

Bamiyan & Central Afghanistan

بامیان و افغانستان مرکزی



The massed peaks of the Hindu Kush form a huge tangled knot in the centre of the country, aptly known as the Koh-e Baba – the Grandfather of Mountains. It's also the Hazarajat, the home of the country's minority Hazara population. Today it's a remote and marginal area, but was once the crucible for some of Afghanistan's greatest cultural achievements.

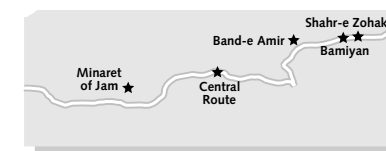
Buddhism flowered in the green Bamiyan valley 1500 years ago; a centre of art and pilgrimage that reached its apogee in the creation of the giant statues of Buddha, which overlooked the town until their cruel destruction by the Taliban in 2001. Even deeper into the mountains, the fabulous Minaret of Jam still stands as a testament to the glories of later Muslim dynasties.

But the scenery is the real star of central Afghanistan – an unending procession of rocky mountaintops, deep gorges and verdant river valleys. The bright light and crisp mountain air makes the landscape sing, not least the incredible blue lakes of Band-e Amir.

The roads can be as bad as the views are spectacular, and visitors should prepare for bumpy travel and some chilly nights at high altitude. You'll need to time your trip for the warmer months: many communities become cut off once the snows of winter arrive, with roads impassable until after the spring melt.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stand in awe beneath the giant empty Buddha niches of **Bamiyan** (p114)
- Dip your toes in the sapphire-blue lakes of the **Band-e Amir** (p122)
- Climb the ancient ruined citadel of **Shahr-e Zohak** (p119), guardian of the Bamiyan valley
- Bump along the remote and spectacular back-roads of Afghanistan's **central route** (p124)
- Scale the lost **Minaret of Jam** (p126), hidden in the folds of the Hindu Kush



RISK ASSESSMENT

Bamiyan has consistently remained one of the calmest provinces in Afghanistan, with no major security incidents. Travellers are advised to avoid the southern route to Bamiyan from Kabul via the Hajigak Pass and Maidan Shahr in Wardak Province due to poor security, where there have been repeated abduction threats made against internationals.

The central route is reasonably secure but very remote. There have been regular reports of robberies against private vehicles in the Chist-e Sharif and Obey areas.

CLIMATE

Dominated by the crags of the Koh-e Baba and Hindu Kush, central Afghanistan has a dry mountainous climate. In summer, days are warm (up to 28°C) while high altitudes mean that nights can be cold even in the middle of August. Warm clothes are essential. Temperatures drop considerably from November, skirting around freezing point. The region sees heavy snow from this point onwards, which can persist until March or even April, cutting off swathes of the region (although Bamiyan remains connected to Kabul year-round).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Central Afghanistan's isolation is felt in its poor transport links to the rest of the country. Two punishing roads lead slowly from Bamiyan to Kabul, via either the northern Shibar Pass, or the Hajigak Pass to the south. Roads are similarly poor leaving the Hazarajat across the central route to Herat – a trip of several days in the summer, frequently impassable during the winter snows and merely treacherous during the spring melt. There are no commercial flights to Kabul, although both the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) and Pactec operate services between Bamiyan and Chaghcheran and the capital.

BAMIYAN**باميان**

Bamiyan sits at the heart of the Hazarajat in a wide valley braided with mountain rivers and is one of the poorest yet most beautiful parts of Afghanistan. Once a major centre

for Buddhist pilgrimage, modern Bamiyan is now more closely associated with the destruction visited on Afghanistan's culture by war. The two giant statues of Buddha that once dominated the valley now lie in rubble, victims of the Taliban's iconoclastic rage. Despite this, the Bamiyan valley still holds a powerful draw over the imagination. It was made a World Heritage site in 2003 for its cultural landscape and is a must-see for any visitor to Afghanistan.

While isolated today, it wasn't always so. Bamiyan was once an important way station on the Silk Road. Trade and pilgrims flocked to its temples and in return Bamiyan exported its art – a synthesis of Greek, Persian and Indian art that had a major influence on Buddhist iconography as far afield as China. Centuries later, Bamiyan became the focus of Afghanistan's nascent tourist industry, as visitors came to rediscover its past glories and gaze in awe at the monumental Buddha statues carved from its cliffs.

War brought an end to that. Initially isolated from the fighting, Bamiyan suffered terribly under the ideological fervour of the Taliban, whose anti-Shiite doctrines drove ethnic massacres as well as the smashing of idols.

Since the Taliban's defeat, Bamiyan has returned to the peace of earlier years and is currently home to a New Zealand-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). It has consistently been one of Afghanistan's real oases of calm, although locals grumble about the slow pace of reconstruction.

For many, Bamiyan can best be experienced at sunset from the hills overlooking the valley. The niches of the Buddhas evoke a particular power at this hour and as the light of the day changes so does the colour of the cliffs, from honey to pink, ochre to magenta.

HISTORY

Bamiyan's place in Afghan history begins with the emergence of the Kushan empire in the 1st century AD. As a halfway point between Balkh and the Kushan capital at Kapisa (near modern Bagram, see p109), it grew rich from the trade along the Silk Road between Rome and the Han Chinese.

The nomadic Kushans quickly took to Buddhism and were instrumental in fusing

Eastern art with the Hellenistic tradition left by the Greeks. This Graeco-Buddhic art flowered in Bamiyan, which quickly became a major centre of culture and religion where monasteries flourished.

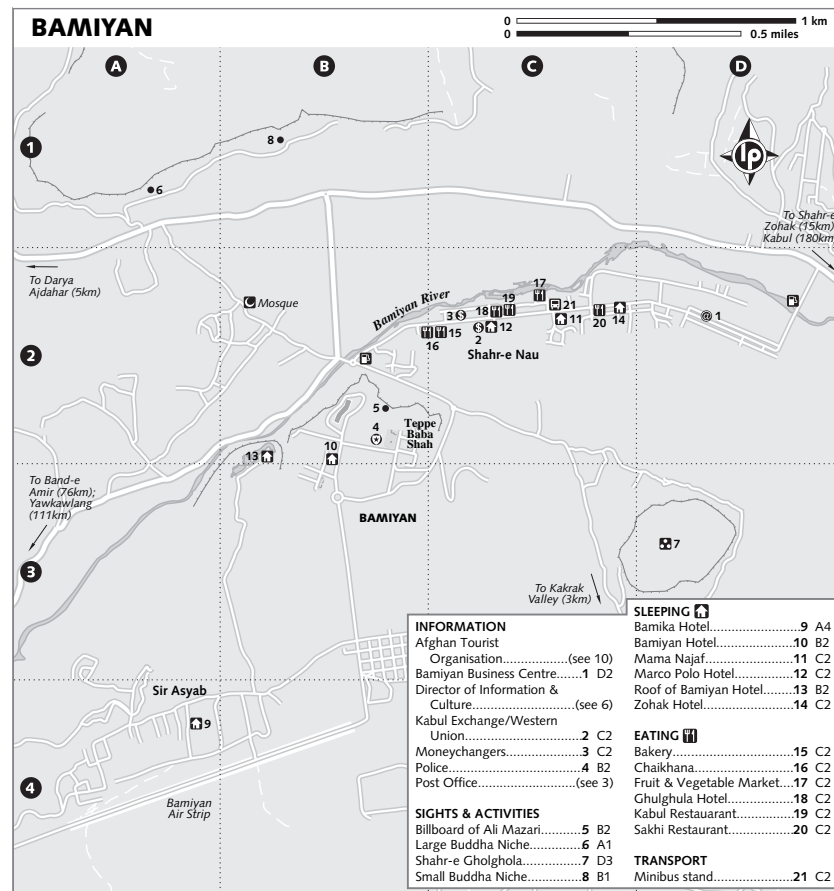
Kushan power waned, but Bamiyan remained a cultural centre. Another wave of invaders, the White Huns, were assimilated in the 4th century and went on to create two giant statues of Buddha, carved out of the sandstone cliffs of the valley walls, bedecked with jewels and gilt. Bamiyan became one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the world.

