yazd (US\$2.20, five to six hours, 1pm). There are three trains a week to Mashhad and, in theory, two to Zahedan (US\$5, 5.50am Sunday and Thursday).

Buy tickets from a travel agency in advance, also saving yourself a trip to the **train station** (☎211 0762), 8km southwest of town. Shuttle taxis leave from Azadi Sq for the station, or go *dar baste* for US\$2.

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

There is no airport bus. You can take a shuttle taxi along Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd from Azadi Sq, or go *dar baste* for about US\$5, depending on traffic.

Taxi

Shuttle taxis use Azadi and Shohada Sqs. From Azadi Sq, they run to the bus terminal, Bazar-e Vakil and Shohada Sq. Taxis all to yourself cost US\$2 to US\$4 around town and at least US\$7 per hour.

Around Kerman

Mahan and Rayen are easily reached by public transport, but services are less frequent to Shahdad and nonexistent to the Kaluts. It's possible to see Mahan, the Kaluts and Rayen with a driver in one very long day for about US\$80.

MAHAN

☎0342 / POP 16,800 / ELEV 1905M

Mahan, 35km southeast of Kerman, is a picturesque and low-key town that has long been famous throughout Iran for its shrine and garden, and as a summer retreat for the wealthy.

i Sights

Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali

آرامگاه شاه نعمت الله ولی MAUSOLEUM
The splendid dome over the **Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali** (admission to museum & roof US\$2.50; ☀7am-10pm) is one of the most recognisable images of eastern Iran. Shah Ne'matollah Vali was a well-known Sufi dervish, mystic and poet who died in

1431 aged more than 100. In the centre of town, the mausoleum itself dates from 1436, built by an Indian king who was an adherent of Shah Ne'matollah Vali's teachings. In the centuries that followed, many rulers added to the complex, most notably Shah Abbas I, who added the turquoise tiled domes. The mausoleum is renowned for its seven intricately carved Indian doors, though two have recently been stolen. But for us the tiny prayer room where Shah Ne'matollah Vali is said to have meditated is the highlight; the plaster walls and ceiling are covered with calligraphy in spiral wheel pattern – ask nicely to be let in.

Entry to the mausoleum is free; the ticket allows you into a small **museum** and onto the roof from where there are superb views of the town, dented Safavid-era cupola and Qajar-era minarets – which can be climbed. Sufi books and music are sold in the courtyard bookshop.

Bagh-e Shahzde باغ شازده GARDENS
Arriving at the handsome **Bagh-e Shahzde** (admission US\$0.40; ☀9am-10pm) is like being beamed onto a different planet. One second you're in the arid semidesert, the next it's all flowing *qanat* water and tall green trees. Built in 1873, the garden contains a cascading series of fountains leading up to a small palace that was once the residence of Abdul Hamid Mirza, one of the last princes of the Qajar dynasty, and is now a souvenir store. To the left, part of the complex has been turned into a teahouse/restaurant (Sofrehkhane Bagh-e Sharzde, opposite), and there's a small but unused bathhouse immediately north of the teahouse (ask to be let in by the ticket man).

As the sun disappears, the fountains and palace are floodlit, which is a wonderful sight.

The gardens are 5km up Mahan's main road from the mausoleum.

Sleeping & Eating

Mahan Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Hotel Jahangardi; ☎622 2700; mahan@ittic.com; Gharani Sq; tw/tr/ste US\$25/33/42; 📞📧) The big, tidy rooms here are fair value (and negotiable), staff are friendly and the restaurant is decent if uninspiring. The hotel is at a roundabout, a couple of blocks west of the mausoleum and the public transport route from Kerman.

Sofrehkhane Bagh-e Sharzde TEAHOUSE \$\$

(☀11am-5pm & 6-11pm) This appealing traditional restaurant in Bagh-e Sharzde has been restored and offers cosy private niches with their own fireplaces. The menu is typical but the food is reasonably good.

i Getting There & Away

About every hour, *savaris* (US\$1.30) and mini-buses (US\$0.20) travel the 35km between Khaju (Kermani) Sq in Kerman and Ne'matollahi Sq, beside the mausoleum.

SHAHDAD & THE KALUTS شهادهاد

Sleepy Shahdad is the largest town in the Takhab area, a group of about 30 oasis villages wedged between the Payeh Mountains to the south and the vast emptiness of the Dasht-e Lut to the north. Shahdad is fiercely hot in summer, but its oranges (harvested in October) are reputedly the best in Iran.

About 75 minutes drive northeast of Kerman, Shahdad is mainly of interest as a gateway to the desert. It's only-if-you've-got-plenty-of-spare-time sights are limited to the Safavid-era **Imamzadeh-ye Mohammed Ebn-e Zeid** mausoleum and, to the east of town, two prehistoric archaeological sites: the **Tappeh-ye Kohne**, the archaeological remains of a village settled about 5000 years ago; and 1km further the **Shahrak-e Kotuluha** (City of the Little People) – the name refers to a local Lilliputian legend but its origin is unknown. There's not much to see.

Shafi Abad, an oasis village a few kilometres north of Shahdad, boasts a Seljuk-era caravanserai where it's possible to climb above the grand gatehouse and the north-west tower, and check out the lodgings along the northern wall where rooms are linked by an unusual arched corridor.

Leaving the Takhab behind, the road to Birjand heads north into the Kaluts, a 145km-long and 80km-wide stretch of desert dominated by long lines of five- to 10-storey high *yardangs* ('sand castles') that have been sculpted over millennia by a uni-directional wind (though locals will give you all sorts of alternative explanations). Which ever one you believe, the reality is spectacular, especially at dawn and sunset when light and shadows paint a shimmering canvas of gold and brown.

There are no official lodgings in Shahdad, but a desert camp at the edge of the Kaluts (which has a lot of lights and paved areas) and real desert camping (subject to the security situation) are both sold as the

'million-star hotel' for the sparkling night skies; speak to a guide in Kerman. Note that midday temperatures can rise to an almost unimaginable 65°C in summer (Gandom Beriyan, 40km north, has the world's highest recorded surface temperature – over 70°C).

There is no public transport to the Kaluts. Semiregular minibuses (US\$0.50) and savaris (US\$3 per seat) travel between Shahdad and Imam Khomeini St, just south of Shohada Sq in Kerman, from where a taxi into Kaluts can be sorted (US\$15 return). However, when we went to press foreigners were forbidden to go without a guide. A savari *dar baste* to the Kaluts and back costs about US\$50. Take your passport as there is a checkpoint in Shahdad.

Rayen

📍0342 / POP 9600 / ELEV 2197M

Rayen is a small town in the lee of Mt Hezar (4420m), 11km from Kerman. On a hill overlooking the town is the **Arg-e Rayen** (admission US\$0.30; ☀️7am-sunset), an ancient adobe 'citadel'. The damage to Bam has seen the re-birth of Rayen's Arg. Its hotchpotch of architectural styles suggests it is well over 1000 years old, though its exact age is unknown. It had been abandoned for about 150 years before restoration began in 1996.

The Arg has an **outer wall** 3m thick at the base and 1m thick at the top, which supports most of the 15 towers. The entrance leads onto the **bazaar** and from the gatehouse you can climb to the **ramparts** for spectacular views. The highlight is the **governor's complex**, entered from the square, where four separate houses have been restored (and labelled) and reflect the relative luxury the governor and his family enjoyed. Note the subtly different shades of mud and straw render, demonstrating different earth used for each *khaneh* (home), and climb to the roof for more amazing views. Covered *kuches* (lanes) weave their way through the rest of the Arg, look for the small **zurkhaneh** (literally 'house of strength'; see p292).

Hamid Reza (📞662 3644) is the caretaker of the Arg and has a simple sword-making workshop inside the main gate.

Sleeping and eating options are limited. Small restaurants and sandwich shops can be found near the Arg and around Azadi Sq.

Rayen Arg Tourist Hotel (📞662 3578; s/tw US\$9/13; 🍷) has nine compact, little-used rooms above a restaurant. Rooms have bathrooms with squat toilets. As you enter town, turn right (west) at the roundabout and it's about 300m along on the right – look for the green-tiled facade.

Rayen is 23km south of the Kerman–Bam road, the turn-off being 88km from Kerman. Buses (US\$1.50) leave Kerman bus terminal every hour or so; Taavonis 3 and 16 are your best bet. Savaris (US\$3) are more frequent, leaving from Kerman's Khaju Sq and terminating 1km from the Arg.

Bam

📍0344 / POP 74,000 / ELEV 1065M

Historic Bam is a desert oasis town famous for the delicious dates that grow on its thousands of palms and for the huge Arg-e Bam mud-brick citadel. Having been all but flattened by an earthquake that killed at least 26,200 people in 2003, Bam doesn't draw as many tourists as it once did. However, rebuilding of the city is largely complete and locals will tell you the new Bam is better than the old. With an earthquake-proof new bazaar, stadium, government buildings and, for most Bamis, a new home, this might be true. But the main reason travellers have come to Bam for almost 2000 years, the Arg-e Bam, is less evocative than it once was. For all this, Bam retains the desert oasis vibe and for us it is still worth the trip.

Bam's bus terminal is south of the centre near Arg Sq, where many buses will set you down; take a taxi to your lodgings. Bam is easy to walk around but taxis make more sense in summer.

👁️ Sights

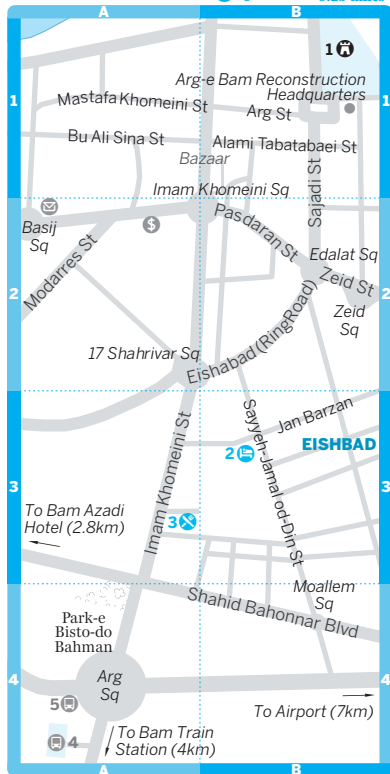
Arg-e Bam

ارگ بم CITADEL (admission free; ☀️24hr) The ancient mud city of Bam is the largest adobe structure on earth and, until the 2003 earthquake, it was one of the jewels in Iran's tourism crown. The site has been occupied for almost 2000 years and post-earthquake analysis revealed the walls were first built using Sassanian-style mud bricks.

Bam was a staging post on the trade routes between India and Pakistan at one end and the Persian Gulf and Europe at the other. Visitors, including Marco Polo, were awestruck by the city's 38 towers, huge mud walls and fairy-tale citadel – the Arg-e Bam.

راین

Central Bam



Central Bam

📍 Sights

- 1 Arg-e Bam.....B1

🏠 Sleeping

- 2 Akbar Tourist Guest House.....B3

🍴 Eating

- 3 Bagh-e Khannevaadeh.....A3

🚗 Transport

- 4 Bus Terminal.....A4
5 Buses and Savaris to Kerman,
Mahan & Jiroft.....A4

Today the Arg is the largest adobe building project on earth. Using mainly traditional methods, about 150 archaeologists, engineers and labourers are rebuilding the outer walls, the main citadel and a few buildings in the surrounding town. As team leader Afshin Ebrahimi told us, there is no plan to

rebuild everything but by the time you read this, visitors should be able to climb onto the outer ramparts, to reach parts of the main citadel and sip tea in the teahouse above its main gate.

It's a complex and painstaking job. As a former director of reconstruction told us, 'every building is different, built at different times using different materials. We must try to rebuild each building using materials as close as possible to those they were originally built with.' Which when we visited meant work to develop a lighter brick to be used in ceilings while being flexible enough to withstand an earthquake.

It's a haunting walk, but even after the *zelzele* (earthquake) the sheer scale of the Arg and the remaining or rebuilt ramparts, arches and supporting walls mean it's not difficult to imagine its majesty.

There is little shade so go in the early morning or late afternoon.

👉 Tours

Local guide **Reza Bahraminejad** (☎0913-955 6475; reza_bahraminejad@yahoo.com) is contactable through Akbar Tourist Guest House and conducts informative, enthusiastic tours, including of Bam (US\$20 per person), to the Jebalbarez mountains (US\$60), and to visit Baluchi nomads on the two-day drive/trek to the 92m-high Vorvar Abshahr waterfall (one/two people US\$120/170).

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

There are quite a few restaurants around but accommodation is limited.



Akbar Tourist Guest House HOTEL \$
(☎251 0187, 0913-246 0731; mr_panjali@yahoo.com; Sayyeh Jamal od-Din St; s/d US\$12/23, without bathroom US\$10/18; 📞📧) Mr Akbar's has long been the meeting place for travellers visiting the Arg and overlanders heading to or from Pakistan (meet here for convoys). Destroyed in the earthquake, the original has slowly been replaced by a comfortable, sociable two-storey, 15-room affair. The easy ambience and tours to nearby locales tend to keep people longer than they expect. Discounts are available.

Bam Azadi Hotel HOTEL \$\$
(☎221 0095; argebam2006@yahoo.com; Jahad Blvd; s/d/tr US\$47/60/82; 📞📞📧) Spacious, clean and comfortable rooms here are fair value even if the place is very quiet and the

Zahedan

☎0541 / POP 567,000 / ELEV 1352M

Zahedan is capital of desolate Sistan va Baluchestan province. It's a flat, dusty, featureless town that used to be known as Dozdab ('Water thieves') until Reza Shah generously changed the name to Zahedan, which means 'ascetics'. Doesn't sound appealing? Well, there's little reason to come here unless you're heading into Pakistan, and security issues make it even less inviting (see the boxed text below). If you come, taxis are plentiful for trips to and from the bus terminal (3km west of the centre) and the airport (3km east). Zahedan can feel like one huge marketplace and, appropriately, Bazar-e Ruz is the centre of town.

location, about 6km from the Arg, means you'll need a taxi to go anywhere. It's off the left of the main road into Bam from Kerman. The restaurant (meals US\$4 to US\$10) is decent.

Bagh-e Khannevadeh

TEAHOUSE \$

(off Imam Khomeini St; meals US\$4-7; ☺4pm-1am) Set in a garden adorned with mulberry trees and running water, this is a popular place for Bamis to eat, drink tea, and smoke qalyan on *takhts* (daybed-style tables) in summer, and in palm-frond huts in winter. We found the chicken kabab (US\$3) and *bastani* (ice cream; US\$0.50) both very good.

i Getting There & Away

Iran Aseman flies twice weekly between Tehran (US\$72) and Bam's small airport east of town.

Bam's bus terminal is just south of Arg Sq but Arg Sq itself is where most services stop en route to or from Zahedan. *Mahmooly* buses to Kerman (US\$3, three hours, 204km) leave frequently. Buses also depart for Zahedan (US\$4.50, four hours, 321km) every couple of hours; Esfahan (US\$10.50, 12 hours) in the early afternoon; Yazd (US\$7) and Tehran (US\$17, 17 hours) at 3.30pm and Bandar Abbas (US\$5, five hours).

Savaris run to Kerman (US\$5, two hours), Jiroft (US\$4) and Zahedan (US\$8) when they fill.

Trains run to Kerman (US\$1, 3½ hours, noon) daily, which is linked by rail to Tehran and Mashhad. Trains to Zahedan are often cancelled.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Some travellers have reported otherwise, but for years foreign guests have been banned from Zahedan's cheap hotels and, indeed, we were turned away. For food, barbecue chicken and kabab places are around the corner of Dr Shariati and Imam Khomeini Sts, near the bazaar, and the hotels have restaurants.

Esteghlal Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎323 8055; www.esteghlalgrandhotel.com; Azadi Sq; s/d/ste US\$49/68/80; 📞📧📺) The best place in town with nice enough three-star rooms and a pleasant outdoor restaurant.

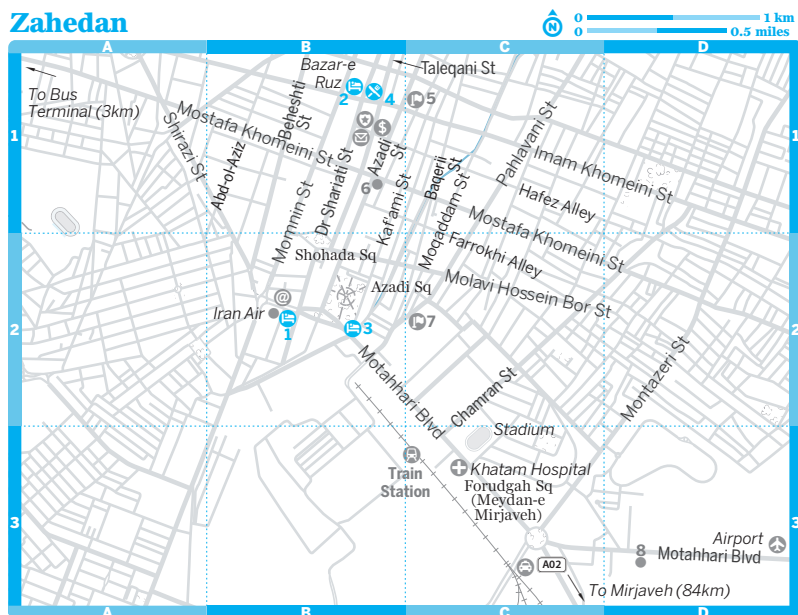
DANGERS & ANNOYANCES: EXTREMISTS & DRUG SMUGGLERS

The road from Kerman to Bam, Zahedan and Pakistan is unavoidable if you are travelling overland to or from Pakistan. In the past few years travellers have been kidnapped in three separate events on this road, all associated with a disgruntled drug smuggler trying to get a relative out of jail. They were all eventually released unharmed and reported being 'treated well', though for one Japanese man kidnapped in Bam in 2007, it took several months. As we published, that was the last kidnapping of a foreigner in Iran.

Unrelated to this, in Zahedan and elsewhere in Sistan-va Baluchistan province Sunni extremists have conducted infrequent but persistent attacks on Iranian military and civilians that, given it's been going on for several years, amounts to a low-level insurgency. The leader of these Jundollah extremists was captured and eventually hanged in 2010, but sporadic events have continued. Locals we spoke with in Zahedan were critical of Tehran's handling of the issue, and openly sympathetic with the emotion, if not the actions, of the Jundollah rebels. So far no foreigners have been targeted.

Clearly travelling in this area is not as safe as travelling elsewhere in Iran. But people continue to do it, usually without trouble. If you're coming this way, particularly east of Bam, keep a low profile, don't go off alone and do your research. Read the **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) and search **Horizons Unlimited** (www.horizonsunlimited.com) for trip reports, and ask at each stop as you head east. If you're driving, you might want to link up with other vehicles at Akbar Tourist Guest House (p233) in Bam.

Zahedan



Zahedan

Sleeping

- 1 Esteghlal Grand Hotel.....B2
 2 Esteghlal Hotel & Restaurant.....B1
 3 Kavir Hotel & Restaurant.....B2

Eating

- 4 Barbecue Chicken ShopsB1

Information

- 5 Indian Consulate.....C1
 6 Khaterat Zahedan Travel Agency.....B1
 7 Pakistani Consulate.....C2
 8 Police Department of Alien Affairs (Visa Extensions).....D3

Kavir Hotel & Restaurant

HOTEL \$

(☎326 0137; Motahhari Blvd; s/d US\$21/33;

The Kavir is worn almost to the point of being worn out. Avoid it unless you're an overlander looking for lock-up parking.

Esteghlal Hotel and Restaurant

HOTEL \$

(☎322 2250; Imam Khomeini St; r without bathroom US\$8) If you're allowed, it has ultrabasic rooms, distant bathrooms and simple, tasty meals (US\$2). Don't confuse it with Esteghlal Grand.

Information

Dangers & Annoyances

We haven't heard of anyone coming unstuck in Zahedan but it can be dangerous and, if there is any kind of security issue, is annoying because you will have a police escort almost everywhere you go. At any time it can be a little unsafe at night. Car theft is a problem so find secure overnight parking. See p233 for more detail.

Useful Contacts

Bank Melli Central Branch (Bank Melli Markazi; Azadi St) Changes US dollars and euros. After hours head to the bazaar.

Diba Coffeenet (Motahhari Blvd, near Azadi Sq; per hr US\$1.50; ☎8am-2.30pm & 3-9pm)

Khaterat Zahedan Travel Agency (☎322 9113; Azadi St)

Police Department of Alien Affairs (Motahhari Blvd; ☎7am-2pm, closed Fri) Just outside the entrance to the airport. Only if you're desperate.

Police headquarters (☎110) Near the bazaar.

Getting There & Away

Iran Air (☎322 0813/4; Motahhari Blvd) flies to Esfahan (US\$62, Friday only), Kerman (US\$31, Friday only), Mashhad (US\$51, twice daily) and Tehran (US\$72, several daily). Mahan Air and Air Aseman also fly to Tehran, Dubai and Karachi.

CROSSING THE PAKISTAN BORDER AT MIRJAVEH

Crossing this border is relatively painless – the painful part is the trip to Quetta. Both the border and security information here are liable to change, so research online at the following websites before you set off:

Horizons Unlimited (www.horizonsunlimited.com) For motorcyclists.

Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) Regular trip reports.

Quetta Overland (www.quetta-overland.com) Dated but useful maps with commentary; GPS waypoints.

The border is open from about 7am to 4.30pm Iranian time and, given Pakistan is 30 or 90 minutes ahead, about 7.30am to 5pm or 8.30am to 6pm Pakistan time; it can close at sunset in winter. Most people arrive from Bam or Zahedan (see p235) either in time to take a day bus to Quetta (617km, 800 to 1400 rupees, nine to 15 hours, usually before 10am) or a night bus (departing between about 3pm and 6pm).

Travellers get preferential treatment on both sides of the border so the whole process rarely takes longer than an hour, even with a vehicle. To change money you'll have to deal with one of the sharks who circle both sides of the border. Know the exchange rates or you *will* be ripped off. Don't buy bus tickets from moneychangers; buy them from the bus or in the square in Taftan. Changers can, however, help with form filling in Pakistan.

Taftan has been described, not unfairly, as hell on earth, especially in summer. If you get stuck there you will likely be put up with the police (there are cheap hotels but the police like to keep you in sight); solo women should strongly consider finding a man-pal for this trip. Moving on, all vehicles (public bus or private) have an armed soldier for the ride to Quetta. Toyota share taxis also make the trip, but it is not clear if foreigners can use these.

Coming into Iran, once the paperwork is finished you will probably be driven in a slow series of police escorts to Zahedan.

Vehicles heading into Iran from Zahedan will stop at one or more checkpoints (p344).

BUSES leave the terminal several times a day for the following destinations; many trips depart in the afternoon or evening to avoid the desert heat. Tehran buses also stop at Bam, Kerman and Yazd. All the following are *mahmooly* service.

Bam (US\$5, four to five hours, frequent)

Bandar Abbas (US\$9, 15 to 17 hours, daily late afternoon)

Esfahan (US\$16, 16 to 19 hours, twice daily, afternoon)

Kerman (US\$7, six to eight hours, several daily)

Mashhad (US\$17, 13 to 15 hours, 5pm to 7pm)

Shiraz (US\$14, 15½ hours, twice daily, late afternoons)

Tehran (US\$21, 19 to 23 hours, several daily)

Yazd (US\$11, 12 to 15 hours, several daily)

Buses to Mirjaveh (US\$1.30, 1½ hours, 96km) leave the bus terminal semifrequently. It's faster to take a taxi to Forudgah Sq in the east of town, known as Meydan-e Mirjaveh, and haggle with a savari driver for as close to US\$4 as you can for the 45-minute drive. The border is 15km beyond Mirjaveh, so clarify that your savari is going all the way.

DRIVERS & MOTORCYCLISTS travelling between Turkey and India often describe the trip between Zahedan and Quetta, across the vast

Baluchestan desert, as the most challenging of their journey. The road is barren and lonely and unless there is an unexpected easing of security issues, you will have a police escort from the time you depart Zahedan until you reach deep into Pakistan; consider driving in convoy on the Pakistan side. In Iran, it's best to stock up with petrol/diesel in Bam, thus avoiding the need to go into Zahedan.

TRAINS along the recently completed line from Zahedan to Bam (Monday and Friday only) are relatively slow and prone to cancellation, so most travellers take the bus. Security issues mean the slow, dusty and uncomfortable train between Zahedan and Quetta has not run for years. If things improve, check the Pakistan rail website (www.pakrail.com) for details.

Mirjaveh

میر جاوه

☑0543 / POP 13.600 / ELEV 846M

Mirjaveh is the town 15km from the Pakistan border. Locals assure us the only reason to stop here is if you get stuck at the border, and they're right. The **Mirjaveh Tourist Inn** (Hotel Ali; ☑322 2486; s/tw US\$8/12; ☐*) is better than you might expect. Overlanders can park up in the gated yard. From Mirjaveh, buses and savaris leave regularly for the border and Zahedan (bus US\$1, 1½ to two hours, 96km).



Northeastern Iran

شمال شرقی ایران

Includes »

Tehran to Gorgan	237
Gorgan	237
Semnan.....	242
Damghan	244
Gonbad-e Kavus	245
Around Gonbad-e Kavus	246
Bajgiran.....	247
Mashhad	248
Around Mashhad	259
Mashhad to Sarakhs.....	261
Sarakhs.....	261
Kalat (Kalat Naderi)	262
The Road to Afghanistan	262

Why Go?

Sandwiched between the vast desert emptiness of the Dasht-e Kavir and the steppes of Central Asia, northeastern Iran has a spine of mountains that become more lushly forested as you head west. East of Minudasht the wilderness has been declared the Golestan (Paradise) National Park. Above the overdeveloped Caspian coast rise more forests and the grand Alborz Mountains.

Mashhad's extraordinarily grand Haram-e Razavi complex surrounding the tomb of Imam Reza is Iran's holiest site and draws millions of pilgrims each year. Mashhad is also the logical staging point for visiting Afghanistan or Turkmenistan.

Best Places to Eat

- » Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse (p255)
- » Sofrakhane Sonati Darvish (p240)
- » Hafez Restaurant (p255)
- » Jahan Hotel Restaurant (p255)

Best Places to Stay

- » Vali's Non-smoking Homestay (p255)
- » Tourist Inn (p240)
- » Hotel Pars (p255)
- » Iran Hotel (p255)

When to Go

Spring (March to May) is the most beautiful season and visitors catch the steppe and mountains mantled in glorious technicolour flowers. But beware, Mashhad is engulfed by No Ruz (Iranian New Year) holidaymaking hordes (late March) and pilgrims for religious festivals such as Ramadan, and ends up transformed into Dante's hell.

April to June means you'll miss the worst human scums, still get to enjoy masses of late-blooming flowers in the mountains and dodge the worst of the summer humidity, for which the Caspian coastline is infamous.

History

Historically, the area developed as Khorasan (Where the [Iranian] Sun Rises) and Tabarestan/Mazandaran (the southeastern Caspian littoral). Millennia of culture reached a zenith here around 1000 years ago, producing many of the era's great scientists and poet-philosophers. But the 13th- and 14th-century ravages of the Mongols and Tamerlane were so complete that Tabarestan's settled civilisation was virtually wiped out. Even now the sites of several once-prosperous cities are mere undulations in the steppe. A few marvellous, lonely towers, most astonishingly at Radkan and Gonbad-e Kavus, are the last witnesses of former glories.

The 16th-century Safavid regime's move towards formal state Shiism was a major factor in the growth of Mashhad from a shrine-village to the region's foremost city.

Tehran to Gorgan

The road to **Manzadaran** from Tehran winds over stunning Alborz mountain terrain and is well worth the journey in itself, but has some treacherous switchbacks.

The gateway to the northern province is the sprawling city of **Sari**, famous for a cluster of three 15th-century tomb towers: the Imamzadeh-ye Yahya, the Imamzadeh-ye Abbas and the Borj-e Soltan Zein-ol Abedin. Keep an eye out for the Khaneh Kholbadi, a restored 18th-century mansion with fabulous coloured windows that scatter light across a glamorous interior.

Sari's finest hotel is the **Hotel Badeleh** (☎/fax 0151-422 2548; Gorgan Hwy, Angilasam; tw/ste US\$92/130; 📞📠). Also good is **Hotel Asram** (☎0151-325 5090; fax 325 5092; Valiasr Hwy; s/tw/tr/ste US\$50/55/65/80; 📞📠📧).

Sari has three flights a week to Mashhad (US\$48). A better option is to explore the wonderful landscape of the Alborz by taking the train from Tehran (four departures daily). Trains also continue to Gorgan.

Gorgan

☎0171 / POP 253,000 / ELEV 135M

This appealing city has a colourful, ethnically mixed population and an attractive location where the green Alborz Mountains stoop to meet the northeastern steppe. Gorgan was the birthplace of 'eunuch-king' Aga Mohammad who founded the expansionist

Qajar dynasty (1779–1925). Its architectural heritage is relatively limited but Gorgan makes a fine base for visiting the Turkmen steppes and Golestan's forested mountains. From the bazaar around Shahrdari (Vahdat) Sq, vibrant Valiasr St leads several kilometres southeast towards Nahar Khoran, an appealingly semirural scattering of woodland restaurants and hotels.

🗨 Sights & Activities

Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) MOSQUE (off Aftab 27th Lane; 🌅dawn to dusk) Built around a quadrangle in the **bazaar**, the attractive 15th-century mosque has blue-tiled portals, sections of traditionally tiled roof and a distinctive Mazandarani-style capped minaret.

Imamzadeh-ye Nur TOWER (Aftab 15th Alley; 🌅 8am-dusk) This 15th-century brick tomb tower may be of specialist interest, but actually finding it is a great excuse to poke around Gorgan's most interesting old alleys.

Taqavi House HISTORIC BUILDING (Taqavi Lane; admission free; 🌅8am-6pm) This magnificent building houses the Golestan Miras cultural-tourist office. Ask to peep inside the 'eight-wife' harem building which is not your average bureaucrat's photocopy cupboard.

Gorgan Museum MUSEUM (Shohoda St; admission US\$3; 🌅8am-6pm) It has limited, dusty ethnological exhibits, and displays sparse finds from local archaeological sites such as Jorjan (Gonbad-e Kavus) and Turang Tappeh (a large tumulus 22km northeast of Gorgan).

Imamzadeh Abdollah IMAMZADEH (Shohoda Sq) This is a still-expanding complex that contains dazzling mirror work. Its large blue dome looks especially photogenic viewed through trees from near the bus terminal against a distant backdrop of seasonally snow-topped ridges.

Nahar Khoran WALKING Forest paths offer an easy clean-air escape from Gorgan, albeit crowded with weekenders and adorned with litter. The road continues several kilometres through **Ziyarat**. This once-picturesque village has suffered an extensive building boom but idyllic views remain through a green cleft valley up to high ridges behind.

گرگان

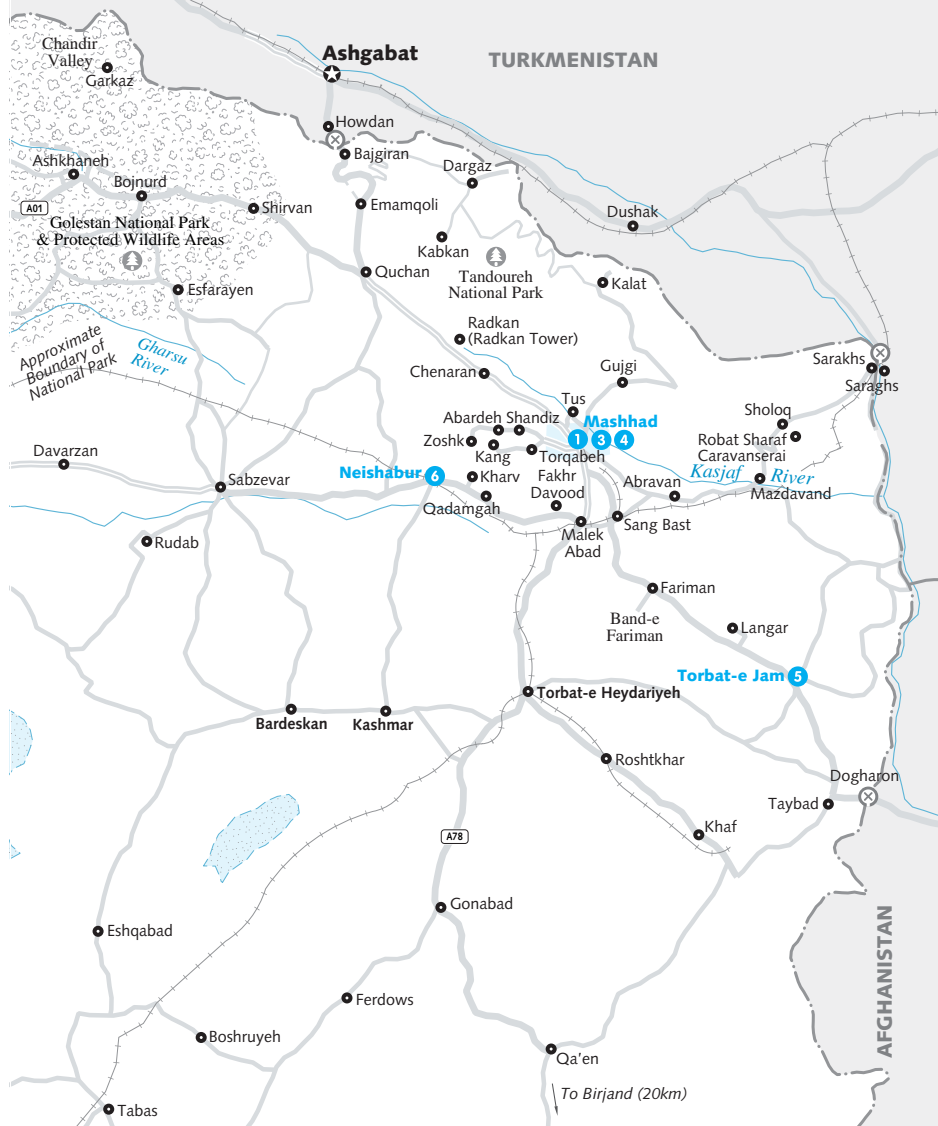


Northeastern Iran Highlights

- 1 Revel in the ecstasy of pilgrims in Mashhad's stunning **Haram-e Razavi** (p249)
- 2 Thunderbird? No, it's an incredible 1000-year-old tomb-tower, **Mil-e Gonbad** (p245) in Gonbad-e Kavus
- 3 Explore the hinterlands of Khorasan by bike with the help of Vali from **Mashhad** (p255)



0 100 km
0 60 miles

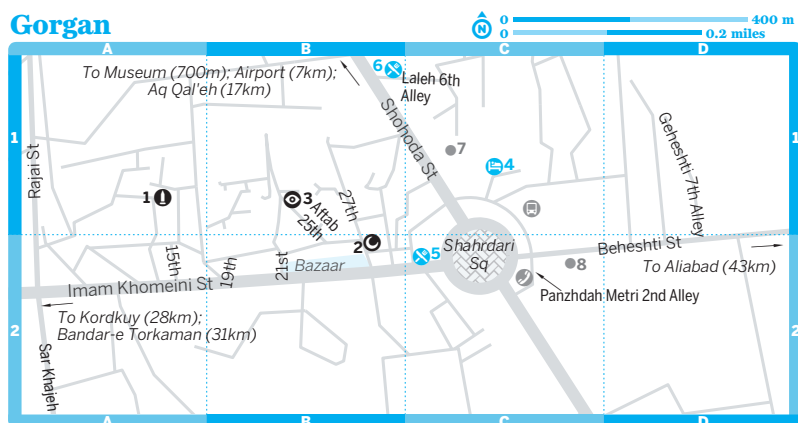


4 Horse-ride the steppe like an invading Mongol on a tour with Adibian Travel Agency in **Mashhad** (p257)

5 Take *chai sabz* (tea) with the Afghans at the Jami Mausoleum in **Torbat-e Jam** (p263)

6 Take in Omar Khayyam's magical poetry in his memorial gardens at **Neishabur** (p260)

Gorgan



Gorgan

📍 Sights

- 1 Imamzadeh-ye Nur A1
 2 Jameh Mosque B2
 3 Taqavi House B1

🏨 Sleeping

- 4 Hotel Pars C1

🍴 Eating

- 5 Absha Restaurant C2
 6 Sofrakhane Sonati Darvish B1

📄 Information

- Golestan Miras (see 3)

🚗 Transport

- 7 Shuttle Taxis to Bus Terminal C1
 8 Shuttle Taxis to Istgah Gonbad C2

walk from Shahr-dari Sq. Ali, the gregarious, philosophical owner, speaks great English, having lived in the UK for nine years.

Hotel Rahumah

HOTEL \$\$

(☎552 0050; Valiasr St km7; r US\$44-50; 🏠) The 10 rooms above this Nahar Khoran restaurant are small suites with little kitchenettes and there's a modish bar-style area. Back rooms face the woods with the murmur of streams. It's almost opposite Coffee Soufi cafe. No English sign.

Guri Camping

CAMPGROUND \$

(☎553 0248; Valiasr St km6; pre-erected tents US\$4; 🚫No Ruz & summer only) Outside the Guri restaurant-teahouse, a row of seasonal tents are filled on a first-come, first-served basis: there are no reservations. Bring mat and sleeping bag.

Hotel Maroof

HOTEL \$\$

(☎442 5591; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; s/d US\$24/32) Although slightly scrappy, this is the cheapest option to have en suite toilets, some Western-style. It's better value than the nearby Hotel Tahmasebi, despite road noise and underlit corridors.



Eating



Sofrakhane Sonati

Darvish

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(☎226 8581; Laleh 6th Alley, off Shohoda St; meals US\$4-6; 🕒11am-11pm) In a 300-year-old domed chamber hung with ships' wheels and lanterns, the Darvish is by far Gorgan's most intriguing restaurant...if you can find it. Menus are limited but the kababs are superlatively succulent. Around 9pm most

🏠 Sleeping

Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Hotel Jahangardi; ☎552 0034; fax 552 2279; Valiasr St km8; tw/bungalow US\$42/55) This place has the most magical location of several Nahar Khoran forest places. Compact, tastefully furnished bungalows are fairly closely packed through pines and palms that twinkle merrily in multicoloured evening lights. Avoid the tired, cheaper rooms above the restaurant. Pleasant outdoor teahouse.

Hotel Pars

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(☎222 9550; First Alley, off Panzhdah Metri 2nd Alley; s/tw/tr/q US\$5/8/10/12) Set around a pleasant courtyard of orange trees, this clean and central yet surprisingly peaceful *mosaferkhaneh* (cheap hotel) lies just a minute's

evenings there's live traditional Persian music from owner-manager Ahmad Morshé, who speaks fluent Romanian plus a little English.

Absha Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(☎222 2993; Imam Khomeini St; meals US\$3-6; ☎noon-4pm & 7.30-10pm) The smartest of many eateries around Shahrđari Sq for decent *polo-morgh* (chicken and rice) and *ghorme sabzi* (green mix of diced meat, beans and vegetables, served with rice). An unpretentious place next door serves ice cream and fresh-squeezed fruit juice.

For pizzerias, head down Valiasr St. Continue all the way to Nahar Khoran for outdoor teahouses, some nicer restaurants and the eccentric **Guri** (☎552 4891; Valiasr St km6; kababs US\$1; ☎4pm-1am), the main building of which is shaped like a giant samovar topped by a big concrete teapot.

i Information

Arpa Coffeenet (Valiasr St; internet per hr US\$1; ☎9am-3.30pm & 5.30-10.30pm) Near Edalat 10th St.

Golestan Miras (☎226 1802; Taqavi House, Taqavi Lane; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Cultural-tourist office. Occupies a splendid, part-renovated 19th-century merchant's house. Plentiful colourful brochures.

International telephone office (Beheshti 2nd Alley; ☎7am-9.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-2pm & 4-9.30pm Fri)

Police Foreign Affairs Department (Niwentisdam Atboye Khoreji; ☎218 2648; Molaghay St; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Visa extensions. Staff are helpful despite sometimes being overloaded with Central Asian applicants. Apply by 9.30am; collect around noon. The office is two short blocks from the big Bank Melli tower where you need to pay the IR300,000 fee.

Tourist Exchange (☎232 1929; Valiasr St at Edalat 23rd St; ☎9am-1pm & 5-9pm) Painless moneychanging.

i Getting There & Away

Air

There are daily flights to Tehran (US\$35) on Iran Air and Iran Aseman. Iran Air flies to Mashhad (US\$35) thrice weekly. English-speaking **Komeil Golestan Tour & Travel** (☎232 6664; komeilgolestan@samopardaz.com; Valiasr St, cnr Edalat 21st St; ☎8.30am-7pm Sat-Wed, to 2pm Thu) sells the tickets.

Bus, Minibus & Savari

From the big **main terminal** (Enqelab Sq), north of the centre, major bus destinations are included in the following table.

Many through-buses to/from Mashhad don't bother with the terminal, instead dropping off and picking up passengers at Enqelab Sq and/or just east of Mofateh Sq (west of the centre). A well-organised minibus terminal directly east of the bus terminal has frequent as-full services to Bandar-e Torkaman (US\$3, 40 minutes).

Minibuses/savaris (shared taxis) for Gonbad-e-Kavus (US\$0.50/1, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Gonbad** (Blvd Jorjan), a small yard at the eastern edge of town.

Train

Gorgan-Tehran services (US\$2 to US\$5, 11 hours) travel overnight in both directions. For day travel through the Alborz mountains, travel to Sari and take a daytime train.

i Getting Around

Convenient shuttle taxis (from US\$1) run from predictable points near Shahrđari Sq. Most city buses start from Panzhdah Metri 2nd Alley. However, for Nahar Khoran Sq and upper Valiasr St, savaris (US\$1) and bus 29 (pre-paid ticket US\$10, every 20 minutes) start from Valiasr Sq.

BUSES FROM GORGAN

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Esfahan	US\$17/8	16hr	2-3.30pm
Mashhad	US\$8/4.50	11hr	6-10am & 6-10pm
Rasht	US\$5	9hr	hourly 7.30-1.30pm & 8.30-10.30pm Seiro Safar
Tabriz	US\$21.50 (VIP)	14hr	3pm Taavoni 5 & Seiro Safar
Tehran	US\$10/5	8hr	frequent am & 10-11.30pm
Zabol	US\$16	25hr	6-7am Taavoni 14
Zahedan	US\$12	26hr	6am Taavoni 14

Around Gorgan

KORDKUY

📍0173 / POP 31,000 / ELEV 28M

کردکوی

Attractive **Park Jangal** is a popular picnic site 5km behind Kordkuy (locally pronounced *Kord-koo*). However, the main reason to visit is to organise a beautiful if arduous 4WD ride across the impressive forest escarpment to the Mil-e-Radkan tower.

The relatively high-class **Bahman Hotel** (📍3221501; www.bahmanhotel.com; Sari Hwy; s/d/ste US\$55/80/95) tries a little too hard to be colourfully grand but is comfortable despite the road noise. It's 150m west of Shahr-dari Sq where very frequent Gorgan savaris arrive (US\$1, 20 minutes).

MIL-E-RADKAN

(WEST RADKAN TOWER) میل رادکان

An awkward but highly rewarding 4WD trip takes you right across the near-vertical mountain ridge behind Kordkuy on a seemingly unending ladder of hairpin bends. Glimpsed Caspian views are fabulous from the top near scruffy Drazno village. Scenery remains appealing as you wind back down out of the forests into a secret valley of traditional mud-and-timber hamlets. **Kondab** and **Latkueh** villages, each requiring a slight detour, are especially quaint. Eventually you find **Mil-e-Radkan**, sitting upon an astounding lonely knoll, wistfully gazing at the cliff-edged valley. In English it's sometimes called West Radkan Tower to differentiate it from the better-known Radkan Tower (p260). It was built for a military commander in AD 1020 by the Bavend dynasty of Tabarestan. Along with a small band of Arabic inscriptions it has some stylised Pahlavi letters, virtually the last known use of that ancient script in Iran. Just getting here is a thrill.

Dry-weather 4WD tracks continue from the Radkan Valley to Dibaj (1½ hours) from where you could take a savari to Damghan (US\$4). However, finding transport from Dibaj to Radkan is very tough. Better start in Kordkuy.

If all goes perfectly, a return trip from Kordkuy to Mil-e Radkan is just about possible in four hours. Seven hours will be more realistic if transporting an assortment of hitchhiking villagers and their livestock to their diverse destinations en route (an ideal way to visit the valley villages). Forget the trip altogether after snow or heavy rain. To find a suitably sturdy 4WD (preferably with food

supplies, snow chains and a shovel packed for eventualities), head to the second *meydan* (town square) south of Kordkuy's central Shahr-dari Sq. Getting a shared place on an overloaded early-morning Toyota truck from here is the cheapest way into the Radkan Valley villages. To charter, ask around the surrounding market for a Kordkuy resident who has both 4WD and family in the valley. We've previously had good experiences with humorous, if vaguely manic, **Ali Fagoni** (with relatives in Kondab), and **Mohammad Reza** (who runs a small Kordkuy carpet shop).

Semnan

سمنان

📍0231 / POP 129,000 / ELEV 1131M

Capital of an eponymous region, booming Semnan lies on the northern edge of the vast Dasht-e Kavir desert, 240km east of Tehran. Since Sassanian times it has been a key stop on the silk route, attracting wealth and regular destruction in equal measure. At first glance it's a diffuse, nondescript city of low-rise modern buildings and wide boulevards. But around the appealing covered bazaar is an interesting complex of historical buildings. A short drive to Shahmirzad reveals an impressive hinterland of arid mountain peaks.

👁️ Sights

OLD SEMNAN

The key sites can all be accessed from within the unusually tall **covered bazaar** via the log-pillared **Takiyeh Market Hall**.

Imam Khomeini (Sultan)

Mosque

MOSQUE

(☀️dawn-dusk) Most impressive is this mosque founded under Fath Ali Shah in the 1820s. Two of its four *iwans* (barrel-vaulted halls opening onto courtyards) offer perfectly measured use of restrained coloured brickwork. There's no such restraint in the dazzling blue tiling of the contemporary **Imamzadeh Yahya**. The extraordinarily high, if austere, west *ivan* of the **Masjed-e Jameh** (Jameh Mosque) dates from a 1424 rebuild, but the mosque's most lovable feature is the gorgeous 21m brick minaret (11th century?). Leaning and kinked, it still dominates the town and is floodlit at night in incongruous electric green.

Hazrat Museum

MUSEUM

(admission US\$1; ☀️8am-noon & 3.30-6pm Sat-Thu) Inside the bathhouse is this museum

IRAN'S TURKMEN PEOPLE

Turkmen people (2% of Iran's population) have a truly extraordinary range of facial features, from Asiatic (Kazakh-Mongolian) to startlingly blue-eyed Caucasian. Their clans are predominantly Sunni-Muslim and speak their own Turkic dialects. Turkmen women have little patience with black chadors, favouring heavy, full-length dresses in bright colours over trousers and shawls with floral designs. Some older men wear white turbanlike headscarves but once-iconic *telpek* hats of shaggy sheepskin are pretty rare these days, as are traditional yurt-style nomad-tents called *dy*.

In the last generation most Turkmens have become settled, swapping their famous horses for motorbikes. Although sheep farming remains an economic mainstay, pasture-lands have increasingly been ploughed up by Zaboli immigrants, leaving Turkmen villages among the most disadvantaged in post-revolutionary Iran. See www.turkmen sahra.com for more about their region.

The Turkmen towns and villages such as Bandar-e Torkaman and Ashuradeh are pretty sleepy places but the Thursday market at Aq Qal'eh is worth hunting out; all make a great place to meet Turkmen Iranians, unwind and experience their famous hospitality.

displaying 3000-year-old pottery from the nearby archaeological site of Hissar, plus some pretty photos of Semnan Province.

Around the bazaar area, the construction of makeshift car parks and somewhat brutal redevelopment has bulldozed heart-breaking holes into the fabric of the old city. Only a small percentage of mud-built **traditional homes** remain, mostly in back alleyways. Several of these have crumbling Yazd-style windtowers (Taleqani 1st and 13th Alleys, Hafez 31st Alley, Ghafari 30th Alley, Abuzar Sq).

Near Abuzar Sq, Ghafari 9th Alley leads down to the lumpy ruins of the city's ancient mud **fortress**.

OTHER SIGHTS

Spiked with blue-tiled baby minarets, **Darvaza-e Arg** (Arg Sq, Taleqani St) is Semnan's dinky but iconic Qajar-era city gate. Around 500m northeast there's an old **cistern** (Qods Blvd) beside what appears to be a fortress **tower**, but was actually a decorative element from a demolished cotton factory.



Activities

Some 5km east of Semnan, the **Shabdiz Tourist Complex** (☎335 3123; Damghan Hwy) is a 20-horse equestrian centre where tourists can rent horses and guides for trips into the nearby desert and mountains (around US\$100 per day; call ahead). A futuristic, ecofriendly five-star hotel plus restaurant, skating rink and sports complex are planned. The knowledgeable, intelligent owner, **Madjid Dadvar** (☎0912 2311077; dadvar.madjid@yahoo.it), speaks decent English and better Italian.

Sleeping

Semnan Tourist Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎444 1433; Basij Blvd; tw US\$45; ☑☎) Behind a dowdy exterior, this friendly 36-room hotel offers international standard rooms with newish furniture, curtained showers, toiletries and freshly laundered towels: good value but 3km from the old-city core.

