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
November. Winter is definitely the best time to visit the southern coast and the Gulf islands. Some prefer not to visit during Ramadan (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 Nadir 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 without meaninglessly trials and minor officials took the law into their own hands.

In 1980 Saddam Hussein, looking to take advantage of the postrevolutionary chaos, invaded Khorasan, in southeast Iran, on the pretext that the oil-rich province was historically part of Iraq.学生 demanding faster reforms, Ayatollah 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 court- ing openly, the public wanted more. The reformers were keen to deliver, but about a third of 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 Te- hran, 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 re- forms. 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 inevita- ble 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 National Psyche

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 re- ality, 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 shop-keeper refuses payment, do remember that this is just ta’arof and insist on paying: your rials will soon be accepted.

Iran Today

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The Culture

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 together, walking, laughing and picnicking in the countryside and parks.

The majority of Iran’s urban dwellers live in the

Population

Iran’s population is around 72 million – and rising fast. More than 60% of university students are women. 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, spend- ing much of the day preparing meals.

Education is highly regarded and liter- acy 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 cruis- ing in cars, and Internet cafés are packed with expectant youngsters on messenger services.

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.

MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH & THE CIA’S FIRST COUP

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IRAN Environment

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 nomadic people who live in the western mountains south of Kermanshah; Kurds (5%) who mostly inhabit the western mountains between Orumiyeh 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 Qashqars of southwest Iran are traditionally wandering herdsmen.

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 Central Asia’s Christians, 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. Islamic 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 daf, a large membrane drum; the daryereh, an instrument played with a bow and a plucked string; the daf or taryeh, a large, tuned, gut-wrapped drum; and the naqqal, a type of dancer. Ethnic minorities are responsible for the most appealing traditional music, and the distinctive Kurdish rhythms have gained some recognition through the success of The Kankars.

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 Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, has been described as one of the most explicitly 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!

Food & Drink

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 hromae (rice) or both. Nun is dirt cheap and comes in four main varieties: thin lavash is great but quickly turns cardboardy; crisp, salty barie 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 zereshek (chicken and rice) or the divine kabab- e barg (literally, ‘leaf kebab’) is thinner and more variable in quality, filee kabab is fillet while jeje kabab are chunks of minced meat. Most Iranian rivers drain into the Gulf, the Caspian Sea, or one of a number of salty and swampy lakes, such as Orumiyeh, 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), 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, but 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 petro-roll 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.

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 banci (ground) kebab, made of minced meat. Makhtsis (spe- cial) kebabs use better quality lamb, kabab- e barg (literally, ‘leaf kebab’) is thinner and more variable in quality, filee kabab is fillet while jeje kabab are chunks of mari-}
of pomegranate juice, walnuts, aubergine and cardamom served over roast chicken, duck or goose. In Western Iran chelow mabn (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 falafel, sausages and ham bread 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.

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 Iran. Iranian beer, often labelled as ‘nonalcoholic malt beverage’, tastes more like cider; it’s best not to think of it as beer.

TEHRAN

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 downsides of modernity through 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 freeways, 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, fewer to the Arzhanin 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 (coffeeneats) open and close at a remarkable rate in Tehran. There are many more in northern Tehran, around Valiasr and Vanak Sqs 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 bustling, 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 Sonnatii Sangalang (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 Golstein 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 Jamshidieh (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).
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 Tehran 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; Vailasr Ave; (T 7.45am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.45am-noon Thu; yes, it’s a bad as it sounds. The nominated Bank Mellli (Map pp190-1; Vailasr 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 care. Drivers don’t stop for you and the oncoming traffic. And be aware of the contra-flow bus lanes, running the wrong way along one-way streets.

Pars Internet (Map pp190-1; 1392 4172; 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 (119). The following are accessible, clean and reputable hospitals:

- Arad Hospital (Map pp190-1; 7760 1001; Somayyeh St) Between Shar’at’i Ave and Bahar St.
- Day Hospital (Map pp190-1; 8881 7111; cnr Vailasr 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 Mellli (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). (T 7.30am-10pm). Internet calls are cheaper.

Tourist Information
Iran Touring & Tourism Organisation (Map pp190-1; ITTO; 8696 7065; 154 Keshavarz Blvd) More tourist operators 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; asi2000@sanapardaz.com; Nejatollahi St)
- Taban Travel & Tourism (Map pp190-1; 3395 6560-61; Sarcheshmeh Cross, Amir Kabir St; taban@sanapardaz.com)

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; 6667 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 tilework 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 cozy 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 IR30,000; 2pm-4:30pm Sat-Tue) has more jewels 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 Melli; 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.

SEPAHSAHL MOSQUE & MADRASSA

The Sepahsalar Mosque & Madrassa (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; Talegan 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 Sat-Thur, 2-6pm Fri), next to 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.rezabbasimuseum.org; Shar’i A’vi; admission IR2500; 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) contains fine examples of Islamic painting and calligraphy from ancient Quans, 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 ABD 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 House), 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 entry 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 deaening, 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 grubbiest part of the city and a pretty duller darker.

Hafez Hotel (Map pp190-1; 6670 9063; hafez hotel@yahoo.com; Bank Mell 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; dms/tw IR25,000/50,000/75,000; 1 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 7565; Lalehzar St; tw/ sw 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; 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 obilging, 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; 28 8890 6058; www.atlas-hotel.com; 206 Talegan St; s/tw US$36/58; 2) 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 and 7pm to 11pm) isn’t bad.

Omid Hotel (Map pp190-1; 28 6664 4564; www.omid-hotel.com; 20 East Nosrat St; s/d with breakfast US$50/70; 2) 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; 28 6670 1872; naderi hotel@yahoo.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d US$15/30; 2) 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; 28 8830 0873; www.indianhotelsafir.com; Tel 10 Ardalan St; d/tw US$85/135; 2) 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; 28 3311 3757; hotel khayyam@hotmail.com; 3 Navidy Alley; s/d US$22/35 with breakfast; P H 2) The Khayyam, off Amir Kabir St, is quiet but tired. Discounts are probable.

Top End

Simorgh Hotel (Map pp190-1; 28 8871 9911; www.simorghhotel.com; 1069 Valiasr Ave; s/d with breakfast US$19/29; 2 H) 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; 28 8896 5021; www.lalehhotel.com; Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave; s/d US$130/152; 2 H) 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; 24h) The closest Iran comes to McDonald’s, but with far superior burgers.

Khoshbin Restaurant (Map pp190-1; 28 3390 2194; Sa’di St; meals IR15,000-35,000; 22h) 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.

THE AUTHOR’S CHOICE

Firouzeh Hotel (Map pp190-1; 28 3311 3508; www.firouzehhotel.com; Dolat Abadi Alley; s/d IR290,000/320,000; 2) 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.

Khayyam Traditional Restaurant (Map p188; 6667 1075; Park-e Shahr; meals IR40,000-60,000; 24h) A relaxing stop on the museum circuit. The closest Iran comes to McDonald’s, but with far superior burgers.