Events in the east threatened Bamiyan's pre-eminence and in the 7th century, Afghanistan felt the eastward thrust of Islam.

High in the mountains, Bamiyan clung on to its Buddhist traditions for another 400 years, until the ascendant Ghaznavids finally brought Islam to the valley for good.

A series of smaller dynasties held sway over Bamiyan until the beginning of the 13th century. The Shansabani kings briefly made the valley the capital of a realm stretching as far north as Balkh and Badakhshan, until they were swept away in the Mongol tidal wave in 1222.

Genghis Khan initially sent his favourite grandson to deal with the Shansabani kings and they responded by slaying the young general. As revenge, Genghis sent his warriors to storm the citadels. Every living thing in the valley was slaughtered.



Bamiyan never fully recovered from the Mongol devastation. While the Hazaras now claim descent from the Mongol invaders, they spent the next 600 years independent but isolated from Afghan history. The Hazaras' adherence to Shiite Islam meant they were further distrusted by the Afghan mainstream.

In the 1890s Abdur Rahman Khan led a military campaign to bring Bamiyan and the Hazarajat under the control of the Afghan state. He declared a jihad against the Hazaras, taking many into slavery and giving their land to Pashtun farmers. Ironically, the Hazaras were allowed to return when the newcomers found it impossible to raise crops in Bamiyan's marginal environment. The area remained the most underdeveloped part of Afghanistan throughout the 20th century.

Bamiyan rebelled against the communist government in early 1979, with the town inspired by the success of Ayatollah Khomeini's Shiite revolution in Iran. After the Soviet invasion, the mountainous surroundings were a blessing to the resistance, who drove the Russians out of the Hazarajat by 1981.

For the first time in their history the Hazaras could organise themselves politically and militarily. Bamiyan was ruled by the mujaheddin party Hezb-e Wahdat, supported by Iran. By the middle of the 1990s, Hazara influence extended as far as Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif.

The rise of the Taliban saw the return of anti-Hazara sentiments. Following their capture of Kabul, the Pashtun militia immediately started a blockade of the Bamiyan valley. The region was dependent on food aid but the Taliban refused access to the international community, in a bid to starve their enemies. By the time the Taliban captured Bamiyan in September 1998, much of the population had fled to the mountains. In an echo of Abdur Rahman Khan's policies, the Taliban tried to encourage Pashtun's nomads to settle on the Hazaras' land.

Almost immediately, the Taliban threatened to blow up the giant Buddhas, but backed down in the face of international outrage. Mullah Omar even went as far as declaring that they should be protected to encourage a future return of tourism to Afghanistan.

WHO'S THAT MAN?

You'll be hard-pressed to find pictures of Ahmad Shah Massoud in Bamiyan: locals still remember his 1995 shelling of Hazara civilians in Kabul. Instead, pictures of the late Hezb-e Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari are prominently displayed, including a large billboard overlooking the town. Mazari was mysteriously killed by the Taliban in 1995 after trying to form an alliance with them against the mujaheddin government in Kabul and the Hazaras are now led by Karim Khalili – another favourite on the walls of Bamiyan.

Such ideals didn't last long. With UN sanctions biting, and faced with a newly resurgent Hazara resistance, the Buddha statues were declared un-Islamic and their destruction was decreed. Over two days in the beginning of March 2001, dynamite and tank-fire reduced the monumental statues to rubble. The world – and the Afghan population – was horrified. The Taliban celebrated by selling picture calendars of the demolition on the streets of Kabul.

The US-led campaign in November 2001 saw a final Taliban spate of killing and destruction before Bamiyan's liberation. But peace has finally returned to Bamiyan, even producing the country's first female governor in the figure of Habiba Sorabi. Economic development has been slower to follow.

ORIENTATION

Bamiyan is set in a wide and pretty valley, dominated by the sandstone cliffs that form its northern wall. Approached from the east, a large sign misleadingly welcomes you to the city of Bamiyan; the town lies a further 15km down the road. Minibuses drop you off outside the chaikhans along the main bazaar (Shahr-e Nau), where you'll also find most of Bamiyan's amenities. The Buddha niches, a short walk over the river from the town centre, are visible from everywhere in Bamiyan. Bamiyan's old bazaar lies destroyed in front of the Large Buddha and much of the area between the two niches has been marked for mine clearance.

At the southwestern end of Shahr-e Nau a road leads uphill to Tepe Baba Shah,

which offers the best scenic views of the valley, as well as being the location for many NGO offices. As it curls uphill, the road splits left towards Shahr-e Gholghola. From Tepe Baba Shah, continue south to the airstrip and the village of Sir Asyab, where you will find some more sleeping options (a taxi from Shahr-e Nau will cost around 80Afg).

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Bamiyan Business Centre (Shahr-e Nau; per hr 60Afg; ☎ 2.30-7pm) Well run with fast internet connections.

Money

There are plenty of moneychangers' offices along Bamiyan's main bazaar.

Kabul Exchange (Shahr-e Nau, next to Marco Polo Hotel) Has a branch of Western Union, but keeps erratic business hours.

Post & Telephone

At the time of research, only Roshan offered mobile phone coverage in Bamiyan. There are PCOs along the main bazaar.

Post office (Shahr-e Nau) Look for the hand-painted 'Post' sign on the door, but it's more reliable to send mail from Kabul.

Tourist Information

An excellent guide to the valley is the recent reprint of Nancy Dupree's *Bamiyan*, but frustratingly this is only available in Kabul.

Afghan Tourist Organization (Bamiyan Hotel, Tepe Baba Shah) Has little tourist information, but can organise cars and drivers.

SIGHTS The Buddha Niches

The empty niches of the Buddha statues dominate the Bamiyan valley. Carved in the 6th century, the two statues, standing 38m and 55m respectively, were the tallest standing statues of Buddha ever made. Now gone, the emptiness of the spaces the statues have left behind nevertheless inspires awe and quiet contemplation in equal measure. The bases of the niches are fenced off and although it is quite possible to view them for free from some distance, a ticket from the office of the **Director of Information and Culture** (in front of Large Buddha niche; 160Afg, ticket also valid for Shahr-e Gholghola & Shahr-e Zohak; ☎ 8am-5pm) allows further access to the site.