Ghods Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎332 2177; Imam Reza Sq; d US\$35; ☑☎) Some rear rooms have cracked windows and worn furniture. Front rooms are better with TV and fridge but suffer more from road noise. Overpriced.

Eating

Ghandil Sabz

SWEETS \$

(Motahhari St; ☎9.30am-1pm & 4-11pm) There's a grotto theme in this curious ice-cream shop about 700m north of Imam Khomeini Sq after 21st Alley.

Sofrakhaneh Sonati Haft Khan

KABABI \$

(Mashahir Sq; breakfast/kabab meals US\$2/5; ☎9am-11pm) The menu is a very short list of ordinary kababs but the decor is unique. Achaemenid figures lead down to a cane-vaulted cavern full of tea-beds, Corinthian columns and an artificial grotto. If that looks fanciful, wait till you see the incredible party room accessed through a secret door between the two gold suns.

Pizza Max

FAST FOOD \$

(Sa'di Sq; pizzas US\$3-4; ☎noon-3.30pm & 6pm-midnight) Good if typically Iranian pizza, mostly for takeaway.

i Information

Aras Coffeenet (Qods Blvd; internet per hr US\$1; ☺10am-7pm Sun-Wed)

Semani Coffeenet (☎333 8010; internet per hr US\$1; ☺8am-10pm Sun-Wed, to 8pm Thu) Separate male and female sections.

Semnan Miras (☎332 1602; www.semnan.miras.ir; Tadayon House, Taleqani St, btwn 3rd & 5th Alleys; ☺8am-2.30pm Sun-Wed, to 1.30pm Thu) They speak minimal English but offer bilingual pamphlets and Farsi-only maps from a lovely Qajar-era mansion with Semnan's finest surviving wind tower.

i Getting There & Away

The main bus terminal is 3km west of Sa'di Sq, 100m beyond Imam Hossein Sq. Between 5.30am and midnight, buses leave every half hour or so for Tehran (US\$2 to US\$3, three hours). Taavoni 2 has a 6am bus to Mashhad (US\$6, 11 hours) and a 7am service to Sari (US\$1, four hours) via Kiyasar, passing through seasonally beautiful valleys full of sunflowers. For savaris to Tehran (US\$4, two hours), sign up at a special office in the terminal.

To Damghan, hourly buses (US\$1, three hours) use a terminal 100m south of Standard Sq (3km east of the centre). The last is at 6pm. Savaris leave more conveniently from Mashahir Sq.

For Shahmirzad via Mahdishahr, minibuses (US\$0.50) and savaris (US\$0.50, 25 minutes) start from Mo'alleh Sq.

Three Mashhad-Tehran trains (stopping at Semnan) and two Semnan-Tehran local services (three hours) operate daily. The train station is 1.5km south of Imam Khomeini Sq.

Around Semnan

CARAVANSERAIS

Several partly renovated caravanserais lie close to the main Mashhad-Tehran highway either side of town, notably at **Lasjerd** (36km west) and **Ahowan** (42km east).

MAHDISHAHR

☎0232 / POP 22,000

Sprawling in arid rocky folds, Mahdishahr (16km from Semnan) is dominated by the impressive if mostly contemporary blue-domed **Al-Mahdi Hosseinieh**. The town's other notable building is the 40-year-old Kakh Palace, now used as the remarkably good-value **Sangesar Hotel** (☎362 4280; fax 362 4380; Saheb Zaman St; d/ste US\$30/41) with blue tiling, grand lobby and two-storey chandelier of 1970s rope-glass. Take the best suite for full effect.

مهدي شهر

SHAHMIRZAD

☎0232 / POP 9000

This popular weekend getaway for Semnanis is a quietly charming oasis amid spiky rock ridges. Gushing streams and a few remnant mud-compound houses grace the upper parts of town around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq. There's enough snow on the ridges 8km behind town to allow impromptu sledging until mid-April. Between Shahmirzad and Mahdishahr, **Darband** is a somewhat scraggy picnic spot behind which a path leads up to a locally famous **cave** in the cliff.

Excellent value even at foreigner prices, **Moshtameh Ferhangi** (☎366 4114; local/foreigner d US\$8/18) is a modern, four-storey octagonal tower hotel set in a garden at the top edge of town. It's unmarked but very obvious: follow Motahhari St up from Naqsh-e Jahan Sq (10 minutes' walk). Rooms are big and although a little bare, have smart bathrooms and good views.

By the chairlift and art-park directly above Naqsh-e Jahan Sq, a basic **teahouse** spills out into pretty gardens on warm afternoons.

Minibuses (US\$0.50) and savaris (US\$1) to Semnan leave from Imam St, 500m downhill from Naqsh-e Jahan Sq. For the picturesque direct route to Pol-e Sefid you'll need to find a taxi driver gutsy enough to ford the unbridged river en-route.

Damghan

دامغان

☎0232 / POP 55,000 / ELEV 1150M

This historic caravan town sits on the edge of the great desert plateau, attractively backed by parched rocky ridges (the highest are discordantly snow-covered well into April). Damghan's timelessly crumbling mud-walled buildings are rapidly being replaced by modern constructions. However, several ancient religious structures in expertly faceted brick are within easy walking distance of the central area.

The covered bazaar hugs the town's central east-west axis (Imam Khomeini St) for the block between Chaharshir Sq (with its four gilded lions) and Imam Khomeini Sq, where Bank Tejarat changes US dollars, euros and UK pounds. From here, Motahhari St heads southeast past Tarikhuneh Mosque (400m) to the train station (2km), while the narrow lane due east passes the Jameh Mosque (200m) and Pir Amadar (300m).

Attractive Azadi Blvd leads north from Chaharshir Sq, a pine-lined stream run-

ning down its middle. It quickly passes an old (but out-of-bounds) caravanserai to the west and shopping mall (Bazaar Khandaq) to the east. The latter contains friendly but slow **Coffeenet Novin** (internet per hr US\$1; ☎8.30am-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri).

👁 Sights

Tarikhuneh Mosque

RELIGIOUS, SHRINE

(Motahhari St; admission US\$0.50; ☎8am-1.30pm & 3pm-dusk Sat-Thu) This is a unique, partly ruined mud-brick structure with 18 extraordinarily sturdy rear columns that date from about AD 760. That reputedly makes this the second-oldest mosque in Iran, possibly having started life as a Zoroastrian palace-temple. The broken columns and partly renovated arches of a colonnaded courtyard are similarly massive and undecorated. But in striking contrast, the 30m-high AD 1038 brick **minaret** is very finely detailed. Now slightly leaning, it's within the yard of a new mosque next door.

Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque)

MOSQUE

This mosque looks outwardly new but was founded a millennium ago. It has another fine brick **minaret** probably dating from the mid-11th century. Continue walking along the same lane to find the round **Pir Alamdar** tower. Dating from the AD 1020s, its original conical roof has been replaced by a newer brick dome but the Kufic inscriptions are remarkable and the interior is even finer.

The similar **Chehel Dokhtar Tower** hides behind the very photogenic **Imamzadeh Jafar** (Chaharshir Sq), a splendid ancient brick building with round side-towers, arched false-windows and a five-levelled dome culminating in a brick cone.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

TOP CHOICE Damghan Inn

HOTEL \$

(☎524 2070; fax 524 6800; Azadi Blvd; r US\$35; 📞) With multiple-domed roofs, this remarkably swish hotel is designed to faintly resemble a caravanserai while offering full midrange facilities. It's beside Park-e Shahrdari, five minutes' walk north from Chaharshir Sq.

Amir Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎523 1776; Varzesh Sq; tw/tr US\$13/15; 📞) Above a popular restaurant, the good-value Amir has small, comfortable rooms with bathrooms and a friendly reception in the cosy lobby. Varzesh Sq is identifiable by its

'sport monument' displaying huge footballs in a giant cup. It's 1.5km from Chaharshir Sq, one large block north, then three east.

Caffe Sun City

TEAHOUSE \$

(Beheshti St; coffee US\$0.50-1.50; ☎9am-midnight; 📞) Thirty metres northeast of Imam Khomeini Sq, this is an appealing spot for a decent Turkish coffee.

📍 Getting There & Away

Damghan's quiet bus terminal looks more like a covered bazaar. It's 1km west on 17 Shahrivar St, a US\$0.50 shuttle-taxi hop from outside Imamzadeh Jafar. Buses/savaris run to Semnan (US\$1/2, three hours), Shahrud (US\$0.50/1, 75 minutes) and Mashhad (US\$6/13, 1½ hours). Arriving in Damghan, incoming transport often leaves passengers obligingly at central Chaharshir or Imam Khomeini Sqs.

Trains on the Tehran-Mashhad line run through Damghan. They are clean and frequent; book tickets (US\$12 to US\$25) with tour operators.

Around Damghan

Local picnickers love **Cheshmeh Ali** where the skeleton of a lonely Qajar-era pavilion sits amid willow trees in a spring-fed reflecting pool. It's almost worth the taxi fare (US\$3.50 each way from Damghan, 30km) for the scenic contrasts en route: high snow-topped ridges, dry rocky outcrops and mud-walled plum orchards.

Along the slowly degenerating ex-asphalt north of here there are some fabulous 360-degree views of a wide mountain-ringed bowl-valley just beyond lonely **Dibaj**.

Gonbad-e Kavus گنبد کاووس

☎0172 / POP 134,000 / ELEV 39M

Until utterly obliterated by the Mongol and Tamerlane rampages, Jorjan was the region's foremost ancient city. All that remains today of Jorjan are a few lumpy **excavations** behind the huge, ornate **Imamzadeh-ye Yahya** (West Mihan St), 3km west of central Gonbad-e Kavus.

👁 Sights & Activities

Mil-e Gonbad

MEMORIAL

(admission US\$0.50; ☎8am-8pm) This predominantly Turkmen town grew up around Jorjan's one surviving building, the utterly magnificent Mil-e Gonbad. Soaring 55m tall on 12m-deep foundations, this astonishing tower has the cross-section of a 10-pointed

star and looks like a buttressed brick spaceship. It was built in 1006 for poet-artist-prince Qabus ibn Vashmgir but is so remarkably well preserved that one can scarcely believe it's 100, let alone 1000 years old. Qabus (Kavus), the Zeyarid ruler of surrounding Tabarestan, had just six years to marvel at his creation before an assassin put him in it permanently. Well, not so permanently, actually. His glass coffin, which originally hung from the tower's dome, vanished long ago. Now there's nothing to see inside, although it's well worth the entry fee for the remarkable echoes both within and even more spookily from the marked circular spot some 40m in front of the tower. Mil-e Gonbad is hard to miss in a park 2.5 blocks north of the central Enqelab Sq.

Hippodrome HORSE RACING
(☉1pm spring & autumn) On Friday the hippodrome at the eastern end of town holds *savar kareh* horse-racing meets.

Swimming pool SWIMMING
(☎555 6909; Peyam St; per hr with/without sauna US\$2.70/1.80; ☉11am-11pm Tue, Thu & Sun for women, other days men) On hot summer days you might want to retire behind the heavy bronze doors of the swish, full-sized indoor swimming pool. It's one block east of Daneshju Blvd near its southern end.

Sleeping & Eating

Mosaferkhaneh Khayyam MOSAFERKHANEH \$
(☎222 7663; off Imam St; tw/tr/q US\$5/7/9, show-ers US\$1) This decent little place is just south of Enqelab Sq before East Mihan St. It's signed in Russian as *гостиница хям*.

Safa Café SWEETS \$
(☉8am-midnight) This fine little cafe sits opposite the tower and offers ice-cream sundaes (US\$0.50 to US\$1), floats, espresso (US\$1) and freshly squeezed seasonal juices. There are also a number of *kababis* and a pizzeria off Enqelab Sq.

Getting There & Away

Busy Istgah Gorgan, towards Imam St's southern end, has minibuses and savaris to Gorgan.

Around Gonbad-e Kavus

GOLESTAN NATIONAL PARK



East of Gonbad, the limited-access Golestan National Park includes partly cultivated steppe and contrastingly thick mountain for-

CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT INCHEH BORUN

The border known as 'Incheh Borun' is actually at **Pol**. That's 4km off the Gorgan road: turn north, 12km before Incheh Borun village. On the Iran side peddlers sell felt rugs and the nearby lakes are popular with picnickers on Fridays, but there's no public transport. On the Turkmenistan side, 1.5km across no-man's land, there's just a lonely gateway where the queues of Turkish LPG gas trucks wait. You're really in the middle of nowhere, with even the small town of Etrek around 20km distant. There is reputedly a bus to Balkanabat (formerly Nebit-Dag) in the late afternoon but don't count on it. It's much more common to cross the Turkmenistan border at Sarakhs (p261) or Bajiran (p247)

ests of 500-year-old trees in which you half expect to meet Asterix and his cohorts. The region is indistinctly littered with clues to the once vibrant Tabarestan civilisation that lasted from the Neanderthal era right up until the 13th century. Then Genghis Khan's hordes brought it all to an abrupt end.

Much of the steppe population is ethnically Turkmen so if you're lucky you might find yourself invited to a horse milking or for tea in one of the increasingly rare reed-ringed felt *öy* tents. For a hefty fee it's possible to take unique spring and autumn **horse treks** in this fascinating area; book through www.inthesaddle.com/iran.htm. For a riders' experience, read www.equitrek.com.au/Iran.html.

The Turkmen Ecologne (☎0912-720 6741; www.turkmenecologne.com; Golestan National Park, Turkmen Sahra; sliding scale from 1-8 per person €136-96;  ), designed by an Iranian architect, is a splendid spot and an excellent base to explore both the Golestan National Park and the surrounding region. The adobe house was actually a number of separate one-room Turkmen family homes that have been brought together as one delightful dwelling and the lovely space is filled with local craftworks. The ever-helpful owner Kamran is keen to show off the area and will arrange horse riding, tours of the park and beyond, and will even collect

guests from Gorgan. Contacting him can be tricky as there's no internet at the ecolodge, but keep trying. Reader recommended.

i Getting There & Away

The main entrance to the park is via Haji Qoshan, once home to ubiquitous Turkmen writer Makhtumkuli. By public transport it's easier to go via Kalaleh. From Kalaleh's Ahmedi Sq, take a Tamar-bound savari, then pay an extra US\$2 to continue *dar baste* (closed door, used to indicate you want a private hire) to Gharra Tappeh Sheikh (GTS; 20 minutes).

ALEXANDER'S WALL

سد اسکندر

Like the Great Chinese and Hadrian's equivalents, Alexander's Wall (Sadd-e Eskander) was built to keep out warlike raiders from the north. For the Iranian world it marked the very real edge of civilisation. Being banished beyond was equivalent to capital punishment. Called Qezel Alam (Red Snake) in Turkmen, it stretched over 160km between the Golestan Mountains and the Caspian and probably dates from the 6th century, making any reference to Alexander the Great mere romantic fiction. Comprehensively cannibalised for building materials over the centuries it's now little more than a muddy undulation. However, a relatively recognisable section, conveniently marked by orange concrete bollards, runs along the northern side of the Tamar-GTS road. Raised some 5m above the fields, the outline of a large, square-planned wall-fort is still

easy to make out at **Malaisheikh**, around 10km west of GTS.

KHALID NIBI SHRINE آرامگاه خالد نیبی

Dramatically perched above a breathtaking sea of badlands sit three small **mausoleums** commemorating Khalid Nibi. Although he was a 5th-century Nestorian Christian, the place now attracts Muslim pilgrims during spring and early summer. From the central shrine, a fairly obvious footpath leads down, then right in about 10 minutes to a grassy knoll dotted with remarkable **pagan grave-markers**. Ancient but of unknown age, these markers include 2m-long spindly phalluses for men and butterfly-shaped stones for women.

From Tamar (off the Kalaleh-Maraveh Tappeh road), Khalid Nibi is 30km by un-surfaced road (allow 90 minutes). Taxis from Minudasht want around US\$20 return, but they struggle with the steep last kilometre. A 4WD from GTS costs around US\$30 return; Kamran at the Turkmen Ecolodge can help arrange visits to all these locations.

Bajgiran

باجگیران

☑0582 / POP 920 / ELEV 1628M

If you're heading to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's surreal capital, consider sleeping here to get an early start for crossing the nearby border (see the boxed text). Bajgiran village isn't an attraction but a few huddles of archaic mud-houses look faintly attractive amid the arid mountain ridges and

CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT BAJGIRAN

From Bajgiran's lower border gate, it's a steady 1.7km climb to the **immigration posts** (☀7.30am-3.30pm Iran time, 9am-5pm Turkmen time); taxis want US\$1. Before crossing the border, change at least US\$10 into Turkmen manats (US\$1=2.85M) either with traders in Bajgiran village or at the small (slightly hidden) office marked 'taxi' to the right of the Iranian immigration building. Iranian formalities are swift as long as you don't sneeze at the 'Human Quarantine' desk. Turkmenistan immigration is just 50m away. As at any Turkmen entry point you'll need US\$12 (in US dollars) to pay for the hologrammed entry card. If arriving on a tourist visa your voucher must be with the immigration officers and the agency representative should be waiting so be sure to synchronise your watches. That's not required if you're on a transit visa.

Turkmen immigration staff are friendly but procedures can be appallingly ponderous, even when everything's in order (two hours to clear six people when we crossed). Beware that Howdan (the Turkmen-side upper customs post, pronounced hovdan) is not a village, has zero facilities and is 25km from the Turkmen lower border gate (Berzhengi Tamozhna). Smart VW minivans charging US\$10 shuttle across this no-man's land, departing once they have a handful of passengers. After further passport checks here, less plush shuttle taxis charge US\$20 per person to any address in Ashgabat (the city limits of which start 7km further north).

communication towers. Savaris from Quchan (US\$1/6 per person/car, 1¼ hours) terminate at the lower border gate. That's 800m beyond the nine-room **Hotel Baj-giran** (☎372 3212; tw US\$9), which has survivable but rather bare rooms with shared toilets.

The prettier of two possible routes from Quchan uses a degraded old road via Emamqoli, descending through a narrow canyon, and rejoining the main new road just beyond the timeless mud-block village of **Dorbadam**.

Mashhad

مشهد

☎0511 / POP 2,965,000 / ELEV 1000M

Mashhad is Iran's holiest and second-biggest city. Its *raison d'être* and main sight is the beautiful, massive and ever-growing Haram (shrine complex) commemorating the AD 817 martyrdom of Shia Islam's eighth Imam, Imam Reza. The pain of Imam Reza's death is still felt very personally over a millennium later and around 20 million pilgrims converge here each year to pay their respects (and no small amount of money) to the Imam. Witnessing their tears is a moving experience, even if you're not a Muslim yourself. If you notice a lot of young couples, that's because the city's also a haven for honeymooners, who believe sharing it with the Imam will bless their marriage. Away from the Haram Complex, Mashhad is a good

place to buy carpets, it's a natural staging post for travel to Turkmenistan or Afghanistan, and offers many interesting excursions into little-touristed Khorasan.

Be aware that during major pilgrim seasons, almost all accommodation and transport will be booked out months in advance. Contrastingly, at other times Mashhad offers about the best-value accommodation in Iran. Winters can be very cold, with snow on the ground for up to five months a year. Summers are contrastingly hot. April is ideal.

History

Following Imam Reza's burial here, the small village of Sanabad began to attract Shiite pilgrims and soon became known as Mashhad (place of martyrdom). Nearby Tus remained a more significant town until 1389 when Tamerlane sacked the whole area and thereafter it was Mashhad that eventually limped back to life as the new capital of Khorasan. The shrine was enlarged in the early 15th century by Tamerlane's son, Shah Rokh, and his extraordinary wife, Gohar Shad, for whom the Haram's main mosque is named. Once the Safavids had established Shiism as the state creed, Mashhad became Iran's pre-eminent pilgrimage site and Shah Abbas I rebuilt the Holy Shrine's new core around 1612. Politically, Mashhad reached its zenith under Nader Shah (p277), whose empire was focused on Khorasan. Even though Nader was a Sunni of missionary zeal, he continued to sponsor the Haram.

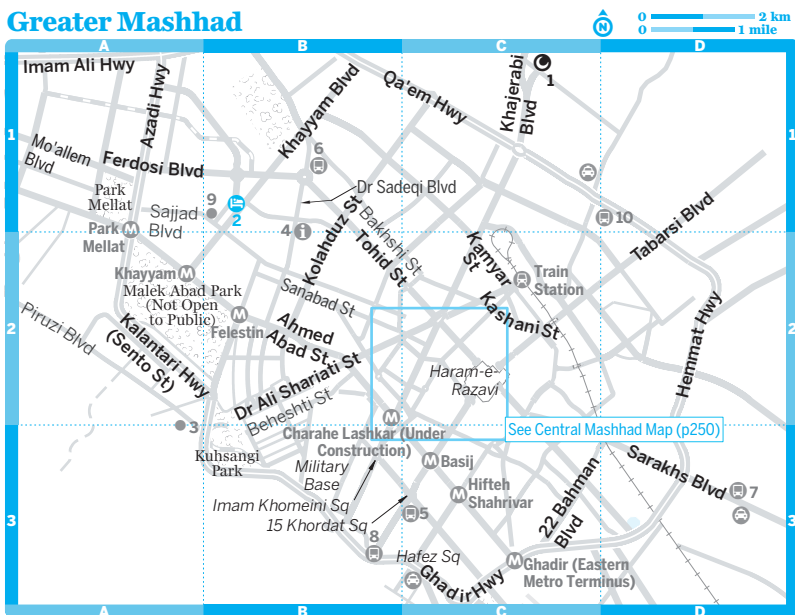
THE MARTYRDOM OF IMAM REZA

Within Mashhad's Holy Shrine, pilgrims break into conspicuous, heartfelt outpourings of grief for murdered Imam Reza as though his assassination (with poisoned grapes and pomegranate juice) were only yesterday. In fact it was in AD 818.

The story starts 20 years earlier with Haroun ar-Rashid, immortalised as the great caliph in the *Arabian Nights* fairy tales. Less fictionally, Haroun ruled the Abbasid caliphate and was very influential in bringing Greek-style analytic thinking and cosmopolitan sophistication to Arab-Muslim society. His temporal power was unassailable. But he coveted the spiritual pre-eminence of Musa, the seventh Shiite Imam. Musa was eventually slapped into Haroun's Baghdad jail, then killed.

Musa's 35-year-old son Ali al-Raza (Razavi) inherited his father's pious mantle, becoming Imam Reza. Meanwhile, after Haroun's death, Haroun's sons Ma'mun and Amin slogged out a civil war to succeed their dad as caliph. Ma'mun, based temporarily in Merv, emerged victorious but needed Reza's help to calm a series of revolts. Having failed to entice the Imam to support him voluntarily in this effort, Ma'mun's agents dragged Reza forcibly across rebellious regions as a symbol of imperial power. However, the ploy appeared to backfire. The Imam's charismatic presence captivated the royal court, leaving Ma'mun worried that he'd be upstaged. So out came those deadly grapes. Ma'mun disguised the crime by honouring Reza's body with burial in Sanabad (today's Mashhad) close to Ma'mun's own father (and Reza's father's nemesis) Caliph Haroun.

Greater Mashhad



In 1928, nonreligious buildings within 180m of the Holy Shrine were flattened to make way for the Haram's biggest enlargement to date. Prior to the 1979 revolution this religious 'island' was further expanded to 320m and construction has continued apace ever since. When historians look back on the era of the Islamic Republic, they will point to the Haram as its greatest architectural achievement. Meanwhile, the charitable foundation that manages the shrine, **Astan-e Qods e Razavi** (www.aqrazavi.org), has become a business conglomerate, managing enterprises from baking to carpets, and minerals to transport. But most of the money comes from donations, bequests and the selling of grave sites: to be buried near the Imam is a great honour and suitably expensive (see Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi, p253).

During the Iran-Iraq War, Mashhad's population ballooned as it was the furthest Iranian city from the front line. Many stayed on and the metropolis is now Iran's second biggest, a huge, unwieldy and rather polluted sprawl with the Haram as Mashhad's physical, as well as spiritual centre. Construction around the Haram never seems to end: eventual enlargement plans supposedly include the partial destruction of Andarzgu St's north side.

Greater Mashhad

Sights

- 1 Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi.....C1

Sleeping

- 2 Homa Hotel MashhadB1

Information

- 3 Edareh-ye Gozarnameh (Visa extensions).....A2
4 Miras Ferhangi Khorasan.....B1

Transport

- 5 Bus to Airport.....C3
6 Felakeh Ferdosi (Buses for Tus, Torqabeh, Abadeh and Zoshk)B1
7 Istgah SarakhsD3
8 Main Bus Terminal.....B3
9 Sherkate Mellie Naft-e-Iran.....B1
10 Very Rare Buses to Kalat Naderi.....D1

Sights

SHRINE COMPLEX

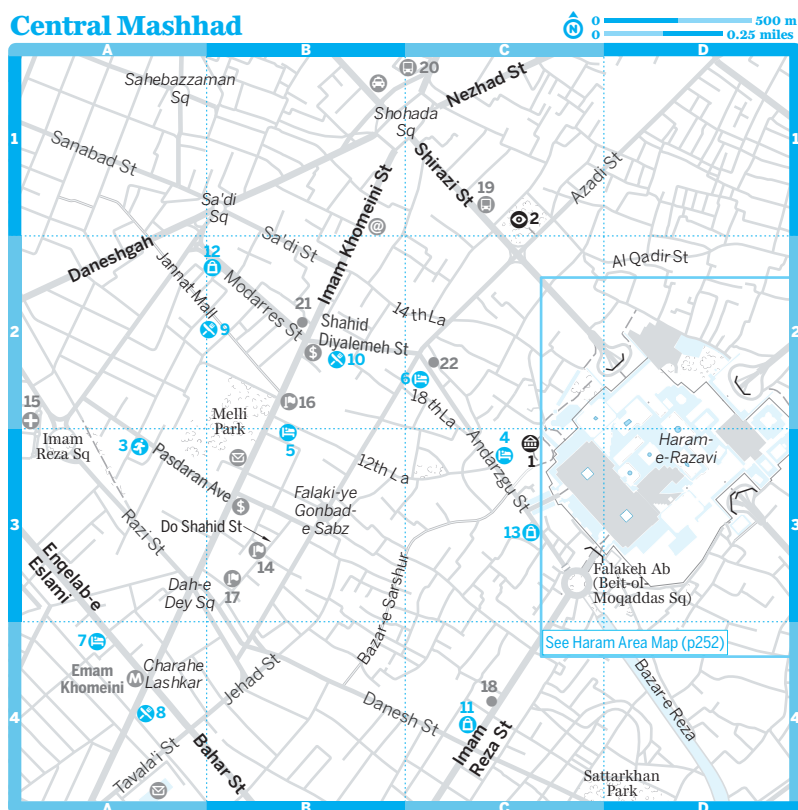
Haram-e Razavi

RELIGIOUS, SHRINE

Imam Reza's Holy Shrine is enveloped in a series of sacred precincts collectively known as the **Haram-e Razavi** (Map p252; ☪24hr), or

Central Mashhad

NORTHEASTERN IRAN MASHHAD



Haram for short. This magical city-within-a-city sprouts dazzling clusters of domes and minarets in blue and pure gold behind vast fountain-cooled courtyards and magnificent arched arcades. It's one of the marvels of the Islamic world, and its moods and glories should be fully savoured more than once at varying times of day. Compare the orderly overload of dusk prayer-time to the fairytale calm of a floodlit nocturnal wander.

No bags or cameras are allowed within the complex, although curiously enough snapping photos with mobile phones is perfectly acceptable. There are left-luggage offices near most entrances. Men and women enter through different carpet-draped portals and are politely frisked. Women must wear a chador: it's sometimes possible to borrow one from your hotel. Dress for either sex should be conservative and clean.

Non-Muslims are allowed in most of the Haram's outer courtyards. They are *not* al-

lowed inside the complex's two holiest buildings, the Holy Shrine and the Gohar Shad Mosque. Technically, non-Muslims are also excluded from the magnificent Enqelab and Azadi courtyards, but you can peep in through relevant gateways. At quieter times, those who act suitably (demure, respectful and soaking up the spiritual rather than the aesthetic) are rarely challenged and might wander through 'by mistake'. However, be particularly careful not to upset Muslim sensibilities: remember, it's a privilege for non-Muslims to be allowed to visit the Haram complex at all.

Foreign Pilgrims Assistance Office TOUR

(☎221 3474; intrela@mail.dci.co.ir; 🕒7am-6pm) Friendly, multilingual staff who live to assist foreign visitors with the shrine will show you a 20-minute video and shower you with books on all things Shiite. However, once you've visited this office there's no escape

Central Mashhad

📍 Sights

- 1 Mehdi Gholibek Museum.....C3
2 Nader Shah Mausoleum C1

👤 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 3 Adibian Travel AgencyA3

🛏 Sleeping

- 4 Hotel NoorC3
5 Hotel ParsB3
6 Iran HotelC2
7 Vali's Non-smoking Homestay.....A4

🍴 Eating

- 8 Hafez Restaurant.....A4
9 Hezardestan Traditional
TeahouseB2
10 Vitamin Sara.....B2

🛍 Shopping

- 11 Bazaar-e Fash C4
12 Friday Book MarketB2
13 Saroye SaeedC3

📄 Information

- 14 Afghan ConsulateB3
15 Imam Reza Hospital &
Pharmacy.....A2
16 Pakistan Consulate.....B2
17 Turkmenistan ConsulateB3

🚗 Transport

- 18 Binalood Travel C4
19 Bus 210 Stop C1
20 Central City Bus Stand, Bus
10 to Kuestan Park C1
21 Iran AirB2
22 Iran AsemanC2

Notice the **Naqqareh Khaneh**, a blue-tiled bandstand platform perched above a clock tower gateway. Twice daily (before dawn and dusk) a mesmerising 10-minute fanfare is performed here by drummers and a heptet of hornblowers in faintly comical Salvation Army-style peaked-caps.

Non-Muslims aren't supposed to transit the spectacular **Enqelab Courtyard** with its two gold minarets and fabulous tile-work. So to reach **Jomhuri Courtyard**, the setting for massed evening *namaz* (prayers), infidels should double back via **Qods Courtyard**, which features a miniature version of Jerusalem's 'Dome of the Rock'.

The gold-domed centrepiece of the Haram complex is the revered 17th-century **Holy Shrine** building. Amid tearful prayer and meditation, the emotional climax to any Mashhad pilgrimage is touching and kissing the *zarih* (gold-latticed cage), which covers **Imam Reza's tomb** in the shrine's spectacular interior. The current *zarih*, the fifth, dates from 2001. Non-Muslims are excluded, but can see the previous *zarih* in the Haram's Main Museum.

You might catch a glimpse of the 50m blue dome and cavernous golden portal of the classic Timurid **Azim-e Gohar Shad mosque** (built from 1405 to 1418). However, non-Muslims aren't allowed within to appreciate its splendid interior hosting the minbar (pulpit) where, according to Shiite tradition, the Mahdi (12th 'hidden' Imam) will sit on the Day of Judgement.

Main Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p252; Muze-ye Merkezi; admission US\$1; ☀8am-5.30pm Sat-Thu, to noon Fri) Bequests and donations from the faithful fill the Haram's fascinatingly eclectic museums. The Main Museum kicks off with chunks of now-superseded shrine decor interspersed with contemporary sporting medals presented by pious athletes, while the basement **stamp collection** includes a 1983 commemorative featuring the 'Takeover of the US Spy Den'. The 1st-floor **Visual Arts Gallery** offers you the opportunity to shower money (or hats) down onto the top of the Holy Shrine's fourth *zarih* tomb encasement (replaced in 2001). Amid seashells and naturalist landscape-paintings of Surrey, notice Mahmood Farshchian's modern classic *Afternoon of Ashura*. It's a grief-stricken depiction of Imam Hossein's horse returning empty to camp after the Imam's martyrdom.

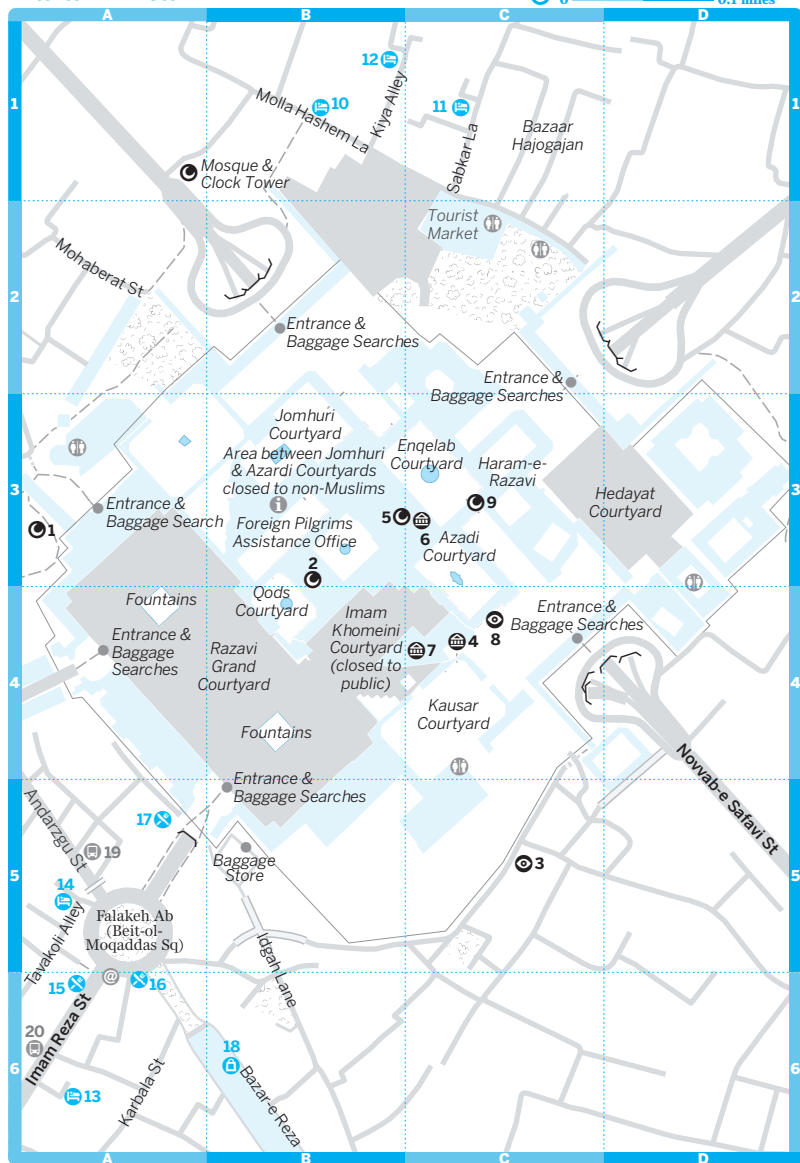
from the free, friendly but over-protective guide/minder they assign you.

A good starting point for nonpilgrim visits is Falakeh Ab, from which several of the domes and minarets are tantalisingly visible in the middle distance. Enter through the vast, part-constructed **Razavi Grand Courtyard**, which should become grander once the blue, white and gold tiling has been affixed to the courtyard's facades and concrete minarets. Curving east you'll pass the Haram's museums (the Main Museum and the Carpet Museum, p252) after the unfinished **Imam Khomeini Courtyard** site. Beyond, look northwest across the gorgeous **Azadi Courtyard** to glimpse the exterior of the Holy Shrine building.

Haram Area

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

NORTHEASTERN IRAN MASHHAD



Carpet Museum

MUSEUM (Map p252; admission US\$2; ☎8am-12.30pm Sat-Wed, to 11.30am Thu) You'll find the horse image repeated here, where rugs range from beautiful classics through to garish coral gardens and a Tabriz-made carpet-portrait

MUSEUM

of WWI bogey-man Kaiser Wilhelm II. Tying the staggering 30 million knots for *Seven Beloved Cities* took 14 years. Upstairs, beside the shoe-deposit counter, is a two-room **Calligraphy Gallery** displaying priceless Korans, many dating back over a millennium.

Haram Area

📍 Sights

- 1 72-Martyrs (Shah) Mosque.....A3
- 2 Azim-e Gohar Shad Mosque.....B3
- 3 Caravanserai Azizolaof.....C5
- 4 Carpet Museum.....C4
- 5 Holy Shrine's Golden Dome.....B3
- 6 Main Museum.....C3
- 7 Mehdi Gholibek Hamam.....C4
- 8 Naqqareh Khaneh.....C4
- 9 Zarih (Imam Reza's Tomb).....C3

🏠 Sleeping

- 10 Al-Naby Hotel.....B1
- 11 Hotel Dustan Javad.....C1
- 12 Hotel Madineh.....B1
- 13 Karimkhan Apartment Hotel.....A6
- 14 Taranom Apartment Hotel.....A5

🍴 Eating

- 15 Amibe Furushi.....A6
- 16 Atlas Hotel Restaurant.....A6
- 17 Jahan Hotel Restaurant.....A5

🛍 Shopping

- 18 Bazar-e Reza.....B6

🚌 Transport

- Bus 13 to Falakeh Park from
Falakeh Ab via Chahara
Laskar.....(see 20)
- Bus 210 Stop.....(see 19)
- 19 Bus 62 to Park Mellat.....A5
- 20 Bus 84 to the Bus terminal.....A6
- Bus 94 to Park Mellat.....(see 20)

72-Martyrs (Shah) Mosque

MOSQUE

(Map p252) Just outside the complex's official limits sits this splendid 15th-century mosque, famous for its beautiful late Timurid tilework and beautiful tracery lamps; it's a lovely spot to soak up the atmosphere of ancient Khorasan.

Mehdi Gholibek Hamam

MUSEUM

(Map p252; admission US\$2; ☉8am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 1pm Fri) In the shadow of the mosque squats one of Iran's most interesting and spacious bathhouse museums. The main delight is the wonderful central dome repainted for centuries in multiple levels – most recently in 1922 with naive murals that feature anthropomorphic figures gallivanting between giant bicycles, a Russian vintage car, an early biplane and a curiously unconcerned-looking victim facing a firing squad.

Caravanserai Azizolaof

BAZAAR

(Map p252) The streets surrounding the Haram's various entrances are full of tourist trinket sellers but also a selection of real markets. This run-down, century-old caravanserai contains down-market electronics stalls run by Afghans. Hurry to see this area before it's all demolished as the Haram precinct plans to expand yet again.

SIGHTS BEYOND THE SHRINE COMPLEX

Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi

MAUSOLEUM

أَبَقَعَه رَابِع (Map p249) This beautifully proportioned, blue-domed **mausoleum** commemorates an apostle of the prophet Mohammad. Coming to pay respects here was said to have been Imam Reza's 'main consolation' in coming all the way out to Khorasan. The tower took its present form after a 1612 rebuild, which added a band of interior Kufic inscriptions by master-calligrapher Ali Reza Abbasi. The jolly floral motifs around it date from a Qajar redecoration. Surrounding the mausoleum is a large cemetery paved with thousands of tombstones. Burial here currently costs from US\$800. That gets you stacked four bodies deep for 30 years before you're dug up again; pay four times that amount per body if you want a 'family room' within surrounding arched colonnades. That's still only half what you'd pay to deposit a corpse beneath the Haram. Get here on bus 34 from Tabarsi Blvd or 38 from Kuh-e Sangi.

Nader Shah Mausoleum

MAUSOLEUM

(Map p250; cnr Shirazi & Azadi Sts; admission US\$0.50; ☉8am-6.30pm) Elsewhere in the Middle East, Nader Shah is considered something of a historical tyrant. But here he's a local hero for briefly returning Khorasan to the centre of a vast Central Asian empire. Nader's horseback statue crowns his otherwise rather dour 1950s grey-granite mausoleum, which was designed to emulate the lines of a tent (reputedly Nader was born and died under canvas). A small **museum** displays guns, a rhino-hide shield and four-pointed hats that must have made Afshar-dynasty courtiers look like jesters.

👉 Tours

Adibian Travel Agency

TOUR

(Map p250; ☎859 8151; www.adibiantours.com; 56 Pasdaran Ave; ☉7.30am-8pm) A professional

MASHTI

Although slightly less significant than pilgrimages to Mecca, Najaf or Karbala, a pilgrimage to Mashhad remains a deeply significant expression of faith for any Shiite Muslim. After *wudu* (ablutions), the supplicant humbly enters the Holy Shrine asking 'permission' from Imam Reza through specific prayers and recitations. Following tearful meditations and Quranic readings, the pilgrimage culminates with the recitation of the *Ziyarat Nameh* prayer in front of the *zarih* (tomb) of Imam Reza.

In the same way that hajj pilgrims are respectfully known as *haji*, those who have fulfilled the pilgrimage to Mashhad are entitled to attach the prefix *Mashti* to their names.

English-speaking agency that offers tours in Mashhad (half day with/without guide US\$40/30) and well beyond (around US\$75/65 per day); can arrange horse riding throughout the region and has connections to the ranch and herds belonging to Louise Firooz, a former American-Iranian princess who sadly died in 2008 but not before she twice rescued the famous 'Caspian horse' breed from extinction. It has walking tours too.

Towhid Foroozanfar

GUIDE

(☎893 7025, 0915 313 2960; towhidfiroozan@yahoo.com) A well-informed, engaging driver-guide who has been recommended by readers.

Vali Ansari Astaneh

TOUR

(☎851 6980, 0915 100 1324; vali32@imamreza.net) Offers very inexpensive low-tech walking, cycling and public-transport-based city tours, village visits, mountain walks and a budget homestay.

Sleeping

Timing is everything. In peak season, accommodation is jam-packed: prices can rise up to 800% in some cases (especially apartment-hotels), though others stay stable. Some hotels discount in mid-winter.

Outside peak season many apartment-hotels are often fabulous value but standards vary considerably and pricing is pretty random. Save a bundle by seeking out those

in forgotten smaller alleys. All those reviewed have hot shower and kitchenette.

NEAR THE SHRINE COMPLEX

Al-Naby Hotel

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p252; ☎222 6981; Molla Hashem Lane; tw US\$17, peak season US\$26) This six-storey tower has fewer frills than many apartment hotels, lacking the obligatory waterfalls and columns (do you care?). But the smallest rooms are newly repainted and very adequate with absolutely fabulous views across the Haram complex from front-facing upper levels.

Taranom Apartment Hotel

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p252; ☎859 5761; Tavakoli Lane; s/d US\$25/35, peak season r from US\$95; ☎) Handily right on Falahak Ab, this very professional eight-storey tower has a cosy mini-atrium with modernist fireplace and comfortably appointed minisuites with fluffy towels, brilliant hot showers and Western toilets with soft paper.

Hotel Noor

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p250; ☎223 2970; fax 223 2976; Andarzu St; d US\$45) The gently trendy 1st-floor lobby is bright and open with highly professional English-speaking staff. Rooms are unfussy business-class affairs with bagged-towels and choice of toilets. Winter discounts 30%, splendid value in peak season.

Hotel Dustan Javad

APARTMENT \$

(Map p252; ☎223 3791; fax 225 9794; Shahid Golabki Alley, off Sabkar Lane; s/tw/tr US\$14/17/21, peak season US\$25/27/32) Sweet little suites in a small, family pension-style hotel off a lively but mostly pedestrianised shopping street.

Karimkhan Apartment Hotel

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p252; ☎854 4077; www.karimkhanhotel.8k.com; off Imam Reza St; d/apt US\$35/50; ☎☎☎) Rooms and corridors attempt something of a retro, semi-art-deco look and bathrooms are impressive with curtained seat-showers but there's some wear on the sitting-room furniture.

Hotel Madineh

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p252; ☎221 2214; Zeiya Lane; tw/tr year-round US\$35/40) This 100-room bed-factory wallows in nouveau-riche foibles including aquarium, fountain-grotto, musical elevators and art-deco-effect coffee shop. Overpriced in the low season but good value at peak times.

BEYOND THE SHRINE COMPLEX



Vali's Non-smoking

Homestay

HOMESTAY \$

(Map p250; ☎851 6980, 0915 100 1324; vali32@imamreza.net; 6th Alley, off Enqelab-e Eslami St, house 277; dm/s/tw US\$6/15/15; ☺☹) Vali is an eccentric and ever-enthusiastic carpet merchant-cum-multilingual guide who offers a twin-bedded guest room in his charming home along with communal carpeted sleeping spaces, some on the open-air terrace. This is the nearest Mashhad gets to a backpacker hostel but it's vastly more personal and inviting with Vali arranging biking tours of the surrounding region and is keen to show foreign guests the highlights of Khorasan. Great home-cooked evening meals cost only US\$3 (often vegetarian) and a good breakfast is a decent US\$1. Prices stay the same all year. Take bus 85 from near the main terminal or 13 from Falakeh Ab, either way getting off at Charahe Lashkar (Metro Emam Khomeini). Highly recommended.

Hotel Pars

TRADITIONAL HOTEL \$

(Map p250; ☎222 4030; fax 221 4944; Imam Khomeini St 26th Alley; s/d US\$12/22; ☺closes low-season) Mashhad's oldest hotel, the Pars occupies a 1935 brick building and its manager lived nine years in England. Rooms have ageing en suite bathrooms but are just as good as many midrange equivalents. The basement *sofrakhane sonati* is a lovely vaulted teahouse (qalyan – water-pipe – US\$1; open 24 hours in season) with a tandoori oven providing fresh bread to accompany meals.

Iran Hotel

APARTMENT \$\$

(Map p250; ☎222 8010; www.irhotel.com; Andar-zgu St; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$45/60/100/130; ☹☺) This hotel with friendly, English-speaking staff gets it right with a restrained elegance that's personable and not over-formal. Bathrooms are small but sparkling clean. Excellent value for singles during peak season, if you can get a room.

Homa Hotel Mashhad

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p249; ☎761 1001; www.homahotels.com; Khayyam Blvd; s/d/ste US\$120/149/157; ☹☺☹☺) Mashhad's inconveniently located top hotel has a shopping-mall-sized lobby with a blue-glass pyramid roof that mimics the Louvre's. Rooms are very large, clean and well kept but lack any real style. Women can only use the indoor pool-spa four mornings

a week. Good breakfast buffet with lots of fresh fruit.

Hotel Pars Mashhad

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(☎868 9201; fax 868 9200; Vakilabad Blvd; d/ste US\$150/281; ☹☺☹☺) The main draw of this sprawling, upmarket complex is the full-sized swimming pool (open Sunday to Friday, women 8am to 1pm, men 3.30pm to 10pm), so avoid Saturdays when it's closed. The location, some 8km west of the centre, is awful for the Holy Shrine but comparatively handy for visiting Kang.



Eating

There are plenty of cheap eateries in the lanes off Imam Reza St and pleasant stream-side restaurants can be found on rural roads around Torqabeh, Shandiz and Zoshk. Upmarket, traditional dining options are limited because most visitors eat production-line hotel dinners provided as part of their tour package.



Hezardestan

Traditional Teahouse

TEAHOUSE \$\$

(Map p250; ☎222 2943; Jannat Mall; meals US\$7-18; ☺lunch & dinner) Hezardestan is one of Iran's most beautiful teahouse-restaurants. Carpets, samovars, antique qalyans, cushions and wooden benches are surrounded by walls adorned with scenes from Ferdosi's *Shahnamah*. There's live music most nights, the manager speaks fluent English and the food is pretty good including vegetarian possibilities. Just be prepared for hefty 'service' and 'tea' charges that can double the bill.

Hafez Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$\$

(Map p250; ☎754 0768; Imam Khomeini St; meals US\$5-7; ☺11.30am-3pm & dusk-10pm Sat-Thu) With attractive wrought iron and copper-work, this newly decorated high-ceilinged eatery is a fine choice in the consulate area. For a taste of Central Asia, try the *chelo estanboli* (US\$2), virtually identical to *plov* (an archetypal if fatty Uzbek lamb-and-rice dish).

Jahan Hotel Restaurant

TRADITIONAL IRANIAN \$

(Map p252; ☎225 0085; top fl, Jahan Hotel, Hozeino Alley; meals US\$3-6; ☺12.30-2.30pm & 7.30-9.30pm) Kababs, schnitzels or trout (US\$4) come with truly phenomenal views across the Haram, making lunchtime dining here a must. Enter via the hotel, easily missed beneath a Bank Mellat sign. Don't be late!

WORTH ITS WEIGHT

Cleopatra added it to her mare's-milk baths. Indian Buddhists dyed their robes with it. Romans slapped it on to cure scabies. And Alexander the Great used it to patch up his battle scars. Today saffron adds flavour and colour to Cornish saffron cake and Spanish paella as well as to *chelo* (rice) in Iran where it remains Persia's classic 'spice'. Saffron comes from the delicately dried stigmas of *Crocus sativus* flowers, grown extensively in southern regions of Khorasan. But producing a kilogram of saffron requires around 200,000 flowers. No wonder it's often so staggeringly pricey.

Vitamin Sara

SWEETS \$

(Map p250; ☎222 7998; Shahid Diyalemeh (Bahonar) St; ☎9am-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri) Come to this unpretentious juice shop for Mashhad's best *maajun* (US\$1), a fabulous mush of crushed walnuts, pistachios, ice cream, cream, banana and honey, all whizzed through the orgasmatron to form one of Iran's most spectacular desserts. Cheaper but inferior versions are available from **Amibe Furushi** (Map p252; desserts US\$1; ☎24hr), on Imam Reza St.

