Herat & Northwestern Afghanistan

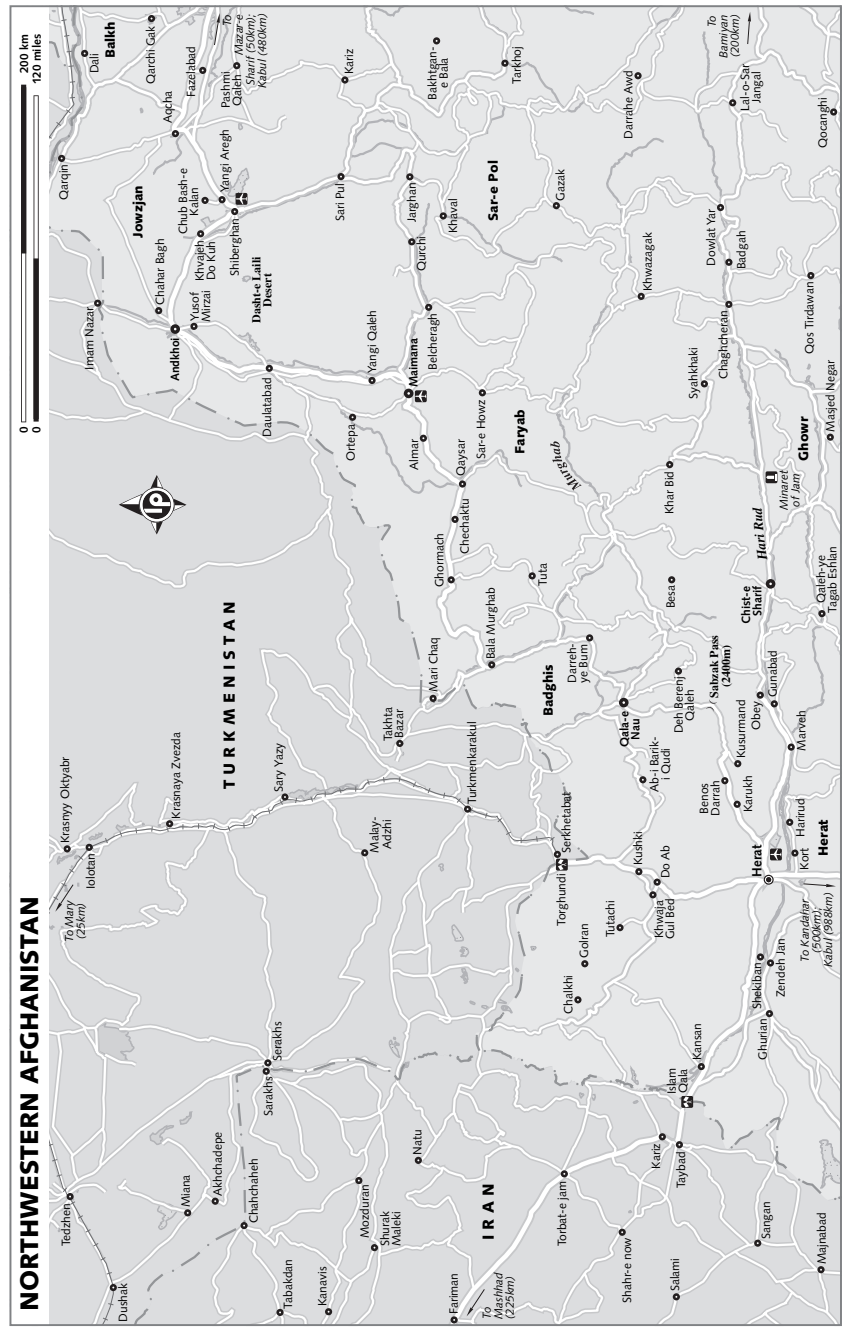
هرات و شمال غرب افغانستان

'Khorasan is the oyster shell of the world, and Herat is its pearl', says an old proverb, referring to this Afghan city's pre-eminence in a region that covered much of medieval Iran and Turkmenistan. It's a saying that still holds much truth, for Herat still shines as the cultural centre of Afghanistan, a seat of poetry, learning and architecture. Invaders from Genghis Khan to the Russians have all taken turns at flattening it, but Herat still manages to hold its head high, offer its visitors tea and suggest they sample its attractions. And there's much to take in, from the Citadel that towers over the Old City to its glorious Friday Mosque and many shrines. Those coming from Kabul will be equally amazed by the efficiency of its infrastructure, not least the electricity supply.

From this ancient Silk Road oasis, the road crosses the Safed Koh mountains – the last outpost of the Hindu Kush – to reach the northwest. Here the land flattens out to form part of the Central Asian steppe, a semidesert that's home to Kuchi nomads and Turkmen and Uzbek farmers. This is the main centre for the greatest of the country's folk arts, the Afghan carpet, and the bright swatches of knotted wool contrast sharply with the dusty landscape that produces them.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaze in awe at the dazzling mosaic tiling of the **Friday Mosque** (p136) in Herat
- Contemplate poetry with the Sufis at **Gazar Gah** (p138), one of Afghanistan's holiest sites
- Climb the battlements of Herat's **Citadel** (p137) for sweeping views across the city
- Haggle for carpets at the bazaar in **Andkhoi** (p144), the northwest's most traditional market town



RISK ASSESSMENT

Herat has traditionally been an area of peace and prosperity, but since the removal of Ismail Khan it has exhibited regular signs of instability, including a number of bombs and riots. Although the city was calm at the time of going to press, check the situation before travelling. Iranian penetration of the city may also cause problems in the event of Western military activity towards Iran.

The route northwest from Herat to Maimana should be avoided due to chronic lawlessness and anti-government armed groups in Badghis province, which is particularly remote. Attacks against police in the Bala Murghab district are common.

CLIMATE

Western Afghanistan feels a world away from the high peaks that otherwise dominate much of the country. Crossed by the low Safed Koh mountains, the land is flat and open, stretching out to the Iranian Plateau and Central Asian steppe. The climate is accordingly hot and dry, dominated around Herat by the *Bad-e Sad o Bist* (Wind of 120 Days) that blows from the end of spring to the start of autumn, carrying a desiccating dust. Summer temperatures can reach 38°C, dropping to just below freezing from December to February.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Transport connections around the northwest and to the rest of Afghanistan can be patchy. From Herat, the highway to Kabul runs through the restive south via Kandahar, making travel extremely dangerous for foreigners. Alternative road routes are challenging for different reasons: either the central route through the Hindu Kush to Bamiyan, or the northwest route to Maimana, Andkhoi and Shiberghan along probably the worst road in the country. Both choices are rough and uncomfortable rides, and highly susceptible to the changing seasons. Andkhoi and Shiberghan are both on the tarmac highway to Mazar-e Sharif.

Daily flights link Herat and Kabul, with regular flights between Herat and Mazar-e Sharif, as well as a less reliable service linking Maimana and Shiberghan to the capital.

Cross-border travel is relatively straightforward, with direct bus links connecting Herat to Mashhad in Iran. Onward travel to Turkmenistan is possible, although the paperwork and permits can take some arranging.