Quick Eats

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

Quick Eats

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.farhangcinema.com) 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 cozy teahouses.

Entertainment

One of the few inner-city theatres featuring cultural events and traditional performances that foreigners are welcome to attend is the Tezate Shahr (City Theatre; Map pp190-1; 6646 0595; Dastboush Park, cnr Valiasr Ave & Enqelab Ave). 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 Sq, where good-quality Iranian and manteaux 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.
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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To/from</th>
<th>One-way fare (IR)</th>
<th>Duration (hr)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bandar Abbas</td>
<td>480,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esfahan</td>
<td>195,000</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerman</td>
<td>364,000</td>
<td>1½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashhad</td>
<td>344,000</td>
<td>1½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasht</td>
<td>195,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiraz</td>
<td>315,000</td>
<td>1½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabriz</td>
<td>256,000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazd</td>
<td>320,000</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

There are some international airlines represented in Tehran.

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

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

**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (Map pp190-1; 8873 8701; Beheshti Ave, 2 Sarafraz St) Also represents Austrian Airlines.

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

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

**Gulf Air** (Map pp190-1; 8873 8701; Beheshti Ave, 2 Sarafraz St) Also represents Austrian Airlines.

**Lufthansa** (Map pp190-1; 8873 8781; Behesti Ave, 2 Sarafraz St) Also represents Austrian Airlines.

**Turkish Airlines** (Map pp190-1; 8874 8450; 239 Motahari 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; 8660 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, six hours), Ramsar (IR15,500/56,000, five hours), Tabriz (IR20,000/50,000, 10 hours), Qazvin (IR9000/20,000, three hours), Hamadan (IR15000/35,000, 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 p260). 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 (IR20,000).

The southern bus terminal (terminal-e-jonoub) has Mercedes/Volvo buses to the south and east of Tehran, such as Mashhad (IR29,000/75,000, 14 hours), Esfahan (IR20,000/33,000, seven hours), Shiraz (IR20,000/33,000, six hours), Yazd (IR25,000/52,000, around 10 hours), Kerman (IR25,000/65,000, 18 hours) and Bandar Abbas (IR20,000/110,000, 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 (IR16,500/33,000) 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 (538 2399) 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), Kerman (IR39,750/63,150, 13 hours, twice daily). See p253 for more on trains.

**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 rather than wait for a public bus. Whether you fly into Mehrabad International Airport or, as seems more likely, the new Imam Khomeini International Airport (see below), 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.

If 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 travelers 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 21 between Tajrish Sq and Azarzant Sq; bus 22 between Imam Khomeini Sq and Arzhangant Sq; and the 33 between Tajrish Sq and Valiasr Ave. 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) is quite handy for travellers. It runs from Harem-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 (Pazand-e Khorod), Imam Khomeini Sq and Taleqani for the US Den of Espionage. It finishes now at Miramad, 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, Arzhangin, Azadi, Ferdosi, Enqelab, Hafte 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**

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 carnivalesque 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

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 (0211-335 2912; IR40,000; 8:30am-3:30pm Jan-Mar), just beyond the outer border gate, 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; P) 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

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:iranmountedf; imoumfe.org; 15 Vazandeh, Moffateh 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

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 Horm-e Motahar station.

BEHESHT-E ZAHRA

Behest-e Zahra is the main military cemetery for those who died in the Iran-Iraq War. It’s 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 cypress forest and over the main road.

NOSHAHR/CHALUS & AROUND

Noshehr 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 nice, while Chalus has better transport connections. Regular shared taxis (IR20000) link the two.

Sights

At Namak Abrud, about 12km west along the road from Chalus, there’s a telecabin (return IR10,000; 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 Noshahr and get off at the sign saying ‘Jungle Park’.

Sleeping & Eating

Shalizar Hotel (332 0005; Azadi Sq; s IR150,000; d IR250,000-300,000; ) In the heart of Noshahr, the Shalizar has clean, comfortable 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 IR20,000-35,000; noc 3-3.30pm & 8-11pm; ) Between Chalus and Noshahr, Malek is a modern, great-value place with satellite TV, fridge, ‘minibar’ and Western bathrooms. The attached and renamed 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 ghaseemi and, yes, burgers.

WESTERN IRAN

غرب ایران

For thousands of years western Iran played host to the rise and fall of civilization’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).

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 (0211-335 2912; IR40,000; 8:30am-3:30pm Jan-Mar), just beyond the outer border gate, 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; P) 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

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:iranmountedf; imoumfe.org; 15 Vazandeh, Moffateh 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

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 Horm-e Motahar station.

BEHESHT-E ZAHRA

Behest-e Zahra is the main military cemetery for those who died in the Iran-Iraq War. It’s 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 cypress forest and over the main road.

NOSHAHR/CHALUS & AROUND

Noshehr 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 nice, while Chalus has better transport connections. Regular shared taxis (IR20000) link the two.

Sights

At Namak Abrud, about 12km west along the road from Chalus, there’s a telecabin (return IR10,000; 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 Noshahr and get off at the sign saying ‘Jungle Park’.

Sleeping & Eating

Shalizar Hotel (332 0005; Azadi Sq; s IR150,000; d IR250,000-300,000; ) In the heart of Noshahr, the Shalizar has clean, comfortable 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 IR20,000-35,000; noc 3-3.30pm & 8-11pm; ) Between Chalus and Noshahr, Malek is a modern, great-value place with satellite TV, fridge, ‘minibar’ and Western bathrooms. The attached and renamed 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 ghaseemi and, yes, burgers.
In Jolfa, the best hotel is above the famous Haj Ali Kababi (Tel 224 1400; x 223 1861; Sardar Camii Lane; s/d 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.

**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-dominated Jameh Mosque, which has some fine plaster mouldings.

**ORUMIYEH (Urmieh)**

ORUMIYEH uses the same name as a city in the old Persian empire, some 200km north of Tabriz. The town is famous for its salt industry and for its large fish market. The city was once a centre of Jewish life and culture, and the **Constitution House** (Motahhari 9am-3pm winter, 9am-1.30pm & 9am-1pm 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 **bazaar** is a World Heritage-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**. It’s well worth walking to the top of the conical **Prison of Soliman** 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 Zanjani by direct bus. From Tabriz, where there are a couple of hotels, rare minibuses (IR1500) and savaris (IR4000) run to Norshabad village, from where you walk to the ruins. Chartering a taxi from Tabriz (IR40,000 return, plus waiting time) is a good idea.

**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 Soliman** mountain, about 2.5km west of the ruins, for spectacular views.

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**Getting There & Away**

Air Iran (Tel 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 (Tel 226 6756; Besat St; s/d IR80,000/120,000; P: ) Conveniently located near the corner of Imam Ave, Reza has Western toilets, satellite TV and a passable restaurant. Fair value.

Hedesthi (Tel 224 6520; Behesti St; admission IR3000; 9am-2pm Tue-Sun) has a new, English-speaking concierge and some more lively exhibits – worth a quick look.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**HOTEL TAK SETAREH** (Tel 223 1861; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw IR60,000/40,000) 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.

