

# Iran

You're going to Iran? Why? The misconceptions about Iran are so many and so misleading that the majority of the Western world sees it as a mysterious, dangerous wasteland full of hostile, crazy Arabs. How wrong they are.

Iran is a fascinating mix of modern and ancient, of East and West, of the exotic and the mundane. It's far more developed than you'd imagine, and far less dangerous. And the people are Persians, not Arabs. In fact, spending a few weeks with the Iranian people will probably redefine hospitality as you know it. The key is to open up to the people and just go with it. When someone you've barely met asks you to eat in their home, accept the invitation. You will be in their care, and that care is warmer than you can imagine – and yes, that includes the kindness shown towards Americans.

While the rich and ancient Persian culture will ensure you are treated well, it also provides a stunning architectural and archaeological backdrop. The wonders of Persepolis, Esfahan and Yazd are the big-ticket items, but wandering through labyrinthine bazaars, shopping for carpets and just sitting, sipping tea and chatting with ordinary Iranians are just as memorable. There is also some good trekking and skiing in the northern mountains.

From a practical point of view, Iran is one of the cheapest countries in the Middle East and, despite its size, transport is both cheap and efficient. Getting a visa can be a hassle, which contributes to Iran being relatively undiscovered by travellers – making it all the more worthwhile to visit.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,648,000 sq km
- **Capital** Tehran
- **Country code** ☎ 98
- **Languages** Farsi, Arabic
- **Money** Iranian rial (IR); US\$1 = IR8970;  
€1 = IR10,980
- **Official name** Islamic Republic of Iran
- **Population** 72 million



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Esfahan** (p211) The most beautiful city in Iran, set around the stunning Imam Khomeini Sq and its exquisite Safavid mosques.
- **Persepolis** (p225) Built by Darius the Great, destroyed by Alexander the Great – the artistry of the ancient Persians in all its monumental glory.
- **Yazd** (p217) A forest of tall, brown wind towers dotted with atmospheric hotels and restaurants.
- **Masuleh** (p204) A gorgeous stepped mountain village where you can sleep over with the locals.
- **Garmeh** (p217) Classic desert oasis, far off the beaten track.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Iran is hot and dry in summer and cold and dry in winter. In the desert and along the Gulf coast, summer (June to August) temperatures regularly top 40°C and the humidity is draining. In midwinter (December to February), places such as Tehran, Mashhad and Tabriz are quite cold and snow is common in the higher regions, particularly the northwest. However, the rest of the country is usually quite pleasant – clear skies and about 15°C during the day.

The best times to visit Iran are mid-April to early June, and late September to early

### HOW MUCH?

- **Internet connection (one hour)** IR10,000
- **Short taxi ride** IR5000
- **Museum admission** IR4000
- **Two-pack of toilet paper** IR7000
- **International phone call (one minute)** IR1700

### LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** IR800
- **1.5L bottle of water** IR2500
- **Pot of tea in a teahouse** IR4000 to IR6000
- **Souvenir qalyan (water pipe)** IR60,000
- **Sausis (sausage) sandwich** IR3500

November. Winter is definitely the best time to visit the southern coast and the Gulf islands. Some prefer not to visit during Ramazan (Ramadan), though it won't affect your travels too much. For about 10 days either side of No Ruz (Iranian New Year, March 21), transport and accommodation are at a premium – book ahead if possible.

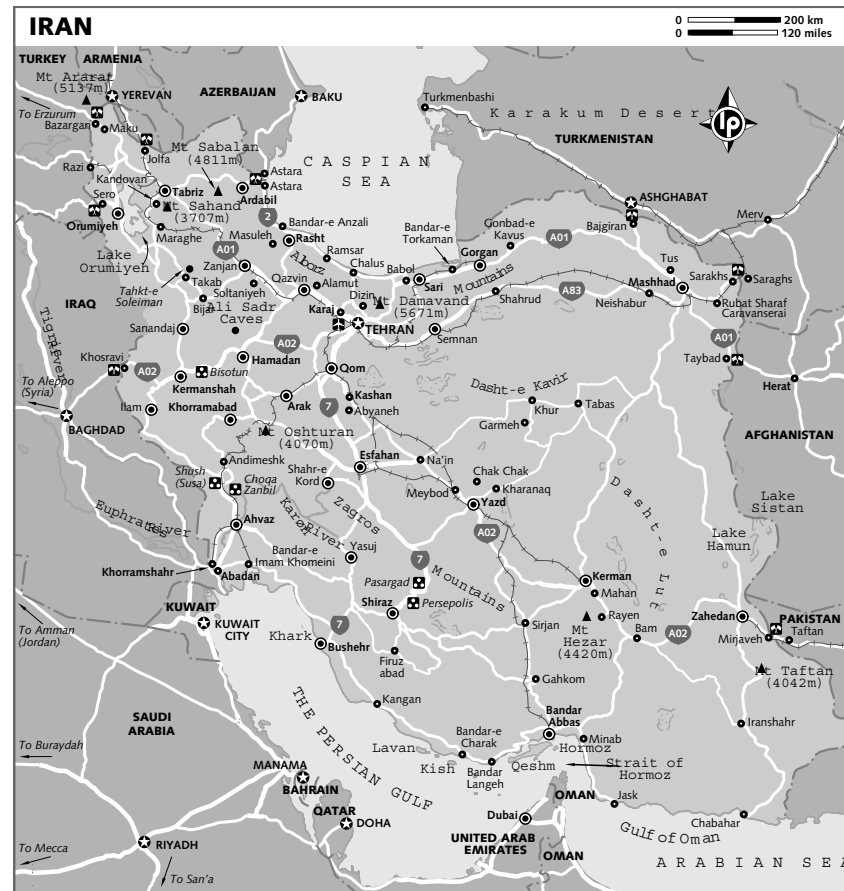
## HISTORY The Achaemenids & the First Persian Empire

In 550 BC 29-year-old Cyrus the Great defeated the Medians and within a century he and his successors, Darius I and Xerxes, had made the Achaemenid empire (550–331 BC) into the greatest the world had seen. The Persians expanded their rule all the way to India in the east and the Aegean Sea in the west, but Xerxes' defeat by the Greeks at Marathon began a slow decline. The end came in 330 BC when Alexander the Great invaded Persia and sacked the greatest of all Achaemenid monuments, Persepolis.

After Alexander's death his empire split, with Persia being controlled by the Macedonian Seleucids who gradually introduced a Hellenistic culture. The Parthians, under King Mithridates, took over in the 2nd century BC and in turn were replaced by the Sassanids, a local dynasty from the Fars province. The Sassanids ruled from AD 224 to AD 638 but suffered continuing conflict with the Roman and, later, the Byzantine Empires.

## Islam & Other Arrivals

Weakened by this scrapping, the Persians, whose religion was Zoroastrianism, fell easy prey to the spread of Islam and the Arabs (see p40). Persia was controlled by an assortment of rulers before the Turkish Seljuk dynasty established itself in the 11th century, heralding a new era of Persian art, literature and science marked by such thinkers as the mathematician-poet Omar Khayyam. The Seljuk era ended abruptly in 1194 when Genghis Khan's Mongol hordes swept into Persia devastating all before them. At the end of the 14th century the Mongols' crumbling Ilkhanid dynasty were themselves routed, this time by bloodthirsty Tamerlane after he rode in from the east.



## From Safavids to Pahlavis

Beginning in 1502, the Safavid era heralded a great Persian renaissance. Under the rule of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629) foreign influences were purged from the country, and architectural works such as those in Imam Sq (p213) in Esfahan have left a permanent reminder. The Safavid decline was hastened by an invasion from Afghanistan in 1722. A few years later Nader Shah, a tribal leader from the northeast, threw out the Afghans and went on to antagonize Persia's neighbours until he was assassinated in 1747.

The brief Zand period, in which Karim Khan-e Zand ruled from Shiraz, was followed by a longer period of decline under

the corrupt and incompetent Qajar rulers (1779–1925). It ended in 1925 when Reza Khan Pahlavi, an officer in the imperial army, founded the Pahlavi dynasty. Foreign influence – and oil – soon became an important element in Iran's story. During WWII, Iran was officially neutral, but Reza Khan was exiled to South Africa because he was thought to be too friendly with the Axis powers. His 22-year-old son, Mohammed Reza, succeeded him. The government of Shah Mohammed Reza was repressive, but Iran was rapidly modernised. Illiteracy was reduced, women emancipated, land holdings redistributed, health services improved and a major industrialisation programme embarked upon.

## The Islamic Revolution

Since the early days of the Pahlavi era there had been a smouldering resistance that occasionally flared into violence. Students wanted faster reform, devout Muslims wanted reforms rolled back, and everybody attacked the Pahlavis' conspicuous consumption. As the economy deteriorated following the 1970s oil-price spike the growing opposition made its presence felt with sabotage and massive street demonstrations. The shah introduced martial law, and hundreds of demonstrators were killed in street battles in Tehran before the shah fled in January 1979. He died a year later.

Exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned on 1 February 1979 and was greeted by adoring millions. His fiery brew of nationalism and fundamentalism had been at the forefront of the revolt, and he achieved his goal of establishing a clergy-dominated Islamic Republic (the first true Islamic state in modern times) with brutal efficiency. Opposition disappeared, executions took place after meaningless trials and minor officials took the law into their own hands.

In 1980 Saddam Hussein, looking to take advantage of the postrevolutionary chaos, invaded Khuzestan, in southwest Iran, on the pretext that the oil-rich province was historically part of Iraq. The resulting war lasted until 1988 and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives as trench warfare and poison gas were used for the first time since WWI.

## Iran Today

Khomeini died in 1989, leaving an uncertain legacy to the country he had dominated for a decade. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei succeeded him as Iran's Supreme Leader, but inherited little of his predecessor's popular appeal.

In 1997 moderate cleric Mohammed Khatami was elected president by a huge majority, most voters hoping he could liberalise some of the social restrictions of the Islamic Republic. Virtually overnight Iran became a different, far more liberal place, and in 2000 the reform movement won a sizable majority in the Majlis (parliament). However, while the religious police disappeared and couples could be seen courting openly, the public wanted more. The reformers were keen to deliver, but about a third of all the legislation passed during their 2000 to 2004 term was subsequently vetoed by the Guardians Council, a hardline body appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei.

People began to feel that the reformers were impotent and during the 2004 Majlis elections many voters stayed away. The result was a conservative victory and Khatami served his last 16 months as virtually a lame-duck president. The 2005 presidential election shocked not only the world, but many Iranians too. Outsider Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hardline mayor of Tehran, came out of the blue to win a clear majority from voters interested as much in rejecting what was perceived as a network

of political elites as a vote to turn back reforms. Economic progress and a reduction in the high unemployment rates are what most Iranians now want.

Meanwhile Iran's relationship with the USA has retreated from the relative warmth generated during their collaboration to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban to mutual sabre-rattling over Iran's seemingly inevitable pursuit of nuclear power, weapons, or both, depending on who you believe. As unpredictable as Iranian politics can be, it seems a fairly safe bet Iran will remain a member of the USA's 'Axis of Evil' for some time to come.

## THE CULTURE The National Psyche

The one newspaper headline you won't read about Iran is 'Iranians Redefine Hospitality!'. But for the vast majority of Iranians that's the truth. They are deeply curious about foreigners, their welcome is warm and even the most religiously conservative are generous hosts. Through long experience, they are adept at differentiating the actions of governments from those of individuals; Americans are at least as welcome as anyone else. Iranians take their role as hosts very seriously, and *ta'arof* (right) notwithstanding, their generosity is usually genuine.

Throughout their history, Iranians have managed to maintain their own culture by subtly assimilating those of the many foreign invaders who have come and gone. Iranians are proud of their Aryan roots and hate being classed as Arabs.

The Iranian way is to bend to the prevailing wind only to spring back in time with regained poise. Ever-changing fortunes have also taught Iranians to be indirect people, unwilling to answer with a bald negative and unable to countenance rudeness or public displays of anger.

## Daily Life

Family is at the heart of Iranian life, providing an essential support unit in a country with no state benefit system and sometimes trying social conditions. On weekends you'll see the typical multigenerational Iranian family out together, walking, laughing and picnicking in the countryside and parks.

The majority of Iran's urban dwellers live in flats. As population has grown land prices

## TA'AROF

*Ta'arof* is a system of formalised politeness that might seem to have people say or offer something merely out of politeness. In reality, *ta'arof* gives everyone the chance to be on equal terms. For example, an offer of food will be turned down several times first, giving the person making the offer the chance to save face if in reality they don't have the ability to provide a meal. A good rule is to refuse any offer three times but, if they continue to insist, do accept.

However, when a taxi driver or shopkeeper refuses payment, do remember that this is just *ta'arof* and insist on paying; your rials will soon be accepted.

have risen, and in Tehran the monthly rent for a two bedroom flat is about US\$450. Compare that with the US\$120 a mid-ranking civil servant earns each month, and you begin to understand why almost all single people and many young couples still live with their parents.

There is a small but conspicuous wealthy class in larger cities – in northern Tehran some of the homes are palatial. In contrast, a typical middle-class couple lives in a modest apartment and both partners work. Small children are looked after by grandparents and evening meals are often eaten with the wider family. In poorer or more traditional families women often stay at home, spending much of the day preparing meals.

Education is highly regarded and literacy is well above average for the region at around 80%. University places are scarce, however, and competition is fierce. More than 60% of university students are women.

Meeting members of the opposite sex is difficult and Iranians have become masters of the art of flirting. You'll see the flirtatious young in shopping malls and parks or cruising in cars, and Internet cafés are packed with expectant youngsters on messenger services.

## Population

Iran's population is around 72 million – and rising fast. More than 60% of inhabitants can be classified as Persians, descendants of the Aryans who first settled in the central plateau of Iran in about 2000 BC. About 25% of the population are Azerbaijanis, who live in the

## MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH & THE CIA'S FIRST COUP

Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh was the first democratically elected leader toppled by a CIA coup. 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, he nationalised the company and expelled British diplomats whom he rightly suspected of plotting to overthrow him.

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 both at home and abroad. Eventually, Winston Churchill managed to persuade the new Eisenhower administration that Mossadegh had to go. The CIA's Operation Ajax was the result. Kermit Roosevelt, grandson of Theodore Roosevelt and one of the agency's top operatives, established a team in the basement of the US embassy in Tehran (p193) and soon won the shah's support. As much as US\$2 million was spent buying support from senior clerics, military officers, newspaper editors and thugs.

At first it seemed the operation had failed when Mossadegh loyalists arrested the coup leaders on 16 August 1953. The shah fled to Rome, but three days later Roosevelt engineered a second, ultimately successful, attempt. The shah returned and the oil industry was denationalised, but the British monopoly was broken and the US now held a 40% stake.

The 96-page CIA history of the coup can be viewed at [www.payk.net](http://www.payk.net).

northwesternmost region of Iran. Turkmen (2%) are a fierce race of horse people and warriors who inhabit Iran's far northeast.

Other inhabitants include: the Lors (2%) – thought to be part Persian, part Arab – a seminomadic people who live in the western mountains south of Kermanshah; Kurds (5%) who mostly inhabit the western mountains between Orumiyyeh and Kermanshah; and Arabs (4%) who mostly live on the south coast and Gulf islands, and in Khuzestan.

More than 300,000 nomads still roam the plains and mountains. The Baluchis are seminomadic and inhabit Baluchestan, a formerly semi-autonomous territory now divided between Iran and Pakistan. The Qashghars of southwest Iran are traditionally wandering herders.

## RELIGION

Iran is the only Shiite Muslim regime on earth, with official figures saying about 89% of the population is Shiite. About 10% is Sunni, made up of Kurds, Baluchis, Turkmen and about half the Arabs. For more on Islam, see p53. The other 1% comprises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, though these numbers might well be higher as many followers of minority faiths call themselves Muslims in official documents.

Most Iranian Christians are Armenians, predominantly members of the Gregorian Church; the rest are mainly Assyrians. Iran is a centre of Zoroastrianism, and followers are found mainly in Yazd, Tehran and Kerman. Freedom of worship is guaranteed in the constitution, but the 300,000 or so Baha'is are routinely persecuted and discriminated against; the religion is not recognised by the Iranian authorities.

## ARTS

Most Iranian artforms predate the Arab conquest but, since nearly all of them reached their peak within the Islamic era, religious influences are rarely completely absent.

## Architecture

Iran's most obvious art form is architecture, and it is often regarded as the field in which Persia made its greatest contribution to world culture. Iranian architecture has influenced building throughout much of the Islamic world, especially in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Most of the

greatest buildings were built for a religious purpose and marvelling at mosques such as the Imam Mosque (p213) in Esfahan will be among the highlights of your trip.

## Music

Traditional Persian music is poetry set to music. The instruments used include the *tar*, similar to the Indian sitar; the *dahol* and *zarb* drums; and the *daf* and *daryereh*, outsized tambourines. Ethnic minorities are responsible for the most appealing traditional music, and the distinctive Kurdish rhythms have gained some recognition through the success of The Kamkars.

Pop and rock are slowly emerging despite being less than encouraged. Popular pop artists include Shadmehr Aghili and clarinet-playing Farhad, while Arian are the first mixed band to be allowed to play publicly; women are banned from performing for men. For rock, underground band O-Hum is one of the most popular.

While pirated music is everywhere, the government is slowly approving the legal release of cutting-edge Western artists like...Queen, Elton John and the hugely popular Gypsy Kings.

## Literature

All over Iran you're likely to encounter four of its greatest poets: Ferdosi, Hafez, Omar Khayyam and Sa'di. Street names and statues abound, and their mausoleums are among the most-visited places in the country.

More contemporary literature is relatively easily accessible in the West.

*Paper* (2005), by Bahiyiyeh Nakhjavani, has been described as one of the most exquisitely written books in years, full of imagery weaving together the story of a 19th-century scribe.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), by Azar Nafisi, analyses life in Iran through the banned books she and her students read in an underground book club. It's a bit dated now, but worth it.

*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003), by Marjane Satrapi, is not traditional literature, but it is very readable. It's a funny, moving, Art Spiegelman-style graphic autobiography of growing up in Iran in the '80s. It was so popular that *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2005) has also been published. Highly recommended!

See p242 for books about Iran by non-Iranian authors.

## Cinema

Iranian film makers are hugely popular in the Western art-house scene, though you're unlikely to see much of their work while in Iran, where locally made action films and dubbed Bollywood are the most popular flicks. However, seeing some Iranian films before you leave home is a great way to get in touch with the country. Some worth looking for include: *10* by Abbas Kiarostami, *Time For Love, Kandahar* or *Gabbeh* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf; *Blackboards* or *Apple* by his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf; *Children of Heaven* or *The Willow Tree* by Majid Majidi; or *The Lizard* (Marmulak) by Kamal Tabrizi. Check out the **Iranian Film Society** ([www.irfilms.com](http://www.irfilms.com)) for the latest releases.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Iran covers 1,648,195 sq km, with the two great deserts, Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut, occupying most of the northeast and east of the central plain. There are three dominant mountain ranges: the volcanic Sabalan and Talesh ranges in the northwest; the vast, ancient and virtually insurmountable Zagros range in the central west; and the Alborz range, which skirts the Caspian Sea and is home to Iran's highest peak, Mt Damavand (5671m; p198).

Most Iranian rivers drain into the Gulf, the Caspian Sea, or one of a number of salty and swampy lakes, such as Orumiyyeh, Iran's largest lake.

### Wildlife

Iran is not blessed with an enormous amount of wildlife and that which is especially notable, such as the Asiatic cheetah ([www.iraniancheetah.org](http://www.iraniancheetah.org)), is often on the endangered list. National parks are rarely set up for visitors, so few visit Iran solely to look at flora and fauna.

### Environmental Issues

Air pollution is the biggest of Iran's environmental problems. All cities suffer to a certain degree, and in Tehran it has reached crisis point. More than 70% of it comes from frighteningly inefficient vehicles. A culture of waste, which has developed because pet-

rol and gas are virtually free, doesn't help. With the population growing so quickly, the energy and pollution issues (if not the desire for weapons) are at the heart of Iran's push for nuclear fuel. Dozens of dams are also being built.

Unrestrained urban and industrial development (look for it on the road skirting the Caspian Sea), deforestation, erosion and overgrazing are also evident.

## FOOD & DRINK

### Food

Iranian food varies considerably from the Middle Eastern norm, but you'll soon discover that the main dish on most menus is kebabs. This lack of variety can be tiresome, but it's an extra reason to say 'yes' if you're invited to eat in someone's home, a real Iranian experience – invitations flow freely.

Almost every meal in Iran is accompanied by *nun* (bread) or *berenj* (rice) or both. *Nun* is dirt cheap and comes in four main varieties: thin *lavash* is great fresh but quickly turns cardboardy; crisp, salty *barbari* is more like Turkish bread; wonderful *sangak* is long, thick and baked on a bed of stones; and *taftun* is crisp with a ribbed surface. Boiled rice is called *chelow*, and dishes include *chelow zereshk* (chicken and rice) and the ubiquitous *chelow kebab*.

A standard Iranian meal starts with a prefabricated green salad, radioactive-pink dressing and soup (*sup*), usually pearl barley. It's often served with kebab, though unlike the greasy doner kebabs so often inhaled after alcohol in the West, Iranian kebabs are tasty, healthy and cooked over hot charcoals. The cheapest, standard version is *kubide* (ground) kebab, made of minced meat. *Makhsus* (special) kebabs use better quality lamb, *kabab-e barg* (literally, 'leaf kebab') is thinner and more variable in quality, *fille kabab* uses lamb fillet while *jufe kabab* are chunks of marinated chicken. Kebabs are usually sprinkled with spicy *somaq* (sumach) and accompanied by raw onion and, for a small extra fee, a bowl of delicious *mast* (yogurt).

If you're sick of kebab, keep an eye out for *zereshk polo ba morq* (chicken on rice made tangy with barberry fruit), *ghormeh sabzi* (stewed beans, greens and mince); *khoresht* (any kind of meaty stew with vegetables); *bademjun* (aubergine served in various styles); and the divine *fesenjun* (a sauce

of pomegranate juice, walnuts, aubergine and cardamom served over roast chicken, duck or goose). In Western Iran *chelow mahi* (fried fish on rice) is quite common in season. Many teahouses specialise in the underrated *dizi* (or *abgusht*), a cheap and delicious soup-stew combination that involves an age-old eating process.

Fast food is widely available, and usually consists of felafel, sausage or hamburger meat loaded into a fresh roll and topped with tomato and pickles – usually about IR3500 to IR5000 with a soft drink. Pizza (IR13,000 to IR20,000) is also common, though usually not very good.

Sweets are an important Iranian institution. Most cities or provinces have their own particular type of sweet, usually available from shops in the bazaar. Probably the best known is *gaz*, a type of nougat with pistachio, from Esfahan. In Shiraz try *koloche masqati*, a combination biscuit and jelly sweet; in Kerman and Bam *kolompeh* (date cookies) are unbeatable; in Qom you can't miss the tins of *sohun*, a delicious pistachio brittle.

### VEGETARIANS

Vegetarianism as a concept is foreign to most Iranians. Solace can be found in the felafels, samosas and potatoes sold in street stalls, and in the wonderful *mirza ghasemi* (mashed aubergine, squash, garlic and egg); the various *kuku* dishes – thick omelettes with mixed herbs, aubergine or cauliflower; and the common *ash* (a filling thick soup).

Self-catering is also an option: nuts, fruits, and vegetables such as cucumbers, tomatoes and pickles are commonly available and cheap.

### Drinks

Drinking in Iran inevitably involves *chay* (tea). According to the rules of Iranian hospitality, a host is honour-bound to offer a guest at least one cup of tea, and the guest is expected to drink it. It is customary to dip the sugar provided into the tea, place the cube between the front teeth and suck the brew through it. Iranian coffee is often called 'Turkish coffee' – it's thick and black. However, Nescafé is more common.

Delicious fresh fruit juices and shakes (about IR4000) are found in shopfronts festooned with oranges, bananas, carrots, pomegranates...and electric blenders.

Sour-tasting but refreshing *dugh* is made of churned sour milk or yogurt, mixed with either sparkling or still water and is often served with meals. Tap water is usually drinkable and bottled water is widely available. Soft drinks come as standard with most Iranian meals.

Alcohol is strictly prohibited and officially unavailable in Iran, so forget about a glass of Shiraz in Shiraz. Iranian beer, often labelled as 'nonalcoholic malt beverage', tastes more like cider; it's best not to think of it as beer.

## TEHRAN

## تهران

☎ 021 / pop 14 million

Tehran is the social and economic heart of Iran and it is here that change begins and ends in the Islamic Republic. It's a fascinating place to feel and see the transformations unfold. It also has the country's finest museums and restaurants, a good range of hotels and it's an easy day trip into the Alborz Mountains from here.

The downsides are terrible pollution, chronic overcrowding and a lack of any responsible planning, so don't expect an exotic crossroads steeped in Oriental splendour.

Give the capital a chance – at least a couple of days spent exploring Tehran is an essential part of the Iranian experience.

### HISTORY

In the 13th century writer Yaqoot Hamavi described Tehran as a village of Rey, then the major centre in the region, where 'rebellious inhabitants' lived in underground dwellings. The Safavid kings helped develop Tehran through the 16th and 17th centuries and it became famous for its enchanting vineyards and gardens. Tehran's real expansion began in 1795, when newly victorious Qajar shah Agha Mohammed Khan declared this dusty town of around 15,000 souls his capital. In the past 100 years or so Tehran has grown into the megalopolis you see today. It was the setting for the CIA's first coup in 1953 (see p182) and pronouncements from Tehran have been the driving force behind the growth of radical Islam since 1979.

Today it is fascinating to walk in the footsteps of that modern history; you can see the White Palace, where the last shah hosted the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt as they plotted

the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh; gaze up at the Azadi Monument, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered to mark the 1979 revolution; or visit the haunting Behesht-e Zahra cemetery (p198), resting place of thousands of dead from the Iran-Iraq War.

### ORIENTATION

Tehran is vast and, with its maze of free-ways, can be confusing. But take comfort in knowing that most of the streets you'll use have English signs and follow a rough north-south grid – the Alborz Mountains are in the north. Tehran's Metro is growing and, combined with countless shared taxis, makes getting around relatively simple. If you're using public transport, get to know the names and locations of the main squares (vital for shared-taxi navigation).

South Tehran is cheaper, more congested and generally less appealing than the wealthy north. However, it is home to many of the sights, good transport links and all the budget hotels. The north is more inviting, more expensive, has cleaner air and better hotels and restaurants.

If you're flying in, see p197. Travellers arriving by bus will be dropped at one of four bus stations: most will come to the western bus station or the southern bus station, near the train station; fewer to the Arzhantin station in the city centre or the eastern bus station. At the time of writing only the southern

bus station connected to the Tehran Metro; elsewhere you're best taking a taxi.

### Maps

If you're staying a while, the **Gita Shenasi Map shop** (☎ 6670 9335; www.gitashenasi.com; 15 Ostad Shahrivar St, Razi St, Valiasr Crossroads, Enqelab Ave) has several maps of Tehran.

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

**Book City Hafez Store** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8880 5733; www.ourbooksite.com; 743 Hafez St) The biggest store of the best chain of bookstores.

**Jahanelm Institute** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6695 0324; Enqelab Ave) Huge range of foreign magazines. It's below ground level in a large arcade.

#### Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 115)

**Fire brigade** (☎ 125)

**Iran Emdad** (☎ 643 6662) Private ambulance service.

**Police** (☎ 110)

#### Internet Access

Internet cafés (coffeenets) open and close at a remarkable rate in Tehran. There are many more in northern Tehran, around Valiasr and Vanak Sq's in particular.

**Ferdosi Coffeenet** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6673 0499; 1st fl, Ferdosi Sq, Enqelab Ave; per hr IR8000; ☎ 9am-10pm)

**Gad Internet** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6648 9004; Valiasr Sq; per hr IR8000; ☎ 10am-10pm) One of several in the Iranian Shopping Centre.

### TEHRAN IN...

#### Two Days

Start early in the **Tehran Bazar** (p192) watching the hustling, bustling and haggling of the country's biggest market. Stop in the **Imam Khomeini Mosque** (p192) at prayer-time for a taste of Islam in action, then head over to Park-e Shahr for some headspace and lunch at the **Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag** (p195). Spend the afternoon in the **National Museum of Iran** (p192), then wander down Khayyam St to the **Iranian Traditional Restaurant** (p194) for a traditional meal. On day two check out the **Golestan Palace** (p192) then, after a coffee with the paper in **Café Naderi** (p195), head down for the 2pm viewing of the **National Jewels Museum** (p192). Round the day out with some alternative cuisine in northern Tehran.

#### Four Days

Follow the two-day plan, then head north to check out the **S'ad Abad Museum Complex** (p193) and for a hike around the trails of **Darband** (p198). Duck across to **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (p194) for an ethnic dinner and spectacular views of Tehran by night. Use your last day to take in the relaxed **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art** (p193) before chilling out in the cafés of northern Tehran and feasting at **Monsoon** (p195).

### TEHRAN

**INFORMATION**

1 Azerbaijan Embassy..... 1 D2  
 2 Dutch Embassy..... 2 D3  
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 Iraqi Embassy..... 4 C2  
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**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Niyavaran Palace (White) Museum..... 11 D2  
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 Reza Abbasi Museum..... 13 D4  
 Sa'd Abad Museum Complex..... 14 C1

**EATING**

Azari Traditional Restaurant..... 15 B6  
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 Casa Mia..... (see 19)  
 Jaam-e Jam Food Court..... 17 C3  
 Khaneh Azarabaijan..... (see 12)  
 Khayyam Traditional Restaurant..... 18 C6  
 Kurdish House..... (see 12)  
 Monsoon..... 19 C3  
 Turkmen Restaurant..... (see 12)  
 Zagros House..... (see 12)

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0 2 miles / 0 4 km

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**Pars Internet** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3392 4173; 369 Ferdosi St; per hr IR9000; ✉ 9am-9pm) Can burn photos to CD, has webcams, headphones and international calls at about IR900 per minute.

**Sepanta Internet** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6676 0418; Si Tir St; per hr IR2000; ✉ 9am-9pm) Slowish but cheap.

### Medical Services

The quality of medical care is reasonably high in Tehran. For 24-hour pharmacies, get your hotel to phone the **pharmacy line** (☎ 191). The following are accessible, clean and reputable hospitals:

**Arad Hospital** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 7760 1001; Somayyeh St) Between Shari'ati Ave and Bahar St.

**Day Hospital** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8801 7111; cnr Valiasr Ave & Tavanir St)

**Tehran Clinic** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8872 8113; Farahani St)

### Money

The airport bank has fair rates. Banks along Ferdosi St and around Ferdosi Sq change cash but won't touch travellers cheques or credit cards (see p246). **Bank Melli** (Map pp190-1; Central Branch; Ferdosi St) is the best bank.

It's much quicker to use the exchange shops (or, if you count your money carefully, the freelance moneychangers waving wads of rials) along Ferdosi St.

### Post

**Main post office** (Map pp190-1; Sa'di St) Southeast of Imam Khomeini Sq.

### Telephone

Phone cards are available from newsstands. Independent telephone offices are often found near the major squares, including the **telephone office** (Map pp190-1; Ferdosi St, Imam Khomeini Sq; ☎ 7.30am-10pm). Internet calls are cheaper.

### Tourist Information

**Iran Touring & Tourism Organisation** (Map pp190-1; ITTO; ☎ 8896 7065; 154 Keshavarz Blvd) More tour operator than information office. Has a few brochures.

### Travel Agencies

Nejatollahi St in central Tehran is packed with agencies selling flight and train tickets, including the following:

**Asia2000 Travel Agency** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8889 6947-58; asia2000@sanapardaz.com; Nejatollahi St)

**Taban Travel & Tourism** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3395 6560-61; Sarcheshmeh Cross, Amir Kabir St; taban@sanapardaz.com)

### NEW NUMBERS

In mid-2005 most Tehran phone numbers expanded from seven to eight digits. All numbers, except those beginning with 5 or 9, grew by repeating the first digit. For example, 123 4567 became 1123 4567. Numbers in this guide were accurate at the time of publication, but if you come across a seven-digit Tehrani number, you'll know what to do.

### Visa Extensions

If at all possible, *do not* get your visa extended in Tehran. If it's unavoidable, go to the **Disciplinary Force for Islamic Republic of Iran Department for Aliens Affairs** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8880 0000; Valiasr Ave; ☎ 7.45am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.45am-noon Thu); yes, it's a bad as it sounds. The nominated **Bank Melli** (Map pp190-1; Valiasr Ave) is about 300m south.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The traffic in Tehran can be both dangerous and annoying. The sheer volume of traffic makes crossing the street seem like a game of Russian roulette. Take some comfort, however, in knowing that, despite most drivers having no regard for little things like road rules, they're actually pretty good at steering their cars and it's too much paperwork to run you over. As a pedestrian, until you get used to it, the best way to safely cross the street is to wait for one or two other road-crossers to appear and put them between you and the oncoming traffic. And be aware of the contra-flow bus lanes, running the wrong way along one-way streets.