Next to the director's office is a large shed containing the salvaged remains of the **Large Buddha**, which give an insight into the construction of the statues. They weren't simply carved out of the sandstone cliffs – rough figures were instead hewn from the rock, which was then covered in mud and straw to create the intricate folds of the robes, before being plastered and painted. The Large Buddha was painted with red robes, while the Small Buddha was clothed in red. Their faces were covered in gilded masks, although all traces of these disappeared in antiquity. The Chinese monk Xuan Zang visited Bamiyan at the height of its glory in the 7th century, writing of the statues that 'the golden hues sparkle on every side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eye by their brightness'. As a devout pilgrim, Xuan Zang may have looked back on the statues' ultimate destruction

THE RECLINING BUDDHA OF BAMIYAN

The Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang, who visited the valley in the 7th century, is our best chronicler of Bamiyan. After accurately describing the two standing Buddhas, he left a description of a third to entice later generations of archaeologists: 'In the monastery situated two or three li to the east of the city, there is an image of the Buddha recumbent, more than one thousand feet long, in the posture of entering Nirvana.' If true, this Buddha would be as long as the Eiffel Tower is tall – but what happened to it?

Since the fall of the Taliban, a team led by the Afghan archaeologist Professor Zmaryali Tarzi has been searching for it, believing it to have been buried under rubble from an earthquake. In an area southeast of the Small Buddha, he believes he may have found part of the toe of this Reclining Buddha. A major problem is that the statue is thought to have been made of mud bricks, and so would have been highly susceptible to erosion. However, Professor Tarzi's excavations have uncovered several small Buddha statues and carved heads, which have been presented to the Kabul Museum. The fate of the Reclining Buddha may never be known, but the search continues.

as reflecting a central teaching of the Buddha: nothing is permanent and everything changes.

The remaining chunks of statue are a small fraction of the total – the Taliban sold much of what was not simply destroyed to Pakistani antique dealers in Peshawar.

The view from the base of the niche to its ceiling is dizzying. The ceiling and walls were once covered with frescoes, using symbolism borrowed from Greek, Indian and Sassanid (Persian) art. The fusion of these traditions gave the Buddhist art of Bamiyan its vitality, which would later spread to India and China.

The cliffs surrounding each Buddha are honeycombed with monastic cells and grottoes, and your entrance ticket allows a guided tour. When we visited, the guides were enthusiastic but didn't have much English (or information), although a proper training programme is now reportedly in place. When exploring the cells and passages, good shoes are recommended, as well as a torch. Hard hats are provided – less for the fear of falling rocks than the inevitability of banging your head on the low ceilings.

The Large Buddha's grottoes are relatively few in number. You enter them by climbing almost around the back of the Buddha, cutting up some way to the left. The path here is marked with white rocks to show recent demining. The cells were originally decorated with frescoes displaying Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, all now lost in this section. In total, it is estimated that around 85% of the paintings disappeared

during the war, through neglect, theft or deliberate destruction.

As you follow the passages you eventually emerge above the head of the Large Buddha. The views are amazing, unless you suffer from vertigo. The top of the niche has been braced with scaffolding to prevent subsidence. As with the cells, the ceiling was once elaborately painted.

The **Small Buddha** niche stands 500m to the east. The intervening section of cliff is honeycombed with cells, sanctuaries and passages tunnelled into the rock. Now long gone, a series of stupas and monasteries at the foot of the cliff further served the Buddhist complex. Xuan Zang noted 10 convents and over a 1000 priests and at its peak, Bamiyan is thought to have contained around 50 temples. Halfway between the two Buddhas is a smaller third niche, high on the cliff, which would have held a free-standing Buddha statue. In the aftermath of the Taliban's ouster, many of these caves were occupied by Hazara internally displaced people (IDPs).

The grottoes of the Small Buddha are far more extensive and rewarding than those at the Large Buddha, in part because this site is nearly a century older. You enter via stairs at the base of the niche – these stairs encircle the niche, allowing the faithful to circumambulate the Buddha, an important ritual. Although almost all of the frescoes have been lost, a few glimpses remain in a couple of places. The so-called assembly hall on the west side has bright blue and maroon fragments of a huge lotus on its cup-

ola, surrounded by a red band decorated with delicate white flowers. It's just enough to give a tantalising idea of how the whole might have looked. Near this hall is a vestibule looking out to the valley, which still retains its original façade, with the stone carved to resemble jutting wood beams.

The grottoes continue on the east side of the niche, with rooms containing carved lantern-roof ceilings and wall niches for Buddha statues.

Bamiyan's heyday as a Buddhist pilgrimage site barely lasted a handful of centuries. After a brief period of coexistence with its expanding Muslim neighbours, it slipped into terminal decline around the 10th century, when many statues and temples were destroyed. Memories of the Buddhist past faded and locals began to suppose that the statues were of pagan kings. Amazingly, Genghis Khan left them standing – about the only thing he did leave intact in Bamiyan. Greater damage was done in the 17th century when the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb smashed their faces. A hundred years later the legs of the Large Buddha were cut off by the Persian Nadir Shah.

During the civil war, the niches and caves were often used as ammunition dumps, with some soldiers occasionally using the statues for target practice. The final, terrible, indignity came with their complete demolition by the Taliban in March 2001, leaving behind an indelible testament to Afghanistan's many cultural losses in recent wars.

Shahr-e Gholghola

A 20-minute walk from Bamiyan stands the remains of Ghorid Bamiyan's last stand against the Mongol hordes. Shahr-e Gholghola was reputedly the best defended of Bamiyan's royal citadels and was captured by intrigue rather than force of arms.

Bamiyan's ruler Jalaludin held strong under Genghis Khan's siege, but he didn't reckon on the treachery of his daughter. She had quit her widowed father's castle in a fit of pique over his remarrying a princess from Ghazni. She betrayed the castle's secret entrance, expecting to be rewarded through her own betrothal to the Mongol ruler. But he put her to the sword anyway and slaughtered the rest of the defenders. The noise of the furious violence gave the citadel's modern name – 'City of Screams'.

To get to the citadel, follow the road up Teppe Baba Shah, but veer left at the first junction. The walk, curving past wheat and potato fields, is a pleasant one, particularly in late summer when you can watch the grain being threshed by yoked oxen. The road skirts the base of the citadel, with a path leading up an area cleared for parking. The ruins were mined during the war, and although there are no red or white rocks visible, it is still strongly advised that you keep only to the worn path to the summit. There is a small police post at the top, where you'll be asked to produce a ticket – the same one covering the Buddha Niches and Shahr-e Zohak (see p117).

The views over the valley to the cliff walls are gorgeous. Looking south, the view extends to the **Kakrak Valley**, which once held a 6.5m standing Buddha (the niche in the cliff is just visible with the naked eye) and some important frescoes, all now lost. It's a good couple of hours' walk, again through pretty farmland. Between the citadel and this valley are the remains of Qala-e Dokhtar (the Daughter's Castle), once home to Jalaludin's duplicitous offspring.

Shahr-e Zohak

The imposing ruins of Shahr-e Zohak guard the entrance to the Bamiyan valley, perched high on the cliffs at the confluence of the Bamiyan and Kalu rivers. Built by the Ghorids, they stand on foundations dating back to the 6th century. Genghis Khan's grandson was killed here, bringing down his murderous fury on the whole Bamiyan valley as a result. The colloquial name Zohak is taken from the legendary serpent-haired king of Persian literature.