HERAT هرات

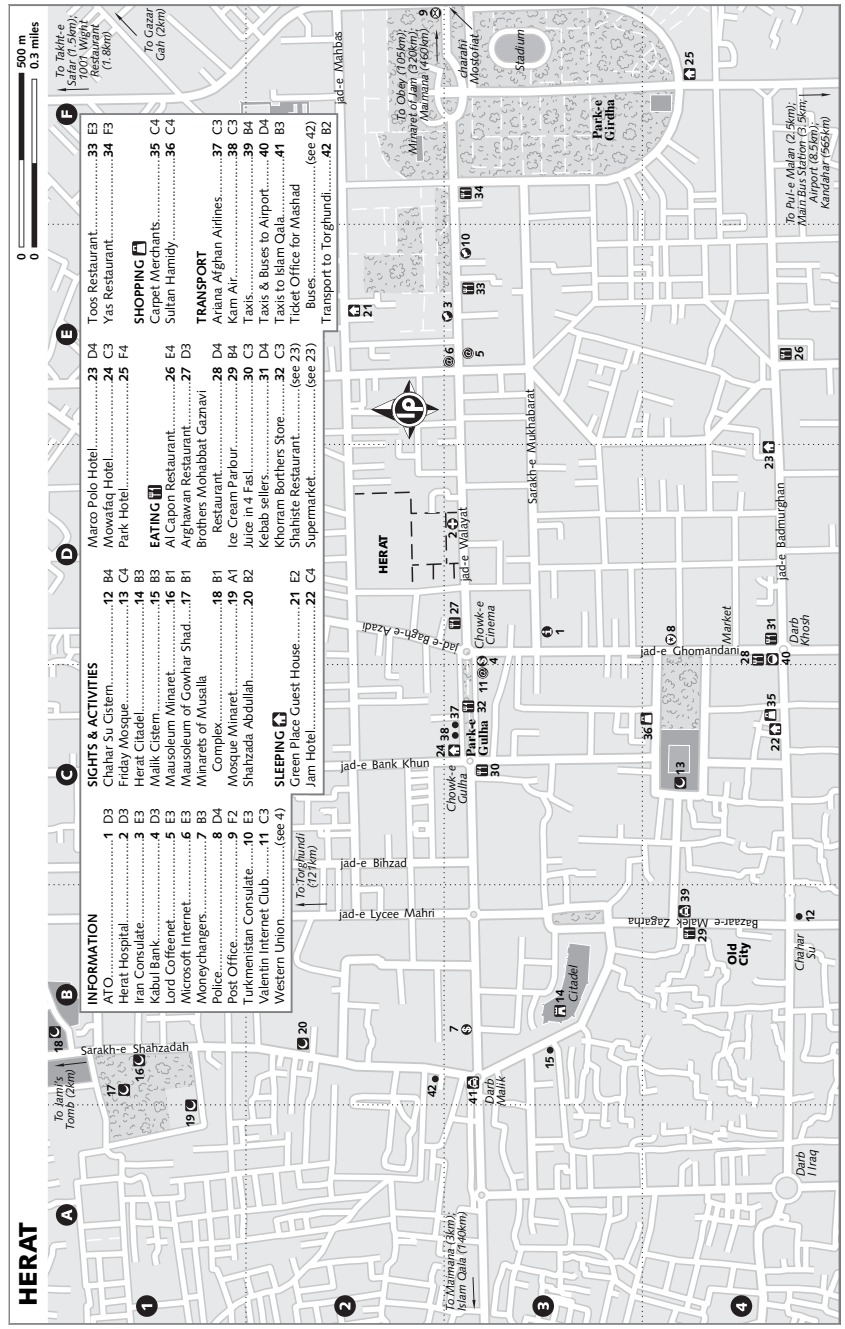
☎ 040 / pop 250,000

Perhaps more than any other city in Afghanistan, Herat speaks of the country's position at the heart of the Silk Road. At the crossroads of trade routes leading to the Middle East, Central Asia and India, Herat has often been coveted by neighbouring powers as a valuable prize. It has flourished throughout history as a rich city-state, a centre of learning and commerce and even one-time capital of the Timurid empire. Such history has given the city a cultured air of independence that can sometimes make Kabul seem a long way away. In the 1970s, Herat was a popular stop on the Hippy Trail for its relaxed air, and rightly so.

Herat's place in history has often been overlooked in favour of Samarkand and Bukhara, but its inhabitants are proud of their past and the city's reputation as a place of culture. Although many of the monuments to Herat's glorious past are in a sorry state, ruined by British and Russian invaders, the city is still the most rewarding sightseeing location in Afghanistan. With its Friday Mosque the city still possesses one of the greatest buildings in the Islamic world, while the Old City is one of the few in Afghanistan to retain its medieval street plan.

Herat's post-Taliban recovery has been less rocky than other parts of the country, due in no small part to the customs revenues from trade with nearby Iran. Visitors coming from Kabul will instantly notice the difference: a reliable power supply, streetlights and public parks. Although street crime can occasionally be a problem, it suddenly seems remarkable to see families out on the streets at 10pm going to ice-cream parlours.

Things haven't been a bed of roses, however. Despite his removal by Hamid Karzai, Herat's longtime 'amir' Ismail Khan continues to dominate the city's political



HERAT & NORTHWESTERN AFGHANISTAN

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and economic scene, and the city's links to neighbouring Iran play an important role. The insecurity along the Herat–Kandahar highway occasionally ripples back to the city, although the presence of an Italian-led PRT has generally been well received.

HISTORY

Herat's history begins as Aria, an outpost of the Achaemenid empire, overrun in Alexander the Great's eastward expansion. In typical fashion he renamed it Alexander Arian in his own honour. The city grew and reaped the benefits of the new Silk Road under the Kushans and Sassanids and into the Islamic era.

Herat's expansion was checked by the visitations of Genghis Khan in 1221, who characteristically levelled the place, killing all but 40 of the populace after they rebelled against his power. But this just proved to be the preface for the city's greatest period, as a new power thundered out of the steppe 150 years later.

Timur founded his empire at Samarkand, but following his death in 1405, the capital moved southwest to Herat. Under Timur's son, Shah Rukh, Herat became one of the greatest centres of medieval Islamic culture and learning. A patron of the arts, Shah Rukh packed his court with scholars, poets and painters. Jami composed his greatest poems here and Bihzad's refined miniature painting would later go on to influence Indian art. The ruler's wife, the extraordinary Gowhar Shad (see boxed text, p138), commissioned many fine buildings from mosques to madrassas.

Such glory couldn't last. After Shah Rukh's death, there was a debilitating squabble for succession and Timurid power started to wane. Sultan Baiqara provided one last hurrah at the start of the 16th century, but the rot had set in. The future Mughal emperor Babur visited Herat at this time and left a lively description of the city, joking that you only had to stretch your leg to kick a poet, and complaining of the royal court's drunkenness. In fact, Baiqara so preferred to drink wine rather than exercise power that Timur's empire soon fell under the arrows of Uzbek invaders.

Herat spent the next centuries being fought over by the Mughals and Safavids. It finally regained its independence only to find itself swept up in the superpower rivalry of the Great Game.

The Persians were the first to make a move on the city, laying siege to it in 1837. Russian officers aided the Persian army, while a single British officer, Eldred Pottinger, rallied Herat's defenders. The Afghans held the day, but the siege influenced British policy for the remainder of the 19th century. Herat was dubbed the 'Gateway to India' and the British were insistent it should stay in their realm of influence – and out of Russian hands.