**Sights**

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Hotel Mashhad (☎ 555 8255; Ferdosi St; dm/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 IR30,000/47,200/55,600,   ) 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).

Afshahe 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 luncheonette place serves tasty vegetarian dishes including chelow khaoresht.

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; Shahada St; 9am-1pm & 4-30pm-7-30pm Sat-Thu) can help with schedules and tickets.

AIR

IranAir (☎ 3349038) 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), Orumiyeh (IR12,000, 4½ hours), Ardabil (IR15,000, four hours), Rasht (IR28,000, eight hours, 9.30pm), 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 Orumiyeh (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)

Train 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, accessible by shared taxi along Imam Khomeini and 22 Bahman Sts.

AROUND TABRIZ

The remarkable village of Kandovan (Chandan; 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 Il-Khanid 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

Ardabil (☎ 0451)

Sprawling below Mt Sabalan, historic Ardabil is a logical stopping point if you’re heading to Azerbaijan 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 Sarein are 27km away.

A few trails southwest of the Sabalan Hotel is Taz Cafe Net (Sheikh Safi St; per hr IR8000).

Sabanal Hotel (☎ 223 2857; fax 223 2877; Sheki Safi St; tw/ir sUS$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 Gooshlan (☎ 224 6644, r 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 (began 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.
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 to travellers, but it’s a transport hub and the jumping-off point for Masuleh.

Information
The city centre is chaotic Shohada Sq (known as Shahrdari 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 Golستان).

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/d IR70,000/80,000) The best of the budget hotels, with clean rooms and shared bathrooms and friendly management.

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

Kourosh Restaurant (222 0890; Erkhesteq Lane; meals IR30,000; 10am-4pm & 6pm-midnight) Kourosh serves fesenjan and several difficult-to-find Gilani dishes. It’s down an alley off Sa’di St, about 50m north of Shohada Sq.

Bijan’s (232 3309; Namju Blvd; meals IR25,000; 6-11pm Sun-Fri) Offering a cozy taste of Tuscany in provincial Iran, Bijan’s Sheffield-trained chef cooks up authentic pastas served in his tiny trattoria. Take a taxi dahan baste (IR5000).

Getting There & Away

Irann Air (722 4444; Gelar 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

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 1250; s/d IR150,000/250,000) at the bottom of the village, and Mehran Suites (757 2065; 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 dahan baste is about IR35,000.

Ramsar

Backed by forested hills, Ramsar is a relatively attractive Iranian ‘beach resort’ even though the beaches are rubbish and women can’t use them. The main road is Mohatab, and the centre is Enqelab Sq, where you can change money at Bank Mellahi.

For travellers, the Caspian Museum (222 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 (222 3592; www.ramsarparsianhotels.ir; Old Wing s/d IR5375/75100; P P P P) 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 (222 0520; apt IR250,000; P P P) and Nazia Suites (222 4588; apt IR150,000-200,000; P P P) are best. Prices fall sharply in winter.

Golehsook Restaurant (222 2463; Motahhari St; meals IR20,000-40,000; 10am-midnight) is cheap but the rooms 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.

Eghbali Restaurant (222 2853; Yasa Alley; meals IR20,000; 11am-4pm & 7-11pm) 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 Khayym 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). Savsars to Tehran (IR20,000, 90 minutes) leave from outside.

If you’re heading west, go to the Darreh-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). Buses 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  Bellam & the Castles of the Assassins

Scattered through the valleys and hillslopes 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 Alamat, once occupied by Hasan Sahab, founder of the Assassins, and reached by a paved road about 110km northeast of Qazvin. Lamiasar (aka Lam Besar, Lamisar) 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 Alamat costs more. A daily Takibus 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

This place is dominated by the Oljiteu Mausoleum (Gonbad-e Soltaniyeh; admission IR5000; 8am-noon & 2-5.30pm, to 8pm summer) used to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Nabobat (☎ 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 Bisiton Hotel (☎ 772 3792; Kashani St) reopens; the soulless and overpriced Hotel Karbal (☎ 772 3665; Parking Shad; 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 (☎ 624 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 (IR150,000) 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 bus heading to Ahvaz.

BISOTUN

Overlooking the main road to Hamadan, about 2km west of Bisotun village, are two eroded bas-reliefs (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

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 Takibus toward Khoram Sabz (IR15000) and another to Taq-e Bostan (IR15,000) 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, to 8pm summer) is used to commemorate the life of Imam Hossein.

Sights

The Aragham-e Ester va Mordekhay (☎ 252 9929; Bu Ali Sina Sq; per hr IR8000; 8am-9.30pm Sat & 10.30am-1.30pm Fri) has been converted to a restaurant.

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), Orumiyeh (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 Bisiton, IR7000),
Lalejin and Qorveh for Sanandaj (IR2500) and other local destinations. For Khorraramabad minibuses/savaris go first to Borujerd (IR3000/30,000), then go on to Khorraramabad (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 souvenier.

KHOARAMABAD

Khuramabad 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-e-Afka (229 4090; www.lorestanmirs.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.

Banks

Bank Melli (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.

Mehmonparaz 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 Guest 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, six hours) are at night. Taavoni has a 1pm 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

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 (224 1818; s/d IR800,000/105,000, 300m north of Beheshti Sq, where rooms have private bathrooms. The only alternative is the mid-range Hotel Bozorg (242 2100; Azadegan Sq; s/d IR175,000/250,000, ), 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 Khorraramabad from a terminal 2km north of town.

SHUSH (SUSA)

0642 / pop 68,000

Settled since about the 4000 BC, Shush (Susa) reached its peak as one of the grand capitals of the ancient world. It’s huge (350–330 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 (for s/tw IS131; 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–dark) 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

A Unesco World Heritage-listed site, the 13th-century BC zigurrat (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 zigurrat and surrounding town were sacked and abandoned in the 7th century AD, and it inevitably 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, but a taxi from Shush (IR8000 return) or between Shush and Ahvaz, (about IR140,000 plus IR15,000 per hour waiting time) is the best option.

AHVAZ

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 (225 6800) 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), Khorraramabad (IR18,000, six hours), Ker-

9000 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

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

0251

Iran’s second-holiest city after Mashhad, Qom (Qhom) 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 Haremama Lane, over the Ahanchi Bridge from the shrine complex.

Etminan Hotel (660 9640; Haremama Lane; s/tw IR8000/100,000) has tiny, tidy rooms with private bathroom; front rooms have views but are terribly noisy.

Safa Apartment Hotel (773 2499; Mo’alem St; d/stv 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
Sleeping & Eating
Sleeping options are limited. Both these places are within a few metres of the northern entrance to the bazaar.

Golestan Inn (4 44 6793; Abazar St; s/d/tr IR50,000/70,000/90,000) 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 (4 44 655; Abazar St; s/d/tr 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 (4 455 322; 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 bademjan (aubergine).