Atlas Hotel Restaurant

MODERN IRANIAN \$\$

(Map p252; 1st fl, Hotel Atlas, Falakeh Ab; meals US\$7-10; ☎noon-3pm & 7-10.45pm) For steak and chips in a middle-class setting, this comfortable hotel restaurant opens longer than most and the coffeehouse downstairs has an espresso machine.

Shopping

Mashhad is a great place to buy carpets. Half hidden through deceptively small doorways, both **Bazaar-e Fash** (Map p250; Imam Reza St; ☎8.30am-1.30pm & 4-8.30pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-1pm Thu) and **Saroye Saeed** (Map p250; Andarzgu St; ☎8am-2pm & 4-7pm) are multi-unit carpet markets mostly aimed at bulk dealers so prices can be excellent. Both places have interesting top-floor repair workshops and remarkably there seems to be no sales pressure.

The wobbly, wooden-ceilinged old **carpet bazaar** (Map p252; 13th Alley, Andarzgu St) is more commercial minded but slated for eventual demolition if the shrine's expansion continues.

Upstairs in the 800m-long **Bazar-e Reza** (Map p252; ☎8am-8pm Sat-Thu), jewellery stalls proffer turquoise (mined at nearby Neishabur, p260) but their sales pitch is often more impressive than their gems.

Around Falakeh Ab, shops sell comparatively inexpensive saffron (see the boxed text, this page) in a range of qualities: a highly portable souvenir.

The Haram is surrounded by bazaars and shopping arcades flogging tacky pilgrimage souvenirs. Try to resist the considerable temptation to buy an over saturated photograph of yourself superimposed upon the Holy Shrine.

The **Friday book market** (Map p250; Mordarres St, south side; ☎8am-2pm Fri) is good for English-language magazines including the *Economist* (US\$4).

Information

Consulates

Afghanistan (Map p250; ☎854 1653; Do Shahid St; ☎8am-noon Sat-Wed) Visas are sometimes only available from the embassy in Tehran, so check the current situation. Otherwise, apply early (foreign visa applicants can walk straight through an unmarked white door part-way down the queue of Afghans); bring a copy of your passport and two mug shots. The 30-day tourist visa should be ready the same day for a flat €75 fee.

Pakistan (Map p250; ☎222 9845; Imam Khomeini St; ☎9am-noon Sat-Wed) Occupies the former British consulate. Very unlikely to issue visas.

Turkmenistan (Map p250; ☎854 7066; Do Shahid St, off Dah-e Dey Sq; ☎8.30am-noon Mon-Thu & Sat) Allow at least six days to get a five-day transit visa. No English spoken; consider using a translator if you don't understand Farsi, Turkmen or Russian. You'll need an onward visa – bring a photocopy of it (Uzbek is best, Azerbaijani sometimes accepted) as well as your main passport page, and be able to state the entry and exit points by which you'll transit Turkmenistan (inflexible). There's a handy photocopy shop three doors from Baghoy Exchange.

Emergency

Imam Reza Hospital (Map p250; ☎854 3031-9; Ibn-e Sina St) Good, accessible hospital with 24-hour pharmacy.

Internet Access

Aftabshargh Coffeenet (Map p250; Imam Khomeini St; per hr US\$1; ☎9am-9pm)

Attar Coffeenet (Map p252; Falakeh Ab; per US\$1; ☺24hr) Three floors up.

Money

Banks with foreign-exchange counters are relatively common but the exchange counters are faster and give fair rates.

Baghoi Exchange (Map p250; Imam Khomeini St; ☺9am-1.30pm & 5-7pm Sat-Wed, 9am-1pm Thu)

Saraf Exchange (Map p250; Imam Khomeini St; ☺9am-2pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu)

Petrol Ration Card Office

Sherkate Mellie Naft-e-Iran (Map p249; ☑7633011; Janbaz Blvd at Blvd Sajjad)

Post

Main post office (Map p250; Tavala'i St) Use for parcels.

Post office (Map p250; Imam Khomeini St) Opposite Bank Mellie. OK for stamps, but not parcels.

Tourist information

Information room (bus terminal arrivals area; ☺24hr) Library-style sitting room gives you space to think after a long journey.

Miras Ferhangi Khorasan (Map p249; ☑725 9311; Sadeghi Blvd; ☺8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Officially you need a letter from these folks before visiting some out-of-the-way sights such as Robat Sharaf (p261). It prints lavish bilingual brochures for each district in Khorasan.

Travel Agencies

Towhid Foroozanfar and Vali Ansari (see Tours, p254) are also useful for buying tickets.

Adibian Travel Agency (Map p250; ☑859 8151; www.adibiantours.com; 56 Pasdaran Ave; ☺7.30am-8pm) Very professional English-speaking agency that sells air and train tickets,

FLIGHTS FROM MASHHAD

DESTINATION	FARE	FLIGHTS PER WEEK (AIRLINE)
Ahvaz	US\$70	2
Bandar Abbas	US\$75	2 (IA)
Esfahan	US\$45 (IA)	6 (Eram), 3 (Aria), 2 (Caspian), 2 (Taban)
Gorgan	US\$30	3 (IA)
Kerman	US\$35	2 (Mahan)
Kermanshah	US\$40 (Aria)	2 (As)
Kish	US\$90	14 (Kish)
Shiraz	US\$50 (IA)	7 (As)
Tabriz	US\$60	2 (IA), 2 (Caspian), 2 (Eram)
Yazd	US\$40	2 (IA)
Zabol	US\$35	1 (Taban)
Zahedan	US\$40	4 (IA)

provides assistance with visa-extension applications and offers tours.

Visa Extensions

Edareh-ye Gozarnameh (Map p249; ☑218 3907; 45 Metri-ye Reza St, Piruzi Blvd; ☺8am-1pm Sat-Wed, to 10.30am Thu) Behind fortified green fencing, this inconveniently located place would look like a prison except that the mad crush of inmates (mostly Central Asians) are all trying to get in. Not the best place to apply. For an additional US\$25 service charge, Adibian Travel (p257) can handle the processing for you.

BUSES FROM MASHHAD

DESTINATION	FARE (VIP/MAHMOOLY)	DURATION	DEPARTURES & COMPANY
Birjand	US\$9/3	8hr	8am, 8-10pm
Esfahan	US\$22 (VIP)	22hr	7am, 3pm, 6-8pm
Gorgan	US\$12/4	10½hr	6-10am & 6-9pm
Herat (Afghanistan)	US\$18	7hr	8am, 10am
Kerman	US\$16 (VIP)	16hr	3pm Taavoni 14
Tabas (via Birjand)	US\$3	10hr	7.30pm Saadet Peyma
Tehran	US\$18/9	14hr	frequent
Yazd	US\$18.50/8	16hr	4pm, 5pm, 6pm Saadet Peyma
Zahedan	US\$17/11.50	15hr	9.30am, 7pm Towfik Peyma

i Getting There & Away

During peak seasons long-distance transport can be booked up months ahead.

Air

INTERNATIONAL SERVICES

Iran Aseman (AS; Map p250; ☎225 8200; Andarzu St) has flights to Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan, single/return US\$220/330, Tuesday), Dushanbe (Tajikistan, US\$200/290, Tuesday), Kuwait (US\$230/340, Wednesday and Friday) and Kabul (US\$203/235, Monday). **KamAir** (www.flykamair.ca) also flies to Kabul (US\$180/209, Saturday). To go further afield, use connections via Bahrain with Gulf Air (US\$180/310, twice weekly) or Doha with Qatar Airways (US\$210/346, thrice weekly). Check out **Jazeera Airways** (www.jazeeraairways.com) for budget flights from Kuwait (Wednesday and Friday in season), starting at 15 Kuwaiti dinars (US\$75).

DOMESTIC SERVICES

To Tehran there are 63 weekly flights (US\$55) on six different airlines, including Saha Air, which uses the world's last Boeing 707s still in passenger service. Other direct flights from Mashhad are shown in the table, p257. Note that IA stands for Iran Air, while AS refers to Iran Aseman.

Arriving in Mashhad by air, the useful hotel reservation counter inside the arrivals hall can book midrange and top-end places. It's well worth using during high season.

Bus, Minibus & Taxi

All of Mashhad's numerous transport terminals are well out of the centre. However, most long-distance bus services can be prebooked at rela-

tively central **Binalood Travel** (off Map p250; ☎852 5580; Imam Reza St).

MAIN TERMINAL

Useful services from the bustling **main bus terminal** (Map p249; end of Imam Reza St) are shown in the table, p257.

Check the security situation before taking Mashhad–Zahedan or Mashhad–Kerman buses, which are subjected to frequent drug searches en-route.

OTHER TERMINALS

For Sarakhs, infrequent buses (US\$2, three hours) leave from the **Istgah Sarakhs** (Map p249; Sarakhs Blvd), about 700m east of Sarakhs Sq. More regular savaris (US\$4, two hours) depart from a point somewhat further east. Get to either by bus 64 from Mosallah Blvd.

Change in Quchan for Bajgiran (and then Turkmenistan).

For Radkan Tower, start by heading to Chenaran. Savaris leave from the west end of Ferdosi Blvd, minibuses from the old TBT garage on Garani Blvd (the western extension of Tohid St).

Train

The train offers a wonderfully comfortable alternative to flying, especially if you pamper yourself with a 1st-class berth (comfortable beds, flat-screen TV, full meal service included). Book as far ahead as possible. Some destinations are shown in the table below.

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

A semiregular public bus runs between the airport terminal and Basij Mustazafin Sq. Taxis cost US\$5.

TRAINS FROM MASHHAD

DESTINATION	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Ahvaz	US\$25	30hr	11.30pm, 5 weekly
Bandar Abbas	US\$46	22½hr	3.30pm Wed, Fri, Sat
Esfahan	US\$22	24hr	6.30pm Mon, Wed, Sat
Sarakhs	US\$15	3hr	10am, 6pm local services
Tabriz	US\$45	24hr	3.30pm
Tehran (express)	US\$45	7hr	7am express
Tehran (old train)	US\$12	12hr	10.30am, 2pm
Tehran	US\$21	12hr	8 daily, 4-10.30pm
Tehran ('Green' train)	US\$40	12hr	7pm
Yazd	US\$34	12hr	9.15pm Mon, Wed, Fri

Bus

Prebuy shiny US\$0.50 tickets from **ticket booths** (☺6.30am-8.30pm) to use the excellent but complex network of city buses. Most buses stop running after 9pm. A few (eg bus 10) continue later, requiring two tickets at night. From stops near Falakeh Ab (Map p252), southbound bus 84 runs to the bus terminal, and buses 13, 62 and 94 wiggle towards Park Mellat. Useful bus 210 passes the Nader Shah mausoleum (first stop), Shohoda Sq (second stop) and Falakeh Ferdosi (one stop beyond the big Saba Hotel). For Kuhestan Park, take bus 10 from Shohoda Sq (Map p250) or Park Mellat.

Metro

The 19-station metro starts from Ghadir Hwy in the southeast, runs beneath Feda'i-ye-e Eslami, Bahar, Enqelab-e-Eslami and Ahmedabad Sts to Park Mellat, then overground down the middle of Vakilabad Blvd, rendering that thundering highway almost uncrossable.

Taxi

Shuttle taxis on straight runs usually cost US\$1 (US\$2 for longer hops). However, any deviation requires payment *dar baste*: US\$0.50 for a shortish hop, around US\$1.50 to cross a larger chunk of the city.

Around Mashhad

KANG

☺0512 / POP 2300 / ELEV 1710M

کنگ

Photogenic Kang is 'Khorasan's Masuleh', a wonderfully homogenous **stepped village** of stacked mud-brick homes, most with porch-balconies and earthen roofs. Stairways duck beneath overhangs while steep slate-bottomed streamways run down the middle of alleyways. For the best **overall view**, fork left at the teahouse where the bus terminates, walk 400m, then cross the river and climb for about three minutes.

A very rewarding way to arrive in Kang is to walk (1½ hours) from the Shandiz-Zoshk road. The hike starts up Zoshk 14th Lane, to the left before Zoshk village, signed in yellow Farsi letters on green. This rough 4WD track crosses a bald, low-mountain pass that's lonely but easy to follow. Buses from Mashhad's Falakeh Ferdosi are fairly rare to Zoshk but relatively frequent to Shandiz or Abardeh (3km beyond); hitchhiking the last 13km to Zoshk is easy enough, passing a series of idyllic little **streamside teahouse-restaurants** en route. Doing the trek with Vali Ansari Astaneh (p254), you'll also get to visit local family homes in Abardeh.

From Kang, five daily buses to Mashhad's Kuhestan Park leave at 7am, 11.30am, 2pm, 4pm and 6.45pm. Alternatively, hitchhike via pretty castle-village Noqondar to **Torqabeh** (22km) from which bus 114 (US\$1, 35 minutes) runs to Mashhad's Falakeh Ferdosi every 20 minutes till 7pm. Torqabeh is famous for canework handicrafts, out-of-town riverside teahouse-restaurants and ice-cream sundaes served with nuts and lemon juice on a bed of noodles!

TUS (FERDOSI)

☺0512 / POP 5000 / ELEV 1182M

طوس (فردوسی)

Just as Stratford-upon-Avon in England is synonymous with Shakespeare, so Tus is inextricably linked with Persia's 11th-century epic poet Abulqasim Ferdosi (see p314). Domestic tourists flock to the **Ferdosi Mausoleum** (admission US\$1; ☺8am-6.30pm), set in its own park and topped by a classically styled stone cenotaph. The current mausoleum only dates from 1964 but there's been a tomb of sorts here since Ferdosi's death in AD 1020. He was originally interred in his own garden because the local Muslim cemetery considered his writings too anti-Islamic for burial there. Similar extreme feelings resurfaced very briefly during the earliest throes of the 1979 revolution during which the mausoleum was damaged.

Beneath the main monument a series of reliefs represent Ferdosi's works. A nicely presented but limited **Tus Museum** (admission an additional US\$1; ☺8am-6pm), within the mausoleum's gardens, displays gory paintings, exhibits 'warlike equipment' and sells postcards. In the rear section of the park, the **Razan gate** shows how incredibly thick Tus's original mud-brick city walls once were. Tus was Khorasan's foremost city before being so comprehensively sacked by Tamerlane's forces (1389) that it was effectively abandoned.

About 1km towards Mashhad, the **Boq'e-ye Hordokieh'** (Gonbad-e Haruniyeh; admission US\$1; ☺8am-4pm) is a massive brick-domed 14th-century mausoleum that looks especially impressive when floodlit at dusk. There are several theories as to the structure's purpose. The most popular (and least likely) is that it was a prison for the assassin of Imam Reza. The rather bare interior displays models of other tomb towers including the impressive **Akhangan Tower** (12km northeast of Tus) with its recently added blue-scalloped 'roof'.

Tus village is now almost a suburb of Mashhad. City buses (two US\$0.50 tickets,

40 minutes) and minibuses leave around three times hourly from Falakeh Ferdosi using two different routes. They terminate outside the mausoleum.

RADKAN

رادكان

About 75km northwest of Mashhad, the mysterious 25m-high **Radkan Tower** has baffled visitors for centuries. A tomb? A coronation spot? According to Iranian archaeo-astronomer **Manoochehr Arian** (www.jamejamshid.com), it was actually a highly sophisticated instrument for studying the stars built in AD 1261 by astronomers led by Nasruddin Tusi (Nasir Al-Tusi; 1201-74). The round, conical-topped brick tower was designed so that the sun shines directly through its doors and niches on solstice and equinox days. It was possibly with data collected here and at his more famous observatory at Maraqeh (p83) that Tusi managed to calculate the earth's diameter and explain discrepancies between Aristotle's and Ptolemy's theories of planetary movement.

The tower is in a field, 1km northwest of Qiasabad hamlet or 3km down an unsurfaced road from Radkan village. Radkan village is itself surrounded by a quietly fascinating scattering of old mud ruins, 9km north of the Quchan-Mashhad highway (it's possible to hitchhike). The village taxi agency charges US\$2 one way to the tower. Mashhad savaris (US\$1.50) are very frequent. If you offer US\$6 *dar baste*, they'll make a side trip to Tus en route, stopping for long enough to visit the Ferdosi Mausoleum.

NEISHABUR

نیشابور

☑0551 / POP 231,000 / ELEV 1194M

An early capital of Khorasan, Neishabur (Nayshaboor) was first settled in the 3rd century AD by the great Sassanian Shah Shapur I as one of his great fortified trading cities, and the place grew fat and rich exploiting the thick veins of turquoise that wind throughout the hills nearby. By the Seljuk period it was a thriving literary, artistic and academic centre, notable as the birthplace of the 11th-century poet and all-round good egg, Omar Khayyam (see the boxed text, p314), but all came crashing down with the Mongol invasions; the Mongol general leading the siege in 1221 was married to a daughter of Genghis Khan himself and when her husband was killed by Neishabur's defenders she demanded the total destruction of the city and the murder of all its inhabitants in bloody re-

venge; victims of the Mongol queen's fury are still regularly uncovered by local farmers and construction workers, their skeletons left to rot in the ruins of their once glorious city.

👁 Sights

Omar Khayyam Tomb Complex TOMB

Neishabur's main attraction remains **Khayyam's Tomb** (admission US\$1; ☉8am-9pm). Its present form is a distinctive 1970s modernist affair with diamond-shaped lozenges of calligraphic tiling (Khayyam's words, naturally) set in a curved, airy net of criss-crossed marble. Don't be surprised to find random Iranians bombarding you with recitations of Khayyam's verses as you ponder the monument.

A big part of the tomb's attraction is its manicured garden setting, **Bagh-e Mahrugh**, with a gently appealing terrace on which to sip tea (US\$1 per pot) with Neishabur's famous crystallised sugar while being serenaded by (caged) birds. Jewellery outlets compete to sell you Neishabur's equally famous turquoise. In the gardens' free southern section, the lovely **Imamzadeh-ye Mohammed Mahrugh** is a fine 16th-century domed mausoleum with an intricately tiled portal.

The octagonal tomb tower of **Sheikh Attar** (admission US\$0.50; ☉7am-9pm) sits in another pretty garden, 1km west (a popular horse-and-carriage ride).

Either end of the gardens is a great place to indulge in a bit of guerrilla picnicking, Iranian style, and you'll be guaranteed to join a family or two for tea and cookies.

The tomb complex is 5km from Neishabur's central Khayyam Sq; take eastbound bus 10 to the end (US\$0.50, 15 minutes).

Shah Abbas Caravanserai CARAVANSERAI

(Imam Khomeini St) Central Neishabur is a rather unexciting place, but very close to Khayyam Sq, the restored Shah Abbas Caravanserai hosts souvenir shops, the **Sofra-khane Sonati Abashah** (tea & qalyan US\$2) traditional teahouse and a small **Nature Museum** (admission US\$1; ☉8am-1pm & 4-6pm); ask at the teahouse if the local speciality of rhubarb is in season and try the sorbet drink. Amid the museum's displays of stuffed birds, local animals, pinned insects and pickled snakes, notice the bottled human footuses.

The single-alley Safavid-era **covered bazaar** (6th Lane, Imam Khomeini St) starts about 300m further west.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kamalalmolk

HOTEL \$

(☎224 4277; Modarres St; s/d/tr US\$16/20/25) Just 30m north of Khayyam Sq, this hotel has five reasonably tasteful, en suite rooms, the quieter back ones looking out across the brilliant little garden-cafe that is the place's trump card. You'd never guess it was there from the uninteresting front restaurant section.

i Getting There & Away

Mashhad savaris (US\$3) and buses (US\$1, two hours) leave when full from Neishabur's somewhat hidden **main bus terminal** (11th Alley, 22 Bahman St), 2km northeast of Khayyam Sq. The **train station** (Jafari St) is about 1km south of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq. Coming by train from Tehran you'll arrive in Neishabur bright and early, allowing plenty of time for sightseeing before continuing to Mashhad the same day.

Mashhad guide Vali Ansari Astaneh (p254) has pioneered a cross-mountain trip that allows a Mashhad–Tus–Neishabur–Mashhad loop by walking (around six hours) or using a 4WD (when conditions allow) between Zoshk and the attractive foothill village of Kharv near Qadamgah.

Mashhad to Sarakhs

In spring, a miraculous green-grass fuzz dappled with red poppies enlivens the dusty badlands of the Mashhad–Sarakhs road (185km), providing April grazing for herds of sheep. **Nomad shepherds'** tent-camps are easiest to spot after **Mazdavadan**, where the road climbs an escarpment, then follows a crag-sided valley of saw-toothed geological uplifts.

In several rural villages, **old mud houses** consist of three or four adobe domes. A few such structures still exist in Sarakhs, but a more impressive collection at **Abravan** is easily spied north of the main road.

A 7km side trip from tiny **Sholoq** village (130km from Mashhad) reveals the evocatively lonely 1128 **Robot Sharaf Caravan-serai** with twin courtyards and a far *ivan* retaining some fine stucco patterning and

calligraphy. Deep pits in chambers on either side once held the water supply. Note that Sholoq has no taxis. You could try to engage a cranky old *motor* (motorcycle) but while US\$1 might be the 'fair price' it's a seller's market and drivers ask a whopping US\$12.

Renting a one-way Mashhad–Sarakhs savari *dar baste* (US\$17) and paying a little extra for stops and side trips makes sense.

Sarakhs

سرخس

☎0512 / POP 36,000 / ELEV 287M

If heading for Merv and Mary, you can cross the Turkmenistan border in this strange, flat town where several redundantly large boulevards don't seem to lead anywhere. A useful landmark west of the town centre is the dolphin-fronted **Hotel Doosty** (☎522 5518; Ghadir Sq; s/d/tr US\$20/24/28; ☎☎). Its best rooms are a decent midrange deal and its restaurant is excellent value (meals US\$3). From here, Customs Blvd forks right (southeast) off the main road and leads after 800m to the **border gate**.

The main road passes the bus terminal (150m beyond the Hotel Doosty) and savari stand (400m) before reaching Pasdaran St (800m). Turn left and follow that street northwest then north for 3km to see the 1356 **Gonbad Sheikh Loghman Baba** (donation appreciated; ☎5.30am–4.30pm) in a wheat-field to your right. That domed brick tomb-tower has a massive, shattered arch support tower and an impressively vast three-storey interior with sections of disintegrating stalactite vaulting held in place by wooden staves.

Buses to Mashhad (US\$2, three hours) run roughly hourly till 4pm supplemented by sporadic but relatively regular savaris (US\$4, two hours).

The inconvenient train station is 7km west of town. Trains leave to Mashhad at 6am and 2.30pm (US\$15, three hours) but no passenger services cross the Turkmenistan border (it's a different rail-gauge).

CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT SARAKHS

Using this **border post** (☎8am–4pm Iran Time, 9.30am–5.30pm Turkmen time) allows the shortest cut between Iran and Uzbekistan. A shuttle (US\$10 per person) crosses 2km of no-man's land to the Turkmen post. Bicycles are carried. Turkmen entry formalities are similar to those at Bajiran (see the boxed text, p247), requiring US\$15 in US dollars (cash). From the border it's 3km away as the crow flies to the Turkmen town of Saraghs (no formal hotel) but 10km by a very circuitous road. From Saraghs occasional minibuses run to the fertiliser-factory town of Tejen (with very basic hotel) where you can change for Mary.

Kalat (Kalat Naderi) کلات

📍0512 / POP 8000 / ELEV 890M

Admiring its near-vertical backdrop of mountain cliffs, you don't need to be a military commander to see why Kalat has historically made the ideal last holdout for rebels on the run. It was one of the only places to have resisted the armies of Tamerlane. And it's still widely called Kalat Naderi for Nader Shah who retreated into its impregnable natural fortifications ahead of his considerable band of enemies. Many Kurds were settled here during the Safavid dynasty to guard against northern invaders, and some women still wear Kurdish costumes.

Spring is the best time to visit, when the countryside turns emerald green and nomad tents dot the foothill grasslands, especially along the Kalat–Dargaz road.

👁️ Sights

Khorshid Palace

TOWER

(Kakh-e Nader, Ghasr-e Khorshid; Imam Khomeini St; admission US\$1; 🕒7.30am–6.30pm) Kalat's foremost sight is Nader Shah's Khorshid Palace, 700m beyond the savari terminus. It's not really a palace at all but a distinctively fluted circular tomb-tower, on an octagonal base set in beautifully manicured lawns. The name Khorshid (literally 'sun') refers to one of Nader's wives, not some arcane astronomical purpose. It was never finished, hence the odd proportions and lack of a dome. Intricate exterior panels include pineapple and pear motifs. These fruits were unknown in 18th-century Khorasan, suggesting that Nader Shah used foreign artisans he'd engaged (ie kidnapped) during his Indian conquests. The tower's magnificent interior uses gilt and ample colour to bring life to 16 stalactite-vaulted alcoves. Stairs beneath the rear terrace lead down into a graciously cool **ethnology museum** (admission included), graphically depicting Khorasan village life. A gift shop sells Naderabilia.

Facing the complex, an obvious 'Tourist Information' sign attracts visitors to Reza Mortezaabi's appealing little **herb shop** (Imam Khomeini St; 🕒7.30am–noon & 4–8.30pm Sat–Thu). Reza speaks good English but 'information' means a photocopied page from a prehistoric Lonely Planet guide.

The beautiful blue dome, easily spied from the museum steps, belongs to the otherwise modest I747 **Kabud Gonbad Mosque** (Imam Khomeini St).

Borg-argavan Shah

TOWER

To fully appreciate Kalat's natural impregnability, backtrack 3km to the Mashhad road tunnel. The cliffs here are otherwise only breached by a very narrow gully stream guarded by the fortified Borg-argavan Shah, an iconic if small, round, mud-brick tower. Just beyond this (visible from the streamside below) the **Katibeh Nader** is an inscription on the cliff-face praising Nader Shah with poetry in Turkish and Farsi. Climb to various rocky outcrops for spectacular views across the Darban village area ringed by bright-red laterite slopes.

🍴 Sleeping & Eating

Mosaferkhaneh Bahrami

MOSAFERKHANEH \$

(📍272 3298; Imam Khomeini St at 13th Alley; d/tr US\$10/15) Has pleasant rooms with decent bathrooms and freshly laundered sheets. It's above an unmarked but popular restaurant with black-and-white trim, 200m from the savari stand.

A few snack shops and an unmarked basement for *abgusht* (lamb stew made with lentils, potatoes and tomato paste) cluster round the savari stand.

📍 Getting There & Away

To Mashhad, savaris (US\$1.50) are sporadic and buses (US\$1) are sadly rare.

The Road to Afghanistan

There are direct buses from Mashhad to Herat (Afghanistan) but you could add a little spice by doing the trip in bus/savari hops via Fariman, Torbat-e-Jam and Taybad. For intermediate stops you will generally need to pay a private taxi.

MASHHAD TO TORBAT-E JAM

In the scrappy railway-junction village of **Sang Bast** (40km from central Mashhad), you could climb the AD 1028 **Ayaz Minaret**. But don't hope to get inside the **caravanserai** in case your wish comes true: it's now the local prison.

TORBAT-E JAM

ترتبت جام

📍0528 / POP 85,000 / ELEV 920M

Where the last ripples of mountain ridge disappear into a vast dusty plain, you'll find this friendly, adamantly Sunni town. White beards and whiter turbans create a street-vibe that's more oriental than in most Iranian cities.

Imam Khomeini Blvd runs 4km from Imam Reza Sq (northwest) to Falakeh Sharak (southeast), passing Shahr-dari Sq half-way. The town's central Valiasr Sq is 600m east of Shahr-dari Sq along commercial Al Mahdi St.

Sights

Jami Mausoleum

آرامگاه جامی MAUSOLEUM, SHRINE (Aramgah St; admission free; ☀️dawn-dusk) Torbat-e Jam's highly impressive must-see sight is the beautiful **Jami mausoleum complex**. Here, 10 religious buildings intertwine around the grave of 12th-century Sunni mystic and poet Sheikh Ahmad Jami. His tombstone rests under a very old pistachio tree, above which soars a particularly impressive blue-tiled **main iwan**. In this *iwan* there are three doors. The one to the right is open to all visitors and leads through a small sanctuary into an inner courtyard across which is the AD 1442 **'New' Mosque**. Look for the magnificent vaulted ceilings and octagonal columns on either side of its prayer hall. It's 'new' compared to the 1302 **Atirgh Mosque** (☺️women-only at prayer times) behind you on the same courtyard, which has double-level arch-vaults and fragments of beautiful calligraphy.

The finest gems are hidden behind the other two locked doors in the main *iwan*. Gatekeeper Qolam Ali Keliddar (who you probably unwittingly met when bagging up your shoes on entering the complex) has the keys. Technically he's only supposed to open the chunky locks for VIPs or those with a letter from Miras Ferhangi. However, foreign tourists are so rare that you'll probably be invited to enjoy green tea with him and visiting Afghan Sufis. The small door on the left leads to the 14th-century **Kermani Mosque**, named after Masoud Kerman who created the splendid mihrab and calligraphy inside. Through the heavy wooden main doors, the 1264 **Khaneh Ghe** sports ancient graffiti and domed ceilings with particularly well-preserved colourful frescoes.

The complex is 700m east of Valiasr Sq via Mirqaveh, then Maadan Sts.

Sleeping

Mosaferkhaneh Me'at Dana MOSAFERKHANEH \$ (☎️222 7569; Natr St, Al Mahdi St, 2nd Alley; s/tw/tr with shower US\$7/10/12, without bathroom US\$5/7/9) Clean simple rooms with camp beds and TV. Very close to central Valiasr Sq.

CROSSING THE AFGHANISTAN BORDER AT DOGHARON

This old Hippie-Trail **border** (☎️7.30am-4.30pm) is open and remarkably easy. Direct Mashhad-Herat buses run twice each morning either way. Or do it yourself in hops via Torbat-e Jam and Taybad. Westbound savaris to the border (135km, 300 Afghanis) leave from Herat's old bus terminal. Visas are *not* issued here.

Sima Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎️222 3377; Behesht 1st St, off Imam Khomeini Blvd; s/tw/tr US\$8/11/12, without bathroom US\$7/9/10) Very green rooms with ageing linen but the better rooms have private squat toilet and shower.

Information

The culture-information office, **Miras Ferhangi** (☎️222 4790; Robat Karim, Beheshti 3rd Alley; ☺️7am-2pm) occupies a pretty, mini-caravanserai, two blocks south, then one west from Valiasr Sq, passing **E1 Technology** (☎️222 8030; Beheshti/Modarres St; internet per hr US\$1; ☺️8am-10pm) en route.

Getting There & Away

For Mashhad, buses (US\$2, 2½ hours) use a terminal near Imam Reza Sq, accessed by shuttle taxi along Al-Mahdi St from Valiasr Sq. Savaris (front/back US\$2/3, two hours) depart till around 9pm from nearby.

Savaris to Taybad (US\$2) leave from Falakeh Sharak.

TAYBAD

تایباد

☎️0529 / POP 49,000 / ELEV 823M

Just 18km from the Afghanistan border post, Taybad's main attraction is the imposing 1444 **Molana Mosque** (☺️7am-dusk). Its towering *iwan* is of a similar grandeur to that of the Jami complex in Torbat-e Jam. The male-dominated **Municipality Hotel** (☎️422 2269; Gumruk Sq; tw/q US\$ 15/19) at the northern edge of town has unsophisticated if fairly spacious box-rooms with bathroom, TV and much too much pink. From a point 300m further north, transport leaves for Mashhad (bus/savari US\$2/5, three hours), Torbat-e Jam (savari US\$3) and Dogharon, the Afghan border (savari/taxi US\$3/2, 20 minutes). Transport to **Khaf** leaves from near Falakeh Molana, passing the dramatic **Karat Minaret** after 25km.



Understand Iran

IRAN TODAY266

International sanctions, inflation, crackdowns on dissent and high unemployment are challenges facing Iran.

HISTORY269

Time has witnessed great empires, mighty invaders, shahs (strong, weak and eccentric) and the birth of an Islamic Republic.

PEOPLE286

Rather than chanting fundamentalists, Iranians are warm, charming and welcoming.

DAILY LIFE.....289

'A book of verses underneath the bough, A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou.' (But without the wine.)

IRANIAN CUISINE296

Iran's diverse and distinct cuisine has evolved over three millennia, influenced by the arid environment and invading forces.

FAITH IN IRAN 301

An understanding of the Shiite Muslim religion and its most revered imams is vital to understand Iranians.

ARCHITECTURE304

Persian architecture has strongly influenced building throughout the Islamic world, and even in India.

CARPETS, ART & CRAFTS308

The Persian carpet is more than just a floor covering to an Iranian; it's an integral aspect of religion and culture.

LITERATURE, MUSIC & CINEMA 313

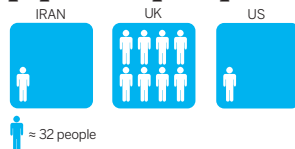
Since the 1st millennium AD Iran has produced outstanding poets; in more recent times, literature and cinema.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS 318

Iran is a land of snow-capped mountains, cliffside villages and vast, sweeping deserts dotted with oases.



population per sq km



Iran Today

Feeling the Pressure

Iran is a country under intense pressure. With the Arab Spring felling regimes across the region, the isolation of international sanctions, dangerous levels of inflation, high unemployment and the ever-present threat of a targeted military strike, you could be forgiven for thinking something has to give.

In 2009, 18 months before Tunisia kicked off the Arab uprisings, it seemed to many that change would come through the ballot box. When that didn't happen millions took to the streets in support of the opposition Green Movement, protesting what they claimed was a rigged election and calling for the president to step aside. But a violent crackdown ended the demonstrations, its leaders were put under house arrest and thousands of regime opponents have since been jailed or disappeared.

The Green Movement was the sort of spontaneous uprising that Iranians had been predicting for 10 years. That it failed, followed by the ruthless efficiency shown in rounding up opponents, has left many people feeling hopeless and paranoid. Some Iranians we spoke with would remove the battery in their already-switched-off phone before discussing politics. At a social level, crackdowns by the Ershad (morality police) and Basij (hardline militia) on dress and hairstyles have increased, and even the millions of long-tolerated satellite dishes are being (selectively) targeted.

So What Now?

Iran is more or less split between those who support the existing system – often rural people and the urban poor – as against those wanting change. The latter have largely given up on the electoral system and gone back to waiting for 'something to happen'. There are three main pos-

- » » Population: 78 million
- » » Area: 1,648,195 sq km
- » » GDP: US\$480.3 billion
- » » GDP growth: 2.5%
- » » Budget surplus: US\$35 billion
- » » Inflation: 22.5%
- » » Unemployment: 15.3%
- » » Population living below the poverty line: 18%

Dos & Don'ts

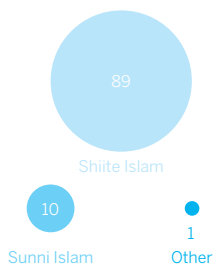
- » Never use the thumbs up sign, which is the equivalent of the middle finger 'up yours'.
- » Men should not offer to shake a woman's hand unless she offers first.
- » Take off your shoes when entering a home or a mosque.
- » When invited to dinner take a tin of the local sweets (eg *gaz* in Esfahan).

Top Books

- » **Journey of the Magi** (Paul William Roberts) Thought-provoking journey 'in search of the birth of Jesus'.
- » **Neither East Nor West** (Christiane Bird) American woman's account of her travels in Iran.

belief systems

(% of population)



if Iran were 100 people



61 would be Persian
16 would be Azari
10 would be Kurdish
6 would be Lor

2 would be Turkmen &
other Turkic groups
5 would be Other

sibilities: a more reform-minded, stable and economically responsible president emerges from within the ruling elite (the Gorbachev option); backroom moves by the elected arm to reduce the power of the clerics (tried and failed under Ahmadinejad); or a popular revolt brought on by economic stress.

There's little appetite for another revolution, so a continuation of the status quo is most likely for the time being. In effect that means parallel governments. The 'normal' government comprises an elected president and *majlis* (parliament), plus lower levels of government with a mix of elected and appointed officials. On the unelected side, the aptly named Supreme Leader is the head of state. He sits above the Guardian Council, a 12-man group with six Muslim clerics who are appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six Islamic jurists appointed by the head of the judiciary, who is himself appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council can veto any law passed by the *majlis* and decides who is fit to run for elected office. The Supreme Leader also has what amounts to a huge private army, with the revolutionary Basij, Sepah and Pasdaran militias reporting to him, not the president.

It's a combination that entrenches political power under the Supreme Leader and is, as was seen during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, one that even a government full of reformists cannot overcome. The economy, however, is proving harder to control.

Nukes, Sanctions & the Economy

Iran believes it has an 'inalienable right' to nuclear energy and has a sophisticated program to deliver this. Iran insists it has no plan to build nuclear weapons, yet it has refused to cooperate with the International

With the value of the Iranian rial diving, the Central Bank of Iran plans to wipe four zeroes off the face value of notes, and has even run an online poll to test the appetite for a new currency name (the *parsi* was a big winner).

» The Valleys of the Assassins: and Other Persian Travels

(Freya Stark) A classic travelogue – challenging perceptions and illuminating reality.

» **All the Shah's Men** (Stephen Kinzer) Page-turning true story of the CIA's 1953 coup in Iran.

» **The Cypress Tree** (Kamin Mohammadi) The author discovers her Iranian heritage during travels home.

» **In the Land of the Ayatollahs Tupac Shapur is King** (Shahzad Aziz) Combines travelogue and humour in its often insightful observations.

Economic sanctions mean most Iranian businesses need to use unorthodox methods to get paid from abroad. For travellers, if you book a tour you might find yourself paying to a Turkish or Russian bank account, or being asked to pay in cash when you arrive.

Atomic Energy Agency and regularly boasts of its capacity to enrich uranium to a level beyond that needed in a power plant.

When coupled with Ahmadinejad's calls for Zionists to be wiped off the map, the result has been repeated threats of an Israeli air strike on nuclear facilities, numerous UN Security Council resolutions calling on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, and a swathe of economic sanctions. In effect, these sanctions have cut Iran off from the international banking system. But they are not Iran's greatest challenge. Since 1979 Iran has subsidised petrol, gas and electricity at a cost of more than US\$80 billion a year. As its own capacity to refine oil dwindled, Iran became a net importer of petrol, paying high market rates then selling it for US\$0.10 a litre. The cost of supplying fuel to a population expecting it for almost nothing was unsustainable.

In recent years the government has embarked on a huge, risky economic restructure. Fuel was rationed (which also helped lessen Iran's dire air pollution problems a little) and prices have risen repeatedly (petrol is now US\$0.30 to US\$0.70 a litre). Not surprisingly, Iranians are not happy. To mitigate the risk of social upheaval, the government pays about US\$40 a month to almost every man, woman and child. Inevitably, that has pushed an already high inflation rate beyond 20%. To make matters worse, after years of being kept artificially strong the Iranian rial lost half its value in a couple of months – the black market is thriving.

Iranians are bracing themselves for tough times. So is the government. It knows, as does the USA and others pushing sanctions, that if things get too bad, the population might decide a new revolution may be worth it after all.

Top Movies

» **Children of Heaven** (1997) Majid Majidi's tale of two poor children losing a pair of shoes.

» **Taste of Cherry** (1997) Abbas Kiarostami looks at the taboo subject of suicide.

» **A Time for Drunken Horses** (2000) Bahman Ghobadi's look at Kurdish orphans and smugglers on the Iraqi border.

» **Offside** (2006) Jafar Panahi's story of women spectators banned from watching football.

» **A Separation** (2012) Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning look at a Tehran marriage falling apart.



History

Iran has been home to organised urban settlements since at least 4000 BC and even from those times the history of Iran has been intertwined with the history of the region as a whole. Initially the Elamites and Medes paid tribute to the greater Mesopotamian powers of Sumeria and Neo-Assyria. But for about 1100 years from 550 BC a succession of Iranian empires were the superpowers that dominated the region from Egypt, the Mediterranean and the borders of Europe in the west to the Indus River in the east. It began with the Achaemenids, was interrupted by Alexander the Great and the Seleucids, and continued with the Parthian and Sassanid dynasties.

The arrival of the Arabs in AD 633 was a turning point in Iranian history. The Zoroastrian religion was soon replaced by Islam, but the more advanced arts, sciences and administration that had defined Persian civilisation were absorbed into Islamic life. What followed was a pattern that would recur for hundreds of years: a strong ruler creates an empire, his death begins the slow fragmentation of control and another strong ruler sweeps the weakened state aside to begin his own empire. The players included the Arabs, several local and Turkish dynasties and the Mongols. Through it all the Persian national, political and cultural identity survived and, indeed, was largely adopted by the invader.

In 1502 the Safavid dynasty reestablished Iran as an independent state, adopted Shi'a Islam as the official religion and expanded the empire across much of the region. Their demise in 1722 led to another round of short-term dynasties before the Qajars, and later the Pahlavis, continued royal rule until the 1979 revolution brought with it the Islamic Republic.

The Elamites & Medes

Elam was the lowland region in what is now Khuzestan province and the first organised settlements appeared as far back as 2600 BC. Elam was close enough to Mesopotamia and the great Sumerian civilisation to

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.

TIMELINE

**3200–2100
BC**

The 150-hectare Shahr-e Sukhteh (Burnt City) thrives – and is burnt down three times – near modern Zabol before being abandoned. Some archaeologists think it was independent of ancient Mesopotamia.

**2000–3000
BC**

Inscriptions recently uncovered near Jiroft, in southeastern Iran, are possibly the world's earliest known writing, pre-dating Mesopotamian writing.

**c 1340–1250
BC**

The enormous Choqa Zanbil ziggurat is built to honour the pre-eminent Elamite god, Inshushinak. It is lost under the sands from about 640 BC until being rediscovered in 1935.

The Elamites' system of inheritance and power distribution was sophisticated for the time, ensuring power was passed through various family lines.

feel its influence and the two were regular opponents on the battlefield. The Elamites established their capital at Susa (Shush) and derived their strength through an enlightened federal system of government that allowed states to exchange natural resources unique to each region.

The Elamites believed in a pantheon of gods, and their most notable remaining building, the enormous ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil, 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.

About this time Indo-European Aryan tribes began arriving 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, and first crop up in Assyrian records in 836 BC. Little more is heard of them until, according to Greek historian Herodotus, Cyaxares of Media expelled the Scythians in about 625 BC.

Under Cyaxares, the Medes became a formidable military force, repeatedly attacking the neighbouring Assyrians. In 612 BC, 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.

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

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 established a reputation as a benevolent conqueror. According to Herodotus in *The Persian Wars*, Cyrus declared 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...and if any one of them rejects it, I never resolve on war to reign'.

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

c 1125 BC

The king of Babylon, Nebuchadrezzar I invades Elam and sacks the capital Susa (Shush).

c 836 BC

The Medes establish a capital at Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) and compete for trade and influence with Babylon, Lydia, Scythia and the Neo-Assyrian empire.

625–585 BC

Median king Cyaxares the Great joins with Babylon to sack Nineveh and end the Neo-Assyrian empire, expanding Median control from Asia Minor in the west to Kerman in the east.

559 BC

Aged 21, Cyrus II becomes king of the fast-rising Achaemenid people. His 30-year rule establishes a multi-state empire governed from Pasargadae, Babylon, Susa and Ecbatana, each with limited regional autonomy.

Cyrus colonised the old Median capital at Ecbatana, redeveloped Shush and built himself a new home at Pasargadae, establishing the pattern whereby Persian rulers circulated between three different capitals. Unfortunately for him, the Scythian Massagetae from the northeast of the empire decided he was indeed imposing his monarchy on them. Cyrus fully incurred the wrath of the Massagetae queen, Tomyris, after he captured her son (who killed himself) and slaughtered many of her soldiers in a battle made especially one-sided because the Massagetae army were drunk on wine planted by the Achaemenids. Herodotus writes:

Rather than putting the Babylonians to the sword as expected, Cyrus spared them and released the Jews who had been held captive there.

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...bloodthirsty as thou art, I will give thee thy fill of blood'.

Cyrus paid no heed to Tomyris, who gathered her forces 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 Tomyris reputedly 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.

In 525 BC Cyrus's son, Cambyses, captured most of Egypt and coastal regions well into modern Libya. It was later recorded 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, 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 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 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 cities of Ecbatana and Shush became administrative centres, but



STINGEVA/P/GETTY IMAGES ©

» Cyrus' tomb, Pasargadae

550 BC

Cyrus II effectively ends the Median Empire when he defeats his own grandfather – the hated king Astyages – in battle at Pasargadae. Within five years he also conquers Lydia.

539 BC

The Achaemenids destroy the Babylonians at Opis. Cyrus releases Jews who had been enslaved in Babylon. Such benign policies were key to maintaining good relations with defeated subject nations.

529–522 BC

Cyrus's son Cambyses II continues his father's empire building by conquering Egypt, Nubia, and Cyrenaica during his short rule. His mysterious death in Egypt sparks a succession crisis.

Persepolis was the imperial showcase, extravagantly decorated to intimidate visitors and impress with its beauty. 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 the famous battle 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

Young and charismatic like Cyrus before him, it was Alexander the Great of Macedonia who finally ended the First Persian Empire. Having de-

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. Some scholars argue 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.

522–486 BC

Darius I (the Great) creates the first superpower through sword and organisation. He divides Persia into provinces, creates a uniform monetary system and adopts a common language.

486–465 BC

War with the Greeks dominates Xerxes I's reign. After burning Athens in 480 BC, the Persians lose control of Macedonia, Thrace and Ionia. The Apadama Palace at Persepolis is completed.



» Stairway, Apadana Palace, Persepolis

feated the Greeks and Egyptians, Alexander saw off Persian armies at Issus in Turkey (333 BC) and Guagamela in present-day Iraq (331 BC), before sweeping aside the remaining armies of Darius III. 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 burned to the ground.

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 became the lingua franca, Greeks settled new towns and Greek culture stamped itself on the older Persian one. However, ambitious satraps and feisty ethnic minorities were bucking the system, particularly the Parthians.

The Parthian Takeover

The Parthians had settled the area between the Caspian and Aral Seas many centuries before. Under their great king Mithridates (r 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, the other at Ctesiphon, in present-day Iraq.

Expert horsemen and archers, the Parthians spent much energy fighting with Rome for control of Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia. In 53 BC Roman general Crassus, who had defeated Spartacus and was now one of three men controlling Rome, took on the Parthians at Carrhae, in modern-day Turkey. Crassus saw his armies decimated before being captured, having molten gold poured down his throat to mock his greed, and losing 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 Sassanids & the Second Persian Empire

Like the Achaemenids before them, the Sassanid rise from small-time dynasty to empire was nothing short of staggering. Beginning in the province of Fars, Ardashir I (r 224–41) led a push that saw the Sassanids 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

Even today experts argue whether the burning of Persepolis was the accidental result of a drunken party or deliberate retaliation by Alexander for the destruction of Athens by Xerxes.

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'.

358 BC

Artaxerxes III (358–338 BC) takes the throne after assassinating eight half-brothers. In 343 BC he defeats Egypt, which is again made a Persian satrapy.

334–330 BC

Alexander the Great's Macedonians defeat Persian armies at Granicus, Issus and Guagamela. He marches on Susa and Persepolis, whose surrender in effect ends the once-mighty Achaemenid empire.

323–162 BC

After Alexander the Great dies in Babylon in 323 BC, infighting sees his empire divided in three, with the Seleucids ruling parts of Persia until 162 BC. Greek becomes the lingua franca.

309 BC

Ambitious Macedonian Cassander has Alexander the Great's Persian widow, Roxana, and their son, Alexander IV, put to death to clear the way for his rule.

The Sassanids re-formulated Zoroastrianism into a state religion incorporating elements of Greek, Mithraic and ancient animist faiths. They spoke their own language, Pahlavi, which is the root of modern Farsi, and developed the grand *ivan* that dominated much Persian architecture.

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.

still see the cities of Bishapur and Shushtar, where Valerian was held, and bas-reliefs depicting the victory at Naqsh-e Rostam.

The Sassanids 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 Khosrow II (590–628) recaptured parts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Turkey. However, after Khosrow was murdered by his son, 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.

The Arabs & Islam

A crucial chapter in Persian history started when the Arabs defeated the Sassanids at Qadisiyya in 637, following up with a victory at Nehavand near Hamadan that effectively ended Sassanid 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 readily forsook Zoroaster for the teachings of Mohammed. Only Yazd and Kerman (both of which clung to Zoroastrianism for a few centuries more) and a few isolated mountain tribes held fast to their old religions. As they rapidly spread across the Middle East, the Arabs adopted Sassanid 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 Saffarids (868–903), the Tahirids (820–72) and the Samanids (874–999), who set up their capital at Bukhara and revived the Persian language.

The Coming of the Seljuks

Inevitably, these local dynasties could not hold onto their power and eventually were ousted by the Seljuk Turks who pushed on through Persia, capturing Esfahan in 1051 and making it 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.

247 BC

The Parthians, natives of the area southeast of the Caspian Sea, rebel against the Seleucids to begin the longest empire in Iranian history, lasting 471 years.



123–88 BC

Mithridates II expands Parthian control from the borders of the Roman Empire to China and India. He establishes diplomatic and trade relations with China. Greek remains the lingua franca.

» Relief of Parthians, Apadana Palace, Persepolis

The Seljuk dynasty heralded a new era in Persian art, literature and science, distinguished by geniuses such as the mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam. 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, particularly in Esfahan's Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque).

The death of Malek Shah in 1092 marked the end of real Seljuk supremacy, and once again a powerful empire splintered into 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. After a flirtation with Christianity and Buddhism, Hulagu was forced to adopt Islam by social pressures in Persia. He called himself *il khan* (provincial khan or ruler, deputy to the great khan in Mongolia), a name later given to the entire Ilkhanid dynasty (1256–1335).