Tehran is one of the most polluted cities on earth. When pollution levels reach crisis point - usually during summer - head north to the hills of Darband or Park-e Jamshidiyeh.

As far as crime is concerned, very few travellers report any problems but those who do have usually been stung in the bogus police scam (p243).

### SIGHTS

Tehran doesn't have much to show for its history, but there are some good museums and the various Qajar and Pahlavi-era palaces are worth a look. The following sights begin with the Tehran Bazar in the south and head north from there. If you're pushed



for time, stick to the Golestan Palace, National Jewels Museum, National Museum of Iran and S'ad Abad Museum Complex.

## Central & Southern Tehran

### TEHRAN BAZAR

The **Tehran Bazar** (Map pp190–1) is a city within a city, encompassing more than a dozen mosques, several guesthouses, a handful of banks (not for changing money), one church and even a fire station. Each corridor specialises in a particular commodity: copper, paper, gold, spices and carpets, among many others. Visiting the bazaar is primarily a people-watching and shopping experience – it's no architectural jewel.

The main entrance is from 15 Khordad Ave, and the best way to explore the bazaar is simply to wander its labyrinth of streets and alleys. You'll almost certainly get lost and it's more fun to just go with it. While in the bazaar, it's worth visiting the 18th-century **Imam Khomeini Mosque** (Map pp190–1) for a glimpse of Islam in action. It's fascinating to just sit and watch.

### GOLESTAN PALACE & GARDENS

The **Golestan Palace** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 3311 8335; www.golestanpalace.org; Ark Sq; ☎ 9am–3pm, closed Sun & Thu) is a monument to the excesses of the Qajar shahs and includes several buildings open to the public and set around a formal garden. You can wander around the gardens and admire the painted tile-work for free, otherwise each museum costs IR3000 or IR4000 – buy all tickets at the main entrance.

The best museums are the **Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar** (Marble Throne Verandah), a ceremonial hall containing an imposing alabaster throne; **Negar Khane**, a gallery with a fine collection of Qajar artworks; and the many-mirrored **Shams-Al Emarat** (Edifice of the Sun), once the tallest building in Tehran and designed to mix European and Persian architectural styles.

If renovation of the **Ethnographical Museum** is complete, it's also worth a look. There's a cosy basement teahouse.

### NATIONAL JEWELS MUSEUM

If you only visit one museum in Tehran, this should be it. The **National Jewels Museum** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 6446 3785; Ferdosi St; admission IR3000; ☎ 2pm–4.30pm Sat–Tue) has more jew-

els on display than you are ever likely to see in one place again. Rubies, emeralds, diamonds, pearls and spinels are encrusted into everything from crowns and sceptres to cloaks, jewellery boxes and swords. Among the impressive displays is a world globe with rubies forming the countries and emeralds the oceans, and the famous Peacock Throne. It's in the basement vault of Bank Mellī; look for the huge black gates and machine-gun-toting guards.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRAN

The **National Museum of Iran** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 6670 2061; www.nationalmuseumofiran.ir; Si Tir St; admission IR10,000; ☎ 9am–4.45pm, to 5.45pm summer, Tue–Sun) houses a small but fascinating collection of pre-Islamic artefacts from sites including Persepolis and Shush.

From Persepolis, there's a 6th-century BC audience-hall relief of Darius I, a frieze of glazed tiles, a famous trilingual Darius I inscription and a carved staircase.

An intriguing exhibit is the grizzly 'salt man', a remarkably intact skull with white hair and beard, plus a leather boot with the foot still in it. The remains are believed to be those of a 3rd- or 4th-century salt miner.

Labelling is sometimes rudimentary but a good illustrated guide is available free – ask for it.

### MUSEUM OF THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

Admission to the National Museum of Iran also buys entry to this neighbouring **museum** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 6670 2655; Si Tir St; ☎ 9am–4.45pm, to 5.45pm summer, Tue–Sun), which features two floors of exhibits dating from the 7th century onwards. You'll see carpets, textiles, ceramics, pottery, silks, portraits and excellent examples of stucco work from mosques throughout the country. English-speaking guides are available.

### GLASS & CERAMICS MUSEUM

The **Glass & Ceramic Museum** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 6670 8153; www.glasswaremuseum.ir; Si Tir St; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun, to 6pm summer) is one of the most impressive in Iran, not only for the exhibits but for the building itself, an interesting example from the Qajar period. The exhibits are beautifully presented in modern, individually lit cases and it's easy to follow the English descriptions leading you through the ages.

### SEPAHSALAR MOSQUE & MADRASSA

The **Sepahsalar Mosque & Madrasa** (Map pp190–1; Mostafa Khomeini St) is Tehran's largest and most important Islamic building. It was built between 1878 and 1890 and its eight minarets are impressive. The poetry, inscribed in several ancient scripts in the tiling, is famous.

### US DEN OF ESPIONAGE

The only indications that this vast complex was once the US embassy are a vandalised symbol of the bald eagle outside the main entrance and the anti-American murals daubed along the southern wall. Now called the **US Den of Espionage** (Map pp190–1; Taleqani Ave) and used by the military, the building is closed to visitors, though occasionally it opens, usually around No Ruz (March 21). Be discreet about taking any photos in the area.

### TEHRAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

This **museum** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 8896 5411; www.tehranmoca.com/en; admission IR2000; ☎ 9am–6pm Thu, 2–6pm Fri), near the Carpet Museum, contains interesting paintings from modern Iranian artists, as well as temporary exhibitions featuring Iranian and foreign photographers and calligraphers.

### CARPET MUSEUM

The **Carpet Museum** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 8896 7707; www.carpetmuseum.ir; cnr Fatemi St & Kargar Ave; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun, to 6pm summer) contains more than 100 high-quality pieces from all over Iran and is a must if you're interested in Persian rugs. There's a decent café inside.

### North Tehran

#### REZA ABBASI MUSEUM

The **Reza Abbasi Museum** (Map p188; ☎ 8851 3001; www.rezaabbasimuseum.org; Shari'ati Ave; admission IR2500; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun) contains fine examples of Islamic painting and calligraphy from ancient Qurans, and galleries with delicate pottery and exquisite jewellery. If you're short of time, the Sa'd Abad and Ni-yavaran palaces are better.

#### SA'D ABAD MUSEUM COMPLEX

In the pretty and extensive grounds of the former shah's summer residence, the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex** (Map p188; ☎ 2228 2031; www.saadabadpalace.org in Arabic; Taheri St, Valiasr Ave; ☎ 8.30am–4pm, to 5pm summer) consists of several

small museums. These include the **National Palace (White) Museum**, the last shah's palace (with 54 rooms); the interesting **Military Museum**, with a collection of armoury; the **Green (Shahvand) Palace**, with its collection of carpets, furniture and other oddments; and the **Museum of Fine Arts**, with some charming Persian oil paintings.

The grounds are open daily and each museum has a separate entrance fee – between IR3000 and IR5000. Take a shared (or private) taxi from Tajrish Sq, or walk about 1.5km from Tajrish, along Shahid Ja'afar.

## SLEEPING

Tehran has a good range of accommodation, though inspiration can be hard to find and it's usually more expensive than elsewhere in Iran. Most hotels tend to be concentrated in a couple of areas, making comparisons relatively easy. Tehran's traffic can be deafening, so if you're a light sleeper look for something away from a main road, or at the back of the building.

## Budget

Most cheap places are within a 1km radius of Imam Khomeini Sq and conveniently near the museums, bazaar and train station. However, it's also the noisiest and grubbier part of the city and pretty dead after dark.

**Hafez Hotel** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 6670 9063; hafez hotel@yahoo.com; Bank Mellī Alley; s/d with breakfast US\$17.55/23.40; ☎ ☎) Off Ferdosi St, the Hafez' quiet, clean and relatively modern rooms with fridges, soft beds and poky Western bathrooms are pretty good value. There's a small restaurant and English is spoken.

**Mashhad Hotel** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 3311 3062; mashhadhotel@yahoo.com; 416 Amir Kabir St; dm/s/tw IR25,000/50,000/75,000; ☎) The Mashhad's tiny and often noisy rooms with share bathrooms are simplicity itself, though management can be helpful. Don't confuse this with the Mashhad Hotel, near the former US embassy.

**Hotel Sa'adi** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 3311 7653; Lalehzar St; s/tw IR70,000/110,000) The family-run Sa'adi has rudimentary but clean rooms with showers, but toilets are shared. There's a low-key restaurant serving Iranian food.

**Mehr Guesthouse** (Map pp190–1; ☎ 3311 0133; s/tw with shower IR40,000/50,000; ☎) Off Amir Kabir St, Mehr could use a facelift but its rooms with firm mattresses are cheap and management is obliging, though little English



is spoken. The squat toilets are shared and singles without shower are IR30,000.

## Midrange

Prices in this range start at about US\$25 for a twin or double room. All rooms have bathrooms, some with squat toilets, and most will have a fridge, TV and air-con.

**Atlas Hotel** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8890 6058; www.atlas-hotel.com; 206 Taleqani St; s/tw US\$38/58; 🍷 🍷) This quiet, tastefully decorated place in the centre of Tehran is fair value. The rooms overlooking the courtyard are best. Rates are negotiable and the Indian/Pakistani restaurant (meals IR45,000 to IR65,000, open noon to 4pm and 7pm to 11pm) isn't bad.

**Omid Hotel** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6641 4564; www.omid-hotel.com; 20 East Nosrat St; s/d with breakfast US\$52/70; 🍷) Well-located near Park-e Laleh, the welcoming staff and large rooms with fridge, TV and video are easy to return to. Best to book ahead.

**Hotel Naderi** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6670 1872; naderihotel@yahoo.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d US\$15/30; 🍷) The atmospheric Naderi has large, airy rooms with a '50s ambience, right down to the bakelite telephones. Rooms are large, but those at the front are noisy. The adjoining café is great.

**Hotel Safir** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8830 0873; www.indianhotelsafir.com; 10 Ardalan St; s/d with breakfast US\$35/45-53; 🍷 🍷) Above the famous Tandoor Restaurant off Mofatteh Ave, the Safir is small, clean and has comfortable rooms with satellite TV. Good value.

**Hotel Khayyam** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3311 3757; hotel.khayyam@hotmail.com; 3 Navidi Alley; s/tw US\$18/25 with

breakfast; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The Khayyam, off Amir Kabir St, is quiet but tired. Discounts are probable.

## Top End

**Simorgh Hotel** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8871 9911; www.simorghhotel.com; 1069 Valiasr Ave; s/d with breakfast US\$119/129; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The most professionally run hotel in Tehran, rates for the stylish rooms include use of the gym, Jacuzzi and pool. It's well set up for business.

**Laleh International Hotel** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8896 5021; www.lalehhotel.com; Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave; s/d US\$130/152; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The former InterContinental has fine rooms, a great location and panoramic views. The restaurants here are pretty good.

## EATING

Tehran boasts plenty of good Iranian restaurants plus a refreshing range of international cuisines: make the most of them.

**Azari Traditional Restaurant** (Azari Coffeehouse; Map p188; ☎ 5537 6702; Valiasr Ave, Rah-Ahan Sq; meals IR25,000; ☎ 7am-4.30pm & 8pm-midnight) About 250m north of Rah-Ahan Sq, this restored coffeehouse serves top-notch *dizi* and chicken kebabs and is wonderfully atmospheric. There's traditional music most nights.

**Iranian Traditional Restaurant** (Agha Bozorg; Map pp190-1; ☎ 8890 0522, 28 Keshavarz Blvd; meals IR20,000-35,000; ☎ noon-midnight) Full of flirting young Tehranis, this attractive underground lair successfully combines old and new – *dizi* and kebabs on the menu and an eclectic nightly music scene.

**Khoshibin Restaurant** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3390 2194; Sa'di St; meals IR15,000-35,000; ☎ 11.30am-3.30pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Cheap, cheerful place with mouthwatering Caspian cuisine including several fish dishes and, vegetarians take note, the divine *mirza ghasemi* and *baghli*, a vegetable *khoresht* that's only available at lunchtime. There's no English sign so look for the fish in the window.

**Armenian Club** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6670 0521-2; 68 Khark St, cnr France Ave; meals IR50,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 8pm-midnight Sat-Thu; noon-3pm Fri) This Christian club is an escape where women can take off their scarves. The barbecued sturgeon, chicken schnitzel and Iranian dishes aren't bad. Look for a yellow awning. Muslims cannot enter.

**Tandoor Restaurant** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8830 0873; Ardalan St; meals IR45,000-65,000; ☎ noon-3pm &

7-11pm) Under the Hotel Safir, the curries and daals are reliably good, and there are several vegetarian dishes.

There are four popular themed restaurants in **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (Stone Park; Map p188; Feizieh Ave, Niyavaran St, Tajrish), in the far north of Tehran, where the spectacular mountain and city views are worth the trip alone. All the restaurants here are open from about 9am to midnight. Starting from the bottom of the hill, you'll come to the **Khaneh Azarbaijan** (☎ 2229 7540; meals IR40,000); then the **Kurdish House** (☎ 2280 1309; meals IR50,000), the **Turkmen Restaurant** (☎ 2281 0106; meals IR35,000), which has the best and cheapest food, including *mirza ghasemi* (IR15,000), and finally **Zagros House** (☎ 2281 0107; meals IR50,000).

From sushi to a divine yellow curry, **Monsoon** (Map p188; ☎ 8879 1982; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; meals IR50,000-90,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11.30pm Sat-Thu) is one of Tehran's best restaurants. The all-Asian menu changes regularly. In the same complex, **Casa Mia** (Map p188; ☎ 8879 1959; meals IR75,000-130,000) is an excellent Italian option.

## Quick Eats

You won't have to look too hard to find a kababi (basic kebab shop) or pizza joint in Tehran.

**Boof** (Map p188; ☎ 2225 3262; Valiasr Ave; meal IR20,000) The closest Iran comes to McDonald's, but with far superior burgers.

**Tomato** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6671 1579; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; pizzas IR20,000; ☎ 9am-11pm) Good pizzas, better lamb sandwiches and decent coffee.

**Jaam-e Jam Food Court** (Map p188; Jaam-e Jam Shopping Centre; cnr Valiasr Ave & Taheri St) A food court? Yes indeed! The food here is not cheap and not necessarily the best in town. But this is as close to a Western-style pick-up bar as you'll find in Tehran. The choice of food – Chinese, Greek, French, British, Italian, Mexican and BBQ – is wide, but this is more about looking hot than eating. So practise raised eyebrows and meaningful looks, and settle in for some flirtatious fun.

## DRINKING

Most of the traditional restaurants mentioned above are also good places to just hang out and drink tea.

**Café Naderi** (Map pp190-1; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; ☎ 8am-7pm, Sat-Thu) Attached to the Hotel Naderi in southern Tehran, Naderi is famous

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Khayyam Traditional Restaurant** (Map p188; ☎ 5580 0760; Khayyam St; meals IR40,000-60,000; ☎ 11am-midnight) Just south of Khayyam Metro station, this beautifully restored restaurant serves a wide variety of Iranian dishes (though some aren't on the menu), including juicy kebabs and various *bademjani* (aubergine or eggplant) options. It's also a great place to just relax with tea and *qalyan*.

not only for its coffee but as a meeting place of intellectuals and artists – there are lots of berets and goatees here.

**Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6673 1075; Park-e Shah; meals IR45,000; ☎ 9am-10pm) A relaxing stop on the museum circuit. Musicians sometimes play at lunchtime.

Tehranis love the walking trails of Darband and Darekeh (Map p188) and the numerous teahouses and restaurants that line them. It's a great place to walk, talk and sip tea in cosy teahouses.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Cinema

Tehran has plenty of cinemas, but most show (often violent) Iranian films. If you want Hollywood or better-quality Iranian flicks, head to the trendy **Farhang Cinema** (Map p188; ☎ 2200 2088; www.fcf-ir.com; Shari'ati Ave, Gholhak; tickets IR10,000) where relatively recent releases can be seen, some in English.

### Theatre

One of the few inner-city theatres featuring cultural events and traditional performances that foreigners are welcome to attend is the **Tezatre Shahr** (City Theatre; Map pp190-1; ☎ 6646 0595; Daneshju Park, cnr Valiasr & Enqelab Aves). Check the English-language newspapers or www.tehranavenue.com for upcoming events.

## SHOPPING

In **Tehran Bazar** (main entrance 15 Khordad Ave) you'll find everything from carpets and tacky souvenirs to intricate glassware. See p192.

Other good shopping strips are the endless Valiasr Ave, particularly around Valiasr and Vanak Sqs, where scarves and manteaus can be bought, while Ferdosi St around Ferdosi Sq and Taleqani St just west of the US Den of Espionage have plenty of souvenir shops.

## THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Firouzeh Hotel** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3311 3508; www.firouzehhotel.com; Dolat Abadi Alley; s/d IR90,000/120,000; 🍷 🍷) The Firouzeh is easily the best budget option, thanks mainly to the efforts of the genuinely friendly English-speaking manager Mr Musavi. It's far enough off Amir Kabir St to be quiet, and the spotless rooms have a fridge, satellite TV and a shower; toilets are shared. The communal area is a good place to meet travellers, and Mr Musavi can arrange everything from bus tickets and vegetarian meals to US\$20 ski trips. There's also a great guest-book. Highly recommended.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p657 for details about international air and bus services to/from Tehran.

### Air

Iran Air flies daily between Tehran and most cities and larger towns in Iran. Services are less frequent on the smaller airlines, including Iran Aseman and Mahan Air. Tehran is full of travel agencies (see p189), which are easier to deal with than airline offices.

Iran Air services from Tehran include the following:

To/from	One-way fare (IR)	Duration (hr)
Bandar Abbas	480,000	2
Esfahan	195,000	¾
Kerman	364,000	1½
Mashhad	344,000	1½
Rasht	195,000	¾
Shiraz	315,000	1½
Tabriz	256,000	1
Yazd	320,000	1

There are some international airlines represented in Tehran.

**Air France** (Map p188; ☎ 2204 4498; Sayyeh Tower, Valiasr Ave)

**Air India** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8873 9762; Serafraz St)

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8855 0156-60; 29 Khalid St)

**British Airways** (Map p188; ☎ 2204 4552, 10th fl, Sayyeh Tower, Sayeh St, Valiasr Ave)

**Emirates** (Map p188; ☎ 8879 6786; 1211 Valiasr Ave)

**Gulf Air** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 2225 3284-7; Nejatollahi St)

**KLM** (Map p188; ☎ 2204 4757; 12th fl, Sayeh Tower, Sayyeh St, Valiasr Ave)

**Lufthansa** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8873 8701; Beheshti Ave, 2 Serafraz St) Also represents Austrian Airlines.

**Turkish Airlines** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8874 8450; 239 Motahhari Ave)

### Bus

There are four bus terminals in Tehran but most travellers should only need the western and southern bus terminals. Tickets can be prebooked at the **Iran Peyma office** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6670 9964; Ferdosi St) but it's just as easy to turn up at the appropriate terminal and ask around the bus company offices.

The western bus terminal (terminal-e gharb) caters for all places west of Tehran, and anywhere along the Caspian Sea west of, and including, Chalus. Mercedes/Volvo

services include Rasht (IR16,500/33,000, eight hours), Ramsar (IR15,500/56,000, six hours), Chalus (IR19,000/35,000, five hours), Tabriz (IR35,000/50,000, 10 hours), Qazvin (IR8000/20,000, three hours), Hamadan (IR18,500/35,000, six hours), Kermanshah (IR27,500/48,000, eight hours, mornings only). International buses to Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan also leave from here (see p250 and p660). To get to the terminal, take a shared taxi (IR4000) to Azadi Sq, from where it's a 10-minute walk, or a private taxi (IR2,000).

The southern bus terminal (terminal-e jonoub) has Mercedes/Volvo buses to the south and east of Tehran, such as Mashhad (IR39,000/75,000, 14 hours), Esfahan (IR20,000/33,000, seven hours), Shiraz (IR38,000/66,000, 12 to 16 hours), Yazd (IR27,000/52,000, around 10 hours), Kerman (IR41,000/65,000, 18 hours) and Bandar Abbas (IR62,000/110,000, 20 hours). The Metro stop here (terminal-e jonoub) makes it easy to reach from Imam Khomeini Sq.

The small eastern bus terminal (terminal-e shargh) has buses to anywhere east, and anywhere along the Caspian Sea east of Chalus. Take a shared taxi to Imam Hossein Sq and another from there.

The central bus terminal (Seiro Safar or Arzhantin terminal) has buses to Esfahan, Kerman, Mashhad, Rasht, Shiraz and Yazd, but the southern bus terminal is better for all these destinations.

### Savari

Most towns within about three hours by car from Tehran are linked by savari (long-distance taxi). They leave from inside, or just outside, the appropriate bus terminals. For instance, savaris to Qazvin (IR20,000) or Chalus (IR60,000) leave from the western bus terminal or nearby Azadi Sq, and savaris to Qom (IR30,000) leave from outside the southern bus terminal.

### Train

Almost all train services in Iran start and finish at the **train station** (Map p188; Rah-Ahan Sq) in southern Tehran. Arrival and departure times are listed in English and the staff at the **information booth** (☎ 5565 1415) speak English.

There are services (daily unless specified) between Tehran and Ahvaz (IR113,800/18,350 in 1st/2nd class, 15 hours, twice

daily), Gorgan (IR39,750/17,200, 10½ hours), Tabriz (IR57,750/27,200, 13 hours), Esfahan (IR31,000 1st class only, seven hours), Mashhad (IR60,200/37,800, 12 to 16 hours, 11 daily), Bandar Abbas (IR88,700 1st class only, 20 hours), Yazd (IR35,950 1st class only, eight hours, twice daily), and Kerman (IR39,750/63,150, 13 hours, twice daily). See p253 for more on trains.

Incredibly, you can't buy tickets at the station. Instead, you'll be sent to **Rah-e-Saadat Agency** (Map p188; ☎ 538 2939; 270 Moktari, Valiasr Ave), about 200m north of the station.

To get there, take any bus or shared taxi heading down Valiasr or Hafez streets.

## GETTING AROUND

### To/From the Airport

If you're arriving in Tehran for the first time, it's wise to pay for a private taxi to your hotel. Whether you fly into Mehrabad International Airport or, as seems more likely, the new Imam Khomeini International Airport (see right), avoid the taxi drivers who approach you outside the terminals and head for the taxi booth, which has set prices. From Mehrabad to most parts of Tehran it's IR30,000, though this rises in peak hour. From the domestic terminal you could catch a bus to Vanak Sq or to the train station.

You can also take the Metro out as far as Sadeghieh near Azadi Sq and get a taxi from there.

### Bus

Buses cover virtually all of Tehran but, as they're often crowded and slow, most travellers end up using shared taxis instead. However, buses are dirt cheap – IR200 for most trips – and since they often use dedicated bus lanes they can actually be faster than a taxi in heavy traffic. Some useful routes include: bus 145 between Imam Khomeini Sq and Tajrish; bus 18 between Tajrish Sq and Arzhantin Sq; bus I-22 between Imam Khomeini Sq and Arzhantin Sq; and the I-33 between Tajrish Sq and Valiasr Sq. Buy tickets at booths near major bus stops. Numbers tend to change frequently, so ask around before getting on.

### Metro

The ever-expanding **Tehran Metro** (www.tehranmetro.com) is cheap and relatively fast, even if it is a frotteur's paradise because it's so packed. The north-south Line 1 (red line)

## IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

More than 30 years after work began, Tehran's huge **Imam Khomeini International Airport** (IKIA; www.ikia.com) finally began taking regular flights in mid-2005. However, at the time of writing many flights were still arriving at the old Mehrabad International Airport. If you land at IKIA, taxis are going to be much more expensive than from Mehrabad. The Metro is supposed to run to IKIA, but you'll probably need to take a taxi to or from the last stop.

is quite handy for travellers. It runs from Haram-e Motahar (for the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini) in the south, and useful stops include the southern bus terminal (terminal-e jonoub), the bazaar (Pamzdah-e Khordad), Imam Khomeini Sq and Taleqani for the US Den of Espionage. It finishes now at Mirdamad, near Vanak Sq, though it will eventually run all the way to Tajrish Sq.

Line 2 (blue line) runs from Dardasht in the east, crossing Line 1 at Imam Khomeini Sq, and on to Sadeghieh, near the western bus terminal. A single trip on either line costs IR650. Line 5 (green line) runs from Sadeghieh out to Karaj. Trips cost IR1000.

### Taxi

Taxis *dah baste* (closed door) and shared taxis travel every nanosecond linking the main squares: Imam Khomeini, Vanak, Valiasr, Tajrish, Arzhantin, Azadi, Ferdosi, Enqelab, Haft-e Tir, Rah-Ahan and Imam Hossein. Any taxi can be chartered for a private trip but you'll have to negotiate a fare. Prices are usually about 30% to 50% higher during peak hour. Sample *dah baste* fares include: Imam Khomeini Sq to Tajrish IR30,000 and Imam Khomeini Sq to Valiasr Sq IR17,000. Bargain hard.

## AROUND TEHRAN

### TOCHAL & DARBAND توچال & در بند

To get a complete picture of Tehran and its people, you need to venture into the affluent, leafy northern suburbs at the very foot of the Alborz Mountains – a perfect antidote to busy, working-class southern Tehran.

From Tajrish Sq minibuses and taxis run to **Tochal telecabin** (Map p188; www.tochalcomplex.com), where rather battered cable cars take you up Mt Tochal (3957m). It operates from 8am to 3pm daily (until 5pm Thursday and Friday) and costs IR20,000 (each way) to Station 5, where there's a restaurant, and another IR15,000 each way to Station 7, where you can go skiing between about November and May. Hire skis at Station 5.

At **Darband** (Map p188), reached by foot or shared taxi from Tajrish Sq, a series of walking trails lead into the foothills. The scenery here is better than at Tochal and the trails near Darband village have something of a carnival atmosphere with food and drink stalls, good teahouses and shops. Both Tochal and Darband get crowded on Fridays, but are peaceful during the week.

## ALBORZ SKI RESORTS

### تفریحگاه اسکی البرز

Skiing in the Alborz Mountains above Tehran can be one of the most unexpected pleasures of a trip to Iran. There are four resorts within day-trip distance, all of which have good facilities, equipment for hire and are pretty cheap. Tochal is the nearest, but **Shemshak Resort** (☎ 0221-355 2912; IR40,000; ☞ 8.30am-3.30pm Jan-Mar) has the most challenging slopes, and **Dizin Resort** (☎ 0262-254 2449; IR50,000; ☞ 8.30am-3.30pm Nov-Apr) is the place to be seen. Dizin usually has decent snow from about November to April. As a rough guide to cost, a day's ski-hire starts at about IR75,000 but can climb as high as IR250,000 – you should be able to get a decent pair of carve skis, boots and poles for about IR140,000.

All the resorts have hotels, with prices starting at about US\$35/50 per single/twin. Rooms at the **Dizin Hotel** (☎ 0262-254 2449; tw US\$50; 📍) are adequate.

Getting there can be a big hassle on public transport, so unless you have friends with a vehicle and chains it's better to use a day tour. Mr Musavi at the Firouzeh Hotel (p194) in Tehran can arrange inexpensive but reliable day trips. Or, try a travel agency or check the English-language newspapers.

## MT DAMAVAND

### کوه دماوند

This magnificent conical volcano (5671m) is the highest in the country. It's possible to climb it in two or three days, starting from the pretty village of **Reyneh**, but if you in-

tend to go mountain climbing, first contact the **Mountaineering Federation of Iran** (☎ 021-883 9928; www.iranmountfed.com; irmountfed@neda.net; 15 Varzandeh, Mofatteh Ave, Tehran). Even if you're not a mountain climber, there are plenty of gentle hiking trails in the area.

## THE HOLY SHRINE OF IMAM KHOMEINI

### مرقد مطهر امام خمینی

The resting place of **Imam Khomeini** (admission free; ☞ 24hr), about 35km south of Tehran on the main road to Qom, is one of the largest Islamic complexes in the world. It's not, however, particularly attractive. The shrine itself is in the aircraft-hangar-sized main building. To get there take the Metro to Haram-e Motahar station.

## BEHESHT-E ZAHRA

### بهشت زهرا

The main military cemetery for those who died in the Iran-Iraq War is an extraordinary, but eerie, place. It can easily be combined with a trip to the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini. The cemetery is about 500m east from the back of the shrine, past a huge civilian cemetery and over the main road.

## NOSHAHR/CHALUS & AROUND

### نوشهر / چالوس

☎ 0191

The twin towns of Noshahr and Chalus are set where the spectacular road from Tehran (via Karaj) meets the coast, so they're easily reached. These classic resort towns have some decent hotels and other facilities, but not much character. Noshahr is nicer, while Chalus has better transport connections. Regular shared taxis (IR2000) link the two.

## Sights

At **Namak Abrud**, about 12km west along the road from Chalus, there's a **telecabin** (return IR30,000; ☞ 10am-4pm) to the top of Mt Medovin (1050m). Get here early to avoid the queues and the clouds that roll in later in the day.

The small **Sisangan National Park**, 31km east of Noshahr, is a lovely pocket of rare forest with a few walking trails. Take any transport between Chalus and Nur and get off at the sign saying 'Jungle Park'.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Shalizer Hotel** (☎ 325 0001; Azadi Sq; s IR150,000-200,000, d IR250,000-300,000; 📍) In the heart of Noshahr, the Shalizer has clean, comfort-

able rooms, some with balconies and views; rates are very negotiable. The excellent underground restaurant (meals IR35,000 to IR50,000, open noon to 4pm and 7pm to 1am) is in a former nightclub.

**Hotel Malek** (☎ 222 4107; Noshahr Blvd; d/ste IR200,000/350,000; ☞ noon-3.30pm & 8-11pm; 📍 📺 📺 📺) Between Chalus and Noshahr, Malek is a modern, great-value place with satellite TV, fridge, 'minibar' and Western bathrooms. The attached and misnamed Malek Burger (meals IR25,000 to IR60,000, open 7am to midnight) has some of the best food on the coast; steak, schnitzel, fish, *mirza ghasemi* and, yes, burgers.

## WESTERN IRAN

### غرب ایران

For thousands of years western Iran played host to the rise and fall of civilisation's earliest empires. Standing at the frontiers with Mesopotamia and Turkey, the region's fortunes have been mixed; the trading riches it enjoyed due to its position on the Silk Road were offset by bloody episodes on the battlefield, most recently during the Iran-Iraq War (p182).

Western Iran extends from the border with Armenia and Azerbaijan in the north to the industrial city of Ahvaz near the Gulf. Culturally, it is the most diverse part of Iran, with Azaris, Armenians, Loris, Bakhtiaris, and Kurds among the distinct ethnic groups you'll encounter. Despite this and a wealth of historical, religious and cultural sights, stunning mountain scenery and great trekking possibilities, few travellers see more than Tabriz. Pity them, then take advantage of the unspoiled expanses and go yourself.

This section starts with Bazargan, the main overland border crossing from Turkey.

## BAZARGAN

### بازرگان

☎ 0462

Bazargan is a one-street town on the Iran-Turkey border but there's little reason to stop here. For border crossing details see p250. The best sleeping option is the **Hotel Hamid** (☎ 337 2435; Imam St; tw IR65,000), just beyond the outer border gate.

Avoid the rip-off taxis outside immigration and take the shuttle bus (IR500)

to Bazargan village, where the main taxi stand is in front of the Hotel Jafapoor. From here, savaris to Maku (IR4000) and Tabriz (IR25,000) leave regularly.

## MAKU

### ماکو

☎ 0462 / pop 40,000

Many travellers stop in Maku just before, or after, crossing the border with Turkey. The town is attractively set in a rocky canyon and the essentials are either side of the Tabriz highway.

Friendly and helpful **Hotel Alvand** (☎ 322 3491; Imam Ave; s/d IR35,000/46,000), just west of the main square, has clean rooms and shared bathrooms – the hot shower is downstairs.

Buses to Tabriz (IR12,000, four hours) and Orumiyyeh (IR12,000, 4½ hours) leave in the morning from the terminal at the east end of town, from where savaris make the same trips. Savaris to Bazargan (IR4000) leave from outside Hotel Alvand.

## QAREH KALISA

### قره کلیسا

Set in lonely, rolling hills **Qareh Kalisa** (Black Church; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-1pm & 2-7pm) is one of the best-preserved Christian monuments in Iran. It's more accurately known as Kalisaye Tad – the Church of St Thaddaeus. Poor St Thaddaeus is believed to have founded a church here in AD 43 before his success led to him and his converts being massacred by the jealous Armenian king in AD 66.

The church was largely rebuilt after extensive earthquake damage in the 13th century. More was added in 1810. Its one service a year, on the feast day of St Thaddaeus (around 19 June), is well attended by Armenian pilgrims from all over Iran.

There is no scheduled public transport and the best access is from Maku, from where you can charter a taxi for about IR80,000 return, including waiting time.

## JOLFA

### جولفا

☎ 0492

Sleepy Jolfa is on the border with the little-visited Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan, and is a waypoint en route to the border crossing to Armenia (see p660 for border details). Jolfa also serves as a base from which to visit the picturesque Aras River Valley and the **Church of St Stephanos** (Kalis Darreh Sham; admission IR2000), an impressive Armenian monastery 16km west of Jolfa.