Sultan Amir Ahmad Hammam (4 422 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). To get there, wander south through the lively bazaar, stopping for sweets and tea, and then north 700m to so far south from Kamal-ol-Molk Sq.

The magnificent Khan-e Ameriha (4 422 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 (4 422 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 (4 422 0032; admission IR2000; 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 (4 422 4070; admission IR2000; 8am-dusk) boasts exceptional three-storey courtyards and fine stained-glass windows.

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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 Qaysarieh 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 commercial activity 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 Qaysarieh Tea Shop (p216).

IMAM MOSQUE
One of the most beautiful mosques in the world is the Imam Mosque (Map p214; Masjed-e Imam; admission IR2500, 8am-11:30am & 1-5pm Sat-Thu, 1pm 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 imagination of Shah Abbas I, who had it built over 27 years from 1611 to 1638.

The 30m-high entrance portal was built over 27 years from 1611 to 1638.

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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 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 iwans 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 dome, although some of it dates back almost 1300 years. Of the dozens of entrances, the main one is the elaborately decorated Qaysarieh 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.

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The pale dome makes extensive use of delicate cream-coloured tiles that change colour throughout the day from cream to
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-Thur & 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; Ostadari St; admission IR2000; 8am-8pm) 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; Ostadari St; admission IR2500; 9am-2pm Wed-Mon) contains some wonderful miniatures, lacquerwork, calligraphy, ceramics, brasswork, woodcarvings and traditional costumes. It’s in a building that was once stable for the nearby Chehel Sotun Palace. Nearby, the Museum of Contemporary Art (Ostadari St; admission IR10,000; 9am-noon & 4-7pm, 5-8pm summer, Sat-Thu) sometimes has interesting exhibitions.

**HASHT BEHESHTE 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 Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh (Madraseh-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 tea-houses 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.

Khajû 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 Khajû.

**ARMENIAN QUARTER**
The lively and liberal Armenian quarter of Jolfa dates from the time of Shah Abbas I. The 17th-century Vank Cathedral (Kelsa-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 Abdullah, 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.

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

**BUDGET**
**Amir Kabir Hostel** (Map p212; 022 7273; mraziee@ hotmail.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; dm/2 w/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 guest-book and a cheap laundry.

**Aria Hotel** (Map p212; 022 72724; 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; 022 8621; fax 220 4264; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/tw/tr IR100,000/170,000; 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; 022 2988; Hafez St; s/d US$54/65; 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.

**Luxury**
**Tous Hotel** (Map p212; 022 1599; tous@yahoo.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/d IR100,000/170,000; A fun staff, clean rooms with bathrooms and a great location.
Pol & Park Hotel (Map p212; 205 667 4785; fax 667 4788; A’ineh Khuneh Blvd; s/d US$23/31)

Although the rooms are a little tired, the Western bathrooms and balconies with views over the Si-o-Seh Bridge make them great value. The English-speaking management is helpful, and prices are negotiable.

Safir Hotel (Map p212; 09 221 9931; www.safirhotel.com; Shahid Medani St; s/d US$45/60)

Built in the shell of a Safavid-era caravanserai and set around a gorgeous garden, the hotel’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.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Esfahan 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 – Sofeh (Map p212; 068 8341), 5km south of the river, and the larger and more convenient Kaveh bus terminal (414 4375), about the same distance south. From Kaveh Mercedes/Volvo buses depart regularly going to Shiraz (IR20,000, 33,000, seven hours); Shiraz (IR19,000, 33,000, eight hours); Yazd (IR12,000, 24,000, five hours); Hamadan (IR18,000, 32,000, seven hours); Kerman (IR20,000, 48,000, nine hours); Esfahan (IR19,000, 40,000, 12 hours); and Kashan (IR900, 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 costs about IR30,000.

Getting to Garmeh is not easy. From Esfahan, a Seiro Safar bus (IR180, 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 buses leave 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 (IR180,000).

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Esfahan 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 – Sofeh (Map p212; 068 8341), 5km south of the river, and the larger and more convenient Kaveh bus terminal (414 4375), about the same distance south. From Kaveh Mercedes/Volvo buses depart regularly going to Tehran (IR20,000, 33,000, seven hours); Shiraz (IR19,000, 33,000, eight hours); Yazd (IR12,000, 24,000, five hours); Hamadan (IR18,000, 32,000, seven hours); Kerman (IR20,000, 48,000, nine hours); Esfahan (IR19,000, 40,000, 12 hours); and Kashan (IR900, 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 costs 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; Engelab Sq; 8am-4pm Sat-Thu).

The train station (688 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 Lateh Sqs. A taxi dah baste costs about IR30,000.

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

GARMEH

Garmeh (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 Ateshaki (443 3356, in Tehran 021-271 1983; www.ateshoni.com; per person US$50), where Tehran 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 (IR180, 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 buses leave 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 (IR180,000).

YAZD

With its winding lanes, wind towers and mud-brick old town, Yazid 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.

Yazd Internet Café (☎ 622 3832; yazd.internet.cafe@gmail.com; per hr IR8000; 9am-9pm) Outside the Jameh Mosque entrance. Can arrange trips to the Jameh Mosque roof!

MONEY

Abas Salari Gold Shop (Qeyam St) can change US$2.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main post office (Shohada Crossroads) Takes a commission

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.

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-Thur).

Activities

The Saheb Zaman Zurkhaneh (Amir Chakhmaq Sq; admission IR1500; © 7am-2pm & 4-6pm) 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.com; dm/s/d IR40,000/100,000/150,000; ) 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 courtyard hotel in Yazd. The courtyard restaurant is good and management can help with tickets, tours and other information. Excellent value!

Malek-o Tojar (☎ 626 1479; info@malehotel.com; Panjeh-ali Bazar, Qeyam St; dm/s/d US$35/55; ) 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.rajatrains.com.

Kohinoor Hotel (☎ 621 2485; dm/r per person £3/10; ) A 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 Chakhmakh (☎ 626 9923; Amir Chakhmakh Sq; s/w/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.

Hamun-e Khan (Chaykhune-ye Sanat; 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 Tojar (☎ 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 vegetable 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, 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 Nembrer Sandwich (Sat-Thu), opposite the camel butchery, which can whip up a fresh and tasty camel burger (IR5000) in no time.

Shopping

The silk merchants 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. Generally 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.rajatrains.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 spraying wings, there’s no way to do this in a day by chartering a taxi (about IR250,000) or taking a guided tour. There’s no public transport to Chak Chak.

Kharanaq (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 building is uninspiring, but the views from the Pir-e-Sabz fire temple make it worthwhile. Meybod and Ardakan (آردکان) are busy cities with a few sites worth a look. Meybod is more interesting, with the old post office, caravanserai and Safavid-era moazedie 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

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 Sho-hada Sq, still widely known as Shahrdari Sq.

If you need an emergency telephone, try the Ferdous Internet (☎ 222 2854; 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.

POUR (☎ 222 2854; 9am-8pm Sat-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.