The towers of the citadel are some of the most dramatic in Afghanistan. Made of mud-brick on stone foundations, they wrap around the side of the cliff, with geometric patterns built into their crenellations for decoration. The towers had no doors, but were accessed by ladders that the defenders pulled up behind them.

Passing the towers, a path leads up through a rock tunnel and the main gateway of the fortress, before switching back up the hill, past ruined barracks and store-rooms. Take extreme care here – the route is marked with red rocks for landmines (many of them faded or peeling), so don't

REBUILDING THE BUDDHAS?

Mullah Omar may have said that all he was doing was 'breaking stones' when he ordered the destruction of the Buddhas, but he was being disingenuous. Bamiyan was once the jewel in Afghanistan's tourism crown and many locals believe that rebuilding the statues will encourage foreign tourism and boost the region's economy, as well as being an act of cultural healing.

Hamid Karzai and Bamiyan governor Habiba Sorabi have both given vocal support. Unesco have been more ambivalent, claiming a mandate to preserve rather than rebuild and that general reconstruction of the town should take priority. Nevertheless proposals have been put forward by several sources, including an Afghan sculptor and a consortium headed by a Swiss museum. Costs are estimated at US\$30 to US\$50 million – big money in a town lacking mains electricity. Equally fanciful has been the plan by a Californian artist to project multiple lasers onto the empty niches to recreate the statues.

Meanwhile, the only actual rebuilding of the Buddhas has been in China, where replicas have been constructed in a theme park in Sichuan. The empty niches seem likely to exert their mournful auras over the Bamiyan valley for the foreseeable future.

stray from the well-worn path. The path quickly steepens and becomes increasingly exposed to strong crosswinds. A rusting anti-aircraft gun and abandoned soldier's post mark the summit.

The views over the confluence of the two rivers are awesome, with their thin strips of cultivated green providing a stark contrast to the dry pink and tan of the mountains. The location's strategic value is immediately apparent, and the heights seemingly impregnable to all except Genghis.

Shahr-e Zohak is around 9km from Bamiyan. To get there take any westbound transport out of Bamiyan. As the confluence of the Bamiyan and Kalu rivers is where the roads from the Shibar and Hajigak Passes meet, any transport should be able to drop you there. Ask to be let out at Tupchi village (40Afg, 25 minutes) or the checkpoint at Shashpul half a kilometre after it, which is next to the confluence. The soldiers here will check you have a ticket from the Director of Information and Culture in Bamiyan (see p117). From here, walk about 1km following the Kalu, until you can see a simple wood-and-earth bridge, roughly level with the last of the citadel's towers (if your vehicle is going in the Hajigak Pass direction – the nearest villages to ask for are Dahane Khushkak, Paymuri or Sawzaw – you can be dropped at this point). A short walk along the edge of a field brings you to a pass leading up to the towers.

Hiring a vehicle from Bamiyan will cost around 1100Afg return, depending on your haggling skills.

Darya Ajdahar

Five kilometres west of Bamiyan lies Darya Ajdahar, or Valley of the Dragon, where you'll find the petrified remains of a monstrous creature that once terrorised the region.

The dragon took up residence in Bamiyan in pagan times, and fed daily on a diet of virgins and camels provided by the browbeaten population. All attempts to slay it ended in a fiery end. Only Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, fresh from creating the Band-e Amir lakes (see p123), could manage the task. The dragon's burning breath turned to tulip petals as they licked around the hero, whereupon he drew his great sword Zulfiqar and cleaved the monster in two.

The dragon can clearly be seen and only those lacking poetry would remark that its body is merely a vast whaleback of volcanic rock split by an ancient earthquake. Others would point instead to the 2m-high horns and the two springs at its head – one running clear with the dragon's tears, the other red with its blood. The springs run the length of the great fissure and bending quietly down next to it, you can sometimes hear the groan of the dead beast echoing through the rock. At the far end of the dragon is a simple shrine dedicated to Ali.

The new village of Ajdahar lies at the head of the valley, built by the UN for Hazara returnees from Iran and Pakistan. It's a grim place, with barely a scrap of greenery, but the villagers are trying hard to make a living. The dragon lies at the valley's far end – look for the white smear on the rock and the spur of the dragon's horn on the north slope. Wear decent footwear for the short climb.

A round trip from Bamiyan to Darya Ajdahar in a private vehicle will cost around 500Afg. Transport leaves erratically to Ajdahar village (30Afg, 20 minutes).

SLEEPING

Marco Polo Hotel (Shahr-e Nau; dm 70Afg) More a chaikhana than a proper hotel, this is a real shoestring option – everyone squeezes into a small room on the ground floor, or retires upstairs to sleep in the restaurant. As with many chaikhana, there's no bathroom so you'll quickly become familiar with Bamiyan's hammam (20Afg per person).

Mama Najaf (☎ 079 9426 250; Shahr-e Nau; dm 300Afg) Two communal rooms sit above a chaikhana, up some extremely rickety wooden stairs. There's a simple bathroom and toilet, but for hot water you'll need to head for the hammam (20Afg per person) across the street.

Zohak Hotel (☎ 079 9235 298; Shahr-e Nau; s/d/tr US\$20/40/50) Bamiyan's best budget option by some degree. The old upstairs dorm has been turned into a restaurant, while the addition of the rooftop shower with piping hot water is very welcome. Rooms are compact and basic, but clean. Food is good, with large plates of rice, vegetables and meat for around 150Afg.

Bamiyan Hotel (☎ 079 9212 543; Teppe Baba Shah; r US\$30, yurts US\$40) This is Bamiyan's oldest hotel and one of the few still run by the ATO.

The luxury yurts the hotel boasted in the 1970s have been rebuilt, offering one of Afghanistan's most novel accommodation options. Standard rooms in the main hotel have shared bathrooms. There's a pleasant garden, although the high perimeter walls block great views across the valley. The restaurant is Bamiyan's best eating choice; a three-course meal with soup and fruit costs around 200Afg.

Bamika Hotel (☎ 079 9398 162; Sir Asyab; r US\$40) This pleasant hotel suffers from poor signing – it's some way into Sir Asyab village, 200m past the ICRC compound. Once there, it's both spacious and spotless. Rooms are large and, unusually for Bamiyan, en suite (with hot-water heater.)

Roof of Bamiyan Hotel (☎ 079 9235 292; Sir Asyab; r US\$40-60) If it's location you're after, head here – this hotel offers fantastic views over the Bamiyan valley. Clean bathrooms are shared, with the cheaper rooms in a separate annexe. There's a restaurant, plus a series of yurts that were under construction when we visited. The manager, an Afghan veteran of the hippy trail, can organise reliable vehicle hire and the like.

EATING

Across Afghanistan, Bamiyan is known for two things – potatoes and *krut*. *Krut* is dried yoghurt made into balls, which can be reconstituted into a sauce, or sucked on as a snack when travelling or working. It's an acquired taste. The potatoes make a pleasant change from rice, however, particularly when made into chips.