Dost Mohammed incorporated Herat into the Afghan kingdom in 1863, but trouble was never far away. Russian expansion towards the border in 1885 nearly brought the imperial powers to war. The British ordered Herat be prepared for an attack and many of Gowhar Shad's buildings were demolished to allow a clear line of artillery fire for the defenders, although war was ultimately averted.

After this, Herat's population were happy to be left alone for most of the 20th century, but still resented Kabul's influence. It declared support for the rebel Bacha Saqao when he seized the throne from Amanullah in 1929 and increasingly resented the communist influence from the capital in the 1970s. Events came to a head in March 1979 when the city rose in open revolt. Led by local mullahs and a mutinous army garrison commanded by Ismail Khan, around 100 Russian advisors were killed with their families. The Russians helped the government quell the rebellion – by carpet-bombing the Old City. Around 20,000 civilians were killed.

Following invasion, the mujaheddin harried the Russians, in one of the most hidden corners of the war. Iran provided crucial support. After the Russian withdrawal in 1989, the city quickly fell to the mujaheddin, with Ismail Khan installed as Herat's ruler.

Nothing could save the city from the ascendant Taliban, however. In 1995 the city's army crumbled in the teeth of a Taliban advance and Herat was captured without a fight. Ismail Khan himself was taken prisoner, but later escaped to Iran.

The educated Heratis chafed under the occupation and Iran closed its borders. Herat's population swelled with an influx of internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing drought.

Ismail Khan returned at the end of 2001 as the Taliban were swept from power. Increasingly conservative with age, he retained his own army and a version of the Taliban's Vice and Virtue Police, styling himself as the Emir of Herat. The city, however, boomed on customs revenues from trade with Iran, once again becoming a quasi-independent city-state, as it has been for much of its history.

Central control over Herat (and its taxes) finally came in late 2004 with Ismail Khan's replacement as governor, an event accompanied with much rioting. Local politics have trodden a sometimes uneasy path since, but the city still remains a beacon of progress compared with much of the country.

ORIENTATION

Herat sits in a wide plain, watered by the Hari Rud. To the north the ridges of the Safed Koh mark the boundary with the Central Asian steppe; to the south the road leads to Kandahar and the Indian subcontinent.

Only the core of Herat's Old City remains, around the crossroads of Chahar Su and the Friday Mosque. The Citadel dominates the northern edge of the Old City, looking out to the minarets of the ruined Musalla Complex. West of this is the wasteland created by Soviet carpet-bombing. Much of this area is undergoing a boom of new building, with glass-fronted villas sprouting up almost daily.

The New Town (Shahr-e Nau) is east and north of the walled city, home to the majority of government and NGO offices. The streets are lined with tall pine trees and decorated with parks, considerably improving the urban environment. Watch out for the working traffic lights – almost unheard of in Afghanistan.

Herat's airport is 8km south of the city. If arriving overland from Iran, Herat's minarets make a ready landmark. Most road transport leaves from the area south of the minarets, near Darb Malik on the edge of the Old City.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 040 223413)
ANSO West (☎ 070 405 697/079 9322 192)
Fire Brigade (☎ 040 445721)
ISAF (☎ 079 9885 181)
Police (☎ 040 222200; Jad-e Ghomandani, opposite the Friday Mosque)

Internet

Prices are around 50Afg per hour.
Lord Coffeenet (Jad-e Walayat)
Microsoft Internet (Jad-e Walayat)
Valentin Internet Club (cnr of Park-e Gulha & Jad-e Ghomandi)

Medical Services

The area around the main hospital has plenty of pharmacies.
Herat Hospital (☎ 040 223412; Jad-e Walayat)

Money

Street moneychangers remain the best option in Herat: there are stands between Darb Malik and Chowk-e Gulha.
Kabul Bank (cnr of Park-e Gulha & Jad-e Ghomandi) Has a branch of Western Union inside.

Post & Telephone

Phone stands and PCOs are everywhere in Herat.
FedEx (☎ 040 220301; charahi Haji Ayoub)
Post Office (charahi Mostofiat)

Tourist Information

ATO (Afghan Tourist Organisation; ☎ 040 223210; Sarakh-e Mukharabat) Can provide drivers and guides for US$40 a day each (US$20 for half a day) and also arrange transport to the Minaret of Jam.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Since Ismail Khan left Herat, security has decreased slightly. Political problems have occasionally spilled onto the streets, usually in the form of quick-to-fire demonstrations. As always, keep an ear very close to the ground. In 2006, violence also flared between Sunni and Shiite groups during Ashura.

Crime has reportedly become more of a problem in Herat, with an increase in street robberies. Several female international workers have reported severe harassment, bordering on violence, so particular care should be taken when walking in the city.

SIGHTS

Old City

Herat's Old City, measuring approximately 1200 sq metres, is the most complete traditional medieval city in Afghanistan. Four main streets branch out from the bazaar of Chahar Su (literally 'four directions'), quartering the city and leading to the old gates that once pierced the city walls (they

HERAT & NORTHWESTERN AFGHANISTAN

were pulled down in the 1950s). Characteristic of medieval urban design, the Old City has three focuses – the commercial centre (Chahar Su), the Royal Centre (the Citadel, opposite) and the Religious Centre (the Friday Mosque, right).

The four main roads leading from **Chahar Su** are lined with booths and shops. Until the 1930s, these roads were covered, with Chahar Su itself crowned with a large dome. Only small portions of the old vaulting survive, in the southeast corner of the city. Behind the shops there are plenty of serais – enclosures for caravans that served as warehouses and inns for traders and craftsmen.

Away from the main thoroughfares, the streets turn into a labyrinth of unpaved lanes, hiding the city's houses behind high mud walls. Wandering the streets and serais is one of the best ways to get a taste of traditional Herati – and Afghan – urban life.

That the Old City survived the Soviet carpet-bombing of Herat is a miracle, but its fabric is now under threat from the city's construction boom. Unlike Kabul, where an official ban on new construction in the Old City prevails, Herat's historic quarter is undergoing 'redevelopment' on an unprecedented scale. In the absence of building controls, owners are demolishing historic properties to rebuild in the popular modern glass-and-concrete style, with little thought for the city's character.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is currently working with Herat's government to rescue buildings and create a sustainable development plan for the Old City. Using a mix of satellite imagery and door-to-door surveys, they produced the first detailed map of the Old City, showing over 15,000 buildings with 62,000 residents, but with old buildings being lost on a weekly basis. AKTC has launched a conservation programme for several historic houses that promotes traditional building techniques, encourages self-built repairs and shows the potential for improving living conditions within traditional city homes.

AKTC has also helped restore Herat's traditional cisterns. The **Chahar Su Cistern**, at the centre of the Old City, and the **Malik Cistern**, opposite the western gate of the Citadel, are what remain of Herat's medieval water-supply system. Filled by aqueducts, they provided year-round clean water for the city's residents, even during the Persian siege of 1837–8. They only ran dry during the 1980s. Both have gorgeous brick vaulted ceilings, with the octagonal Chahar Su Cistern having a span of over 20m. Surrounded by bazaars and mosques, the cistern's restoration should hopefully provide a focus for further economic regeneration in the Old City, although at the time of writing their exact future use was under discussion with community leaders.