The Mongols destroyed many of the Persian cities they conquered, obliterating much of Persia's documented history. But they also became great arts patrons, leaving many fine monuments, including the wonderful Oljeitu Mausoleum at Soltaniyeh. During Mongol rule Farsi definitively replaced Arabic as the lingua franca.

The empire fragmented when Abu Said died without a successor, and soon 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 and moved the capital to Qazvin. 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 (p249).

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

53 BC

Parthian armies rout the Romans at Carrhae. Those Roman soldiers fortunate enough to survive report the Parthians fought under dazzlingly bright flags. It is Europe's first glimpse of silk.

AD 25

Parthian emissaries deliver lions to the court of the Han dynasty in China. These are believed to be the inspiration for the lion dancing still seen at Chinese New Year.

224

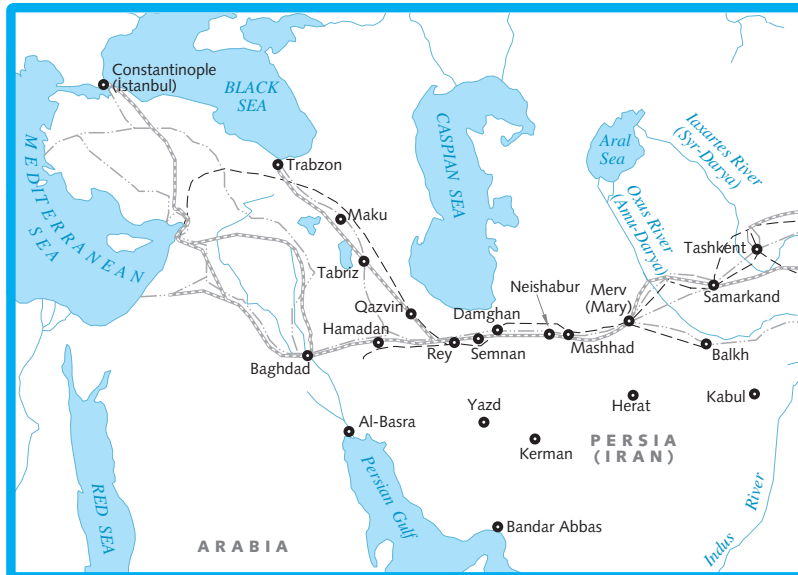
Ardashir Babakan overcomes local rivals to challenge and defeat the Parthian king Artabanus V, and seize control of Parthian territories. He establishes the Sassanid capital at Firuz Abad.

241–272

Shapur I succeeds Ardashir and expands Sassanid hegemony to include Bactria. He famously defeats the Romans at Edessa in 260, where emperor Valerian is captured on the battlefield.

Main Silk Road Routes

HISTORY



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 (p96). Ismail Safavi, a distant descendent of Safi od-Din, eventually conquered all the old Persian imperial heartlands, from Baghdat to Herat. He ruled as Persian Shah (r 1502–24) and despite defeat to Ottoman sultan Selim the Grim at the disastrous battle of Chaldoran (which started 41 years of warring with Persia losing control of eastern Anatolia and Iraq), 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.

c 250

The Sassanid state religion was Zoroastrianism and other faiths were not allowed. However Shapur I was interested in the philosophy of Mani (216–276), which went on to become Manichaeism.

387

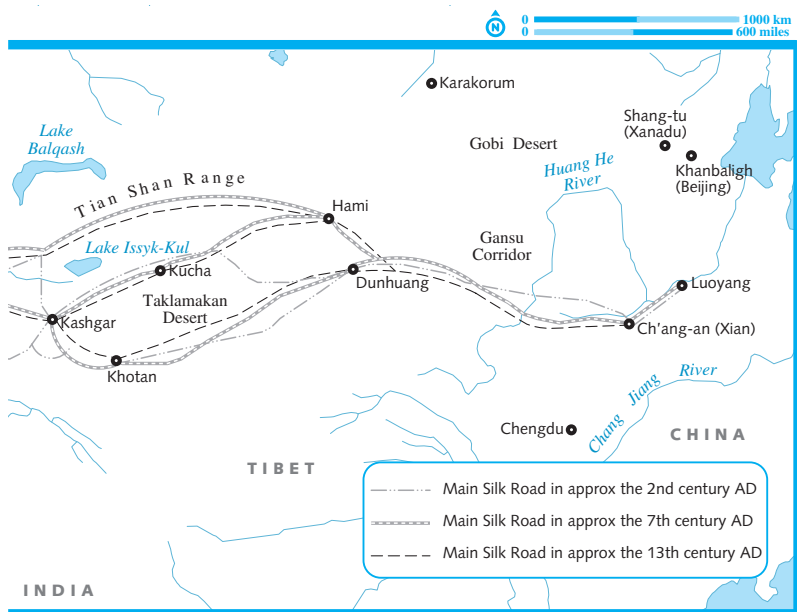
The Persian and Byzantine empires solve their long-running dispute over control of Armenia by carving it up; it was one of the first (and ultimately unsuccessful) examples of partition.

529

One of history's first socialists, Mazdak, wins a huge following preaching that nobles should share their wealth and women with the masses. After a noble revolt he is assassinated.

590–628

Khosrow II expands the Sassanid empire to its largest, stretching from Egypt to the borders of modern China. He is murdered by his son in 628 and the empire quickly unravels.



The Safavids enshrined Shiism as Persia's state religion, bringing it into regular conflict with the Sunni Ottoman Empire, and oversaw a renewed flowering of Persian art and architecture. Abbas moved the capital to Esfahan and promptly set about rebuilding the city around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq.

European powers began looking on Persia as a market. English companies were given business concessions and trade increased. The Safavid empire continued for almost a century after Abbas's death, but it was a period of political infighting and internecine rivalries. In 1722 the Afghans besieged Esfahan and eventually took control of the city, slaughtering thousands but sparing the architectural wonders.

Nader Shah & Karim Khan Zand

The Safavids were briefly rescued from oblivion by a soldier of fortune, Tahmasp Qoli, who in 1729 scattered the Afghans, along with the Russian and Turkish forces that were encroaching in the north. He ruled

632

The Prophet Mohammed dies and a year later Arab forces driven by religious zeal attack Persia. By 651 the last Sassanid king dead and the empire is history.

661–750

The Umayyad Caliphate take control of much of the lands of the former Sassanid empire, governing from Damascus and spreading Sunni Islam.

680

Imam Hossein, son of Imam Ali, is killed along with 72 partisans at Karbala. This becomes the defining event in the antagonism between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

749–830s

An uprising in Khorasan casts off Umayyad rule and the Abbasid Caliphate is born. Heavily influenced by Persian customs, the Abbasids choose Baghdad as their capital, near former Sassanid capital Ctesiphon.

Persia in all but name until 1736, when he grew tired of the pretence and crowned himself Nader 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. History regards him as 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 diamond in Tehran's National Jewels Museum. His constant warring rapidly wore out the country and his assassination in 1747 brought a welcome, if temporary, end to hostilities.

THE SILK ROAD

Silk first began moving westward from China more than 2000 years ago when the Parthians became enamoured with the soft, fine fabric. By about 100 BC the Parthians and Chinese had exchanged embassies, and silk, along with myriad other goods, was being traded along the route. Trade grew after the Romans developed a fixation with the fabric after their defeat at Carrhae in 53 BC. Eventually silk would become more valuable than gold to the Romans, who fixed the supply issue when 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, which was not a single road but rather a web of caravan tracks dotted with caravanserais a day's travel apart – roughly 30km. These were fortified rest stops with accommodation for traders, their camels and goods. 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 Istanbul). During winter, the trail often diverted west from Rey, passing through Hamadan to Baghdad.

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.

820–999

As Abbasid control weakens, a series of regional dynasties takes regional control. The Taherids (820–72) in Khorasan, the expansionist Saffarids (868–903) from Sistan and the Samanids (874–999), based in Bukhara.

928–1140

The Persian Ziarids (928–1077) and Buyids (945–1055) were noted for their support of the arts, but their power gave way to Turkish clans, beginning with the Qaznavids in 962.

980–1037

Philosopher and physician BuAli Sina (Avicenna or Ibn Sina) lives primarily in Hamadan and Esfahan and publishes 250 books including the *Canon Medicinæ*, used in European universities until the 17th century.

1051

Nomad Turks from Central Asia, the Seljuks (1051–1220) sweep across Persia and create an empire reaching east to Syria, Palestine and the gates of Byzantine Constantinople.

A Lor from western Iran, Karim Khan Zand (r 1750–79) grabbed power. He had little interest in warfare and is instead remembered for moving the capital to Shiraz, where he built the impressive Arg-e Karim Khan and the Masjed-e Vakil (Regent's Mosque).

The Qajars & the Constitutional Revolution

The Qajar dynasty was a disaster for Iran, taking just a few years to turn the country into an international laughing stock. Following Karim Khan's death in 1779, 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.

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. The Qajar shahs spent so much on luxuries that the treasury needed to hastily sell 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 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 it 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.

However, the *majlis* didn't appeal to ruthless new Shah Mohammad Ali, who attacked it with artillery and, in 1908, introduced martial law. This led to an uprising in Tabriz in 1909 (p84). Shah Mohammad Ali was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, who was still a child.

During WWI both Britain and Russia occupied parts of Iran while the Turks ravaged the partly Russian 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.

A steady trickle of European travellers and adventurers came, saw and wrote about Safavid Persia, most notably the French jewellers Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–89) and John Chardin (1643–1713), and English buccaners Sir Anthony Shirley (1565–1635) and Sir Robert Shirley (1581–1628), in the early 17th century.

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').

1079

In an observatory built by the Seljuks, mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam (1048–1123) calculates the length of the year as 365.242198 days, preceding the Gregorian calendar by almost 500 years.



» Omar Khayyam's tomb

1218

Mongol leader Genghis Khan's westward advance arrives with catastrophic results.

The Mongols take most Persian territories, raze cities including Tus and Nishapur and slaughter tens of thousands.

1256

Hulagu Khan leads a second Mongol drive into the Middle East, destroying the power of the Ishmaelite Assassins. The Ilkhanids rule from Maraghe, then Soltaniyeh, until 1335.

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.

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

The Pahlavis

From the moment in 1921 that Reza Khan staged a coup d'état 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 badly neglected. Like Atatürk, Reza Shah aimed to improve the status of women and to that end he made wearing the chador illegal. Like Atatürk, too, he insisted on the wearing of Western dress and moved to crush the power of the religious establishment.

However, Reza had little of Atatürk's subtlety 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 21-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 the generated 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 CIA and Britain (see p46).

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

1271–95

Marco Polo crosses Iran while travelling to and from China, stopping in Tabriz, Kashan, Yazd, Kerman, Hormoz, Bam, Tabas and Neishapur, among others.

1380

Tamerlane, the sword-happy Tatar, brutally takes control of Persia from a series of local rulers. Governing first from Samarkand, then Herat and Qazvin, the Timurids prove great patrons of the arts.

1502

A teenage Ismail Savafi (r 1502–24) takes Tabriz and, within 10 years, territories from Baghdad to Uzbekistan to establish the Safavid Empire.

1514

The Ottomans rout the Safavids at the battle of Chalدران, starting 41 years of warring that sees Persia lose control of eastern Anatolia and Iraq.

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 in Iran he could do so with impunity. The shah reacted by banishing Khomeini.

In 1971 the shah organised lavish celebrations for the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire, hoping to fan the flames of nationalism. More than 60 international monarchs and heads of state came to the party, held in a purpose-built tent city (p200) at Persepolis. The news coverage brought Iranian culture to the world, but at home it encouraged those who saw the shah as wasteful.

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

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

AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI

An earnest, ruthless 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 who lived a modest life; a religious leader who reduced the age at which 'women' could marry to nine; a war leader who sent young men to their deaths with the Iraqi as martyrs; and the man who proclaimed the infamous fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

Born in the village of Khomein in central Iran about 1902, 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 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 and, in 1978, to Paris. When the shah fled in 1979, Khomeini returned to take control of Iran through force of character, and remained leader until his death in 1989 (p71).

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 is everywhere, often beside and thus legitimising that of the current leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

1587

Strong, paranoid Safavid Shah Abbas I (Abbas the Great, 1587–1629) moves the capital to Esfahan and embarks on a monumental building program from which Naqsh-e Jahan emerges.

1736–47

Nader Shah crowns himself shah, moves the capital to Mashhad, drives the Ottomans from Georgia and Armenia and the Russians from the Caspian coast, reclaims Afghanistan and invades India for treasure.

1750

Karim Khan Zand emerges from three years of war to claim power. He moves the capital to Shiraz and is remembered as a humble ruler who calls himself *vakil* (regent) rather than shah.

1795

After years of war Qajar ruler Aga Mohammad Khan finally defeats the Zand. He moves the capital to Tehran before being murdered by his servants.

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.

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

him to squander much of this on weapons that then stood idle in the desert. As the world slipped into recession, oil sales slumped and several planned social reforms were cut.

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 much of the organising was done by unionists, communists and ordinary middle-class citizens.

As the economy faltered 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 reputation for torture and killing. In November 1978, he imposed martial law and hundreds of demonstrators were killed in Tehran, Qom and Tabriz. The US's long-standing support began to falter and in December the now-desperate shah appointed veteran opposition politician Shapur Bakhtiar as prime minister. It was too late. On 16 January 1979 (now a national holiday), Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his third wife, Farah Diba, finally fled.

Khomeini's frequent broadcasts on the BBC's Persian Service had made him the spiritual leader of opposition. But at 76 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'.

The Aftermath of the Revolution

Ayatollah Khomeini soon set about proving the adage that 'after the revolution come 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'iyyin, the Islamic People's Mojahedin, and the communist Tudah had been instrumental in undermining the shah. But once the shah was gone they were swept aside. People disappeared, executions took place after brief and arbitrary 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.

1797–1834

Fath Ali Shah presides over two disastrous wars with expansionist Russia that illustrate how Iran has fallen behind the world. Iran is forced to cede Caucasus territories (modern Azerbaijan and Armenia).

1848–96

Nasser al-Din Shah attempts to modernise Iran, all the while siring hundreds of princes who take from the treasury at will. Russia and Britain assert control in domestic politics and trade.

1906

The 'Constitutional Revolution' sees Iran get the Middle East's first constitution after public outrage at Mozaffar-e-din Shah's reckless spending threatens to boil over into revolt. A Majlis (parliament) is formed.

1921

Soldier Reza Khan takes control of the army in a coup. By 1925 he has crowned himself the first shah of the Pahlavi line. He sets about modernising Iran.

Following a referendum in March 1979, in which 98.2% of the population voted in favour, the world's first Islamic Republic was formed with Ayatollah Khomeini as 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 later blessed by Khomeini. A US special forces rescue mission failed when the helicopters supposed to carry them to safety collided in the desert near Tabas. For 444 days the siege of the US embassy dogged US president, Jimmy Carter.

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.

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 sense of righteousness and religious fervor, fanned by its mullahs.

Fighting was fierce, with poison gas and trench warfare being seen for the first time since WWI. Islamic volunteers (the *basijis*) 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 pushed the Iraqis back to the border, but rather than accept peace Iran adopted a new agenda that included occupying Najaf and Karbala, important Shiite pilgrimage sites.

The war dragged on another six years. 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 ceasefire was finally negotiated in mid-1988, though prisoners were still being exchanged in 2003.

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. Despite this, by 1983 all effective resistance to Khomeini's ideas had been squashed.

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.

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.

1941

Reza Shah's support for Nazi Germany prompts an invasion by Soviet and British forces. Reza Shah is exiled and his 21-year-old son Mohammad Reza becomes shah.

1951–53

Having arranged the nationalisation of the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, Mohammad Mossadegh is elected prime minister only to be overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the America's CIA.

1962

Mohammad Reza embarks on an ambitious reform agenda, known as the White Revolution, to improve education and women's rights, reform land title and erode the power of the clerics.

16 Jan, 1979

After months of demonstrations, crackdowns, funerals and more demonstrations, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and his family leave Iran. In 1980 he dies of cancer in Egypt.

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.

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.

After Khomeini

When Ayatollah Khomeini died on 4 June 1989 his position as Supreme Leader passed to the former president, 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 but domestic policy took on a more pragmatic tone. This included an aggressive campaign to curb sky-rocketing population growth through contraception and a greater efforts to bring electricity, running water, telephone and sealed roads to rural areas long ignored under royal rule.

Khatami & the Reformists

In 1997 the moderate, reform-minded 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.

His election sent an overwhelming message of discontent to the ruling Islamic conservatives and resulted in a spontaneous, unlegislated liberalisation. 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 (p266).

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. 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'.

Ahmadinejad Era

With reformists barred from running and the public disillusioned with politics, former Republican Guard member and Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was unexpectedly elected president in 2005. Despite his religious conservatism, Ahmadinejad's man-of-the-people image ap-

1 Feb, 1979

Ayatollah Khomeini, now 77, returns and turns a broad-based revolutionary movement into a victory for hardline Islamic forces. In April a referendum confirms Iran as an Islamic Republic.



» Ayatollah Khomeini

BRADLEY MANHEW/ONYX/PIANET IMAGES ©

4 Nov, 1979

Conservative students storm the US Embassy in Tehran and take 52 Americans hostage. They are held for 444 days and finally released on the day of Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration.

1980–88

The Iran-Iraq War begins with an opportunistic invasion by Saddam Hussein's forces. In Iran, 87 cities and nearly 3000 villages are bombed. More than 900,000 people are killed on both sides.

pealed to a population frustrated and angry with the clique of clerics, military and their cronies that had become Iran's new elite.

Ahmadinejad's promises to 'put petroleum income on people's tables' went down well but in reality were not affordable. Fuel prices, inflation and unemployment rose, social crackdowns were more frequent, international sanctions over the nuclear issue became tighter and, particularly in urban areas, Ahmadinejad and his government were seen by many Iranians as incompetent. In the background, Ahmadinejad quietly replaced provincial governors and experienced bureaucrats with his own ex-Revolutionary Guard cronies.

In the run-up to the 2009 presidential election, opposition coalesced around reformist candidate and former prime minister, Mirhossein Mousavi. When Ahmadinejad was hastily declared the winner the Green Movement staged massive street protests in Tehran and elsewhere, orchestrated on Twitter and by mobile phones. The ensuing crackdown claimed dozens of lives.

For more details on Iran Today, see p266.

In 2004 the Guardian Council barred more than 2000 Reformist candidates, including 82 sitting members, from *majlis* elections. Many Iranians chose not to vote and conservatives were swept back into power.

3 June, 1989

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dies, aged 86. The leadership shuffles, with recently appointed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei becoming Supreme Leader and Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani elected president.

1997

Reformist Mohammad Khatami is elected president in a landslide. Harsh laws on dress and social interaction stop being so strictly enforced and many women start wearing make-up and tighter clothing.

2003

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

2005

Populist Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is elected president, defeating regime insider, former president and wealthy businessman Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.



People

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.

Iran's population has more than doubled since the 1979 revolution, as contraception was outlawed and large families encouraged. This policy was hastily reversed when the economic implications became clear and between 1990 and 2010 population growth fell from 3.9% to 1.6% thanks largely to government efforts. However, in 2010 the Ahmadinejad government labelled contraception an unwanted Western import and announced an end to the internationally lauded population-management scheme. Instead, population growth would be boosted by cash deposits for each new child. Given many of those born in the 1980s are now having children of their own, the estimated population of 78 million could rise rapidly.

The rapid urbanisation of Iranian society started well before 1979, but was intensified by the Iran–Iraq War. Now more than 70% of the population is estimated to live in cities and large towns. Traditional rural life still exists, but as in any other developing country, the pull of the big city is leaving rural villages populated largely by the old. Iran hosts the world's second-largest community of long-stay refugees, with more than one million Afghans and 46,000 Iraqis registered as refugees with Iran's Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs. Despite high unemployment, Afghan refugees are critical to the Iranian economy, performing much of the low-paid manual labour that Iranians don't like to do, but the Afghans are excluded from services such as schools.

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 descendants 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, when Gilaki and Mazandarani people are included in the number (their language is a variation on Farsi but are still ethnically Persians), now make up about 60% 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 *Daily Life* (p289).

Almost 70% of the population is aged under 30 years old and about one-third under 15, making unemployment and underemployment serious issues in Iran.

More than 97% of all children are enrolled in schools, with almost as many girls as boys.

Azaris

Commonly called 'Turks' in Iran, the Azaris make up about 16% of the population. They speak Azari Turkish, a dialect mixing Turkish with Farsi. They are concentrated in northwest Iran, in the Azarbaijan provinces around Tabriz. See p85 for more.

Kurds

Iran has more than seven 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, and at more than 20 million in total comprise the largest ethnic group without their own country. Kurds are widely feared and misunderstood by other Iranians. For more on the Kurds, see p121.

Arabs

Arabs make up about 2% of the 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, music and faith (many are Sunni Muslims) mean other Iranians consider them exotic. See also p211.

Lors

These proud people constitute about 6% 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 a significant minority remain nomadic. Whether nomadic or settled, most live in or near the mountainous western province of Lorestan; see the boxed text, p134.

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, p243.

Baluchis

The population of dry, barren Sistan va Baluchestan province is largely Baluchi. Baluchis comprise around 2% of Iran's population and are part

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.

Bahman Ghobadi's film *A Time for Drunken Horses*, a co-winner of the Cannes' Caméra d'Or prize in 2000, is the story of Kurdish orphans living in a border village. Ghobadi has since had hits with *Turtles Can Fly* and *Half Moon*.

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 Lors 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'.

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.

of a greater whole that spreads into western Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their culture, faith, language and dress are more associated with Pakistan than Iran; see p227.

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, among others; see Nomads, p172.



Daily Life

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. To understand what makes Iranian daily life unexpectedly familiar in some ways yet unrecognisably different in others, it's necessary to look at a national psyche that has evolved over millennia, influenced by environment and religion, to create as rich and complex a society as you will find anywhere.

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

The National Psyche

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.

Let's dispel these images. Despite the Islamic government and Sharia laws, Iranians are not frightening people. They are generally warm and welcoming to a degree that can be embarrassing to Westerners. That Iranians take their role as hosts very seriously comes from a genuine desire to put others' needs first and please where possible. In daily life this manifests itself as *ta'arof*, the Iranian system of courtesy, which can be a minefield if unknown but for travellers means you will be treated with politeness wherever you go.

A glance at Iran's history allows 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.

Iran's attitudes to the West are contradictory. Most Iranians can talk at length about the faults of Western governments, all the while admiring 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. For travellers, it's an aspect of Iranian culture you'll encounter with regular questions of 'what do you think about Iran?'

Iranians are proud of their Aryan roots, and intensely dislike being classed as Arabs, who they see as rough and culturally unsophisticated. The million-plus Afghans in Iran are met with institutional racism.

In essence the Iranian soul is a deeply sensual one – perhaps the biggest surprise for Westerners expecting religious fanaticism and austerity.

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 confusing to outsiders, but is a mode of social interaction in which everyone knows their place.

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 routine politeness. So for example, an offer of food will be repeatedly turned down before being accepted. This gives the person making the offer the chance to save face if in reality they cannot provide a meal (they will stop offering after the second or third time). 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 and expect to be delayed at doorways as Iranians insist that whoever they're with goes through the door first with repeated '*befarmayid*' (please). Be prepared for small talk at the beginning of any exchange, as the health of every member of your family is enquired after. Returning this courtesy will be greatly appreciated. Also be prepared for questions considered 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 driver not to offer you the trip for free, and worse form for you to accept his offer.

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.

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 (p314) 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 now.

How Iranians Live

The majority of Iran's urban dwellers live in flats, and in major cities homes are rapidly being replaced with apartment blocks. Land in Tehran is as expensive as many North American and European cities, and the cost of living is increasingly prohibitive. With the monthly rent for an average two-bedroom property in Tehran about US\$800, and the salary of a midranking civil servant US\$375 a month, the struggle to make ends meet means many Iranians work more than one job and, in the case of the middle classes, often both men and women work. Many couples live with parents for years before they can afford their own place.

Rich & Poor

The gap between rich and poor is huge. Teachers, earning not much more than US\$300 a month, are the sort of middle-class state employee hardest hit by inflation rates running at more than 20% per annum. On

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.

the other hand, a fortunate minority live in lavish villas or marble-and-glass apartments in the wealthy northern suburbs of Tehran. It is not uncommon to spend US\$100 on a meal for two at a trendy northern Tehran restaurant, an amount most Iranians could not even dream of spending on a meal. 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 occur after dinner.

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 take time to prepare and though supermarkets exist and some pre-packaged ingredients are available, many women spend a decent chunk of each day just buying, cleaning and chopping the herbs served with every meal. 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 one Iranian family told us: 'men who cook are not real men'. Mostly it is safe to say that men's role in the home is confined to appreciating the quality of the cooking. Which they do well, Iranians being true gourmets.

Family Life

Family life is of supreme importance to Iranians and often a family will 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 several generations walking, laughing and picnicking together.

Living alone is extremely unusual 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. Being married and having a

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

DRUG
ADDICTION

'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 insecurity about Iran's place in the world. Iranians know that many foreigners have a negative, one-dimensional impression of their country. And they don't like it. Iranians like to think of themselves as equals to Europeans, and don't like being treated as second-rate or being regarded as somehow fanatical when they visit travel abroad.

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.

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 85%, 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 cafes and parks, parade up and down boulevards and spend lots of time cruising around in cars.

For the most part, 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.

Sport

Football is a national obsession and Iran has been competing internationally since 1941, winning three Asian Cups during the '60s and '70s and qualifying for three World Cups. The men's professional league has 18 teams in the top division and runs from August to May, with games played most Thursdays and Fridays.

You'll see kids playing football in streets and squares across Iran, but 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*. Wrestling, skiing, taekwondo and archery are also popular.

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. Shah Abbas the Great also enjoyed polo, and today you can still see the burly stone goal posts at either end of Esfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq. Another ancient sport peculiar to Iran is the *zurkhaneh* (literally, 'house of strength').

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

Iran's biggest football rivalry is between Tehran clubs Persepolis (pronounced 'Perspolis' and playing in red), known as the working-class team, and Esteghlal (blue home strip), the villainous wealthy club.

ZURKHANEH

Unique to Iran, the *zurkhaneh* literally means 'house of strength' and is a mix of sport, theatre and religion that 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. The *zurkhaneh* itself is a small, traditional gymnasium often decorated like a shrine, and what goes on inside incorporates the spiritual richness of Sufism, traditional rituals of Mithraism and the heroism of Iranian nationalism. Typically a group of men stand around a circular pit and 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. Most *zurkhaneh* are open to the public and it's usually free to watch. You won't see many local women, but Western women are welcomed as honorary men.

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.

Women Through the Ages

Historically, women have lived in a relatively 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. There is a long precedence for this. Archaeological evidence suggests that in pre-Islamic Iran women were able to work, own, sell and lease property and that they paid taxes. Women managed work sites and held high-level military positions. But it wasn't until the Prophet Mohammed that women's rights were specifically addressed. Islam recognises 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 in 1931 with a bill that gave women the right to seek divorce. In subsequent years the marriage age was raised to 15 for girls, girls gained access to an education equal to that of boys, women were encouraged to work outside the home and legislation was passed to abolish the veil, a move that polarised opinion among women. In 1962 Mohammad Reza Shah gave women the vote and in 1968 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 Islamic Republic, and its adoption of a version of Sharia law, would affect their rights. Within a couple of years women were back in the hejab – and this time it was compulsory. The legal age of marriage for girls 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. 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.

However, 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 – putting them at a marked advantage to some Arab neighbours. 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.

The Cypress Tree, by Kamin Mohammadi, who contributed to earlier editions of this guide, is the story of Mohammadi's childhood in Iran, exile to London following the revolution and return to discover her family and the strong women among them.

Sigheh is the Islamic practice of a temporary marriage contract that allows sex outside of a normal marriage. To many Iranians, especially women, it is seen as a sort of legalised prostitution.

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* (Iranian Parliament) and calls to improve women's rights became louder. Among the most prolific Islamic feminists is Faezeh Raf-

IRAN'S AGE-OLD CELEBRATION OF THE NEW YEAR

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

Haft Seen

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

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

On many tables you'll also see *sekeh* (a gold coin, symbolising adequate income), *serkeh* (vinegar to ward off bitterness), a mirror, a Quran and candles. You'll also see sorry-looking goldfish in tiny bowls symbolising life – until they die in their millions after No Ruz.

Chahar Shanbe-soori

On the Tuesday night before the last Wednesday of the year *chahar shanbe-soori* (Wednesday Fire) sees people sing, dance (men only) and jump over fires. The jumping symbolises the burning away of ill luck or health, to be replaced by the healthy redness of the flames. Unfortunately, actually finding a fire can be tough.

Chahar shanbe-soori is viewed as a pagan festival by the government. When we have been fire jumping we've seen open animosity between revellers and (half-hearted) police or Basij militiamen. Some towns have grudgingly 'approved' fire-sites, though visiting these can be deafening and rather hazardous due to the uncontrolled bursts of fireworks. In many cities, however, fires are banned altogether; ask locally for the situation.

No Ruz

When No Ruz finally arrives, families gather around the *haft seen* table to recite a prayer seeking happiness, good health and prosperity, before eating *sabzi polo* (rice and vegetables) and *mahi* (fish). Mothers are also expected to eat symbolic hard-boiled eggs, one for every child. At the moment the sun passes the celestial equator (announced on every radio station), people kiss and hug and children are given *eid* (presents). For the following two weeks Iranians visit relatives and friends in their home towns.

Sizdah be Dar

No Ruz celebrations finish on the 13th day of the year, *Sizdah be Dar* (usually 2 April). Everyone goes picnicking out of town, taking their *haft seen sabzi* with them. The *sabzi* is either thrown into water or, in some cases, left to blow off the roof of the car. Either way, the *sabzi* is meant to have soaked up the bad aspects of the previous year, so this ceremony symbolises getting rid of bad luck.

sanjani, 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.

Women Today

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. Women make up almost two-thirds of all university entrants, though their subsequent employment rate is below 20%. Although women's importance in the workforce is acknowledged – maternity leave, for example, is given for three months at 67% of salary or four months if breastfeeding – there is still widespread discrimination.

However, a woman's testimony is still only worth half that of a man's 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.

On the street, especially in Tehran, you will see that superficially the dress code has eased compared with the days when the black chador dominated. Despite crackdowns that have become more regular in recent years, women of all ages can be seen wearing shorter, tighter, brightly coloured coats and headscarves worn far back on elaborate hairstyles. Young women have lost their fear of being seen outside the home with unrelated men and are prepared to risk arrest to do so. 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'.

But since conservatives regained control of the *majlis* in 2004 and the presidency in 2005 (with Ahmadinejad), this change has become more difficult to achieve. Since mid-2007, and more so since the Green Movement mass protests in 2009, the government has been much more aggressive in enforcing restrictive laws that had, in effect, been dormant during the Khatami years. Across the country, female university students were told to start wearing a *magna'e* (nunlike head scarf or wimple) or stop coming to class. In cities, and especially in Tehran, the liberties taken for granted for a decade from 1997 are being challenged by periodic high-profile crackdowns on what is perceived as bad hejab – usually too much make up and not enough scarf.

While many of the Khatami-era reforms remain, the immediate future for women is less optimistic and more uncertain 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.

MUST-SEE FILM

A Separation (2012) is Asghar Farhadi's complex portrayal of the emotional challenges a Tehran couple face as their marriage falls apart. It won the Golden Globe and Academy Award for best foreign-language film, and was nominated for an Academy Award for original screenplay.



Iranian Cuisine

Iran is home to a diverse and distinct cuisine that has evolved over three millennia, influenced by both the arid environment and the changing cultures that have swept through the country. The result is a cuisine with great regional variations depending largely on locally available produce – think camel kabab and dates in the desert, fish on the Gulf coast and a huge variety of vegetable dishes (with meat, of course) in the fertile Caspian provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran.

While tastes are broadening, it remains that outside Tehran restaurant menus are dominated by kababs and fast food. To enjoy the best cooking you really need to be invited into an Iranian home. There's a good chance that will happen and when it does, just say 'yes'. As a guest you will be honoured as a 'gift of God' and the fabulous food and humbling hospitality should make for a meal you'll remember for a lifetime.

What Iranians Eat & Where

Teahouses have traditionally been the places Iranians would go to socialise and eat, with tea, qalyan (water pipe) and food mixing in cavernous underground settings. These places come in a range of styles from austere to atmospheric, with cuisine and prices to match.

Simple *kababis* tend to be found around major *meydans* (squares) and serve, yes, kababs. These 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.

Fast food is popular and begins with places selling bread-roll 'sandwiches', with tomatoes and pickles over one of *sausis* (sausage), 'hamburger' (minced meat), *felafel*, *jegar* (liver), *zaban* (tongue) or *maghz* (brain). The Iranian pizza infatuation means it's usually easier to find pizzas and burgers than kabab. Beware that Iranian pizza is not always to Western tastes, think flabby base, tasteless cheese and a thick layer of porkless sausage. Tomato paste isn't in the recipe, but locals squeeze on ketchup to taste.

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

Bread & Rice

Almost every meal in Iran is accompanied by *nun* (bread) and/or *berenj* (rice). *Nun* is cheap and usually fresh. There are four main varieties:

Barbari Crisp and salty and more like Turkish bread, and often covered with sesame seeds.

Lavash Common for breakfast and is flat and thin; it's mouthwatering when fresh but soon turns cardboard-like.

Sangak 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.

Taftun Crisp with a ribbed surface.

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.

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. *Za'feran* (saffron) 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 savoury crust from the bottom of the rice pan, often including slices of potato, is a national favourite.

Kababs

Even in a restaurant with a long menu, most main-dish options will be kabab. These are served either on bread or as *chelo kabab* (on a vast mound of rice), and in contrast with the greasy doner kebabs inhaled after rough nights in the West, Iranian kababs are tasty, healthy and cooked shish-style over hot charcoals. They are usually sprinkled with spicy *sumaq* (sumac) and accompanied by raw onion, grilled tomatoes and, for an extra fee, a bowl of *mast* (yoghurt).

Common kabab incarnations include:

Bakhtiyari kabab Lamb chops and chicken, the king of kababs.

Chelo kabab 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.

Juje kabab Grilled chicken pieces marinated in *somaq*.

Kubide kabab The cheapest, most common version made of minced mutton, breadcrumbs and onion ground together.

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.

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

Ancient Persians believed good diet was light on fat, red meat, starch and alcohol – these transformed men into selfish brutes. Instead, fruit, vegetables, chicken and fish were encouraged as the food of gentler, more respectable people. In practice, this philosophy was governed by a classification of 'hot' and 'cold' foods, which is still widely used today.

Similar to China's Yin and Yang, the 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? The classification has nothing to do with temperature, and regional variations exist, but it's generally agreed that animal fat, wheat, sugar, sweets, wine, most dried fruits and nuts, fresh herbs including mint and saffron, and most meats are 'hot' (but not beef). 'Cold' foods include fish, yoghurt and watermelon (all 'very cold'), rice, many fresh vegetables (particularly radishes) and fruits, beef, beer and other nonwine alcohol. Some foods are hotter or colder than others, and some, such as pears, feta and tea, are neutral.

As you travel, you'll see the balance in dishes such as *fesenjun* (sauce of pomegranate juice, walnuts, eggplant and cardamom served over roast chicken and rice), where the pomegranate (cold) is balanced by the walnuts (hot). On the table, *mast* (yoghurt), cheese, radishes and greens – all cold – are balanced with 'hot' kababs, chicken and sweets. Getting the balance right is what is most important. Too much 'cold' food is thought to be particularly unhealthy, so be careful of eating watermelon and *dugh* (churned sour milk or yoghurt mixed with water) with your fish meal, unless the *dugh* comes with chopped herbs to balance it out. 'Hot' foods are apparently not so dangerous: too much 'hot' and you might end up with a cold sore, if you're prone to them.

A nationwide ban on smoking qalyan (water pipe) in teahouses and restaurants was lifted in late 2011. This Iranian tradition had been banned for health reasons (though these effects have not been proven), but the ban had been loosely enforced in many provinces.

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

Non-Kabab Meals

For a change from kabab it's worth asking for common stand-bys *zerezhk 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 vegetarian dishes made from *bademjan* (eggplant).

But it doesn't end there. Certain (usually downmarket) eateries and many *chaykhanehs* (teahouses) specialise in underrated *dizi* (see the boxed text, below). Most restaurants will also serve one or another variety of *khoresh*t (thick, usually meaty stew made with vegetables and chopped nuts, then served with rice and/or French fries). However, in some less popular restaurants *khoresh*t can 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 pomegranate juice, 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.

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 *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg, served with bread or rice).

Dessert & Sweets

While after-meal dessert is often a bowl of fruit, Iran produces such a head-spinning array of freshly made *shirini* (sweets) that sweet-toothed travellers might remember the country by its regional specialities.

Esfahan Gaz, rosewater-flavoured nougat, often with pistachio.

Kerman Colompe, a soft, date-filled biscuit.

Orumiyeh *Noghl*, sugar-coated nuts.

Qom Sohan, a brittle, toffee-like concoction of pistachio and ginger.

Yazd Baghlava, like Turkish baklava but thicker, and *pashmak*, candyfloss made of sugar and sesame.

Other widely available sweets worth trying include refreshing *paludeh* or *falude* (a sorbet made of rice flour, grated fresh fruit and rose water) and *bastani*, Iranian ice cream.

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 is 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, tear some bread into bite-sized morsels, put it into your bowl and drain the soupy broth from the *dizi* over the top of the bread. Eat this then turn to the main ingredients left in the *dizi*: chickpeas, potatoes, tomatoes and soft-boiled mutton. Grind these together using the provided metal pestle; do include the inevitable chunk of fat which while looking unappetising does add taste and texture. Eat the resulting mush with a spoon or bread.

If it gets too hard fear not, the waiter will show the way.

Costs

In this guide a meal is defined as a main course, another course (starter or dessert) and a drink as follows:

\$ (Budget) Less than US\$5

\$\$ (Midrange) US\$5-15

\$\$\$ (Top End) More than US\$15

Restaurants often add 10% or 15% to the bill in the name of service, though the waiter will rarely receive anything unless you add a further amount. In this book the 'service charge' has usually been included in the overall meal price (see also Tipping, p337).

Drinking in Non-Drinking Iran

Alcohol is banned in Iran but brace yourself for plenty of tea.

Tea, More Tea & Coffee

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 kettle steaming away 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 drunk black and is usually served with a bowl of *ghand* (chunks of sugar). It is customary to dip the sugar into the tea and place it between the front teeth before sucking the brew through it. Dentists don't recommend this.

Like Turkey, Iran was a nation of coffee drinkers until tea was introduced by British traders in the 19th century. These days traditional Iranian *ghahve* (coffee), served strong, sweet, black and booby-trapped with a sediment of grounds, is hard to find. Instead, in the past decade we've seen the rapid spread of European-style cafes in major cities, often doubling as trendy ice-cream parlours; the coffee blends are a mixed bag. Outside cities, coffee addicts should consider self-catering.

Juices, Shakes, Dugh & Soft Drinks

You'll never be too far from a delicious fresh fruit *ab* (juice) and fruit *shir* (milkshake). Both cost between about US\$1.50 and US\$3. Juices are seasonal and usually come au naturel, without added sugar. 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 yoghurt mixed with water) is a sour but 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, and bottled water is widely available. Despite the USA embargo, Coca-Cola is bottled under licence and competes with local soft drinks Zam Zam, Parsi Cola and others. Canned drinks cost multiples of the same drinks sold in bottles.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Vegetarianism is growing in popularity among educated Tehranis and this has led to the creation of an [Iranian Society of Vegetarians](http://www.iranvegetarians.com) (www.iranvegetarians.com). But for most Iranians, it remains a foreign concept. Sure, there are a lot of good vegetarian dishes in Iranian cuisine, but most restaurants don't make them.

During Ramadan most eateries close from dawn until dusk. Because travellers don't have to fast, hotel and bus terminal restaurants stay open, albeit behind heavy blinds. Eating, drinking or smoking in public is bad form during Ramadan.

Ab (Juice)

- » *Ab anar* (pomegranate)
- » *Ab talebi* (honeydew melon)
- » *Ab hendune* (watermelon)
- » *Ab porteghal* (orange)
- » *Ab sib* (orange)
- » *Ab havij* (carrot)

ISLAMIC BEER BUT NO SHIRAZ

Try to think of your trip to Iran as a cleansing experience for your body, away from nasty alcoholic toxins. This way you'll feel better about not being able to get a drink. While alcohol is quietly tolerated in Christian communities, 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 'whiskey' whispered as you go by. But, believe us, the sickly sweet clear spirit you'll likely be sold is rocket fuel.

There are several brands of *ma'-osh-sha'ir* ('Islamic beer') proudly declaring '0.0% alcohol'. Russian-made Baltika tastes most like beer, while Delster comes in several fruit 'flavours' and is popular because it doesn't try too hard to taste like beer. The lemon version is pleasantly refreshing.

Sadly, the chance of finding a glass of Shiraz (Syrah) 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.

Saraban, A Chef's Journey Through Persia, by Greg and Lucy Malouf, is a thick, beautifully designed and photographed account of the Malouf's journey of food discovery through Iran. The recipes are a mix of the traditional and modern interpretations.

Solace can be found, however, in the felafels, samosas and potatoes sold in street stalls, and in the Persian mastery of all things *bademjan*, especially the meatless Caspian dish *mirza ghasemi* (see Cut the Caviar – Gilan Cuisine, p101). 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 struggle to find 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. Cheaper hotels might let you use the kitchen.

Habits & Customs

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 daybed), is normal here. So if you end up in someone's home, remember to remove your shoes before sitting around the plastic sheet that acts as the 'Iranian table', and avoid putting your left hand into a communal dish.

For Iranians, breakfast is a simple affair, consisting of endless tea served with leftover (ie rather crisp) *lavash*, feta-style cheese and jam – often carrot-flavoured. Most hotels usually throw in an egg. Lunch is the main meal of the day and is eaten with mountains of rice between noon and 2pm. Dinner is usually a bit lighter and eaten from about 7pm onwards. Many restaurants close earlier on Friday. On religious holidays, almost everywhere selling food will shut for the morning at least.



Faith in Iran

Official statistics suggest 99% of Iran's population are Muslim, made up of around 89% Shiite and 10% Sunni. Small communities of Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews make up the numbers. Aside from the Baha'i religion, the practise of which is outlawed, freedom of worship is guaranteed in the constitution. But most believe minorities number more than the official statistics because calling yourself a Shiite Muslim makes navigating Iran's potentially tricky bureaucracy easier.

Iranians will happily accept that visitors are Christians and, in most circumstances, Jewish. But admitting to being atheist or agnostic can result in incomprehension, even among better-educated Iranians.

Islam

Muslims accept 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* (alms-giving), *sawm* (*ruzeh*; fasting during Ramadan) and *haji* (the pilgrimage to Mecca that those able should perform).

Almost every town has a Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque), which literally means Congregational Mosque, that serves as the local centre of worship and Islamic discussion.

Shiism & Sunnism

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 (ruler). 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 three times before 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 'followers of Ali'). When Ali's second son, Hossein, and his supporters were slaughtered by the caliph's troops in 680, the division became permanent and bitter. Today the representation of its imams ('leaders' or more loosely, 'saints') is one of the most visible aspects of Shiism and you'll see pictures of Imam Hossein, in particular, 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.

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.

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

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*).

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 dynasty of the successors of the Prophet Mohammed as rulers of the Islamic world).

Devout Shia Muslims might celebrate the death days of all 12 imams, but most concentrate on the first, Ali, the third, Hossein, and the eighth, Reza (p248) – the only one buried in Iran, in the lavish Haram-e Razavi (p249) in Mashhad.

The episode that ensured Sunni and Shia would be antagonistic to one another was the massacre of the third imam, Hossein, and his 72 followers in 680. Having set up camp at Karbala, in present-day Iraq, the group was besieged for nine days, and on the 10th Hossein was killed. Hossein's martyrdom is commemorated in a 10-day anniversary that culminates on Ashura. It's during Ashura that the Iranian culture of martyrdom is most evident. It's not unusual to see men flogging themselves with chains or 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 AD 874. Most Shiites believe he lives on in occultation as their divine leader. It is believed Mahdi will eventually return when, with the prophet Jesus, he will guide the world to peace and righteousness.

Shias believe only the imams can truly 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.

It's impossible to say how much the martyrdom of the 12 imams feeds into modern Iranian cultural traits, but martyrdom remains a powerful motivator. During the Iran-Iraq War (p283) thousands of men and boys quite literally sacrificed their lives (some cleared mine fields by walking through them) in the name of country and/or religion.

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

- » 1 Imam Ali (600–661) 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

Sufism

A mystical aspect of Islam that is particularly close to Iranian hearts, *tasawwuf* (mysticism) is ultimately discovered in 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 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 *khanqas* (prayer and meditation houses) where people go to worship. Sufism does not conflict with Shiism or Sunnism, yet is treated with suspicion by the authorities.

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

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, are exempt from military service and have guaranteed seats in the *majlis* (parliament). However, they are not encouraged; conversion from Islam is punishable by death.

Baha'ism

Baha'ism originated in Iran during the 1840s as a Shia reform movement. Baha'i doctrines are egalitarian, teaching the complete equality of men and women and the unity of all humanity. They didn't, however, impress Iran's authorities, who tried to suppress the movement by massacring followers and executing the founding prophet, The Bab, in Tabriz in 1850.

Today they remain the most persecuted religious minority in Iran. It is illegal to practise the religion in public and followers 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 – the country's largest religious minority. Most are urban, but there are some Baha'i villages, especially in Fars and Mazandaran provinces.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrians, the followers of Iran's pre-Islamic religion, are based mainly around Yazd, with its fire temple and nearby desert pilgrimage site at Chak Chak (p185). Sizeable communities also live in Tehran. Estimates of Iran's Zoroastrian population vary between 30,000 and 100,000. Several traditions and ceremonies dating from Zoroastrian times are important in modern Iranian culture, including No Ruz (the Iranian New Year), Chaharshanbe-soori on the Wednesday before No Ruz, and Shab-e yalda, celebrated on the winter solstice. For more, see p164.

Christianity

The Christian community in Iran consists mainly of Armenians who settled at Jolfa, in the north of Iran, and were then moved to New Jolfa in Esfahan in Safavid times. Others live around Orumiyyeh (p79). Today Iran's 250,000 Christians also include Roman Catholics, Adventists, Protestants, Chaldeans and about 20,000 Assyrians. 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.

Judaism

Iran has been home to Jews since about the 8th century BC – even before Cyrus the Great famously liberated Jews enslaved at Babylon (p270). Today about 25,000 Jews live in Iran, primarily in Tehran, Esfahan and Shiraz. More than 50,000 left Iran when life became more difficult following the revolution – most migrating to the USA. In 2007 Israel offered up to US\$60,000 a family to all remaining Iranian Jews to migrate to Israel. However, the Society of Iranian Jews snubbed the offer, saying the 'identity of Iranian Jews is not tradable for any amount of money'.

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

About 10,000 Aramaic-speaking Mandaean live around the Shatt al Arab in Khuzestan. Mandaeism is a Gnostic religion some believe descends from John the Baptist.

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.



Architecture

Architecture is often regarded as the field in which Persia made its greatest contribution to world culture. For the visitor, it seems every town and village has some historic building. And these serve as a reason to visit while offering a glimpse into the varied peoples and dynasties that have ruled the nation during the past 3000 years.

Most of the greatest buildings were built for religious purposes, with first Zoroastrianism and Islam (after AD 637) most prevalent. As such, most of what is known as Persian architecture is also called Islamic architecture. However you see it, the influences cross religious divisions and churches and synagogues in Iran will usually include Persian features.

What Makes Persian Architecture Unique?

The defining aspects of Persian architecture are its monumental simplicity and its lavish use of surface ornamentation and colour. The ground plans of ordinary Persian buildings mix only a few standard elements: a courtyard and arcades, lofty entrance porticoes and four *iwān* (barrel-vaulted halls opening onto the courtyard).

Typical Persian mosque design consists of a dome above an entrance *iwān* that leads into a large courtyard surrounded by arched cloisters. Behind these are four inner *iwān*, one of them featuring a decorated niche indicating the direction of Mecca. In the Islamic world in general this is usually called a mihrab although in Iran this term is also used to

Persian architecture has strongly influenced building throughout the Islamic world, especially in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Probably the most famous building of Persian origin is India's iconic Taj Mahal, designed by Safavid-era architect Ustad Ahmad Lahouri.

WORLD HERITAGE SITES

Iran's 13 Unesco World Heritage Sites are all significant architectural sites, listed here chronologically. For details see whc.unesco.org.

- » Choqa Zanbil, 13th century BC (p138)
- » Pasargadae, 6th century BC (p202)
- » Bisotun, 6th century BC (p128)
- » Persepolis, 5th century BC (p198)
- » Arg-e Bam, 4th century BC to 18th century (p231)
- » Shushtar Hydraulic Complex, primarily 3rd century (p139)
- » Armenian Monastic Ensembles, 7th to 14th centuries (Qareh Kalisa, p78, and Church of St Stephanos, p94)
- » Takht-e Soleiman, primarily 13th century (p118)
- » Oljeitu Mausoleum, Soltaniyeh, 14th century (p116)
- » Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum, Ardabil, 16th to 18th centuries (p96)
- » Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq, Esfahan, 17th century (p157)
- » Tabriz Bazaar, primarily 18th century (p85)
- » The Persian Garden, nine sites (see p150).