POST

Main post office (Taleqani St)

TELEPHONE

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

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 222 302-2966; 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 Khanı (Arg-e ıfe Karim Khanı; Citadel of Karim Khanı; Ardakan 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-shah-e Cheragh; Ahamadi 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 chador (available from a desk at the entrance).

At the southeast corner of the courtyard is the Mausoleum of Sayyed Mir Mohammad (Bogh-e-shayyed 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 Dastqueib 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 (Amargah-e Hafez; Soleiman Sq; admission IR3000; 8am–9.30am—12.30pm & 2pm–9pm summer).

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 (Amargah-e Sadi; 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.

The smaller Bagh-e Nanarjestan (Orange Garden; Dastpeh St; admission IR30,000; 8am-sunset), east of the bazaar, features a mirror-rolled 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-Thur, 10am-1pm Fri) has got the group tour of the budget range, rooms here are small but clean and management is obliging.

Eating

Yord Restaurant (224 0814; www.yordrestaurant.com; Zand Blvd; s/d incl breakfast US$30/40; P M) The welcoming, knowledgeable staff are a highlight here, and large rooms with satelite TV and fridge aren’t bad either. It’s getting a room the accepted ‘stuff’, is far from touristy. The (mostly male) patrons banter animately and the dizi (IR7000) and kebabs, grilled on the sidewalk, are super cheap.

Minibuses to Marvdasht (for Persepolis, IR2000) leave regularly from behind the terminal. You can also sit with tea and a qalyan in Shiraz Eram Hotel (admission IR30,000; h 5-8pm)

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)

Magnificent Persepolis (Takht-e Jamshid; admission IR5000; 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun) is the embodiment of the Achaemenid empire (see p180). Begun in about 518 BC by King Darius I (the Great), this massive palace complex was built as the Achaemenid’s spring capital. It was added to by a host of subsequent kings over the following two centuries.

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 the Unfinished Gate.

Air

Iran Air (223 0041; cnr Zand Blvd & Faqihi St) flies to Tehran (IR315,000, several daily), Esfahan (IR173,000, Bandar Abbas (IR230,000, seven weekly), Mashhad (IR450,000, daily) and Ahvaz (IR229,000, twice weekly). Iran Aseman (223 8841; Zand Blvd) flies similar routes for the same prices.

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

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The Vakil Bazaar was constructed by Karim Khan as part of a plan to make Shiraz into a great trading centre. With vaulted arches, two-storey caravanserais, 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).

Yord Restaurant (224 0814; www.yordrestaurant.com; Zand Blvd; s/d incl breakfast US$30/40; P M) The welcoming, knowledgeable staff are a highlight here, and large rooms with satelite TV and fridge aren’t bad either. It’s getting a room the accepted ‘stuff’, is far from touristy. The (mostly male) patrons banter animately and the dizi (IR7000) and kebabs, grilled on the sidewalk, are super cheap.

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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 Hramasara (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 Noruz, 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 (222 316; 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

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.

The highlight is the easily explored 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

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

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 unsigned rocky trail leads to the Fire Temple (admission IR5000). 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 Noruz, Iranian New Year), though check it’s definitely on before heading out for it.

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 – it gets diabolically hot in summer. Increasing numbers of travellers are using the Gulf ports to enter or leave Iran.
Main hospital (252 6591; Siraf St)
Police headquarters (252 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)

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!

Mosaferkhane-ye Pars (252 2479; Engelab Sq; tr IR60,000) Simple rooms and share bathrooms and a friendly atmosphere in a great location over looking Engelab Sq.

Sadra Tourist Inn (252 2346; cnr Valiasr St & Khalilj-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; Khalilj-e Fars St; meals IR40,000; noon-3.30pm & 7-11.30pm) The seaside location, vaulted ceilings and traditional music (Thursday and Friday) add to the illusion that you are in a former underground cistern make this the best place to eat on the coast. Consider the tasty fish kebab and surprisingly spicy dizzi. 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 (IR200,000, 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 11 hours), Ahvaz (IR31,000, seven hours), Shiraz (IR18,000/32,000, five hours) and Esfahan (IR35,000/63,000, 16 hours).

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 (252 0799; Qods Sq; 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.

KISH ISLAND
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 profession- lines (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
Bandar Lengeh 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 main post (Shahrivar St) and the main post office (Valiasr St) are located. Morvarid Money Exchange (7am-9pm) is in the main post office.

Getting to Bandar Lengeh
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). Savarir also go to Bandar Abbas (IR30,000, 2½ hours).

Ferries and catamarans sail from the Val- fajre 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 the 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
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.

Sleeping
If these places don’t suit, there are several more on or just off Imam Khomeini St. Mema Pazir Bouali (222 2516; Shahrivar Blvd; d/d IR150,000/50,000) 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.

Hotel Ghods (222 2311; Enqelab St; $152,000) is 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; 7am-3.30pm & 6-10pm; meals IR20,000-30,000) is a few doors south of Hotel Amir, serves good sazbi and rice (IR15,000) and meagu (battered prawns or shrimps, IR20,000).

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

Persian Restaurant (224 4417; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR30,000; 11am-3.30pm & 7-10pm) A longtime favourite, this central, busy little
place whips up decent fish dishes, kebabs and chelow khorshet (stew and rice).

Restaurant (☎️ 222 3413; Taleqani Blvd; meals IR25,000-30,000; 🍽 11am-11pm Sat-Thu) There’s no English menu in this unnamed place, but the Iranian dishes are fresh and the location above the bazaar is perfect as the sun sets into the Gulf.

**Drinking**

Bandar is short on atmospheric teahouses. Instead, locals head down to the seafront in the late afternoon and buy tea and qalyan from vendors spaced along the sea wall.

**Getting There & Away**

The city is well connected to the rest of Iran by road, rail and air but, if you’re travelling overland, it’s a long ride. For international ferry services, see p664. Helpful staff at Bala Parvaz Travel Agency (☎️ 222 4900; Imam Khomeini St) can sort out plane, ferry and train tickets.

**AIR**

Iran Air flies to Tehran (IR480,000, several times daily), Shiraz (IR230,000, five per week), Esfahan (IR361,000 thrice weekly) and Mashhad (IR468,000, twice weekly). Kish Air flies to Kish Island (IR195,000, daily).

**BOAT**

Speedboats to Hormoz (IR9000) and Qeshm (IR120,000, or IR180,000 by covered launch) islands leave when full from the main jetty, opposite the bazaar. International ferries leave from the Shahid Baharan docks, about 6km west of the city centre.

**BUS**

The bus terminal is in the far east of the city – a taxi dah baste costs about IR9000. Mercedes/Volvo buses run to cities including Bandar Lengheh (IR9,000/15,000, 3½ hours), Bushehr (IR45,000/85,000, around 14 hours), Bam (IR20,000/34,000, about eight hours), Kerman (IR29,500/43,600, eight hours), Shiraz (IR28,500/55,000, 10 hours), Yazd (IR30,750/55,000, 10 hours) and Esfahan (IR37,500/73,000, 16 to 18 hours). Taaevon 17 (Imam Khomeini St) has a handy office in town.