Friday Mosque

Over 800 hundred years old, Herat's **Friday Mosque** (Masjid-e Jami; ☹ closed to non-Muslims during Fri prayers) is Afghanistan's finest Islamic building, and one of the greatest in Central Asia. A master class in the art of tile mosaic, its bright colours and intricate detailing are an exuberant hymn in praise of Allah.

Most visitors enter the mosque via the park on its eastern side, which leads up to a huge and richly tiled façade. The entrance corridors are to either side of this, but they are frequently locked outside the main prayer hours, forcing visitors to gain access to the mosque proper via the small street entrance on its northern wall. This is actually a more atmospheric choice, as the cool dark of the entrance corridor suddenly gives way to a bright sunburst of colour as you enter the main courtyard. Don't forget to remove your shoes at this point.

The mosque is laid out in a classical plan of four *iwans* (barrel-vaulted halls) with arcaded walls around a central courtyard nearly 100m long. Two huge minarets flank the main *iwan*. Almost every square centre is covered in breathtaking mosaic, surrounded by blue bands of Quranic script. Only the simple whitewash of the *iwans* adds a note of modesty. The minarets, with their repeated bands of stylised flowers, arabesques and geometric patterns are simply dizzying.

The mosque was originally laid out by the Ghorid Sultan Ghiyasuddin in 1200. Originally it would have had quite a different appearance, as the Ghorids preferred plain brick and stucco decoration. The Timurids restored the mosque in the 15th century and introduced the bright mosaic, but by the early 20th century so much of this had been lost that visitors remarked on the mosque's dullness.

The lavish tiling that now covers the mosque is the product of the mosque's tile workshop, an ongoing restoration project since the 1940s. While many of the mosaics are based on Timurid originals, the workshop has also introduced its own designs, colours and calligraphy. This traditional-meets-modern approach has led to the creation one of the gems of contemporary Islamic abstract expressionism.

The workshop is in a courtyard to the left of the main portal entrance in the garden – ask to visit it at the small office of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, just inside. The courtyard also contains one of the few remnants of the original Ghorid decoration, overlaid with Timurid tiling – a demonstration of the continuum of artistic styles that the mosque has witnessed. The craftsmen are normally happy to show off their work, from glazing the raw tiles to laying out the intricate mosaics.

It's normally not a problem to take photos in the mosque, but this should be avoided during prayer times. Early morning is the best time to catch the light on the tiles. Donations for the mosque's upkeep can be placed in the ceremonial bronze cauldron in the eastern arcade. Cast in the 13th century, it would have originally been filled with sweet drinks for worshippers on religious holidays.

Herat Citadel

Towering over the Old City, the **Herat Citadel** (Qala-ye Ikhtiyaruddin; admission 250Afg; ☹ 8am-5pm) has watched over Herat's successes and setbacks with its imposing gaze for centuries. The oldest building in Herat, it is believed to stand on the foundations of a fort built by Alexander the Great. It has served as a seat of power, military garrison and prison since its construction until 2005, when the Afghan army presented it to the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, opening its doors to outsiders for the first time.

The Citadel is built on an artificial mound and stretches 250m east to west. Its 18 towers rise over 30m above street level, with walls 2m thick. A moat once completed the defences, although this was drained in 2003 to lay out a public park in the grounds. The present structure was largely built by Shah Rukh in 1415, after Timur trashed what little Genghis Khan had left standing. At this time, the exterior was covered with the monumental Kufic script of a poem proclaiming the castle's grandeur, 'never to be altered by the tremors of encircling time'. Sadly, most of this tiling has been lost bar a small section on the northwest wall, the so-called 'Timurid Tower'.

Time's tremors inevitably did great damage to the Citadel. Repeated conquerors pillaged the Citadel, with locals prizing the valuable roof-beams and baked bricks. The greatest indignity came in 1953 when Herat's army commander ordered its complete demolition in order to move his military base on the outskirts of the city. Only the direct intervention of King Zahir Shah halted the destruction. Subsequent neglect caused several sections to collapse. An extensive renovation programme was launched in the 1970s, completed just two months before the Soviet invasion.

Visitors enter through the modern western entrance to the Citadel's lower enclosure. Most of this section is currently closed, so you are instead led through an imposing wooden gate and atrium to the upper enclosure. This is the most heavily fortified part of the Citadel and has its own wells, which were used to allow defenders to withstand sieges. Archaeological excavations are still ongoing in the main courtyard. To the left, there is a small hammam with beautifully painted but damaged walls, showing flowers and peacocks.

The biggest attraction is the Citadel's huge curtain wall topped with battlements. These offer tremendous views over Herat, looking south towards Chahar Su, and north to the minarets of the Musalla Complex. It's also possible to make out the last remains of the Old City walls.

Leaving by the western gate there is a small museum, which is planned to open in 2007.

Musalla Complex & Minarets

Herat's Musalla was Gowhar Shad's masterpiece, comprising a mosque, madrassa, mausoleum and over 20 minarets. At its height, it rivalled any of the great showpieces of Islamic architecture from Samarkand to Esfahan. Today, only five minarets and Gowhar Shad's mausoleum remain. The loss of the rest is a testament to the sorrier type of imperial meddling in Afghan politics.

HERAT & NORTHWESTERN AFGHANISTAN

The **Mausoleum of Gowhar Shad** (Bagh-e Gowhar Shad; admission free; ☼ 8am-sunset) sits in a small park, currently undergoing extensive replanting. It's a textbook example of Timurid architecture, with its square box topped with a high drum and ribbed melon dome, albeit one largely denuded of its turquoise tiling. The door to Gowhar Shad's tombstone is normally locked, but the *chowkidar (caretaker)* can unlock it for you. The inside dome is beautifully painted in blue and rust-red. Shah Rukh was also originally buried here, until Ulughbek removed his body to Samarkand. Also inside are the broken remains of the mosaic that covered the exterior, mostly knocked off by Soviet shelling. The building next door holds the tomb of Mir Ali Shir Nawai, Sultan Baiqara's prime minister.

The mausoleum is at the heart of the old complex. By the park entrance is the sole standing minaret of her madrassa, tilting at a worrying angle and braced with steel cables. The tiling, a series of blue lozenges filled with flowers, only survives on its one side, where it is protected against Herat's abrasive wind. There are two balconies – just below the lower storey, mortar has taken a horrible bite out of the minaret.

On the southern edge of the park, the stump of another minaret is the only sign of Gowhar Shad's mosque. It was destroyed by Soviet artillery. Tantalising fragments remain of the beautiful mosaic and its white marble facings. Noting that minarets are usually the simplest parts of a building, Robert Byron was so moved by its fine decoration to write 'if the mosaic on the rest of the Musalla surpassed or even equalled what survives today, there was never such a mosque before or since.'

The loss of the complex rivals the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas for deliberate cultural vandalism. In 1885, when the British feared a Russian invasion of Afghanistan, they persuaded Abdur Rahman Khan to prepare Herat for defence. In a matter of days, British engineers dynamited almost the entire complex, to give a free line of fire for artillery. The invasion never came, but the damage was done. Two further minarets fell to earthquakes in the early 20th century, while the Soviets turned the whole area into a free-fire zone in the 1980s.