In Jolfa, the best hotel is above the famous **Haj Ali Kababi** (☎ 302 2207; r IR80,000; 📶) at the west end of town.

Infrequent savaris (IR20,000, two hours) and rare buses (IR8000, 3½ hours) run to and from Tabriz, but if you're a group it's better value to take a half-day tour to Jolfa and St Stephanos with Nasser or Mansour Khan from the Tabriz **tourist information office** (☎ 525 2501, 0914-116 0149; Qods St).

## ORUMIYEH (URMIEH)

☎ 0441 / pop 500,000

Orumiyeh lies to the west of the lake of the same name and boasts a long and deep-rooted Azari heritage, with liberal doses of Christianity and Judaism thrown into the ethnic mix. Today about a third of the population is Christian, the highest of any Iranian city. There is little of visual interest for the traveller but, if you're passing through, don't miss the bustling bazaar.

Most essentials are on or near Imam Ave, between Faqiyeh Sq and Enqelab Sq, including the **Wisaynet Coffeenet** (☎ 224 1400; Khayyam St; per hr IR8000).

## Sights

The **bazaar**, off Imam Ave, between Besat St and Faqiyeh Sq, is full of life and worth rambling around for an hour or so. While you're there, look for the hidden entrance to the partly Seljuk-era, brick-domed **Jameh Mosque**, which has some fine plaster mouldings.

**Orumiyeh Museum** (☎ 224 6520; Beheshti St; admission IR3000; 🕒 9am-2pm Tue-Sun) has a new, English-speaking director and some more lively exhibits – worth a quick look.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Tak Setareh** (☎ 223 1861; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw IR60,000/80,000) In a lane leading northwest from Imam Ave, about 150m south of Besat St, this helpful, English-speaking place is excellent value. Rooms have Eastern bathrooms and fridge and discounts are possible.

**Reza Hotel** (☎ 222 6580; Besat St; s/d IR80,000/120,000; 📶) Centrally located near the corner of Imam Ave, Reza has Western toilets, satellite TV and a passable restaurant. Fair value.

**Flamingo** (☎ 346 1177; Kashani St; meals IR35,000; 🕒 noon-3pm & 5-10.30pm) Central and serves the best Iranian food. Stalls around town sell delicious baked potatoes for IR1000.

## Getting There & Away

**Iran Air** (☎ 344 0520) flies to Tehran (IR272,000, twice a day).

Several bus companies have offices along Imam Ave. The terminal for buses, minibuses and savaris is northeast of the centre – catch a shared taxi along Imam Khomeini St. There are buses to Kerman-shah (IR27,000, 11 hours), Maku (IR10,000, five hours), Tabriz (IR12,500, 4½ hours), Sanandaj (IR25,400, seven hours) and Tehran (IR55,000, 13 hours). Savaris to Tabriz (IR25,000, three hours) are faster, crossing the lake by ferry. A new bridge should cut the trip for all transport. To Sero, take a savari (IR10,000) from the Sero terminal (off Raja'i Blvd) or a direct taxi (IR40,000). For other destinations, get connections in Tabriz or Kermanshah.

## SERO

Miniscule Sero is 4km east of a secondary border-crossing point between Iran and Turkey. It's quieter and quicker than Bazargan. There is nowhere to stay. Smiling-assassin taxi drivers want IR50,000 per car for the 45-minute trip to Orumiyeh – wait for fellow passengers.

## TAKHT-E SOLEIMAN

In a bowl of mountains ringed by 1500-year-old fortress walls, **Takht-e Soleiman** (Throne of Soleiman; admission IR4000; 🕒 8am-sunset) is a World Heritage-listed site and one of the most memorable experiences in western Iran. Once the spiritual centre of Zoroastrianism, the site has been used since the Achaemenid period (550–330 BC). However, the oldest remaining structures are the ruined **Sassanian palace** and **fire temples**. It's well worth walking to the top of the conical **Prison of Soleiman** mountain, about 2.5km west of the ruins, for spectacular views.

The easiest way to get there is by charter taxi (about IR200,000 for the day) from Zanjan, stopping in Dandy en route. Alternatively, get to Takab on a series of minibuses from Tabriz, via Meyando'ab and Shahn Dezh, or from Zanjan by direct bus. From Takab, where there are a couple of hotels, rare minibuses (IR1500) and savaris (IR4000) run to Nostrabad village, from where you walk to the ruins. Chartering a taxi from Takab (IR40,000 return, plus waiting time) is a good idea.

## TABRIZ

☎ 0411 / pop 1,400,000

Tabriz had a spell as the Persian capital during the Safavid period (AD 1502–1736), although most of its inhabitants are now Azaris. The city fills a sprawling low depression between red hills and from afar can seem like an impenetrable maze of low-rise apartments. However, the central bazaar area is lively and, with a good range of sleeping options and exceptionally helpful local guides, Tabriz makes the ideal base for exploring northwestern Iran.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are several other Internet cafés in the electronics malls off Imam Khomeini St.

**Kral Coffeenet** (☎ 0914-311 3992; per hr IR5000;

🕒 8.30am-11pm)

**Sabs Coffeenet** (☎ 554 0577; Tarbeyat Shopping Mall;

per hr IR6000; 🕒 9am-10pm; Sat-Thu) The mall is off Imam Khomeini St.

### MONEY

Exchange offices in the bazaar and the tourist office (see below) both change money much faster and at good rates.

**Bank Melli** (Shohada Sq)

### TELEPHONE

**Telephone office** (Miyar Miyar Alley; 🕒 8am-9pm)

Small place, hidden in a lane off Imam Khomeini St.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist office** (☎ 525 2501, 0914-116 0149; amico nasser@yahoo.com; Shohada St; 🕒 9am-1pm & 4.30pm-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Upstairs in a building straddling the main bazaar entrance is where you'll find the best tourist office in Iran. Brothers Nasser and Mansour Khan speak several languages and are full of helpful advice, without hassle. They have maps, tea, a book exchange and offer fairly priced tours to surrounding areas. Make this your first stop.

### VISA EXTENSIONS

**Passport office** (☎ 477 6666; Saeb St; 🕒 7.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-11.30pm Thu) Good place to extend your visa – often done on the same day.

## Sights

Tabriz has the largest, oldest and some say most interesting **bazaar** in Iran. Built more than 1000 years ago, it was damaged several times by earthquakes and most of the 35km of covered, often brick-vaulted passageways

## تبریز

and 7000 shops you see today date to the 15th century. There are several local tea-houses, usually full of *qalyans* (water pipes) with men attached, which make great places to soak up the atmosphere. Tabriz is renowned for carpets, silverware, jewellery, silk and spices such as henna. At the western end you can walk through the **Jameh Mosque**, with its impressive brick-vaulted interior, and on to **Constitution House** (Motahhari St; admission IR3000; 🕒 9am-3pm winter, 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm summer), which is where the 1906 constitution was signed.

Although badly damaged by earthquakes, the 15th-century **Blue Mosque** (Kabud; admission IR2000; 🕒 9am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) is still notable for the extremely intricate tilework. A sensitive restoration is ongoing: walls painted to resemble the missing tiled areas work quite well.

**Azərbayjan Museum** (Imam Khomeini St; admission IR2000; 🕒 8am-5pm Sat-Thu, to 8pm summer) has a worthwhile collection of exhibits from regional archaeological digs. Look for the copy of the famous Chelsea carpet, thought to be one of the best ever weaved, and the stone 'handbags', an ancient symbol of wealth.

The remains of the large, crumbling **Arg-e-Tabriz** (citadel; Imam Khomeini St), built in the early 14th century, are impressive in their enormity but don't warrant further exploration.

**Elgoli** is a large, pleasant park and a good place to get away from the city – as many locals do on summer evenings. Take a shared taxi (IR2000) from Shahrdiri Sq.

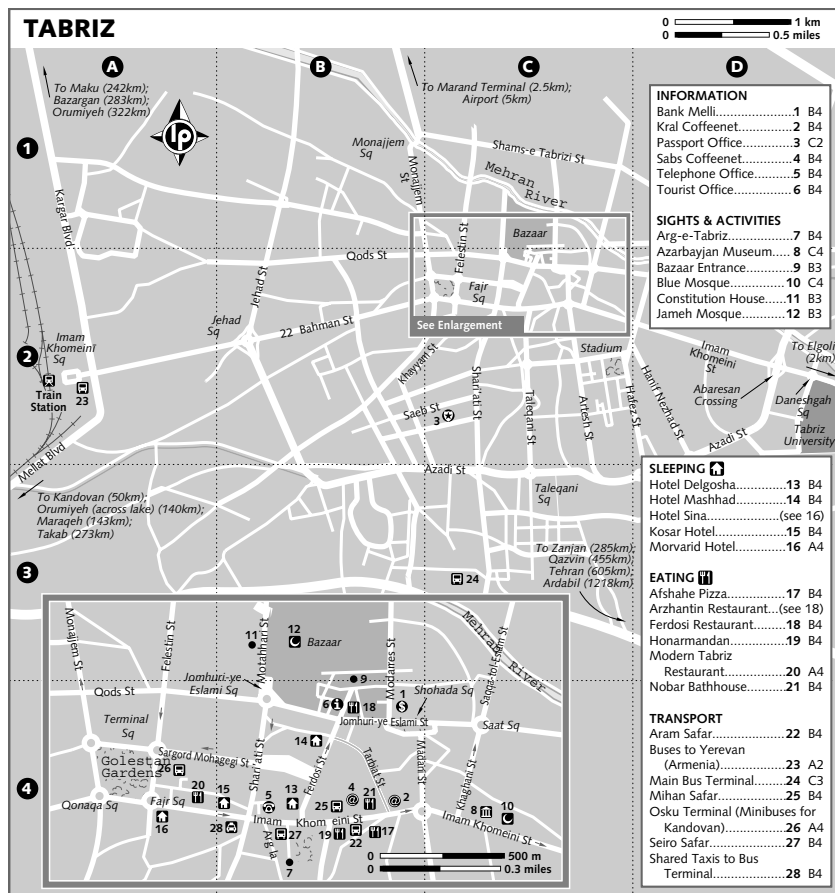
## Sleeping

Most accommodation is centrally located on or not far off Imam Khomeini St.

**Kosar Hotel** (☎ 553 7691-3; info@kosarhotel.com; Imam Khomeini St; s/d IR110,000/142,000; 📶) The best value in town, this new and professionally managed midrange place has clean, well-furnished rooms with satellite TV and fridge; most have Western bathrooms. Rooms at the back are quieter.

**Hotel Sina** (☎ 551 6211; Fajr Sq; s/tw IR150,000/250,000; 📶) Spacious, clean, bright rooms and friendly English-speaking service make this a good bet.

**Morvarid Hotel** (☎ 551 3336-7; morvarid\_hotel@yahoo.com; Fajr Sq; s/d/tr IR99,000/136,000/152,000) Rooms with private Western bathroom and fridge are reasonable value.



**Hotel Mashhad** (☎ 555 8255; Ferdosi St; dm/s/tw IR15,000/34,300/47,200) Simple, cheap and popular with backpackers, clean rooms have basin and table. The share showers cost IR5000 a wash and there's a no-frills restaurant downstairs.

**Hotel Delgosha** (☎ 554 3362; Ferdosi St; s/d/tr IR34,300/47,200/55,600; 🚰) Beds are crammed into these basic but clean rooms. It's IR5000 to use the shared showers.

## Eating

Tabriz' most famous dish is the cheap and hearty *dizi* (*abgusht*, meat stew).

**Ferdosi Restaurant** (*dizi* IR10,000) Down a small lane off Jomhuri-ye Eslami St, this unsigned and earthy eatery is a great place

to sample it with the locals; look for the yellow doors.

**Afshaha Pizza** (Imam Khomeini St; pizzas IR15,000; ☎ 11am-10pm) A popular fast-food option.

**Modern Tabriz Restaurant** (☎ 556 7411; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR20,000-35,000; ☎ 8am-10pm) It's no longer modern, but the food, service and retro, mirrored interior will impress nonetheless. There are several fish options.

**Honarmandan** (☎ 553 4594; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR15,000-30,000; noon-11.30pm Sat-Thu) The décor might be tacky, but dishes such as *dizi* (IR10,000) and *chelow ghimeh* (rice and minced meat, IR15,000) are hard to beat for taste and value.

**Arzhantin Restaurant** (meals IR12,000; ☎ 1-4pm Sat-Thu) In the same lane as the Ferdosi, off

Jomhuri-ye Eslami and just behind the tourist office, this tiny lunchtime place serves tasty vegetarian dishes including *chelow khoresht*.

Renovation of the **Nobar Bathhouse** (Imam Khomeini St) is finally nearing completion and it should be worth a look for tea or food.

## Getting There & Away

Whatever mode of transport you're using, the **tourist office** (☎ 525 2501, 0914-116 0149; amiconasser@yahoo.com; Shohada St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4.30pm-7.30pm Sat-Thu) can help with schedules and tickets.

## AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 334 9038) flies to Tehran (IR256,000, several daily), Mashhad (IR508,000, twice weekly) and Istanbul (twice weekly).

## BUS & SAVARI

Take a shared taxi from the corner of Imam Khomeini and Shari'ati Sts south to the terminal. Services run (Mercedes unless stated, not always regularly) to Jolfa (IR8000, 3½ hours), Kermanshah (IR33,000, 11 hours, 5pm), Maku (IR8500, about four hours), Orumiyyeh (IR12,000, 4½ hours), Ardabil (IR15,000, four hours), Rasht (IR28,000, eight hours, 8.30pm), and Tehran (IR35,000/50,000 in Mercedes/Volvo, nine hours). For Qazvin and Zanjan take any Tehran-bound bus.

Savaris leave from the bus terminal for Orumiyyeh (IR30,000), Maku and Bazargan (IR40,000), Jolfa (IR20,000, two hours) and Ardabil (IR30,000).

International buses leave from Imam Khomeini Sq near the train station for Yerevan (Armenia; IR150,000, four times weekly); buy tickets from **Seiro Safar** (☎ 555 7797; Imam Khomeini Sq). To both Baku (Azerbaijan; IR150,000, eight hours) and Istanbul (Turkey; IR200,000) buses leave nightly at about 10pm from outside the relevant bus office on Imam Khomeini St, notably **Aram Safar** (☎ 552 3724) and **Mihan Safar** (☎ 555 4908).

## TRAIN

There are two overnight trains to Tehran (IR51,000/23,000 in 1st/2nd class, 13 hours). Trains also travel west to Turkey (Van, Ankara and Istanbul) and to Damascus (Syria). The **train station** (☎ 444 4419; Imam Khomeini Sq) is about 5km west of the town centre, acces-

sible by shared taxi along Imam Khomeini and 22 Bahman Sts.

## AROUND TABRIZ

The remarkable village of **Kandovan** (Chandovan; admission IR2500), 50km southwest of Tabriz, is built around and inside volcanic rock formations similar to those found in Cappadocia in central Turkey. Many of the cave homes are still inhabited. Catch a minibus from Tabriz to Osku, then a savari to Kandovan; or charter a taxi from Tabriz for around IR90,000, including one-hour waiting time.

**Maraghe** was a capital of the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty (1220-1380) and is famous for its four ancient brick tomb towers. It's 150km southeast of Tabriz and can easily be visited as a day trip in combination with Kandovan.

## ARDABIL

☎ 0451

Sprawling below Mt Sabalan, historic Ardabil is a logical stopping point if you're heading to Azarbaijan or the Caspian Sea coast from Tabriz. Its main attraction is the impressive **Sheikh Safi od-Din Mausoleum** (Sheikh Safi St; admission IR4000; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, 8.30am-noon & 3.30-7pm summer, Tue-Thu), where the founder of the Safavid dynasty is buried. It also has an interesting **bazaar**, and the hot mineral springs at **Sareyn** are 27km away. A few doors southwest of the Sabalan Hotel is **Tak Taz Cafe Net** (Sheikh Safi St; per hr IR8000).

**Sabalan Hotel** (☎ 223 2857; fax 223 2877; Sheikh Safi St; s/tw US\$15/25) is in a good location virtually opposite the mausoleum and has clean, quiet rooms, some with Western bathroom and fridge. Negotiate breakfast into the price. The restaurant is decent.

Cheaper is the simple **Hotel Goolshan** (☎ 224 6644; IR60,000), which has clean, bright rooms with firm beds and share bathrooms about 50m east of Imam Khomeini Sq.

**Iran Air** (☎ 223 8600) offers flights to Tehran (IR221,000) at least once a day. Regular buses service Tabriz (via Bostan Abad, IR7,600, four hours), and leave for Tehran via Astara (IR4000, two hours), Rasht (IR12,000, five hours) and Qazvin (IR18,500, eight hours). More frequent savaris run to Tabriz (IR30,000, 2½ hours) from Bahonar Sq and to Astara (IR10,000, 70 minutes) from the bus terminal, which is 3km northeast of the centre.

**ASTARA**

☎ 0182

This busy border town on the Caspian coast is the main crossing point between Iran and Azerbaijan; see p661.

**Caspian Coffeenet** (☎ 521 3747; per hr IR8000; ☎ 9am-10pm Sat-Thu & 1-9pm Fri) can occupy some time. **Bilal Hotel** (☎ 521 5586; Mo'alem Sq; s/d IR100,000/172,000; ☎) is central, the clean rooms have Western bathrooms and the manager speaks English.

Plenty of savaris and minibuses head towards Rasht, Bandar-e Anzali and Ardabil.

**RASHT**

☎ 0131

Fast-growing Rasht is the largest city in the Shomal (Caspian littoral) and despite the near-constant rain is a popular weekend and holiday destination for Tehranis. The city itself has little to offer travellers, but it's a transport hub and the jumping-off point for Masuleh.

**Information**

The city centre is chaotic Shohada Sq (known as Shahr-dari Sq), where you'll find the post office and police headquarters, which can extend your visa within 24 hours. Stretching southeast from Shohada Sq, Imam Khomeini St is the main thoroughfare and home to most of the accommodation.

The major banks will change money, but it's quicker at **Mehrpouya Exchange** (☎ 222 7826; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-8pm) down a lane off Imam Khomeini St (near Hotel Golestan).

Get online at **Violet Coffeenet** (☎ 224 7172; Imam Khomeini St; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 9am-9pm), upstairs just southeast of the Carvan Hotel.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Except Bijan's, all these places are a short walk from Shohada Sq.

**Carvan Hotel** (☎ 222 2613; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw IR70,000/80,000) The best of the budget hotels, with clean rooms and shared bathrooms and friendly management.

**Ordibehesht Hotel** (☎ 222 9210; Shohada Sq; s/d US\$25/30; ☎) This clean, quiet midrange hotel is just west of the square. The quaint, comfortable rooms have a Western bathroom and fridge.

**Kouros Restaurant** (☎ 222 0890; Erkhtesat Lane; meals IR30,000; ☎ 10am-4pm & 6pm-midnight) Kouros serves *fesenjun* and several difficult-to-find

آستارا

Gilani dishes. It's down an alley off Sa'di St, about 50m north of Shohada Sq.

**Bijan's** (☎ 323 3099; Namju Blvd; meals IR25,000; ☎ 6-11pm Sun-Fri) Offering a cosy taste of Tuscany in provincial Iran, Bijan's Sheffield-trained chef cooks up authentic pastas served in his tiny trattoria. Take a taxi *dah baste* (IR5000).

**Getting There & Away**

**Iran Air** (☎ 772 4444; Golsar Ave) flies daily to Tehran (IR195,000).

Buses head in all directions from the main bus terminal, accessible by shared taxi heading southeast along Imam Khomeini St. Several bus companies have offices just north of Shohada Sq. Mercedes/Volvo buses run to Tehran (IR16,500/33,000, six hours), Tabriz (IR28,000/50,000, nine hours) and Gorgan (IR26,500/40,000, nine hours). For destinations along the Caspian coast, take any bus, minibus or savari going your way. Savaris to Qazvin, Tehran, Ramsar and Bandar-e Anzali leave from around Shohada Sq.

**MASULEH**

☎ 0132

This is one of the most beautiful villages in Iran, with its earth-coloured houses stacked on top of one another and clinging to the mountainsides. The locals are interested to meet travellers who don't arrive on buses and it's a great place to stay in an Iranian home. The mountains around the village are ideal for hiking. The **Cultural Heritage Organization** (☎ 757 2066; www.masooleh.ir) welcome visitors.

The two hotels in Masuleh, the **Monfared Masooleh Hotel** (☎ 757 3250; s/d IR150,000/250,000) at the bottom of the village, and **Mehran Suites** (☎ 757 2096; apt IR120,000-200,000) at the top, are alright, but staying in one of the 70 rooms in local homes (some with private bathroom) for about IR60,000 to IR80,000 a double (more in summer and if you include food) is a far richer experience. Just walk into town and the offers will come.

From Sabzi Sq in Rasht, take a savari (IR3000) to Fuman, then another past stunning scenery to Masuleh (IR4000). A taxi *dah baste* is about IR35,000.

**RAMSAR**

☎ 0192

Backed by forested hills, Ramsar is a relatively attractive Iranian 'beach resort' even though the beaches are rubbish and women

ماسوله

رامسر

can't use them. The main road is Motahhari, and the centre is Enqelab Sq, where you can change money at Bank Melli.

For travellers, the **Caspian Museum** (☎ 522 5374; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-3pm, 8am-1pm & 4-8pm summer) is housed in Reza Shah's small but extravagantly furnished 1937 summer palace and is worth a look.

More interesting is the nearby **Ramsar Grand Hotel** (☎ 522 3592; www.ramsarparsianhotels.ir; Old Wing s/d/ste US\$53/75/100; ☎) a neocolonial wonder that dominates the town. The hotel now has two wings; the old wing's '40s-era rooms are small but attractive while the newer, less expensive main building is a monument to all things '60s. Neither is worth the money.

Ramsar also has several apartment hotels near Enqelab Sq, of which the **Caspian Suites** (☎ 522 0520; apt IR250,000; ☎) and **Nazia Suites** (☎ 522 4588; apt IR150,000-200,000; ☎) are best. Prices fall sharply in winter.

**Golesorkh Restaurant** (☎ 522 2463; Motahhari St; meals IR20,000-40,000; ☎ 10am-midnight), west of Enqelab Sq, Golesorkh serves delicious Caspian fish dishes (about IR35,000) and the to-die-for *mirza ghasemi*.

Minibuses run the whole Rasht-Chalus route, but short-hop savaris are much faster. They both stop at the terminal in western Ramsar, or take any bus heading your way. Buses to Tehran leave from a terminal about 500m north of the Ramsar Grand Hotel.

**QAZVIN**

☎ 0281

Qazvin is a pleasant stopover and a good base from which to visit the Castles of the Assassins (p206).

Most of the life-support services are on or near the central Azadi Sq, including the **post office** and **Bank Sepah**. Unsigned **Paetz Internet** (Taleqani St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 9am-9pm) is handy; look for the green gates on the north side of the street, about 150m east of Azadi Sq.

**Sights**

The 16th-century **Chehel Sotun Palace** (Azadi Sq) is set in attractive gardens and has a mildly interesting **museum** (admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-8pm) inside. The ancient **Jameh Mosque**, 700m south of Azadi Sq, has some features dating back to the Arab period (AD 637-

1050), including an exquisitely decorated prayer hall. About 300m further south, the 16th-century **Imamzadeh-ye Hossein** shrine has a well-proportioned blue dome framed by fountains. The covered **bazaar** amply repays idle wandering.

**Sleeping & Eating**

The following are on Azadi Sq or Taleqani St, which heads east from that square.

**Hotel Iran** (☎ 222 8877; Shohada St, Azadi Sq; s/tw IR100,000/150,000; ☎) Popular Hotel Iran has a range of rooms, most with private facilities. The manager speaks English and can arrange trips into the Alamut region.

**Alborz Hotel** (☎ /fax 222 6631; Taleqani St; hotel \_alborz\_q@yahoo.com; s/d IR190,000/280,000; ☎) This modern European-style place has small, well-appointed rooms with Western bathroom and satellite TV. Staff are helpful and there's a good coffee shop.

**Khasar Hotel** (☎ /fax 222 4239; Khaleqi Alley; tw IR55,000) Down a lane virtually opposite the Alborz, the Khasar is cheap but the rooms and shared bathrooms are pretty grim.

**Eghbali Restaurant** (☎ 222 4990; Taleqani St; meals IR25,000-50,000; ☎ 11am-4pm & 7-11pm) About 200m east of Azadi Sq, the large menu includes local specialties like *gheymeh nasar* (lamb stew, IR15,000).

**Yas** (☎ 222 2853; Yasa Alley; meals IR20,000; ☎ 7am-10pm) With fewer menu options but much more atmosphere, this eatery is a local favourite famous for its excellent *gheymeh nasar*. It's off the north side of Taleqani St, just east of Khayyam St.

**Getting There & Away**

The main bus and minibus terminal is at Darvazeh Sq (Tehran Gate), where buses go regularly to Tehran (IR8500, three hours), and occasionally to Hamadan (IR14,000, 3½ hours) and Kermanshah (IR19,000, six hours). Savaris to Tehran (IR20,000, 90 minutes) leave from outside.

If you're heading west, go to the Dorah-e Hamadan junction where buses stop momentarily on their way to Zanjan (IR10,000, 2½ hours), Tabriz (IR31,000, seven hours) and Hamadan. For Rasht, go to Enqelab Sq (Darbaza Rasht).

Trains to Tehran, Zanjan and Tabriz depart several times a day. The train station is about 2km south of Azadi Sq; call ☎ 223 0001 to check the schedule.

## AROUND QAZVIN

### Alamut & the Castles of the Assassins

الموت & لعه حشاشيون

Scattered through the valleys and hilltops of the Alborz Mountains are the shattered remnants of over 50 fortresses, collectively known as the Castles of the Assassins (Dezha-ye Hashish-iyun). The castles were the heavily fortified lairs of the adherents of a bizarre religious cult whose followers kidnapped and murdered leading political and religious figures. Today, the castles are mostly rubble and the stunning views, mountain villages and opportunities for hiking are the main attractions.

The most famous castle is **Alamut**, once occupied by Hasan Sabah, founder of the Assassins, and reached by a paved road about 110km northeast of Qazvin. **Lamiasar** (aka Lam Besar, Lamsar) is the most extensive ruined site and is only 65km from Qazvin. A guide is recommended, but not essential.

You can charter a taxi in Qazvin that will drive you to the beginning of the track to Lamiasar, wait while you climb around the ruins and bring you back for about IR150,000 plus IR10,000 per hour for waiting. Hotel Iran in Qazvin also organises trips to Lamiasar, with English-speaking guides, for a pricey US\$35. To Alamut costs more. A daily minibus leaves Qazvin's Tehran Gate at about 11.30am for Gazor Khan (three hours), from where you can walk to Alamut, and returns the following morning. You'll need to negotiate a bed in the village.

### Soltaniyeh

سلطانيه

This place is dominated by the **Oljeitu Mausoleum** (Gonbad-e Soltaniyeh; admission IR5000; ☎ 7am-7pm, to 9pm summer), resting place of the Mongol sultan Oljeitu Khodabande. With the largest brick dome in the world – 48m high, and 25m in diameter – it was originally built as the final resting place of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, but the sultan inconveniently converted to Sunnism so Ali stayed in Najaf. Much of the interior is covered by scaffolding.

The mausoleum is not far from the old road (*not* the expressway) between Qazvin and Zanjan, but is much closer to Zanjan (36km). Take any bus (IR8000) or savari (IR40,000) between the two towns, get off at the junction and catch a shared taxi (IR3000) to Soltaniyeh village.

## KERMANSHAH

☎ 0431 / pop 800,000

كرمانشاه

This is the largest and busiest city in the central west and has long traded on its location on the Royal Road to Baghdad. The city is a rich mix of Kurds, Lori and other Iranians, but with its oil refineries and other major industries, it's decidedly lacking in charm.

The vast Azadi Sq marks the north edge of central Kermanshah. From here, the main drag is called Beheshti St as it runs north and turns into Sheikh Shoodi St before ending at Taq-e Bostan. South of Azadi Sq, it's called Modarres St and then Kashani St and is home to a relatively uninteresting **bazaar**, the **Bank Mellî** (Modarres St), opposite the mosque, and **Padideh Coffeenet** (☎ 727 0120; per hr IR5000; ☎ 8am-10pm), which is off Kashani St about 200m south of Gohad Sq. There's a **telephone office** (Beheshti St; ☎ 7am-10pm) about 100m north of Azadi Sq on the west side.

### Sights

The Sassanian-era (AD 224–642) bas-reliefs and carved alcoves at **Taq-e Bostan** (admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-8pm) are Kermanshah's star attraction. The figures in the large grotto are believed to represent Khosro II while, in the small arched recess, Shapur II and his grandson, Shapur III, can be seen. From Azadi Sq take a shared taxi to 15 Khordad Sq (IR1500) and another to Taq-e Bostan (IR1500), or charter one for about IR10,000.

In the centre of town, the colourful Qajar-era **Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk** (Hadid Abil St; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5.30pm, 8am-noon & 4-8pm summer) is used to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Nabovat** (☎ 823 1018; Azadi Sq; s/tw/tr IR40,000/60,000/90,000; ☎) Very basic but mostly clean rooms and share bathrooms. The triple has a private bathroom.

Until the **Bisotun Hotel** (☎ 772 3792; Kashani St) reopens, the soulless and overpriced **Hotel Karbala** (☎ 727 3665; Parking Shaderi; s/tw US\$20/30; ☎), just off Modarres St, is the best mid-range option. That doesn't mean it's much good; most of the small rooms have fridge, basin and shower; some have squat toilets.

Food in Kermanshah includes a lot of offal or sliced fat kebabs – not good. The best places to eat are the **restaurants** (☎ about noon-3.30pm & 6-10pm) around Taq-e Bostan.

## Getting There & Away

There are several **Iran Air** (☎ 824 8610; Beheshti St) flights each day to Tehran (IR218,000).

The huge bus and minibus terminals are side by side about 8km north of Azadi Sq – shared taxis to the terminal (IR1500) leave from the northeastern corner of the square. Buses leave regularly for Esfahan (IR25,000, nine hours), Tabriz (IR33,000, eight hours), Ahvaz (IR40,000 in Volvo), and Tehran (IR27,500, nine hours). For Hamadan take a minibus (IR6000, three hours) or a savari via Kangavar. For Khorramabad, Taavoni No 7 has an 8.30am bus (IR15,000, five hours), or take any bus heading to Ahvaz.

## BISOTUN

بيستون

Overlooking the main road to Hamadan, about 2km west of Bisotun village, are two eroded **bas-relief carvings**. Access is via a rusty scaffold (not always open) that affords views of a 480 BC Darius receiving supplicants, with a winged Zoroastrian angel overhead. It's surrounded by entertaining cuneiform inscriptions (translations are available from the shop just west of here). Come in the morning for the best view. Savaris (IR5000) run from 15 Khordad Sq in Kermanshah.

## HAMADAN

☎ 0261

همدان

Hamadan has for millennia been an important trading city and is the site of Ecbatana, one of the ancient world's greatest cities when it was the fortified capital of the Median empire (750–550 BC). Pitifully little remains, and these days Hamadan is notable for its European-style street plan, designed in 1929 by German engineer Karl Frisch.

The centre of town is the huge Imam Khomeini Sq, from which streets fan out cartwheel-style. Change money at **Bank Mellî** (Imam Khomeini Sq) and check email at **Net Gostar** (☎ 252 9929; Bu Ali Sina Sq; per hr IR8000; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm Sat-Thu & 10.30am-1.30pm Fri).

### Sights

The **Aramgah-e Ester va Mordekhay** (☎ 8am-3pm winter, 9am-4pm summer) is the most important Jewish pilgrimage site in Iran. Jews believe that it contains the body of Esther, the Jewish wife of Xerxes I, who is credited with organising the first Jewish emigration to Persia in the 5th century BC.

Just north of the main square, the **Jameh Mosque** (off Ekbatan St) has 55 columns, and was built during the Qajar period.

The distinctive **BuAli Sina (Avicenna) Mausoleum** (admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-7pm), is Hamadan city's icon. BuAli Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, was a famous philosopher and physician, whose 11th century works were used in European universities until the 1600s. It is a rare triumph of modern Iranian design.

Some ruins of **ancient Ecbatana** (☎ 822 4005; admission IR4000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-5pm, to 8pm summer) can be seen around the archaeological site at Hekmetaneh Hill, about 750m north of Imam Khomeini Sq. Most items of interest are in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran.

## Sleeping & Eating

The cheapest hotels are around Imam Khomeini Sq.

**Arian Hotel** (☎ 826 1266; fax 826 7329; Takhti St; s/d/tr US\$35/40/45; ☎ P) A comfortable mid-range option, the sizable rooms have Western bathroom, fridge and satellite TV, and management are helpful. US\$10 discounts are possible.

**Hamadan Guest House** (☎ 252 7577; Ekbatan St; r IR70,000; P) Just north of Imam Khomeini Sq, the clean, three- and four-bed rooms here are very simple and the smelly bathrooms can be a long walk, but it's still the pick of the budget joints. The adjoining teahouse/restaurant is both cheap and atmospheric.