QUIRKS OF PERSIAN ARCHITECTURE

All along the great trade routes from east to west caravanserais (an inn or way-station for camel trains, usually consisting of rooms arranged around a courtyard) were set up to facilitate trade. Although the earliest caravanserais date to Seljuk times, many of those surviving date from the reign of Shah Abbas I who was credited with establishing a network of 999 such structures: Caravanserai Zein-o-din (see p186) is a fine restored example. Caravanserais were built either at regular points along trading routes (roughly every 30km, a day's camel ride), or beside the bazaar in towns and cities. It's easy to see this arrangement in Esfahan (p155) and Kerman (p223), in particular.

In the hot southern deserts you will see the remains of *yakh dans* (mud-brick ice houses) built to store ice through the summer. Water, often from a *qanat* (underground water channel or canal; p179), was left outside to freeze during winter – the ice that formed was scraped off and then moved to an adjoining building, often a stepped dome. The *yakh dan* at Meybod (p185) near Yazd resembles a circular ziggurat outside and a vast hollow egg inside. Yazd is also famous for its *badgirs* (windrowers; p175), while Esfahan still has many curious-looking circular towers that were once used to rear pigeons for meat and manure.

refer to the cut-out space in the ground in front of it. Many commentators believe the four-*ivan* design can be traced to old Zoroastrian ideas about the four elements and the circulation of life.

These basic features are often so densely covered with decoration that observers are led to imagine the architecture is far more complex than it actually is. The decorations are normally geometric, floral or calligraphic. A wall's decoration sometimes consists of nothing but mosaics forming the names of Allah, Mohammed and Ali, repeated countless times in highly stylised script.

Tiles

The tiled domes of Iranian mosques, reminiscent of Fabergé eggs in the vividness of their colouring, are likely to remain one of your abiding memories of Iran.

The art of Persian tile production dates back to the Elamite period, but it peaked during the Safavid era (1502–1736). Safavid-era tiles come in two main forms. The best are *moarraq kashi* (mosaics) – patterns are picked out in tiny pieces of tile rather than created in one piece. Less fine and more common are the *haft rangi* (seven-coloured) tiles, which are square with a painted surface and first appeared in the early 17th century; see Shah in a Hurry, p161.

In terms of colourful tiles, Qajar buildings may lack in quality, but they often make up in quantity. Standout examples include the Golestan Palace (p37) in Tehran and the walls of the wonderful Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk (p126) in Kermanshah.

Pre-Islamic Architecture

The only substantial remains left from before the 7th century BC are those of the remarkable Elamite ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil (p138). The ancient inhabitants of Persia imbued their mountains with great religious symbolism and built characteristic pyramidal ziggurats to imitate them. The earliest builders used sun-dried mud bricks, but baked brick was already being used for outer surfaces by the time Choqa Zanbil was built in the 13th century BC – the bricks there look like they came out of the kiln last week.

The surviving sites from the Achaemenid era (550–330 BC) include the magnificent ceremonial palace complexes and royal tombs at

FIRE TEMPLES

Many mosques occupy sites that were once home to Zoroastrian fire temples. When Islam arrived and religious preferences changed, so too did the use and decor of the local place of worship.

In desert cities, such as Yazd and Esfahan, minarets are quite tall because they traditionally acted as a landmark for caravans crossing the desert. In mountainous areas or places surrounded by hills, such as Shiraz, where this function was impossible, most minarets are short.

Pasargadae (p202), Naqsh-e Rostam (p201), Shush (p136) and the awesome Persepolis (p198). These are decorated with bas-reliefs of kings, soldiers, supplicants, animals and the winged figure of the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda.

The Achaemenids typically built with sun-dried brick and stone and there are links with the old ziggurats in both shape and decoration. The Achaemenid style also incorporated features taken from Egyptian and Greek architecture. They built colossal halls supported by stone and wooden columns with typically Persian bull's-head capitals.

Alexander the Great's arrival in 331 BC brought Greek and Macedonian architectural styles. The ruined Anahita Temple at Kangavar, built with Greek capitals to honour a Greek goddess, is probably the best remaining example. Under the Parthians (from 247 BC to AD 224) a few characteristically Persian features, including the *ivan*, began to appear, though little remains.

In the Sassanian period (AD 224–642), buildings became larger, heavier and more complex even while stone was used less. Ardashir's Palace (p203) at Firuz Abad is one monumental example. The four-*ivan* plan with domed, square chambers became increasingly common, with the distinctive Persian dome seen for the first time. The Sassanians built fire temples throughout their empire and the simple plan of the earliest examples was retained throughout the pre-Islamic era, even in the design of churches.

The Arab Conquest & Early Persian Islamic Style

The Arab conquest didn't supplant the well-developed Sassanian style but it did introduce the Islamic element that was to have such a pervasive impact on Persian arts. Not only did the Arab period (AD 642–1051) shape the nature and basic architectural plan of religious buildings, but it also defined the type of decoration – no human representation was to be permitted, and ceremonial tombs or monuments also fell from favour. In place of palace complexes built as symbols of royal majesty came mosques designed as centres of daily life for ordinary people.

As Sassanian and Arab ingredients merged, a distinctly Persian style of Islamic architecture evolved. From the mid-9th century, under the pa-

DOMES & MINARETS

The development of the dome was one of the greatest achievements of Persian architecture. The Sassanians (AD 224–642) were the first to discover a satisfactory way of building a dome on top of a square chamber by using two intermediate levels, or squinches – the lower octagonal and the higher 16-sided – on which the dome could rest. Later domes became progressively more sophisticated, incorporating an inner semicircular dome sheathed by an outer conical or even onion-shaped dome. Externally the domes were often encased in tiles, with patterns so elaborate they had to be worked out on models at ground level first.

The minaret started life as an entirely functional tower, from the top of which the *muezzin* called the faithful to prayer. However, during the Seljuk period (AD 1051–1220) minarets became tall, tapering spires, which were far more decorative than practical. Since it is feared that someone standing atop a minaret can look into the private family areas of nearby houses, Shiite mosques often have a separate hutlike structure on the roof from where the *muezzin* makes the call to prayer (*azan*); though these days it's more likely to be a tape recording). Most minarets still have a light, often green (the colour of Islam), in the uppermost gallery. Traditionally these lights and indeed the minarets themselves acted as a beacon to direct people coming to town to pray.

trone of a succession of enlightened rulers, there was a resurgence of Persian nationalism and values. Architectural innovations included the high, pointed arch, stalactites (elaborate stepped mouldings used to decorate recesses) and an emphasis on balance and scale. Calligraphy became the principal form of architectural decoration. A good example is the Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque; p174) in Na'in.

The period also marks the emergence of a series of remarkable towers, more secular than religious in purpose. Built of brick and usually round, the towers show a development of ornamentation starting with little more than a single garter of calligraphy and graduating to elaborate basket-weave brickwork designed to deflect the harsh sunlight. Today these are commonly referred to as tombs, but some, such as Radkan Tower (p260), were important early astronomical observatories.

The Seljuks, Mongols & Timurids

Many of the Seljuk rulers (1051–1220) took a great personal interest in patronage of the arts. Architectural developments included the double dome, a widening of vaults, improvement of the squinch (see the boxed text, p306) and refinement of glazed tilework. A unity of structure and decoration was attempted for the first time, based on rigorous mathematical principles. Stucco, incorporating arabesques and Persian styles of calligraphy, was increasingly used to enhance brick surfaces.

Although often seen as a dark age in Iranian history, the Mongol period (1220–1335) saw new developments in Persian architecture. The conquest by Genghis Khan's rampaging hordes was initially purely destructive, and many architects fled the country, but later the Mongols, too, became patrons of the arts. The Mongol style, designed to overawe the viewer, was marked by towering entrance portals, colossal domes, and vaults reaching up into the skies. It also saw a refinement of tiling, and calligraphy, often in the formal angular Kufic script imported from Arabia. Increasing attention was paid to the interior decoration of domes.

The Timurids (1380–1502) went on to refine the Seljuk and Mongol styles. Their architecture featured exuberant colour and great harmony of structure and decoration. Even in buildings of colossal scale, they avoided the monotony of large empty surfaces by using translucent tiling. Arcaded cloisters around inner courtyards, open galleries, and arches within arches were notable developments.

The Safavids

Under a succession of enlightened and cultivated rulers, most notably Shah Abbas I, came the final refinement of styles that marked the culmination of the Persian Islamic school of architecture. Its greatest expression was Abbas' royal capital of Esfahan, a supreme example of town planning with one of the most magnificent collections of buildings from one period anywhere in the world – the vast and unforgettable Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq (p157).

Other fine examples of Safavid architecture are at Qazvin (p108), while the Holy Shrine (p251) of Imam Reza at Mashhad gained much of its present magnificence in Safavid times.

The Qajars

The Qajar period (1795–1925) marks the rather unhappy transition between the golden age of Persian Safavid architecture and the creeping introduction of Western-inspired uniformity from the mid-19th century. Now widely regarded as tasteless, flimsy and uninspired, the often colourful Qajar style did produce some fine buildings, including the Golestan Palace (p37) in Tehran and the stately mansions in Kashan (p147).

During the Safavid period Shah Abbas the Great ordered 999 caravanserais to be built. Of them, only two were circular, one near Esfahan and the other at Zein-o-din, south of Yazd. The latter has been restored and turned into a wonderful hotel (see Caravanserai Zein-o-din, p186).



Carpets, Art & Crafts

In Iran Islamic art favours the non-representational, the derivative and the stylised over the figurative and the true to life. Geometric shapes and complex floral patterns are especially popular because Islam forbids the representation of living beings. However, the portraiture and images of animals in Iran is much more common than you'd find in Sunni Arab countries.

Carpets

The best-known Iranian cultural export, the Persian carpet, is far more than just a floor-covering to an Iranian. A Persian carpet is a display of wealth, an investment, an integral aspect of religious and cultural festivals, and part of everyday life.

History

The oldest surviving carpet is the 'Pazyryk' rug, believed to date from the 5th century BC and discovered in the frozen tomb of a Scythian prince in Siberia in 1948. Its exact origins are unknown, but some scholars believe it is in the style of carpets found in the Achaemenid court. Today it is in the Hermitage Museum (www.hermitagemuseum.org) in St Petersburg.

Early patterns were usually symmetrical, with geometric and floral motifs designed to evoke the beauty of the classical Persian garden. Stylised animal figures were also woven into carpets, and along with human figures (often royalty), became more popular in the later pre-Islamic period. After the Arab conquest, Quranic verses were incorporated into some carpet designs, and prayer mats began to be produced on a grand scale; secular carpets also became a major industry and were prized in European courts. However, little remains from before the 16th century.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, carpet-making was patronised by the shahs and a favoured designer or weaver could expect great privileges. Carpet designs were inspired by book illumination and the whole process reached a peak during the reign of Shah Abbas I (Abbas the Great; r 1587–1629). As demand for Persian carpets grew, so standards of production fell and designs became less inspired, though they still led the world in quality and design.

According to the National Iranian Carpet Center, today more than five million Iranians work in the industry and carpets are the country's largest non-fossil-fuel export by value. The trade relies on the prestige evoked by the term 'Persian carpet', but maintaining the brand is increasingly difficult with cheaper 'Persian carpets' being produced in India and Pakistan, and fewer young Iranians interested in learning to weave.

Arguably the most famous Persian carpets are the twin 'Ardabil carpets', vast rugs (10.7m x 5.34m) woven with 30 million knots in the 16th century for the Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum. They are now kept in London's Victoria & Albert Museum (www.vam.ac.uk) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

The pocket-sized *Oriental Rugs in Colour*, by Preben Liebetrau, includes an explanation of the carpets and rugs of Iran and Turkey and is probably the most useful carpet guide to carry.

Types of Carpets & Rugs

To most people (including us in this chapter), the words 'carpet' and 'rug' are used interchangeably. But there is a difference – a carpet is bigger than a rug. Anything longer than about 2m is considered a carpet, while anything shorter is a rug. As well as carpets, which are made using thousands or even millions of knots, you will also find kilims, which are thinner, flat-woven mats without knots and thus, no pile.

Carpets come in a huge variety of designs. Some are inspired by religion, such as those on prayer rugs, usually displaying an arch representing the main arch of the Al Haram Mosque in Mecca and perhaps a lamp symbolic of the statement in the Quran that 'Allah is the light of Heaven'. Other common motifs include amulets to avert the evil eye and other, pre-Islamic motifs, such as stylised Trees of Life. They may also be inspired by whatever surrounds the weaver, eg trees, animals and flowers, particularly the lotus, rose and chrysanthemum. Gardens are commonly depicted and, in the case of a tribal nomad, such a carpet will be the only garden the weaver will ever own.

In general, these designs are classified as either 'tribal' or 'city' carpets. Tribal designs vary greatly depending on their origin, but are typically less ornate. City carpets are the classic Persian rugs, usually highly ornate floral designs around one or more medallions.

Most Iranians aspire to own fine, formal city rugs of Tabriz, Esfahan, Kashan, Qom or Kerman. They consider tribal carpets the work of peasants, and those who cannot afford hand-woven city carpets would buy a carpet made on a machine using chemical dyes and inferior wool (or even synthetic fibres) before they'd buy a tribal carpet.

Weaving

Most handmade carpets are woven from hand-spun wool. Each rug is woven around a vertical (warp) and horizontal (weft) foundation, usually made of cotton – the skeleton of the rug. The best are made from sheep wool though occasionally goat or camel hair is used, usually by tribal weavers in the warps or selvedges (edge bindings) of rugs, kilims or saddle bags to give them strength. Silk carpets are magnificent but they're largely decorative, while wool and silk mixtures are more practical and look beautiful. Weavers are often, but not always, women.

Dyes

Dyeing is often done in large vats in small, old-style buildings in the older parts of towns; walk the old town streets of Kashan, in particular, to see it in action. The dyes themselves are the product of centuries of innovation and experimentation. Colours are extracted from natural, locally available sources, including plants (such as herbs, vegetables and fruit skins), insects and even shellfish.

In 1859 chemical dyes such as aniline and chrome were introduced. They caught on quickly because they were cheap and easy to use. Not everyone abandoned the old ways, however, and some weavers, notably those in the Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari region west of Esfahan, have continued using natural dyes almost uninterrupted to the present day. Today Iranian rug producers big and small are turning back to natural dyes.

Looms

Traditionally, nomadic carpet-weavers used horizontal looms, which are lightweight and transportable. Designs were either conjured up from memory, or made up as the weaver worked. These carpets and

During the Safavid period sheep were bred specifically to produce the finest wool, and vegetable plantations were tended with scientific precision to provide dyes of just the right shade.

CARPET
MUSEUM

Tehran's Carpet Museum of Iran (p48) has a price-less collection from around the country and is the best place to see rugs without getting into a bazaar.

In 2006–07 some 1200 Iranians produced the world's largest hand-woven carpet for the vast Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan mosque in Abu Dhabi. It measures 5627 sq metres, weighs 35 tons and includes 2,268,000,000 knots.

rugs were woven for domestic use or occasional trade and were small because they had to be portable. In villages, many homes or small workshops have simple upright looms where weavers can create better designs, with more variety.

Over the last 150 years larger village workshops and city factories have begun using bigger, modern looms. Some still require people to do the weaving, while others are fully mechanised – producing ‘machine carpets’ that cost about half as much as their hand-woven equivalents.

Knots

You may come across the terms ‘Persian (or *senneh*) knot’ (known in Farsi as a *farsi-baf*) and ‘Turkish (or *ghiorde*) knot’ (*turki-baf*). Despite the names, both are used in Iran: the Turkish knot is common in the Azarbayjan provinces and western Iran.

As a rough guide, an everyday carpet or rug will have up to 30 knots per sq cm, a medium-grade piece 30 to 50 knots per sq cm, and a fine one 50 knots or more per sq cm. A prize piece might have 500 or more knots per sq cm. The higher the number of knots, the better the quality. Nomad weavers tie around 8000 knots a day; factory weavers about 12,000 knots a day.

Buying Carpets & Rugs

Iranians have had more than 2500 years to perfect the art of carpet-making – and just as long to master the art of carpet-selling. If you don't know your warp from your weft, it might be worth reading up before visiting Iran, or taking an Iranian friend when you go shopping (bearing in mind that professional ‘friends’ who make a living from commission are a fact of life).

If you know what you're doing you might pick up a bargain, but unless you're an expert, don't buy a carpet or rug as an investment – buy it because you like it. Before buying, lie the carpet flat to check for bumps or other imperfections. Small bumps will usually flatten out with wear but big ones are probably there to stay. To check if a carpet is handmade, turn it over; on most handmade pieces the pattern will be distinct on the underside (the more distinct, the better the quality).

WHERE TO BUY YOUR PERSIAN RUG

Persian carpets come in almost as many different designs as there are ethnic groups and major urban centres. Usually the name of a carpet indicates where it was made or where the design originated. The bazaars are the best places to buy and the experience of shopping, haggling and eventually buying is a memorable part of travelling in Iran.

» Tehran (p37) With more than 3000 carpet merchants, this labyrinthine bazaar has the biggest range, most competition and the lowest prices.

» Esfahan (p155) Many travellers buy here because shopping around Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Sq is so enjoyable. Prices are a bit higher. Plenty of Esfahani city carpets are available, and the widest selection of Bakhtiyari rugs from the nearby Zagros Mountains.

» Shiraz (p188) Another pleasant place to shop, with evenings in the bazaar particularly atmospheric. Shiraz has the best range of Qashqa'i rugs, runners, kilims and saddle bags, with their distinct geometric patterns, including stylised animals and birds and floral designs in the borders, and fine *gabbeh*, small, thick flat-woven rugs with loose pile.

» Tabriz (p85) Huge range of carpets, from fine works in silk or with silk highlights, to simpler weaves from regional villages and tribal groups.

Taking Them Home

Export regulations for carpets are notoriously changeable; ask a reputable dealer for the latest. At the time of writing there was no limit to the number of carpets you could take home. However, some larger, older and more valuable carpets cannot be exported without special permission. See Export Restrictions (p330) for other details.

Sanctions mean the customs guys in your home country might frown upon purchases from Iran. One reader reported US customs are 'quite strict' about anything bought in Iran for more than US\$100 – meaning most carpets. Carpet sellers know this and will offer give you a receipt for less than you paid, or even to indicate you bought it in Dubai.

Carrying carpets is usually cheaper than posting because you're less likely to have to pay duty if you can get them through airport customs at home. Alternatively, most carpet dealers can arrange postage and costs are not outrageous. If there are no sanctions, most countries allow you to import up to 25 sq metres of Persian carpets before they start charging you as a merchant; though you will probably still have to pay some duty.

Painting

The earliest known distinctively Persian style of painting dates back to the Seljuk period (1051–1220) and is often referred to as the Baghdad School. Early painting was mainly used to decorate Qurans and pottery, and during the Mongol period (1220–1335) all sorts of manuscripts, especially poetry books.

In the 16th century an important school of Persian art developed in Tabriz, under the guidance of Sultan Mohammed, and its distinctive designs and patterns also influenced carpet design. Persian painting reached its apex under the Safavids, when Shah Abbas I turned Esfahan into a centre for the arts. The demise of the Safavids deprived artists of their patrons, and coincided with growing influences from India and Europe. Persian artists rarely signed their works so little is known about most artists.

Calligraphy

With the arrival of Islam several distinctly Persian calligraphic styles emerged, some of them so elaborate that they are almost illegible, eg *nashki* and later, *thulth*. The Quran was faithfully reproduced as a whole in calligraphic form, but you're more likely to see Quranic verses, and the names of Allah and Mohammed, in tiles and deep relief stucco in mosques across the country.

By the 16th century, Shiraz and Esfahan were producing some of the finest calligraphy in the Islamic world. Some of the best examples can be seen at Tehran's Reza Abbasi Museum (p48), named for the renowned 16th-century calligrapher and painter.

Miniatures

The Persian miniature-painting (*minyaturha*) tradition began after the Mongol invasion, influenced by artisans brought to the royal court from China. It reached its peak during the 15th and 16th centuries. Later, artists from eastern Iran, who had studied under the great Mohammadi in Herat (now in Afghanistan), also influenced this art form.

Persian miniatures are now famous throughout the world. Favourite subjects include courting couples in traditional dress (usually figures from popular poetry), polo matches and hunting scenes. Esfahan has dozens of miniaturists and is the best place to buy.

For a more complete description of which carpets come from where, see www.oldcarpet.com and click through to Carpet By Zone.

BIHZAD

Bihzad, Master of Persian Painting, by Ebadollah Bahari, is the lavishly illustrated life of Kamal al-Din Bihzad, the great 15th-century Persian artist and manuscript illustrator.

One of the best-loved modern Iranian artists is Sayyed Ali Akhbar Sanati, whose sculpture and paintings are on display in the Sanati Museum of Contemporary Art (p225) in Kerman.

Contemporary Art

Contemporary art in Iran is concentrated in Tehran, where a small but sophisticated community of artists produce and exhibit work in a variety of media. Their work is not always appreciated by the authorities, and several, including Tehrani artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, have found greater acclaim internationally than at home.

Despite the limited resources available to Iranian artists – there are few professional galleries and institutions capable of launching an artist's career – the restrictions themselves seem to inform their aesthetic. The art has a distinctive Iranian flavour that several experts argue is impossible to classify in terms of Western contemporary art. For a short list of Tehran galleries, see p49.

Crafts

Glassware

Small, translucent glass vessels dating back to the 2nd millennium BC have been found at Choqa Zanbil (p138) and by the Sassanian era Persian *shisheh alat* (glassware) had become a sought-after luxury traded as far away as Japan. By early Islamic times, two principle techniques were used: mould-blown to produce thicker items, and free-blown for more delicate articles. Glassware was usually green, lapis lazuli, light blue or clear with a tinge of yellow, and decorations were cut into the glass. The art reached its peak during the Seljuk era when the manufacture of enamelled and gilded glassware flourished.

Under the Safavids Shiraz became an important centre of glass production, with rose-water sprinklers, long-necked wine bottles, flower vases and bowls particularly popular. By the reign of Karim Khan Zand, the famous wine from Shiraz was exported in locally crafted jugs and bottles. See Iran's history of glassware in Tehran's excellent Glass & Ceramics Museum (p46).

Lacquer Work

Some consider this the most interesting of Iran's decorative arts; it can be traced back to early Islamic times as an independent art form. Wooden or papier-mâché objects are painted, then a transparent sandarac-based varnish is applied in successive layers from three to more than 20 coats. The result gives an impression of depth and provides great durability. Common designs are the popular Persian motif of the nightingale and the rose, flowers and classic love stories. Pen boxes are the most common form of lacquer work.

Marquetry

One of the most intricate styles of woodwork is a form of marquetry (*moarraaq*) called *khatam*. A Persian style of marquetry slowly developed through the centuries and by the 17th century *khatam* was so prestigious that several Safavid princes learned the technique.

Several different woods, including betel, walnut, cypress and pine are used, with the inlaid pieces made from animal bones, shells, ivory, bronze, silver and gold. The final product is coated with varnish. Genuine Persian *khatam* contains no paint; the colours come from the inlaid pieces. *Khatam* can be used for furniture but visitors usually buy it in the form of ornamental boxes or picture frames. Most of what you'll see for sale in souvenir shops is not genuine, as they are often made with the use of machines.

Tehran Studio Works, The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh details some of the Tehrani painter's acclaimed work, which now hangs in galleries around the world.



Literature, Music & Cinema

Literature

Iran is a nation of poets and overwhelmingly the most important form of writing is poetry. Familiarity with famous poets and their works is universal: ask almost anyone on the street can quote you lines from Hafez or Rumi (see the boxed text, p314).

While writers have long been persecuted in Iran, their numbers increased dramatically during the Khatami years, particularly women novelists who regularly topped best-seller lists. But writers haven't fared so well under the conservative Ahmadinejad government. All books must be approved by government censors before publication and thousands of new and old works have been banned, from Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* to all works by Sadeq Hedayat, one of Iran's most famous prerevolutionary novelists.

Poetry

The 9th century AD saw several poetic styles born in Persia. These include the *masnavi*, with its unique rhyming couplets, and the *ruba'i*, similar to the quatrain (a poem of four lines). Poems of more than 100 nonrhyming couplets, known as *qasideh*, were first popularised by Rudaki during the 10th century. These styles later developed into long and detailed 'epic poems', the first of which was Ferdosi's *Shahnamah*.

Moral and religious poetry became popular following the success of Sa'di's most famous poems, the *Bustan* and *Golestan*. By the 14th century, smaller *qazal* poems, which ran to about 10 nonrhyming couplets, were still being used for love stories; the most famous *qazal* poet is Hafez.

Early in the last century modernist Persian poetry changed the poetic landscape. This style is exemplified by the work of Nima Yushij. Ahmad Shamloo's *Fresh Air*, a book of poems published in 1957, marked the introduction of a lyrical style that was also political and metaphoric.

Novels

Literary fiction is a young but fast-growing art in Iran, with beginnings in the 19th century evolving with political upheavals in the 20th and 21st centuries. While writing styles have changed, the spectre of censorship has been ever-present and continues today. As such, few of the hundreds of published novelists (about half of whom are women) write completely freely, and fewer are translated into English.

Sadeq Hedayat is the best-known Iranian novelist outside Iran, and one whose influence has been most pervasive in shaping modern Persian fiction. *The Blind Owl*, published in 1937, is a dark and powerful portrayal of the decadence of a society failing to achieve its own

Paragraphiti (www.paragraphiti.com) translates titles into English and publishes new Iranian fiction.

Many epic poems celebrate the glories of the old Persia, unencumbered by the foreign rulers who reigned through this period.

Poets such as Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri were influential from the 1950s onwards.

modernity. Hedayat's uncensored works have been banned in Iran since 2005. Contemporary author Shahrar Mandanipour was also banned from publishing between 1992 and 1997 and, after years of struggle against the censor's pen, eventually moved to the USA in 2006. In 2009 he published the critically acclaimed *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, the story of an author who struggles to write a love story that will get past the censors.

During a government-orchestrated campaign in the late 1990s, it is widely accepted that more than 80 writers, poets, translators and political dissidents were murdered. In 1995 Mandanipour, along with 20 other writers, travelled to address poets in Armenia. While en route by bus through the Zagros Mountains, their driver tried to drive the bus off a 300m-high cliff, jumping to save himself at the last second. The bus hit a

THE GREAT IRANIAN POETS

Iranians venerate their great poets, who are often credited with preserving the Persian language and culture during times of occupation. Streets, squares, hotels and *chay-khanehs* (teahouses) are named after famous poets, several of whom have large mausoleums that are popular pilgrimage sites.

Ferdosi 940–1020

Hakim Abulqasim Ferdosi, first and foremost of all Iranian poets, was born near Tus outside Mashhad. He developed the *ruba'i* (quatrain) style of 'epic' historic poems and is remembered primarily for the *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings), which took 33 years to write and included almost 60,000 couplets. Ferdosi is seen as the saviour of Farsi, which he wrote in at a time when the language was under threat from Arabic. Without his writings many details of Persian history and culture might also have been lost and Ferdosi is credited with having done much to help shape the Iranian self-image.

Hafez 1325–1389

Khajeh Shams-ed-Din Mohammed, or Hafez (meaning 'One Who Can Recite the Quran from Memory') as he became known, was born in Shiraz. His poetry has a strong mystical quality and regular references to wine, courtship and nightingales have been interpreted in different ways (is wine literal or a metaphor for God?). A copy of his collected works, known as the *Divan-e Hafez*, can be found in almost every home in Iran, and many of his verses are used as proverbs to this day.

Omar Khayyam 1047–1123

Omar Khayyam (Omar the Tentmaker) was born in Neishabur and is probably the best-known Iranian poet in the West because many of his poems, including the famous *Rubaiyat*, were translated into English by Edward Fitzgerald. In Iran he is more famous as a mathematician, historian and astronomer.

Rumi 1207–1273

Born Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Balkhi in Balkh (in present-day Afghanistan), Rumi's family fled west before the Mongol invasions and eventually settled in Konya in present-day Turkey. There his father and then he retreated into meditation and study of the divine. Rumi was inspired by a great dervish, Shams-e Tabrizi, and many of his poems of divine love are addressed to him. He is credited with founding the Maulavi Sufi order – the whirling dervishes – and is also known as Maulana ('the Master').

Sa'di 1207–1291

Like Hafez, Sheikh Mohammed Shams-ed-Din (known as Sa'di), lost his father at an early age and was educated by some of the leading teachers of Shiraz. Many of his elegantly phrased verses are still commonly used in conversation. His most famous works, the *Golestan* (Rose Garden) and *Bustan* (Garden of Trees), have been translated into many languages.

boulder and stopped, teetering on the edge. The driver fled and the writers were promptly arrested. They were later released with instructions not to talk about the event.

Music

Aside from traditional music, which is played in teahouses across the country, it's not easy to find musical performances in Iran. That doesn't mean there aren't any musicians. But government restrictions mean every public performance needs a licence, which is difficult to obtain for anything modern or remotely political. Women performers were banned for many years but now women-only concerts are commonplace.

Classical

For Iranians there is no distinction between poetry and lyrics, and traditional Persian music is poetry set to a musical accompaniment. Like epic poems, some 'epic songs' are very long and masters can spend most of their lives memorising the words.

Classical Persian music is almost always downbeat and can sound decidedly mournful or, as one young Shirazi told us, 'depressing'. Despite this, it remains hugely popular and you'll hear it in taxis and teahouses across the country. Two singers particularly worth listening out for are Shajarian and Shahram Naziri, both of whom have helped promote interest in classical Persian music internationally.

While the voice is usually central to this form of music, it is backed by several instruments that have deep roots in Persian culture. Among the most common:

- » *tar* – a six-string instrument, usually plucked
- » *setar* – similar to the *tar* but with four strings
- » *nay* – generic name for various types of flute
- » *sorna* – similar to an oboe
- » *kamancheh* – a kind of four-stringed viola played like a cello
- » *santur* – dulcimer played with delicate wooden mallets
- » *tombak* – vase-shaped drum with a skin at the wide end
- » *dahol* and *zarb* – large and small drums respectively

Folk

The most appealing and melodious traditional music is heard among ethnic minorities, such as the Turkmen in northern Iran. Azaris favour a unique style of music, often based around a love song, whereas Kurds have a distinctively rhythmic music based mainly around the lute and their own versions of epic songs, called *bards*.

Folk music employs most of the instruments mentioned above, with regional variations; along the Persian Gulf a type of bagpipe called the *demam* is popular. The music of Sistan va Baluchestan is understandably similar to that of Pakistan and typically uses instruments such as the *tamboorak* (similar to the Pakistani *tambura*, a type of harmonium).

Pop & Rock

Iranian pop music has re-emerged under the watchful eye of the Iranian authorities. Many of the most popular Iranian musicians fled after the Islamic Revolution, including '70s superstar Googosh. They now perform abroad. While their music is largely created in Los Angeles, these and more modern 'Tehrangeles pop' artists are widely available on bootleg copies in Iran.

Nine-piece Arian was the first mixed-gender band to get official approval after the revolution. Their debut album, *Gole Aftabgardoon*

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood is Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel about growing up through the revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic. It's compelling, funny and, ultimately, heart-rendingly sad. The movie version, *Persepolis*, was released in 2007.

The Kamkars, a Kurdish family ensemble, have been celebrated for their concerts featuring traditional Iranian music and rousing Kurdish folk songs. They tour in Iran and worldwide.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the lyrics of most traditional music revolve around Islam, though some are based on love or celebrate ancient military victories.

THE MAKHMALBAF FAMILY – A CINEMA DYNASTY

Born in 1957 in Tehran, Mohsen Makhmalbaf first gained infamy when he was imprisoned for five years after fighting with a policeman. He was released during the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and started to write books before turning to film-making in 1982. Since then he has produced more than a dozen films, including *Boycott*, *Time for Love*, *Kandahar*, *Gabbeh* and, more provocatively, *Salaam Cinema*. Many of his films are based on taboo subjects: *Time for Love* was filmed in Turkey because it broached the topic of adultery; and *Marriage of the Blessed* was a brutal film about the casualties of the Iran–Iraq War.

Makhmalbaf has become a virtual exile from Iran because of the country's censorship. In 1997 Makhmalbaf's daughter Samira produced her first film, *The Apple*, to critical acclaim. In 2000 her second film, *Blackboards*, was a smash hit at the Cannes Film Festival; she was the youngest director ever to have shown a film there.

The Makhmalbaf movie factory continues to churn out winners. Samira's younger brother made a 'making-of' documentary about *Blackboards*; then younger sister Hana directed a feature about the shooting of Samira's film *At Five in the Afternoon*. On the strength of that film, *Joy of Madness*, Hana beat Samira to a 'youngest-ever' record by being invited to the Venice Film Festival at the age of 14. Even Mohsen Makhmalbaf's second wife (the sister of his first wife, who died tragically), Marzieh Meshkini, has directed an acclaimed film, *The Day I Became a Woman*, which examines what it is to be a woman in Iran.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf survived two assassination attempts while filming *Kandahar* in Iran, and in 2007 the whole family was attacked while on location in Afghanistan for Samira's film *The Two-legged Horse*. A man posing as an extra threw a bomb onto the set, wounding six actors and several extras and killing the horse in the film's title.

Having moved to Paris in 2005, in 2009 Mohsen Makhmalbaf became a spokesman abroad for Green Movement leader and presidential candidate Mirhossein Mousavi. His outspoken criticism of the Ahmadinejad government has left him, in effect, an exile. For more on the Makhmalbafs, see www.makhmalbaf.com.

(The Sunflower), was released in 2000 and soon they were playing to crowds of more than 50,000. Other favourite artists include Benyamin Bahadori, Moin, Omid and current favourites Mohsen Yeganeh and Barobax.

Iran's rock and rap scene is mainly underground but a steadily growing number of bands and musicians are finding a Persian way to rock. Groups such as O-Hum set the scene with 'Persian rock', a mix of familiar and Iranian instruments and the poetic lyrics of Hafez and Rumi. The result is like '90s grunge rock with an Iranian flavour; download free tracks at www.iranian.com. Other popular rock acts include Barad, Meera, Hypernova, Niyaz and Mohsen Namjoo.

To hear Iranian music listen to free tracks available on www.iranian.com/music.html or www.theiranianradio.com. To buy Persian music, and make sure your money goes to the artists, check out www.cdbaby.com.

Cinema

Iran's love affair with cinema started at the dawn of the last century and in 1900 the country's first public cinema opened in Tabriz. Though Iranian films were made earlier, Esmail Kushan's 1948 *The Tempest of Life* was the first film to be made in Iran and, since then the home-grown industry has not looked back.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that the first signs of a distinctive Iranian cinematic language emerged, with poet Forough Farrokhzad's 1962 film of life in a leper colony, *The House Is Black*, setting the scene.

For news and history of Iranian cinema, see Wikipedia or the Farabi Cinema Foundation's site at www.fcf.ir.

The first 'new wave' of Iranian cinema in the 1970s captured the attention of art-house movie fans around the world: Abbas Kiarostami, Dariush Mehrjui, Bahram Beiza'i, Khosrow Haritash and Bahram Farmanara. The second 'new wave' was made up of post-revolutionary directors such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Rakhshan Bani Etemad, Majid Majidi and Jafar Panahi. It helped develop a reputation for Iranian cinema as art house, neorealist and poetic. The newest generation is known as the 'third wave' and its most notable exponents are Asghar Farhadi, Bahman Ghobadi and Mani Haghighi. Whatever the number, Iranian new wave is consistent in looking at everyday life through a poetic prism that is part fictional feature, part real-life documentary.

The strict censorship of the post-revolutionary state has encouraged the use of children, nonprofessional actors and stories that are fixated on the nitty-gritty of life, and which have proved popular overseas.

Iranians love their own cinema and flock to it in droves. But many internationally acclaimed 'art-house' films never get released at home, and are distributed on the bootleg market instead. Some Iranians feel the masters are making movies specifically for foreign markets and film festivals. Dozens of films are churned out every year for the domestic market, many of them action flicks, though the appetite for films looking at social issues is increasing.

Of these the most notable is *A Separation*, the 2012 winner of the Academy Award for best foreign language film and nominee for best original screenplay, in which director Asghar Farhadi looks at a Tehran couple's dissolving marriage and how the hiring of a carer for an ill parent complicates matters further.

Other films worth seeking out include Majid Majidi's film *Children of Heaven*, which was nominated for the best foreign language film Oscar in 1998. It is a delicate tale focusing on two poor children losing a pair of shoes. *The White Balloon*, written by Abbas Kiarostami and directed by Jafar Panahi, tells the story of a young girl who loses her money while on the way to buy a goldfish. The film won several international awards.

Taste of Cherry, directed by Abbas Kiarostami, was co-winner of the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, despite being very controversial inside Iran because it deals with suicide, a taboo subject in Islam.



Natural Environments

Land of Mountains & Deserts

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 snow-capped mountains border vast desert plateaus and cliffside villages contrast with palm-filled oases.

More than half of Iran is covered by mountains, with four ranges 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 ski fields and the snow-capped Mt Damavand (5671m; p73), the Middle East's tallest mountain. The northern slopes of the Alborz Mountains are densely forested to about 2500m and form the largest area of vegetation in the country. The forests will look familiar to Europeans (oak, ash, pine, poplar, willow, walnut, maple and elm), and the loveliest pockets are around Masuleh (p105), in the Golestan National Park east of Minudasht (p246), and, more accessibly, at Nahar Khoran (p237), just south of Gorgan.

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 south.

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.

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, accounting for almost 25% of the country. The deserts include occasional salt lakes and are dotted with luxuriant oases – a welcome sight for travellers down the ages. 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 (p174) and the villages around are classic examples.

People of the Land

Think of Iran's mountain ranges as the foundations of 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, the mountains and the

Google Earth Landscapes

- » **The Kaluts** N 30° 38' 34.63", E 58° 0' 58.48"
- » **Qeshm Geological Park** N 26° 37' 0.46", E 55° 29' 29.43"
- » **Zagros Mountains** 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"

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 almost as big as Queensland, Australia. Iran shares borders with seven countries: Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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 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, 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 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 a large quake rocks the capital. Building standards are poor (and poorly enforced) and a government report in 2004 stated that of the 15 million homes in Iran, 7.2 million are vulnerable to a major earthquake. Sobering indeed.

lack of rivers have had a direct effect on the development of Persian culture.

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 melted snow often channelled through ingenious underground canals called *qanats* (p179).

Without river connections these communities lived in relative isolation. Large towns would be the focus of trade for hundreds of surrounding villages otherwise hemmed in by mountains or desert. Further trade was done by camel caravans, which linked these population basins to each other and beyond via the silk routes and the coasts.

These environs also dictated the Iranian cuisine. With fresh vegetables hard to find, people of the deserts ate a menu heavy with protein (camel and goat meat) and hardy fruits (dates, oranges and pomegranate), while those from the wet, fertile, Alborz provinces in the north ate more vegetables (hello eggplant) and a wider variety of fruit. For a taste of these contrasting lifestyles, spend a night each in Garmeh (desert, p174) and Masuleh (mountain, p105).

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

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 p321), 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 Transcasian oreol, Laristan mouflon and Alborz red sheep,

Iran harbours more than 8200 species of plants, about 2000 of them endemic.

Serious birders should bring *Birds of the Middle East*, by RF Porter, S Christensen and P Schiermacker-Hansen.

Birding Websites

- » **Birding Pal** (<http://birdingpal.org/iran>) A list of professional and enthusiast birding guides in Iran.
- » **Ornithological Society of the Middle East** (www.osme.org) Excellent trip reports.

More than a thousand wetland sites around the world are protected under a 1971 agreement, signed in Ramsar, on Iran's Caspian Sea coast. Known as the Ramsar Convention, birds and their wetland habitats are the greatest beneficiaries. Iran is home to 22 wetlands that are protected by Ramsar.

an ibex with a long black beard and curved horns. And, as described in Jason Elliot's book *Mirrors of the Unseen*, the origins of the modern horse come from the loins of the pint-sized and now near-extinct Caspian horse.

Notable other species include the spectacular Persian wild ass, goitered and Jebber gazelles, maral, Asian black bear and brown bear. Most large mammals are found in the forests of the Alborz Mountains, although large cats, wild dogs and gazelle are also found around the deserts.

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

Birds

Sitting at the crossroads of the European, Oriental and African faunal regions, and harbouring an amazing array of habitats from Alpine tops to semitropical mangroves and inter-tidal sand flats, Iran is an exceptional country for birds, boasting almost 500 species, many of which are listed as globally endangered. While the jewel in the crown is the Pleske's ground jay, a bird unique to Iran and a resident of the central deserts, the country is also rich in mountain species, including Caspian snowcock, Caucasian black grouse and Radde's accentor, as well as a large number of the expected desert birds, such as assorted sandgrouse, larks and wheatears.

A growing number of birders are coming to Iran in search of these birds, many of which are hard to find elsewhere, and to enjoy the exceptional birding along the Persian Gulf. In winter in particular, many hundreds of thousands of birds flock to the shallow waters of the Gulf, with the Bandar Abbas-Qeshm areas particularly good. Vast flocks of waders, including crab plovers and terek sandpipers, mingle with various herons, egrets and pelicans and together create one of the most important wintering area for birds in the Middle East.

For the casual birder, some of the more prominent species include golden eagles in the northern mountains, three species of bee-eaters, the colourful pied and Smyrna kingfishers, both common in Khuzestan, plus the startling blue Indian roller in the Bandar Abbas area and its cousin the European roller in the north.

Endangered Species

Habitat loss and one million hunting licenses (each with free bullets from the state) have taken their toll on the wildlife. In the mountainous northwest, 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 Persian fallow deer remains vulnerable but is nonetheless a rare Iranian conservation success story. Thought extinct in the 1950s, 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.

National Parks & Reserves

National parks, and the wildlife they are designed to protect, are luxuries most Iranians don't have the time, money or education 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. Attitudes are changing in cities such as Tehran and Shiraz but it could be decades before Iran's nature reserves have 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 more than 140 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 are few signs. Other parks, such as Sisingan on the Caspian, suffer the opposite problem: they are small, overused and quickly overrun by weekenders.

Hardy souls might strike out on their own, but unless time is no problem and you have some Farsi, it will be difficult. Your best bet is to employ a travel agency close to the park you want to visit. Alternatively, use one of the specialist outdoor agencies listed on p328.

Relatively 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.

- » **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 Kordistan. 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, oraal rams, brown bears, wolves, leopards, goitered gazelles and assorted bird life. Best visited in spring. Permits required.
- » **Lake Orumiyeh National Park** An important wetland, this park is home to rare deer and a multitude of migratory birds. Relatively accessible from Tabriz, but increasingly threatened.

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.

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.

Since 2000 the Iranian government has worked with the United Nations Development Programme and the Wildlife Conservation Society to designate land, mainly in Yazd and Semnan provinces, as parks and reserves, increase punishments for poaching and undertake an extensive tracking program. The aim was to identify exactly where the cheetah roam and try to link 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 jebbeer, goitered gazelles, wild sheep and goats, has made this harder, as it has forced the cats deeper into mountainous areas in search of more modest meals – such as hare and even lizards.

On the positive side, education programs have significantly reduced poaching and the creation of protected areas is expected to help other native species. The project is ongoing. For more information visit the **Iranian Cheetah Society** (www.wildlife.ir) or **iranian.cheetah** on facebook.

Environmental Issues

Iran faces several serious environmental challenges, most of which can be summed up as habitat loss and pollution. But it's not all bad news. Public awareness of the environment has risen significantly in recent years.

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 didn't help and crops were soon being sown in areas unsuitable for intensive agriculture.

The impacts have been dire. Official estimates suggest 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 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. On the plus side, the government is aware of the problem and in recent years school children have planted millions of trees.

Pollution

Chronic air pollution is the environmental problem you're most likely to notice while travelling in Iran. Tehran sets the standard (p64) but growing industry and car ownership have made poisonous air a problem across the country. Iran's pollution problem is worse for having been ignored until it reached crisis point.

The good news is the government has taken dramatic steps to force people into realising the impact of endlessly burning fossil fuels. The most important, and controversial, has been removing subsidies and thus raising the price of all fuels (that the motivation was more economic than environmental is by the by). Until about 2007, many Iranians believed cheap fuel was their birthright. Since then the prices of *benzin* (petrol), gas and electricity have gone up by between 800 and 1000 percent each. Not surprisingly, per person consumption has fallen. In theory, market forces should bring more efficient vehicles and fuel to Iran, too. In practice, sanctions are a huge barrier.

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 and Qeshm. Pollution in the Caspian Sea is a problem that now threatens the internationally recognised wetlands of the Anzali Lagoon at Bandar-e Anzali.

While most attention has been focused on the country's nuclear power program, Iran is the Middle East's only producer of wind turbines and has several wind farms and a major solar power plant in Yazd.



Survival Guide

SAFE TRAVEL	324	TRANSPORT	342
DIRECTORY A-Z	325	GETTING THERE & AWAY	342
Accommodation	325	Entering the Country	342
Activities	327	Air	342
Business Hours	329	Land	343
Children	329	Sea	345
Climate	330	GETTING AROUND	345
Customs	330	Air	345
Dangers & Annoyances ..	330	Bicycle	346
Electricity	332	Bus	346
Embassies & Consulates ..	332	Car & Motorcycle	347
Gay & Lesbian Travellers ..	333	Hitching	349
Holidays	333	Local Transport	349
Insurance	335	Minibus	350
Internet Access	335	Private Taxis	350
Language Courses	335	Savari (Shared Taxis) ...	350
Legal Matters	335	Train	351
Maps	336	HEALTH	352
Money	336	LANGUAGE	356
Photography & Video ...	337		
Post	338		
Telephone	338		
Time	339		
Toilets	339		
Tourist information	339		
Travellers with Disabilities	339		
Visas	339		
Women Travellers	339		

Safe Travel

Iran is a safe place to travel, so much so that many travellers describe it as the 'safest country I've ever been to', or 'much safer than travelling in Europe'. Violent crime against foreigners is extremely rare and, indeed, if you do your best to fit in with local customs, you are unlikely to be treated with anything but courtesy and friendliness – that applies to Americans, too.

Western embassies (p332) advise their nationals to register on arrival, especially if you will be in Iran for 10 or more days, or plan to visit remote places.

Crime

While we have heard of very few assaults and thefts, it pays to take the usual precautions. It makes sense, too, that if the economic situation worsens crime will rise. Basic things to be aware of:

- » On transport keep valuables, including your passport, money and camera, with you at all times.
- » Hotels are quite safe but locking your bags prevents hotel staff going through

them and, perhaps, 'sampling' your toiletries.

» There is a black market in stolen foreign passports so, unless it's with your hotel reception, keep yours strapped to your body.

» If you are to encounter a pickpocket, it will be in a crowded bazaar.

Kidnapping & Terror

Several tourists were kidnapped in the southeastern provinces of Sistan va Baluchestan and Kerman between 1999 and 2007. All were eventually released unharmed and the drug dealers responsible are understood to have been dealt with.

A low-scale insurgency has seen several attacks on military and civilians in Sistan va Baluchestan province since 2005. Tourists have not been targeted, but it pays to keep a low profile when travelling between Bam and the Pakistan border. See the boxed text, p233 for more details.

Police & Security Forces

Uniformed police and military are ubiquitous but have no interest in hassling foreigners. In cities such as Esfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad you'll find helpful Tourist Police – usually including an English-speaker – in conveniently located booths.

Photographing the wrong thing is the action most likely to arouse police interest. We've been detained several times (at the border, Tehran train station etc). In all cases we acted unwittingly (which has been genuine) and emphasised we were tourists, then deleted the pictures and were allowed to move on. Don't argue in these situations. See p336 for what to do if you are arrested.

Road Safety

Iranian driving is unpredictable and it's on the road – or crossing it – that you're most likely to be in danger. There's little you can do to control this beyond asking your driver to slow down (*yavash tar boro!*) or taking a train. For more on road safety, see p331.

Security Checks

Foreigners are expected to carry their passport at all times, but this can be tricky as hotels are also supposed to keep guests' passports for police inspection. Always carry several photocopies of both your passport's face page and your Iranian visa, and if you go out of town leave a photocopy at reception and take the passport. If you are stopped, show your photocopies unless you are sure the police are genuine.

On roads near borders your transport is likely to be stopped by police searching for drugs and other smuggled goods; see p344.

Directory A-Z

Accommodation

Iran has a reasonable choice of accommodation, from tiny cells in noisy *mosaf-erkhanehs* (basic lodging houses) to luxury rooms in five-star hotels. Camping, however, is almost nonexistent. The Orwellian-sounding Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance categorises most hotels and decides what they can charge. Prices rise in April each year and the rates are displayed (usually in Arabic numerals) at reception.

For many years foreigners paid more than Iranians for the same midrange and top-end rooms, but this officially mandated dual-pricing ended in 2008.

While *otagh* (room) prices are fixed, friendly negotiation might save you a bit during quieter times, especially between mid-October and early March. But don't count on it. The reluctance to bargain is partly due to a lack of effective competition. For foreigners, midrange and top-end places will sometimes quote prices in US dollars or euros, though they accept (and are, in theory, required to be paid in) local currency.

Hotels will almost always keep your passport overnight so carry a photocopy, and get the original back if you're heading out of town. Check-out time is usually 2pm.