Opposite the park, four huge minarets mark the corners of Baiqara's long-gone madrassa. The minarets were covered in a delicate blue mosaic framed in white and set with flowers. Some tiling remains – war and abrasive wind has wiped out the rest. The towers now lean like drunken factory chimneys and exert a particularly mournful air at sunset. A road between the minarets still allows traffic to trundle past, the vibrations damaging the fragile foundations. Several tombstones lie abandoned in the area, including an exquisite yet eroded black marble tombstone, carved in the intricate Haft Qalam (Seven Pens) style. Long abandoned to the elements, a better-cared-for example can be seen at Gazar Gah (below).

Gazar Gah

This shrine, 5km northwest of Herat, is one of Afghanistan's holiest sites, dedicated to the 11th-century saint and poet Khoja Abdullah Ansari. Run by Sufis from the Qadirriyah order, it receives hundreds of pilgrims from across Afghanistan daily; Gazar Gah's name means 'the Bleaching Ground', a Sufi allusion to the cleansing of one's soul before Allah.

GOWHAR SHAD

The wife of Shah Rukh, Gowhar Shad, was one of the most remarkable women in Afghanistan's history. Although her name meant 'joyful jewel', she was anything but the trophy wife her name suggests. She was a great patron of the arts and commissioned some of Islam's finest buildings, including Herat's Musalla Complex and the Great Mosque in Mashhad (Iran). She also paid an active part in politics. Her son, Ulughbek, was made the viceroy of Samarkand and following her husband's death, she was heavily involved in the manoeuvrings over his succession. Her other son, Baisanghor, drank himself to death, so Gowhar Shad planned to make Ulughbek the ruler of Herat. Years of disputes followed, with her various sons and grandsons fighting for power, ultimately sowing the seeds of the empire's downfall. She finally met her end at the ripe age of 80, murdered by a rival after plotting to install her great-grandson on Herat's throne. Her gravestone reads she was 'the Bilqis [Queen of Sheba] of the time'.

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The shrine is the most complete Timurid building in Herat and is dominated by its 30m-high entrance portal, decorated with restraint with blue tiles on plain brick. More tiling fills the inside, much of it showing a distinctly Chinese influence – possibly a by-product of the embassies that Shah Rukh (who commissioned the shrine in 1425) exchanged with the emperor of China. The courtyard is filled with the gravestones of the many of Herat's old ruling families.

The saint's tomb is at the far end beneath a large ilex tree. An intricately carved 5m-high white marble pillar also stands guardian, contained behind a glass case. It's fascinating to sit and watch men and women offering prayers to the tomb before turning around to perform the full prayer ritual facing Mecca. Prayers are also tied in rags to the ilex tree, usually by women having problems conceiving.

There are several other graves worth noting in the shrine. Amir Dost Mohammed, that great survivor of the First Anglo-Afghan War, is buried to the left of Ansari's tomb, having died soon after capturing Herat in 1863. His grave is surrounded by a white balustrade and marked with another marble pillar. One of Sultan Baiqara's sons also lies here. His tombstone is an incredible example of the Haft Qalam style of carving – interlaced flowers and arabesques painstakingly carved into seven layers of relief. The tombstone is kept in a locked side room, so you'll have to ask to be shown it.

There are more graves outside the portal entrance. Look for the much worn statue of a dog immediately outside. Local tradition ascribes this to the grave of Gazar Gah's architect, who wished to sit humbly before the Sufi master into the next life.

Slightly to the southwest of the main shrine is the **Zarnegar Khana** ('Golden Pavilion'). Built during Baiqara's time, it is a retreat for the shrine's Sufi adherents, who hold their *zikr* rituals inside. The interior has a fine domed ceiling, painted in blue and red, and picked out in gold leaf. The Zarnegar Khana was closed for restoration at the time of research. The grounds of the shrine also contain a second domed building, the Namakdan pavilion, and a cistern containing water from the holy Zam Zam spring at Mecca.

There's no entrance fee at Gazar Gah, but the Sufis who tend the shrine will welcome a small donation. Don't forget to remove your shoes on entering.

Buses run regularly to Gazar Gah from Chowk-e Cinema (5Afg, 15 minutes). A taxi costs around 50Afg.

Jami's Tomb

Mawlana Abdur Rahman Jami was Herat's greatest poet and one of the greatest Sufi poets who wrote in Persian. He was a regular at the court of Sultan Baiqara, where he composed many treatises on the soul's meditation of the divine. He died in 1492 and is still revered by modern Heratis, who can often quote from his greatest work, *Haft Awrang* (Seven Thrones), and regularly visit his **grave** (Sarakh-e Tanki Mawlawi; donation welcome, ☼ sunrise-sunset).

The tomb is a quiet and contemplative place, inside a modest enclosure under a pistachio tree, with a finely carved headstone. A large pole is hung with green banners and has had many nails hammered into it as prayer offerings. The tomb is visited by both men and women, who sit either side of the grave, in prayer or meditation. It's commonplace to walk around the grave and to take a pinch of earth as a blessing. There is also a small donation box here.

A larger mosque stands adjacent to the grave. Both are modern, rebuilt after being severely damaged by Soviet shelling in 1984. A taxi ride from the centre of Herat costs 80Afg.

Shahzada Abdullah

Two shrines sit on the main road just south of the Musalla Complex. Built in the late 15th century, they contain the tombs of two princes, Abdullah and Qasim, who died in the 8th century. Abdullah's tomb is the one nearer the road. The exteriors are plain fired brick with ogee portal arches, while the interiors are richly decorated with tiling – probably the best surviving tilework from medieval Herat.

Even a couple of years ago, the tombs were clearly visible from the road, but they have now been largely obscured by Herat's construction boom. The tombs' guardians, who also tend the many pigeons outside, appreciate a small donation from visitors.

Takht-e Safar

Spread across a hill 5km north of Herat, Takht-e Safar is a popular place for picnics. Built as a pleasure garden for Sultan Baiqara in the 14th century, it's an oasis of green, with good views to the city. It's a popular place for picnics and to catch the sunset (when cars full of wedding parties often descend on the scene).

At the bottom of the hill is a small theme park, complete with rides and a giant concrete pigeon. As you go up the hill, you pass a large swimming pool, popular with men species in the summer months. There's a small café offering drinks and ice cream. Further up the hill is a wedding club, backed by a large mural of Ismail Khan with Ahmad Shah Massoud. Climbing these steps provides the best views of Herat.

Pul-e Malan

This fine old 22-arched bridge is a few kilometres south of the city, visible from the road when driving from the airport. Believed to have been constructed by the Seljuks in the early 12th century, it has survived the floods that have washed away countless other bridges on the Hari Rud. According to legend, two sisters, Bibi Nur and Bibi Hur, collected egg shells to mix with the clay of the bricks, making the structure stronger than steel. It's no longer used for motor traffic, but is worth a visit for its picturesque setting.

SLEEPING

Sleeping options should change dramatically in Herat during the life of this book, with the opening of the city's first five-star hotel under construction on the outskirts near Takht-e Safar.