**Hezaroyek Shab** (☎ 822 7569; meals IR25,000-50,000; ☎ 11.30am-3.30pm & 7-11pm Sat-Thu) A huge variety of Iranian dishes, plus Western fare and a charming English-speaking owner. It's 2km south of town but taxi drivers know it.

**Chaykhuneh Baharestan** (☎ 254 2777; Shohada St; meals IR10,000-15,000; ☎ 6am-7pm) Just off Imam Khomeini Sq, it serves great *dizi*.

## Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is about 1.2km north of the main square and easily reached along Ekbatan St. Buses regularly go to Esfahan (IR19,500, eight hours), Orumiyyeh (via Sanandaj, IR37,000, 12 to 14 hours); and Tehran (IR15,000, five hours). Bus companies have offices around Imam Khomeini Sq.

The main minibus terminal is about 200m northeast of the bus terminal and serves Kermanshah (via Bisotun, IR7000),

Lalejin and Qorveh for Sanandaj (IR2500) and other local destinations. For Khorramabad minibuses/savaris go first to Borujerd (IR3000/30,000), then go on to Khorramabad (IR1800/15,000). Savaris to Kermanshah (IR30,000) and Qazvin (IR40,000) leave from Sepah Sq, near the bus terminal.

## AROUND HAMADAN

The village of **Lalejin**, 32km north of Hamadan, is famous for its pottery and turquoise glazing. You can browse the showrooms, visit workshops and fend off endless entreaties to purchase a souvenir.

## KHORRAMABAD

خرم آباد

☎ 0661 / pop 300,000

Set in a long, steep-sided valley, the scenic capital of Lorestan is famous for, and dominated by, the imposing hilltop citadel, the **Falak-ol-Aflak** (☎ 220 4090; www.lorestanmiras.org; admission IR4000; ☞ 9am-noon & 3-5pm, to 7pm summer). Views from the top are breathtaking and the museum inside is interesting and well presented. **Bank Mellī** (Imam Khomeini St) changes money, and **Khoram Pardos** (☎ 220 0006; Kashani St; per hr IR8000; ☞ 10am-1pm & 6-9pm) has Internet connections; it's on the east side of the river, in the street that has the last bridge before the river bends, as you head north.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Karoon** (☎ 220 5408; Shari'ati St; s/tw/tr US\$15/20/24) Musty but relatively clean, with eastern bathrooms and English-speaking management. Bargain hard.

**Mehmunpazir Sahel** (☎ 220 3260; Shari'ati St; s/tw IR55,000/75,000) You probably won't be allowed to stay, which is probably a good thing. It's grim, and has no shower.

Some decent kababis can be found just west of the bridge leading to the citadel, and juice bars are plentiful on Imam Khomeini St.

## Getting There & Away

Buses leave from outside the relevant bus company offices along Shari'ati St. Services to Tehran (IR35,000 in Volvo, seven hours) and Esfahan (IR18,000, seven hours) usually leave in the morning and evening, and buses to Ahvaz (IR18,000, six hours) at night. Taavoni 17 has a 2pm bus to Kermanshah (IR13,000, 3½ hours). For Hamadan, see p207 and take a savari/minibus in reverse.

Minibuses (IR9500, 4½ hours) and savaris (IR40,000, three hours) to Andimeshk depart from south of Imam Hossein Sq.

## ANDIMESHK

اندیمشک

☎ 0642 / pop 140,000

Andimeshk is not unattractive but it is boring and is mainly useful as a transport hub en route to Shush and Choqa Zanbil. The town centre is, surprise surprise, Imam Khomeini St where you'll find **Hotel Rostam** (☎ 424 1818; s/d IR80,000/105,000), 300m north of Beheshti Sq, where rooms have private bathrooms. The only alternative is the mid-range **Hotel Bozorg** (☎ 422 2100; Azadegan Sq; s/d IR175,000,000/250,000; ☞ ☎), where you can arrange taxis to Shush and Choqa Zanbil for about IR100,000 per half day.

The blue-glass bus terminal has irregular services to Tehran (IR27,000, 12 hours), Esfahan (IR27,000, 11 hours) and Ahvaz (IR10,000). For Shush, frequent minibuses (IR1500, one hour) and savaris leave from the terminal. Savaris run to Khorramabad from a terminal 2km north of town.

## SHUSH (SUSA)

شوش (سوسا)

☎ 0642 / pop 68,000

Settled since about the 4000 BC, Shush (Susa) reached its peak as one of the grand capitals of the Achaemenid empire (550-330 BC). Little of that grandeur remains, but Shush is easily the best and most relaxed base from which to explore the area and visit Choqa Zanbil. Apart from the limited remains of the Ancient City, Shush is home to the **Tomb of Daniel** (Aramgah-e Danyal), the resting place of a Jewish figure best known for his exploits in lions' dens. Odd!

The best-value place to stay and eat is the **Apadana Hotel** (☎ /fax 522 3131; s/tw with breakfast IR170,000/190,000; ☞ ☎), centrally located on the river. Rooms have Western bathrooms, fans and a fridge. Prices are negotiable by about IR20,000.

## Ancient City

Work at the **archaeological site** (admission IR4000; ☞ 8am-dusk) has uncovered the remains of four mounds, which formed the centre of ancient Shush. The **Royal Town**, once the quarter of the court officials, is nearest the entrance. Northwest of this is the **Apadana**, where Darius I built his residence and two other palaces. Two well-preserved foundation tablets

found beneath the site of **Darius' Palace** record the noble ancestry of its founder. The imposing **Chateau de Morgan**, near the entrance, was built by the French Archaeological Service at the end of the 19th century as a defence against marauding Arab and Lori tribesmen. It's not open to the public.

## CHOQA ZANBIL

چغا زنبیل

A Unesco World Heritage-listed site, the 13th-century-BC **ziggurat** (admission IR5000; ☞ guarded 24hr) at Choqa Zanbil is the best surviving example of Elamite architecture anywhere. Its pure size combined with its age can't fail to impress. The ziggurat and surrounding town were sacked and abandoned in about 640 BC, and it incredibly became 'lost' under the desert sands for more than 2500 years. It was accidentally rediscovered during a 1935 aerial survey by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, forerunner of BP.

Originally it had five concentric storeys but only three remain, reaching a total height of about 25m. There was originally a complex of chambers, tombs, tunnels and water channels on the lowest level, as well as two temples to Inshushinak on the southeastern side. The rest of the city is not well preserved.

There's no public transport to Choqa Zanbil, so a taxi from Shush (IR80,000 return) or between Shush and Ahvaz, (about IR140,000 plus IR15,000 per hour waiting time) is the best option.

## AHVAZ

اهواز

☎ 0611

This place is big and ugly and you'll probably only use it as a transit point to or from Shush and Choqa Zanbil. The city was heavily bombed throughout the Iran-Iraq War and has since been ruined by uncontrolled redevelopment.

If you must stay, the **Iran Hotel** (☎ 221 7200; Shari'ati St; s/tw IR150,000/250,000; ☞ ☎) is reliable if uninspiring. Budgeteers might consider **Tulu** (☎ 222 2221; Shari'ati St; r IR60,000), which is central and cheap but, critically, has no fans.

**Iran Air** (☎ 365 680) flies every day to Tehran (IR264,000) and Esfahan (IR195,000), and less often to Mashhad and Shiraz. The main bus terminal is about 5km west of the river. Services include Bushehr (IR20,000, seven hours), Esfahan (IR37,500, 14 hours), Khorramabad (IR18,000, six hours), Ker-

manshah (IR24,000, nine hours) and Shiraz (IR26,000, 10 hours).

There are three trains a day to Tehran (IR113,800/18,350 in sleeper/2nd class, 17 hours).

## CENTRAL IRAN

مرکز ایران

As home to three of Iran's most interesting, attractive and contrasting cities – Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd – central Iran will be on almost every traveller's itinerary. But it's not just about the big three. Although relatively sparsely populated, especially in the east where Iran's two great deserts meet, there are several lesser-known but equally appealing towns to occupy your time.

## QOM

قم

☎ 0251

Iran's second-holiest city after Mashhad, Qom (Ghom) is home to both the magnificent **Hazrat-e Masumeh** (☞ 24hr) shrine and many of the hardline clerics who rule the country. The shrine is dedicated to Fatima (sister of Imam Reza), who died and was buried here in the 9th century. This extensive and ever-growing complex was initiated by Shah Abbas I and expanded by other Safavid rulers anxious to establish their Shiite credentials. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter the shrine itself but you can enter the courtyards and observe the pilgrims, mullahs and Shiite devotees. Be discreet if taking photographs. A few hours is enough in Qom, which is best visited as a stop between Tehran and Kashan.

There is a huddle of cheap guesthouses in Haramnema Lane, over the Ahanchi Bridge from the shrine complex.

**Etmīnan Hotel** (☎ 660 9640; Haramnema Lane; s/d IR80,000/100,000) has tiny, tidy rooms with private bathroom; front rooms have views but are terribly noisy.

**Safa Apartment Hotel** (☎ 773 2499; Mo'allef St; d/ste US\$30/40; ☞ ☎), about 600m south of the shrine, has rooms with satellite TV and Western bathrooms. They're as good as you'll find in Qom and offer great value.

Buses and savaris from Tehran's southern bus terminal stop momentarily at a large roundabout north of town before



continuing to Kashan and all points beyond. Savaris to Tehran (IR30,000) or Kashan (IR20,000) leave from near the Ahanchi Bridge opposite the shrine.

## KASHAN

کاشان 0361

Historic Kashan is a large but tranquil oasis town well worth a stop between Tehran and Esfahan. The centre of town is the stretch of Mohtasham between Imam Khomeini Sq and Kamal-ol-Molk Sq, about 700m to the south, though many of the life-support services are found on Shahid Mohammad Ali-ye-Raja'i St, which becomes Ayatollah Kashani St and Amir Kabir St as it heads south towards Fin.

**Bank Melli** (Amir Ahmad St), just west of the bazaar, changes money, and **Central City Cafe-net** (☎ 0912-261 0911; Shahid Mohammad Ali-ye-Raja'i St; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-11pm) has fast Internet service; it's just north of the intersection with Baba Afzal St.

## Sights

The main reason to visit Kashan is to see the beautifully restored Qajar-era mansions just off Alavi St in the southeast of town. To get there, wander south through the lively **bazaar**, stopping for sweets and tea, and then another 700m or so further south from Kamal-ol-Molk Sq.

The magnificent **Khan-e Ameriha** (☎ 422 4008; admission IR2000; ☎ 1-5pm, 7.30am-7pm summer), with its dizzying seven courtyards, is a living work of art. Restoration is ongoing and it will likely become a hotel when completed. You'll still be able to visit; ask to see the roof.

On the opposite side of Alavi St, the **Khan-e Borujerdi** (☎ 422 3777; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-5pm, to 7pm summer) was once home to a wealthy handicrafts merchant and contains charming wall paintings and a lovely courtyard flanked by summer and winter houses. About 100m further south, the **Khan-e Tabatabai** (☎ 422 0032; admission IR20,000; ☎ 8am-6pm, to 8pm summer) was the home of a carpet merchant and is famous for its carved reliefs, mirror and stained-glass work. The entrance is adjacent to the conical-roofed shrine.

**Khan-e Abbasi** (☎ 422 4070; admission IR20,000; ☎ 8am-dusk) boasts exceptional three-storey courtyards and fine stained-glass windows.

## Sleeping & Eating

Sleeping options are limited. Both these places are within a few metres of the northern entrance to the bazaar.

**Golestan Inn** (☎ 444 6793; Abazar St; s/d/tr IR60,000/70,000/90,000) On Motahari Sq, the Golestan's no-frills rooms and clean shared bathrooms make it the best budget option, despite the wafer-thin mattresses.

**Sayyah Hotel** (☎ 444 4535; Abazar St; s/d IR120,000/160,000, with bathroom IR180,000/240,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) About 150m east of the Golestan, Sayyah is the best midrange option where clean rooms have fridge and, if you ask, views over the city. There's a decent restaurant (open 7am to 9pm) downstairs.

**Delpazir Restaurant** (☎ 455 322; Ayatollah Kashani St; meals IR40,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Run by an English lady, her Iranian husband and their sons, Delpazir has a wide range of Iranian dishes, such as a very rich *fesenjun* (chicken marinated in pomegranate and walnut sauce) and excellent *bademjun* (aubergine).

**Sultan Amir Ahmad Hammam** (☎ 422 0038; Alavi St; ☎ 10am-3pm & 7-11pm Sat-Thu) Next to Khan-e Borujerdi, this beautifully restored *hammam*-turned-restaurant is a great place to stop for tea or lunch. If you don't eat or drink, there is an admission fee.

## Getting There & Away

Dozens of buses leave Kashan for Esfahan (IR9000/15,000 in Mercedes/Volvo, three hours) and Tehran (IR10,500/18,000) every day, leaving from 15 Khordad Sq or the terminal, 1km north. Minibuses/savaris run to Qom (IR5000/20,000). Trains pass through between Tehran and Esfahan or Kerman, but the hours are unsociable.

## AROUND KASHAN

### Fin Garden

باغ فین  
About 8km southwest of Kashan, this beautiful **garden** (admission IR2500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, 7.30am-10.30pm summer) has buildings from the Safavid (1502-1736) and Qajar periods, as well as pools, natural springs, orchards and a charming **teahouse**. The gardens are famous as the site of the murder of Mirza Taghi Khan – commonly known as Amir Kabir – in 1851; you can check out the serene-looking waxwork re-enactment. If you've visited formal gardens in Shiraz, Fin is probably not worth a special trip. Take a shared taxi (IR2000) from Kashan.

## Abyaneh

ابیانہ 0362

Nestled in a mountain valley 82km south of Kashan, this ancient red-mud village makes a fascinating day trip. Recognised for its antiquity and uniqueness by Unesco, most of the original structures date to the Safavid period. Villagers still wear distinctive clothing and speak Middle Persian, a dialect long-since disappeared elsewhere.

The only sleeping option is the **Abyaneh Hotel Restaurant** (☎ 436 2223; bed per person with breakfast US\$20; ☎ ☎ ☎), where construction work has been proceeding slowly for years. Prices are outrageous, especially considering most rooms are dorms. Meals (about IR40,000) aren't bad.

Rare minibuses run from Kashan, but it's possible you'll be dropped near a nuclear site and need to wait for an equally rare connection. Easier is chartering a taxi for a full day from Kashan for around IR150,000, or arrange to stop in Abyaneh between Kashan and Esfahan (about IR200,000 for the taxi).

## ESFAHAN

اصفهان 0311

Of all Iran's cities, don't miss Esfahan. The cool blue tiles of its Islamic buildings, and the city's majestic bridges, contrast perfectly with the hot, dry Iranian countryside around it. The architecture is superb and there's a relaxed atmosphere compared with other Iranian towns. It's a city in which to walk, get lost in the bazaar, shop for handicrafts, doze in beautiful gardens, and meet people.

Esfahan reached its peak when Shah Abbas I came to power in 1587. He set out to make Esfahan a great city, and the famous half-rhyme *Esfahan nesf-e jahan* (Esfahan is half the world) was coined at this time to express its grandeur.

## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**Naqshe Jahan Bookshop** (Map p214; ☎ 0931-310 7901; Imam Sq; ☎ 9am-9pm) Good range of English-language books and postcards.

### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 229 2222, 115)

**Tourist police** (Map p212; ☎ 668 0046-7; ☎ 24hr) Outside the Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh.

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Central Library of Esfahan** (Map p212; ☎ 222 3698; Goldasteh Ave; per hr IR5000; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) Friendly, English-speaking staff and loads of fast terminals.

**Rose Internet** (Map p212; ☎ 221 1222; Imam Sq; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-9pm Sat-Thu & 10am-6pm Fri)

## MEDICAL SERVICES

**Al Zahra Hospital** (Map p212; ☎ 669 2180; Soffeh St) English-speaking doctors.

**Dr Hosseini Pharmacy** (Map p212; ☎ 222 3511; Shahid Madani St; ☎ 24hr)

## MONEY

**Bank Melli** (Map p212; Sepah St)

**Money exchange office** (Map p212; ☎ 222 2592; Sepah St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Sat-Thu) Much faster and competitive rates.

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p212; Neshat St) For parcels.

**Post office** (Map p214; Imam Sq)

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Iran Travel & Tourism** (Map p212; ☎ 222 3010; irantravel1964@hotmail.com; Shahid Medani St) Tickets and tours.

## VISA EXTENSIONS

Esfahan is the best place in Iran to get your visa extended. Staff at the **Department of Foreign Affairs office** (Map p212; ☎ 668 8166; 2nd Lane, Chahar Bagh Baia; ☎ 7am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7am-noon Thu) will take your money on the spot and usually issue the visa inside an hour. Head south from Si-o-Seh Bridge, pass the enormous Azadi Sq roundabout and 2nd Lane is 50m south of a pedestrian overpass.

## Sights & Activities

Sights here are organised north to south.

## JAMEH MOSQUE

The **Jameh Mosque** (Map p212; Masjed-e Jameh; admission IR3000; ☎ 8-11am & 1.15-4.30pm, 8am-noon & 2-6pm summer) is a virtual museum of Islamic architecture and is the biggest mosque in Iran. On display are 800 years' worth of Islamic design, from the simplicity of the Seljuk period (1051-1194), through the Mongol Ikhanid period (1220-1380) and on to the more baroque Safavid period (1502-1736). To fully appreciate this mosque you must go into the fine interior rooms, including the **Room of Sultan Uljaitu**, with its exquisite stucco mihrab,

the room beneath the grand **Nezam al-Molk Dome** and the Seljuk-era hypostyle **prayer halls** either side, and the **Taj al-Molk Dome**, widely considered the finest brick dome ever built.

### BAZAR-E BOZORG

The **Bazar-e Bozorg** (Great Bazaar; ☞ Sat-Thu) is one of the highlights of Esfahan, linking

Imam Sq with the Jameh Mosque, about 2km away. The covered bazaar, one of the largest in the country, was mostly built during the early 16th century, although some of it dates back almost 1300 years. Of the dozens of entrances, the main one is the elaborately decorated **Qeysarieh Portal** at the north end of Imam Sq. In the bazaar

itself, the distinctive domed and vaulted ceilings usually culminate in an opening, sometimes star-shaped, allowing shafts of light to spill in on the commerce below. See also p216.

### IMAM SQUARE (NAQSH-E JAHAN)

When French poet Renier described Esfahan as 'half of the world' in the early 17th century, it was the myriad wonders of the square called Naqsh-e Jahan that inspired him. While the name has changed it is still the home of arguably the most majestic collection of buildings in the Islamic world.

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 architectural jewels of the Safavid empire. At 512m long and 163m wide, this immense space is the second-largest square on earth after Tiananmen Sq.

The square is best visited in the late afternoon and early evening when the fountains are on and the splendid architecture is illuminated; you can't beat the view from the Qeysarieh Tea Shop (p216).

### IMAM MOSQUE

One of the most beautiful mosques in the world is the **Imam Mosque** (Map p214; Masjid-e Imām; admission IR2500; ☞ 8am-11.30am & 1-5pm Sat-Thu 1-5pm Fri, to 7pm summer). The richness of its blue-tiled mosaic designs and its perfectly proportioned Safavid-era architecture form a visually stunning monument to the im-

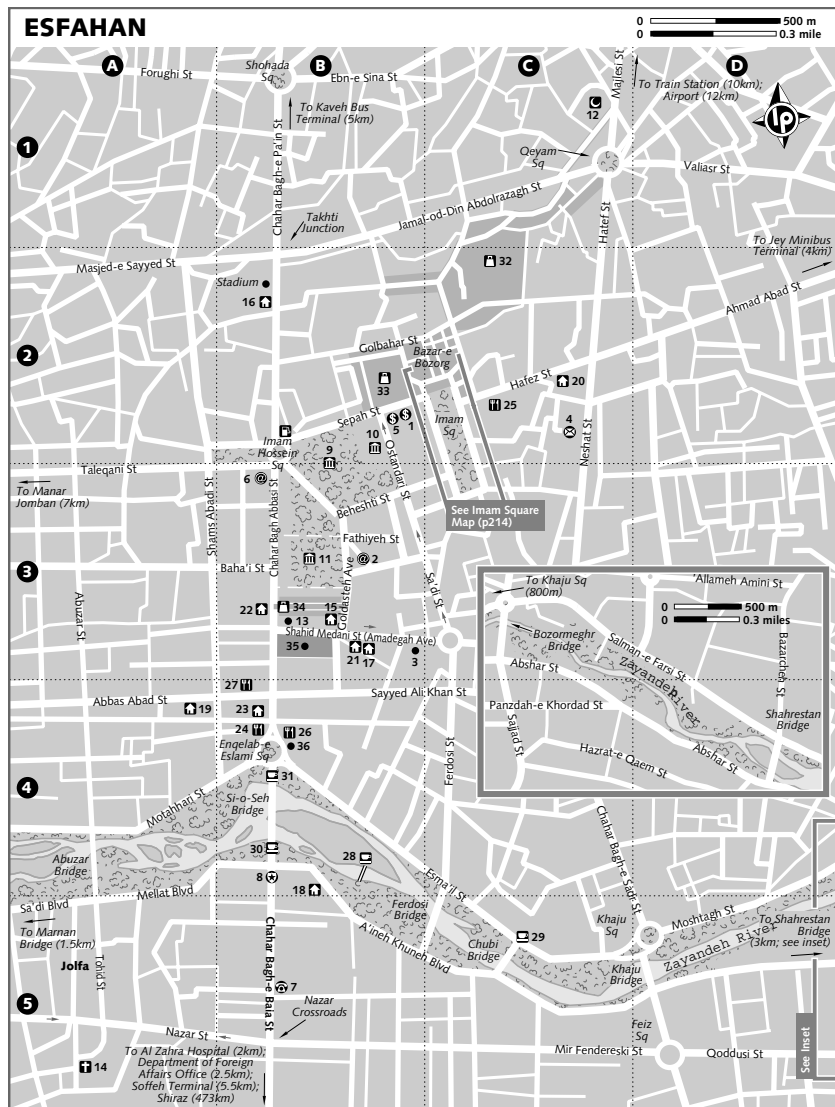
agination of Shah Abbas I, who had it built over 27 years from 1611 to 1638.

The 30m-high entrance portal was built largely as an ornamental counterpoint to the entrance to the Bazar-e Bozorg. Although the portal faces the square, the mosque itself is angled in the direction of Mecca. A short corridor winds into the inner courtyard, which has a pool for ritual ablutions surrounded by four *iwans* (vaulted halls). The walls of the courtyard contain the most exquisite sunken porches, framed by mosaics of deep blue and yellow. The main sanctuary is entered via the south *ivan* and the black paving stones under the dome create seven clear echoes when stamped upon. The interior ceiling is 36.3m high, although the exterior reaches up to 51m due to the double-layering used in construction.

### SHEIKH LOTFOLLAH MOSQUE

It isn't as grand as the nearby Imam Mosque, but the **Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque** (Map p214; admission IR2500; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm, to 7pm summer) is an exquisite study in harmony. Built between 1602 and 1619, also by Shah Abbas I, 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. It is named after the ruler's father-in-law, Sheikh Lotfollah, a revered Lebanese scholar.

The pale dome makes extensive use of delicate cream-coloured tiles that change colour throughout the day from cream to

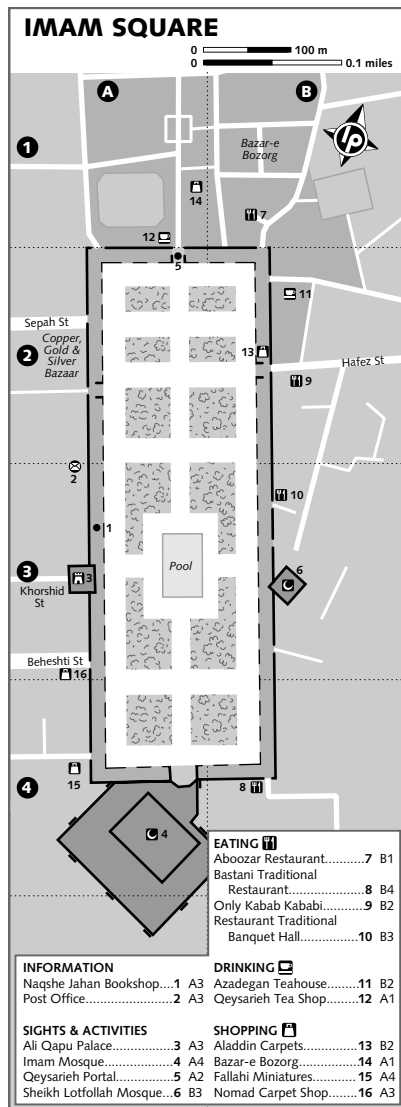


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Central Library of Esfahan.....2	B3	Iran Travel & Tourism.....(see 35)		Restaurant Shahrzad.....27	B4
Dr Hosseini Pharmacy.....3	B3	Main Post Office.....4	C2	<b>DRINKING ☞</b>	
Iran Travel & Tourism.....(see 35)		Money Exchange Office.....5	B2	Agig Restaurant & Teahouse.....28	B4
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Chehel Sotun Palace.....9	B2	Abbasi Hotel.....15	B3	Bazar-e Bozorg.....32	C2
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		Ash-e Reshte Place.....(see 16)			
		Bame Sahel Teahouse.....24	B4		

pink; sunset is usually best. Photography is allowed but flashes are not.

### ALI QAPU PALACE

The six-storey **Ali Qapu Palace** (Map p214; admission IR2500; ☎ 8.30am-sunset Sat-Thu & 2.30pm-sunset Fri) was built in the late 16th century, it is believed, as a residence for Shah Abbas I.



Many of the murals and mosaics have been destroyed, but the fretwork stalactites on the top floor, chiselled out in the shapes of musical instruments, are beautiful. The views of the square from the top floor are superb, so don't miss it.

### CHEHEL SOTUN PALACE

This marvellously decorated **palace** (Map p214; Ostandari St; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-5pm, 8am-noon & 2-8pm summer) was built as a pleasure pavilion and reception hall sometime in the first half of the 17th century; though its exact age is unknown, what you see today was built after a fire in 1706. Its 20 columns, when reflected in the pool, become 40, hence the name, which means 'forty columns'. The main hall features a stunning series of frescoes showing the decadence of palace life and horror of war, including a gory battle with the Uzbeks. There is a miniscule museum inside.

The extensive gardens are a pleasant place to sit and chill, and there's a small teahouse. Early morning is best for photos.

### MUSEUMS

The **Decorative Arts Museum of Iran** (Map p212; Ostandari St; admission IR2500; ☎ 7am-2pm Wed-Mon) contains some wonderful miniatures, lacquerwork, calligraphy, ceramics, brasswork, woodcarvings and traditional costumes. It's in a building that was once stables for the nearby Chehel Sotun Palace. Nearby, the **Museum of Contemporary Art** (Ostandari St; admission IR10,000; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-7pm, 5-8pm summer, Sat-Thu) sometimes has interesting exhibitions.

### HASHT BEHESHT PALACE

Built in the 1660s, the small **Hasht Behesht Palace** (Map p212; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-5pm, to 7pm summer) was once the most luxurious in Esfahan. It has been damaged over the years but retains a seductive tranquillity that comes from its setting amid the tall trees of the surrounding garden. The Hasht Behesht (meaning Eight Paradises) blends in perfectly, with the soaring wooden columns on its open-sided terrace seeming to mirror the trees in the surrounding park. Inside are some impressive mosaics and stalactite mouldings, most of which can be seen from outside.

### MADRASEH-YE CHAHAR BAGH

Part of an expansive complex built at the end of the Safavid dynasty, the **Madrasesh-ye**

**Chahar Bagh** (Madrasesh-ye Madar-e Shah; Map p212; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; admission IR30,000; ☎ 8am-7pm Thu & Fri) is extraordinarily beautiful and restful. The complex contains a prayer hall with a lovely mihrab, two of the finest Safavid-era minarets in Esfahan, some exquisite mosaics and a particularly attractive dome.

### ZAYANDEH RIVER BRIDGES

There are few better ways to spend an afternoon than strolling along the **Zayandeh River**, crossing back and forth using the fairy-tale old bridges, stopping in their cosy teahouses and just relaxing with the Esfahanis. In total, 11 bridges (six are new) cross the Zayandeh, the most interesting being east of Chahar Bagh St.

The pedestrian **Si-o-Seh Bridge** links the upper and lower halves of Chahar Bagh St, and was so-named because it has 33 arches. It was completed in 1602 and has simple teahouses at either end. **Chubi Bridge** was built for Shah Abbas II, primarily to help irrigate palace gardens in the area; its cosy teahouse is one of the best in Esfahan.

**Khaju Bridge** is the largest and doubles as a dam. On hot summer days, Iranians lounge around under the cool arches here, making this a great place to meet people.

**Shahrestan Bridge** is the oldest – most of its present stone-and-brick structure is believed to date from the 12th century – but it's a good 3km from Khaju.

### ARMENIAN QUARTER

The lively and liberal Armenian quarter of **Jolfa** dates from the time of Shah Abbas I. The 17th-century **Vank Cathedral** (Kelisa-ye Vank; Map p212; Kelisa St; adult/student IR30,000/15,000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm, to 6.30pm summer) is the historic focal point of the Armenian church in Iran. The exterior of the church is a little dull, but the interior is richly decorated, and shows a fascinating mixture of Islamic and Christian styles, with a domed ceiling. The attached **museum** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) contains over 700 handwritten books, and other ethnological displays, including a moving pictorial display on the Armenian genocide in Turkey.

### MANAR JOMBAN

In Kaladyn, about 7km west of the city centre, is the tomb of Abu Abdollah, known as **Manar Jomban** (Shaking Minarets; Map p212; admission

IR2000; ☎ 8.30am-4pm, to 8pm summer) because if you lean hard against one minaret it will start to sway back and forth – and so will its twin. If it's crowded you won't be able to climb the minaret, but an attendant will shake it so you can see the effect. Frequently, however, it's closed due to concerns that the minarets are being shaken too hard, too often.

Buses (IR250, 20 minutes) go west along Bahai St from near the corner of Chahar Bagh Abbasi St and run past Manar Jomban.

### Sleeping

There's a good range of accommodation in Esfahan, though prices can be higher than you'd pay elsewhere.

### BUDGET

**Amir Kabir Hostel** (Map p212; ☎ 222 7273; mrziaee@hotmail.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; dm/s/tw/tr IR30,000/55,000/80,000/120,000; ☎) A cheap, popular backpacker hangout, the rooms and shared bathrooms here are decidedly basic. However, the Ziaee brothers speak good English and can sort out bus tickets. There's a guestbook and a cheap laundry.

**Aria Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 222 7224; fax 233 2441; Shahid Medani St; s/d incl breakfast US\$15/20; ☎) While the questionable plumbing can be a problem, for the money the centrally located Aria is still good value. Rooms are cleaned daily and have soft beds, fridge, Iranian TV and Western bathrooms (some with baths). Guests can use the kitchen.

**Shad Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 221 8621; fax 220 4264; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/tw/tr IR68,800/85,000/95,000; ☎) Central and fair value, Shad has small, clean two- and three-bed rooms and share bathrooms, and there's a kitchen. Front rooms are noisy.

**Tous Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 222 1599; tous@yahoo.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/d IR100,000/170,000; ☎) Fun staff, clean rooms with bathrooms and a great location.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

All the rooms in this range have bathrooms and air-con, and most will have a TV and fridge as well.

**Sadaf Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ /fax 220 2988; Hafez St; s/d US\$45/65; ☎) The hotel is well managed and located, and the spotless rooms with fridge and satellite TV are about the best in the midrange. Discounts are available and the rooftop restaurant is a delight in summer.

**Pol & Park Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 667 4785; fax 667 4788; A'ineh Khuneh Blvd; s/d US\$21/31; (P) (Q)) Although the rooms are a little tired, the Western bathrooms and balconies with views over the Si-oh-Seh Bridge make them great value. The English-speaking management is helpful, and prices are negotiable.

**Safir Hotel** (Map p212; ☎/fax 221 9931; www.safirhotel.com; Shahid Medani St; s/d US\$45/60; (P) (Q)) Diagonally opposite the Abbasi, this is a busy but welcoming place with modern rooms and a handy café. English and French are spoken by the obliging management. Discounts are possible.

**Saadi Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 220 3881; saadi\_hotel@yahoo.com; Abbas Abad St; d/tr IR185,000/215,000; (P) (Q)) Central but in a relatively quiet street, Saadi is a solid option with large rooms and a kitchen open to guests.

**Abbasi Hotel** (Map p212; ☎ 222 6010; www.abbasihotel.com; Shahid Medani St; s/d ind breakfast US\$94/141; (P) (Q) (Q)) Built in the shell of a Safavid-era caravanserai and set around a gorgeous garden, the Abbasi's probably the best hotel in Esfahan. Still, the rooms and service can be a little disappointing, considering the price. Ask for a room overlooking the courtyard.