Bamiyan only has a few restaurants, all along the main bazaar in Shahr-e Nau, and all offering standard chaikhana fare for 50Afg to 70Afg: kebabs, *pulao* and *shorwa* (soup). None stand out over any others; try the Ghulghula Hotel, the Kabul Restaurant or the Sakhhi Restaurant. All are 1st-floor affairs, with steps leading up from the street, making window space a good place to watch the world go by.

The restaurants at the Zohak, Bamiyan and Roof of Bamiyan Hotels offer more variety, although you'll need to give advance notice when you want to eat.

The shops along Shahr-e Nau bazaar are stocked with food staples and a few treats. The fruit and vegetable market runs parallel to the main street, one block to the north.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses depart from the area around Mama Najaf hotel. Transport to Kabul (400Afg, nine to 11 hours), leaves around 4am to 5am, so it's important to check what's available the day before travel. Note that Kabul transport generally takes the southerly road via the Hajigak and Unai Passes, which at the time of research was not considered safe for travel for foreigners since it passes through restive Wardak Province. The northern road, via the Shibar Pass, is the more secure (and picturesque) option, but get up-to-date advice before travelling. Both roads are very poor quality – something of a political issue in the province.

Direct minibuses to Band-e Amir (150Afg, three hours) tend to be restricted to Thursday, Friday and Saturday. A large Millie bus also runs this route every Friday morning (40Afg, 3½ hours).

Heading west, minibuses travel most days to Yawkawlang (200Afg, five hours) according to demand, but transport beyond Yawkawlang is hard to find unless you're prepared to hire your own vehicle. Snowfall and floods can make the road west from Bamiyan extremely difficult from November to as late as May. For more on travelling this route see p124.

There's no public transport heading north from Bamiyan, making it easier (and quicker) to go to via Kabul and the Salang Tunnel. With your own transport, the direct road is slow and remote, albeit with good mountain views. From Bamiyan, take the Shibar Pass road and turn north where the road splits at Shikari. The road passes the ruined ramparts of Sar Khoshak (destroyed by Genghis Khan) and the entrance

THE SHIBAR PASS

As the narrow road bumps over the Shibar Pass (2960m) spare a thought for Alexander the Great's soldiers who slogged over it in the winter of 327 BC. Cold and tired, they didn't know (or probably care) that they were crossing a continental watershed, where the Indian subcontinent is divided from Central Asia. Rivers to the east of the Shibar Pass ultimately join the Indus river system, while those on the west flow towards the Amu Darya.

to the Ajar Valley at Doab before eventually turning east to follow the Surkhab river to Doshi, where the road joins the main Kabul–Mazar-e Sharif highway. Allow a day's solid driving for this route. Should the Salang Tunnel be closed for maintenance, traffic is often diverted along this back road. If this happens, minibuses can take up to 36 hours to travel from Kabul to Mazar-e Sharif.

Vehicle hire in Bamiyan tends to cost around US\$50 to US\$100 for a half/full day for a 4WD.

Flights from Kabul with UNHAS or Pactec take around 25 minutes. It's a dramatic approach by air, swooping down the length of the valley.

AROUND BAMIYAN

Band-e Amir

بند امير

The glittering lakes of Band-e Amir must rank as Afghanistan's most astounding natural sight, hidden in the Koh-e Baba at an altitude of 2900m. A series of six linked lakes, their deep blue waters sparkle like otherworldly jewels against the dusty mountains that surround them.

The lakes' high mineral content gives them their colour, and in the case of the most accessible lake, Band-e Haibat (the suitably named Dam of Awe), these minerals have been deposited along its shore to produce a huge curtain wall over 12m high, streaked with sulphur and containing its waters high above 'ground' level. It's a

weird and stupendous sight, and it's not surprising that locals should far prefer a mythic, rather than geological, explanation for the lakes' formation (see the boxed text, opposite). The lakes are reputed to contain great healing powers and pilgrims still visit to take the waters.

Approaching Band-e Amir, the first hint you have of their striking qualities is a bright flash of lapis lazuli as the largest lake, Band-e Zulfiqar appears briefly to your right. Soon after, the road starts to descend from a plateau immediately above the flat mirror of Band-e Haibat. Its deep blue waters and white dams fringed with vegetation are a rude shock when set against the cream and pink mountains – a sight to draw breath from even the most jaded travellers.

Arriving at the floor of the valley, vehicles stop a five-minute walk away from the dam walls, near a cluster of chaikhanas and kiosks. On Fridays and Saturdays, the area absolutely throngs with Afghan day-trippers, providing a rare echo of Afghanistan's tourist heyday.

At the lakeshore, it's possible to hire pedalos (75Afg per 15 minutes), shaped like swans, to take onto the water. They're slightly kitsch, but are a great way of seeing the lake, particularly if you've got the stamina to pedal all the way to the end and back – a good couple of hours. Alternatively a boat (the 'Donald Duck') carries up to 10 people for trips around the lake and back for 50Afg a head.

On a more spiritual level, a small shrine, known locally as Qadamjoy Shah-e Aulia ('The place where Ali stood'), overlooks the lake here. Built in the 1920s on the site of an older tomb, its doors are covered with small padlocks left as votive tokens, particularly from women offering prayers for love and fertility.

BAND-E AMIR WALKING TOUR

A walk around the edges of the lakes is the best way to appreciate their scale, and the cliff-top walk offers a succession of sublime vistas. The summer sun can be very fierce at this altitude, so take a hat and plenty of water.

Follow the rough path up from the chaikhanas to quickly find yourself looking down on **Band-e Haibat**. After about 15 minutes the path reaches a promontory with a great view, looking across the lake, and down into the first of a series of coves with inviting shallows. Continuing along the path, you have to cut inland for about 20 minutes, through some very dusty scrubby terrain, occasionally veering back toward the water. An hour after setting out you find yourself looking over the far shore of the lake and across to **Band-e Panir** (Dam of Cheese) This is the prettiest of the lakes, almost a perfect triangle of bright turquoise, fringed with a white beach. The lake sits slightly above Band-e Haibat bound by a white calcium travertine dam, and above this again is the tiny **Band-e Pudina** (Dam of Mint), almost completely overgrown with vegetation. Curving to the northwest, and higher still, the waters of the largest lake, **Band-e Zulfiqar** (Dam of Ali's Sword), are just visible. The lakes are linked by a series of cascades, each feeding the one below.

Carrying on the walk for another 30 minutes, the cliffs descend and allow you to reach the shores of Band-e Pudina and Band-e Panir. Few people get this far, and their relative seclusion makes them great spots to take a dip. Band-e Panir in particular is relatively shallow and not as cold as the icy waters on the other lakes. Women should take absolute care that there are no locals around before plunging in.