Jam Hotel (☎ 040 223477; Darb Khosh; s/d 300/600Afg) Tucked away in the Old City, this is Herat's best budget option. The rooms are basic, but have had a bit of a spruce-up since we last visited, making them good value for the price. The shared bathrooms are very simple and there's a restaurant for *pulao* (a rice dish) and kebabs. Rooms at the back have a great view of the Old City, overlooking the Friday Mosque.

Park Hotel (☎ 040 223010; Park-e Girdha, r US$20) Built in the 1930s, the Park is Herat's oldest hotel – Robert Byron stayed here while writing *The Road to Oxiana*. It's a cavernous, colonial-style place complete with creaky beds and overstuffed chairs, and surrounded by pine trees. All rooms are en suite. The hotel was being used mainly as a wedding hall when we visited. Full of potential, it just needs a little love (and money) spent on its upkeep.

Mowafaq Hotel (☎ 040 223503; Chowk-e Gulha; with bathroom s/d US$20/30) Currently Herat's largest hotel, the Mowafaq is a trusty standby and conveniently located between the Old City and the New Town. The good-sized rooms are clean but everything feels a bit tired and dusty. The pool hasn't seen water in years. Get a room looking out to the minarets if you can.

Marco Polo Hotel (☎ 040 221944; heratmarcopolo@yahoo.com; Jad-e Badmurghan; s/d from US$41/51, with bathroom US$72/82; 🌐 💻) This friendly and ever-expanding hotel is a great option. The rooms aren't elaborate, but there's 24-hour hot water, free internet, and helpful staff. The more expensive rooms also come with a free (nonalcoholic) minibar and laundry. Breakfast is included – a huge spread of bread, cheese, yogurt, eggs and fruit.

Green Place Guest House (☎ 070 405905; Jad-e Mahbas, lane 2; r US$50; 🌐 💻) A small family-run guesthouse with a friendly atmosphere, the Green Place (there is a garden) is a pleasant escape from the city. There are half a dozen rooms, all spotlessly clean and with shared bathroom. Prices include breakfast – dinner is available on request.

EATING & DRINKING

The Persian influence on Herati culture can easily be seen when you go out for a meal. Iranian-style rice (steamed and topped with sour sumac berries) is served as much as Afghan *pulao*. Locals also have a preference for black tea (sucked through a sugar-cube) over the green tea drunk in the rest of Afghanistan.

Arghawan Restaurant (☎ 040 221919; Chowk-e Cinema; kebab meal 200Afg; 🕒 10am-10pm) Popular with middle-class Heratis and internationals alike, the attraction here isn't so much the formal dining room as the outside seating area, strewn with bolsters to slump against for shade from the daytime. The set meals are excellent value, comprising soup, salad, bread, rice, kebabs, tea and a soft drink.

Yas Restaurant (Park-e Girdha; menu from 60-200Afg) One of the few places we found in Herat serving *mantu* (a type of ravioli), Yas also has a decent range of kebabs with rice, salad and yogurt. The pizzas are disappointing in comparison. The restaurant always seems to be busy – its success has allowed it to buy what could be Herat's largest TV.

Shahiste Restaurant (Jad-e Badmurghan; meals 200Afg) On the 1st floor of the Marco Polo Hotel, this restaurant offers good Iranian-style food. The menu often only has a couple of dishes, but makes up for this with generous plates of salad, pickled vegetables and yogurt.

Brothers Mohabbat Gaznavi Restaurant (Darb Khosh; meals from 50Afg) One of the better large kebab joints, busy at any time of day or night. It serves up an endless procession of kebabs, *pulao* and chai. Female travellers may find themselves directed upstairs to the family dining room.

Al Capon Restaurant (Jad-e Badmurghan; meals from 100Afg) According to the sign, 'Al Capon' was a cowboy, but he rustles up a decent plate of rice and kebabs. Salads and a few Western-style fast-food items fill out the menu.

Toos Restaurant (Jad-e Walayat; pizzas 150Afg) Good for those wanting a break from Afghan fare, this place does a good imitation of Western fast food. Tasty pizzas are eat-in or takeaway, along with a few interesting variations on the hamburger theme.

Ice cream parlour (Bazaar-e Malek Zagarha; ice cream from 40Afg) This is the best place for ice cream in the Old City. With its low ceiling, wall carpets and Bollywood posters, it's a cosy place to tuck into a bowl of rosewater and pistachio ice cream. Afghan women eat here too.

Juice in 4 Fasl (Chowk-e Gulha; juice from 20Afg) Bright and shiny, this juice bar has wonderful juices and smoothies, from thick banana to tart pomegranate. There's ice cream too, slathered with mango puree, and an upstairs seating area that's perfect for watching Herat go about its business.

Khorram Brothers Store (Park e-Gulha; snacks from 30Afg) In the small park by Chowk-e Gulha, this snack bar sells a few kebabs plus hot and cold drinks including, unusually, coffee. It's almost worth visiting just for the fountain opposite – a concrete kitsch masterpiece of towering bears, goats and waterbirds.

Kebab sellers (Darb Khosh) Calling these places chaikhanas would be far too grand – there's hardly room to sit down – but these hole-in-the-wall joints are perfect if you're in need of a quick kebab.

Itinerant fruit sellers push carts around the Old City and there's also a market next to the Friday Mosque. If you're after imported goods, there's a good **supermarket** (Jad-e Badmurghan) near the Marco Polo Hotel. It even has its own shopping trolleys.

SHOPPING

Herat is famous for its blue glass, handmade in a rough and chunky style. If you're lucky enough for it to survive Afghanistan's roads, it makes a great souvenir.

Sultan Hamidy (north side of Friday Mosque) Sultan Hamidy (or Ahmad) and his family have been making Herati glass for generations. The tiny factory is two doors down from the shop, with glass-blowing every couple of days. The shop itself is an Aladdin's Cave, with everything from glass and metalwork to rugs, beads and embroidery, all displayed as an anarchic explosion of stock. Prepare to spend hours looking for antiques, both old and new.

Carpet Merchants (Darb Khosh) One of the best places to buy carpets from the region is direct from the wholesale merchants who occupy this serai on Darb Khosh. Carpets and *gilims* festoon the balconies and courtyard, indicating that you're in the right place. Herati carpets are usually deep red, although the merchants buy from across the west and northwest as well as eastern Iran – Baluchi styles are also sold in large numbers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kam Air (☎ 040 228951; Park-e Gulha) flies daily to Kabul (3250Afg, one hour), and every Monday and Thursday to Mazar-e Sharif (2500Afg, 50 minutes). **Ariana Afghan Airlines** (☎ 040 222315; Park-e Gulha) also has a daily service to Kabul (3200Afg).

At the bottom of Sarakh-e Shahzada, there are large buses to Kabul (600Afg, one day), which continue onto Mazar-e Sharif (1000Afg, two days). Note, however, that these travel to the extremely dangerous southern highway through Kandahar and cannot be recommended. In the same area you'll also find transport offices with buses to Iran, with daily departures to Mashhad (270Afg, seven hours) and Tehran (700Afg, two days).

Transport to Maimana is found 3km west of Herat's centre on Sarakh-e Fargha. HiAces leave daily at around 4am (1100Afg, two days). For more on this route, see right.

Minibuses to Obey (80Afg, two hours), Chist-e Sharif (180Afg, four hours) and Chaghcheran (800Afg, 1½ days) leave from the bus station 3km south of Herat on the road to the airport. This is also the general transport depot for HiAces to most other destinations from Herat.