## Eating

There is not much culinary variety in Esfahan's restaurants.

**Bastani Traditional Restaurant** (Map p214; ☎ 220 0374-5; Imam Sq; meals IR30,000-45,000; ☎ 11.30am-10.30pm) The great location and traditional food, including several types of *khoresht*, make it worth braving the lunchtime tour groups. Evenings are much quieter.

**Restaurant Traditional Banquet Hall** (Map p214; ☎ 221 9068; Imam Sq; meals IR35,000; ☎ 11.30am-10pm) This modern-traditional teahouse-cum-restaurant was described by one reader as the best place he ate at in Iran. The Iranian food, atmosphere, service and regular evening music are all good.

**Aboozar Restaurant** (Map p214; ☎ 222 0654; meals IR13,000-25,000; ☎ noon-3pm) This bustling little place is where the *bazaris* eat fast, cheap meals. Arrive early or you'll miss the best food.

**Restaurant Shahrzad** (Map p212; ☎ 220 4490; Abbas Abad St; meals IR50,000; ☎ noon-10.30pm) Among Esfahan's best restaurants, the period wall-paintings, stained-glass windows and mirrorwork make Shahrzad an experience worthy of the fine food.

**Bame Sahel Teahouse** (Map p212; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ 8am-11pm) On the top floor of the Sahel Hotel, the *dizi* (IR14,000) is good and the character raw.

**Maharaja Restaurant** (Map p212; ☎ 222 4985; Enqelab Sq; meals IR25,000-40,000) If you can deal with the dire service, the Maharaja's Indian food, including yellow daal, makes a welcome change.

Chahar Bagh Abbasi St is where you'll find the greatest concentration of pizza, sandwich, burger, ice-cream and, occasionally, real kebab joints, especially near Sayyed Ali Khan St. Near the Amir Kabir Hostel there are a couple of kababis and an excellent all-day **ash-e reshte place** (Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ 7am-9pm), great for breakfast; look for the huge pot inside the doorway. A bowl with bread is IR5000.

Elsewhere, the **Only Kabab Kababi** (Map p214; Hafez St), just east of Imam Sq, makes a fast, tasty kebab, and further along **Fereni Hafez** (Map p212; Hafez St; ☎ 8am-midnight) serves delicious *fereni*, made of rice-flour, milk, sugar and rose-water, for IR1000; look for the red sign.

## Drinking

Esfahan has some of the most atmospheric teahouses in Iran. The most famous are in the pillars of bridges spanning the Zayandeh River – the tiny, richly decorated teahouse in the **Chubi Bridge** (Map p212; ☎ 8am-8pm) should not be missed, while the **Si-o-Seh Bridge** (Map p212; ☎ 8am-11pm) has teahouses underneath both ends.

There are two good teahouses on Imam Sq. **Qeysarieh Tea Shop** (Map p214; ☎ 8am-11pm), upstairs at the north end of the square, is quite simply the best place to sit on the terrace and watch the square, especially at sunset. Cheap tea, too. Tucked away in the northeastern corner, the more local **Azadegan Teahouse** (Map p214; Chaykhuneh-ye Azadegan; ☎ 221 1225; ☎ 10am-10pm) is cluttered with statues, bells, weapons, ceramics, and lines of men smoking *qalyan*. Good fun!

On a small island on the river, **Agig Restaurant & Teahouse** (Map p212; ☎ 11am-midnight) is a good place to meet flirting students, or perhaps flirt with students meeting...

## Shopping

Esfahan has probably the widest selection of handicrafts anywhere in the country. The best buys are carpets (from all over Iran),

miniatures hand-painted on camel bone, inlaid boxes and intricate copper, brass and silver work. Prices can be higher than elsewhere but for the vast range of price and quality, and the pleasure of shopping in the **Bazar-e Bozorg** and the wonderful arcades of **Imam Square**, it's worth it.

Most carpet shops are on or just off Imam Sq. For gold, head directly to the **Bazar-e Honar** (Map p212; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu). Bargain hard. Recommended, reputable shops:

**Aladdin Carpets** (Map p214; ☎ 221 1461; Imam Sq; ☎ 8am-8pm)

**Fallahi Miniatures** (Map p214; ☎ 220 4613; Imam Sq; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 3-7.30pm) There's also a branch opposite the Abbasi Hotel.

**Nomad Carpet Shop** (Map p214; ☎ 221 9275; nomadshop@yahoo.com; Imam Sq; ☎ 9am-8pm Sat-Thu)

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (Map p212; ☎ 222 8200; Shahid Medani St) has flights to Tehran (IR195,000 one way, several daily), Shiraz (IR196,000, daily), Ahvaz (IR195,000, daily), Mashhad (IR379,000, five weekly), Bandar Abbas (IR361,000, three weekly), Kerman (IR267,000, twice weekly), Bushehr (IR220,000, weekly) and Zahedan (IR407,000, weekly).

### BUS

There are two major bus terminals – **Soffeh** (Map p212; ☎ 668 8341), 5km south of the river, and the larger and more convenient **Kaveh bus terminal** (☎ 441 4375), about the same distance north. From Kaveh Mercedes/Volvo buses depart regularly going to Tehran (IR20,000/33,000, seven hours); Shiraz (IR19,000/33,000, eight hours); Yazd (IR12,600/24,000, five hours); Hamadan (IR18,000/32,000, seven hours); Kermanshah (IR25,000/48,000, nine hours); Kerman (IR19,000/40,000, 12 hours); and Kashan (IR9000/15,000, three hours). City buses and shared taxis (IR3000) to Chahar-Bagh Abbasi St pass by regularly on the main road outside the terminal; a taxi *dah baste* should cost about IR12,000 – not IR30,000.

### TRAIN

Trains run to Tehran (IR31,000, seven hours, 10pm daily) via Kashan (IR18,000, 3½ hours); and to Bandar Abbas (IR66,000) via Yazd (IR15,000 in 1st-class sleeper, three

times weekly). For tickets, head to the convenient **Raja ticket office** (Map p212; ☎ 222 4425; Enqelab Sq; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu).

The **train station** (☎ 668 8001) is about 6km south of town but if you have a prebooked ticket you can catch a shuttle bus from outside the Kowsar International Hotel at the southern end of Si-o-Seh Bridge – ask at the ticket office.

## Getting Around

You can happily walk around most of Esfahan's sights. The airport is about 12km from the city centre. To get there catch a shared taxi from Takhti Sq and another from Qods or Laleh Sqs. A taxi *dah baste* costs about IR30,000.

Bus 301 runs along Chahar Bagh Abbasi St linking the Kaveh and Soffeh bus terminals (IR500).

## GARMEH

گرمه

☎ 0324 / pop about 300 and a few camels

The tiny oasis village of Garmeh is everything you'd imagine an oasis village to be. More than 50 varieties of date palm spread out from a small spring, and where the palms finish the ancient mud-brick village begins. In the midst of this village is **Ateshoni** (☎ 443 3356, in Tehran ☎ 021-273 1983; www.ateshoni.com; per person US\$20), where Tehrani artist Maziar Ale Davoud has fled the fumes to renovate the family home. The US\$20 includes all the food (and wonderful dates and pomegranates) you can eat. It gets ridiculously hot in summer.

Getting to Garmeh is not easy. From Esfahan, a Seiro Safar bus (IR18,000, about seven hours) leaves at 1pm. Get off at Khur, and if you've called ahead someone will be waiting to drive you (IR30,000) the last 37km into the desert. From Yazd, the Mashhad bus leaves about 1pm every day, passing Na'in about 5pm and reaching Khur about 9pm. From Garmeh, a direct bus to Yazd via the desert road leaves on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 1pm. From Khur, daily buses run to Esfahan via Na'in at 1pm or 2pm (IR18,000).

## YAZD

یزد

☎ 0351 / pop 450,000

With its winding lanes, wind towers and mud-brick old town, Yazd is one of the highlights of any trip to Iran. Wedged between

the northern Dasht-e Kavir and southern Dasht-e Lut deserts, Yazd boasts the best old – and still inhabited – city in the country. Yazd was an important centre for the pre-Islamic religion, Zoroastrianism, and still has the largest Zoroastrian community in the country. It's also famous for its *badgirs*, the wind towers designed to catch and

circulate the merest breath of wind and funnel it to underground living rooms, which dominate the city's roofscape.

Yazd is planned around a very loose northeast-southwest grid, with Beheshti Sq at its centre. If you stay within walking distance of this square, most sights and restaurants can be visited on foot. Expect to

get delightfully lost when walking around the old city.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Dr Mogibiyan Hospital** (☎ 624 0061; Kashani St)

**Tourist police** (☎ 621 4444)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Issatis.net** (☎ 623 1425; www.issatis.net; Kashani St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 5-9.30pm Sat-Thu) International phone calls for about IR1000 per minute.

**Y@zd Internet Café** (☎ 622 3832; yazd.internet.cafe@gmail.com; per hr IR8,000; ☎ 9am-10pm) Outside the Jameh Mosque entrance. Can arrange trips to the Jameh Mosque roof!

### MONEY

**Abas Salari Gold Shop** (Qeyam St) Green corner store; fast with no commission.

**Bank Mellî** (Shohada Crossroads) Takes a commission of US\$2.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Main post office** (Ghasem Abad St)

**Telephone office** (Taleqani Blvd)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Recommended local guides include **Hossain Bagharian** (☎ 0913-352 0370) and the endlessly enthusiastic **Hadi Safaeian** (☎ 523 8037, 0913-353 1894; hadiinyazd@hotmail.com).

**Tourist information office** (☎ 621 6542-5; Ziaee Sq; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3.30-6pm, 8.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-7pm summer) Maps and brochures available; can arrange tours.

### VISA EXTENSIONS

**Police Department of Aliens Affairs** (Rah Ahan Blvd; ☎ 7am-2pm Sat-Wed, 7am-noon Thu) Opposite the bus terminal, not as reliable as Esfahan or Shiraz. The relevant Bank Mellî is around the corner.

## Sights

### OLD CITY

According to Unesco, the old city in Yazd is one of the oldest towns in the world. Almost everything is made from sun-dried mud bricks, and the resulting brown skyline is dominated by tall *badgirs*. The best way to see it is simply to wander, get lost and feel the history oozing out of the baked-brown labyrinth of lanes. Ask locals to direct you to one of the restored traditional houses, notably **Khan-e Lari** (admission IR1500; ☎ 7.30am-3pm Sat-Thu).

## MOSQUES & SHRINES

Conservative Yazd has dozens of mosques but the most magnificent is undoubtedly the 14th-century **Jameh Mosque** (☎ 5am-10pm). Its 48m-high minarets dominate the old city and the elaborately tiled 15th-century entrance portal is among the tallest in Iran. The beautiful mosaics covering the dome, and on the mehrab (the niche indicating the direction of Mecca), are also quite special.

Not far away, the 14th-century **Mausoleum of Seyed Roknaddin** (Bogheh-ye Seyed Roknaddin; ☎ 8am-7pm Wed; ☎ 7.30am-dark) probably wasn't a prison and definitely wasn't built by Alexander the Great, as often claimed, but is worth a look and there are clean public toilets inside. Nearby is the 11th-century **Tomb of the 12 Imams**, which boasts fine inscriptions but no actual tombs.

The stunning three-storey façade of the *takieh* (the building used to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein) in the **Amir Chakhmaq Complex** (to climb IR1500; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4pm-6pm) is one of the most recognisable and unusual buildings in Iran. Views from the top are superb.

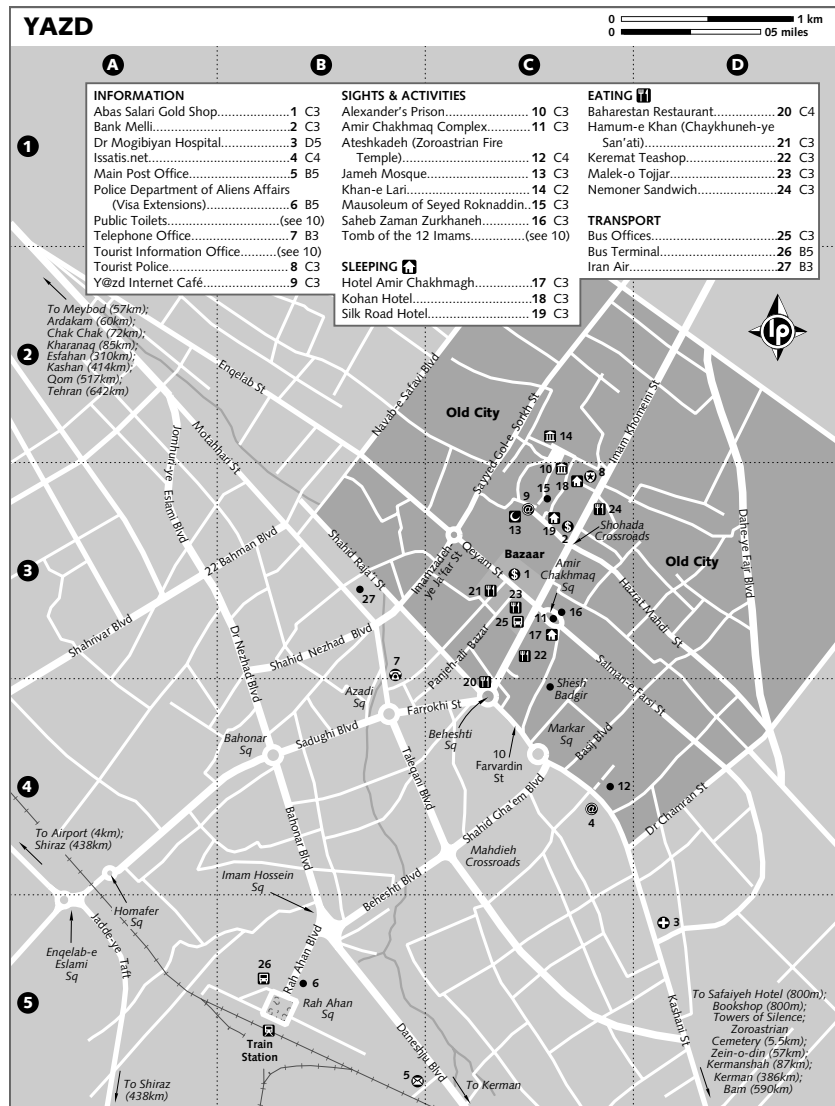
## ZOROASTRIAN SITES

The **Ateshkadeh** (Zoroastrian Fire Temple; Kashani St; ☎ nominally open 7-11am & 5-7pm Sat-Thu) attracts followers from around the world. Its sacred flame has apparently burned since about AD 470 and was transferred here in 1940.

On barren hilltops on the outskirts of Yazd, the **Towers of Silence** (Dakhmeh-ye Zartosthiyun) were until recently used as burial sites where corpses were picked clean by vultures. The best way to get there is to charter a taxi (about IR20,000 including one-hour waiting time).

## Activities

The **Saheb Zaman Zurkhaneh** (Amir Chakhmaq Sq; admission IR10,000; ☎ 6-8am & 6-10pm Sat-Thu) is a great place to see a *zurkhaneh* (traditional gym) in action. The equipment is rather unorthodox, including huge bowling-pin-style weights to wave around. All of this is done to a drumbeat and the words of Hafez. This particular *zurkhaneh* is under the five *badgirs* of a now-disused *moazedi* (ice-house). Check out the cavernous area downstairs.



## Sleeping

Yazd has some of the most atmospheric and good-value hotels in Iran.

**Silk Road Hotel** (☎ 625 2730; www.silkroadhotel.ir; dm/s/d IR30,000/100,000/150,000; 📍 🚶 🚶) In the heart of the old city off Masjed Jameh Ave, attractive and comfortable rooms with Western bathrooms in this restored traditional house have made the Silk Road the most popular place in Yazd. The courtyard restaurant is good and management can help with tickets, tours and other information. Excellent value!

**Malek-o Tojjar** (☎ 626 1479; info@malekhotel.com; Panjeh-ali Bazar, Qeyam St; dm/s/d US\$3/35/55; 📍 🚶 🚶) Atmosphere pours out of this Qajar-era home-cum-restaurant and hotel. The rooms, set around a covered courtyard, are not huge and the bathrooms are tiny, but the setting, courtyard restaurant and location easily compensate. The underground dorm, with attached bathroom, is the best in Iran. Prices are negotiable.

**Kohan Hotel** (☎ 621 2485; dm/r per person €3/10; 📍 🚶 🚶) This renovated traditional house, off Imam Khomeini St in the midst of the old city, has rooms with Western bathroom, TV and fridge. Management is friendly and there are great views from the roof. Prices are negotiable. Follow the signs from Imam Khomeini St.

**Hotel Amir Chakhmagh** (☎ 626 9823; Amir Chakhmagh Sq; s/tw/tr IR35,000/60,000/80,000; 📍 🚶 🚶) Previously the most popular backpacker haunt, this friendly place is ultrabasic. Rooms are noisy and bathrooms shared, but the views are super.

## Eating

Yazd has several atmospheric teahouses-cum-restaurants in restored homes, mills and *hammams*.

**Hamum-e Khan** (Chaykhuneh-ye Sar'i'ati; ☎ 627 0366; meals IR35,000; 📍 11.30am-3.30pm & 7.30-11pm) This elegantly restored underground *hammam* now serves an extensive menu of Iranian food, including trout (IR24,000), around tranquil pools. Or you can drink tea here at any time between 10am and 11pm. It's in the Meydan-e Khan Bazaar, off Qeyam St.

**Malek-o Tojjar** (☎ 626 1479; Panjeh-ali Bazar; meals IR35,000) In the courtyard of the hotel of the same name, this is one of the most romantic places in Iran. Fountains and traditional furniture are bathed in soft light and music,

and the reasonably priced food is excellent, including a few vegetarian dishes.

**Silk Road Hotel** (☎ 625 2730; meals IR25,000-30,000; 📍 11am-10.30pm) Another serene courtyard restaurant, this one boasts the usual Iranian dishes plus Indian curries, pizzas, some Mediterranean meals and genuine meat-free vegetarian options. Off Masjed Jameh Ave.

Less formal eateries include the rustic **Keremat Teashop** (Imam Khomeini St), which serves tea, *qalyan*, kebabs and breakfasts of ineffable sheep offal; the unsophisticated **Baharestan Restaurant** (☎ 622 5107; Beheshti Sq; meals IR20,000; 📍 11.30am-10pm); and the **Nem-omer Sandwich** (📍 Sat-Thu), opposite the camel butchery, which can whip up a fresh and tasty camel burger (IR5000) in no time.

## Shopping

The bazaars in the old city are the best places in Iran to buy silk (known locally as *tirma*), brocade, glassware and cloth – products that brought the town its prosperity in centuries past.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 622 2080; Motahhari St) flies to Mashhad, (IR320,000, twice weekly) and Tehran (IR250,000, twice daily).

### BUS & MINIBUS

Many bus companies have convenient offices along Imam Khomeini St. Buses leave from the bus terminal, accessible by shared taxi from Beheshti Sq and Azadi Sq. Mercedes buses run reasonably frequently to Tehran (IR27,000, 10 hours), Esfahan (IR12,600, five hours), Kerman (IR15,000, five hours) and Bandar Abbas (IR30,750, 10 hours), and much less often to Shiraz (IR18,000, seven hours), Mashhad (IR45,500, 16 hours, 4pm), Bam (IR24,600, nine hours) and Zahedan (IR 34,500, 14 hours); the 4pm Zahedan bus gets you to the border just as it opens.

### TRAIN

Depending on the season, three or four trains pass through Yazd on the way to and from Tehran each day – one going to Bandar Abbas and the others to Kerman. Relatively convenient trains include a 6am service to Kerman (IR13,750 in 2nd class, five hours) and an 8pm sleeper train to Tehran (IR35,950,

eight hours). The **train station** (☎ 139) is south of town near the bus terminal.

A new line linking Yazd and Mashhad, via Meybod and vast tracts of desert, was due to open in 2005. Ask around in Yazd for details or check www.rajatrails.com.

## AROUND YAZD

### Desert Loop Day Trip

An enjoyable day trip from Yazd involves a loop along quiet roads to the ancient mud-brick village of Kharanaq, the Zoroastrian shrine of Chak Chak and the desert cities of Ardakan and Meybod. It's a long day (about 7am to 6pm) and, without sprouting wings, the only way to do this in a day is by chartering a taxi (about IR250,000) or taking a guided tour. There's no public transport to Chak Chak.

**Kharanaq** (خرانق; admission IR10,000; 📍 7.30am-2pm Sat-Thu) is a crumbling village about 85km northeast of Yazd, parts of which are believed to be more than 1000 years old. Wandering through the Qajar-era mosque, 17th-century shaking minaret, restored caravanserai and ancient aqueduct is a great way to spend an hour or so. Buy tickets in the caravanserai.

In a dramatic desert-mountain landscape, **Chak Chak** (چک چک) is the most important Zoroastrian pilgrimage site in Iran. The buildings are uninspiring, but the views from the Pir-e-Sabz fire temple make it worthwhile.

**Meybod** (مبید) and **Ardakan** (اردکان) are busy cities with a few sites worth a look. Meybod is more interesting, with the old post office, caravanserai and Safavid-era *moazedi* all adjacent to each other. There's also a bizarre circular bird tower as you enter town from Yazd – avoid mind-altering drugs before entering this taxidermists' delight!

## SHIRAZ

### ☎ 071

Shiraz was one of the most important cities in the medieval Islamic world, and was the Iranian capital during the Zand period (1747-79), when many of its most beautiful buildings were built or restored. Through its many artists and scholars, Shiraz has been synonymous with learning, poetry, roses and, at one time, red wine.

Shiraz is a relaxed and cultured city, with wide tree-lined avenues, and enough monuments, gardens and mosques to keep most visitors happy for several days. It's also the

base for visiting Persepolis – making this one of Iran's most visited cities.

## Orientation & Information

Most of the sights and tourist facilities are along or near Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd – simply called 'Zand'. The city centre is Shohada Sq, still widely known as Shahrdari Sq.

### EMERGENCY

**Dr Faqih Hospital** (☎ 235 1091; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd)

**Police headquarters** (☎ 236 4998; Shohada Sq)

**Tourist police** (Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Ferdous Internet** (☎ 222 5014; per hr IR8000; 📍 9am-9pm)

**Max Coffee Net** (☎ 628 6081; Mollasadra Passage, Molla Sadra St; per hr IR8000; 📍 9am-10pm, closed Fri) In a small complex of computer stores 50m south of the western end of Zand.

### MONEY

**Bank Melli** (Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd) Changes money.  
**Zand Exchange** (☎ 222 2854; 📍 9am-8pm Sat-Thu) Much quicker than Bank Melli.

### POST

**Main post office** (Taleqani St)

### TELEPHONE

**Telephone office** (Park Hotel Lane; 📍 8am-10pm)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist information office** (☎ 0917-302 2966; Zand Blvd; 📍 9am-noon & 4-7pm) English-speaking staff provide free maps in English and French, postcards and directions.

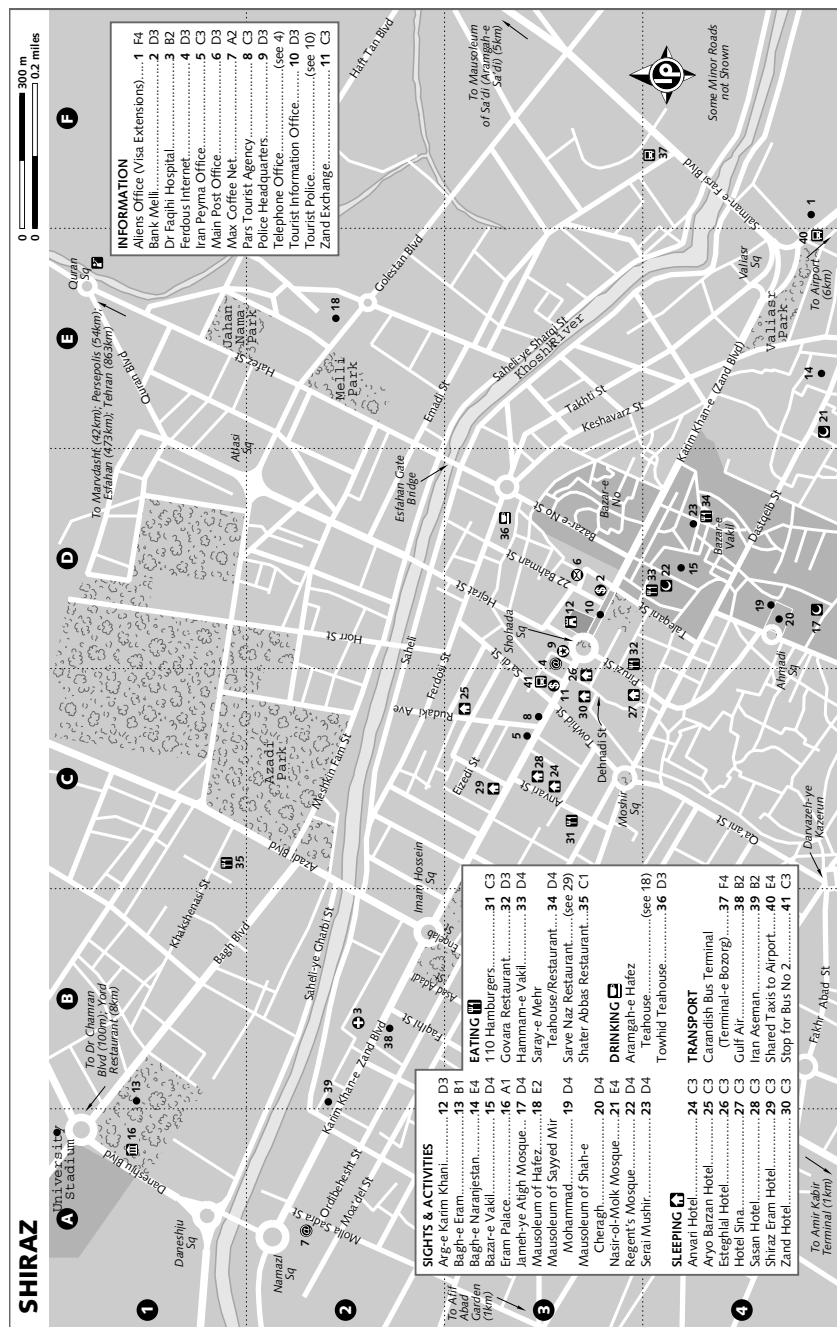
### VISA EXTENSIONS

**Aliens office** (Valiasr Sq; 📍 7.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-noon Thu) A good place to extend visas – you usually get 30 days, delivered the same day. Walk or take a shared taxi (about IR800) along Zand to Valiasr Sq, where it's on the southeast corner.

## Sights & Activities

### ARG-E KARIM KHANI

The walls and 14m-high circular towers of the **Arg-e Karim Khani** (☎ 222 1423; Citadel of Karim Khan; Shohada Sq; admission IR3000; 📍 8am-4pm, to 7pm summer) dominate the city centre. This well-preserved fortress was, in the time of the Zand dynasty, part of a royal courtyard



which Karim Khan hoped would rival that of Esfahan. The courtyard is filled with citrus trees, but that's about it.

### REGENT'S MOSQUE (VAKIL MOSQUE)

The beautiful **Regent's Mosque** (Masjed-e Vakil; admission IR2500; ☎ 8am-noon & 3.30pm-sunset, Sat-Thu) was built in 1773 by Karim Khan. It has two vast *iwans* to the north and south, and a magnificent inner courtyard surrounded by beautifully tiled alcoves and porches. Although the structure of the mosque dates from 1773, most of the tiling, with its predominantly floral motifs, was added in the early Qajar era (about 1820).

The best time for a look is during noon prayers. Women should wear a manteau that reaches below the knee and a dark scarf.

### BAZAR-E VAKIL

Shiraz' atmospheric bazaar has been described as the most architecturally impressive in the country. It was constructed by Karim Khan as part of a plan to make Shiraz into a great trading centre. The vaulted brick ceilings ensure that the interior is cool in summer and warm in winter. In the best traditions of Persian bazaars, the **Bazar-e Vakil** (☎ dawn-dusk Sat-Thu) is best explored by wandering without concern for time or direction, soaking up the atmosphere in the labyrinthine lanes.

Chances are you'll stumble across **Serai Mushir**, off the southern end of the main bazaar lane coming from Zand. This tastefully restored two-storey caravanserai is a pleasant place to gather your breath and do a bit of souvenir shopping.

### MAUSOLEUM OF SHAH-E CHERAGH

The famous **Mausoleum of Shah-e Cheragh** (Mausoleum of the King of the Lamp, Bogh'e-ye Shah-e Cheragh; Ahmadi Sq; ☎ 222 2158; ☎ 7am-6pm, to 9pm summer) houses the remains of Sayyed Mir Ahmad, a brother of Imam Reza of Mashhad fame who died, or was killed, in Shiraz in 835. A mausoleum was originally erected over the grave in the mid-14th century, and it's now an important Shiite place of pilgrimage. The intricate mirror tiling inside the shrine is dazzling. At the mausoleum there is a separate entrance for men and women. Women must wear a chador (available from a desk at the entrance).

At the southeast corner of the courtyard is the **Mausoleum of Sayyed Mir Moham-**

**mad** (Bogh'e-ye Sayyed Mir Mohammad), a brother of Mir Ahmad. And through the southeast entrance to the courtyard is the 9th-century **Jameh-ye Atigh Mosque**.

### NASIR-OL-MOLK MOSQUE

The 19th-century **Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque** (admission IR15,000; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm, to 8pm summer), off Dastqeb St, is one of the most elegant in southern Iran. The stunning stained glass and exquisitely carved pillars of the winter prayer hall are worth the admission.

### MAUSOLEUM OF HAFEZ

Hafez the poet is an Iranian folk-hero; loved, revered and as popular as many a modern pop star. And there is no better place to try and understand Hafez' eternal hold on Iran than here, at the **Mausoleum of Hafez** (Aramagh-e Hafez; Golestan Blvd; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-9.30pm).

Set in a charming garden, the marble tombstone was placed here by Karim Khan in 1773. In 1935 an octagonal pavilion was erected above it. There is a wonderfully atmospheric teahouse (p225) in a walled garden inside the grounds. Spend an hour sitting in a discreet corner, at sunset if possible, watching Iranians react to what is, for many, a pilgrimage to Hafez. Take a shared taxi from Shohada Sq, or take bus 2.

### MAUSOLEUM OF SA'DI

The **mausoleum** (Aramagh-e Sa'di; Bustan Blvd; admission IR3000; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm, to 10pm summer) commemorates another famous Persian poet, Sa'di. It's tranquil, but not as impressive as the Hafez mausoleum. The plain marble tomb, which dates from the 1860s, is inscribed with various verses from Sa'di. The underground teahouse set around a fish pond can get a bit too atmospheric – ie stinky. Take a shared taxi from Shohada Sq, and another from Valiasr Sq, or bus 2 all the way from Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd.

### FORMAL GARDENS

Apart from those surrounding the mausoleums of Hafez and Sa'di, Shiraz has several formal gardens, though the hefty admission fees mean seeing one is probably enough.

Famous for its cypress trees, **Bagh-e Eram** (Garden of Paradise; Daneshju Blvd; admission IR40,000; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm, to 7pm summer) is one of the most famous gardens in Iran. Alongside a pretty pool is the charming 19th-century

**Eram Palace**, though it's not open to visitors. Take any shared taxi along Zand heading towards the university.

Picturesque **Aff Abad Garden** (admission IR30,000; ☎ 5-8pm) holds the **Aff Abad Palace**, once owned by the shah. The palace, built in 1863 and influenced by the Qajar style of architecture, has a lower floor that's now an interesting military museum. The gardens are a fair way from the city centre, so charter a taxi.

The smaller **Bagh-e Naranjestan** (Orange Garden; Dastqeb St; admission IR30,000; ☎ 8am-sunset), east of the bazaar, features a mirror-filled pavilion that was a governor's residence during the Qajar period.

## Tours

**Pars Tourist Agency** (☎ 222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 10am-1pm Fri) has good-value group tours to Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam (US\$8 per person) and dozens of other professionally organised trips elsewhere in Fars Province. They also hire bikes (US\$4 a day).

## Sleeping

Shiraz is well stocked with good-value hotels, all an easy walk to the centre. Midrangers should head for Rudaki St, and budgeteers to Dehnadi St or neighbouring Piruzi St. Rates are negotiable in most places.

## BUDGET

**Zand Hotel** (☎ 222 2949; alvanch@yahoo.com; Dehnadi St; s/tw/tr IR55,000/75,000/95,000; ☎ ☎) The best-value budget option, with a friendly, well-informed manager and clean rooms with private bathroom downstairs, showers only upstairs; specify! Guests can use the kitchen.

**Anvari Hotel** (☎ 233 7591; Anvari St; d/tr 90,000/130,000; ☎) At the 'luxury' end of the budget range, rooms here have bathrooms and guests can use the kitchen. The IR8000 breakfast is good.

**Hotel Sina** (☎ 222 5665; Piruzi St; s/d IR120,000/140,000; ☎) Rooms with eastern bathrooms, TV and fridge are clean and management is helpful. Knock IR20,000 off in low season.