**TRAIN**

The daily train to Tehran leaves at 1pm (IR87,000, in 1st class, 21 hours), traveling via Sirjan and Yazd (IR53,000). Trains to Esfahan (IR55,750, 15 hours) run three times a week. The station is in the far north of the city so you’ll need to charter a taxi to get here.

**AROUND BANDAR ABBAS**

**Hormoz Island**

Historic Hormoz Island is worth a quick visit, and is easily accessible from Bandar Abbas. About 750m northeast of the jetty are the ruins of a 16th-century Portuguese castle (admission IR2000). It’s the most impressive colonial fortress in Iran, but is badly neglected. Get the caretaker to open the subterranean parts.

Speedboats travel between the jetty (opposite the bazaar) in Bandar Abbas and Hormoz village (IR9000, 30 minutes) at least every hour, the last returning about 4pm.

**Qeshm Island**

Mountainous Qeshm is the largest island (1335 sq km) in the Gulf and, if you have the time both literally and mentally, is a great place to just wander around. It’s dotted with villages and mangrove forests and is gradually being developed as a duty-free zone – a sort of poor man’s Kish. The main town is Qeshm, which is well equipped with hotels and the usual life-support services, but elsewhere you’ll need to make friends to find a bed.

The undoubted highlight of Qeshm is Laft, a beautiful Bandari fishing village 58km west of Qeshm town. The badresses, wells, dhowns and chilled-out locals make this a great place to spend an afternoon and well worth the taxi from Qeshm town (about IR100,000 for five hours).

There are plenty of hotels in Qeshm town, including the Hotel Sahel (☎️ 522 4723; Imam Khomeini Ave; tw IR70,000, close to Sangi pier (where the boats from Bandar arrive) with reasonable twins and share bathrooms; and the excellent value Qeshm International Hotel (☎️ 25 4985; 22 Bahman Blvd; s/d/tr US$30/55/80; P ☎️ 2), a well-luxurious place at the southern end of town.

For information about boat transport to Qeshm see opposite.

Minab

**0765**

Surrounded by date palms and with a crumbling fortress overlooking the town, Minab is an easy and pleasant day trip from Bandar Abbas – or an alternative base. The region is famous for ceramics and mosaic tiles, and the Thursday market is one of the most colourful in Iran; it’s held about 500m downstream from the bridge as you enter town.

**Sadaq Hotel** (☎️ 222 9999; s/d IR100,000/153,000; 🛋️) is about 500m before the main bridge into town. Its large, spotless rooms with TV, fridge, and Eastern bathroom are fair value, and the restaurant is decent.

Savars from Bandar (IR15,000, 75 minutes) leave from a roadside known as ‘garage’ just south of Abuzar Sq.

**SOUTHEASTERN IRAN**

**Kerman**

Southeastern Iran is frontier territory. From historic Kerman, on the cuspal of the cultural divide between the central plateau’s ethnic Persians and the more eastern-oriented Baluchis, the exotic is never far away as you skirt the southern reaches of the blistering hot Dasht-e Lut and on to Zahedan. While earthquake damage means the Arg-e Bam citadel is not quite the draw it was, it’s still worth a visit. And a stop in relaxed Rayen to wander through its own little-visited mud-brick citadel is worth the effort.

**Kerman**

**0341 / pop 508,000**

Kerman sits near the edge of the Dasht-e Lut desert on the road to Pakistan (and Bam) and is an agreeable place to spend a day or two. It’s the capital of Kerman province and for many centuries thrived on its position along the Asian trade routes. These days it’s famous for its carpets and industry, and infamous as a major transhipment centre for opium from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The two main squares in Kerman are Azadí Sq to the west and Shohada Sq to the east. Most of the important offices and things to see are on or close to the road between these two squares, or in the bazaar near Shohada Sq.
Kerman

For small, personal and fairly priced tours of the desert and other regional highlights, Jalal Mehdizadeh (☎ 271 0185, 0913-142 3174; jalal guesthouse@yahoo.com) and Vatan Caravan Tours and Travel Agency (vatan_caravan@yahoo.com; Ganj Ali Khan St) are worth investigating.

VISA EXTENSIONS
Management of Foreigners Affairs office (☎ 272 5798; Police Building No 14, Abbas Pour St; ☎ 7am-1.30pm, Sat-Thu) Reported to extend visas, including transit visas, within two days.

Sights & Activities
BAZAR-E VAKIL
Kerman’s 1km-long covered bazaar, running from Tohid Sq to the Jameh Mosque, is one of the best in Iran. Within it, the Hamam-e Ganj Ali Khan (☎ 222 5577; Gang Ali Khan Sq; admission IR3000; 8.30am-6pm, to 7.30pm summer) was once Kerman’s largest bathhouse and has been transformed into a museum where tacky wax dummies illustrate the workings of a traditional bathhouse. Hamam-e Ebrahim Khan (☎ 7am-5pm, to 7pm summer), at the end of the gold bazaar, is the real thing and men, but not women, can still be rubbed, scrubbed and beaten, all for the fun of it and IR20,000.

MOSQUES & MAUSOLEUMS
Built in 1349 but extensively modernised by the Safavids, the Jameh Mosque, off Sho- hada Sq in the bazaar district, has four lofty iwans, shimmering blue tiles and a handy English explanation at the main entrance; the back entrance leads into the bazaar. The twin-domed Moshari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah (Shohada Sq), mausoleum to a renowned Sufi mystic, is worth a quick look.

KERMAN NATIONAL LIBRARY
The Kerman National Library (Shahid Qarani St; ☎ 7am-midnight) is a particularly harmonious example of Qajar-era architecture. Wandering through the forest of finely carved columns supporting vaulted ceilings, it’s hard to imagine it was once a textile factory.

MUSEUM OF THE HOLY DEFENCE
The Museum of the Holy Defence (Felestin St; admission IR3000; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm) commemorates the Iran-Iraq War. Symbolism abounds, although much of it won’t be obvious without an English-speaking guide. Inside is a gallery of gruesome photos and an animated model of a famous battle. Outside are tanks, missile launchers and a battlefield complete with bunkers, minefield and sound effects. Well worth a look.

Sleeping
Akhavan Hotel (☎ 244 1417-2; akhavanhotel@yahoo.com; Ayatollah Sadoqi St; s/d incl breakfast US$24/34; ☎). The modern and semiluxurious rooms here are excellent value, even better once the jovial Akhavan brothers knock up to US$10 off during quieter times. These guys speak English and can arrange tours and tickets, and the restaurant is great value.

Eating
Chaykhaneh-ye Sardar (☎ 226 4016; Bazar-e Vakil; meals IR45,000; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm). The modern and semiluxurious restaurant here is excellent value, even better once the jovial Akhavan brothers knock up to US$10 off during quieter times. These guys speak English and can arrange tours and tickets, and the restaurant is great value.