If you get off the beaten track and are open to it, you'll likely encounter heart-warming hospitality that sucks you into unplanned homestays. It's worth packing a few small presents from home to express your gratitude, as paying cash for such accommodation might be inappropriate.

Camping

Iranians love tents, but there are few official camping grounds. Unless you can make yourself look like a nomad, camping can draw unwanted attention from the authorities. Trekkers and mountaineers who need to camp should discuss plans with the provincial tourist information office first (p339) if not accompanied by a recognised guide. The office may be able to write a letter of introduction.

Couchsurfing

Iran has a fast-growing **Couchsurfing** (www.couchsurfing.org) community and making contact with its members is an easy and increasingly popular way to get 'inside' Iranian culture. Most readers who have surfed Iranian couches, or more likely carpets, have reported a memorable time for positive reasons. However there have also been warnings that some Iranian hosts expect to accompany their guests everywhere, and if you're not up for that it's best to commit to less time with the option of extending to avoid an early and embarrassing departure. Also, *ta'arof* or not, do insist on paying for at least something during your stay, or take a gift from home.

HOW MUCH?

Accommodation in this book is presented in order of preference, not budget. Prices vary across the country, with Tehran usually the most expensive, Esfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad in the middle and less visited centres such as Kerman, Hamadan and Bandar Abbas cheapest. The following is a rough guide:

BUDGET	MIDRANGE	TOP-END
US\$40 & under	US\$41-150	More than US\$150

These prices are for double rooms and include the 17% for tax and service charged by upmarket hotels. All rooms include bathrooms, and rates include breakfast, unless otherwise stated.

Mosaferkhanehs & Mehmanpazirs

Iran's most basic accommodation is in male-dominated *mosaferkhanehs* (literally 'travellers' houses'), a dorm or basic hotel, and similar *mehmanpazirs*. Standards in these places vary but expect shared bathrooms, squat toilets and no spoken English. Some bottom-end places won't even have a communal shower. Prices start at around US\$6 per bed in a noisy, grotty, male-only dorm. Simple, private rooms, perhaps with a sink, start at about twice that. Pack a towel, toilet paper and sleep sheet, as bedding can sometimes be semi-clean and/or stained.

In a growing number of cities some *mosaferkhanehs* are not allowed to accept foreigners, or require written permission from the police. That's easy to organise through a 10-minute visit to the local Amaken – an arm of the police – assuming you arrive in business hours.

Hotels

BUDGET

Basic one- and two-star hotels, noted in this guide as

PRACTICALITIES

- » **Electricity** Current is 220V AC, 50Hz. Wall sockets are mainly the European, two round-pin type.
- » **Newspapers** Iran's English-language daily newspapers are the *Tehran Times* and *Iran News*, both of which cleave to the government line with exceptions from the wires. They are available only in Tehran and some other large cities. Both offer decent, if sometimes eccentric, international coverage.
- » **Radio** Frequencies for the BBC World Service (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice) include 11760Hz, 15575Hz and 1413kHz; and for VOA (www.voanews.com) 11740Hz and 15195kHz.
- » **Television** All Iranian broadcasters are state-controlled. However, many Iranians get Farsi-language satellite TV from North America. On Iranian TV, channels 1 to 4 are national, 5 and 6 province-based. Most hotels have the 24-hour IRINN news channel, which has a news-ticker in English.
- » **Weights & measures** Iran uses the metric system.

'budget hotels', normally have an attached bathroom with at least a hot shower, plus air-con, heating, TV (Iranian channels), fridge and maybe a phone. Prices start at about US\$12/18 for a single/double and go up to about US\$35/45. Double beds are rare, breakfast will often cost extra, and cleanliness can be questionable –

don't be afraid to ask for fresh sheets.

MIDRANGE

Most two-star hotels, and all three- and four-star rooms, will come with a clean private bathroom, phone, fridge and TV (sometimes with foreign channels). There might be a reasonable restaurant, and breakfast will be included. You'll find toilet paper but bath plugs are a long-shot. Like a 40-something boxer, a lot of places in this range charge rates that reflect a more glorious past than the beaten-around present; try negotiating. Aside from garden-variety hotels, the midrange includes:

Traditional hotels The most charismatic midrange places are the *hotel sonnati* (traditional hotels), where old courtyard houses have been transformed into social little hotels. If you're staying in a *hotel sonnati*, you'll know you're in Iran. Yazd has many and others can be found in Kashan, Esfahan and Shiraz.

Apartment hotels In the upper midrange are a growing number of modern 'apartment hotels', which

THE SEASONAL SWING

There are two clear tourist seasons in Iran. Low season starts in October and continues through winter until shortly before No Ruz (Iranian New Year, on 21 March) and the beginning of spring. From a few days before No Ruz, hotels in popular holiday destinations, such as Kish Island, Esfahan, the Caspian Sea coast, Shiraz and Yazd, are packed, and prices are at their highest.

No Ruz marks the beginning of daylight saving, longer opening hours and annual government-approved price increases across the economy, including hotels. After the 13-day holiday period is over you'll find room prices usually rise by about 20% from the winter (low season) rate, and stay that way until October, when they fall back a bit or can be (slightly) more easily haggled down. The whole cycle then begins again next No Ruz. There are a few exceptions. In summer prices along the Caspian Sea coast can skyrocket, while in hot places like Yazd and Kerman prices can fall with demand.

can be good value outside the high season.

Tourist Inns Most towns of decent size have a government-run Tourist Inn (*mehmansara jahangardi*). Standards vary considerably but they are usually fair value and often employ at least one English speaker.

TOP END

Until recently, many of Iran's top hotels pre-dated the 1979 revolution. Several accidentally maintained decor which, like the Bee Gees, became so out-dated that it was almost retro-cool. However, competition from new luxury hotels and apartment hotels has seen many, though not all, of these places refitted.

In most top end establishments the rooms and service will not live up to Western standards, but while prices are high by Iranian standards they are not (in most cases) outrageous compared with what you'll be used to. Note that hotels with indoor pools and saunas have segregated swimming times for men and women. The generously sized outdoor pools of the disco-era hotels are purely ornamental these days.

Other

Accommodation

Along the Caspian Sea coast and in those northwestern rural resort-villages most frequented by Iranian tourists, you'll find locals renting out rooms, bungalows and self-contained apartments ('suites') in their homes, gardens or above shops. In the low season prices can be very reasonable, but in summer prices rise by up to 400% and bookings are essential. Some suites and almost all rooms/homestays are unmarked in Farsi let alone English so it's just a case of asking around for an *otagh*. Food is generally not included.

Activities

Cycling

Iran's main highways can be terrifyingly truck-dominated, but secondary routes are well-suited to cycle touring (p346). Few locals push the pedals, but a steady stream of overlanders brave the traffic en route between Europe and Asia.

Diving

Scuba diving and snorkelling is limited to sites around Kish Island and Qeshm Island in the Persian Gulf. Qeshm is the better option.

Mountaineering

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

Start your research at these websites:

Iran Mountain Zone (www.mountainzone.ir) Mostly in Farsi, but with trip logs in English, a mountain index and contacts for local climbing clubs.

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

Summit Post (www.summitpost.org) Search Iran for dozens of detailed trip reports – some with maps – by 'Nader'.

The magnificent Alborz Mountains contain about 70 peaks over 4000m; those listed here are the most notable.

Mt Damavand (5671m) Northeast of Tehran, Iran's highest and best-known peak has a classic Fuji-esque profile, but reaching the summit is not of great technical difficulty (p73).

Alam Kuh (4850m) Mt Alam is Iran's most technical peak with an 800m near-vertical granite wall on its most difficult northern face: a world-class challenge (p107).

Mt Sabalan (4811m) An elegantly soaring peak usually approached from Meshgin Shahr, though it's worth arranging guides and equipment in Tabriz.

Mt Oshturan (4070m) Too tame for climbers, Oshturan is the most accessible peak of the splendid Zagros Mountains. It has an attractive lake near the summit and is ideal for mountain walkers (p134).

EQUIPMENT RENTAL & PURCHASE

Camping and climbing equipment is relatively inexpensive and stores in Tehran, Shiraz and Qazvin, in particular, are well stocked. A limited range of equipment can be rented at Darband and from some mountain guides.

GUIDES, PORTERS & MAPS

The cost of a guide depends on your bargaining skills, the number of climbers in the group, the equipment needed, the length of the trip and the difficulty of the route. English-speaking guides charge about US\$90 a day.

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews by Lonely Planet authors, check out <http://hotels.lonelyplanet.com>. You'll find independent reviews, as well as recommendations on the best places to stay. Best of all, you can book online.

A donkey and handler will cost between US\$45 and US\$120 a day.

Few trekking or mountain-climbing maps are available in English, though climbing maps for the Alam Kuh are available at the climbing centre in Rudbarak (p107). Elsewhere, spend the money you saved on maps on a local guide. Gita Shenasi (p62) in Tehran has a map of the Alborz Mountains with peaks and walking routes.

Rock Climbing

Rock climbing is growing in popularity in Iran and there are several accessible and challenging climbing routes. Hiring equipment is not easy but if you are keen you'll probably be able to turn up to many walls and be invited to join the locals (on weekends especially). You'd be wise to check with police or tourist information offices

before setting out as certain innocuous-looking climbs can overlook sensitive military posts. That said, if locals are using the climb there won't be a problem. A good place to meet people who know these climbs is online at www.summitpost.org, and www.rockclimbing.com/routes/Asia/Iran/ lists options but adds few details.

The most appealing climbs include:

Band-e Yakhchal Easily accessed by hiking an hour uphill from Darband in north Tehran, there are several low walls and the 200m-high Shervin wall; there's a hut here called Shervin Hut. The lower 25m have been set up for climbing and reports are that in summer it's a difficult but not especially technical climb to the summit. It's busy on Fridays.

Farhad Tarash (p128) Cliffs around the ancient collec-

tion of inscriptions at Bisotun include a particularly challenging rock-face. The Kermanshah tourist information office can put you in touch with the local climbers club for support and equipment.

Alam Kuh (Mt Alam; p107)

The 650m-high wall here rises from an elevation of 4200m and is a major expedition. Kassa Mountaineering & Tourism (see the boxed text below) offers a six-day trip, including acclimatisation time. There is a thorough description of routes at www.mountainzone.ir.

Skiiing

There are more than 20 functioning ski fields in Iran. The season is long, the snow is often powdery and untracked and, compared with Western fields, skiing in Iran is a bargain.

The season in the Alborz Mountains (where most slopes are located) starts as early as November and lasts until just after No Ruz (ie late March); around Tabriz and at Dizin it can last until mid-May. The slopes are busy with Iranians on Thursdays and Fridays, and with diplomats and expats on Saturdays; other days it should be pretty quiet. Iranians don't get off-piste that much, so even on Fridays finding untouched powder is not hard.

All the resorts have lodges, chalets and hotels, which charge from about US\$50 to US\$150 for a room. Ski lifts cost as little as US\$8 a day. You can hire skis, poles and boots, but not clothes, at the resorts. The slopes are also some of the most sexually equal areas of Iran outside of the family home; skiing was banned after the revolution, and after the ban was lifted in 1988 the images were of women skiing in chadors. But with Khatami's rise to the presidency in 1997 came a considerable easing of restrictions on the slopes. These have been tightened somewhat under

OUTDOOR & ADVENTURE AGENCIES

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

Aftab Kalout (☎021-6648 8374/5; www.kalout.com)

Professional Tehran-based outfit specialising in eco-tourism, desert trips, trekking and eco-cum-cultural tours.

Araz Adventure Tours (☎021-7760 9292; www.araz.org)

Recommended by readers. Offers range of mountaineering, climbing, horse- and camel-trekking, plus cultural tours. Director Mohsen Aghajani speaks English. Most equipment can be provided.

Kassa Mountaineering and Tourism (☎021-7751

0463/4; www.kassatours.com) Trekking, rock-climbing, heli-skiing, desert expeditions and climbing tours to 'any mountain you want to climb'. Run by experienced, English-speaking climber Ahmad Shirmohammad.

Sepid Mountaineering Company (☎0711-235 5939, 0917-313 2926; www.iransightseeing.com) Shiraz-based Abdollah Raeesi and crew organise mountaineering, cross-country skiing, nomad and horseback tours.

Adventure Iran (☎021-8834 2103; www.adventureiran.com) Tehran-based company run by experienced trekkers and mountaineers including Reza Zarei. Can put together backpacker-specific itineraries.

the Ahmadinejad presidency. Women must still keep their heads covered, but on higher slopes there is usually plenty of hair to be seen (particularly at Shemshak). Skiing is very popular among the affluent young.

Contact or visit the very helpful **Iran Ski Federation** (☎021-2256 9595; www.skifed.ir) or check their website (in Farsi, translate in Chrome) for details of all the slopes. For tour packages, see the adventure operators in the box or refer to some of the following websites, which also have brief details about the various ski fields.

Also check out www.iran.skitours.ir and www.iranski.com.

Further details of Iran's major ski fields are in this guide:

Tehran: Most accessible and with the best skiing are Shemshak, Dizin and Tochal (p54).

Tabriz: There is also good downhill skiing available near Tabriz (p88) and Ganjnameh (p134).

Zagros Mountains: Smaller fields at Sepidan (p173) north of Shiraz, and Chelgerd (p172), west of Esfahan.

Trekking

There's plenty of good trekking in Iran, but information is hard to come by. Nader's descriptions of various routes on www.summitpost.org are probably the best place to start, while for something more organised see the boxed text (p328) for listings of companies.

Solo trekking is possible but taking a guide is a good idea as much for his translation skills and friends along the route as the actual navigation. In remote regions, especially near borders, you may stumble across military/police/security areas; an Iranian guide or a few phrases of Farsi should hopefully smooth over any misunderstandings. Drinking water is often scarce, so

take your own supplies in desert regions, and purification tablets or water filters elsewhere.

One and two-day walks are possible in many areas, particularly the northwest and around Tehran. For Tehran, nearby Tochal and Darband are a good start. Further afield, Kelardasht, Masuleh and Takht-e Soleiman make good launch pads for mountain walks. Day and overnight desert treks can be easily arranged from Yazd.

But perhaps the most popular and rewarding route (in spring and summer) is through the historic Alamut area, once home to the Assassins, including the trek taking you across the Alborz Mountains and down to the Caspian detailed on p115.

Business Hours

Opening and closing times can be erratic, but you can rely on most businesses closing Thursday afternoons and Friday (the Iranian weekend). Sights, especially government-operated museums and landmarks, open for longer during the warmer months.

The opening hours of many sights and business change between No Ruz (March 21) and September 21, when many closing times are pushed back by an hour. In hotter areas many businesses close their doors from about noon until 4pm – along the blistering Persian Gulf coast doors stay shut until about 5pm – but businesses then operate in the relative cool of evening until about 8pm or 9pm.

In this book hours will generally accord (more or less) with the following list unless stated otherwise.

Banks 8am to 2pm Saturday to Wednesday, 8am to noon Thursday.

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

Museums 9am to 6pm summer, 4pm or 5pm winter, closed on Monday.

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

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

Restaurants lunch noon to 3pm, dinner 6pm or 7pm to 10pm, or whenever the last diner leaves.

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

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

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

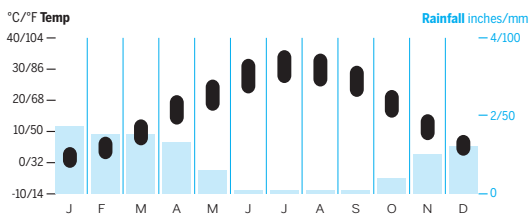
Children

Foreign children will be the source of much amusement and curiosity, which is both a great cultural ice-breaker and, after a while, can be annoying. Nappies (diapers), powders, baby formula and most medications are widely available, though not necessarily in familiar brands. The hardest thing will be trying to keep children entertained in a country where journeys are long and attractions often rather 'adult'. Parents should relate fairly clearly to their daughters aged nine or older that they'll have to wear hejab.

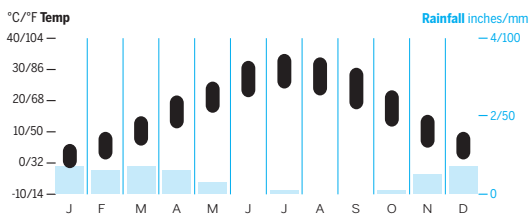
Eating with the family is the norm in Iran, and taking your kids into a restaurant will not only be welcome but can bring you more-attentive service. While few menus include special meals for children, staff often tailor the size of the meal to the size of the child. Most food is not spicy.

Climate

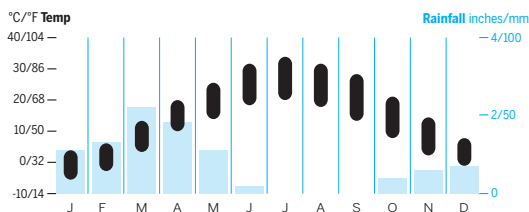
Tehran



Esfahan



Mashhad



If you have small children and plan on using taxis, you'll probably have to bring your own baby seat. Few vehicles have seatbelts in the back, so it's worth asking for them when you book. High chairs are rare and childcare agencies and nappy-changing facilities almost non-existent. Breastfeeding in public is not a great idea.

Customs

Contrary to popular belief, Iranian officialdom is fairly relaxed about what foreigners take into and out of the country; at airports, your bags probably won't be searched at all. However, don't take this to mean you

can load your luggage with vodka, bacon and porn. You are allowed to import, duty-free, 200 cigarettes and 50 cigars, and a 'reasonable quantity' of perfume. And of course zero alcohol, which remains strictly illegal.

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

You should have no trouble bringing in your laptop, smartphone, shortwave radio, iPad and video equipment if it doesn't look professional. Visitors are supposed to declare cash worth more than US\$1000. In practice few do and the authorities aren't really interested.

Export Restrictions

Officially, you can take out anything you legally imported into Iran, and anything you bought, including handicrafts other than rugs up to the value of US\$160 (hang on to your receipts), as long as they are not for 'the purpose of trade'. Many traders will undervalue goods on receipts issued to foreigners. A 'reasonable number' of rugs can be exported with no limit on value. In our experience, we've never been asked to show any paperwork when carrying (small numbers of) rugs out of Iran.

You can also take out 150g of gold and 3kg of silver, without gemstones. If you want to exceed these limits, you will need an export permit from a customs office. Officially you need permission to export anything 'antique' (ie more than 50 years old), including handicrafts, gemstones and coins. No more than IR200,000 in Iranian cash is allowed to be taken out of Iran.

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

Dangers & Annoyances

Earthquakes

Earthquakes happen every day in Iran (see the boxed text, p319), but most travellers will never feel one. If you get unlucky, the following precautions might help.

It's most important to protect yourself from falling debris. If you're indoors, stay inside and take cover under a sturdy desk or table. Hold on to it and be prepared to move with it. Hold the position until the shaking stops and you can move outside. Stay clear of windows, appliances and freestanding furniture (such as wardrobes) that might fall over. Use a pillow to protect your head.

In a mud-brick building it's vital to create space (under a bed, perhaps) that won't be filled with dirt and dust, which could lead to suffocation – the primary cause of death in Bam.

If you're outside, stay away from buildings and power lines.

Traffic

Forget religious fanatics, gun-toting kidnappers or any other threats you've associated with Iran, you're more likely to get into trouble with

the traffic than anything else. Iranians will tell you with a perverse mix of horror and glee that Iran competes for the highest per-capita number of road deaths on earth – in 2010 that was more than 22,000 people, with another 200,000 plus injured.

No-one pays any notice of road rules and the willingness of a car to stop at a busy intersection is directly proportional to the size of the vehicles in its path. Playing on this, some cun-

ning motorists have fitted deafening air horns, usually found on trucks and buses, to their Paykans and Prides. A quick blast sees other traffic screech to a halt, fearing they've been outsized. Meanwhile, the modest little Paykan/Pride sails through the intersection. Size (or at least the perception that you're big) matters.

Be aware of contraflow bus lanes (along which buses hurtle in the opposite direction to the rest of the traffic), and motorbikes

IRANIAN CALENDARS

Three calendars are in common use in Iran: the Persian solar calendar is the one in official and everyday use; the Muslim lunar calendar is used for Islamic religious matters; and the Western (Gregorian) calendar is used in dealing with foreigners and in some history books. Newspapers carry all three dates. When entering Iran the stamp in your passport will be in Farsi and refer to the Persian calendar. Be sure to confirm the Western date so you don't overstay your visa; check <http://payvand.com/calendar>.

Persian Calendar

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

SEASON	PERSIAN MONTH	APPROXIMATE EQUIVALENT	SEASON	PERSIAN MONTH	APPROXIMATE EQUIVALENT
spring	Farvardin	21 Mar-20 Apr	autumn	Mehr	23 Sep-22 Oct
<i>(bahar)</i>	Ordibehesht	21 Apr-21 May	<i>(pa'iz)</i>	Aban	23 Oct-21 Nov
	Khordad	22 May-21 Jun		Azar	22 Nov-21 Dec
summer	Tir	22 Jun-22 Jul	winter	Dei	22 Dec-20 Jan
<i>(tabestan)</i>	Mordad	23 Jul-22 Aug	<i>(zamestan)</i>	Bahman	21 Jan-19 Feb
	Shahrivar	23 Aug-22 Sep		Esfand	20 Feb-20 Mar

Muslim Calendar

The Muslim calendar starts from the month before the Hejira and is based on the lunar year of 354 or 355 days, so it is out of step with the Persian solar calendar by some 40 years. The website www.rabiah.com/convert converts Islamic (Hijri) dates to Western (Gregorian) ones and vice versa.

Zoroastrian Calendar

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

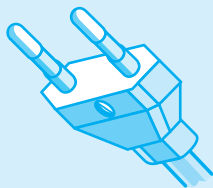
speeding through red lights, along footpaths and through crowded bazaars.

Vehicles never stop at pedestrian crossings so don't underestimate the possibility of dying a horrible death while crossing the road. It may be little consolation, but the law says that if a pedestrian is hit the driver is always at fault and is liable to pay blood money to the family of the victim. Until you've got your head around the traffic, perhaps the best advice comes from one pragmatic reader: 'Cross a busy street with an Iranian person, but make sure the Iranian is closest to the approaching traffic.'

Unmarried Couples

There was a time when unmarried foreign couples found it difficult to get a room. These days, however, hotel staff usually won't ask too many questions – exceptions are likely to be in low-budget establishments.

Electricity



230V/50Hz

Embassies & Consulates

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

For a list of Iranian embassies see the **Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.gov.ir).

Embassies & Consulates in Iran

Many embassies ask travellers to register their presence by phoning in and asking for the consul. If you do, let them know when you leave, too. In a genuine emergency call the number here, wait until the message gives you the emergency number, and call that.

Afghanistan Tehran (Map p50; ☎021-8873 5040; www.afghanembassy.ir; cnr 4th St & Pakistan St, off Beheshti Ave, Tehran; ☎8am-2pm Sat-Wed) Thirty-day tourist visas cost €75 and are issued in two to three days; Mashhad (Map p250; ☎854 1653; Do Shahid St; ☎8am-noon Sat-Wed) Unreliable.

Armenia (Map p42; ☎021-6670 4833; 1 Ostad Shahriar St, Razi St, Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, Tehran; ☎9am-noon Sun-Thu) Visas issued, call 2-4pm for information. Tourist visas

also available on the border or at Yerevan airport.

Australia (Map p50; ☎021-8386 3666; www.iran-embassy.gov.au; 15 Eslamboli St, 23rd St, Tehran)

Azerbaijan Tehran (Map p53; ☎021-2224 8770; Nader Sq, 15 Golbarg St, Chizar; ☎9am-1pm Sun, Tue, Thu for applications, 5-6pm for collection); Tabriz (☎0411-333 4802; Mokhaberat St, Valiasr; ☎9am-noon Sun-Thu) A 30-day tourist visa is issued in Tehran, usually requiring an invitation certified in Baku; call for details. Visas not available at land borders.

Canada (Map p50; ☎021-8152 0000; www.canadainternational.gc.ca/iran; 4 Shahid Sarafraz St, Motahhari Ave, Tehran)

France (Map p42; ☎021-6409 4000; www.ambafrance-ir.org; 64 Nofl Loshato St, Tehran)

Germany (Map p42; ☎021-3999 0000; www.teheran.diplo.de; 324 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

India Tehran (Map p50; ☎021-8875 5103-5; www.indianembassy-tehran.com; 46 Mir-emad Ave, cnr Ninth St, off Dr Beheshti Sts, Tehran); Tehran visa applications (249 Morvarid Gasht Gardaneh, Beheshti Ave, Tehran; ☎9am-5pm Sun-Thu); Zahedan (Map p234; ☎0541-322 2337; off Imam Khomeini St; ☎10am-1pm & 2.30-5pm Sun-Thu) Tourist visas (US\$50) issued in seven days.

Iraq (Map p42; ☎021-8893 8866; Valiasr Ave, Tehran) Just south of Valiasr Sq. Not issuing tourist visas. Check online for latest on Iraqi Kurdistan.

Ireland (Map p53; ☎021-2229 7918; embassyofireland.ir; 5 Bonbast Nahid St, N Kamraniyeh Ave, Farmanieh, Tehran)

Japan (Map p50; ☎021-8871 7922; www.ir.emb-japan.go.jp; cnr Bucharest & Fifth Sts, Arzhantin, Tehran)

Netherlands (Map p50; ☎021-2366 0000; <http://nrlambassade.org>; 7 West Arghavan, Sonbol St, Farmanieh, Tehran)

YOU'VE BEEN WARNED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New Zealand (Map p53; ☎021-2612 2175; www.nzembassy.com/iran; cnr 2nd Park Alley, Sosan St, Nth Golestan Complex, Aghdasiyeh St, Niavaran, Tehran)

Pakistan Tehran (Map p38; ☎021-6694 4888; www.mofa.gov.pk/iran; Block 1, Etemad-zadeh Ave, Jamshidabad, Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave, Tehran); Mashhad (Map p250; ☎0511-222 9845; Imam Khomeini St, Mashhad); Zahedan (Map p234; ☎0541-322 3389; Pahlavani St, Zahedan) Embassy not issuing visas to nonresidents; consulates have not issued visas for several years.

Switzerland (Map p50; ☎021-2200 8333; www.eda.admin.ch; Yasamin St, off Sharifi Manesh Ave, Elahieh, Tehran)

Tajikistan (Map p53; ☎021-2283 4650; 10, 3rd Alley, Shahid Zeinaly St, Niavaran, Tehran; ☎9am-noon Mon, Wed, Thu, Sun) North of Niavaran Palace; issues tourist visas for one/two/four weeks for US\$30/40/50. Takes a week; bring a letter of introduction from your embassy.

Turkey (Map p42; ☎021-3595 1100; tehran.emb.mfa.gov.tr; 314 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

Turkmenistan Tehran (Map p53; ☎021-2220 6731; 5 Barati St, off Vatanpour St, off Lavasani St, Farmanieh; ☎9.30am-11am Sun-Thu);

Mashhad (☎0511-854 7066; Do Shahid St off Dah-e Dey Sq; ☎8.30-noon Mon-Thu & Sat) A 5-day transit visa or a tourist visa are issued either the same day or after a week (yes, inconsistent) with a letter of introduction, eg from www.stantours.com, photos and copies. Once approval has been given, speed of stamping depends on the price paid.

UK (Map p42; ☎021-6670 5011; ukiniran.fco.gov.uk; 198 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

US Interests Section of Swiss Embassy (☎021-2254 2178; 39 cnr Shahid Mousavi [Golestan 5th] and Paidardarf St, Pasdaran, Tehran)

Uzbekistan (Map p53; ☎021-2229 1519; 15, 4th Dead End, Aqdasieh St, off Pasdaran St, Aqdasieh, Tehran) Most countries need a letter of invitation (LOI) from Uzbekistan. If you have one a 30-day tourist visa is issued on the spot for US\$93. It's near the Sadaf Shopping Centre.

Gay & Lesbian Travellers

Despite what President Ahmadinejad might like to say, Iranian gays and lesbians do exist. Unlike most other places, however, in Iran homosexuality is not only illegal but punishable by hundreds of lashes and even death.

In recent years several men have been hanged for the 'crime' of having consensual homosexual sex. Barbaric laws aside, there is no reason why gay and lesbian travellers shouldn't visit Iran. There are no questions of sexuality on visa application forms, and we have not heard of homosexual travellers being treated badly provided they refrain from overt acts of affection.

Arranging meetings with Iranian gays and lesbians will, however, be tough. The nearest thing to a gay 'scene' is a few nervous-looking men sitting alone in Daneshgu and Laleh parks in Tehran. For lesbians it's even tougher. The best way to make contact is online (but it's unwise to say where in this book).

It makes sense not to advertise that you're part of a same-sex couple. Most hoteliers won't ask, though you might find in some places discretion is the better part of valour when seeking a double bed.

Holidays

Public holidays commemorate either religious or secular events. It's worth staying aware of the dates, especially if you are planning to extend your visa. Government offices and just about everything else will close for the morning, at least, on a holiday, but many small businesses open after lunch. Transport functions fairly normally and hotels remain open, but many restaurants will close. Holidays are sometimes extended for a day if they fall near the Iranian weekend. In Tehran, public holidays are sometimes announced at short notice when air pollution reaches dangerous levels. In recent years that has been in mid July and late November/early December. These holidays affect government offices, schools, universities, sporting arena and can (but doesn't always) include museums.

Religious Holidays

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

Tasua (9 Moharram, 24 November 2012, 12 November 2013, 2 November 2014)

Ashura (10 Moharram, 25 November 2012, 13 November 2013, 3 November 2014) The anniversary of the martyrdom of Hossein, the third Shiite imam, in battle at Karbala in October AD 680. This is celebrated with religious theatre and sombre parades.

Arbaeen (20 Safar, 3 January 2013, 23 December 2014) The 40th day after Ashura.

Martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammed (28 Safar, 10 January 2013, 30 December 2014)

Martyrdom of Imam Reza (30 Safar, 12 January 2013, 1 January 2014)

Birth of the Prophet Mohammed (17 Rabi'-ol-Avval, 29 January 2013, 18 January 2014)

Martyrdom of Fatima (3 Jamadi-I-Okhra, 13 April 2013, 3 April 2014) Fatima was the daughter of Prophet Mohammed.

Birth of Imam Ali (13 Rajab, 4 June 2012)

Ascension of Holy Prophet (27 Rajab, 6 June, 2013) Maabath.

Birth of Imam Mahdi (15 Shaban, 5 July 2012)

Martyrdom of Imam Ali (21 Ramazan, 10 August 2012)

Eid al-Fitr (1 Shavval, 19 August 2012, 8 August 2013, 28 July 2014) The Festival of the Breaking of the Fast that marks the end of Ramazan. After sunset on the last day of Ramazan large meals are consumed across the country.

Martyrdom of Imam Jafar Sadeh (25 Shavval, 12 September, 2012)

Eid-e Ghorban (10 Zu-I-Hejjeh, 26 October 2012) Marks the day when Abraham offered to sacrifice his son. Expect to see plenty of sheep being butchered.

Qadir-e Khom (18 Zu-I-Hejjeh, 3 November, 2012) The day Prophet Mohammed appointed Imam Ali as his successor while returning to Mecca.

RAMAZAN (RAMADAN)

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

Ramazan can be a trying period, particularly if it falls in summer when the days are that much longer and the heat and hunger tend to shorten tempers. Businesses and shops keep odd hours. However, public transport continues to function and travellers are exempt from the fast so you don't need to worry about finding food on flights, trains or bus trips, and many hotels keep their restaurants open. Other restaurants either close altogether or open only after dark. Many shops selling food remain open throughout Ramazan, so you can buy food to eat in your room.

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

APPROXIMATE DATES FOR RAMAZAN

» 21 July to 18 August 2012

» 9 July to 7 August 2013

» 28 June to 27 July 2014

» 18 June to 16 July 2015

Secular Holidays

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anniversary of the Arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini (5 June; 15 Khordad) In 1963 Khomeini was arrested after

urging the Muslims of the world to rise up against the superpowers.

NO RUZ

No Ruz (see the boxed text, p294), the Iranian New Year, is a huge family celebration on a par with Christmas in the West. From a practical point of view, Iran virtually shuts down between 21 March (the beginning of new year) and Sizzdah be Dar (2 April). Finding hotel accommodation (especially midrange and top end) is very tough from about 17 March until 2 April and all forms of long-distance public transport are heavily booked, though savaris run more frequently making some shorter trips relatively easy. Government offices and most businesses, including many restaurants, close from 21 to 25 March inclusive, and many stay shut the full two weeks. It's not impossible to travel during No Ruz, but think twice before heading to popular tourist destinations such as Esfahan, Mashhad, Yazd, Shiraz and anywhere on the Persian Gulf or Caspian coasts. Mountain areas such as rural Kurdistan and primarily business cities such as Tehran and Kermanshah remain relatively uncrowded. On the positive side, museums and tourist sites stay open longer hours while some normally closed attractions will open.

Insurance

In 2011 it became compulsory to have travel insurance to get a visa to Iran. When looking for a policy, make sure Iran is actually covered. Some insurers, particularly in the USA, consider the region a 'danger zone' and either exclude it altogether or insist on exorbitant premiums. Travel in areas such as Kordistan and Sistan-va Baluchistan might not be covered if your country's foreign office warns against travelling there.

Internet Access

In Iran, internet cafes are known as *coffeenets*, though you'll rarely find coffee on the menu. You can get online in all but the smallest towns and villages. Most *coffeenets* charge about US\$1.50 an hour, more in hotels. Speeds are variable, but most cities have ADSL connections.

Viruses, worms, Trojans and key-loggers (if not Stuxnet) are widespread. Access to thousands of websites is blocked by the government, from news sites to Skype. To get around this, most Iranians use a VPN client – set one up on your device before you leave home. If you don't, you'll find hotel connections virtually useless, while *coffeenets* can sometimes get you around the wall. For news, try Al Jazeera's English service aljazeera.com.

If you plan to use a messenger service, note that **Yahoo! Messenger** (www.yahoo.com) is used almost everywhere, but **MSN Messenger** (www.msn.com) is harder to find. **Skype** (www.skype.com) is blocked; **ooVoo** (ooVoo.com) might not be.

Wi-fi is increasingly available in hotels and cafes but remains the exception rather than the rule. If you're desperate, access via a dial-up connection is possible using pre-paid cards bought from *coffeenets* or newsstands.

Language Courses

The following schools have good reputations for intensive Farsi courses aimed at foreigners. If you sign up, the schools will help arrange a student visa, but give the application plenty of time. For free online Farsi classes, try the excellent www.easypersian.com.

Loghatnameh Dehkhoda Institute (Map p53: ☎021-2271 7120; www.icps.ut.ac.ir; 4th floor, 3011 Valiasr Ave, Shemiran, Tehran) The Inter-

national Center for Persian Studies here is affiliated with Tehran University and offers six-week (US\$470 tuition only) intensive and longer, less intensive courses in northern Tehran.

University of Isfahan (Map p154; ☎0311-793 2039-41; www.ui.ac.ir/isco or int-office@ui.ac.ir; Hezar Jerib St, Esfahan) Tuition and accommodation in the university guesthouse on campus, where foreign students share a floor with views over the city, costs about US\$800/1200 for four/six weeks and US\$2000 for a three-month course. Apply about three months before you intend to arrive (longer for UK and US passport holders).

Legal Matters

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

There are two 'crimes' that foreigners may not be aware of. Homosexual activity is illegal and has resulted in the death penalty for some Iranians. Deliberate refusal to wear correct hejab

IF YOU ARE ARRESTED

In our experience – yes, we have been arrested a couple of times – the primary motives for arresting a foreigner are usually curiosity, mild suspicion and the desire to appear powerful. In the unlikely event you are arrested:

- » Keep cool, you are a tourist (*jahangardi*) and this is just a misunderstanding.
- » It's best not to reply to, or appear to understand, any questions in Farsi.
- » When you can understand the questions, they will likely be very detailed and you will be expected to answer. Do so politely, patiently, openly and diplomatically. Be complimentary about Iran and Iranians.
- » Answer your interrogators so that their curiosity is satisfied, their suspicion allayed and their sense of their own self-importance flattered.
- » Take special care not to incriminate yourself or anyone else, especially anyone Iranian, with a careless statement. Do not volunteer to show your photos if they include images of Iranians, who could be unwittingly dragged into something. Equally, don't actively try to hide them as this will raise suspicions.
- » If things get heavy, ask to contact your embassy in Tehran (though we were ignored when we made this request a few years back).

(the Islamic dress code for women) can also result in a public flogging (although a foreigner will probably be deported).

Maps

Gita Shenasi (see p63) in Tehran publishes maps of all major towns and cities, country maps and some mountain ranges. Some are in English, while others list streets and suburbs in English and everything else in Farsi. Maps are harder to find outside Tehran.

Gita Shenasi's *Iran Road Map* (1:2,250,000) is updated annually and is highly detailed. Outside Iran, look for the excellent, if dated, *Reise Know-How Iran* (1:1,500,000).

Money

The official unit of currency is the Iranian rial, but Iranians

almost always talk in terms of tomans, a unit equal to 10 rials. The sooner you get your head around the idea of tomans, the better. However, with inflation soaring (see p29) and the Central Bank of Iran openly discussing wiping three or four zeroes off the rial or doing away with the currency completely, in this book we have converted all prices into US dollars. The idea is that as rial inflation rises, prices should remain relatively steady in dollar terms. For more on the economic situation, see *Iran Today* (p266).

For all intents and purposes, Iran for the visitor is a purely cash economy. No credit cards. No travellers cheques. Just bring cold, hard cash – preferably in high-denomination euros or US dollars printed since 1996. Apart from some hotels, carpet shops and tour agencies where you can pay in dollars or euros, all trans-

actions are in rials. Where prices are quoted in euros we list them in euros. Other major currencies, such as British pounds, Australian or Canadian dollars, Swiss francs and UAE dirhams, can be changed in Tehran and other big cities, if not smaller towns. However, Turkish lira are treated with scorn everywhere except close to the Turkish border; ditto for the Afghan, Azerbaijani, Turkmen and Pakistani currencies.

Whichever currency you choose, the most important thing to remember is to bring as much cash as you're likely to need, then a bit more. Getting your hands on money once you're inside Iran is a nightmare.

ATMs

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

Cash

Although there are coins for IR1, IR2, IR5, IR10, IR20, IR50, IR100, IR250 and IR500, only the last two are at all common, and themselves come in three different sizes. So rare are IR1 coins (no longer minted) that they are considered lucky despite being utterly worthless. Coins are marked only in Farsi numerals, while notes come in Persian and European numerals. There are notes for IR100 (rare), IR200 (rare), IR500, IR1000 (two varieties), IR2000 (two varieties), IR5000 (two varieties), IR10,000, IR20,000, IR50,000 and IR100,000.

Usually no-one cares what state rial notes are in, then out of the blue someone will reject one because it has a tiny tear or is too grubby. On the other hand, foreign currencies will be rejected if they are not clean and without any tears whatsoever.

Black Market

Changing money on the street is illegal and as long as exchange shops are allowed to trade money at market rates it makes little sense to do this. That said, the volatile state of the rial means there will be plenty of people prepared to buy your foreign exchange on the black market.

If you do change money on the street expect to be treated like a total moron with no idea of current rates. You should demand at least the same rate as you'd get in the exchange shop and expect the changer to take a 'service fee'. Count the rials carefully (there are often notes missing or folded over), and don't hand over your bills until you're sure the count is correct.

Credit Cards

Ahm, no. Sanctions mean your credit card will be useless in Iran. The only exceptions are a handful of carpet shops with foreign accounts, but if they can help at all (it's far from guaranteed) you'll pay a hefty 10% plus service charge for the privilege. Bring enough cash.

Changing Money

The easiest way to change money is at an official money-exchange office, where the whole deal is done in seconds, unlike in most banks where it can take considerably longer.

BANKS

At the time of writing banks had been limited to changing money at a fixed rate, called the First Market, which was far lower than the floating market rate to be had at exchange shops. How long these two mandated rates lasts is anybody's guess.

Although it sometimes seems as if every fourth building is a bank, only a few banks will actually change your money and then usually only US dollars, euros or, less often, British pounds in cash (and only after the day's rates arrive from Tehran between 9am and 10am). The best bet will always be your town's central branch (*markazi*) of Bank Melli (BMI), or the central branches of the other major banks: Bank Mellat, Bank Tejarat, Bank Sepah and Bank Saderat. You need your passport; bank staff will help with the Farsi paperwork.

OFFICIAL MONEYCHANGERS

Exchange shops are reliable and can be found in most cities, usually signed in English and with rate boards in the window. When we went to press their rates were decided on the floating market, officially called the Second Market, which at that time bought you about 50% more rials than changing at the bank (First Market) rate. The process is completely paperwork free.

International Transfers

Sanctions have made it practically impossible to transfer money into or out of Iran without the assistance of a worldwide network of shady money dealers.

Tipping

Tipping is not a big deal in Iran. In upmarket restaurants (mainly in Tehran) a 10% gratuity might be expected – on top of the 10% service charge that's often built into the bill. But in most other places any money you leave will be a pleasant surprise. It's normal to offer a small tip to anyone who guides you or opens a building that is normally closed. If your offer is initially refused, persist (see 'Ta'arof, p290). There is no culture of 'baksheesh' in Iran.

Travellers Cheques

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

RIALS OR TOMANS?

No sooner have you arrived in Iran than you will come up against the idiosyncratic local practice of talking about prices in tomans even though the currency is denominated in rials. One toman is worth 10 rials, so it's a bit like shopkeepers in Europe asking for '10' whenever they wanted €1.

To make matters worse, taxi drivers and shopkeepers will often say 'one' as shorthand for IR10,000. However, before you consider cancelling your trip on the grounds of commercial confusion, rest assured that after a few days you'll understand that the five fingers the taxi driver just showed you means IR50,000. And as you start to get a feel for what things cost, you'll understand that if something sounds too good to be true – or too bad – it probably is.

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

Photography & Video

Memory cards are widely available.

Photographing People

Most Iranians are happy to have their picture taken provided you ask first. However, where lone women are concerned it doesn't matter how

WHAT A BARGAIN!

As a general rule the prices of groceries, food, sights, transport (except private taxis) and most things with a price tag attached are fixed. But virtually all prices in the bazaar are negotiable, particularly for souvenir-type products and always for carpets. In touristed areas, such as Imam Sq in Esfahan or the Bazar-e Vakil in Shiraz, bargaining is essential.

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

Remember that bargaining is not a life and death battle. A good bargain is when *both* parties are happy and doesn't necessarily require you to screw every last toman out of the vendor. If you paid more than your travelling companion, don't worry. As long as you're happy, it was a good deal.

nice you ask, the answer will usually be no. Exceptions might be made for women photographers.

Offering to take pictures of your Iranian friends and post or email to them later is greatly appreciated – as long as you remember to post or email them.

Restrictions

Avoid photographing airports, naval dockyards, nuclear reactors, roadblocks, military installations, embassies/consulates, prisons, telephone offices or police stations – basically, any government building at all. A group of Polish travellers were detained for hours in Bandar Abbas for taking a picture of the port, and we can speak from experience of being arrested in Howraman-at Takht for unknowingly taking a photo of a hill that

happened to be the Iraq border. If you get caught, don't try to be anything except a dumb tourist.

Post

Postage is less reliable and much more expensive than it once was and can take quite a while. Postcards can reach Europe in four or five days, but as some readers have reported they might also take two months. Post boxes are rare except outside post offices. Poste restante is unreliable. If you're sending mail to an Iranian address that's complicated or remote, try to get the address in Farsi.

Parcels

Sending a parcel from Iran can involve much form shuffling, but your package will usually arrive. Take your

passport and unwrapped goods to the parcel post counter (*daftar-e amanat-e posti*) at the main post office (*postkhuneh-ye markazi*) in a provincial capital before 2pm. They will be checked, packaged and signed for in triplicate. There are three parcel services – *pishtaz* (express), *havayi* (airmail) and surface. Rates can vary, but a 5kg parcel sent anywhere by surface mail will cost less than US\$100; air mail is more expensive. The customs officer on duty generally has discretion over what can be posted abroad, so be nice (see also p330 for customs regulations).

Telephone

Iran's country code is 98. To dial out of Iran call 00; if calling from outside Iran, drop the initial 0 from all area codes. Phone numbers and area codes change with disconcerting regularity, but in general numbers include a three-digit area code and a seven-digit number. The exception is Tehran, where 021 is followed by an eight-digit number.

More than 90% of Iranians have mobile phone access and most travellers buy a SIM card on arrival. If you need a payphone, cards are available in newsstands, though most are for domestic calls only. In our experience, every second card phone is broken. Local calls are so cheap that most mid-range and better hotels, bus stations and airport terminals have at least one public telephone permitting free local calls.

International calls are also relatively cheap (US\$0.20) per minute to most countries. These rates can be had at small, private telephone offices (usually open from about 7.30am until 9pm), where you give the number to the front desk and wait for a booth to become available. You'll normally be charged a

minimum of three minutes. In many cities international calling cards are available from newsstands, grocery stores and *coffeenets*.

You can't make reverse-charge (collect) calls to or from Iran.

Mobile Phones

Iran has several mobile-phone networks but only two, government-owned MCI and **MTN Irancell** (www.irancell.ir), which is owned by the Iranian government and South African group MTN, enjoy wide coverage. Of these, Irancell has pay-as-you-go SIM cards that non-residents can buy for US\$4 and a copy of your passport (most people buy and get the SIM activated on arrival at Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran). Top up your credit at vendors displaying yellow and blue MTN signs, who always charge about 10% more than the card's face value. Full pricing is available in English on Irancell's website, but expect to pay US\$0.05 to US\$0.07 per minute for local calls, and about US\$0.50 per minute international. SMS messages cost IR100 locally and IR1500 for international.

Irancell SIMs allow GPRS data transfer after a free registration process, and WiMAX has been rolled out in several cities. In our experience the GPRS service was unreliable and download speeds slow.

Time

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

Time throughout Iran is 3½ hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), so noon in Tehran is 3.30am in New York; 8.30am in London; 10.30am in Turkey; 11.30am in Azerbaijan; noon in Afghanistan; 1.30pm in Pakistan and Turkmenistan (note this when preparing to

cross borders); and 6.30pm in Sydney.

Daylight saving is observed between No Ruz (usually 21 March) and September 22.

Toilets

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

Fortunately, most of the ubiquitous small grocery stores stock toilet paper or tissues. All but the cheapest guesthouses now supply toilet paper too, though sometimes you'll need to ask. That said, it's worth remembering that the wise traveller carries an emergency stash of TP, the unwise traveller can use this page. Whatever you use, most plumbing is not designed for paper so put your used sheets in the bin not the bowl.

Tourist information

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

Cultural Heritage offices, universally known as *Miras Faranghi* in Farsi and often housed in restored historic buildings in provincial capitals, dispense information. They don't see too many walk-in tourists but will usually try to find someone who

speaks English and search around in filing cabinet drawers until you have a showbag full of brochures, maps, postcards and other promotional paraphernalia. Some cities also have more proactive private or semi-private tourist offices, where basic information is available in English and guides and tours can be arranged.

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

Travellers with Disabilities

Facilities are rare, but as long as you are healthy and come with the right frame of mind there is no reason why travellers with disabilities shouldn't enjoy Iran. Wheelchair ramps are starting to appear, though they remain exceptional. Only the more upmarket hotels are guaranteed to have elevators big enough for wheelchairs; disabled accessible toilets are very rare indeed. Bring your own medications and prescriptions.

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

Disabled Travelers Guide (www.disabledtravelersguide.com)

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

Visas

See p24 for details on getting and extending a visa.

Women Travellers

The following advice comes from author Virginia Maxwell. Females planning a trip to

Iran will be preoccupied with four questions: What should I wear? How should I behave? Will I be safe? What should I take? This section aims to give practical advice, dispel preconceptions and reassure; it is based on our own experiences and those of female travellers we have encountered on the road.

What Should I Wear?

There's no use beating about the bush – most female travellers will find that Iranian dress rules are both an imposition and an inconvenience. They're also a fashion nightmare: sourcing attractive and appropriate clothing can be a real challenge, and headscarves – however attractive the material – almost always look frumpy. After weeks of wearing shapeless outfits, uncomfortable head covering and dull colours, you'll be very happy to return to your wardrobe at home.

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

Signs in public places show officially acceptable versions of *hejab*: the *chador* (literally 'tent' in Farsi), an all-encompassing, head-to-toe black garment held closed with hand or teeth; or a *manteau* (shapeless coat or coat dress) and a *rusari* (scarf) covering the hair, neck and décolletage. Girls must start to wear *hejab* when they reach puberty, but many start from a much earlier age (we've seen plenty of babies and toddlers sporting Islamic head coverings).

In reality the dress code is more relaxed and open to interpretation. It's not unusual to see young women in the larger cities wearing figure-hugging *manteaus*

(often tightly belted trench-coats), skinny jeans, high heels and colourful *rusaris* that have been arranged to offer plentiful glimpses of hair and neck. But in the smaller cities, towns and villages this rarely happens – the *chador* is common and those who don't wear it are clad in an ensemble of shapeless coat, black pants, sensible shoes and a *maqna'e* (nun-like head scarf, or wimple). Colour schemes are uniformly dull.

Iranian women who flout *hejab* can find themselves in serious trouble – we've met quite a few who have been accosted by members of the *gasht ershad* (morality police) in the street and told to cover up. Their infringements have included wearing sunglasses above the headscarf, failing to wear a coat that fully covered their bottom, wearing bright colours, wearing nail polish, wearing sandals that show the feet or ankles, and not fully covering their hair.