**Esteghlal Hotel** (☎ 222 5383; Dehnadi St; s/d/tr IR54,000/72,000/86,000, with shower IR63,000/92,000/110,000) A reasonable back-up if Zand is full.

## MIDRANGE

**Aryo Barzan Hotel** (☎ 224 1222; www.aryohotel.com; Rudaki Ave; s/d/ste incl breakfast US\$37/50/\$75; ☎ ☎)

The classy Aryo Barzan offers top-end quality for a midrange price. The comfortable rooms have Mini Me-sized baths. The restaurant and café are good.

**Shiraz Eram Hotel** (☎ 230 0814; www.eramhotel.com; Zand Blvd; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/40; ☎ ☎ ☎) The welcoming, knowledgeable staff are a highlight here, and large rooms with satellite TV and fridge aren't bad either. It's getting a makeover, so prices might rise. The buffet breakfast (IR30,000 for nonguests) is great, and food in the Sarve Naz Restaurant (meals IR35,000) is pretty good.

**Sasan Hotel** (☎ 230 2028; sasanhotel@shirazpost.com; Anvari St; s/d IR135,000/185,000; ☎) Lower midrange rooms here are small but clean and management is obliging.

## Eating

**Yord Restaurant** (☎ 625 6774; meals IR45,000; ☎ 8pm-midnight, call first for lunch) About 8km northwest of the city, Yord serves up fantastic Iranian food and fresh bread along with liberal doses of nomadic Qashqa'i culture in a huge, wonderfully colourful yord (tent). There's live music most nights. It's almost impossible to find without a taxi (IR25,000, ask for Yord in Dinakan); the restaurant will call one for the return journey. Worth every rial!

**Hammam-e Vakil** (☎ 222 6467; Taleqani St; meals IR40,000; ☎ 11am-11pm) In the marvellously restored baths of the Bazar-e Vakil, this teahouse and restaurant serves good *dizi* and kebab with live music. It's a bit touristy, but still a must-see in Shiraz.

**Shater Abbas Restaurant** (☎ 227 1612; Khakshenas St; meals IR40,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) The open-sided kitchen and tasty food make this a popular place with Shirazis. The lari kabab (a speciality of southern Iran, IR28,000) is recommended for carnivores. Look for the flame torches outside.

**Govara Restaurant** (☎ 222 7211; Piruzi St; meals IR20,000; ☎ 11am-11pm) No frills, subterranean place serving good, cheap kebabs, *khoshkhs* and fish dishes.

**Saray-e Mehr Teahouse/Restaurant** (☎ 222 9572; meals IR25,000-35,000; ☎ 8am-10pm) Deep in the bazaar, near the Serai Mushir, this ambient old place is great for tea or lunch.

Zand and the nearby streets are home to numerous cheap kababis and pizza joints; we liked the shwarmas (IR8000) at **110 Hamburgers** (Anvari St).

## Drinking

You can also sit with tea and a *qalyan* in most of the places to eat.

**Aramgah-e Hafez** (Golestan Blvd; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) In the grounds of Hafez' tomb, this delightful garden teahouse is the perfect place to sit, contemplate and listen to traditional music.

**Towhid Teahouse** (Ferdosi St; ☎ 7am-11pm) This teahouse, packed with a mesmerising array of lovingly collected 'stuff', is far from touristy. The (mostly male) patrons banter animatedly and the *dizi* (IR7000) and kebabs, grilled on the sidewalk, are super cheap.

## Shopping

The Vakil Bazaar was constructed by Karim Khan as part of a plan to make Shiraz into a great trading centre. With vaulted brick ceilings and a range of stores catering to tourists and locals alike, it's one of the finest bazaars in Iran. There are a few teahouses and the Serai Mushi is a pleasant courtyard in a two-storey caravanserai. Shiraz is a good place to buy printed fabrics, tea sets and *qalyan* pipes made from copper and bronze.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 233 0041; cnr Zand Blvd & Faqih St) flies to Tehran (IR315,000, several daily), Esfahan (IR117,000, daily), Bandar Abbas (IR230,000, seven weekly), Mashhad (IR450,000, daily) and Ahvaz (IR229,000, twice weekly). **Iran Aseman** (☎ 230 8841; Zand Blvd) flies similar routes for the same prices.

Iran Air flies to Dubai, Doha, Bahrain and Kuwait and **Gulf Air** (☎ 230 1962; Zand Blvd) has twice-weekly flights to Bahrain.

### BUS & MINIBUS

Shiraz' main bus/minibus station is **Carandish bus terminal** (Terminal-e Bozorg; ☎ 730 1654), though you can buy tickets to many destinations at the convenient **Iran Peyma** (Taavoni No. 1; ☎ 222 3888; Zand) office. Mercedes/Volvo buses and minibuses leave frequently for cities including Bandar Abbas (IR28,500/55,000, 10 hours), Bushehr (IR18,000/32,000, five hours), Esfahan (IR19,000/33,000, eight hours) and Tehran (IR38,000/66,000, 12 to 16 hours), and less frequently for Kerman (IR23,500/37,000, eight hours), Yazd (IR18,000/28,500, seven hours), Ahvaz (IR26,000/40,000, 10 hours) and Kerman-shah (IR44,000/65,000, 16 hours).

Minibuses to Marvdasht (for Persepolis, IR2000) leave regularly from behind the terminal.

## Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shared taxis to the airport leave from Valiasr Sq. A taxi *dah baste* will cost about IR10,000 to most hotels.

## BICYCLE

Shiraz is one of the few places in Iran where it's easy to hire a bicycle and the traffic is certainly manageable. Pars Tourist Travel Agency hires out decent mountain bikes for US\$4 a day and also has guided bike tours for IR55,000/80,000 a half/full day.

## AROUND SHIRAZ Persepolis (Takht-e Jamshid)

پرسپولیس (تخت جمشید)

Magnificent **Persepolis** (Takht-e Jamshid; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-5pm Nov-Mar; 6am-6pm Mar-Jun & Sep-Oct, 6am-8pm Jul & Aug) is the embodiment of the greatest successes of the ancient Achaemenid empire (see p180). Begun in about 518 BC by King Darius I (the Great), this massive and magnificent palace complex was built as the Achaemenids' spring capital. It was added to by a host of subsequent kings over the following 200 years.

The original name was Parsa, but the Greeks, who invaded and destroyed the city in 331 BC, named it Persepolis.

## THE SITE

Entrance to the site is via the monumental **Grand Stairway**, carved from massive blocks of stone but with shallow steps so Persians in long elegant robes could walk gracefully up into the palace. At the top of the stairway is **Xerxes' Gateway** (Gate of All Nations), with three separate doors and a hallway. The remaining doors are covered with inscriptions, graffiti and carvings in the ancient Elamite language. Continuing east, you pass some double-headed capitals that once topped the columns in the Apadana Palace before reaching the **Unfinished Gate**.

The southern door of Xerxes' Gateway leads to the immense **Apadana Palace**, where the kings received visitors. Inside, the **Court of Apadana** was built from stone somehow excavated from nearby mountains. The roof of the **central hall** was supported by 36



towering stone columns, each 20m high. The stairways are decorated with superb reliefs, and the Apadana Stairway, at the eastern entrance, is considered a master work. As you look at the reliefs depicting people from the Achaemenids' ancient subject nationalities, it's not hard to see why.

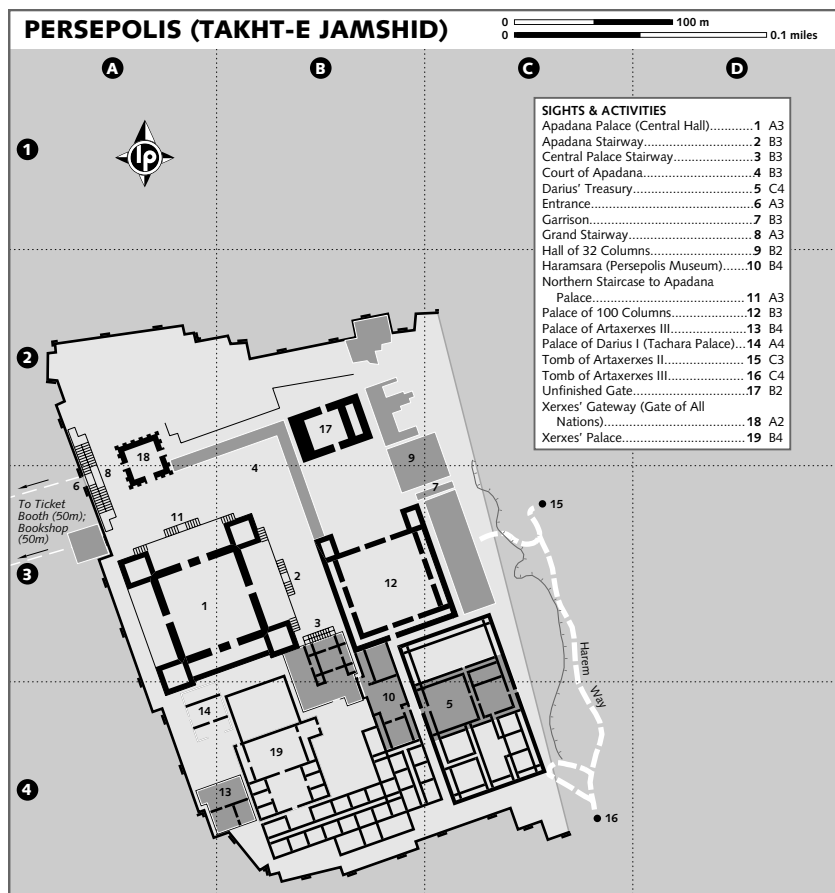
Behind the central hall, and connected by another stairway, is the **Palace of Darius I**. Once the private residence of Darius I, it was filled with statues covered with jewels, but only the carvings along the staircase remain.

The **Palace of 100 Columns** was probably one of the largest buildings constructed during the Achaemenid period (559–330 BC), and contained 100 columns about 14m high, each with reliefs showing Darius struggling

with evil spirits. **Darius' Treasury** was a large collection of rooms housing the wealth of the city. Overlooking all of this are the **Tomb of Artaxerxes II**, and the larger **Tomb of Artaxerxes III**, which are carved into the rocky hills overlooking the site.

The restored **Haramsara** (Persepolis Museum; admission IR5000) is believed to have housed the king's harem. Today it's a modest museum, with a few ceramics, carvings, cloths and coins.

An impressive sound-and-light show (in Farsi only) is supposed to play at 8.30pm on Thursday and Friday evenings from March to September (and daily during No Ruz, Iranian New Year), though check it's definitely on before heading out for it.



## GETTING THERE & AWAY

By public transport, take a minibus from the south side of the Carandish bus terminal in Shiraz to Marvdasht. From the last stop, walk about 1km along the main road to Imam Khomeini Sq, from where a shared taxi (IR2000, 12km) or private taxi (about IR10,000) will take you to Persepolis.

Easier is a charter taxi from Shiraz; expect to pay about IR120,000 for a six-hour trip to Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam and IR220,000 for an 11-hour day including Pasargad. **Pars Tourist Agency** (☎ 222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd) in Shiraz organises daily tours to Persepolis for US\$8 per person, leaving at 8am.

## Naqsh-e Rostam

نقش رستم

Hewn out of a cliff, the four tombs of **Naqsh-e Rostam** (admission IR3000; ☎ 7.30am–5pm, to 7pm summer) are believed to be those of Darius II, Artaxerxes I, Darius I and Xerxes I (from left to right). There are also several **reliefs** from the Sassanian period depicting scenes of imperial conquests and royal investitures. Facing the cliff is the **Kaba Zartosht**, which is believed to be an Achaemenid fire temple, although the walls are marked with inscriptions cataloguing Sassanian victories. Photographers should get there before mid-afternoon.

Naqsh-e Rostam is 6km north from Persepolis. If you charter a taxi to Persepolis, this site can be visited along the way, otherwise shared taxis usually link the two (IR2000).

## Pasargad

پاسارگاد

Begun under Cyrus (Kouroush) the Great in about 546 BC, the city of **Pasargad** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am–5pm, 7am–6pm summer) was superseded by Persepolis soon after Cyrus' death. It's not as visually stimulating as Persepolis, though the scattered ruins and plains are beautiful in a lonely kind of way.

The first and most impressive structure you'll see is the six-tiered **Tomb of Cyrus**. Within walking distance are the insubstantial remains of three **Achaemenid Palaces**; the ruins of a tower on a plinth, known as the **Prison of Solomon**; and a large stone platform on a hill known as the **Throne of the Mother of Solomon** (Takht-e Madar-e Soleiman), which affords panoramic views.

Pasargad is 130km north of Shiraz (80km north of Persepolis) so if you really need to see it the best option is to charter a taxi (or

take an organised tour) and combine it with a visit to Persepolis. By public transport, take a bus (IR8500) from the Carandish bus terminal in Shiraz to Sa'adatshahr (Sa'adat Abad), and a taxi the remaining 30km.

## Firuz Abad

فیروز آباد

The remains of the Sassanian-era cities of Firuz and Gur are about 6km before Firuz. On the road from Shiraz, an abandoned chairlift leads to the ruins of the three-storey **Doktar Palace**.

About 2km further towards Firuz, an un-signposted rocky trail leads to the **Ardeshir Fire Temple** (admission IR3000).

At least one bus and several minibuses run between Shiraz and Firuz every day.

## THE PERSIAN GULF

خليج فارس

The Persian Gulf is one of the least visited parts of Iran and that in itself is a great attraction. It's different from the rest of the country, with its Bandari culture and architecture blending Persian and Arab roots, and a laid-back way of life that suits the climate perfectly – it gets diabolically hot in summer. Increasing numbers of travellers are using the Gulf ports to enter or leave Iran.

## BUSHEHR

بوشهر

☎ 0771

Set on a peninsula jutting out into the ocean, Bushehr is perhaps the most relaxed town along the Gulf. The Bandari architecture and dress provide the flavour but, as it's five hours from Shiraz and not really on the way to anywhere, you need plenty of time to devote some of it to Bushehr.

The highlight is the easily explored **old city**, a kind of living museum of traditional Bandari architecture that has yet to be flattened to make way for development. Much of it is, however, terribly run down – one reader described it as looking like 'Grozny after the third Russian war'.

## Information

**Bank Melli** (Leyan St)

**Coffeenet Baharrayanehlian** (☎ 252 1505; Leyan St; per hr IR5000; ☎ 8am–10pm) Opposite Bank Melli; look for the red sign.

**Main hospital** (☎ 252 6591; Siraf St)

**Police headquarters** (☎ 253 0799; Qods Sq; ☎ 8am-2pm) Can extend visas, including transit visas; ask for English-speaking Saeed Iranzad.

**Post office** (Valiasr St)

**Telephone office** (Novvab-e Safavi St; ☎ 7am-10pm) Just south of Enqelab Sq.

## Sleeping & Eating

Getting a cheap room in Bushehr was a nightmare of red tape, but in theory permits are no longer required. Yippee! The cheap options are near Enqelab Sq, just northeast of the terminal. Bushehr's waterfront and around the bazaar are the places to find food.

**Hotel Sadi** (☎ 252 2605; Nader St; tw IR40,000) The pick of the budget options, where small, clean rooms have their own bathrooms!

**Mosaferkhune-ye Pars** (☎ 252 2479; Enqelab Sq; tr IR60,000) Simple rooms and share bathrooms and a friendly atmosphere in a great location overlooking Enqelab Sq.

**Sadra Tourist Inn** (☎ 252 2346; cnr Valiasr St & Khalij-e Fars Sts; d \$30; ☎) Well-located on the seafront, rooms here are tired but still the cheapest in the midrange.

**Ghavam Restaurant** (☎ 252 1790; Khalij-e Fars St; meals IR40,000; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 7-11.30pm) The sea-side location, vaulted ceilings and traditional music (Thursday and Friday) of this former underground cistern make this the best place to eat on the coast. Consider the tasty fish kebab and surprisingly spicy dizi. Tea and *qalyan* on the roof are great at sunset.

**Salon Ghaza Khoreid Faghid** (☎ 252 5755; Novvab-e Safavi St; meals IR20,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Just south of the bazaar, there is no English sign and zero frills but the local speciality *ghalye mahi*, a richly flavoured fish stew, is worth finding.

## Getting There & Away

**Iran Air** (☎ 252 2041; Valiasr St) flights include Tehran (IR225,000, twice daily) and Esfahan (IR220,000, twice weekly). Iran Aseman flies to/from Dubai three times a week.

The town's bus terminal is just west of the bazaar. Relatively infrequent Mercedes/Volvo services depart for Bandar Abbas (IR49,000/85,000, about 14 hours), Bandar Lengeh (IR29,000/50,000, about nine hours, 4.30pm), Ahvaz (IR31,000, seven hours), Shiraz (IR18,000/32,000, five hours) and Esfahan (IR35,000/63,000, 16 hours).

**Valfajre-8 Shipping Company** (☎ 252 2188; www.vesc.net; Solhabad St) has passenger ferries to Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.

## KISH ISLAND

☎ 0764

Kish is Iran's Hawaii, without the bars and bikinis. And while Iranians not familiar with such decadence simply love the place, it's of little interest to most foreigners. If you do come here, perhaps as a back-door entry point from Dubai, the diving isn't bad and there's a fun bike path around the edge of the island. That path passes all the sights, the pick of which are the ruins of ancient **Harireh**, the rusted and haunting **Greek Ship**, and the **Men's Beach** and **Ladies Beach** – don't get them confused!

Divers should head to the professionally run **Kish Dive Centre** (☎ 442 2757) on the beach outside the Shayan Hotel. A one-hour dive with equipment is about US\$35. Bikes can be hired from vendors near here for about IR15,000 an hour. For brochures and other information, drop into the **Kish Tourism Organisation** (KTO; ☎ 442 2434; Sanaee Sq; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Sat-Thu).

You can fly into Kish from Dubai without a visa, get a 14-day pass at the airport and then head down to the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 442 0734; Ferdous Villas, Complex 2, Ferdosi St), where they can grant you a full tourist visa within 48 hours.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are dozens of hotels on Kish, but cheap ones are like needles in haystacks. The KTO might be able to help, or check www.irantour.org/kishisland-hotels.html. Almost all hotels have restaurants.

**Hotel Khatam** (☎ 443 1520; khatamhotel@hotmail.com; Khatam Blvd; tw IR200,000; ☎) In the village of Saffein, these comfortable rooms are good value for Kish.

**Asia Hotel** (☎ 443 0774; Saffain St) Around the corner from the Khatam, it has similar rooms and rates. Bargain in both.

**Shayan International Hotel** (☎ 442 2771; Sahel Sq; s/d incl breakfast US\$80/110; ☎) This prerevolution edifice mixes quality with a suggestion of '70s kitsch. Ask for a room facing east.

If the prices of the above places are too much, the proprietors of the **Salar Kish Hotel** (☎ 442 0111; Sanaee Sq; dm IR60,000; ☎) might let you share an apartment.

## جزیره کیش

Kish has a curious mix of Western-style fast-food places and try-hard theme restaurants, mostly in the northeast. One standout is **Payab Restaurant** (☎ 0914-769 1213; Olympic Blvd; meals IR50,000; ☎ 7-11pm), located in an underground water reservoir. The fish dishes are mouthwatering.

## Getting There & Away

**Iran Air** (☎ 442 2274; Sanaee Sq) flies to and from Tehran (IR452,000) and Shiraz, and **Kish Airlines** (☎ 442 3922; Sanaee Sq) flies more regularly to Tehran, Shiraz, Esfahan and Mashhad. Kish Airlines also flies to Bahrain, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain.

Valfajre-8 sails daily between Kish and Bandar Lengeh (IR65,000); catamarans take two hours but the bigger ferries take close to five. Buy tickets at the port.

The alternative is to take the speedboat from Bandar-e Charak; see below. Note that speedboats stop in high winds.

## BANDAR LENGEH

☎ 0762

Bandar Lengeh is an infectiously lethargic place, and a pleasant overnight stop to or from Kish Island. There is not much to do except wander around, taking in the different dress (look for the distinctive Bandari burkas worn by some women) and the bazaar.

**Hotel Amir** (☎ 224 2311; Enqelab St; r IR52,000), not far north of the port entrance, is the only hotel in the town centre and the simple rooms are fair value. Bathrooms are shared and some English is spoken.

The **Amir Restaurant** (☎ 224 1370; Enqelab St; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 6-10pm; meals IR20,000-30,000), a few doors south of Hotel Amir, serves good *sabzi* and rice (IR15,000) and *meigu* (battered prawns or shrimps, IR20,000).

From the bus terminal, about 2km east of the docks, buses go to Bandar Abbas (IR15,000, four hours) about every hour, and twice daily to Bushehr (IR31,000, nine hours). Savaris also go to Bandar Abbas (IR30,000, 2½ hours).

Ferries and catamarans sail from the **Valfajre 8 terminal** (☎ 222 0252; Imam Khomeini St) to Kish Island (IR65,000 one way, two to five hours, twice daily). For international services, see p664. Alternatively, take an early morning (about 6am) savari to Bandar-e Charak (IR15,000, one hour) and a speedboat from Charak to Kish (IR30,000, 45 minutes).

## BANDAR ABBAS

☎ 0761

Bandar Abbas is the busiest port in Iran and the major city along the Gulf. Sights are few, but the city – universally known as Bandar – is the ideal base from which to explore the nearby islands and Minab. Bandar's population is a fascinating mix of Arabs, Persians and African Iranians, with a large Sunni minority. The best place to see it all come together is in the **bazaar**.

## Orientation & Information

The city centre is 17 Shahrivar Sq, where the **police headquarters** (☎ 222 7676) and **Bank Melli** are located. **Morvarid Money Exchange** (☎ 222 7446; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4.30-9pm Sat-Thu), in a small arcade west of the square, is a better place to change money. The **main post office** (Shahrivar St) and the **telephone office** (Mahan Alley; ☎ 7am-9pm) are near the square.

Get online at **Intel Coffeenet** (Imam Khomeini St; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-noon & 4-10pm), or **Coffee Net Sorena** (Imam Khomeini St; per hr IR9000; ☎ 5pm-9pm Sat-Thu), on the 3rd floor just west of 17 Shahrivar Sq.

## Sleeping

If these places don't suit, there are several more on or just off Imam Khomeini St.

**Mema Pazir Bouali** (☎ 222 2516; Shari'ati St; dm/r IR15,000/50,000) Family-run and ideal for solo women, this infectiously friendly place has clean if noisy rooms, shared bathrooms and a great little teahouse. Look for the yellow awning; it's upstairs.

**Mosaferkhuneh-ye-Bazar** (☎ 222 2303; Taleqani Blvd; s/d/tr IR44,000/60,000/71,000) Luxury it ain't, but this popular *mosaferkhuneh* (cheap hotel) is perfectly located on top of the bazaar, overlooking the Gulf.

**Hotel Ghods** (☎ 222 2344; Imam Khomeini St; s/d IR450,000/550,000; ☎) Ghods is the best midrange choice, with large, relatively quiet and well-equipped rooms.

## Eating

For 'modern Iranian' fast food – pizza and burgers – head west to Sayyadan St, where such establishments pull crowds of chatty students. **Tanuri Pizza** (pizzas IR20,000) uses real mozzarella, making it the pick of the bunch.

**Persian Restaurant** (☎ 224 4147; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR30,000; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 7-10pm) A longtime favourite, this central, busy little

## بندر عباس





## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 245 8871; Dr Mafatteh St) has flights to Esfahan (IR267,000 one way, twice weekly), Tehran (IR364,000, daily) and Zahedan (IR205,000, weekly). **Mahan Air** (☎ 245 0423; Dr Beheshti St) also flies to Tehran and Mashhad.

### BUS & SAVARI

Regular Volvo buses leave the terminal for Bam (IR13,000, three hours); Bandar Abbas (IR38,000, eight hours); Esfahan (IR40,000, 12 hours); Shiraz (IR37,000, eight hours); Tehran (IR65,000, 18 hours); Yazd (IR25,000, five hours); and Zahedan (IR21,000M, six hours). Mercedes buses are less frequent, but cheaper. Savaris to Bam (IR20,000, two hours) and Rayen (IR15,000, 75 minutes) leave from Sarasiyab Sq (about 5km east of Kermani Sq). Savaris to Mahan (IR4000) leave from Kermani Sq and occasionally from Azadi Sq.

### TRAIN

The train to Tehran (IR63,150/39,750 in 1st/2nd class, 13 hours, twice daily) stops at Yazd, Kashan and Qom, but not Esfahan. There's also a daily train to Bam and the line through to Zahedan should be finished during the life of this book. Tickets can be bought from **Kerman Tours** (☎ 245 0465; Azadi Sq) or arranged through Akhavan Hotel, saving you the trip to the **train station** (☎ 211 0762) 8km southwest of town – take a shared taxi from Azadi Sq.

## AROUND KERMAN

### Mahan

☎ 0342

Mahan is a relaxed town 38km southeast of Kerman. The highlight is the 15th-century **Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5pm, to 8pm summer), the mausoleum of a well-known local poet, mystic and founder of the Ne'matollah order of dervishes.

About 5km up the main road from the mausoleum is the charming and famous **Bagh-e Shahzade** (admission IR3000; ☎ 9am-6pm, 8am-11pm summer) gardens, with a collection of pools leading to a large palace, part of which has been converted into a teahouse and restaurant (meals IR35,000).

Mahan is easily visited on a day (or half-day) trip from Kerman, but you could stay and eat in the good-value **Mahan Inn** (☎ 622 2700; Gharani Sq; d/ste US\$15/25; P ☎).

Regular savaris (IR4000, 20 minutes) and minibuses (IR800, 35 minutes, approximately hourly) to Kerman leave from outside the mausoleum.

## RAYEN

☎ 0342

With the demise of Bam, several other ancient adobe structures are challenging for the title of 'new Arg'. The pick of them is the **Arg-e Rayen** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) in Rayen, halfway between Kerman and Bam. About a quarter the size of its Bam cousin, the hotchpotch of architectural styles suggests the Arg-e Rayen is over 1000 years old. The imposing outer walls are 3m thick at the base and 1m thick at the top, and support most of the Arg's 15 towers. Caretaker **Hamid Reza** (☎ 662 3644) will unlock the various doors for you for a small tip.

The **Restaurant Arg** (☎ 662 3931; meals IR30,000), 30m downhill from the Arg, serves large portions of tasty food and has a few simple rooms for a negotiable IR30,000 per bed.

Buses (IR5500, two hours) run to and from Kerman terminal every hour or so; Taavonis No. 3 and No. 16 are your best bet. Savaris (IR15,000) from Kerman's Sarasiyab Sq are usually more frequent. Private taxis cost about IR150,000 for a half-day trip from Kerman.

## BAM

☎ 0344

This ancient oasis town famed for its magnificent citadel, the Arg-e Bam, was all but flattened by a powerful earthquake that killed more than 31,000 people on 26 December 2003. Rebuilding work has slowly returned some normality, though signs of the destruction will be around for years to come. It's a long haul to get to Bam, but travellers who have made the trip invariably think it worthwhile. Although badly damaged, the Arg remains a truly impressive structure and the hospitality of locals, who are desperate for you to come, is memorable. If you don't want to stay, it's possible to make a long day trip from Kerman.

The **Bank Sepah** (Shahid Sadoqi St) can change money and **Internet access** (Pasdaran St; per hr IR15,000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3.30-8pm Sat-Thu) can be found between the Bank Tejarat and a shop selling motorbikes.

## راین

## بم

## Arg-e Bam

The ancient mud city of Bam was one of the jewels in Iran's tourism crown. Dating from at least as far back as the Sassanian period, the city was a staging post on the trade routes between India and Pakistan at one end and the Gulf and Europe at the other. Marco Polo was one of the visitors awestruck by the city's 38 towers, huge mud walls and fairy-tale citadel, the **Arg-e Bam** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk).

Today the 9th-century walls, mud-brick ramparts and monumental entrance gateway are crumbling, but are still far more impressive than many other ruined sights you'll see across the Middle East. A gangway has been built to allow visitors to enter and leads through the collapsed main gate and up to the foot of the citadel itself. Reconstruction has begun but it's going to be slow – estimates range from 20 to 50 years. The focus is on using traditional materials.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Akbar Tourist Guest House** (☎ 231 4843, 0913-144 4146; mr\_panjali@yahoo.com; Sayyeh Jamal od-Din St; dm/s/d IR30,000/50,000/80,000) Panjalizadeh Akbar and his family have rebuilt this landmark on the overland trail and their warm hospitality and courtyard communal area are attracting travellers. Facilities are adequate if simple (bathrooms are shared), but a restaurant and several air-con doubles are expected soon.

**Azadi Hotel** (☎ 222 2097-9; r/ste US\$65/75; P ☎) Left of the main road into Bam from Kerman, this has large, comfy rooms and helpful service. The restaurant (meals IR40,000) is probably the best sit-down option in Bam.

Bami dates are fantastic, but the restaurants are less inspirational. Among the simple eateries along Imam Khomeini St, the pink-painted **Maroof** (☎ 0913-320 8291; meals IR20,000; ☎ 11am-2pm & 6-11pm) serves tasty kebabs plus a few more exotic dishes; virtually opposite is the **Shandiz Pizza** (pizzas IR20,000; ☎ 11am-11pm).

## Getting There & Away

Iran Aseman flies between Bam and Tehran (IR420,000, at least daily).

Bam's terminal is just south of Arg Sq, but most buses are going to or from Zahedan and stop instead at the square itself; when we passed bus offices were located in shipping containers on the northwest corner. A taxi from Arg Sq to the town centre costs around

IR5000, a shared taxi is IR1000. Mercedes buses from Bam include: Bandar Abbas (IR20,000, nine hours); Kerman (IR9,500, three hours); Yazd (IR18,000, eight hours); Esfahan (IR45,000, 11 hours) and Zahedan (IR12,000, five hours). The 6.30am Zahedan bus is good if you want to cross the border the same day. Savaris to Kerman (IR20,000, two hours) leave Arg Sq several times an hour. For Rayen, ask to be dropped at the turn-off and take any transport from there.

The train to Tehran (20 hours) leaves at 4pm on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, stopping at Kerman, Yazd and Kashan. The line to Zahedan should be finished in the next couple of years.

## ZAHEDAN

☎ 0541

Zahedan is a dusty, featureless frontier desert town with virtually zero attractions but, since it's the nearest major town to the border with Pakistan, most overland travellers spend time here – either at the terminal or overnight.

The **Institute for Internet Services** (☎ 321 4180; Azadi Sq; per hr IR14,000; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu) has decent connections; the **Bank Melli central branch** (Azadi St) changes US dollars but head to the bazaar (or better, wait until Taftan) to change Pakistani rupees. Head to the **Khatam hospital** (☎ 322 7067) in an emergency. The **Police Department of Alien Affairs** (☎ 323 1182; Motahhari Blvd; ☎ 7am-2pm, closed Fri) handles visa extensions. See p244 for details of the Indian and Pakistani consulates.

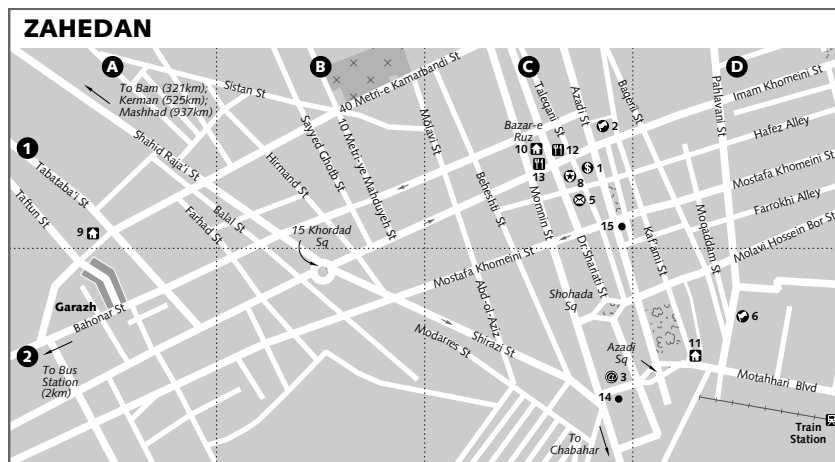
If you do end up in Zahedan, the **Bazar-e Ruz** is the most interesting part of town. It has a definite Pakistani and Afghani flavour, with the *salwar kameez* (a long tunic worn over baggy pants) being the dominant form of dress among men.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Momtazahirmand** (☎ 322 2313; Bazar-e Ruz; s/tw IR35,000/50,000; ☎) Right in the bazaar, most rooms have a sink and the shared showers and toilets are clean. It's along the first laneway on the left off Shari'ati (look for a brown door with coloured glass panels).

**Abuzar Hotel** (☎ 451 2132; 40 Metri-e Kamarbandi St; r without/bathroom IR40,000/60,000; P) Away from the centre, this friendly place is good value and has a decent restaurant downstairs.

**Kavir Hotel** (☎ 321 1840; Motahhari Blvd; s/d IR90,000/120,000; P ☎) It's the pick of the mid-



range but it's a long way from opulent. The bordello-like interiors could be cleaner, so could the bathrooms. The restaurant is fair.