Returning to Band-e Haibat, it is possible to walk the perimeter of the dam walls. Algal growths make it slippery in places. At the far end are several tents, erected for the few

THE MIRACLES OF ALI

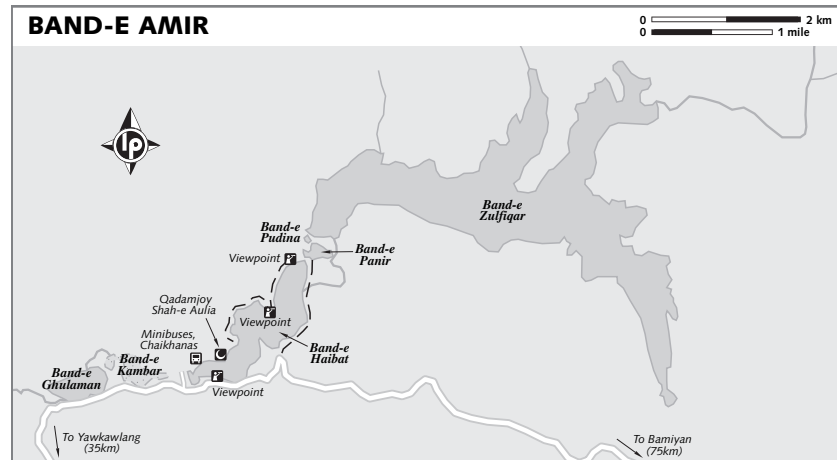
An infidel king called Babar ruled the Hindu Kush with a terrible fury. He was particularly frustrated by his inability to control a raging river near his capital. Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law, was travelling through the region, and, disguised as a slave, was brought to the king. Babar laughed at the captive and challenged him to perform a series of miracles. This Ali did – he hurled down rocks at the river to form Band-e Haibat, and sliced the top off a mountain with his sword to create Band-e Zulfiqar. His groom dammed Band-e Kamar and inspired by Ali, the king's own slaves made Band-e Ghulaman. Band-e Panir and Band-e Pudina were made with the help of a nomad woman, a piece of cheese and a sprig of mint. To top off the day's work, Ali killed a dragon that had been terrorising the region. Babar was so amazed with these feats that he converted to Islam on the spot.

pilgrims who come to Band-e Amir for the reportedly curative powers of the mineral waters. The walls terminate at the cliff, although there is a rough and precipitous path that can take you to the top. This follows the cliff edge past several chimney-like rock formations. After an hour, the path descends to the eastern shore of Band-e Pudina (also accessible if you have your own vehicle).

Two further lakes lie to the west of Band-e Haibat. The first, **Band-e Kamar** (Dam of the Groom) has almost completely dried up and is little more than a series of puddles. The shore of **Band-e Ghulaman** (Dam of the Slaves) is a further kilometre west. This has the lowest mineral content, and its shallows are thick with reedbeds. There is also plenty of bird-life here, giving it a much different character to the other lakes. The green shores are an ideal place for a picnic.

SLEEPING & EATING

In the past couple of years, a small 'street' has grown up to the side of Band-e Haibat, with half a dozen simple chaikhanas offering the usual *pulao*, kebabs and an occasional omelette and chips for around 60Afg. Although you may see people fishing with lines on the lake, the *mohi* (fish) themselves rarely end up on the menu.



A few of the chaikhans are little more than pitched tents, where for the price of dinner (or 100Afg, according to the manager's whim) you can stay for the night. Bring warm clothes and ask for an extra blanket. A short walk from the tents is a latrine block, dubbed the 'Taliban House' by local wags.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are direct minibuses to the lakes from Bamiyan on Thursday, Friday and Saturday mornings (150Afg, three hours), as well as a large bus every Friday morning (40Afg, 3½ hours). Hiring a vehicle from Bamiyan should cost around US\$60. Public transport sometimes stops at the hamlet of Qarghanatu, two-thirds of the way from Bamiyan, for breakfast. The chaikhans here serve *kimak*, a type of dried salty sheep's cheese.

Band-e Amir is a further 15km after the turn-off from the Bamiyan–Yawkawlang route: note that there are several stretches where the verges of this road are mined, although not in the immediate vicinity of the lakes. Band-e Amir is largely inaccessible during the winter, although the frozen lakes would be a tremendous sight.

THE CENTRAL ROUTE

راه مرکزی

Crossing the centre of the country along the spine of the Hindu Kush is one of the most remote and adventurous journeys it's possible to do in Afghanistan, but one that rewards travellers with a continuous parade of stunning mountain scenery. Travelling from Bamiyan, the route travels through the Hazarajat over a series of high mountain passes to the heart of the medieval Ghorid empire. This is a land of tiny villages, marginal agriculture, and nomad caravans with their camels and yurts. At its centre lies the fabled Minaret of Jam, hidden from foreign eyes for centuries, and even now is accessible to only the hardest of travellers.

PRACTICALITIES

Some commercially available maps of Afghanistan mark the road from Bamiyan to

Herat as a highway, a classification to be taken with a large pinch of salt. The road quality ranges from poor to painfully bad, all plied by seemingly indestructible HiAces and Kamaz trucks.

Public transport runs the length of the central route, although connections can be erratic and there are several bottlenecks. The two trickiest sections for onward transport are west from Yawkawlang (opposite) and travelling onward from the Minaret of Jam (p128). Squeezing into public transport on long journeys can be particularly uncomfortable on this route, so one popular option is to buy two spaces instead of one. Expect to get out and walk some steep stretches, or put rocks under the vehicle's wheels to help it ford rivers.

With nonstop travelling, perfect connections and no problems, it's just possible to travel across the centre from Kabul to Herat in four days, although you'd need a week in bed afterwards to get over it. In practice, allowing around six or seven days is more realistic.

Hiring a vehicle allows you to make the trip in something approaching comfort, as well as allowing stops for the myriad photo opportunities you will find along the way. Expect to pay around US\$100 to US\$120 per day for a 4WD. Prices depend on your starting point: Herat is the most expensive place to hire vehicles for this route, with Chaghcheran the cheapest. A 4WD is essential, although in 2003 we did meet a Citroen 2CV that had somehow made the traverse having driven all the way from Paris! If there are only a couple of you in the vehicle, don't be surprised if the driver stops to load rocks into the back as extra weight ballast. When making your plans, be explicit as to whether fuel is included and whether you are hiring the vehicle for a set period of time, or just to get to a certain destination. Politics and recent history can also play a part: Hazara drivers in Bamiyan we talked to were reluctant to drive all the way past Jam, as it meant them returning on their own through non-Hazara areas. That said, a local driver who knows the region is almost always the best option.

Between Bamiyan and Herat, fuel is available at Yawkawlang, Lal-o-Sar Jangal, Chaghcheran, Chist-e Sharif and Obey.

AN AMERICAN PRINCE OF GHOR

Britain and Russia were the main drivers of the Great Game, but there were plenty of lesser-known actors on the stage, often playing for their own stakes. One of the most notable was the American adventurer Josiah Harlan, the probable inspiration for Kipling's classic story *The Man Who Would Be King*. Born in Pennsylvania in 1799, Harlan fled to India after being jilted by his fiancée. After working as a surgeon for the British East India Company he made a brief journey to Afghanistan before finding service with the Maharajah of Punjab, Ranjit Singh, in 1829. Seven years later he switched allegiances to the Sikh's great rival on the Afghan throne, Dost Mohammed. In 1838, Harlan led Dost Mohammed's army from Kabul via Bamiyan to campaign against the Uzbek warlord and slaver Murad Beg. As they breasted the Hajigak Pass, he became the first American to fly the Stars and Stripes on the Hindu Kush. On the march, Harlan became close friends with the Hazara ruler, Mohammad Reffee Beg, who crowned Harlan the Prince of Ghor in perpetuity.