Fortunately, foreign women are not usually judged as harshly as Iranian women when it comes to *hejab*, and few Iranians will bat an eyelid if you have your fringe or a bit of neck or hair showing. It pays to look at what women around you are wearing; for example, you'll want to dress more conservatively in Qom than you would in Tehran.

HEAD COVERINGS

The biggest challenge that you'll encounter is keeping your scarf on. Silk scarves aren't much use, as they tend to slip off; the only way to make them work is to tie them under the chin *babushka*-style. Wool can work, but not if it's too fine and slippery. Your best bet is textured cotton, which tends to adhere to hair more effectively and slips less. Make sure that your scarf is wide enough to cover all of your hair, and long enough to be able to throw over your shoulders as an anchoring device. Practice before you leave home.

Some travellers wear a thick elasticised headband and fasten their scarves to it with safety or bobby pins, ensuring that their scarf doesn't slip – this can work well with silk and fine cotton, so is worth considering if you are travelling here over summer and want to wear something light. Bring the band with you, as we've never seen them in Iranian shops.

When this book was researched, local fashionistas were wearing their scarves as high and as far back on their heads as possible. This is relatively easy to do if you have long hair (the scarf is draped over a high ponytail or bun, which anchors it), but it's impossible for those with shorter hairstyles.

MANTEAUS

The word '*manteau*' has a fashionable ring to it, but most of the local versions are badly designed, desperately ugly sacks. The majority are made from polyester (ghastly in summer) or cheap cotton. The trench-coat style is more attractive (and is the most popular version for fashion-conscious Iranian women), but it can be hot and uncomfortable – remember that your *manteau* will need to stay on in restaurants, cinemas, shops and other interior public spaces.

We have found that loose-fitting cardigans going down to the mid-thigh are the most comfortable form of outerwear. These can be worn over T-shirts or jumpers (sweaters) and are both modest and attractive. Bring them from home – they're hard to source in Iran. In summer, you'll need to wear something light – long peasant blouses and tunics made with natural fibres work well, as do *shalwar kameez*, a long shirt or tunic worn over baggy pants. If you're coming overland from India or Pakistan you'll have plenty of opportunities to purchase these along your journey.

All manteaus are worn over trousers; jeans are perfectly acceptable. Do not wear skirts.

CHADORS

Don't even think about it. The only times when foreign women must wear a chador are when visiting important shrines. In these instances, the chadors can almost always be borrowed onsite.

How Should I Behave?

Half-truths and stereotypes about women exist on both sides of the cultural divide: some Westerners assume that all Iranian women are black-cloaked, repressed victims, while some Iranians, influenced by foreign movies and media, see Western women as 'easy' and immoral. When in Iran, be aware that sex before marriage is uncommon (well, that's the official line) and that there may be some males who – influenced by aforementioned stereotype – will try it on with you, particularly if you are travelling solo. The best way to prevent this happening is to be polite but not overly friendly in your dealings with the local males.

If you need advice or directions, approach women first. Younger ones are more likely to speak English.

Most Iranian women only travel with their fathers, brothers and husbands, so Western women travelling by themselves or with male friends may be considered as being of dubious moral standing. Be aware of this and be careful not to break the following local conventions:

- » In restaurants and teahouses, head to the separate areas set aside for women and families where these exist.

- » If you are by yourself it's best not to enter teahouses, as men will either harass you or treat you like a leper (the only local women who would do such a thing are of very dubious moral standing indeed).

- » On city buses, use the women's entrance in the middle of the bus and sit at the back with the other women.

- » On intercity buses you can sit in any part of the bus, but you should always try to sit next to a woman (it's OK to sit next to a Western male you are travelling with).

- » Don't shake hands with Iranian men unless they initiate this. Instead, place your hand over your heart as a greeting.

- » If you are by yourself or even with another female, don't accept an invitation into a man's house unless at least one of his female relatives will also be present.

Will I be Safe?

Violence against foreign women is almost unheard of in Iran, even if the odd grope in a savari isn't (consider yourself warned). We rarely hear about instances of sexual assault, although this has happened – if travelling solo you may be safer to use female guides, steer clear of teahouses and avoid budget hotels where Iranian or migrant workers stay (eg *mosaferkhanehs*).

What Should I Bring?

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

Transport

GETTING THERE & AWAY

International sanctions have made Iran increasingly isolated, but it is fairly simple to get into the country on a plane, by train from Turkey or across numerous border crossings from neighbouring countries.

Flights and tours can be booked online at lonelyplanet.com/bookings.

Many websites offer 'carbon calculators' for estimating travel carbon emissions.

Entering the Country

Assuming you have a visa, most immigration and border officials are efficient and tourists rarely get too much hassle. Land borders can take longer if you're on a bus or train. Women need to be adequately covered from the moment they get off the plane or arrive at the border (see p339, for details).

ESPECIALLY IN IRAN, THINGS CHANGE...

Prices in this chapter *will* change and should be read as a guide only. With sky-high inflation and fuel costs rising sharply when we were researching, prices on the ground will almost certainly be higher than those listed here.

Such economic factors are particularly trying for small businesses, so don't be surprised if some services have closed altogether. Having said that, we're confident we've listed strong businesses wherever possible. We're also confident that on the ground you will be able to get the latest taxi/bus/train fares yourselves, just as you check with airlines or travel agents the conditions of air tickets. For up-to-date details ask other travellers on the [Thorn Tree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree) (www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree).

Arriving without a visa is risky, as the visa on arrival process sees a lot of people turned away (see p24).

Passport

Iran will not issue visas to Israeli passport holders, and people with an Israeli passport will be turned away at the border (you won't get on a flight to Iran with an Israeli passport). Similarly, having an Israeli stamp in any other passport will see you turned away or put on the next flight out.

Air

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

Airports & Airlines

Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKIA) sees most of Iran's international air traffic. It's small, so delays are possible. Elsewhere, Shiraz, Esfahan, Bandar Abbas and Kish are (in that order) potentially useful arrival or departure points, while Abadan, Ahvaz, Mashhad, Tabriz and Zahedan are less useful. See the Getting There & Away sections of these destinations for specific airport information.

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

The following airlines fly to/from Iran. Note that Caspian Airlines, Kish Air and Taban Air have all had fatal crashes in the past 10 years.

IRANIAN AIRLINES & THEIR INTERNATIONAL DESTINATIONS

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

Caspian Airlines (www.caspian.aero) Flights to Damascus, Dubai, İstanbul, Kiev, Yerevan.

Iran Air (www.iranair.com) Amsterdam, Ankara, Baku, Beijing, Beirut, Cologne, Copenhagen, Damascus, Doha, Dubai, Frankfurt, Gothenburg, Hamburg, İstanbul, Karachi, Kuala Lumpur, Kuwait, London, Milan, Mumbai, Paris, Stockholm, Tashkent, Vienna.

Kish Air (www.kishairline.com) Damascus, Dubai, İstanbul.

Mahan Air (www.mahan.aero) Almaty, Baghdad, Bangkok, Birmingham, Damascus, Delhi, Dubai, Dusseldorf, İstanbul, Kabul, Kuala Lumpur, Phuket, Shanghai.

Taban Air (www.tabanair.ir) Almaty, Baghdad, Bishkek, Damascus, Delhi, Dubai, Jaipur, Konya, St Petersburg, Sofia, Tashkent.

FOREIGN AIRLINES & THEIR MAIN DESTINATIONS

Aeroflot (www.aeroflot.com) Moscow.

Air Arabia (www.airarabia.com) Sharjah.

Air Asia X (www.airasia.com) Kuala Lumpur, twice weekly.

Air India (www.airindia.com) Delhi.

Alitalia (www.alitalia.com) Rome.

Ariana Afghan Airlines (www.flyariana.com) Kabul, Mazar-i Sharif.

Armavia (www.u8.am) Yerevan.

Atlasjet (www.atlasjet.com) İstanbul.

Austrian Airlines (www.aa.com) Vienna.

Azerbaijan Airlines (www.azal.az) Baku.

British Midland International (www.flybmi.com) London.

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

Emirates (www.emirates.com) Dubai.

Etihad Airways (www.etihadairways.com) Abu Dhabi.

Iraqi Airways (www.iraqi Airways.co.uk) Baghdad, Najaf.

Georgian Airways (www.airzena.com) Tbilisi.

KLM (www.klm.com) Amsterdam.

Kuwait Airways (www.kuwait-airways.com) Kuwait City.

Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com) Frankfurt, Munich, Zurich.

Pegasus (www.flypgs.com/en) İstanbul.

Qatar Airways (www.qatarairways.com) Doha.

Syria Air (www.syriaair.com) Damascus.

Saudi Arabian Airlines (www.saudiaairlines.com) Jeddah, Riyadh.

Tajik Air (www.tajikair.tj) Dushanbe.

Turkish Airlines (www.turkishairlines.com) İstanbul.

Tickets & Routes

Buying tickets in Iran is best done through an agent; Iranian airlines have yet to master internet bookings or even reservations.

The Middle East is a popular staging point, with several airlines connecting Tehran, Esfahan, and Shiraz to the world via various Gulf airports. East and Southeast Asia also have quite a few services, but there are no direct flights from North or South America. Instead, most people come through Europe, where a host of airlines have regular flights to Tehran, or the Middle East. As usual, less direct routes (eg via Moscow) are usually cheaper.

Land

It's possible to arrive by land from seven countries. Crossing from Turkey is easy and from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan is doable with varying degrees of hassle. The borders to Afghanistan and Pakistan are straightforward, but check security before you head to these. Foreigners cannot

cross into Iraq proper, though the border to Iraqi Kurdistan is open intermittently.

In recognition of Iran's pivotal position in trans-Asian travel, in this book we've summarised the details of all the crossing points available to foreigners in 'Crossing the Border at...' box texts. General points are given here, but for the specifics follow the cross-references to the relevant chapter.

Bicycle

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

Car & Motorcycle

To bring your own vehicle into Iran, you must be more than 18 years old and have an international driving permit. For the vehicle, you'll need a *carnet de passage* (temporary importation document).

Assuming your papers are in order, crossing into and out of Turkey and Pakistan is usually pretty straightforward. Third-party insurance is compulsory, and if you don't already have it, it can be bought in Maku, near the border. If you already have insurance check that it's valid for Iran (this is increasingly unlikely due to sanctions) and accredited with Iran Bimeh, the Iranian Green Card Bureau.

No one but the police is allowed to have a motorbike with an engine larger than 150cc. However, foreigners in transit can ride bikes of any size. With big bikes so rare, expect to attract plenty of attention. For information about driving around Iran, see p347.

Shipping vehicles across the Persian Gulf is possible but tedious, but a reasonable number of people do it nonetheless. Rules and ferry times change regularly. Try the following websites for details.

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

Horizons Unlimited (www.horizonsunlimited.com) Search the HUBB forum, which has details on borders, fuel, shipping and repair shops.

Lonely Planet Thorn Tree ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thorn tree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorn-tree)) Plenty of trip reports.

Other travellers have shipped from Bandar Abbas to Mumbai and been very pleased with Ali from **Seco Shipping Services** (<http://sites.google.com/site/secoshipping-services/>).

Border Crossings

AFGHANISTAN

The border at Dogharon, 20km east of Taybad, is open and straightforward. Daily buses between Herat and Mashhad make the trip simpler still. Note that visas are *not* issued here. See the boxed text (p263) for more information.

ARMENIA

The border between Iran and Armenia is only 35km long, with one crossing point in Iran at Norduz. Armenian visas are issued at the border, though sometimes the bus leaves before you have your visa – apart from that it's pretty smooth. See the boxed text (p95) for more information.

AZERBAIJAN

The Azeri border has two recognised crossings: between Astara (Azerbaijan) and Astara (Iran; see the boxed text, p83), and Culfa (Azerbaijan) and Jolfa (Iran; see the boxed text, p93), the latter leading to the exclave of Nakhchivan, from where you cannot enter Armenia and must fly to get to Baku. Visas are *not* issued here.

Direct buses between Tehran and Baku (US\$40, three weekly, 24 hours), via Astara, are available but are not such a good idea because you'll probably get stuck for hours while your conveyance gets a full cavity search, which is considerably less interesting

than it sounds. Taking one bus to the border, crossing as a pedestrian and finding another bus is *much* easier.

IRAQ

Border posts at Mehran and Khosravi – servicing the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq – are open for locals only. Further north, the chaotic Haj Omran border near Piranshahr is the gateway to Iraqi Kurdistan and opens fitfully to foreigners. On entering Iraqi Kurdistan you get a visa on arrival; see the boxed text (p83) and check Lonely Planet's **Thorn Tree** (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree) for the latest information.

PAKISTAN

Along the 830km border with Pakistan, the only recognised crossing for foreigners is between Mirjaveh (Iran) and Taftan (Pakistan). For border details see the boxed text (p235).

TURKEY

The main road crossing to/from Turkey is at Gürbulak (Turkey) and Bazargan (Iran), where there are hotels, moneychanging facilities and regular transport on either side of the border, though staying in nearby Maku is more pleasant; see the boxed text (p75) for details.

Foreigners can also cross at Esendere (40km from Yüksekova, Turkey) and Sero, near Orumiyeh in Iran. There is nowhere to stay on either side and transport can be infrequent; see the boxed text (p78) for further information. Motorists usually cross at Bazargan.

Bus

Travelling by bus you have two options: long haul or short hops.

Buses between Tehran and İstanbul and/or Ankara cost about US\$45 (about 36 to 42 hours). They leave from Terminal-e Jonub and go via Terminal-e Gharb; several bus companies offer the service, but usually it's just one bus

CHECKPOINTS

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

Taking the bus from Zahedan to Bam we have witnessed both the reasons for and effect of such searches. Each of our bags had our ticket number written onto it, just in case we tried to deny it later on. Before departure a couple of men used a knife to pry open the underneath of several seats and stuff contraband within. At the checkpoint we got off the bus and, with everyone else, took our luggage to a table. As travellers we were waved through with barely a glance at our luggage, but they spent 45 minutes opening and searching everything else on the bus and sniffing around inside. Apparently they didn't find whatever had been secreted inside the seats, as the grinning smugglers retrieved it soon after we moved on.

that runs (see p67 for bus departures). Those in the know swear it's better to take the Ankara bus, which is full of students and embassy workers, rather than the Istanbul bus, which is full of traders and therefore more likely to be taken apart at customs.

Alternatively, take it more slowly and enjoy eastern Turkey and western Iran along the way. By taking a bus to – but not across – either border you'll avoid having to wait for dozens of fellow passengers to clear customs. It's usually possible to cross from Erzurum (Turkey) to Tabriz (Iran) in one day if you start early. It takes longer in winter when high mountain passes near the border can be snowbound.

Train

The train from Istanbul to Tehran via Ankara and Tabriz is called the *Trans-Asia Express*. It runs weekly in either direction and, at the time of writing, trains on the 2968km journey departed Istanbul at 11.55pm on Tuesday, and left Tehran at 9.25pm on Wednesday; it takes 70 hours and costs about €40 each way. Seating is in comfortable 1st-class couchettes with four berths. Check www.raja.ir or the Turkish railways website at www.tcdd.gov.tr for the latest info.

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

TURKMENISTAN

There are three border posts open to foreigners along this 1206km-long frontier. From west to east, there is inconvenient and little-used Incheh Borun/Gyzyl-Etrek (see the boxed text, p246), Bajgiran (see p247) linking Mashhad and the Turkmen capital Ashgabat, and Sarakhs and Saraghs (see p261) for those heading east. You must change transport at all three crossings.

The paperwork and organisation involved in travelling to Turkmenistan is a hassle; **Stantours** (info@stantours.com) seems to be the best at making it all go (relatively) smoothly.

Sea

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

Persian Gulf

The main shipping agency for trips across the Persian Gulf is **Valfajr-8** (www.valfajr.ir), which operates car ferries and catamarans between Bandar Abbas and Sharjah once or twice a week (other routes listed on the website no longer run). As services are infrequent, oft-delayed and more expensive than flying, few people bother.

GETTING AROUND

Most visitors are pleasantly surprised by the transport system in Iran. Once you accept that the driving is more...erm...imaginative than you're used to, you'll appreciate that services on most forms of public transport are frequent, fairly punctual and very cheap. Book ahead if you're travelling on a weekend or, especially, any public holiday (p333).

Air

Domestic air fares in Iran are low and flights on most routes are frequent.

Airlines in Iran

Iran Air is the largest among a growing roster of domestic airlines and boasts an extensive network of flights, covering most provincial capitals. Domestic prices are set by the government, so it doesn't matter which airline you fly the price will be the same. For tickets it's best to use one of the many travel agencies, where you'll get all the options, rather than an airline office.

When making a booking, check the aircraft type and avoid any clunking old Tupolevs that have yet to fall out of Iran's skies. Iran's domestic airlines are:

Caspian Airlines (code RV; www.caspian.aero)

Iran Air (code IR; www.iranair.com)

Iran Aseman (code EP; www.iaa.ir)

Kish Air (code Y9; www.kishairline.com)

Mahan Air (code W5; www.mahan.aero)

Taban Air (code TBM; www.tabanair.ir)

Mahan Air, Iran Air and Kish Air are the most reliable and have the most routes, while Caspian Airlines and Taban Air are best avoided. Whichever airline you choose you'll find delays are common. Despite this, get to the airport an hour ahead of domestic departures.

Getting a domestic ticket from outside Iran is difficult. Sanctions mean paying for a seat online (if online booking is available) doesn't work. It is theoretically possible to call an Iran Air office outside Iran and get a booking reference, which you then pay for at an Iran Air office in Iran or at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. More reliably, use any Iranian-based tour agency (see p26).

names, but in the terminal they might still direct you to, for example, 'ta'avoni hasht' (cooperative number 8). The best *ta'avonis*, with the most extensive networks, are TBT (Taavoni 15) and Iran Peyma (often with the word 'Ta'avoni' or 'Bus No One' written on it).

For a bit more comfort Seiro Safar and Hamsafar offer newer, better buses for a little extra cost, though most travellers don't bother seeking out a specific company and just take whichever is the next bus going their way.

There are two main types of bus:

Mahmooly Meaning 'normal', these are Volvo, Scania or similar intercity coaches. The driver is accompanied by one or two attendants, who hand out packaged food and handle luggage. Most have toilets. Older, 1960s-era Mercedes *mahmooly* buses have mostly been retired on account of their pollution.

VIP More luxurious because they have seats that recline almost fully and more service. They operate on major routes, such as Tehran to Esfahan or Mashhad, and cost about 50% more than a *mahmooly*.

Bus Terminals

Most bus terminals are located at the edge of town and are easily reached by shuttle or private taxi. Some cities have more than one bus terminal; if in doubt, ask at your hotel or charter a taxi to the relevant terminal. Tell the driver '*terminal-e* (your destination)' and he'll know where to drop you – pronounce 'terminal' with a prolonged 'aal' at the end.

Bus terminals are filled with the offices of individual bus companies, though time-tables are rarely in English. Just ask 'Shiraz?', 'Esfahan?' or wherever and you'll be directed to the right desk, or listen for your destination being screamed out when a bus

IS THIS SEAT FREE?

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

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

But sometimes the opposite sex is impossible to avoid. In shared taxis people pop in and out of the front and back like pinballs in an attempt to keep unrelated men and women apart. But when this proves impossible, you'll end up next to someone of the opposite sex and no one will get too upset. On the Metro women can choose the women's only carriages or squeeze in with the men. And on sleeper trains you might find yourself in a mixed compartment if you don't specify that you want a single-sex compartment.

is about to leave. Terminals always have somewhere selling food, and larger terminals might have a police station, left-luggage facility and even a hotel.

If you're leaving a secondary town, such as Bam, Zanjan or Kashan, you may need to go to a major roundabout to board a passing bus, rather than at the terminal. Locals will point you to the right place.

Reservations

You can buy tickets up to a week in advance from bus company ticket offices in town or at the terminal. Between major cities, such as Esfahan and Tehran, buses leave at least every hour between about 6am and midnight. In medium-sized towns, such as Hamadan and Kerman, buses to nearer locations leave every hour or so, but longer trips (and any cross-desert trip) will often be overnight. In smaller places, where there may be only one or two buses a day to your destination, it is essential to book ahead.

There are often no-shows for bus trips, so seats can

magically appear on otherwise full buses just before departure. Alternatively, you might be offered the back seat.

Tickets are almost always in Farsi, so learn the Arabic numbers (see p359) to check the day of departure, time of departure, bus number, seat number, platform number and fare...or ask a local.

The Journey

Expect to average about 60km/h on most journeys. On most trips of more than three hours you'll stop at roadside restaurants serving cheap food. Ice-cold water is normally available on the bus and is safe to drink. Every two hours or so the driver will stop to have his tachograph checked by the police as a precaution against speeding. If it's summer, try to get a seat on the side facing away from the sun.

Car & Motorcycle

Self-drive 'holidays' don't really exist in Iran unless you bring your own car, which is exactly what a steady stream

of travellers do en route between Europe and Asia. Most report the country driving is great and the city driving is not. If you're considering an overland journey these sites have the stories of those who've gone before:

www.africa-overland.net

/asia-overland

www.horizonsunlimited.com

Bring Your Own Vehicle

If you are driving your own vehicle, you should always slow down and get ready to stop at roadblocks. Usually if you wind down your window, smile nicely, and give the officials your best 'I-don't-know-what-to-do-and-I-don't-speak-Farsi' look, you will be waved straight through. At worst you'll have to show your passport, licence and vehicle documents. Keep to the main roads near the Pakistan, Iraq or Afghanistan borders to steer clear of drug smugglers and police. Be sure to find a hotel with safe parking when in the southeast.

Driving Licence

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

Fuel & Spare Parts

While fuel in Iran is not as dirt cheap as it once was, it will still be a bargain compared with what you pay at home. Except in the desert, you'll find large towns with *benzin* (petrol) stations at least every 100km. Not all stations sell diesel and there is usually nothing written on the pump to differentiate it from *benzin* – be sure to ask. Fuel quality is poor – drivers told us most *benzin* was just 71 octane – so don't expect the same mileage as at home. More problematic, though, are the long queues in towns within 100km or so of a border, where well-organised smuggling operations leave

FUELLING UP

In theory, foreigners are supposed to buy a fuel card when they cross the border and some readers have reported being forced to do this at Bazargan. In effect, the card means you pay much more for *benzin* (petrol) and diesel than locals do – US\$1.30 a litre plus the going local rate. However, changes to the way fuel is sold mean this card is best avoided (the Sero border is better for this).

Iranian drivers are limited to a per-day quota that depends on whether the vehicle is used for private or commercial use. The whole system is underpinned by an ambitious system by which every vehicle owner has a ration card, which is swiped through a machine to record the date and quantity of every litre bought.

For you, however, things are simpler. Just turn up to a petrol station and if you don't have a card the station will fill your tank and put it on their own card. At research time this meant you'd pay IR3500 (US\$0.25) per litre for diesel, rather than the base IR1500 (US\$0.11) rate; petrol was between US\$0.30 and US\$0.70 a litre. Expect the rial prices to rise as the value of the rial falls. Either way, it's a bargain compared with what you pay at home.

little for locals. Iranian motor oil can also be of dubious quality. International brands are safer. See also the boxed text above.

Even the tiniest settlements have repair shops. The price for repair work is open to negotiation but you won't have much choice when it comes to spare parts. In the height of summer, scalding heat makes tyre blowouts fairly common.

Hire

It's possible to rent a car but unusual. Instead, 'car rental' usually means chartering a taxi or private driver, either privately or through a travel agency. Local drivers-cum-guides are mentioned throughout the destination chapters of this guide.

Insurance

Your vehicle will need a *carnet de passage* and a green card, both of which you should organise before you arrive.

Road Conditions

Road surfaces are generally excellent. On the other hand, driving at night is more dan-

gerous because of occasional unmarked potholes and the risk of running into tractors and other vehicles crawling along the road with no lights. On intercity roads most signs are in English and Farsi. All cities have street signs, many in English and Farsi.

Road Hazards

Iranian drivers in the cities. Camels in the deserts. Unmarked speed bumps everywhere. The last, often at the edges of towns, are both highly annoying and dangerous, and you'll often be completely unaware they exist until your car suddenly gets airborne as you launch over the bump.

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

Road Rules

Lanes? What are they? Driving across Iran is not a task to be taken lightly. In theory, every-one drives on the right but this can't be depended upon; faced with a one-way street going the wrong way, the average Iranian driver sees nothing wrong with reversing down it. Take 10 Iranian drivers and an otherwise deserted road and they will form a convoy so tightly packed that each can read the speedometer of the car in front. 'Optimum braking distance' is not widely understood.

Take comfort, however, in the knowledge most foreign drivers make it across Iran without too much trouble.

Hitching

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country, and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk and in Iran, women should not even consider it.

For men, however, it's doable. Hitching, as understood in the West, is a novel concept in Iran. Although you will often see people standing by the roadside, they are actually waiting for space in a bus, minibus or shared taxi, for which they expect to pay. Occasionally drivers will offer foreigners a free ride in return for practising their English or out of simple hospitality. Like anywhere, you're most likely to find rides in more remote areas. And as we found hitching through the Dasht-e Lut, host drivers will be typically generous; ours bought us food, shared their smoke, even tracked down some rocket fuel in a tiny desert town because they thought we wanted it, and refused all attempts to pay them. You should be prepared to pay something, however, and make the offer, although it will usually be turned down. In such a case it's nice to have something small to thank them with.

When flagging down a ride, rather than using the thumb out sign (which could be construed as offensive), wave your hand down with palm down, as if patting the air down.

Local Transport Bus & Minibus

Most Iranian towns and cities have local bus services. Because local buses are often crowded and can be difficult to use unless you know exactly where you're going, most travellers use the Metro, where possible, or shared and private taxis instead.

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

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

Minibuses service local suburban routes and are quite often so crammed with passengers that you can't see out to tell where you're going. You normally pay in cash when you get on. Men and women get a seat anywhere they can; there is no room for segregation. Minibuses stop at normal bus stops or wherever you ask them.

Metro

Metros are the great hope for Iranian cities slowly being strangled by traffic. The Tehran Metro is growing and Mashhad's first Metro line is operating. The first phases of underground railways in Shiraz and Esfahan are scheduled, *insh'Allah* (God willing), to be operational by 2013.

Taxi

City taxis come in three main incarnations in Iran.

SHUTTLE (SHARED) TAXI

In most towns and cities, shared or shuttle taxis duplicate or even replace local bus services. They usually take up to five passengers: two in the front passenger seat and three in the back. While Kia Prides make up the bulk of shuttle taxis, there are still plenty of old Paykans cruising the streets. Note that shuttle taxis operate in cities, while savaris (see p350) offer a similar service between towns.

Shuttle taxis travel between major *meydans* (squares) and along main roads, so the key to using them is to learn the names of the *meydans* along your intended route. There is a

NAH DAR BASTE!

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

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

When you want to get out simply say *kheili mamnun* (thank you very much) or make any other obvious noise. Pay during the trip or when you get out; drivers appreciate exact change.

The government-regulated fares range from a few cents for short trips to a couple of dollars, depending on the distance, the city (Tehran is the most expensive) and the traffic. Try and see what other passengers are paying before handing over your money.

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

When trying to hail a shuttle taxi, don't bother with anything along the lines of 'Iran Hotel, on the corner of...': the driver will have lost interest after the word 'hotel', picked up someone else and be half-way there before you know it. Use a major landmark or a town square as a destination, even if you are getting off

before then. Shout it quickly and loudly: 'FeDOSe!' will do for Ferdosi St or Sq; similarly, 'eHESHTe!' for Beheshti St or Sq; and so on. The driver will either ignore you, or give you a quick beep on the horn and pull over for half a second while you leap in.

PRIVATE TAXI

Any taxi without passengers, whether obviously a shared taxi or a more expensive private taxi (usually yellow), can be chartered to go anywhere in town; an act usually called 'service' or 'agence'. Unless it's a complicated deal, including waiting time, simply hail the vehicle, tell the driver where you want to go, and ask 'chand toman?' Immediately offer about 60% of what he suggests but expect to end up paying about 75% or 80% of the originally quoted price.

If your destination has no known street address, tell the driver the name of the place and the nearest square, main road or other landmark.

AGENCY TAXIS

Agency taxis, or 'telephone' taxis, are ordered by phone. Any hotel can arrange an agency taxi (often with the manager's brother behind the wheel). These are the most expensive taxis but you get a better car, the comfort of knowing there will be someone to complain to if anything goes wrong and, possibly, a driver who speaks English. One reader wrote to say that lone women are advised to get someone to call them a taxi if they're travelling after dark, thus avoiding being hooted

at or ignored by dozens of drivers as they try to hail one. Demand is such that Tehran has a women-only taxi company – female drivers, female passengers, no groping.

Minibus

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

Minibuses are marginally more expensive than buses, and can be faster because they have fewer passengers and spend less time dropping off and picking up. On the downside, they're uncomfortable and usually leave only when they're full, which can mean a wait.

Private Taxi

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

To hire a taxi for the whole day costs between about US\$50 and US\$120, depending on factors including your ability as a negotiator, the quality of the car, the distance you plan to drive and where you are. The smaller the town, the cheaper the price.

Savari (Shared Taxi)

You can almost always find a savari for a trip between towns less than three hours apart. Savari means 'shared taxi' and is usually applied

DRIVER GUIDES

In this book we include recommendations for private drivers and guides in their home cities. These (mostly men) speak English and make a good, flexible alternative to more formal tours. They are often happy to meet visitors in Tehran and take country-wide tours. For details see the Tours sections for Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, Yazd, Kerman, Tabriz and Bam.

USEFUL RAIL JOURNEYS

For the latest routes and prices, see www.raja.ir.

FROM	TO	FARE	DURATION	DEPARTURES
Tehran	Tabriz	US\$5.50-18	13hr	2 daily (overnight)
Tehran	Gorgan	US\$7/3.50 1st/2nd class	10hr	daily (overnight, extra daytime services to Sari)
Tehran	Esfahan	US\$6.50	7½hr	daily (overnight)
Esfahan	Shiraz	US\$12.50	9hr	daily (morning or evening)
Tehran	Mashhad	US\$5-37	8-13hr	16 daily
Mashhad	Yazd	US\$25.50	18½hr	every 2nd evening
Yazd	Kerman	US\$2.50	5-6hr	6am daily

to intercity versions of the species. Speed is the main advantage because savaris are generally less comfortable than buses. Sometimes two people will be expected to squeeze into the front passenger seat, though for longer journeys a total of four passengers is normal.

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

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

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

Train

Travelling by train is an inexpensive way to get around Iran and meet Iranians.

Iran's first line was the trans-Iranian railway, built in the 1930s to connect the Caspian Sea at Bandar-e Torkaman with the Persian Gulf at Bandar-e Imam Khomeini. A useful way of getting to Sari or Gorgan from Tehran, the route goes through mountains and passes, and is one of the great engineering achievements of the 20th century. It has recently been joined by another engineering marvel; the line between Esfahan and Shiraz that bores its way through the Zagros mountainscape. The line is part of an ambitious program to expand Iran's rail network that in recent years has seen lines open from Qazvin to Astara via Rasht, Mashhad to Bafq and Bam to Zahedan (though the connecting service into Pakistan has not run for years due to security issues).

Routes

Tehran is the main hub and most services begin or end in the capital. There is at least one daily service to Mashhad, Esfahan, Tabriz, Bandar Abbas and Kerman. Trains usually depart on time, but arrival times for stops en route are often in the middle of the night and, as a result, most travellers take the bus.

Classes & Costs

The majority of trains have two classes, though a sig-

nificant minority have only one. If you decide a 2nd-class compartment is too crowded for you, you can often upgrade to 1st class along the way, provided there's space. A seat in 2nd class costs a bit less than a *mahmooly* bus, and a 1st-class seat is a bit less than a VIP bus.

On overnight trains (usually to/from Tehran) the 1st-class carriages have sleeper couchettes (*ghazal*) with four or six bunks. Solo women should strongly consider requesting a single-sex sleeper. On most 1st-class services meals are served in your compartment and aren't too bad. Long-distance trains also travel with a restaurant car.

The most comfortable trains are on the busy Tehran to Mashhad route. The *Sirmorgh*, for example, is more expensive than other 1st-class options but includes dinner, breakfast, a particularly comfortable bed and the mixed blessing of a TV. You can ask to be seated in a nonsmoking compartment.

Reservations

Train ticketing is on an integrated system and tickets can be booked up to a month in advance. Especially for trains leaving on Thursday, Friday and public holidays, it's recommended you book ahead.

Health

Due in part to its dryness and relative isolation, your chances of getting seriously ill with a virus or other infectious disease in Iran are fairly small.

The most common reason for travellers needing medical help is as a result of accidents. If you are unfortunate enough to need a hospital, Iran is home to some of the best in the Middle East. Many doctors have been trained in Europe or North America and, especially in the larger cities, you shouldn't have too much trouble finding one who speaks English. In remoter areas, medical facilities are more basic.

BEFORE YOU GO

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

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

weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. While yellow fever is not a problem in

Iran, if you're arriving from a country where it is a problem you might be asked to show proof of yellow fever vaccination before you're allowed in the country.

Travellers can register with the International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers (IAMAT; www.iamat.org). Its website can help travellers to find a doctor with recognised training.

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

Insurance

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

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

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

for overseas health costs, because banking sanctions mean it will be very difficult for insurers to pay doctors direct in Iran. It's also worth ensuring your travel insurance will cover repatriation home or to better medical facilities elsewhere, if necessary. Your insurance company might be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, but it's faster to ask your hotel or, in an emergency, call your embassy or consulate. Travel insurance usually covers emergency dental treatment.

Not all insurance covers emergency aeromedical evacuation home or to a hospital in a major city, which may be the only way to get medical attention for a serious emergency.

Recommended Vaccinations

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

Websites

World Health Organization (www.who.int/ith) The superb, free *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually.

MD Travel Health (www.mdtravelhealth.com) Travel health recommendations updated daily.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) Another useful website.

HIT BY A TAXI

So what actually happens if you get hit by a car? If the experience of New Zealander Scott Malyon is indicative, you'll be treated pretty well. Malyon told us his story in Yazd, where he'd been recuperating for three months after being hit by a taxi. With two broken legs and head injuries, Malyon needed emergency hospital treatment, care from a bone specialist and intensive physiotherapy. The Iranian government paid for the treatment and the local police made sure his four visa extensions were processed without a hitch. On top of this, the taxi driver was taken to court and eventually made to pay significant compensation. All up, he said, a difficult experience was made much easier by the hospitality and treatment.

IN IRAN

Availability & Cost of Health Care

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

Medical care is not always readily available outside major cities. Medicine, and even sterile dressings or intravenous fluids, may need to be bought from a local pharmacy, which are usually very well stocked. Nursing care may be limited or rudimentary as this is something families and friends are expected to provide.

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

Infectious Diseases

The following infectious diseases are present in Iran, but reports of travellers being infected are extremely rare.

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It causes a high temperature and severe sore throat and, sometimes, a closure of the throat requiring a tracheostomy to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an injection alone, or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years.

Hepatitis A

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

Hepatitis B

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

HIV

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

Malaria

There is little malaria in Iran. Still, it's worth knowing that malaria almost always starts with shivering, fever and sweating. Muscle pains, headache and vomiting are common. Symptoms may occur anywhere from a few days to three weeks after the infected mosquito bite. The illness can start while you are taking preventative tablets if they are not fully effective, and may also occur after you have finished taking your tablets.

Rabies

Rabies is present in Iran and any dog bites or licks on broken skin should be treated with suspicion as rabies can be fatal. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of post-bite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated you will

need a course of five injections starting within 24 hours of the injury. Vaccination does not provide immunity; it merely buys more time to seek appropriate medical help.

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is found in Iran, especially in the south-east. TB is spread through close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG vaccine is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population, though it is not a guarantee against infection.

Traveller's Diarrhoea

While water is safe to drink almost everywhere in Iran, avoiding tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected can help you avoid diarrhoea. Freshly prepared meals are best, while pre-prepared dishes like *khoresht* should be avoided by those with fragile stomachs.

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing lots of salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours, is accompanied by fever, shaking, chills or severe abdominal pain you should seek medical attention.

Environmental Hazards

Heat Illness

Heat exhaustion occurs following heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with

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

Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water such that you produce pale, diluted urine. Electrolyte replacement sachets are the easiest and fastest way to treat dehydration; they are available in Iran, though it makes sense to carry them from home. Alternatively, fluid replacement with water or fruit juice or both, and cooling by cold water and fans is recommended. The treatment of the salt loss component consists of salty fluids as in soup or broth, and adding a little more table salt to foods than usual.

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

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. Using DEET-based insect repellents will prevent bites. Mosquitoes also spread dengue fever. Bees and wasps only cause real problems to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis). If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings you should carry an adrenaline injection or similar.

There are plenty of scorpions in Iran's deserts and they can cause a painful bite, though contrary to popular misconception, they are rarely life threatening.

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

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

Water

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

Travelling with Children

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

If your child is vomiting or experiencing diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders for reconstituting with boiled water.

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

Lonely Planet's *Travel With Children* is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information and what to do if you get sick on the road.

Women's Health

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, and diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy. Apart from condoms you should bring any contraception you will need. Tampons are almost impossible to find in Iran, but sanitary towels are available in cities.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible but be sure to have a check-up before embarking on your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage is most likely, and after 30 weeks – most airlines will not carry a traveller more than about 32 weeks pregnant. Antenatal facilities vary between cities in Iran and there are major cultural and language differences. Taking written records of the pregnancy, including details of your blood group, are likely to be helpful if you need medical attention. Ensure your insurance covers pregnancy, delivery and postnatal care.

Language

The official language of Iran is called Farsi by its native speakers, although in the West it's commonly referred to as Persian. As the language of Iran, and also Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Farsi has around 70 million speakers, but only about 50 million claim it as their first language. The dialect of Farsi spoken in Afghanistan (known as Dari) is very similar to the standard Farsi of Iran, while Tajik (the variety spoken in Tajikistan) is usually considered a separate language.

Farsi is written and read from right to left in the Perso-Arabic script. If you read our coloured pronunciation guides as if they were English, you'll be understood. Note that **a** is pronounced as in 'act', **aa** as the 'a' in 'father', **e** as in 'bet', **ee** as in 'see', **o** as in 'tone' and **oo** as in 'zoo'. Both **gh** (like the French 'r') and **kh** (like the 'ch' in the Scottish *loch*) are guttural sounds, pronounced in the back of the throat, **r** is rolled and **zh** is pronounced as the 's' in 'pleasure'. The apostrophe (') indicates the glottal stop (like the pause in the middle of 'uh-oh'). The stressed syllables are indicated with italics.

BASICS

Hello.	سلام	sa-laam
Goodbye.	خدا حافظ	kho-daa-haa-fez
Yes.	بله	ba-le
No.	نه	na
Please.	لطفا	lot-fan
Thank you.	متشکرم	mo-te-shak-ke-ram
Excuse me.	ببخشید	be-bakh-sheed
Sorry.	متأسفم	mo-ta-as-se-fam

WANT MORE?

For in-depth language information and handy phrases, check out Lonely Planet's *Middle East Phrasebook* and *Farsi Phrasebook*. You'll find them at shop.lonelyplanet.com, or you can buy Lonely Planet's iPhone phrasebooks at the Apple App Store.

How are you?

حالتون چطور هست؟ haa-le-toon che-to-re

Fine, thanks. And you?

خوب خیلی ممنون khoo-bam khey-lee mam-noon
شما چطور هستید؟ sho-maa che-to-reen

What's your name?

اسمتون چی هست؟ es-me-toon chee-ye

My name is ...

اسم من ... هست es-me man ... hast

Do you speak English?

شما انگلیسی حرف می زنید؟ sho-maa een-gee-lee-see
harf mee-za-need

I don't understand.

من نمی فهم man ne-mee-fah-mam

Can I take a photo?

می توانم عکس بگیرم؟ mee-too-nam aks
be-gee-ram

ACCOMMODATION

Where's a ...? ... کجاست؟ ... ko-jaast

campsite	محل چادر زدن	ma-hal-le chaa-dor za-dan
guesthouse	مهمان پذیر	meh-maan- pa-zeer
hotel	هتل	ho-tel

Do you have a ... room? شما اتاق دارید؟ sho-maa o-taa-gha ... daa-reen

single	یک خوابه	yek khaa-be
double	دو خوابه	do khaa-be
twin	دو نفره	do na-fa-re

How much is it per ...?	برای هر ... چقدر هست؟	ba-raa-ye har ... che-ghadr hast
night person	شب نفر	shab na-far

Can I get another (blanket)?

می توانم (پتو) ...
ی دیگر بگیرم؟
mee-too-nam (pa-too)
ye dee-ge be-ge-ram

The (air conditioning) doesn't work.

(تهویه مطبوع) کار نمی کند
tah-vee-ye-ye mat-boo'
kaar ne-mee-ko-ne

DIRECTIONS

Where's the ...? کجاست؟ ... ko-jaast

bank	بانک	baank
market	بازار	baa-zaar
post office	اداره پست	e-daa-re-ye post

Can you show me (on the map)?

می توانید (در نقشه) به
من نشان بدهید؟
mee-too-noon
(dar nagh-she) be
man ne-shun be-deen

What's the address?

آدرس اش چی هست؟
aad-re-sesh chee hast

Could you please write it down?

لطفا می توانید
آن را بنویسید؟
lot-fan mee-ta-vaa-need
aan raa be-ne-vee-seed

How far is it?

تا اونجا چقدر
راه هست؟
taa oon-jaa che-ghadr
raah hast

How do I get there?

چطور به اونجا بروم؟
che-tor be oon-jaa be-ram

Turn left/right.

بپیچ چپ/راست
be-pee-ch chap/raast

It's ... اون ... هست oon ... hast

behind ...	پشت ...	posh-te ...
in front of ...	جلوی ...	je-lo-ye ...
next to ...	کنار ...	ke-naa-re ...
on the corner	گوشه	goo-she-ye
opposite ...	مقابل ...	mo-ghaa-be-te ...
straight ahead	مستقیم	mos-ta-gheem

EATING & DRINKING

Can you recommend a ...?	می توانید یک ... پیشنهاد کنید؟	mee-too-noon yek ... peesh-na-haad ko-noon
cafe	کافه	kaaf-fe
restaurant	رستوران	res-too-raan

Signs

Entrance	ورود
Exit	خروج
Open	باز
Closed	بسته
Information	اطلاعات
Toilets	توالت
Men	مردانه
Women	زنانه

I'd like a/the ... please. لطفا من ...
می خواهم mee-khaam

nonsmoking section قسمت غیر سیگاری
ghes-ma-te ghey-re
see-gaa-ree

table for (four) یک میز برای (چهار نفر)
yek meez ba-raa-ye
(chaa-haar)

What would you recommend?

شما چی پیشنهاد می کنید؟
sho-maa chee peesh-na-haad
mee-ko-noon

What's the local speciality?

غذای مخصوص محلی چی هست؟
gha-zaa-ye makh-soo-se
ma-hal-lee chee-ye

Do you have vegetarian food?

شما غذای گیاه خوری دارید؟
sho-maa gha-zaa-ye
gee-yaah-khaa-ree daa-reen

I'd like (the) ... please. لطفا من ...
را می خواهم ro mee-khaam

bill صورت حساب
soo-rat he-saab

drink list لیست نوشیدنی
lees-te
noo-shee-da-nee

menu منو
me-noo

that dish آن غذا
oon gha-zaa

Could you prepare a meal without ...? می توانید یک غذای بدون ... درست کنید؟
mee-too-noon yek
gha-zaa-ye be-doo-ne
... do-rost ko-noon

butter کره
ka-re

eggs تخم مرغ
tokh-me-morgh

meat stock آبگوشت
aab-goosht

I'm allergic to ... من به ... حساسیت دارم
man be ...
has-saa-see-yat
daa-ram

dairy produce لبنیات
la-ba-nee-yaat
aa-jeel

nuts آجیل
aa-jeel

seafood غذای دریایی
gha-zaa-ye
dar-yaa-ye

coffee ...	قهوه ...	ghah-ve ...
tea ...	چای ...	chaa-yee ...
with milk	با شیر	baa sheer
without sugar	بدون شکر	be-doo-ne she-kar

... water	آب ...	aa-be ...
boiled	جوش	joosh
mineral	معذنی	ma'da-nae
(orange) juice	آب (پرتقال)	aa-be (por-te-ghaal)
soft drink	نوشابه	noo-shaa-be

EMERGENCIES

Help!	کمک!	ko-mak
Go away!	برو کنار!	bo-ro ke-naar
Call ...!	... صدا کنید!	... se-daa ko-neen
a doctor	یک دکتر	yek dok-tor
the police	پلیس	po-tees

I'm lost.
من گم شده ام man gom sho-dam

Where are the toilets?
توالت کجاست؟ too-vaa-let ko-jaast

I'm sick.
من مریض هستم man ma-reez has-tam

I'm allergic to (antibiotics).
من به (آنتی بیوتیک)
حساسیت دارم has-saa-see-yat daa-ram

SHOPPING & SERVICES

Where's a ...?	... کجاست؟	... ko-jaast
department store	فروشگاه زنجیره ای	foo-roosh-gaa-he zan-jee-re-yee
grocery store	بقالی	bagh-ghaa-lee
newsagency	روزنامه فروشی	rooz-naa-me foo-roo-shee
souvenir shop	کادو فروشی	kaa-do foo-roo-shee
supermarket	فروشگاه	foo-roosh-ghaah

I'm looking for ...
... من دنبال ...
... می گردم man don-baa-le ... mee-gar-dam

Can I look at it?
می توانم به آن نگاه کنم؟
ne-ghaah ko-nam

Do you have any others?

چیز دیگر هم
دارید؟ chee-ze dee-ge ham daa-reen

It's faulty.
آن خراب هست oon kha-raa-be

How much is it?
آن چقدر هست؟ oon che-ghadr hast

Can you write down the price?
می توانید قیمت
را بنویسید؟ mee-too-neen ghey-mat ro-be-ne-vee-seen

That's too expensive.
آن خیلی گران هست oon khey-lee ge-roon hast

What's your lowest price?
پایین ترین
قیمت تون چند هست؟ paa-yeen-ta-reen ghey-ma-te-toon chan-de

There's a mistake in the bill.
در صورت حساب
اشتباه شده dar soo-rat-he-saab esh-te-baah sho-de

Where's an ATM?
خود پرداز کجاست؟ khod-par-daaz ko-jaast

What's the exchange rate?
نرخ ارز چی هست؟ ner-khe arz chee hast

Where's the local internet cafe?
کافی نت محلی
کجاست؟ kaa-fee ne-te ma-hal-lee ko-jaast

How much is it per hour?
برای هر ساعت
چقدر می شود؟ ba-raa-ye har saa-'at che-ghadr mee-she

Where's the nearest public phone?
نزدیکترین تلفن
عمومی کجاست؟ naz-deek-ta-reen te-le-fo-ne oo-moo-mee ko-jaast

I'd like to buy a phonecard.
می خواهم یک کارت
تلفن بخرم te-le-fon be-kha-ram

TIME & DATES

What time is it?
ساعت چنده؟ saa-'at chan-de

It's (two) o'clock.
ساعت (دو) هست saa-'at (do) hast

Half past (two).
(دو) و نیم (do) vo neem

At what time ...?
چه ساعتی ...؟ che saa-'a-tee ...

At ...
... در ... dar ...

Question Words

When?	کی؟	key
Where?	کجا؟	ko-jaa
Who?	کی؟	kee
Why?	چرا؟	che-raa

Numbers

1	۱	یک	yek
2	۲	دو	do
3	۳	سه	se
4	۴	چهار	chaa-haar
5	۵	پنج	panj
6	۶	شش	shesh
7	۷	هفت	haft
8	۸	هشت	hasht
9	۹	نه	noh
10	۱۰	ده	dah
20	۲۰	بیست	beest
30	۳۰	سی	see
40	۴۰	چهل	che-hel
50	۵۰	پنجاه	pan-jaah
60	۶۰	شصت	shast
70	۷۰	هفتاد	haf-taad
80	۸۰	هشتاد	hash-taad
90	۹۰	نود	na-vad
100	۱۰۰	صد	sad
1000	۱۰۰۰	هزار	he-zaar

Arabic numerals, used in Farsi, are written from left to right (unlike script).

yesterday ...	دیروز ...	dee-rooz ...
tomorrow ...	فردا ...	far-daa ...
morning	صبح	sobh
afternoon	عصر	asr
evening	شب	shab

Monday	دو شنبه	do shan-be
Tuesday	سه شنبه	se shan-be
Wednesday	چهار شنبه	chaa-haar shan-be
Thursday	پنج شنبه	panj shan-be
Friday	جمعه	jom-e
Saturday	شنبه	shan-be
Sunday	یک شنبه	yek shan-be

TRANSPORT

Is this the ... to (Rasht)?	این ... برای (رشت) هست؟	een ... ba- raa-ye (rasht) hast
boat	کشتی	kesh-tee
bus	اتوبوس	oo-too-boos
plane	هواپیما	ha-vaa-pey-maa
train	قطار	gha-taar

What time's the ... bus?	اتوبوس ... کی هست؟	oo-too-boo-se ... key hast
first	اول	av-val
last	آخر	aa-khar
One ... ticket, please.	یک بلیط ... لطفاً	yek be-leet ... lot-fan
one-way	یک سره	yek sa-re
return	دو سره	do sa-re

How long does the trip take?