### Eating

There are plenty of fast-food outlets on Dr Shari'ati St, including kababis and good barbecue chicken (IR12,000 for half a chook, tomatoes and bread) places. Apart from the hotel restaurants, the **Esteghlal Restaurant** (☎ 322 2250; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR15,000) does a filling *khoresht*.

### Getting There & Away

**Iran Air** (☎ 322 0813-4; near Azadi Sq) has flights to Tehran (IR477,000, 12 per week), Esfahan (IR407,000, weekly), Kerman (IR205,000, weekly), Mashhad (IR347,000, three weekly) and Chabahar (IR226,000). Mahan Air flies to Tehran daily except Friday; buy tickets at **Khaterat Zahedan Travel** (☎ 322 9113; Azadi St).

Regular Mercedes/Volvo buses leave the sprawling terminal in the west of town to just about everywhere. Destinations include Bam (IR12,000, five hours), Kerman (IR21,000/35,000, six hours), Yazd (IR34,500/55,000, 14 hours), Esfahan (IR44,800/75,000, 21 hours), Shiraz (IR49,200/75,000, 17 hours), Bandar Abbas (IR42,200/65,000, 17 hours), Mashhad (IR70,000/100,000, 15 hours) and Tehran (IR63,300/95,000, 22 hours). A taxi from the terminal to town should cost about IR6000, or IR1500 shared.

To the Pakistan border or Mirjaveh, savaris and the odd pick-up (about IR15,000)

leave Forudgarh Sq (also known as Meydan-e Mirjaveh). Occasionally buses (IR5500, 1½ hours) leave the terminal, where smiling-assassin taxi drivers also ask IR100,000 for the trip – bargain hard. Diehard trainpotterers with wide masochistic streaks might consider the twice-monthly train to the border, and thence on to Quetta.

### MIRJAVEH

میر جاوه

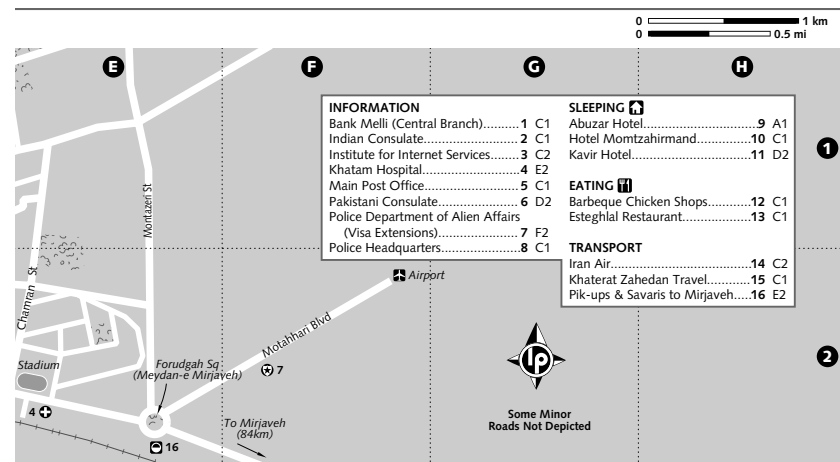
☎ 0543

Mirjaveh is the closest town to the border with Pakistan, although it's not necessary to come here as pick-ups and shared taxis run directly between Zahedan and the border – see p660. Coming from Pakistan, buses run to Zahedan for an outrageous IR20,000, savaris cost about IR100,000 for the whole vehicle. If you get stuck, **Mirjaveh Tourist Inn** (Hotel Ali; ☎ 322 2486; s/tw IR40,000/75,000; P ☎) isn't bad, but isn't that secure, either.

## NORTHEASTERN IRAN

### شمال شرق ایران

Northeastern Iran encompasses the eastern part of the Alborz Mountains and the wide, flat steppes and desert further south. It's a region full of history, with the Gonbad-e Kavus tower and the vast Islamic complex around the shrine to Imam Reza in Mashhad among the highlights. The borders with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are open.



### SARI

☎ 0151

Sari is a busy but attractive town some distance back from the Caspian coast. The centre is little Haft-e Tir Sq (usually called Sa'at Sq because of the clock), from where streets radiate in all directions. Sights include the 15th-century **Shrine of Yahya**, tucked in behind the **bazaar**, and the nearby **Soltan Zein-ul-Abedin Tower**; and the **Shrine of Abbas**, about 2km east of Clock Sq. All three are active places of worship but none is unmissable.

Three Internet cafés surround Sa'at Sq, including **Safanet** (per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-3pm & 4-8pm).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Sarouyeh Guesthouse** (☎ 324 5600; Danesh St; s/d IR80,000/85,000; P) Located just off Taleqani St, east of Shohada Sq, this good-value place has rooms with eastern bathrooms and fans.

**Sarouyeh Hotel** (s/d IR170,000/260,000; P ☎) Across the courtyard from its sister guesthouse, the spacious rooms are better here. **Mosaferkhaneh** (Modarres St; dm/tw/tr IR15,000/50,000/55,000) Ultrabasic rooms and shared toilets. There's no shower. Head upstairs, 5m from the corner of Sa'at Sq.

**Sorena Restaurant** (☎ 222 7069; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; meals IR40,000; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 7pm-midnight) About 1km from Sa'at Sq, this trendy upstairs restaurant has plenty of kebabs and some tasty fish dishes.

ساری

### Getting There & Away

Iran Air flies to Tehran (IR195,000) and Mashhad (IR275,000).

The bus terminal is about 3km north-east of Sa'at Sq (take a shared taxi along 18 Dei St). Buses run to Tehran (IR14,000, five hours), Rasht (IR19,000, seven hours) and Mashhad (IR30,000, 11 hours, mostly morning and evening). For Gorgan, minibuses (IR5000) leave from a separate terminal, 2km east of Sa'at Sq, or take a savari (IR20,000) from the office opposite.

Trains to Tehran (IR13,750 in 2nd class, eight hours) and Gorgan depart daily. The train station is about 1km south of Sa'at Sq.

### GORGAN

☎ 0171

Gorgan is a reasonable place to break up a journey between the Caspian and Mashhad. In the bazaar, **Jameh Mosque**, off Aftab 27 Lane, has a traditional sloping, tiled roof and an unusual minaret. About 200m west, the **Shrine of Nur** is mildly interesting.

About 6km east of Gorgan, **Nahar Khoran** is an unspoiled forest area with plenty of hiking trails.

The centre of Gorgan is huge Valiasr Sq, usually known as Shahrdari Sq. **Pasargad Coffee** (☎ 222 7001; Edalat St; per hr IR5000; ☎ 10am-10pm) is in the Laleh Arcade; and there's a **phone office** (Behesht 2nd Alley; ☎ 7am-10pm) about 40m east of Shahrdari Sq.

**Pars Hotel** (☎ 222 9550; s/tw/tr IR45,000/55,000/65,000), set around a quiet courtyard, has

INFORMATION		SLEEPING	
Bank Melli (Central Branch).....	1 C1	Abuzar Hotel.....	9 A1
Indian Consulate.....	2 C1	Hotel Momtazhirmand.....	10 C1
Institute for Internet Services.....	3 C2	Kavir Hotel.....	11 D2
Khatam Hospital.....	4 E2		
Main Post Office.....	5 C1	EATING	
Pakistani Consulate.....	6 D2	Barbecue Chicken Shops.....	12 C1
Police Department of Alien Affairs (Visa Extensions).....	7 F2	Esteghlal Restaurant.....	13 C1
Police Headquarters.....	8 C1	TRANSPORT	
		Iran Air.....	14 C2
		Khaterat Zahedan Travel.....	15 C1
		Pick-ups & Savaris to Mirjaveh.....	16 E2



Some Minor Roads Not Depicted

upstairs rooms that are simple but comfortable and the English-speaking manager is very helpful. Walk about 20m north from Shahrdari Sq, turn right and it's in the first alley on the left, off Shohada St.

**Hotel Tahmasebi** (☎ 442 2780; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; tw with breakfast IR200,000; P ♻), 500m down from Imam Khomeini Sq, has rooms with (some smelly) squat toilets. The best option, though nothing special for the price.

The *ghormeh sabzi* and kebabs at **Abshar Restaurant** (☎ 222 2993; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR20,000; ☎ noon-10pm), just west of Shahrdari Sq, are great value.

From the bus terminal, at Enqelab Sq 2km northwest of Shahrdari Sq, Mercedes/Volvo buses go in all directions including Tehran (IR20,000/36,000, about eight hours), Mashhad (IR30,000/40,000, nine hours) and Shahrud (IR12,000/18,000, four hours). Mini-buses for Sari (IR5000, 2½ hours) leave from a separate terminal 3km southwest of Imam Khomeini Sq. Savaris and minibuses also serve Shahrud; change at Azadshahr for the scenic drive across the Alborz Mountains.

The train to Tehran (IR39,750/17,200 in 1st/2nd class) departs daily; the station is about 300m west of the bus terminal.

## AROUND GORGAN

### Gonbad-e Kavus (Gonbad-e Qabus)

گنبد کاووس

This chilled-out Turkmen town, 93km west of Gorgan, is named after its most famous asset – the spectacular **Mil-e Gonbad tower** (admission IR3000; ☎ 7.30am-dusk) and its sponsor, Qabus ebn-e Vashmgir. Completed in 1006, the circular tower is 55m tall and has 12m-deep foundations. Minibuses from Gorgan run every hour or so, but savaris are much faster; you'll need to change at Azadshahr, 17km nearer to Gorgan, from where savaris also run to Shahrud (IR25,000). It's well worth stopping en route to Mashhad or along the mountain pass road to Shahrud.

## TEHRAN TO MASHHAD

Flying or taking the overnight train at least one way to Mashhad is a good idea, but if you decide to go by road there are a few interesting stops along the way. Semnan is the first major town, about five hours by bus from Tehran. Damghan is three hours further, but Shahrud and nearby Bastam are prettier than both.

## Shahrud

شاهرود

☎ 0273 / pop 120,000

The highlight of leafy Shahrud is the lively **bazaar**, not far from central Jomhuri-ye Eslami Sq. The pretty village of **Bastam**, 7km north, has a beautiful mosque that's worth a visit.

**Hotel Nader** (☎ 333 2835; s/d IR70,000/120,000, with shower IR85,000/130,000) is nothing to write home about, but has a restaurant and clean showers in some rooms; all toilets are shared. To find it, walk south about 700m from Jomhuri-ye Eslami Sq, turn right at the biggish road and take your first left – it's 250m on.

**New Islami Hotel** (☎ 222 2335; Shohada St; tw IR50,000; P) is about 15m east of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Sq. Forget about showers here. It's run by nice people, though, and it's clean.

The bus/minibus terminal is about 5km south of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Sq, where bus agents have offices. Buses go to Tehran (IR19,000), Mashhad (IR21,000), Gorgan (IR12,000) and Sari (IR18,000).

## Neishabur

نیشابور

☎ 0551

Neishabur, 114km west of Mashhad, is most famous as the home town of poet and all-round genius Omar Khayyam (see p73). The **Mausoleum of Omar Khayyam** (admission IR4000, ☎ 8am-sunset) is designed to reflect his mathematical as well as poetic achievements, and sits in attractive gardens that also contain the fine 16th-century **Mausoleum of Mohammed Mahruq**. In the town centre, a partially restored Safavid-era **caravanserai** (☎ 8am-5pm, to 7pm summer) houses a small museum.

Neishabur can be visited as a day trip from Mashhad. Alternatively, the **Tourist Hotel** (☎ 33445; s/d US\$20/25; P ♻), in the centre of town, is reliable and has a good restaurant.

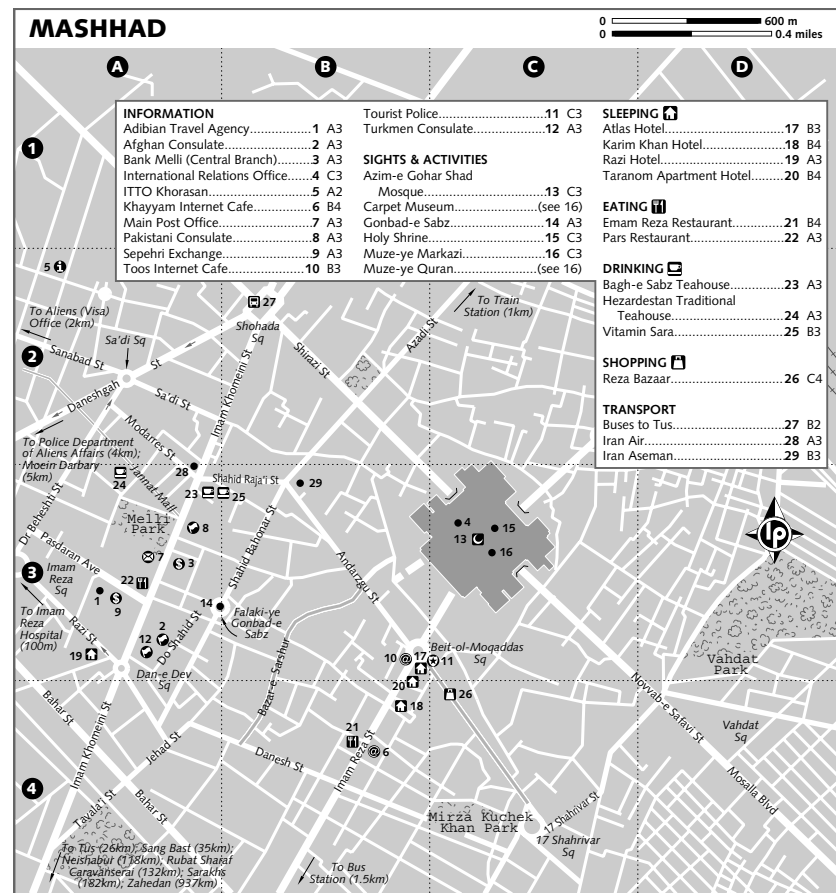
Minibuses from Mashhad (IR7000, 2½ hours) leave in the morning, or take any bus heading towards Tehran. If you charter a taxi it's easy to visit Neishabur along with the 17th-century **Qadamgah Mausoleum**, just off the main Mashhad-Neishabur road, the ancient minaret and dome at **Sang Bast**, and the Timurud-era caravanserai at **Binolud**.

## MASHHAD

مشهد

☎ 0511 / pop 3.1 million

As the place where the eighth Shiite Imam and direct descendant of the Prophet Mo-



ammed, Imam Reza, died in 817, Mashhad (Place of Martyrdom) is the most holy city in the country. Here you'll see tears, wailing and selfless devotion in full frame, as more than 12 million pilgrims journey to the city each year. Particularly around No Ruz (late March) and in summer, Mashhad is packed.

Mashhad is the capital of vast Khorasan province, which, despite being largely made up of desert plains, does have several attractions within easy reach of Mashhad.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Imam Reza Hospital** (☎ 854 3031-9; Ebn-e Sina St)

**Tourist police** (☎ 841 8236; Beit-ol-Moqaddas Sq)

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Khayyam Internet Cafe** (☎ 851 7272; Imam Reza St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 24hr) Offers IR800 per minute international calls and fast connections.

**Toos Internet Cafe** (Imam Reza St; per hr IR5000; ☎ 8.30am-midnight Sat-Thu, 4pm-midnight Fri)

## MONEY

You'll find that there are a number of banks in Mashhad that will change money, including **Bank Melli central branch** (Imam Khomeini St). However, **Sepehri Exchange** (Pasdaran Ave; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Wed & 9am-2pm Thu) is a much faster option.

## POST

**Main post office** (Imam Khomeini St)

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**ITTO Khorasan** (☎ 726 9501; 2nd fl, Saheb al-Zaman Ave, Molavi St; ☎ 8am-4pm) Has simple maps and a few brochures. The office at the train station is just as good.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Adibian Travel Agency** (☎ 859 8151; www.adibian.tours.com; 56 Pasdaran Ave; ☎ 7.30am-8pm) For tickets, visa renewals and city and regional tours including Neishabur, Kalat, Torbet-e Jam and Sarakhs.

**VISA EXTENSIONS**

**Police Department of Aliens Affairs** (☎ 876 0603; 45 Metri-ye Reza Blvd) Near Piroozy Blvd. Not the best place to apply, but it's there if you're desperate. A taxi *dah baste* should cost about IR6000 from the Holy Shrine; ask for *Edari-ye Atbareh Khariji* (Aliens' Office).

**Sights****ASTAN-E QODS-E RAZAVI**

The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, and the surrounding buildings, are known collectively as the **Astan-e Qods-e Razavi** (☎ 24hr) and comprise one of the marvels of the Islamic world. The original tomb chamber of Imam Reza was built in the early 9th century, but later destroyed, restored and destroyed again.

The present **Holy Shrine**, with its golden dome, was built under the orders of Shah Abbas I at the beginning of the 17th century. Since 1983, continuous construction has ensured the architects (both literal and metaphorical) of the Islamic Republic will be remembered long after they're gone. The main entrances are at the end of Imam Reza Ave and Shirazi St.

As well as the shrine, the complex contains two mosques, museums, 12 lofty *iwans* (two of them coated entirely with gold), six theological colleges, several libraries, a post office and a bookshop. The remarkable **Azim-e Gohar Shad Mosque** has a 50m blue dome and cavernous golden portal.

Three museums are entered from the southern courtyard. The **Muze-ye Markazi** (Central Museum; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-4pm) houses an eccentric collection including Olympic medals, stamps, paintings, shells, a huge 800-year-old wooden door and a one-tonne stone drinking vessel made in the 12th century. The **Muze-ye Quran** (Quran Museum) has a collection of more than 100 hand-inscribed Qurans, and the attached **Carpet Museum** (admission for both IR3000; ☎ 8am-1pm) has an impressive collection of carpets dating back 500 years.

The Holy Shrine, the Azim-e Gohar Shad Mosque and the courtyards outside are off-limits to non-Muslims. If you're not with a guide, you're supposed to report first to the friendly **International Relations Office** (☎ 7am-5pm) in the far west of the complex and are assigned a guide. Evenings are a good time to wander about unaccompanied. Women must wear a chador, available at the entrance. Bags and cameras are not permitted inside.

**Sleeping**

Mashhad is full of hotels, most within a few minutes' walk of the shrine complex. Some will not accept foreigners. Outside No Ruz and the June-to-September pilgrimage season, prices are very negotiable.

**Karim Khan Hotel** (☎ 0912-307 8414; www.karimkhanhotel.8k.com; Imam Reza St; d/apt IR300,000/450,000; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The classy Karim Khan boasts stylish rooms and professional service for a very reasonable price; apartments sleep four. There's a good restaurant downstairs.

**Razi Hotel** (☎ 854 1122; Razi St; s/d incl breakfast IR98,200/148,900; ☎) The Razi is a comfy, good-value budget option, although it's a decent walk to the shrine.

**Atlas Hotel** (☎ 854 5061; Beit-ol-Moqaddas Sq; s/d US\$30/45; ☎ ☎) Ideally located for views of the shrine and access to the bustling bazaar, comfortable rooms here have recently been renovated. Fair value.

**Taranom Apartment Hotel** (☎ 859 5761; Tavakoli Lane; d IR120,000; ☎) Top-value place where affable staff complement the clean rooms with private bathrooms. The hotel is off Imam Reza St.

**Eating**

There are lots of cheap eating houses around the shrine complex, especially on Imam Reza St. Most hotels also have restaurants.

**Pars Restaurant** (☎ 222 5331; cnr Imam Khomeini & Pasdaran Sts; meals IR18,000-25,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm Sat-Thu) This unpretentious place serves cheap but tasty *khoresh*, *ghormeh sabzi* and kebab meals.

**Emam Reza Restaurant** (☎ 851 4658; Imam Reza St; meals IR15,000-25,000; ☎ 11am-4pm & 7pm-1am Sat-Thu) Typically characterless for Mashhad, but the hearty servings of the usual Iranian fare are welcome.

**Moein Darbary** (☎ 878 5248; Kalantari Hwy; meals IR60,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Considered one of the best restaurants in Mashhad, Moein

Darbary serves top-notch Iranian fare. Take a taxi (IR7000) – most drivers know it.

**Drinking**

The teahouses also serve food, but drinking and smoking is the primary pastime.

**Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse** (☎ 222 2943; Jannat Mall; meals IR45,000-60,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 5pm-midnight) Atmosphere oozes out of the subterranean Hezardestan but, while the tea and sweets (IR15,000), *qalyan* (IR15,000), meals and live music are all pretty good, it gets pricey when you add a IR20,000 service charge.

**Bagh-e Sabz** (1st fl, cnr Imam Khomeini & Shahid Raja'i Sts) At Bagh-e Sabz, overlooking the corner, watching the young couples and groups flirting shamelessly can be fun.

**Vitamin Sara** (☎ 222 7998; Shahid Raja'i St) Don't miss the banana and pistachio shakes (IR6000) – awesome!

**Shopping**

Mashhad has several bazaars, including the 700m-long Reza Bazaar. The city is famous for turquoise (but beware of fakes), saffron and rugs.

**Tours**

**Towhid Foroozanfar** (☎ 0915-313 2960; towhid@imamreza.net) is a well-informed, engaging and passionate guide offering tours within Mashhad and also to Kalat, Torbet-e Jam, Neishabur, Tus and other regional highlights. Prices are negotiable but very reasonable.

**Getting There & Away****AIR**

**Iran Air** (☎ 225 2080; Modarres St) flies several times daily to Tehran (IR344,000); daily to Esfahan (IR379,000) and Shiraz (IR430,000); and less often to Bandar Abbas (IR468,000), Tabriz (IR508,000), Yazd (IR319,000) and Zahedan (IR347,000). **Iran Aseman** (☎ 252 8200; Andarzu St) also flies to Tehran and Esfahan, and **Mahan Airlines** (☎ 221 9294) flies to Kerman.

**BUS**

The bus terminal is about 2km southwest of the Holy Shrine (reached by shared taxi along Imam Reza Ave), and from here a plethora of buses go to every major city and regional town. Long-distance routes by Mercedes/Volvo include: Shahrud (IR25,000/40,000, 10 hours), Tehran (IR39,000/75,000, 14

hours), Yazd (IR45,500/79,000, 16 hours), Esfahan (IR60,000/85,000, about 22 hours) and Zahedan (IR57,000/90,000, 15 hours).

To Afghanistan, the fastest way is a bus or savari to Taybad, another savari the last 20km to the border and another from there to Herat. Easier is the direct bus to Herat (IR55,000, eight to 12 hours), which has delays aplenty but assures you an exit registration. For details, see p661.

**TRAIN**

Several trains run daily between Tehran and Mashhad, mostly overnight services (around 13 hours). Fares range from IR27,250 in 2nd class to IR122,700 in the four-berth sleeper 'green class', which includes dinner and breakfast.

**AROUND MASHHAD Tus (Ferdosi)**

طوس (فردوسی)

Tus (also known as Ferdosi) is a former regional capital. After being razed by the Mongols, it was abandoned and is now better known for the **Mausoleum of Ferdosi** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-4pm, to 7pm summer), dedicated to one of Iran's most famous poets, Abolqasem Ferdosi, who wrote the epic *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings). Beneath the stone mausoleum (completed in 1965) is a simple marble tomb and reliefs depicting scenes from the Book of Kings. The small **Tus Museum** (admission IR2000) in the gardens contains a 73kg copy of the *Shahnamah*, and a café inside the gardens serves drinks and simple meals. Minibuses and savaris leave regularly from Shohada Sq in Mashhad.

**Sarakhs**

سرخس

Sarakhs is on the border with Turkmenistan; see p661 for details on crossing the border. The town is remarkable mainly for the **Gonbad Sheikh Loghman Baba** tower on the outskirts of town.

If you're coming this way, don't miss the fantastically remote **Rubat Sharaf Caravanserai**, reached by a 6km road south from Shorleq, about 130km from Mashhad. You'll need to hitch from Shorleq, likely by motorbike.

Several buses (IR7000, 2½ hours) and savaris (IR20,000, two hours) travel daily from Mashhad to Sarakhs. There are also two trains (IR6000; three hours) daily, the best leaving Mashhad at 10.30am and returning at 3pm.



# IRAN DIRECTORY

## ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Iran is generally cheap and there is a reasonable choice, from a tiny cell in a noisy *mosaferkhuneh* (basic lodging house) right through to a few world-class luxury hotels. Camping facilities, however, are almost nonexistent.

In this chapter a 'budget' room will be a *mosaferkhuneh* or other basic hotel. Except in Tehran, where prices are higher, in this chapter a budget room is a double/twin costing less than US\$20. Probably the cheapest rooms will be small and just have a bed and access to a grotty shared bathroom sans toilet paper – these cost about IR60,000 a twin (budget places seldom have double beds). If you add a private bathroom, usually with squat toilet, you're looking at between about IR90,000 and IR180,000. Almost every room in Iran is heated, though some go without fans. Some *mosaferkhunehs* won't accept foreigners, though this is increasingly rare.

## PRACTICALITIES

- The following daily newspapers are available at newsstands in Tehran and other large cities: *Iran Daily* (balanced and generally liberal); *Iran News* (most liberal; good international coverage); *Kayhan International* (somewhere right of Genghis Khan) and *Tehran Times* (thorough; the government line).
- All Iranian broadcasters are controlled by the state, though many Iranians watch satellite stations from California. On Iranian TV, channels 1 to 4 are national, 5 and 6 province-based. Channel 4 has 15 minutes of English news at 11.30pm.
- You can pick up the BBC World Service. Frequencies include 11760kHz, 15575kHz and 17640kHz; and, for VOA, 11760kHz and 15205kHz.
- Electric current is 220V AC, 50Hz. Wall sockets are the European, two-round-pin type.
- Iran uses the metric system for weights and measures.

'Midrange' hotels in this chapter range from about US\$20 to US\$70 a twin/double. All will have private bathrooms – many with Western toilets – and often they'll have air-conditioning, a fridge and TV (some with satellite).

Prices are set by the government and most midrange and top-end places charge foreigners more than Iranians, though prices can be negotiated outside peak times (see No Ruz, The Peak Section p245). Prices are often quoted in US dollars, though they accept (and usually prefer) rials. All guests must fill out a registration form and hotel management will usually want to keep your passport because police/security officers check to see who's staying. Check-out is usually 2pm.

Top-end hotels are few and far between, and in this chapter they cost more than US\$70. There are also 'homestays' (a room in someone's home) and 'suites' (fully equipped apartments), mainly in the Caspian provinces.

## ACTIVITIES

Growing numbers of travellers are combining activities such as skiing in the mountains north of Tehran (p198), trekking, and even diving off Kish Island (p228) with the more well known cultural attractions of Iran. There are reasonably easy hiking trails in the Alborz Mountains north of Tehran, and around places such as Masuleh (p204) and Alamut (p206). For the more adventurous, Mt Damavand (p198) can be climbed in three days.

For mountaineers and trekkers, more information can be obtained from **Araz Adventure Tours** (☎ 021-760 9292; www.araz.org), **Kassa Mountaineering & Tourism** (☎ 021-751 0463; www.kassaco.com) and the **Mountaineering Federation of Iran** (☎ 021-830 6641).

## BOOKS

As well as this book, Lonely Planet publishes a comprehensive country guide, *Iran*.

New travel literature, social and political commentaries about Iran have been racing off the presses in recent years. These are some of the best.

*All The Shah's Men* (2003) is journalist Stephen Kinzer's thoroughly researched and thrilling account of the CIA coup that ousted Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953. Highly recommended!

*Persian Pilgrimages* (2002), by Afshin Molavi, sees the US-educated Iranian journalist explore his homeland through a series of 'pilgrimages' to cities and historical sites. This is a well-balanced read, full of insight into Iranian culture.

*The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (2004), by Kenneth Pollack, looks at the history of Iran's path towards nuclear weapons – and argues against a US invasion.

*Shah of Shahs* (1985), by journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, is a fast-paced yet perceptive account of Iran in the decade leading to the revolution.

*Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan*, by Isabella Bird, is a classic travelogue from Bird's time in Iran during the 1890s.

See p184 for books by Iranian authors, and p24 for general titles on the Middle East.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Few places have uniform opening and closing times, but most businesses close early on Thursday and all day Friday. Many businesses close for a siesta (from about 1pm to 3pm or 4pm); along the hot Gulf this siesta stretches until about 5pm.

In this chapter hours will accord with the following list unless stated otherwise.

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

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

**Museums** Open 8.30am to 6pm in summer (4pm or 5pm in winter), with one day off, usually Monday or Tuesday.

**Post offices** Open 7.30am to 3pm Saturday to Thursday. Some main offices open until 9pm.

**Private businesses** Open 8am or 9am till 5pm or 6pm Saturday to Wednesday, till noon Thursday.

**Shops** Open 9am to 8pm, but more likely to have a siesta.

**Telephone offices** Open daily 8am to 9pm. In smaller towns they can close at 5pm.

## CHILDREN

Nappies (diapers), baby formula, most simple medications and so on are available in the big cities. Parents will need to explain to their daughters aged nine or older that they'll have to wear a scarf, and make sure they do. High chairs, child-care agencies, baby seats in cars and nappy-changing facilities are as rare as rocking-horse shit. Breastfeeding in public is not a good idea.

## CUSTOMS

Iranian officialdom is fairly relaxed about what foreigners take into and out of the country; you're unlikely to be searched. However, don't take this to mean you can load your luggage with vodka, bacon, or magazines featuring semiclad women that might provoke 'moral outrage'.

On arrival, you'll fill out a form declaring what you have, and get a yellow copy – keep this until you leave; it's a big hassle if you lose it. You'll probably get away with almost 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. Visitors are supposed to declare cash worth more than US\$1000, but no-one really cares.

## Export Restrictions

You can leave with handicrafts other than carpets or rugs up to the value of US\$160 (keep receipts). Many traders are willing to undervalue goods on receipts issued to foreigners. You can take out Persian carpets or rugs up to a total of 20 sq metres in size, 150g of gold and 3kg of silver, without gemstones. To exceed these limits, you need an export permit from the customs office. Officially, you need permission to export anything 'antique' (ie more than 50 years old). Staff are not trained in antique identification, so there is always a slight risk that anything vaguely antique-looking could be confiscated.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Open hostility towards Western visitors – including Americans – is extremely rare and violent crime almost unheard of. Many travellers regard Iran as one of the safest and most hospitable countries in the world. Uniformed men are a common sight but, as long as you dress appropriately and don't point your camera at anything you shouldn't, they'll likely be as courteous as other Iranians. And while the notorious *komite* (religious police) are no longer, the change of presidency in 2005 could see a tightening of interpretations. If you are arrested, insist on seeing identification, telephone your embassy and remain deferential at all times.

## Scams

A few travellers have been stopped in the street by bogus plain-clothes policemen. Never show or give important documents,

money or cameras to any policeman in the street. If they insist, tell them you'll walk to the police station or that your passport and valuables are at your hotel. At the time of writing, Tehran was the place where you needed to be most wary of bogus police. If they try this scam on you and you send them away, be aware a bag snatch might follow you.

## DISCOUNT CARDS

With admission prices now virtually free, the ISIC (International Student Identity Card) are pretty useless.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Iranian Embassies & Consulates

Following are Iranian embassies and consulates in major cities around the world. For addresses of Iranian embassies in other Middle Eastern countries see the relevant country chapter. If your country isn't here, try **NetIran** ([www.netiran.com](http://www.netiran.com)).

**Afghanistan** (☎ 017-24700; Solh Ave, Gharah Rah Shir Pour, Kabul)

**Australia** (☎ 02-6290 2421; [www.iranembassy.org.au](http://www.iranembassy.org.au); 25 Culgoa Crt, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

**Azerbaijan** (☎ 12-921932; Cafar Cabbarli 10) Opposite Nizami Metro station. For visas.

**Canada** (☎ 613-233 4726; [www.salamiran.org](http://www.salamiran.org); 245 Metcalfe St, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2K2)

**Denmark** (☎ 3916 0073; [www.iran-embassy.dk](http://www.iran-embassy.dk); Svanemøllevej 48, 2100 Copenhagen)

**France** (☎ 01 4069 7900; [www.amb-iran.fr](http://www.amb-iran.fr); 4 Ave d'Iena, 75116, Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 030-8419 1835; [www.iranembassy.de](http://www.iranembassy.de); Podbielskiallee 67, D-14195, Berlin)

**Ireland** (☎ 01-288 5881; [iranembassy@indigo.ie](mailto:iranembassy@indigo.ie); 72 Mount Merrion Ave, Blackrock, Dublin)

**Japan** (☎ 3-3446 8011; [www.iranembassy.jp.com](http://www.iranembassy.jp.com); 10-32-3 Chome Minami Aazabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo)

**Netherlands** (☎ 070-354 8483; [www.iranianembassy.nl](http://www.iranianembassy.nl); Duingew 20, 2585JX, The Hague)

**New Zealand** (☎ 04-386 2976; [www.iranembassy.org.nz](http://www.iranembassy.org.nz); 151 Te Anau Rd, Hataitai, Wellington)

**Pakistan** Islamabad (☎ 051-2276270; House 222-238, St 2, G-5/1, Islamabad); Karachi (☎ 021-5874371; 81 Shahrah-i-Iran, Clifton, Karachi); Lahore (☎ 042-7590926; asran@worldcall.net.pk; 55 Shadman II, Lahore); Quetta (☎ 081-843098, 2/33 Hilli Rd)

**UK** (☎ 020-7225 3000; [www.iran-embassy.org.uk](http://www.iran-embassy.org.uk); 27 Princes Gate, London SW7 1PX)

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

## Embassies in Iran

Embassies in Tehran generally open from about 9am to noon for visa applications and from 2pm to 4pm for collecting visas, although much shorter hours are possible. Western missions are usually closed on Friday and Saturday, others on Thursday afternoon and Friday.