Soon after the campaign, Dost Mohammed was swept up in the upheaval of the First Anglo-Afghan War and Harlan was ejected by the British. Having immersed himself in the Afghan culture, Harlan became a fierce critic of British policy in the region, and published a fiery memoir that was quickly banned in London.

Returning to the USA, Harlan later served as a Union colonel in the American Civil War and died in 1871 en route to China, in search of one last adventure.

The central route can normally only be tackled between May to October, although bear in mind that early snow or a late-spring melt can still cause problems outside these dates. Local transport tends to start winding down for the winter in November, when the high passes start to close. Babur recorded making the trip in the winter of 1506 – but only just, recording snow reaching past the stirrups of his horse.

In terms of facilities along the central route, only Jam's new guesthouse offers any form of comfort or modern amenities. Accommodation is at chaikhans throughout, with their limited washing and toilet facilities. Diet is equally restricted and we found even rice hard to find in some places, until descending to the Herat floodplain. Chaghcheran, as the regional centre, is the only place west of Bamiyan with any kind of phone coverage until you reach Obey. If you need to stay in touch a Thuraya phone is essential.

BAMIYAN TO CHAGHCHERAN Yawkawlang

Travelling west from Bamiyan past Band-e Amir, the land becomes increasingly barren until you reach the small town of Yawkawlang, where a river becomes bound with splashes of green irrigated land, leading to a tidy and newly built main bazaar.

It's almost too new and tidy. Possession of Yawkawlang was regularly contested

between the Taliban and Hezb-e Wahdat, with the local population being the main losers. In January 2001, after a final attempt by the Hazara to hold the town, the Taliban massacred over 170 of Yawkawlang's male residents and destroyed the bazaar.

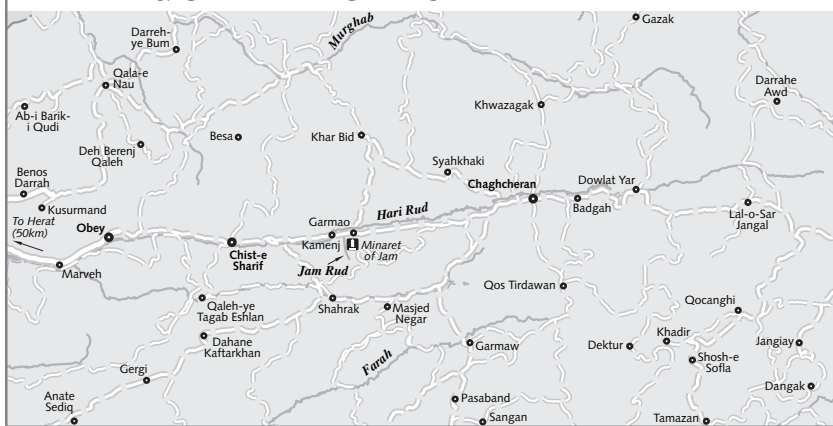
There are two chaikhans posing as hotels in Yawkawlang, standing opposite each other: the Pak Hotel and the Newab Hotel (west end of bazaar, 100Afg). Neither are great and both lack bathrooms, but the former at least has a private room for sleeping.

Yawkawlang tends to be the final terminus for transport from Bamiyan (200Afg, five hours), and westbound transport can sometimes be tricky to arrange. Hi-Aces only go irregularly to Chaghcheran (650Afg, one day), so usually the best option is to take a minibus to Panjao (Panjab on some maps; 100Afg, 2½ hours), which leave most mornings. Panjao is at the junction of the road going west to Chaghcheran, and east to Kabul via the Unai Pass, and has more plentiful transport connections. Read the risk assessment box (p114) before considering continuing to Kabul this way. Yawkawlang has an airstrip, used by regular Pactec flights.

Lal-o-Sar Jangal

The road from Yawkawlang climbs steadily as it heads west, through a series of passes. After nearly three hours it crosses the grandest in the mountain chain, the Shahtu Pass

BAMIYAN & CENTRAL AFGHANISTAN



(3350m), en route to Panjao. The views, over the pastel-brown mountains topped with rocky crags, are wonderful. There are plenty of herds of goats and sheep here, and a succession of pretty valleys threaded with shallow rivers to be forded. Five hours after leaving Yawkawlang, the road reaches the bazaar town of Lal-o-Sar Jangal.

Lal (as it's locally known) is the traditional limit of Hazara territory, and sits below the Kirmin Pass (3110m), the watershed between the Helmand river system, flowing south, and the Hari Rud, which the road follows until it reaches Herat.

Lal's bazaar is well stocked and is overlooked by a ruined fort. There are several chaikhans – the Sdaqat Hotel (near the fuel station, 70Afg) on the southern edge of town is adequate. Minibuses leave in the morning to Chaghcheran (500Afg, eight hours) and Panjao (100Afg, two hours).

CHAGHCHERAN TO HERAT

Chaghcheran

چغچران

At Chaghcheran the dense mountains the road has been winding through appear to recede, as the road climbs to a wide and largely barren plateau. A large sprawl of low buildings strung along the banks of the Hari Rud, Chaghcheran is the capital of Ghor province and its size comes as something of a shock after so many tiny villages.

Although the town has a mixed population, it sits at the heart of Aimaq territory. A seminomadic Turkic people, Aimaq camps

are easily spotted by their distinctive yurts. These are in contrast to the black felt tents of the Kuchi, who also live in the region in sizeable numbers. It's not uncommon to see Kuchi camel caravans travelling to and from Chaghcheran to sell livestock. The town also hosts a Lithuanian-led PRT.

Despite its size, sleeping options in Chaghcheran are restricted to chaikhans, which are found in a cluster south of the river – turn west at the red-and-white roundabout. None are signed in English, and all are depressingly basic. The Koswar Hotel (100Afg) at least has the advantage of a toilet cubicle and a couple of private rooms.

Chaghcheran is the regional transport hub, all arranged from the non-descript transport office (next to Farvaden Pharmacy) near the chaikhans – look for the small painted with a bus and truck. HiAces run daily to Herat (800Afg, 1½ days) and Lal-o-Sar Jangal (500Afg, eight hours), and occasionally to Yawkawlang (650Afg, one day) and Kabul (via Panjao, 900Afg, 1½ days). The office also has 4WDs – we were quoted US\$200 for a two-day trip to Herat via the Minaret of Jam. There is a small airstrip on the eastern edge of town, with regular UNHAS and Pactec flights to Kabul (via Bamiyan) and Herat.

The Minaret of Jam

منار جام

Reaching a dizzying height of 65m, the **Minaret of Jam** (Minar-e Jam; ticket US\$5, still/video camera US\$5/10, vehicle US\$10, translator US\$15) stands as a



lonely sentinel at the confluence of the Hari Rud and Jam Rud rivers, the greatest surviving monument of the medieval Ghorid empire. Forgotten by the outside world until the mid-20th century, it remains a holy grail for many travellers to Afghanistan. The first view of the minaret as it looms suddenly and unexpectedly from the folds of the mountains is worth all the rough roads it takes to get there.