Transport for Torghundi on the Turkmenistan border leaves on an ad hoc basis from the same area as the Mashhad buses. For more information see p216.

GETTING AROUND

Millie buses leave irregularly from Darb Khosh to the airport (6Afg, 50 minutes), although shared taxis (50Afg) from the same spot can be a better bet. The whole taxi should cost 300Afg or less.

Most taxi rides in Herat will cost between 50Afg and 80Afg. Until the last couple of years, a highly enjoyable way of seeing Herat was to hire a *gari* (horse-drawn buggy). The drivers take great pride in decorating their carriages, dressing their horses with bells and red pom-poms, but they are disappearing fast: on our most recent visit we only spotted a couple, having been largely replaced by scores of autorickshaws. Both cost around a third less than a taxi over the same distance.

Millie buses also ply the streets on set routes, which can be hard to fathom. Stops are on the main roundabouts, with tickets usually costing about 3Afg.

THE NORTHWEST

Where Herat looks toward the Iranian Plateau, northwest Afghanistan turns its face to the dry semi-desert landscapes of Central Asia. Skirting the length of the Turkmenistan border, it's a place of oases, seasonal rivers and dusty brown hills that sprout into life at the hint of rain. The same rains can make travel near impossible at these times – even gravel roads are largely an aspiration and you're just as likely to find yourself bumping along dry riverbeds and over sand dunes.

WARNING

At the time of going to press, Badghis province was considered too dangerous for travel, due to activity of criminal and anti-government elements. Travellers are currently advised to fly between Herat and Mazar-e Sharif (p141).

There's a small international presence in the northwest, but Badghis province in particular remains a wild area. Once in Faryab province security is generally better, handled by General Dostum's Uzbeks.

HERAT TO MAIMANA هرات الی میمنه

While scenically dramatic, travelling this route through the northwest is not a trip to be taken lightly. The road is probably the worst in Afghanistan, and there's some stiff competition. A 4WD is essential, as there are large stretches of off-road driving and fording of rivers. In spring, rains can make this route almost impossible as swathes of the track turn to mud; in winter snow on the Sabzak Pass near Herat can cause its own problems. In the best of conditions, it's a drive of two very long days. By public transport, it's well worth buying an extra seat in the vehicle for comfort.

On top of this, Badghis has a poor reputation for lawlessness, with a low police presence. Banditry against vehicles and NGOs is not uncommon, as well as tension between the Tajik and minority Pashtun populations that sometimes spills into violence. The stretch of road between Qala-e Nau and Bala Murghab (where public transport overnights in both directions) is the worst for lawlessness. When we took this route we were made to sleep in a local police station for security reasons. Checking the security situation with reliable sources is essential before planning a trip. Qala-e Nau is currently the only place on this road with mobile phone reception, making a Thuraya a good idea for staying in touch.

If all this sounds too much, take heart that there's a Kam Air service between Herat and Mazar-e Sharif twice a week.

Qala-e Nau قلعه نو

From Herat, the road heads north over the Safed Koh mountains, zigzagging its way over the Sabzak Pass (2400m). The landscape is harsh but dramatic, all rough peaks and escarpments studded with low trees. As you descend, the country becomes drier and drier until you reach Qala-e Nau, about seven hours from Herat.

Qala-e Nau is the capital of Badghis, big enough to have a roundabout and some fancy Victoriana street lights that at least show an aspiration towards electricity. Most public transport stops for a meal break in the town and there are some decent chaikhanas, with low barrel-vaulted ceilings. Bizarrely, several claimed to serve spaghetti alongside the usual *pulao*-shaped offerings.

There's a Spanish-led PRT on the southern outskirts of Qala-e Nau. The road between Herat and Qala-e Nau is currently being upgraded, but at the time of research the tarmac finished about 80km after leaving Herat.

Bala Murghab بالا مرغاب

All transport between Herat and Maimana stops overnight in this small farming town, a full day's drive from both. It's an anomaly in the area in having a mainly Pashtun population, due to Abdur Rahman Khan's experiments in population movement in the 1880s. The town itself has little to draw visitors, but the surrounding farmland along the Murghab river is green and attractive.

There are a couple of chaikhanas on the town square, but police are unlikely to let foreigners sleep in them for security reasons. Instead, you're likely to be redirected to the Governor's Hotel – also known as the police compound. There are a couple of rooms, otherwise you bed down under the stars with whoever's on night-watch. It's not great, but it's fairly secure. Prices seem to vary according to whim: some people haven't been charged, others hit for dollars in double-figures.

As with much of this region, the landscape is dominated by rounded hills of loess – the fertile dust blown from Central Asia. Arid for most of the year, they suddenly turn green with the onset of the spring rains. At other times, Kuchi caravans are liable to provide the only colour in the landscape.

MAIMANA میمنه

The capital of Faryab, the largely Uzbek town of Maimana has an easy-going provincial air. Horse-drawn taxis are the order of the day as much as cars, bumping along the rough roads and throwing up plumes of dust. Respite only comes with the spring rains, when the streets become a mess of sticky mud.

According to early Arab accounts, Maimana was founded by Israelites exiled from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, although archaeological digs have uncovered Neolithic beads in the area indicating much older habitation. The city grew and prospered, even taking the obligatory levelling by Genghis Khan in its stride.

Maimana rose again to become a powerful khanate, which spent much of its time playing off the rivalry between Kabul and Bukhara to its own advantage. It was a thorn in the side of Afghan amirs throughout the century, only being forced into the Afghan state at the end of a gun wielded by Abdur Rahman Khan in 1884, the last of the independent Uzbek city states.

Modern Maimana is a lot more relaxed now. The town is centred on a large park surrounded by pines, once the site of Maimana's Citadel. The main bazaar areas are to the north, between the park and the Maimana river. Monday and Thursday are the busiest bazaar days. Look out for the bright *chapans* and *gilims* for sale. A Norwegian PRT is based on the east side of the park.

Sleeping & Eating

At the time of research, police were only allowing foreigners to stay in one hotel in Maimana, although in theory there are several chaikhanas with private rooms on offer.

Maimana Municipal Hotel (☎ 079 915 8353; south of Maimana park; s/d 500/1000Afg) is a dusty 1930s edifice, with reasonable rooms filled with creaking furniture. The hotel is woefully low on bathrooms – just two for nearly 20 bedrooms. If it's full (it was block-booked with Indian and Chinese construction workers when we visited), the management is usually happy to let you stay in the plush conference room, which has surprisingly comfy sofas. Some locals know it as the Daulat Hotel.

Aside from the chaikhanas in the bazaar, **Turkestan Restaurant** (northeast cnr of park) is the only sit-down option for eating. The

THE DASHT-E LAILI

The Dasht-e Laili desert takes its name from the story of Majnun and Layla, the Romeo and Juliet of Persian literature. Their love forbidden by Layla's father, Majnun wandered the desert alone until he lost his mind. Layla was forced to marry another. Years later, following her death, Majnun made a pilgrimage to her grave, whereupon he lay down next to her and expired. The two lovers were finally reunited in the afterlife.