**Afghanistan** Mashhad (Map p239; ☎ 859 7551; Do Shahid St); Tehran (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8873 5040; fax 8873 5600; Beheshti Ave, cnr 4th St & Pakistan St; ☎ 9am-2pm Sat-Wed, 9am-noon Thu) In both places, 30-day tourist visas cost US\$30 and are issued in two days.

**Armenia** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6670 4833; emarteh@yahoo.com; 1 Ostad Shahriar St, Razi St, Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, Tehran) Tourist visas issued in nine to 11 days for US\$50, in three to five days for \$80.

**Australia** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8872 4456; [www.iran.embassy.gov.au](http://www.iran.embassy.gov.au); 13 Eslamboli St, 23rd St, Tehran)

**Azerbaijan** (Map p188; ☎ 2223 5197; Nader Sq, 15 Golbarg St, Chizar, Tehran; ☎ 9am-noon Sun, Tue, Thu) Single-entry tourist visas issued in three days for US\$40.

**Canada** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8873 2623; [www.iran.gc.ca](http://www.iran.gc.ca); 57 Shahid Sarafraz St, Motahhari Ave, Tehran)

**France** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 2228 0372; [www.amba.france-ir.org](http://www.amba.france-ir.org); 85 Nofl Loshato St, Tehran)

**Georgia** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 2221 1470; Agha Bozorgi St, Fereshti St, Tehran; ☎ 9.15am-1.30pm Sun, Tue, Thu) Two-week tourist visas cost US\$40 and take four days (US\$60 for two-day service).

**Germany** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3999 0000; [www.teheran.diplo.de](http://www.teheran.diplo.de); 324 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

**India** Tehran (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8875 5103-5; [www.indianembassy-tehran.com](http://www.indianembassy-tehran.com); 46 Mir-omad Ave, cnr Ninth St & Dr Beheshti St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sun-Thru); Zahedan (Map pp236-7; ☎ 0541-322 2337; off Imam Khomeini St) Visas issued in four days with a letter from your embassy; IR460,000.

**Iraq** (Map p188; ☎ 2221 1154; 20 Karamian Alley, Dr Shari'ati Ave, Tehran) Not issuing tourist visas.

**Japan** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8871 3974; fax 8872 1792; cnr Bucharest & Fifth Sts, Arzhantian Sq, Tehran)

**Lebanon** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 8890 8451; 30 Afshin St, Tehran) Visas issued for IR31,500 with letter from your embassy.

**Netherlands** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 2256 7005-7; 1st E Lane, 22 Sharzad Blvd, Darous, Tehran)

**New Zealand** (Map p188; ☎ 2280 0289; [newzealand@mavara.com](http://newzealand@mavara.com); 34, cnr 2nd Park Alley, Sosan St, Nth Golestan Complex, Aghdasiyeh St, Niavaran, Tehran)

**Pakistan** Mashhad (Map p239; ☎ 222 9845; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 9am-noon Sat-Wed); Tehran (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6694 4888; fax 6694 4898; Block 1, Etemadzadeh Ave, Jamshidabad, Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave); Zahedan (Map pp236-7; ☎ 0541-322 3389; Pahlavani St) Single-entry

visas (US\$35) issued in Mashhad and Tehran in two to seven days with letter of introduction from your embassy.

No visas are issued in Zahedan!

**Spain** (Map p188; ☎ 8871 4575; fax 8878 7082; 76 Sarv St, Afrika Hwy, Tehran)

**Syria** (Map p188; ☎ 2205 9031; fax 2205 9409; Afrika Hwy, Arash Blvd, Tehran) Visas same day.

**Turkey** Orumiyyeh (☎ 0441-222 8974, Beheshti St); Tehran (Map pp190-1; ☎ 3311 5299; 314 Ferdosi St)

**Turkmenistan** Mashhad (Map p239; ☎ 854 7066; Do Shahid St; ☎ 8.30-noon Sat, Tue, Wed); Tehran (Map p188; ☎ 2254 2178; fax 2258 0432; 39 Fifth Golestan St, Pasdaran Ave; ☎ 9.30am-noon Sun-Thru) Bring an invite and US\$51 for overnight processing, US\$31 for 10 days later.

**UK** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 6670 5011; [www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iran](http://www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iran); 143 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

**United Arab Emirates** Bandar Abbas (☎ 222 4229; Nasr Blvd); Tehran (Map p188; ☎ 8678 1333; 355 Vahid Dastjerdi Ave)

**USA** (Map p188; ☎ 2200 8333; Sharifi Manesh, Elahieh, Tehran) The Swiss embassy has a US Interests Section. It might be able to help in an emergency but cannot offer full consular services.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is illegal and, in theory, punishable by hundreds of lashes and even death (although foreigner would probably be deported instead). Barbaric laws aside, there is no reason why gay and lesbian travellers shouldn't visit Iran. There are no questions of sexuality on visa application forms, and we have not heard of any homosexual travellers being treated badly as long as they refrained from overt displays of affection in public.

Meeting Iranian gays and lesbians is difficult. Gays could try [www.homanla.org](http://www.homanla.org), while [www.khanaye-doost.com](http://www.khanaye-doost.com) is an Iranian lesbian site.

## HOLIDAYS

Iran always seems to be mourning the death of some religious figure or a more recent revolutionary victory.

## Religious Holidays

In addition to the main Islamic holidays (p648), Iran observes the following, which change with the lunar calendar (check out <http://www.payvand.com/calendar/>, which can convert Persian dates, which are different to other lunar calendar dates, to Gregorian calendar dates).

## NO RUZ – THE PEAK SEASON

No Ruz, the Iranian New Year, has been celebrated by Persians, Kurds and others for thousands of years. Today, it's the main annual holiday in Iran and a huge family celebration. Starting on the spring equinox (around 21 March), Iranians traditionally return to their home villages and towns to celebrate with friends and relatives.

For the traveller, visiting Iran during No Ruz has good and bad points. It is more so-able than other times, but also requires more forward planning. Accommodation and public transport are heavily booked in the week before 21 March and, especially, in the 10 days following No Ruz. Both hotel and transport costs rise by about 30% as a matter of course. You're strongly advised to book your hotel ahead. Most businesses (but not hotels), including many restaurants, close for about five days from 21 March.

No Ruz also marks the beginning of the 'high' season. Hotel rates rise by about 20% and don't fall again until October. In busier places such as the Gulf and Caspian coasts, prices often double.

**Ashura** (10 Moharram) Anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at Karbala; celebrated with religious dramas and sombre, chain-flailing street parades. Intense.

**Arba'een** (20 Safar) The 40th day after Ashura

**Death of Imam Reza** (30 Safar)

**Birthday of Imam Mahdi** (15 Shaban)

**Death of Imam Ali** (21 Ramadan)

**Death of Imam Jafar Sadeh** (25 Shawwal)

**Qadir-e Khom** (18 Zu-I-Hejeh) The day Prophet Mohammed appointed Imam Ali as his successor

## National Holidays

These holidays follow the Persian calendar, meaning their Western calendar dates are usually the same each year.

**Magnificent Victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran** (11 February; 22 Bahman) 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

**Eid-e No Ruz** (21 to 24 March; 1-4 Farvardin) Iranian New Year

**Islamic Republic Day** (1 April; 12 Farvardin) Anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979

**Sizdah Bedar** (2 April; 13 Farvardin) The 13th day of the Iranian New Year; 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) Anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989

**Anniversary of the Arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini** (5 June; 15 Khordad)

**Anniversary of the Death of Dr Seyed Beheshti** (28 June; 7 Tir)

**Day of the Martyrs of the Revolution** (8 September; 17 Shahrivar)

## INTERNET ACCESS

Many young Iranians are addicted to Internet messaging and you can get online in all Iranian cities and big towns, and quite a few smaller centres. Internet cafés are known as 'coffeenets', though getting a coffee is about as likely as getting a stiff whisky. Costs range from about IR5000 to IR15,000 an hour. Note that Yahoo! Messenger is much more common than MSN Messenger.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Some Iran-specific websites:

**Cultural Heritage Organisation** ([www.chn.ir/english/index.asp](http://www.chn.ir/english/index.asp)) News on Iranian cultural activities, archaeological finds and great links.

**Iran Chamber Society** ([www.iranchamber.com](http://www.iranchamber.com))

Historical, cultural and background information galore.

**Iran Mania** ([www.iranmania.com](http://www.iranmania.com)) Links to just about everything about Iran.

**Iran Touring & Tourism Organisation** ([www.itto.org](http://www.itto.org)) Useful summary of facts and figures about Iran and its various regions.

**Iran Traveling Center** ([www.irantravelingcenter.com](http://www.irantravelingcenter.com)) For travellers.

**Net Iran** ([www.netiran.com](http://www.netiran.com)) News, facts and figures, covering politics, law and government structure.

## LANGUAGE

The vast majority of Iranians speak the national language, Farsi (Persian), but it's the mother tongue of only about 60% of the population. The most important minority languages are Turkish/Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Arabic, Baluchi and Lori.

English is understood by many of the educated middle-class, university students, most employees of midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants, and most staff in travel agencies and tourist offices.

The Language chapter (p679) lists some important Farsi words and phrases, and

Lonely Planet's *Farsi Phrasebook* can get you through most difficulties.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Iran's legal system is based on Islamic principles. For most minor crimes, including having sex with an Iranian woman or, if you're a woman, deliberate refusal to comply with the hejab (the Islamic dress code for women), foreigners will probably get deported, though more serious punishments are possible. The penalties for drug use and smuggling are extremely harsh. See p243 for advice on dealing with bogus police.

## MAPS

Maps are hard to find outside Tehran, so visit the **Gita Shenasi office** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 021-670 9335; [www.gitashenasi.com](http://www.gitashenasi.com)) in Tehran. Gita Shenasi's *Iran 2004* (1:2,250,000) is the best country map.

## MONEY

The official unit of currency is the rial (IR), but in conversation Iranians almost always refer to the *tooman*, a unit of 10 rials. It is essential when asking the price of anything to think in *tomans* – that way you won't find yourself in a situation where the vendor is demanding 10 times more than you thought you had agreed on. Often the unit of currency is omitted when discussing prices, so be aware and don't assume you are deliberately being ripped off. There are coins for 500, 250, 100 and 50 rials, and notes for 50,000, 20,000, 10,000, 5000, 1000, 500 and 200 rials.

Iran is a cash economy. No credit cards. No travellers cheques. Just cold, hard cash, preferably in US dollars or euros. You can change cash in some bank branches but it's easier and rates are the same in moneychanging shops, jewellers, carpet shops or on the street. There is no currency black market.

## ATMs & Credit Cards

While there are ATMs in Iran, they are of no use to travellers because none are linked to international banking networks. Credit cards are similarly useless; you can't use them to pay for a hotels, plane tickets, anything. You cannot draw cash on your credit card. There is constant talk that Iran will be linked into the international credit card and ATM networks, but don't bank on it happening before you get there.

## Cash

Bring as much cash in US dollars or euros as you are likely to need. You can change these two almost everywhere, though the greenback is still the most widely accepted, especially in remote areas. British pounds can be changed in some places, but it can be a hassle. US notes should be undamaged and should have been printed since 1996.

'Official' Interbank rates are artificially low, so don't believe the rates you see on Oanda or other currency converters. The [www.iranmania.com/defaultenglish.asp](http://www.iranmania.com/defaultenglish.asp) page has up-to-date conversions.

Country	Unit	Iranian rial (IR)
Australia	A\$1	6890
Canada	C\$1	7270
euro zone	€1	10,980
Japan	¥100	8280
UK	UK£1	16,420
USA	US\$1	8970

## International Transfers

If you've been robbed, lost your wallet or maybe bought one too many carpets and are out of cash, it is possible to have money transferred from overseas to a bank or an individual's account in Iran.

The easiest way to do this is go to the nearest Bank Melli (BMI) central branch, preferably in Tehran where Mr Abdollahi at counter 14 speaks English. Get the Swift code for this particular BMI branch (eg Tehran central branch is MELIIR THA060); and ask whether there is a BMI branch in your home country (these are listed at [www.bmi.ir](http://www.bmi.ir)), or which bank in your country is affiliated with BMI (eg in Australia, it's Westpac bank). Get someone at home to go to a branch of the nominated bank (eg Westpac) with your full name, passport number and the Swift code, and deposit the money. A few days later, the cash should arrive.

## Tipping

Tipping is not expected in Iran, but it's usual to round up a bill or add 10% at good restaurants. You'll also be expected to offer a small tip to anyone who guides you or opens a door that is usually closed, but Iran doesn't have the baksheesh mentality of much of the Arab world.

## DUAL PRICING

The officially sanctioned practice of charging foreigners more than Iranians for the same service is annoying. All but the cheapest hotels charge foreigners about 30 to 50% more than Iranian guests, though this is sometimes negotiable. The good news, however, is that where you used to pay 10 times as much to enter tourist sights, most now have the same low prices for everyone.

## Travellers Cheques

American Express. Leave home without them! Like credit cards, travellers cheques are useless in Iran. No matter what currency or who issues them, Iranian banks will not change travellers cheques.

## POST

Postage is cheap. The cost of sending a postcard to Europe, North America and Australasia is IR1000. The cost for a normal-sized letter by airmail to anywhere outside Iran should be IR4000. The service is reliable and reasonably swift. Postcards usually reach Europe in four or five days. Rates for parcels tend to vary, but a 5kg parcel to anywhere by surface mail should cost less than US\$20. Carpets cannot be posted but kilims (flat, woven mats) can.

Poste restante is little used and, according to readers, quite unreliable. You're far more likely to receive your goods if you get them posted to a particular hotel or home.

## TELEPHONE

Making telephone calls within Iran and internationally is both cheap and easy. For domestic calls, modern cardphones and older coin phones (which are only good for local calls) can be found in most cities, often outside post offices. Phone cards (*carte telefon*) are available from newsstands and telephone offices in denominations of IR5000, IR10,000 and IR20,000, and can be used to make local or long-distance calls in Iran, but not international calls.

Local calls are almost free in Iran so your hotel should let you make them for nothing.

International calls can be made at private telephone offices. International calls are dirt cheap at IR1700 per minute to anywhere;

there's a minimum charge of three minutes. International calling cards are also available from newsstands, though telephone offices usually work out cheaper. Some coffee-nets offer international calls through the Internet for about IR1000 a minute to Europe, Australasia and North America.

You can't make reverse-charge calls to or from Iran.

### Mobile Phones

Mobile phone use is booming in Iran, but while SIM cards from about 30 foreign countries are supposed to work in Iran, they often don't. Things are changing fast and the network is due to be upgraded, so check with your phone company to see if there is a reciprocal agreement.

Getting hooked up to the domestic network short-term is an expensive hassle. SIM cards cost about US\$500 from the government, or double that on the black market. You can resell your SIM once you've finished with it, but it hardly seems worthwhile. There was talk of cheaper SIM cards becoming available – ask around in the major cities.

### TOILETS

Iranian toilets are often the squat kind; even if you pay a royal US\$50 for a hotel room, it might not be fitted with a throne. Mosques, petrol stations, bus and train stations and airport terminals always have toilets, and they're usually survivable. Toilet paper is only reliably provided in top-end hotels, but is available in most grocery shops in major cities.

### VISAS

It's definitely worth it, but getting an Iranian visa is inevitably a hassle. Turkish passport-holders can get a three-month tourist visa on arrival. Everyone else will need to apply well ahead of departure; to be safe that means months in the US and at least five weeks in most other countries. Americans and Brits will need to jump

through a frustrating set of hoops. US citizens are welcome, but unless you have an Iranian sponsor or are prepared to badger the Iranian interests section in Washington, you'll probably only get a visa if you join an organised tour or arrange a private guide.

Regulations seem to change all the time. They also vary from one Iranian embassy to another so check Lonely Planet's **Thorn Tree bulletin board** ([thornetree.lonelyplanet.com](http://thornetree.lonelyplanet.com)) to learn which consuls are hot, and which not. The best issue 30- or 45-day tourist visas virtually on the spot (if you've got the right passport). The worst demand you have local contacts, then leave you waiting for weeks or months – don't be afraid to call them, but be nice. Some will only issue transit visas.

It's best to apply for a tourist visa in your home country. It's possible, but harder, to get tourist visas while you're on the road. These days transit visas have become a last resort.

Many Iranian embassies have their own websites so you can often download the appropriate forms and check prices and other requirements. In most cases you must complete two or three application forms (in English); provide up to four passport-sized photos – women should check if they need to have their hair covered in the photo – and pay a fee, often by money order, which varies according to nationality but is rarely less than the equivalent of US\$50.

In mid-2005 Iran announced it would issue seven-day tourist visas to people flying into the airports in Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, Tabriz and Esfahan. They cost US\$50 and are available to citizens from 68 countries – but not Americans or British. Whether or not these can be extended was not explained.

Increasing numbers of travellers are biting the bullet and using agencies to arrange their visas. Agents can usually get you a visa even if you've already been rejected. They apply on your behalf and send you an approval number, which you then take to the Iranian mission in a city you have previously nominated. For example, you can apply in Europe then travel overland and pick up your visa in Istanbul without needing to wait weeks for it. The agency fee is separate from the normal fee you pay at the embassy.

### THE BIG COVER UP – DRESSING FOR SUCCESS IN IRAN

From the moment you enter Iran, you are legally obliged to observe its rigid dress code. So what exactly does this mean? The letter of the Islamic law says all females aged nine or older must wear hejab (modest dress) in the actual or potential sight of any man who isn't a close relative. All parts of the body except hands, feet and the face above the neckline and below the hairline should be covered, and the shape of the body must be disguised.

In practice, as a foreigner you'll be cut quite a lot of slack on your interpretation of the hejab. In most situations a perfectly acceptable outfit would include a scarf (as colourful as you like); a loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirt that covers your bottom; jeans or pants; and shoes – sandals in summer. Some women choose to buy a *manteau* (or *roupush*), an overcoat of varying lengths, and wear that over everything. In summer, a lightweight *manteau* makes sense because if you bring safety pins to close the gaps, you can get away with wearing it with nothing but a bra beneath on your top half. Carry a blouse with you in case you're invited into someone's home – Iranian women often lose their scarves and overcoats once indoors, but sitting around in a bra would probably be pushing the limits a bit too far.

Many Iranian women still wear the *chador*, a tent-like cloak (normally black), draped loosely over the head, legs and arms. For foreigners it's not necessary – nor advisable – to wear one unless you need to, such as entering a particularly holy site. And forget about dowdy long skirts – the vast majority of Iranian women wear pants.

Iranian women have pushed the hejab to its very limit in recent years. In Tehran, in particular, capri pants, inches of make-up and vast tracts of coiffured hair are not uncommon. But, all this could change with hardliners again just controlling both the Majlis (parliament) and presidency.

To avoid offending anyone, just keep your eyes open and watch what the women around you are wearing and doing. If your clothing is offensive, you'll soon enough be told – usually by an older woman. Unless you go out of your way to make a statement, that will be as bad as it gets.

It's easier for men. Pants must be long, but short-sleeve shirts are usually OK unless you're visiting a particularly holy place. During Ramazan, it's recommended that you wear long sleeves.

**Iran Traveling Center** ([www.irantravelingcenter.com](http://www.irantravelingcenter.com)) US\$70 charge. Good feedback from users.

**Iranianvisa.com** ([www.iranianvisa.com](http://www.iranianvisa.com)) Charges €30 to arrange a visa number through a simple website.

**Pars Tour & Travel** ([www.key2persia.com](http://www.key2persia.com)) Charges US\$30 but will often drop this if you use its efficient Shiraz-based agency once you arrive.

A final option is to enter through the 'back door' – Kish Island. You can fly from Dubai to Kish without a visa, get stamped in for a stay of 14 days on the island, then head to the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs office** (☎ 0764-442 0734; Ferdous Villas, Complex 2, Ferdosi St, Kish Island), which can issue 30-day tourist visas to most foreign nationals within two working days. From here, the mainland is a short boat or plane ride away.

### Tourist Visas

Clearly, a tourist visa is the best option. Like transit visas, you must enter Iran within three months of the issuing date. If you're arranging your tourist visa through a rela-

tive, visa agency, travel agency or other contact in Iran, they will need your full personal and passport details and a brief itinerary. A week or so later your sponsor will send you an authorisation number from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, which you then take, with your cash, to collect your visa from the relevant embassy.

Double-entry tourist visas are available from some embassies – a good excuse is that you want to visit the mosques of Herat, in Afghanistan, then return to Iran.

### Transit Visas

Unfortunately, new Iranian policy says transit visas cannot be extended. However, it is sometimes possible to extend your five-, seven- or 10-day transit visa – try Bushehr and Shiraz. In theory, transit visas should be issued within a few days, but it often takes two or three weeks and you might still need a (sometimes expensive) letter of recommendation from your embassy if you apply from outside your home country.

### STAMPED OUT

Israeli passport holders and anyone with evidence of a visit to Israel in their passport will not be able to get a visa to enter Iran. For more on Israeli stamps, see p353.

## Visa Extensions

The secret to extending your visa simply is to plan your itinerary so you're in Esfahan, Shiraz or Tabriz just before your first visa expires. The locations of visa offices are provided in the relevant sections. You usually cannot extend more than three days before your existing visa expires, and your new visa begins from the date it's issued, not the date your old visa expires. If you're in the cities mentioned, you can expect to get one 30-day extension within a few hours. In theory you can extend to a total stay of three months, though the second extension is usually shorter.

To get an extension arrive early (most offices close at 1pm), then obtain and fill out the visa extension form. In most cities you'll then be directed to a branch of Bank Mellî where you pay IR100,000 and receive a receipt. Take this back to the visa office, pay a further IR2500 for paperwork, provide one or two photocopies of your passport and original Iranian visa, and two passport-sized photos (women might need wearing hejab in the pictures). In Tabriz, Esfahan and Shiraz the extension is issued on the spot; in other places it can take up to two days.

Yazd, Kerman, Zahedan, Bushehr and Rasht are second-string cities for extensions, but avoid Mashhad, Bandar Abbas and especially Tehran, which can be a nightmare.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Despite having the hassle of wearing a scarf every time you step outside – see p249 – most women find the sexual harassment and constant come-ons common in other Middle Eastern countries are largely absent in Iran.

By comparison, women enjoy considerably more independence in Iran than elsewhere in the Middle East. One welcome consequence of this is that female visitors will find it quite easy to meet and chat with Iranian women, particularly in large cities such as Esfahan, Shiraz and Tehran where educational standards are higher.

Unwanted attention does occur, though, especially in remote or untouristed areas, and some women will feel more comfortable travelling with a male companion or in a group.

# TRANSPORT IN IRAN

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Entering Iran

For anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport, there won't be any entering Iran. For everyone else, assuming you've managed to somehow get a visa, you shouldn't have any problems (see also Customs, p243). Just remember not to lose that little yellow customs form they give you – you'll need it when you leave.

### Air

Iran's main international airport is in the western suburbs of Tehran, though by the time you read this more flights might be using the new Imam Khomeini International Airport, about 35km south of the city. Shiraz, Esfahan, Tabriz, Mashhad, Bandar Abbas, Bushehr and even Zahedan also see infrequent international services, usually from elsewhere in the Middle East.

The national carrier is **Iran Air** ([www.iranair.com](http://www.iranair.com)), with smaller Iranian airlines including **Iran Aseman** ([www.iaa.ir](http://www.iaa.ir)) and **Mahan Air** ([www.mahanairlines.com](http://www.mahanairlines.com)) also offering a handful of international flights. Iran Air has a vast network of direct flights between Tehran and Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia. On Iranian airlines female passengers must wear hejab and no alcohol is served.

European airlines including **Air France** ([www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com)), **British Airways** ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)), **KLM** ([www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)) and **Lufthansa** ([www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com)) fly into Tehran, while Middle Eastern airlines including **Gulf Air** ([www.gulfair.com](http://www.gulfair.com)), **Emirates** ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) and **Kuwait Airways** ([www.kuwait-airways.com](http://www.kuwait-airways.com)) service the Gulf and further.

### Land

Iran is bordered by seven countries, but most overland travellers enter or exit via Turkey or Pakistan. For details of travel between Iran and Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan, see p660. The Iraqi frontier was closed at the time of writing.

### TURKEY

#### Road

There are two border crossings. The easiest and most popular is at Bazargan/Gürbulak

(open 24 hours, see p199), reached via Tabriz. Most long-distance buses between Tehran and İstanbul use this route, but it is far quicker to catch a bus, minibus or savari to either border, cross independently and then catch onward transport, rather than wait hours for the rest of the bus to clear customs and immigration.

Further south, a useful alternative for travellers heading to or from Orumiye is Sero (Iran)–Esendere (Turkey; open 8am till 10.30pm Iran time; see p200). There are buses most days from Orumiye to İstanbul via Van.

### Train

International trains run from Tehran to İstanbul and Damascus. The *Trans-Asia Express* to İstanbul (IR499,500, about 66 hours) via Ankara departs on Thursday evenings. The Damascus (IR722,250, about 65 hours) train leaves on Monday evenings. Both trains have deluxe four-bed couchettes. Check [www.rajatrails.com](http://www.rajatrails.com) for up-to-date timetables.

### Sea

Ferries sail across the Gulf from Bushehr, Bandar Abbas and Bandar Lengeh to Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. The ferries are operated by the **Valfajre-8 Shipping Company** ([www.vesc.net](http://www.vesc.net)) and schedules are published on its website. See p663 for details.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

Iran's once ludicrously cheap domestic airfares are no more, but they're still very reasonable. Fares are set by the government, so are the same irrespective of the airline. It's worth booking ahead a couple of days as flights are often full. Around No Ruz, a couple of weeks is wiser.

Iran Air offers a free domestic flight to passengers who fly into Iran with the airline. Otherwise, buying inside Iran is often cheaper.

### AIRLINES IN IRAN

The main domestic airline, Iran Air, has regular services to just about anywhere you want to go. The airline is reliable, safe and efficient. Ask for a pocket-sized timetable from any Iran Air office. Other smaller airlines, such as **Iran Aseman** ([www.iaa.com](http://www.iaa.com)),

**Mahan Air** ([www.mahanairlines.com](http://www.mahanairlines.com)) and **Kish Airlines** ([www.kishairline.com](http://www.kishairline.com)), have more erratic schedules but are useful for specific destinations. Fares for domestic flights are the same whether booked at a travel agency or directly at the airline office.

### Bus

Like Turkey, Iran is extremely well covered by bus and minibus services. Fares are dirt cheap, services are frequent and most buses are comfortable – standing is not normally allowed.

The best companies, with the most extensive networks, are Iran Peyma (Taavoni No 1), Hamsafar and Seiro Safar, which has the most modern fleet (mostly air-con Volvos).

You rarely need to book ahead – just ask around at the bus company offices in the terminal and get on the next bus going your way. From one major city to another, say Shiraz to Esfahan, buses from one company or another leave at least every hour. But departures are much less frequent in more remote places and between smaller towns.

What you pay depends on the type of bus you take. Prices tend to vary from one

## KNOW YOUR IRANIAN BUSES

There are three main species of bus in Iran, all of which are reasonably comfortable and very cheap. Confusingly, their names differ from region to region.

**Mercedes** (Aliases: normal, super, old and, in western Iran, RD. Cost: about half a Volvo) These ancient but funky-looking Mercedes buses are dirt cheap and often have more legroom than their newer cousins, but the air-con won't work and they're slower. Prices in this chapter are for Mercedes buses unless stated.

**Super-luxe** (Aliases: lux, super-lux, several others. Cost: about 30% to 45% more than Mercedes) This class doesn't always exist and standards are variable, to put it mildly. Buses look more modern but are usually 10-20 years old and, despite the 'Arctic Winter' sign on the roof, the air-con never works.

**Volvo** (Aliases: deluxe, super-deluxe, air-con. Cost: about twice a Mercedes) We call these Volvo because that is usually what they are; new coaches similar to those in Europe. The air-con should work and you'll get a snack and a sweet drink.

Taavoni to another, but the amounts are so small it's barely worth shopping around.

While roads are generally good you'll be lucky to average more than about 65km/h on most routes because all buses are speed-limited and must make regular stops at police checkpoints to show their trip log.

Cramped minibuses are often used for travel over shorter distances and between less-populated places.

### Car & Motorcycle

A good number of travellers drive the overland route between Turkey and Pakistan. The flexibility is unbeatable and, with petrol virtually free, it's pretty cheap. However, the distances are great, the countryside is often boring and the traffic is truly horrendous.

If you're bringing in a vehicle you'll need a *carnet de passage* (see p662) and an international driving licence. In Iran, the main automobile organisation is the **Touring & Automobile Club of the Islamic Republic of Iran** (☎ 021-874 0411; 12 Shahid Arabali, Khorramshahr Ave, Tehran).

Leaded petrol (called *benzin*) costs IR800 per litre and diesel is a ridiculous IR150 a litre. The quality, however, is often poor. Some travellers have reported being charged a hefty 'fuel tax' at the border. In 2005 there was talk this would be formalised, making it much more costly than it is now. Petrol stations are found on the outskirts of cities and towns, though diesel can be hard to find.

In theory, you're supposed to drive on the right in Iran. Road surfaces are generally good, but the roads are poor or unpaved in remote desert and mountainous regions. Never drive off the main road near the Pakistani, Iraqi or Afghani borders.

Although it is possible to hire your own car in Tehran (check the *Tehran Times*), there's really no point. It's much easier to hire a taxi with a driver for about IR200,000 to IR300,000 per day, and let the driver deal with the traffic, the parking and the navigation.

### Local Transport

Almost any car in Iran is potentially a taxi. In towns, shared taxis are used for short trips, constantly plying set routes between designated points (usually major squares) for between IR500 and IR4000 a trip. The

taxis are usually white or orange Paykans and will cram in five passengers – two in the front and three in the back. Prices are fixed in shared taxis.

There are no meters and if you hire a taxi privately you'll need to negotiate the fare before you get in. In this chapter a private taxi is referred to as a taxi *dah baste*, which literally means 'closed door'. If you stop an empty taxi but want to hire it on a share basis, tell the driver *nah dah baste* (no closed door).

### Savari

Savaris are shared taxis that run between major towns less than four hours away by car. This form of transport is more useful for the short hops in western Iran and the Caspian provinces, rather than the sparsely populated central desert areas.

Savaris cost about three times more than buses, but are still cheap at about IR10,000 to IR15,000 per hour. They are less comfortable than buses so speed is their main advantage.

If you wish to speed up a departure, or crave a little extra comfort, pay for an empty seat or simply charter the vehicle (about four times the single fare). Savaris normally leave from inside, or just outside, the relevant bus terminal, or from a designated point (usually a roundabout) on the outskirts of town.

### Tours

Iranian agencies operate group tours for foreigners and also offer more flexible private tours. These can usually be arranged online, and services range from booking hotels to fully organised and catered tours; expect to pay about US\$130 per person per day for the latter. Many travellers, particularly from the USA and UK, use Iran-based agencies at least as a starting point to facilitate or speed up the visa process (see p248). If you book a tour the agency will generally organise your visa as part of the cost of a tour.

The following are reputable, Iran-based operators.

**Arg-e-Jadid Travel** (in Tehran ☎ 021-8881 1072; www.atc.ir)

**Azadi International Tourism Organisation** (AITO; in Tehran ☎ 021-8873 2191; www.aitotours.com)

**Caravan Sahara** (in Tehran ☎ 021-8884 8672; www.caravansahra.com)

**Pars Tourist Agency** (in Shiraz ☎ 071-222 3163; www.key2persia.com) Welcomes groups of any size on any budget.

**Persepolis Tour & Travel Agency** (in Tehran ☎ 021-8880 5266; www.persepolistour.com)

**Poonel Tour & Travel** (in Tehran ☎ 021-8876 8563; www.poonel.com)

### Train

Tehran is the hub of Iran's growing network of trains and almost all services begin or end there. Trains from Tehran head to Tabriz, Ahvaz, Esfahan, Bandar Abbas, Bam and Mashhad, stopping at points in

between. Although trains don't run everywhere, they are efficient, reasonably fast, much more comfortable than buses and ridiculously cheap. Taking a 1st-class sleeper overnight to Mashhad, for example, makes a lot of sense and it's a great way to meet Iranians.

It's always worth paying a little more for 1st-class compartments. If you buy a ticket from any town along a route (ie not at the starting point), you may only be able to get a 2nd-class ticket. Overnight trains usually have comfortable four- or six-bed couchettes, with bedding provided.

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