The minaret was built in 1194 for Sultan Ghiyasuddin, the grandest of the Ghorid rulers, and marks the highpoint of their fired-brick architecture (Ghiyasuddin also commissioned Herat's Friday Mosque at this time). Three tapering cylindrical storeys rise from an octagonal base, the whole completely covered in intricate *café-au-*

lait brick decoration. Interlocking chains, polygons and medallions wind delicately around the shaft, interspersed with text from the Quran.

At the neck of the first section, a band of Kufic text spells out Ghiyasuddin's name in glazed turquoise, the only colour on the minaret. Above this are spars from the original wooden scaffold and brick buttresses that would originally have supported a balcony. The second and third shafts are more restrained in their decoration, surmounted by a final lantern gallery with pinched and pointed arches. Few muezzins have ever had such a stage for their call to prayer.

At the time of its construction, the minaret was the tallest in the world and until the 20th century only the Qutb Minar in Delhi was taller. For many years, archaeologists were mystified as to its purpose. Its isolated location begs the same question from every visitor: why here? Given the lack of associated buildings, it was assumed by many to be part of a concurrent Central Asian trend for raising single massive towers as statements of political power, possibly marking victory over a pagan populace. Jam is now recognised to be the site of the lost city of Firuzkoh, the Ghorids' capital destroyed by the Mongols (see the boxed text, below).

It's possible to climb the minaret and the views are amazing. A ladder allows you to crawl through a narrow entrance hole to the interior. There are two staircases, winding around each other like a DNA double-helix. Care should be taken on the narrow steps and a torch isn't a bad idea. The stairs end in an open chamber, from where you

FIRUZKOH – THE TURQUOISE MOUNTAIN

Unlike the majority of Afghan empires that arose from the plains, the Ghorids were born of the mountain fastness of the Hindu Kush. Even so, the decision to build their capital Firuzkoh ('The Turquoise Mountain') in such an inaccessible place – far from the trade routes, with barely a square metre of flat arable land – seems an act of almost wilful perversity. Until recently, archaeologists were reluctant to accept Jam as the site of the lost city.

Post-Taliban surveys have forced a change of mind. In the immediate vicinity of the minaret, several courtyards and pavements of baked brick have been uncovered (possibly the minaret's mosque), along with the remains of other buildings. If the Ghorids' own chronicles are to be believed, the mortar for these was mixed with the blood of prisoners taken from recently conquered Ghazni. A Jewish cemetery was also recorded at the site before the war, while the watchtowers on the slopes to the west of the minaret were probably part of Firuzkoh's larger defences. Smaller looted artefacts have included carved doors, coins and pottery from as far as Iran and China. Archaeologists continue to survey the site.

can look out over the confluence of the rivers. A second staircase continues from here up to the lantern gallery, although the climb feels more than a little precarious.

In 2002, the Minaret of Jam became Afghanistan's first World Heritage site, simultaneously being placed on the list of World Heritage sites in danger. It's easy to see why. Sat on the confluence of the Hari Rud and Jam Rud rivers, erosion of the foundations has been a constant worry, and gabion walls have been built to reinforce the structure. Even so, the minaret still lists at a worrying angle. Illegal looting, which ironically reached its peak after the fall of the Taliban, has also damaged the site, and robber holes can easily be spotted in the area.

SLEEPING & EATING

There is a small government-run **guesthouse** (r US\$30; dinner US\$10, breakfast US\$5) next to the minaret. Rooms are simple, but the mattresses are comfortable and the shower is one of the most welcome you'll take in the country. Meals are hearty. In Garmao, the nearest village 15km away up the Jam Rud, the Hotel Jam (70Afg) offers the usual chaikhana deal of a space on the floor for the price of dinner.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

No public transport goes to Jam. The best option is to take transport between Chaghcheran and Herat and get off at Garmao, where several locals act as motorbike taxis to the minaret (500Afg, two hours). The road is little more than a track, and is the roughest on the central route. Onward transport options from Garmao can be tricky, as vehicles are usually full when they drive through the village, but HiAces usually pass through en route to Chaghcheran (400Afg, five hours) around dawn, or to Herat (500Afg, one day, staying overnight at Darya Takht) in the afternoon. The road west, with its villages and orchards, is very picturesque.

With your own vehicle, Jam can be reached from Chaghcheran in seven hours, or from Herat in about 15 hours. There are two equally dramatic routes from Chaghcheran – the southerly main road via Garmao, or the northern road via Ghar-e Payon. The latter brings you to the minaret from the opposite bank of the Jam Rud. There is no bridge and the river can only

be forded by vehicles in the late summer. When the spring melt is in full spate, it can only be crossed by means of a zip wire – not for the faint-hearted!

Chist-e Sharif

چشت شریف

Travelling from the centre, Chist-e Sharif marks the end of the high peaks and the start of the wide plains leading to Herat. Building styles change, from rough squat mountain architecture to mud-brick compounds with domes and *badgirs* (wind towers) to keep them cool.

Chist-e Sharif is another Ghorid centre, and the ancient home of the Chistiyah Sufi order, founded in the 12th century. The order left behind two fine **domed tombs** (*gombeds*), which sit among pine trees on the western edge of town. Like the Minaret of Jam, they are decorated with intricate raised fired brick, although are in considerably poorer repair. The Chistiyah were noted for their use of music in their devotions, which brought them into conflict with the orthodoxies of the day. The main centre for the order is now in Ajmer, Rajasthan, although Afghans still visit the tomb of the 12th-century leader Maulana Maudud Chishti for blessings. The tomb, rebuilt in the last century, is on the western side of the pines, picturesquely looking down the main bazaar street.

Chist-e Sharif has a busy bazaar and several chaikhanas for eating and sleeping. The **Eqbal Hotel** (Main bazaar; 70Afg) is the pick of the bunch, with decent food, ice-cold drinks and airy rooms. The **Chist Hotel** (Herat Rd), a kilometre out of town, is a large white modern building built in the aftermath of the Taliban's ouster, but has yet to open its doors to customers.

Heading west, the road dramatically improves after Chist-e Sharif. There are regular minibuses to Herat (180Afg, four hours), stopping at Obey (100Afg, two hours). Transport to Chaghcheran is not frequent so take whatever is available – minibuses to Chaghcheran from Herat usually stop for the night in Darya Takht, 40km away.

Obey

اوبی

Compared to the rest of the central route, Obey feels like civilisation – the main streets are paved and the bazaar is busy. Burqas, which have been largely absent

since Bamiyan, reappear in large numbers. The Hari Rud, a rushing river since Chaghcheran, becomes tamed and lazy, anticipating its eventual dissipation in the deserts of Turkmenistan.

Obey is known for its **hot springs**, which are actually 10km to the west of town, where a road off the highway curves up into the hills. There is a bathhouse with grubby tubs and an older building with a deep pool. A *chowkidar* (caretaker) will let you in and expect a tip of around 50Afg. If you follow the path along the river for an hour, following the right fork where it splits, there is an

other spring, used by local villagers. There's a simple pool covered with thatch and with a sandy bottom – it's a much more pleasurable experience, although the water is ferociously hot. As women come here to wash and do laundry, it's best to go with a trusted local who knows the way.

Minibuses and yellow taxis travel throughout the day to Herat (80Afg, two hours) from the road with the large square pigeon towers. Transport west is best arranged from Herat – also a more preferable option for sleeping, although there are several chaikhanas along Obey's main bazaar street.

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