Drinking
Chaykhaneh-ye Vakil (☎ 222 5989; Bazar-e Vakil; ☎). This architecturally magnificent subterranean teahouse and restaurant is the most atmospheric in Kerman. It’s more about sipping tea and smoking qalyan under the vaulted ceilings than eating, but the dizi (noon to 3pm) isn’t bad.

Information
EMERGENCY
Bahonar Hospital (☎ 223 5011-8; Shahid Qarani St)
Police headquarters (☎ 110, 211 3068; Adalat St)
INTERNET ACCESS
Alpha Cafe Net (☎ 226 7270; Valiasr Sq; ☎ 8am-10pm, closed Fri)
MONEY
Bank Melli central branch (Adalat St) Avoid it...or prepare for a blizzard of paperwork.
Exchange shops (Felestin St) Much faster.
POST & TELEPHONE
Main post office (Adalat St)
Telephone office (Tohid Sq; ☎ 7am-10pm)

SOUTHEASTERN IRAN — Kerman

www.lonelyplanet.com
BUS & SAVARI
Regular Volgo 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 (IR21,000, 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 (0263 0465; Azadi St) or through Akhavan Hotel, saving you the trip to the train station at 2110762. 8km southwest of town – take a shared taxi from Azadi Sq.

AROUND KERMAN
Mahan
Mahan
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 Shahzadeh (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 (062 2700; Ghari Sq; d/t/s US$15/25).

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

RAYEN
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 (066 3044) will unlock the various doors for you for a small tip.

The Restaurant Arg (066 3043), 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.

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 (IR21,000, 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.

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 (0263 4843, 0913-144 4146; meals IR15,000; 7am-9pm) in Rayen, half a day’s drive from Bam or Kerman, has a definite Pakistani and Afghan flavour, with the salwar kameez (worn over baggy pants) being the dominant form of dress among men.

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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 a half a chook, tomatoes and bread) places. Apart from the hotel restaurants, the Esteghali Restaurant (☎ 322 2258; Imam Khomeini St; s/d 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 Khatereh 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, savarises 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 smuggling-assassin taxi drivers also ask IR100,000 for the trip – bargain hard. Diehard trainspotters with wide masochistic streaks might consider the twice-monthly train to the border, and thence on to Quetta.

MIRJAVEH
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, savarases 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; ☏ 8am-3pm & 4-8pm) isn’t bad, but isn’t that secure, either.

Getting There & Away
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-ol-Abedin Tower; and the Shrine of Allah, about 2km east of Clock Sq. All three are active places of worship but none is unmissable.

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

Sleeping & Eating
Sarouyeh Guesthouse (☎ 324 5600; Danesh St; s/d IR80,000/85,000; ☏ 8am-3pm & 4-8pm) Across the courtyard from its sister guesthouse, the spacious rooms are better here. Sarouyeh Hotel (s/d IR170,000/260,000; ☏ 8am-3pm & 4-8pm) About 1km from Sa’at Sq, this trendy up-stairs restaurant has plenty of kebabs and some tasty fish dishes.

NORTHEASTERN IRAN
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.
Hotel Tahmasbi (☎ 442 2780; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; tw with breakfast IR200,000; ⬇️), 500m down from Imam Khomeini Sq, has rooms with (some smelly) squat toilets. The best option, though, is the superbly located Hotel Tahmasebi, 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.

The ghorime sabzi and kebabs at Ashbar 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 Squ 2km northwest of Shahrdari Sq, Mercedes/Volkswagen buses go in all directions including Tehran (IR20,000/36,000, about eight hours), Mashhad (IR30,000/40,000, nine hours) and Shahroud (IR12,000/18,000, four hours). Minibuses for Sari (IR5000, 2½ hours) leave from a separate terminal 3km southwest of Imam Khomeini Sq. Saraviks and minibuses also serve Shahroud; 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)

This chilled-out Turkmen town, 93km west of Gorgan, is named after its most famous asset – the spectacular Mil-e Gonbad tower (admission IR3000; ⬇️ noon-5pm; sponsored by the Persian Gulf oil company) and its sponsor, Qabus ebn-e Vashmigur. Completed in 1066, 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 Shahroud (IR25,000). It’s well worth stopping en route to Mashhad or along the mountain pass road to Shahroud.

**THEM 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 with about five hours by bus from Tehran. Damghan is three hours further, but Shahroud and nearby Bastam are prettier than both.

Shahrud

**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 IR5000; ⬇️) 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**

Neishabur

**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 IR6000; ⬇️ 8am-sunset), in the centre of town, is reliably and has a good restaurant.

Mashhad (Mashhad) is a much faster option.

Minibuses from Mashhad (IR7000, 2¼ 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 Biholud.

**MASHHAD**

**0511 / pop 3.1 million**

As the place where the eighth Shia Imam and direct descendant of the Prophet Mo-
The Holy Shrine, the Azim-e Gohar Sharif 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; (P ( ) ) 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 (0854 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 (0854 5061; Belt-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 (0859 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 (0222 5331; cnr Imam Khomeini & Pasdaran Sts; meals IR18,000-25,000; (noon-3pm & 6-11pm Sat-Thu) This unpretentious place serves cheap but tasty khoresht, ghorme sabzi and kebab meals.

Emam Reza Restaurant (0851 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 (0878 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. Take

Drinking

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

Hezardastan Traditional Teahouse (0222 2943; Jannat Mall; meals IR45,000-60,000; (noon-3pm & 5pm-midnight) Atmospheric oozes out of the subterranean Hezardastan 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 in a JR20,000 service charge.

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

Vitamin Sara (0222 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 Feroozanzar (0915-313 2960; towelhildimmam reza@yahoo.com) 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 (0222 250 080; Modares St) flies several times daily to Tehran (IR34,400); 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 (0252 8200; Andarguzat St) also flies to Tehran and Esfahan, and Mahan Airlines (0222 2924) 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 services 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 Taybav, 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-bereep sleeper ‘green class’, which includes dinner and breakfast.

Around Mashhad

Tus (Ferdos) (طوسر) 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) 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 Sharif Mosque has a 50m blue dome and cavernous golden portal.

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 Sharif 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 calligraphic and inscribed Qans, and the attached Carpet Museum (admission for both IR3000; (8am-1pm) has an impressive collection of carpets dating back 500 years.
ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in Iran is generally cheap and there is a reasonable choice, from a tiny cell in a noisy moshafkhuneh (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 moshafkhuneh 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 IR600,000 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 moshafkhunehs won't accept foreigners, though this is increasingly rare.

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 Season 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.kassao.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.


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 forenoon day 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 semi-clad 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 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 and don’t enforce this rule – here 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.


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 (Map p239; ☏ 859 7551; Do Shahid St, Tehran; ☏ 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$50 and are issued in two days.

Armenia (Map pp190-1; ☏ 6670 4833; emarthe@yahoo.com; 1 Ostad Shahriar St, Raazi St, Jomhuriye Elamii Ave, Tehran) Tourist visas issued in nine to 11 days for US$55, in three to five days for $80.