مسافرت چقدر
طول می کشد؟

What station/stop is this?

این کدام ایستگاه
هست؟

Please tell me when we get to (Sari).

لطفاً وقتی به
(ساری) می رسید
به من بگویید

How much is it to ...?

برای ...
چقدر می شود؟

Please take me to (this address).

لطفاً من را
(به این آدرس) ببر

Please ... here. ... لطفاً اینجا ...

stop	توقف کن	ta-vagh-ghof kon
wait	منتظر باش	mon-ta-zer baash

I'd like to ... من می خواهم ...
hire a ... یک کرایه کنم ...
yek-ke-raa-ye ko-nam

4WD	چهار دبلیو دی	chaa-haar daa-bel-yoo dee
car	ماشین	maa-sheen

How much ... کرایه ...
for ... hire? چقدر می شود؟
che-ghadr mee-she

daily	روزانه	roo-zaa-ne
weekly	هفتگی	haf-te-gee

Is this the road to (Enghelab)?

این راه به (انقلاب)
می رود؟

I need a mechanic.

من یک مکانیک
لازم دارم

I've run out of petrol.

من بنزین تمام کر
ده ام

FARSI ALPHABET

Farsi is written from right to left. The form of each letter changes depending on whether it's at the start, in the middle or at the end of a word or whether it stands alone.

Word-Final	Word-Medial	Word-Initial	Alone	Letter
ا	ا	ا	ا	alef
ب	ب	ب	ب	be
پ	پ	پ	پ	pe
ت	ت	ت	ت	te
ث	ث	ث	ث	se
ج	ج	ج	ج	je
چ	چ	چ	چ	che
ح	ح	ح	ح	he
خ	خ	خ	خ	khe
د	د	د	د	daal
ذ	ذ	ذ	ذ	zaal
ر	ر	ر	ر	re
ز	ز	ز	ز	ze
ژ	ژ	ژ	ژ	zhe
س	س	س	س	se
ش	ش	ش	ش	she
ص	ص	ص	ص	saad
ض	ض	ض	ض	zaad
ط	ط	ط	ط	taa
ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ	zaa
ع	ع	ع	ع	eyn
غ	غ	غ	غ	gheyn
ف	ف	ف	ف	fe
ق	ق	ق	ق	ghaaf
ك	ك	ك	ك	kaaf
گ	گ	گ	گ	gaaf
ل	ل	ل	ل	laam
م	م	م	م	meem
ن	ن	ن	ن	noon
و	و	و	و	ve
ه	ه	ه	ه	he
ی	ی	ی	ی	ye

GLOSSARY

Here, with definitions, are some unfamiliar words and abbreviations. Generally the Farsi words in this book are transliterations of colloquial usage. See Language (p356) for other useful words and phrases.

agha – sir; gentleman

Allah – Muslim name for God

aramgah – resting place; burial place; tomb

arg, ark – citadel

astan-e – sanctuary; threshold

ateshkadeh – a Zoroastrian fire temple where a flame was always kept burning

ayatollah – Shiite cleric of the highest rank, used as a title before the name; literally means a 'sign or miracle of God'

azad – free; liberated

azadi – freedom

badgir – windtower or ventilation shaft used to catch breezes and funnel them down into a building to cool it

bagh – garden

bandar – port; harbour

Bandari – indigenous inhabitant of the Persian Gulf coast and islands

bastan – ancient; ancient history; antiquity

bazar – bazaar; market place

bazari – shopkeeper in the bazaar

behesht – paradise

boq'eh – mausoleum

borj – tower

bozorg – big, large, great

burqa – a mask with tiny slits for the eyes worn by some Bandari women

caliphate – the dynasty of the successors of the Prophet Mohammed as rulers of the Islamic world

caravanserai – an inn or way-station for camel trains; usually consisting of rooms arranged around a courtyard

chador – literally 'tent'; a cloak, usually black, covering all parts of a woman's body except the hands, feet and face

coffeenet – internet cafe
cuneiform – ancient wedge-shaped script used in Persia

dar baste – literally closed door, used in taxis to indicate you want a private hire

darvazeh – gate or gateway, especially a city gate

darya – sea

dasht – plain; plateau; desert, specifically one of sand or gravel

enqelab – revolution

Farsi – Persian language or people

Ferdosi – one of the great Persian poets, born about AD 940 in Tus, near Mashhad; wrote the first epic poem, the *Shahnamah*

fire temple – see *ateshkadeh*

gabbeh – traditional rug

golestan – rose garden; name of poem by *Sa'di*

gonbad – dome, domed monument or tower tomb; also written 'gombad'

Hafez – one of the great Persian poets, born in Shiraz in about AD 1324

hajj – pilgrimage to Mecca

halal – permitted by Islamic law; lawful to eat or drink

hammam – bath, public bathhouse; bathroom

Hazrat-e – title used before the name of Mohammed, any other apostle of Islam or a Christian saint

hejab – veil; the 'modest dress' required of Muslim women and girls

Hossein – the third of the 12 *imams* recognised by Shiites as successors of the Prophet Mohammed

Hosseinieh – see *takieh*

imam – 'emam' in Farsi; religious leader, also title of one of the 12 descendants of Mohammed who, according to Shiite belief, succeeded him as religious and temporal leader of the Muslims

Imam Reza – the eighth Shiite *imam*

imamzadeh – descendant of an *imam*; shrine or mausoleum of an *imamzadeh*

insh'Allah – if God wills it

istgah – station (especially train station)

iwan – 'eivan' in Farsi; barrel-vaulted hall opening onto a courtyard

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

kabir – great

kalisa – church (sometimes cathedral)

kavir – salt desert

khalij – gulf; bay

khan – feudal lord, title of respect

khan-e sonnati – traditional house

kuche – lane; alley

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

madrasesh – school; also Muslim theological college

majlis – Iranian Parliament

manar – minaret; tower of a mosque

markazi – centre; headquarters

masjed – mosque; Muslim place of worship

Masjed-e Jameh – see *Jameh Mosque*

mehmankhaneh – hotel

mehmanpazir – a simple hotel

mehmansara – government-owned resthouse or hotel

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

minbar – pulpit of a mosque

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

mosaferkhaneh – lodging-house or hotel of the cheapest, simplest kind; 'mosafer' means traveller or passenger

muezzin – person at mosque who calls Muslims to prayer

mullah – Islamic cleric; title of respect

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

Omar Khayyam – Famous as a poet, mathematician, historian and astronomer; his best-known poem is the *Rubaiyat*

pasazh – passage; shopping arcade

Persia – old name for Iran

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

pik-up – utility with a canvas cover

pol – bridge

qal'eh – fortress; fortified walled village

qalyan – water pipe, usually smoked in traditional teahouses

qanat – underground water channel

qar – cave

Quran – Muslim holy book

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

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

rud, ruddkhuneh – river; stream

Rumi – famous poet (born in 1207) credited with founding the Maulavi Sufi order – the whirling dervishes

ruz – day

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

sardar – military governor

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

shah – king; the usual title of the Persian monarch

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

shahr – town or city

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

ta'arof – ritualised politeness

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

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

tappeh – hill; mound

terminal – terminal; bus station

toman – unit of currency equal to 10 *rials*

vakil – regent

yakh dan – mud-brick ice house

zarih – the gilded and latticed 'cage' that sits over a tomb

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

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

zurkhaneh – literally 'house of strength'; a group of men perform a series of ritualised feats of strength, all to the accompaniment of a drumbeat

behind the scenes

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index

12 imams 302

A

Ab Karm 73
 Abravan 261
 Abyaneh 152-3
 accommodation 325-7, 356-7, *see also individual locations*
 Achaemenids 270-2
 activities 17, 327-9, *see also individual activities, locations*
 Agha Bozorg Mosque & Madrasah 146
 Ahmabad 95
 Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud 267-8, 284-5, 286, 295
 Ahowan 244
 Ahvaz 140-1
 air pollution 64, 70, 322
 air travel 342-3, 345
 Aks Khaneh 40
 Alam Kuh 107-8
 Alamut Castle 113, **12**
 Alamut Valley 112-15, **114, 12**
 Alaviyan Dome 131
 Alborz Mountains 52-4, 71-3, 237, 318, 327
 alcohol 181, 299
 Alexander the Great 136, 199, 200, 202, 272-3, 306
 Alexander's Prison 178
 Alexander's Wall 247
 Ali Qapu Palace (Kakh-e Ali Qapu) 161
 Allah-Allah tower 96
 Amir Chakhmaq Complex 178
 Anahita Temple 203
 Andej 113
 Andimeshk 135-6
 animals 319-20, *see also Asiatic cheetah, birds, dolphins, turtles*
 Apadana Palace 199, **272, 274**
 Aq Qal'eh 243
 Arab people 287

000 Map pages

000 Photo pages

Aramgah-e (Tomb of) Hafez 192, **13**
 Aramgah-e (Tomb of) Sa'di 192
 Aramgah-e (Tomb of) Shah Ne'matollah Vali 229-30
 Aras River Valley 94-5
 archaeological sites
 Bishapur 203
 Haft Tappeh 137
 Hamadam 131
 Harireh 207
 Kashan 149
 Pasargadae 202, **271**
 Persepolis 8, 198-201, **198, 9, 272, 274**
 Shahdad 230
 Shush 136
 Tang-e Chogan 203
 Tappeh-ye Seyalk (Sialk) 149
 architecture 16, 304-7
 Ardabil 96-9, **98**
 area codes 338
 Arg-e Bam 231-2
 Arg-e Karim Khan 190
 Arg-e Rayen 231
 art galleries, *see also museums*
 Aks Khaneh 40
 Assar Art Gallery 49
 Calligraphy Gallery 253-4
 House of the Artists 49
 Howze Khaneh 40
 Jahan-Nama Museum & Gallery 52
 Museum of Fine Arts 51
 Negar Khane 39
 Reza Abbasi Museum 48
 Sanati Museum of Contemporary Art 225
 Seyhoun Art Gallery 49
 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art 47-8
 arts 304-17, *see also individual arts*
 Asalem 100
 Ashura 19, 302
 Ashuradeh 243
 Asiatic cheetah 319, 321
 Asiyab Khurabe 95
 Astara 99-100
atashkadehs, see fire temples
 ATMs 336
 Azadi Tower 54-5
 Azari people 85, 287

B

Babak Castle 95-6
badgirs 175
 Fahraj 186
 Kashan 146
 Laft 215
 Semnan 243

Tehran 40
 Yazd 175, 177, 178, 179
 Bagh-e Chehel Sotun 162
 Bagh-e Dolat Abad 177
 Bagh-e Eram 193
 Bagh-e Fin 149-50
 Bagh-e Mahrugh 260
 Baha'ism 303
 Bajigiran 247-8
 Bakhtegan National Park 321
 Bakhtiyari people 172
 Baluchi people 227, 288
 Bam 231-3, **232**
 Bandar Abbas 211-14, **212**
 Bandar-e Golmankhaneh 83
 Bandar-e Lengeh 210-11
 Bandar-e Torkaman 243
 Bandari people 211, 214-15
 bargaining 338
 Basij 266, 267
 Bastam 78
 bathrooms 339
 Bavanat 202
 bazaars 13
 Ardabil 97
 Bandar Abbas 211-12
 Bazar-e Bozorg 155-7, **13**
 Esfahan 155-7, **13**
 Kashan 146
 Kerman 223
 Kermanshah 125
 Mashhad 256
 Qazvin 109
 Sanandaj 120
 Shiraz 188-90
 Tabriz 85
 Tehran 37, 62-3, **40**
 Yazd 178
 Zanjan 116
 Bazar-e Bozorg 155-7, **13**
 Bazargan 75
bazaris 62
 Bazm 202
 bearded vulture 320, 321
 Behesht-e Zahra 71
 Belbär 124
 Berkeh Khalaf 217
 bicycle travel, *see cycling*
 Bijar Protected Area 321
 birds 320, 321
 bird-watching
 Arjan Protected Area 321
 Bakhtegan National Park 321
 books 320
 internet resources 320
 Lake Orumiyyeh National Park 82, 321
 Qeshm Island 215, 216

Bishapur 203
 Bisheh waterfalls 135
 Bisotun 128
 Biyakara 123
 black market 337
 Blue (Kabud) Mosque 85-7
 boat travel 345
 Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin 177
 Bonab 83-4
 books 266-7
 bird-watching 320
 carpets 308
 culture 266-7, 282
 food 297, 300
 history 269, 270, 271, 280, 281,
 282, 293, 303
 painting 311
 poetry 274
 travel literature 266-7, 282
 Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi 253
 border crossings
 Afghanistan 263, 344
 Armenia 95, 344
 Azerbaijan 93, 100, 344
 checkpoints 344
 Iraq 344
 Pakistan 235, 344
 Turkey 75, 78, 344-5
 Turkmenistan 246, 247, 261, 345
 bridges
 Karim Khan Bridge 203
 Lashgar Bridge 140
 Pol-e Chubi 163
 Pol-e Dokhtar 136
 Pol-e Ebrahimabad 97
 Pol-e Khaju 163
 Pol-e Jajim 97
 Pol-e Sardar 117
 Pol-e Sefid 244
 Pol-e Shahrestan 163
 Pol-e Shandran 139
 Pol-e Si-o-Seh 163
 Bu'Ali Sina 129-30
 budgeting 14, 299
 bus travel 344-5, 346-7, 349
 bushwalking, *see* trekking
 business hours 329

C
 calendars 331
 calligraphy 311
 camel trekking 174, 179, 328
 camping 325
 car travel 343-4, 347-9, **346**
 caravanserais 305
 Ahowan 244
 Caravanserai Azizolaof 253
 Dokhtar Caravanserai 116

Farhad Tarash 128
 Golshan Caravanserai 223
 Khan Amin al-Dowleh Timche 146
 Lasjerd 244
 Meybod 186
 Pichebon Caravanserai 115
 Robat Sharaf Caravanserai 261
 Seray-e Moshir 189
 Shafi Abad 230
 Shah Abbas Caravanserai 260
 Zein-o-din 186
 Carpet Museum of Iran 48
 carpets 12, 308-11, **12**
 books 308
 internet resources 311
 museums 48, 252
 cash 14-15, 28, 336
 Caspian Sea 97
 castles & fortresses
 Abu Mirza 95
 Alamut Castle 113, **12**
 Arg-e Bam 231-2
 Arg-e Karim Khan 190
 Arg-e Rayen 231
 Arg-e Tabriz 88
 Babak Castle 95-6
 Castles of the Assassins 12, 109,
 113-15, **12**
 Dezhe Sasal 100
 Falak-ol-Aflak 134
 Ghal'e-ye Portoghaliha, Hormoz
 Island 219
 Ghal'e-ye Portoghaliha, Qeshm
 Island 215
 Javer Castle 95
 Lamiasar Castle 113
 Maku citadel 75
 Malaisheikh 247
 Narin Castle, Meybod 185-6
 Narin Castle, Na'in 174
 Qal'-e Tabarak 71
 Qal'eh Rudkhan 105
 Salosel Castle 139-40
 Sanandaj fortress 119
 Saryazd Sassanid Fortress 186
 Shahrak 113
 Takht-e Soleiman 118-19
 Tal-e Takht 202
 Castles of the Assassins 12, 109,
 113-15, **12**
 cathedrals, *see* churches &
 cathedrals
 cell phones 15, 339
 central Iran 31, 142-203, **143**
 accommodation 142
 climate 142
 food 142
 highlights 143
 travel seasons 142

Chahar shanbe-soori 18, 294
 Chahkoo Canyon 216
 Chak Chak 185
 Chaldoran 78, 84, 276
 Chalus 107
 checkpoints 344
 Chelgerd 172
 Cheshmeh Ali 245
 cheetah, Asiatic 319, 321
 Chehel Sotun Palace, Esfahan 161-2
 Chehel Sotun Palace, Qazvin 108
 children, travel with 329-30, 355
 Chogan Gorge 203
 Choqa Zanbil 10, 138, **10**
 Christianity 303
 Church of St Stephanos 94
 churches & cathedrals
 Anglican Church 88
 Church of St Stephanos 94
 Kelisa-ye Vank 163-4
 Marsarjis Church 80
 Qareh Kalisa 78-9
 Sarkis Cathedral 48
 St Mary's, Orumiyeh 79
 St Mary's, Tabriz 85
 Vank Cathedral 163-4
 CIA 46, 47, 280
 cinema 316-17, *see also* films
 climate 14, 330, *see also individual
 regions*
 climbing 327-8, *see also* rock
 climbing
 Alborz Mountains 107-8
 Farhad Tarash 128
 Mt Damavand 73
 Mt Sabalan 88
 Shiraz area 193
 Zagros Mountains 172
 consulates 332-3
 cosmetic surgery 54
 costs 299, 325
 courses 335
 crafts 312
 credit cards 337
 cultural considerations, *see
 also* women travellers
 clothing 29, 340-1
 etiquette 266, 300
 food 300
 photography 337-8
 public transport 347
 ta'arof 290
 culture 16, 266-7, 282, 289-95
 currency 14, 336
 customs regulations 330
 cycling 327, 343, 346
 Kish island 208
 Mashhad area 254

cycling *continued*
 Shiraz area 193
 Zagros Mountains 173
 Cyrus II (the Great) 129, 202, 270-1, 272

D

Dahe-ye Fajr 18
 Dalani 123
 Damghan 244-5
 dangers, *see* safe travel
 Daniel, Tomb of 137
 Darakeh 52-3
 Darband 52-3
 Darbarsar 72
 Darb-e-Astaneh 135
 Darius I 271-2
 central Iran 198, 200, 201
 Tehran 41
 western Iran 128-9, 134, 136, 137
 Dasht-e Kavir 173-5, 318, 321
 Deilaman 106
 Dezli 123
 Dibaj 245
 disabilities, travellers with 339
 diving 208, 216, 327
dizi 298
 Dizin 72
 dolphins 215, 216
 domes
 Alaviyan Dome 131
 Gonbad Sheikh Loghman Baba 261
 Gonbad-e Arqala 83
 Gonbad-e Jabaliye 226-7
 Gonbad-e Kabul 83
 Gonbad-e Qaffariyeh 83
 Gonbad-e Sorkh 83
 Gonbad-e Toghrol 71
 Mil-e Gonbad 245-6
 Seh Gonbad 80
 Taj al-Molk Dome 155
 Dorbadam 248
 Dorud 134-41
 Dorud-Andimeshk Railway 135
 drinks 104, 299-300
 driving, *see* car travel
 driving licences 348
 drug addiction 291
 Duzal 95

E

earthquakes 84, 87, 231-3, 319, 330-1
 Ecbatana 132, 270

economy 266-8, 290-1
 education 286, 292
 Eid al-Fitr 19
 Elamites 269-70
 electricity 326, 332
 Elgoli (Shahgoli) 88, 90-1
 email services 335
 embassies 332-3
 emergencies 15, 64, 358
 employment 266, 285
 environment 318-22
 environmental issues
 alternative energy 322
 conservation 320
 endangered species 320-1
 habitat loss 322
 pollution 64, 70, 97, 322
 Esfahan 6, 153-71, **154, 156, 6, 10, 12, 13**
 accommodation 165-7
 attractions 154-65
 drinking 167-8
 food 167-8
 information 169
 itineraries 158
 shopping 168-9
 tours 165
 travel to/from 169-70
 travel within 170-1
 walking tour 159, **159**
 Esther & Mordecai Tomb 129-30
 etiquette 266, 300, *see also* cultural considerations
 Evan Lake 113
 events 18-19, *see also* festivals
 Arbaeen 334
 Ashura 19, 302, 334
 Dahe-ye Fajr 18
 Eid al-Fitr 19
 Eid-e Ghorban 334
 Heart-Rending Departure of the Great Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran 19
 Islamic Republic Day 19
 Magnificent Victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran 18
 Martyrdom of Fatima 334
 Martyrdom of Imam Reza 18
 Qadir-e Khom 334
 Ramazan 19, 334-5
 Sizdah be Dar 19
 exchange rates 15

F

Fahrhaj 186
 Fajr Film Festival 18
 Farahzad 178
 Farhad Tarash 128

Farsan 172
 Farsi language 274, 356-62
 Fath Ali Shah 39-40, 45-6, 144, 242, 243, 279
 Ferdosi, Hakim Abulqasim 259, 274, 313, 314
 festivals 18-19, *see also* events
 Chahar shanbe-soori 18, 294
 Fajr Film Festival 18
 highlights 18
 International Fajr Theatre Festival 18
 No Ruz 19, 294, 326, 335
 Sizdah be Dar 294
 films 268, 284, 287, 288, 317, *see also* cinema
 museums 49
 Fin 149-50
 fire temples
 Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan 164
 Chak Chak 185
 Pir-e-Sabz 185
 Yazd Ateshkadeh 178-9
 Firuz Abad 202-3
 food 8, 296-300, **8**
 books 297, 300
 desserts 183
 dizi 298
 etiquette 300
 Gilan cuisine 101
 haft seen 294
 highlights 16
 kababs 296-8
 language 357-8
 football 62, 292
 fortresses, *see* castles & fortresses
 Fuman 105

G

galleries, *see* art galleries
 Ganjnameh 134
 gardens, *see* parks & gardens
 Garmarud 115
 Garmeh 11, 174-5, **11**
 gay travellers 333
 Gazor Khan 113-15
 Genghis Khan 246, 275, 307
 geography 266, 318-19
 Ghal'e-ye Portoghaliha, Hormoz Island 219
 glassware 46-7, 312
golabtoun douzi 217
 Golestan National Park 246-7, 321
 Golestan Palace 37-40
 Gonbad-e Kavus 245-6
gonbads, *see* domes
 Gorgan 237-41, **240**
 government 267, 285

Green Palace 51
 guides 26, *see also* tours
 Bam 232
 Esfahan 165
 Gogan area 242
 Kashan 150
 Kelardasht area 108
 Kerman 227
 Kermanshah 126
 Mashhad 250-2, 254
 Qazvin 110
 Rasht 102
 Semnan 243
 Shiraz 193
 Tabriz 89
 Tehran 55
 Yazd 179
 Zagros Mountains 171
 Gur 203

H

Haddish 200
 Hafez 187, 192, 313, 314
 Haft Cheshmeh 135
haft seen 294
 Haft Tappeh 137
 Hamadan 128-34, **130**
hammams
 Hamam-e Ebrahim Khan 223
 Hamam-e Ganj Ali Khan 223
 Hamam-e Ali Gholi Agha 162
 Hamam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad 148-9
 Hamam-e Vakil 191
 Khan Hamam 120
 Kordasht 95
 Lahijan 105
 Mehdi Gholibek Hamam 253
 Meymand 222
 Nobar Hamam 88
 Ramsar 107
 Safa Hammam 110
 Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad 98
 Toudeshk 173
 Haram-e Razavi 249-52, **252**
 Harireh 207
 Harra Sea Forest 215
 Hasanlu 87
 Hashtpar 100
 Hawasawa 124
 Hazrat-e Masumeh 144
 health 352-5
 Heart-Rending Departure of the Great Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran 19
 heat exhaustion 354
 Hedayat, Sadeq 313-14
 Hegmataneh Hill 131

Hengham 216
 hepatitis 353-4
 hiking, *see* trekking
 history 269-85
 1979 Revolution 282-3
 Achaemenids 270-2
 Ahmadinejad era 284-5
 Alexander the Great 136, 199, 200, 202, 272-3, 306
 books 269, 270, 271, 280, 281, 282, 293, 303
 Elamites 269-70
 Esfahan 153-71
 First Persian Empire 270-2
 Iran-Iraq War 71, 283
 Islam 274
 Khan, Genghis 246, 275, 307
 Khatami & the Reformists 284
 Mashhad 248-9
 Medes 270
 Nader Shah 45-6, 75, 162, 187, 248, 253, 262, 278
 Pahlavi dynasty 280-2
 Parthians 273
 Qajars 279
 Safavids 276-7
 Sassanids 273-4
 Second Persian Empire 273-4
 Seljuks 274-5
 Shiraz 187
 Tabriz 84-5
 Tamerlane 83, 84, 116, 237, 245, 248, 262, 275
 Tehran 35
 Third Persian Empire 276-7
 Western trade 279-81
 hitchhiking 349
 holidays 333-5
 Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini 70-1
 homestays 11, 17
 Hormoz Island 218-19
 horse riding 193, 243, 246, 254, 328
 Hosseiniehs, *see also* mausoleums, tombs
 Al-Mahdi Hosseinieh 244
 Aminiha Hosseinieh 109
 Amir Chakhmaq Complex 178
 Takieh Biglar Begi 126
 Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk 126
 hotels 326-7
 House of the Artists 49
 Howraman 123-4
 Howraman-at-Takht 123-4
 Hulagu Khan 82, 109, 275

I

ice houses
 Meybod 186
 Yakhchal Moayedi 225-6

Imam Khomeini Mosque 37
 Imam Mosque 224-5
 Imam Reza 248, 249-52
 Imam (Naqsh-e Jahan) Square 157-61, **6**
imamzadehs, *see also* mausoleums, tombs
 Duzal 95
 Imamzadeh Abdollah 237
 Imamzadeh Abdullah 140
 Imamzadeh Jafar 245
 Imamzadeh Shah-e Abdal-Azim 71
 Imamzadeh-ye Abd al-Samad 153
 Imamzadeh-ye Ali Ebn-e Hamze 193
 Imamzadeh-ye Hossein 109, 131
 Imamzadeh-ye Mohammed Mahrugh 260
 Imamzadeh-ye Yahya 152
 Tomb of Daniel 137
 immigration 342
 insurance 335, 348, 352
 International Fajr Theatre Festival 18
 internet access 335
 internet resources
 accommodation 327
 bird-watching 320
 carpets 311
 cinema 316
 climbing 327
 health 353
 literature 313
 music 316
 planning 15
 Iran Ebrat Museum 45
 Iran-Iraq War 15, 71, 283
 Isfahan, *see* Esfahan
 Islam 10, 274, 301-3
 Islamic calendar 331
 Islamic holidays 334
 Islamic Republic Day 19
 itineraries 20-3, **20, 21, 22, 23**

J

Jameh Mosques 223
 Ardabil 97
 Damghan 245
 Esfahan 154-5, **155**
 Fahraj 186
 Gorgan 237
 Hamadam 131-2
 Kerman 223
 Kermanshah 126
 Lahijan 105
 Na'in 174
 Natanz 153
 Orumiteh 80
 Qazvin 109

Jami Mosques *continued*

- Sanandaj 120-1
- Semnan 242
- Shushtar 140
- Tabriz 85
- Yazd 177
- Zanjan 116
- Jami mausoleum complex 263
- Jolfa 93-4
- Jorjan 245
- Judaism 303

K

- kababs 296-8
- Kabudi Island 82
- Kakh-e Ali Qapu 161
- Kakh-e Chehel Sotun, Esfahan 161-2
- Kakh-e Chehel Sotun, Qazvin 108
- Kalat 262
- Kaleno 107
- Kaleybar 95-6
- Kaluts, the 230-1
- Kamala 123
- Kandovan 93
- Kang 259
- Karim Khan Zand 35, 39 187, 190, 192, 279
- Kashan 146-52, **147**
- Kazerun 203
- Kelardasht 107-8
- Kerman 222-9, **224-5**
- Kermanshah 124-8, **125**
- Khalid Nibi shrine 247
- Khalij-e Fars, *see* Persian Gulf
- Khalkhoran 97
- Khan, Genghis 246, 275, 307
- Khan, Hulagu 82, 109, 275
- Khan, Kuchuk 101, 279
- Khan-e Abbasian 148
- Khan-e Ameriha 148
- Khan-e Borujerdi 148
- Khan-e Lari 178
- Khan-e Tabatabaei 147
- Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk 192
- Khanegah Dervish Monastery 116
- Khanum (Women's) Mosque 116-17
- Kharanaq 185
- Khatami, Mohammad 267, 284, 294-5
- Khayyam, Omar 260, 290, 314
- Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah 70-1, 281-3, **284**
- Khorramabad 134
- Khotbeh Sara 100
- kidnapping 233, 324

000 Map pages

000 Photo pages

- Kish Island 205-10, **206**
- Kondab 242
- Koran, *see* Quran
- Kordasht 95
- Kordkuy 242
- Kuchuk Khan 101, 279
- Kuh-e Kamtal 95
- Kurdish people 121, 287

L

- Laft 215
- Lahijan 105-6
- Lake Gahar 135
- Lake Orumiyeh 82-3, 321
- Lake Orumiyeh National Park 82, 321
- Lamiasar Castle 113
- language 14, 356-62
 - accommodation 356-7
 - courses 335
 - emergencies 358
 - food 357-8
 - glossary 361-2
 - transport 359
- Larak 216
- Lasjerd 244
- Latkueh 242
- Lavandevil 100
- legal matters 335-6
- lesbian travellers 333
- Lisar 100
- literature 313-15, *see also* books
- Lorish people 134, 287

M

- madrasesh
 - Agha Bozorg Mosque & Madraseh 146
 - Madraseh va Masjed-e Sepahsalar 47
 - Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh 162
 - Madraseh-ye Khan 191
- Magnificent Victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran 18
- Mahan 229-30
- Mahdishahr 244
- majlis* 267, 278, 279, 295
- Makhmalbaf, Mohsen 316
- Makhmalbaf, Samira 316
- Maku 75-8
- Mandanipour, Shahriar 314-15
- Manzadaran 237
- maps 336
- Maran 115
- Maraqeh 83
- Marazakand, 94-5
- Marco Polo 85, 176, 207, 231, 278
- Martyrdom of Imam Reza 18
- Mashhad 248-59, **249, 250, 252**

- accommodation 254-5
- attractions 249-53
- food 255-6
- information 256-7
- shopping 256
- tours 253-4
- travel to/from 258
- travel within 258-9

Mashti 254

- Masjed-e Agha Borzog 146
- Masjed-e Jameh, *see* Jameh Mosques
- Masjed-e Shah (Masjed-e Imam) 158-60, **160**
- Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah 160-1, **6**
- Masuleh 106-7
- mausoleums
 - Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali 229-30
 - Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh 191
 - Baba Taher Mausoleum 130-1
 - Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin 177
 - Boq'eh Chelabi-oglu Mausoleum 116
 - Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi 253
 - Boq'e-ye Hordokieh 259
 - BuAli Sina (Avicenna) Mausoleum 130
 - Ferdosi Mausoleum 259
 - Haram-e Razavi 249-52, **252**
 - Jami mausoleum complex 263
 - Kashef-ol-Saltaneh 105
 - Khalid Nibi shrine 247
 - Moshtari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah 224
 - Nader Shah Mausoleum 253
 - Oljeitu Mausoleum 116
 - Poets' Mausoleum 88
 - Saheb-al Zaman shrine 140
 - Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum 96-7
 - Sheikh Jebra'il 97
 - Sheikh Zahed Mausoleum 106
- Mazdavad 261
- measures 326
- medical services 353
- metro 349
- Meybod 185-6
- Meymand 222
- Milad Tower 55
- Mil-e Gonbad 245-6
- Mil-e Radkan 242
- miniatures 311
- minibus travel 350
- Mirjaveh 235
- Miyando'ab 84
- Mo'alleh Kalayeh 113
- mobile phones 15, 339
- Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah 47, 51, 52, 200, 280-2, 293
- money 14-15, 29, 336-7

mosaferkhanehs 326
 mosques, *see also* Jameh Mosques
 72-Martyrs (Shah) Mosque 253
 Agha Bozorg Mosque & Madrasah
 146
 Azim-e Gohar Shad mosque 251
 Blue (Kabud) Mosque 85-7
 Chahar Padeshah 105
 Haji Fakr 97
 Imam Khomeini (Sultani) Mosque
 242
 Imam Khomeini Mosque 37
 Imam Mosque 224-5
 Jami 'New' Mosque 263
 Kermani Mosque 263
 Khanum (Women's) Mosque 116-17
 Masjid-e Agha Borzog 146
 Masjid-e Ganj Ali Khan 223
 Masjid-e Nasir-al-Molk 191-2
 Masjid-e Shah (Masjed-e Imam)
 158-60, **160**
 Masjid-e Sheikh Lotfollah 160-1, **6**
 Masjid-e Vakil 191
 Mehrabad Mosque 83-4
 Mirza Ali Akbar 97
 Nabi (Shah) Mosque 109
 Sardar Mosque 80
 Tarikhuneh Mosque 245
 Mossadegh, Mohammad 46, 280
 motorcycle travel 343-4, 347-9, **346**
 mountaineering, *see* climbing, rock
 climbing
 Mt Alam 107-8
 Mt Alvand 128, 134
 Mt Belqeis 118
 Mt Damavand 73
 Mt Medovin 107
 Mt Oshaturan 135
 Mt Sabalan 96
 Mt Sahand 93
 Mt Takht-e Soleiman 108
 Mullah Hasan Kashi tomb 116
 museums, *see also* art galleries
 Aks Khaneh 40
 Asef Mansion 120
 Azarbaijan Museum 87-8
 Carpet Museum 252
 Carpet Museum of Iran 48
 Decorative Arts Museum 162
 Film Museum of Iran 49
 Gilan Rural Heritage Museum 101-2
 Glass & Ceramics Museum 46-7
 Hamam-e Ganj Ali Khan 223
 Haram Main Museum 251
 Iran Ebrat Museum 45
 Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk 192
 Mehdi Gholibek Hamam 253
 Museum of Measurement 88

Museum of the Holy Defence 223
 Museum of the Islamic Period 44-5
 Muze-ye Honarha-ye Tazeini 162
 National Jewels Museum 45-6
 National Museum of Iran 41-4
 Niyavaran Palace Museum 52
 Orumiyyeh museum 79
 Ostad Shahriyar house museum 88
 Pars Museum 190
 Persepolis 200
 Qazvin Museum 108-9
 Quran Museum 85
 Rasht 101
 Reza Abbassi Museum 48
 Royal Automobile Museum 51
 Sa'd Abad Museum Complex 49-52
 Sahebqaraniyeh 52
 Shohada Museum 47
 Shush 136-7
 Talar-e Ayaheh 40
 Traditional Musical Instruments
 Museum 226
 Yazd Water Museum 179
 music 315-16

N

Nader Shah 278
 Tehran 45-6, 75
 central Iran 162, 187
 northeastern Iran 248, 253, 262
 Na'in 173-4
 Namak Abrud 107
 Namakdan Cave 216
 Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square
 157-61, **6**
 Naqsh-e Rajab 201
 Naqsh-e Rostam 201-2
 National Jewels Museum 45-6
 National Museum of Iran 41-4
 national parks & reserves 82-3, 320-1
 Neishabur 260-1, **279**
 newspapers 326
 Niasar 152
 No Ruz 19, 294, 326, 335
 nomadic people 9, 172, 288, **3**
 Norduz 95
 northeastern Iran 31, 236-64, **238-9**
 accommodation 236
 climate 236
 food 236
 highlights 238
 itineraries 23, **23**
 travel seasons 236
 Noshahr 107
 Nosratabad 119
 nuclear energy 267-8
 Nushabad 152

O

Oljeitu Mausoleum 116
 Omar Khayyam Tomb Complex
 260, **279**
 opening hours 329
 Orumiyyeh 79-82, **80**

P

painting 311
 Palace of 100 Columns 200-1
 palaces
 Ali Qapu Palace 161
 Apadana Palace 199, **272, 274**
 Ardasher's Palace 203
 Audience Palace 202
 Chehel Sotun Palace, Esfahan 161-2
 Chehel Sotun Palace, Qazvin 108
 Cyrus's Private Palace 202
 Golestan Palace 37-40
 Green Palace 51
 Hadish 200
 Kakh-e Ali Qapu 161
 Kakh-e Chehel Sotun, Esfahan
 161-2
 Kakh-e Chehel Sotun, Qazvin 108
 Kakh-e Eram 193
 Kakh-e Hasht Behesht 162
 Khorshid Palace 262
 Niyavaran Palace 52
 Palace H 200
 Palace of 100 Columns 200-1
 Palace of Darius 136
 Palace of Shapur 203
 Qal'eh-e Doktor 203
 Tachara 200
 White Palace 51
 Palangan 123
 parks & gardens
 Bagh-e Chehel Sotun 162
 Bagh-e Dolat Abad 177
 Bagh-e Eram 193
 Bagh-e Fin 149-50
 Bagh-e Harandi 226
 Bagh-e Mahrugh 260
 Bagh-e Naranjistan 192
 Bagh-e Nazar 190
 Bagh-e Shahzde 230-1
 Elgoli (Shahgoli) Park 88
 Khaqani garden 87
 Park-e Jamshidiyeh 53-4, 60
 Park-e Laleh 47
 Park-e Mellat 48
 Park-e Shahr 40-1
 Pasargadae 202, **271**
 passports 324, 342
 Pavah 124
 Peacock Throne 45
 people 6, 13, 286-8, *see also*
individual ethnic groups

Persepolis 8, 198-201, **198, 9, 272, 274**

Persian Gulf 31, 204-19, **205**

Persian Gulf *continued*
accommodation 204

climate 204

food 204

highlights 205

travel seasons 204

Persian people 286

photography 324, 337-8

planning, *see also individual regions*

budgeting 14, 299

calendar of events 18-19

children 329-30, 355

health 352-3

internet resources 15

Iran basics 14-15, 28-9

Iran's regions 30-1

itineraries 20-3, **20, 21, 22, 23**

tours 26-7

travel seasons 14

visas 15, 24-7, *see also visa extensions*

plants 319

plastic surgery 54

poetry 13, 274, 313

Pol 246

Pol-e Khaju 163

Pol-e Si-o-Seh 163

politics 266-8

pollution 64, 70, 97, 322

Polo, Marco 85, 176, 207, 231, 278

population 266, 286-7

postal services 338

Prison of Solomon 202

public holidays 333-5

Q

Qal'eh Rudkhan 105

qalyans 298

Qamsar 152

qanats 179

Qarachilar 95

Qaravolkhana 118

Qareh Kalisa 78-9

Qashqa'i people 172, **3, 9**

Qazvin 108-12, **110**

Qeshm Island 214-18, **215**

Qeshm Island Geopark 215-16

Qeshm Town 215

Qom 143-5, **144**

Quran, the 147, 162, 191, 223, 294, 302, 311, **10**

R

radio 326

Radkan 260

Radkan Tower 260

Ramazan 19, 334

Ramsar 106-7

Rasht 100-4, **102**

Rayen 231

Razmian 113

religion 267, 301-3, *see also individual religions*

Rey 71

Reza, Imam 248, 249-52

Reza Shah 39, 40, 47, 51, 52, 107, 279-80, 293

road distance chart **346**

rock carvings

Bisotun 128

Chogan Gorge 203

Ganjnameh 134

Kalat 262

Taq-e Bustan 125-6

rock climbing 328, *see also climbing*

Rudbarak 107

Rumi 314

S

Sa'di 187, 192, 313, 314

safe travel 28-9, 324, 330-2, 338

alcohol & drugs 181

crime 324

drug smugglers 233

earthquakes 330-1

kidnapping 233, 324

police & security forces 324, 336, 344

pollution 64, 70

traffic 63-4, 324, 331-2

saffron 256

Safi od-Din, Sheikh 96-7, 276

Safi-od-Din Mausoleum 96-7

Sahebqaraniyah 52

Salosel Castle 139-40

Sanandaj 119-22, **120**

sanctions 29

Sang Bast 262

Sang-e Shir 132

Sarakhs 261

Sari 237

Saryazd 186

savaris 350-1

Seh Gonbad 80

Selin 124

Semnan 242-4

Sepid Dasht 135

Sepidan 173

Sero 78

Seyhoun Art Gallery 49

Shafi Abad 230

Shah Abbas I 276-7, 307, 308, 311

central Iran 144, 153, 157-8, 158, 160, 161, 163, 186

northeastern Iran 248

Persian Gulf 211, 218

southeastern Iran 230

Shah Hamzeh Bazm 202

Shahdad 230-1

Shahmirzad 244-5

Shahrchay Dam 80

Shahr-e Kord 172

Shahrud Valley 112-13

Shapur I 108, 203, 139, 260, 273-4

Shapur II 125, 136

Sheikh Safi od-Din 96-7, 276

Shemshak 72-3, **10**

Shevi Waterfall 135

Shibderaz 216, 217

Shiism 10, 301-3

Shikhlar 118

Shiraz 13, 187-98, **188-9, 6-7, 13**

accommodation 193-5

attractions 187-98

drinking 195-6

food 195-6

information 196-7

shopping 196

tours 193

travel to/from 197

travel within 197-8

shrines, *see Hosseiniyehs, imamzadehs, mausoleums, tombs*

Shush 136-7

Shushtar 138-40

Silk Road 278, **276-7**

Sir 80

Siyah Rud 95

skiing 328-9

Alborz Mountains 10, 18, 107, **10**

Dizin 72

Shemshak 72-3, **10**

Shiraz area 193

Tabriz area 88

Tarik Dare 134

Tehran area 54, 71-3

Zagros Mountains 172, 173

soccer 62, 292

Soltaniyeh 115-16

southeastern Iran 31, 220-35, **221**

accommodation 220

climate 220

food 220

000 Map pages

000 Photo pages

highlights 221
 travel seasons 220
 sports, see football
 Strait of Hormoz 211
 Sufism 302-3
 Sunniism 301
 Sust 100
 swimming 208

T

ta'arof 290
 Tabriz 84-93, **86**
 accommodation 89-90
 activities 88
 attractions 85-8
 drinking 90
 food 90-1
 information 91
 tours 88-9
 travel to/from 91-2
 travel within 92-3
 Tahmasp I 35, 84, 108, 276
 Takht-e Soleiman 118-19
 Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk 126
 Talezang 135
 Tamerlane 83, 84, 116, 237, 245, 248,
 262, 275
 Tang-e Chogan 203
 Tappeh-ye Seyalk (Sialk) 149
 Taq-e Bustan 125-6
 taxi travel 349-51
 Taybad 263
 tea 104, 299
 Tehran 11, 30, 34-73, **36, 38-9, 40,**
 42-3, 50, 53, 11
 accommodation 34, 55-7
 activities 52-4
 attractions 35-55
 bazaar 37, 62-3, **40**
 climate 34
 drinking 60-1
 entertainment 61-2
 food 34, 57-60
 highlights 36
 information 63-5
 itineraries 37
 shopping 62-3
 tours 55
 travel seasons 34
 travel to/from 65-7
 travel within 67-70
 telephone services 15, 338-9
 theft 324
 tiles 305
 time 339
 tipping 337
 Tochal Telecabin 54
 toilets 339

Tomb of Daniel 137
 tombs
 Aramgah-e Hafez 192, **13**
 Aramgah-e Sa'di 192
 Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali
 229-30
 Artaxerxes II & III 200
 Ayatollah Khomeini 70-1
 Bogh'e-ye Sayyed Mir
 Mohammad 191
 Cyrus II (the Great) 202, **271**
 Darius I & II 201
 Elamite royal tombs 138
 Esther & Mordecai Tomb 129-30
 Haram-e Razavi 249-52, **252**
 Hazrat-e Masumeh 144
 Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini 70-1
 Imam Reza 251
 Khajeh Taj ad-Din 146
 Kuchuk Khan 101
 Mullah Hasan Kashi tomb 116
 Naqsh-e Rostam 201-2
 Omar Khayyam Tomb Complex
 260, **279**
 Sheikh Alome Shushtari Shrine 140
 Sheikh Attar 260
 Tomb of Cyrus 202, **271**
 Tomb of Daniel 137
 Tomb of Hafez 192, **13**
 Tomb of Sa'di 192
 Tomb of Shah Ne'matollah Vali
 229-30
 Tomb of the 12 Imams 178
 Xerxes I 201
 Torbat-e Jam 262-3
 Torqabeh 259
 Toudeshk Cho 173
 tourist information 339
 tours 26-7, 328, see also guides
 4WD 178, 216, 242
 adventure 328
 Bam 232
 Bavanat region 202
 camel trekking 174, 179, 328
 Dasht-e Kavir 173, 174, 175, 178, 186
 Esfahan 165
 Golestan National Park 246
 Kashan 150
 Kerman 227
 Mashhad 250-2, 253-4
 Persepolis 201
 Qeshm Island 215, 216
 Shiraz 193
 Tabriz 88-9
 Tehran 55
 Yazd 179
 Zagros Mountains 173

towers
 Akhangan Tower 259
 Allah-Allah tower 96
 Azadi Tower 54-5
 Borg-argavan Shah 262
 Borj-e Qorban 131
 Khorshid Palace 262
 Milad Tower 55
 Mil-e Gonbad 245-6
 Pigeon Towers 164-5
 Radkan Tower 260
 Towers of Silence 179
 traffic 331-2
 train travel 345, 351
 Dorud-Andimeshk Railway 135-6
 travel literature 266-7, 282
 travel seasons 14, 326
 travel to/from Iran 342-5
 travel within Iran 345-51
 travellers cheques 337
 trekking 329
 Alamut Valley 110, 113-15
 Alborz Mountains 107
 Darband 52-3
 Dasht-e Kavir 174, 179
 Gorgan area 237
 Mashhad area 254, 259
 Mt Alvand area 134-5
 Mt Sabalan 96
 Shiraz area 193
 Takht-e Soleiman area 118
 Tehran area 52-4
 Zagros Mountains 173
 Zardkoud Mountains 135
 Turkmen people 243, 287
 turtles 215, 216
 Tus 259-60
 TV 326

U

Unesco World Heritage Sites 304
 Bagh-e Chehel Sotun 162
 Bagh-e Dolat Abad 177
 Bagh-e Eram 193
 Bagh-e Fin 149-50
 Bisotun 128
 Choqa Zanbil 10, 138, **10**
 Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square
 157-61, **6**
 Oljeitu Mausoleum 116
 Pasargadae gardens 202
 Persepolis 8, 198-201, **198, 9,**
 272, 274
 Qeshm Island Geopark 215-16
 Safi-od-din Mausoleum 96-7
 Shushtar's irrigation system 139
 Tabriz bazaar 85
 Takht-e Soleiman 118-19

Urmia (Orumiye) 79-82, **80**
 US Den of Espionage 47
 Ushtebin 95

V

vacations 333-5
 vaccinations 353
 Valasht Mountain Lake 107
 vegetarian travellers 299-300
 visa extensions 27
 Esfahan 169
 Gorgan 241
 Hamadan 133
 Kerman 228
 Mashhad 256, 257
 Rasht 104
 Shiraz 196-7
 Tabriz 91
 Tehran 65
 Yazd 184
 Zahedan 235

visas 15, 24-7, *see also* passports
 vulture, bearded 320, 321

W

walking, *see* trekking
 walking tours 159, 180, **159, 180**
 water skiing 208

weather 14, 330, *see also individual regions*
 websites, *see* internet resources
 weights 326
 West Radkan tower 242
 western Iran 30, 74-141, **76-7**
 accommodation 74
 climate 74
 food 74
 highlights 76
 itineraries 22, **22**
 travel seasons 74

White Palace 51
 wildlife 319-20
 windtowers, *see badgirs*
 women in Iran 291-5
 women travellers 29, 339-41, 349, 355
 World Heritage Sites, *see* Unesco
 World Heritage Sites

X

Xerxes I 129, 134, 198, 199, 200, 201, 272

Y

Yasuj 173
 Yazd 8, 175-85, **176, 3, 8**
 accommodation 181-2

attractions 176-9
 drinking 183
 food 183
 information 184
 shopping 184
 tours 179
 travel to/from 185
 travel within 185
 walking tour 180, **180**

Yuj 115

Z

Zagros Mountains 171-3, 318, **3, 17**
 Zahedan 233-5, **234**
 Zanjan 116-18, **117**
 Zayandeh River 163
 Zein-o-din 186
 Zendan-e Soleiman 119
 ziggurats 149, 305
 Ziyarat 237
 Zoroastrian Cemetery 179
 Zoroastrianism 118, 164, 269, 303, 331, *see also* fire temples
 Zoshk 259
 zurkhanehs
 Ardabil 97
 Rayen 231
 Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh 178

how to use this book

These symbols will help you find the listings you want:

- | | | |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Sights | Tours | Drinking |
| Beaches | Festivals & Events | Entertainment |
| Activities | Sleeping | Shopping |
| Courses | Eating | Information/Transport |

These symbols give you the vital information for each listing:

- | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Telephone Numbers | Wi-Fi Access | Bus |
| Opening Hours | Swimming Pool | Ferry |
| Parking | Vegetarian Selection | Metro |
| Nonsmoking | English-Language Menu | Subway |
| Air-Conditioning | Family-Friendly | London Tube |
| Internet Access | Pet-Friendly | Tram |
| | | Train |

Reviews are organised by author preference.

Look out for these icons:

- Our author's recommendation
- No payment required
- A green or sustainable option

Our authors have nominated these places as demonstrating a strong commitment to sustainability – for example by supporting local communities and producers, operating in an environmentally friendly way, or supporting conservation projects.

Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Buddhist
- Castle
- Christian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery
- Ruin
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Diving/Snorkelling
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Skiing
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity/Course/Tour

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating

- Eating

Drinking

- Drinking
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Transport

- Airport
- Border Crossing
- Bus
- Cable Car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol Station
- Taxi
- Train/Railway
- Tram
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed Road
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian
- Overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour
- Detour
- Path

Geographic

- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Swamp/Mangrove
- Reef
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Glacier

Areas

- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Park/Forest
- Sportsground
- Sight (Building)
- Top Sight (Building)



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

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