Every spring, the Dasht-e Laili springs briefly into life with the rains, turning an electric green and studded with flowers. Its name may also be a spin on *laleh,* the Dari word for the tulips that bloom so brightly here at this time.

breeze-block architecture lends the place a certain awkward ambience, and although the menu promises a choice of dishes, you'll end up with kebabs whatever you go for. Not signed in English, look for the glass kiosk outside with the brazier, next to the UNHCR compound.

There are several snack and juice stalls clustered around the south gate of the park; if you're lucky they'll be selling *boloni* and *mantu*.

Getting There & Away

Ariana operates an erratic flight to Kabul: check at the office on the northeast corner of the park, although it's frequently closed.

Minibuses to Shiberghan (300Afg, six hours) and Mazar-e Sharif (400Afg, eight hours) leave every morning from a stand by the river, 500m north of the main square near the police station. The road follows the direct route via Daulatabad and the Dasht-e Laili desert. Transport to Andkhoi (280Afg, five hours) leaves from the same area, but is less frequent.

HiAces make the epic trip to Herat (1000Afg, two days) daily at around 4am, leaving from the Sadam Yush depot, near the Municipal Hotel.

ANDKHOI اندخوی

Visiting Andkhoi feels a little like stepping back in time to a part of Central Asia that no longer exists. It's a modest place given its history – it thrived in the medieval era and Timur visited in 1380 where he received an omen to conquer Herat. Now a mixed Turkmen and Uzbek farming community on the edge of the Dasht-e Laili it feels far removed from the bustle of most Afghan towns, and a long way from anywhere. The old street plan is yet to be despoiled by the ugly glass-and-concrete buildings so popular elsewhere in Afghanistan and there's barely a scrap of Western clothing in evidence. You'll never have seen so many people wearing *chapans* (robes).

Bazaar days (Monday and Thursday) are the best time to visit. The main bazaar area is between the streets west and north of the town square. Huge piles of melons line the streets when in season, competing for space amid the blacksmiths, dried goods and tea stalls. Although there's no animal market, it can still sometimes feel like the town has more donkeys and camels than motor vehicles. The real reason to come here however is for the carpets and textiles.

Andkhoi has been a carpet centre since the 1920s, when floods of Turkmen refugees, fleeing from the aftershocks of the Russian Revolution, entered north Afghanistan. The flocks of karakul sheep they brought with them transformed the local economy, producing high-quality skins and rugs.

The main road west from the town square, surrounded by shops selling wool, is where you'll find most of the carpets. Dealers from Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif buy and commission much of their stock from here. Watching the traders make a deal is a fascinating process. Although the carpet sellers are mainly wholesale, they're always happy to make a sale and the prices are considerably less than you'll find elsewhere. Tucked amid the carpets, you'll also find people selling textiles – hand-woven silks, *suzanis* (spreads embroidered with silk or wool) and clothes. The haggling is about as laidback as it comes and if you can throw in a few words of Uzbek or Turkmen, don't be surprised if your purchase comes with an invitation home for dinner.

Sleeping & Eating

The only hotel in town is the **Andkhoi Hotel** (Muncipal Hotel; Main square; r 500Afg), a big pink-and-blue building on the northeast corner of the square. Rooms are basic but big, with simple shared bathrooms. Staff are friendly and usually surprised to see any foreigners pitching up.

There are plenty of chaikhanas in the bazaar – the height of Andkhoi's dining experience.

Getting There & Away

A smooth tarmac highway leads to Shiberghan (70Afg, one hour) and Mazar-e Sharif (150Afg, 3½ hours). HiAces and shared taxis leave throughout the day from a stand on the road, east of the town square. Heading south, HiAces leave most mornings to Maimana (280Afg, five hours) on a poor desert road. In theory it should be possible to cross into Turkmenistan from here via the border town of Imam Nazar, although the border is currently under dispute and no transport was running when we visited (for more information, see p216).

SHIBERGHAN شبرغان

Another of the old khanates that ran across the north like knots on a string, the city of Shiberghan is the centre of Uzbek power in Afghanistan and the hometown of General Abdul Rashid Dostum (see boxed text, below). A nondescript sort of a place, its lowslung appearance belies its history. Shiberghan was part of ancient Bactria, the great range of steppe that hosted the warring city states of the Greeks and later, the Kushans. In 1978 archaeologists working at Tillya Teppe outside the city uncovered a major Kushan gravesite containing a wealth of gold artefacts – the so-called 'Bactrian Gold' (see p89).

Other visitors commented on a different sort of treasure. When Marco Polo stopped in Shiberghan he noted that 'here are found the best melons in the world in very great quantity.' Modern travellers may well agree. In addition to farming, Shiberghan's economy is now boosted by its natural gas fields – the pipeline to Mazar-e Sharif follows the main highway. The city has many Turkish NGO offices, evidence of Dostum's period in exile there in the late 1990s. Posters of the big man himself are everywhere.

There's not much to see in Shiberghan itself and although you might spend a night here if you've come from Maimana, it's just as easy to push on to Mazar-e Sharif. The small Turkmen town of **Aqcha** lies 50km to the east off the main highway and has an interesting traditional bazaar every Monday and Thursday, with carpet and jewellery sellers.

Sleeping & Eating

If you need to stay the night, the **Shibirghan Hotel** (Main Square; r US$20) is the best option. It's on the northern edge of the main square – look for the phone towers and football pitch. Rooms are adequate, but nothing fancy.

GENERAL DOSTUM

In the towns of the northwest, Ahmad Shah Massoud posters have been replaced with pictures of a stocky bullish man with a heavy moustache. This is General Abdul Rashid Dostum, undisputed heavyweight of Afghanistan's Uzbeks.

Dostum was a paratrooper for the Afghan army when the Soviets invaded and commanded a large Uzbek militia that fought the mujaheddin across the north. In 1992, he sensed the wind was changing and switched sides – a defection that precipitated Najibullah's ultimate downfall. Dostum helped Massoud capture Kabul, but once in the capital the Uzbek militias became feared for their orgies of rape and pillage. Within two years he switched sides again and teamed up with Hekmatyar to bombard the city with heavy artillery.

Dostum's control of the Salang Pass meant almost total control of the north, which he ran like a private fiefdom, printing his own money and even running his own airline, Balkh Air. Newly independent Uzbekistan provided much backing until Dostum's world collapsed with the Taliban capture of Mazar-e Sharif in 1997.

In 2001, Dostum became just another warlord back on the make after the Taliban's collapse, but has had to share the northern spoils with more powerful Tajik rivals. At the time this guidebook was researched, he was Chief of Staff of the Afghan army, personally appointed by Hamid Karzai.

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HERAT & NORTHWESTERN AFGHANISTAN

There are several cheap restaurants and chaikhanas immediately to the south and east of the main square, serving kebabs, *pulao* and *mantu*.

Getting There & Away

There should be a weekly flight to Kabul, provided Ariana wants to operate it – it was out of action when we asked around. The airport is 10km east of the city.

Minibuses to Mazar-e Sharif (100Afg, two hours) fill up quickly from a small terminal on the eastern edge of Shiberghan – look for the brick factories nearby. Transport to Aqcha (40Afg, 30 minutes) also leaves from here.

Andkhoi transport (70Afg, one hour) leaves from west of the square, past one of Dostum's gauche terracotta-and-lobster-pink palaces.