Australia (Map pp190-1; ☏ 8872 4546; www.iran.embassy.gov.au; 13 Eslamibolbi 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; ☏ 859 7551; Do Shahid St, Tehran)

China (Map p120; ☏ 8845 8636; www.iran-china.org; 346 Yuexiu Rd, Shaoming, Zhenjiang)

Czech Republic (Map p120; ☏ 8861 1740; www.czechembassy.org.uk; 185 Jasmine St, Tehran; ☏ 9am-noon Thu; 9am-noon Sat, Tue, Wed.)

Denmark (Map p120; ☏ 3916 0073; www.iran-embassy.dk; Svanemøllevej 48, 2100 Copenhagen)

India (Map pp190-1; ☏ 2228 0372; www.amba-france.org; 85 Nolf Loshato St, Tehran)

Indonesia (Map p120; ☏ 8866 6262; www.indonesiaembassy.org; 212 Nofl Loshato St, Tehran)

Iran (Map p120; ☏ 8873 2623; www.iran.gc.ca; 57 Shahid Sarafraz St, Motahhari Ave, Tehran)

Japan (Map pp190-1; ☏ 6670 5011; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iran; 143 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

Korea (Map p120; ☏ 8871 1797; www.iran-embassy.org; 1-36 Razi St, Tehran; ☏ 9am-noon Thu; 9am-noon Sat, Tue, Wed.)

Malaysia (Map p120; ☏ 6670 4833; emarthe@yahoo.com; 1 Ostad Shahriar St, Razi St, Jomhuriye Eslami Ave, Tehran) Tourist visas issued in nine to 11 days for US$50, in three to five days for $80.

New Zealand (Map pp190-1; ☏ 2228 0372; www.amba-france.org; 85 Nolf Loshato St, Tehran)

Norway (Map p120; ☏ 8871 1797; www.iran-embassy.org; 1-36 Razi St, Tehran; ☏ 9am-noon Thu; 9am-noon Sat, Tue, Wed.)

Pakistan (Map p120; ☏ 8871 3794; fax 8872 1797; cnr Bucharest & Fifth Sts, Arzhangin Sq, Tehran)

Poland (Map pp190-1; ☏ 8880 4545; 30 Afshin St, Tehran) Visas issued for IR31,500 with a letter from your embassy.

Spain (Map pp190-1; ☏ 8871 4575; fax 8878 7082; 76 Savr St, Afqria Hwy, Tehran)

Syria (Map pp190-1; ☏ 2205 9031; fax 2205 9409; Afqria Hwy, Arshad Blvd, Tehran)

Turkey (Map pp190-1; ☏ 0441-222 8974; Beheshti St; Tehran; ☏ 3311 5299, 314 Ferdosi St)

United Arab Emirates Bandar Abbas (Map pp190-1; ☏ 222 4229; Nasr Blvd; Tehran; ☏ 8678 1333; 355 Vahid Dastjerdi Ave)

USA (Map pp190-1; ☏ 6670 5011; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/iran; 143 Ferdosi St, Tehran)

The UK (Map p120; ☏ 3916 0073; www.iran-embassy.dk; Svanemøllevej 48, 2100 Copenhagen)

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is illegal and, in theory, punishable by hundreds of lashes and even death (although foreigners would probably be deported instead). Barbaric laws and attitudes may deter some gay and lesbian travellers from visiting Iran. There are no questions on 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.

In addition to the main Islamic holidays (p648), Iran observes the following, which change with the lunar calendar:

- **Arba’een** (10 Moharram) Anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.
- **Birth of Imam Ali** (10 Zul-Hijjah) The Day of Ashura.
- **Death of Imam Reza** (30 Safar) Ashura.
- **Birthday of Imam Mahdi** (15 Shaban) The Day of Muharram.
- **Death of Imam Ali** (12 Farvardin) Ashura.
- **Death of Imam Jafar Sadeq** (25 Shawwal) The Day of Muharram.
- **Qadir-e Khom** (12 Zul-Hijjah) The Day of Muharram.

**HOLIDAYS**

Iran always seems to be mourning the death of some religious figure or a more recent revolutionary victory.

**Religious Holidays**

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- **Birth of Imam Ali** (10 Zul-Hijjah) The Day of Ashura.
- **Death of Imam Reza** (30 Safar) Ashura.
- **Birthday of Imam Mahdi** (15 Shaban) The Day of Muharram.
- **Death of Imam Ali** (12 Farvardin) Ashura.
- **Death of Imam Jafar Sadeq** (25 Shawwal) The Day of Muharram.
- **Qadir-e Khom** (12 Zul-Hijjah) The Day of Muharram.

**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) 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 (3 June; 15 Khordad)
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 ‘coffeenechts’, 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:
- Iran Chamber Society (www.iranchamber.com) Historical, cultural and background information galore.
- Iran Mania (www.irancell.com) Links to just about everything about Iran.
- Iran Tourism & Tourism Organisation (www.ittou.org) Useful summary of facts and figures about Iran and its various regions.
- Iran Traveling Center (www.irantravelingcenter.com) For travellers.

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.gitasenasi.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 toman, 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 hotel, 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.irancell.com/defaultenglish.asp page has up-to-date conversions.

International Transfers

If you’ve been robbed, lost your wallet or 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 MELIR THA060); and ask whether there is a BMI branch in your home country (these are listed at www.bmi.ir), or which bank in your country 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 hotel 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.

POSTAGE

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.

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.

INTERNET DIRECTORY • Internet Access

www.lonelyplanet.com
there’s a minimum charge of three minutes. International calling cards are also available from newstands, though telephone offices usually work out cheaper. Some coffeeen sell 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 or the lonelyplanet.com website 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 hijab (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 hijab. 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.

Many 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.

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 hijab 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 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.
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 you旧 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 Melli 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 to be 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), with smaller Iranian airlines including Iran Aseman (www.iaa.ir) and Mahan Air (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), British Airways (www.britishairways.com), KLM (www.klm.com) and Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com) fly into Tehran, while Middle Eastern airlines including Gulf Air (www.gulfair.com), Emirates (www.emirates.com) and Kuwait Airways (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
There are two border crossings. The easiest and most popular is at Bazargan/Gürbülük (open 24 hours, see p199), reached via Tabriz. Most long-distance buses between Tehran and Istanbul 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 Orumiyeh is Sero (Iran)–Esendere (Turkey; open 8am till 10.30pm Iran time; see p200). There are buses most days from Orumiyeh to Istanbul via Van.

Train
International trains run from Tehran to Istanbul and Damascus. The Trans-Asia Express to Istanbul (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.rajatrains.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 Vafaie-8 Shipping Company (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.

AIRCRAFT 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), Mahan Air (www.mahanairlines.com) and Kish Airlines (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 buses and minibuss 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 (Taaonoi 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
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). If you have your own vehicle, the cost is about IR30,000 to IR60,000 for a day.

**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

The following are reputable, Iran-based operators.

**Arg-e-Jadid Travel** (in Tehran 021-8881 1072; www.atc.ir)


**Caravan Sahra** (in Tehran 021-8884 8672; www.caravansahra.com)

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