

Central Iran

ایران مرکزی



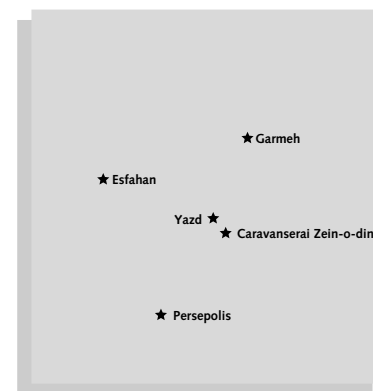
Ever since Cyrus the Great's dramatic rise from provincial overlord to ruler of the largest empire on earth, central Iran has been something of a showcase for the region's greatest civilisations. The unrelenting splendour and majesty of Esfahan, the refined elegance of Shiraz and the mud-brick antiquity of Yazd, Abyaneh and Kharanaq are a fascinating contrast, representing the fusion over 2500 years of myriad cultures and starkly different terrains. Then, of course, there's that monumental expression of artistic harmony commissioned by Darius I – Persepolis.

With so much on offer, it's no surprise that the towns of Iran's central provinces are where you'll probably spend the most time. But it's not just about ticking off the popular sights, because central Iran has many an unsung gem. Kashan, with its splendid mosques, gardens and magnificently restored traditional houses, is one. If you want to get off the beaten track there's the desert oasis of Garmeh, the cave village of of Garmeh, caravanserai stops such as Zein-o-din and Toudeshk, or the chance to camp with nomads in the Zagros Mountains.

Central Iran's people are as diverse as the places they live. In Qom they're conservative and religious, Shirazis are laid-back and fun-loving, and the Qashqa'i and Bakhtiari nomads live a lifestyle dictated by nature. Often you will experience the region's cultural richness and physical beauty in combination: sitting in the garden of Hafez's tomb discussing the ways of the world with a Shirazi medical student, perhaps; watching a nomad woman make yogurt by hand; or drinking tea with a carpet salesman in Esfahan's Imam Sq. Whatever it is you happen upon, central Iran is a place you'll remember for a long time.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch the sun set over Esfahan's many-splendoured **Imam Square** (p238) from the rooftop **Qeysarieh Tea Shop** (p249)
- Sit on the hill behind the sublime **Persepolis** (p279), just soaking it all up
- Haggle over a carpet or kilim in the vaulted arcades of Esfahan's **Bazar-e Bozorg** (p238) or **Imam Square** (p238)
- Lose yourself in the historic laneways of **Yazd** (p255), and find yourself in a traditional hotel
- Treat yourself to a dose of Safavid-era luxury in the wonderfully restored **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** (p267)
- Experience a real desert oasis at simple, silent **Garmeh** (p254)





QOM

☎ 0251 / pop 1,070,000 / elev 931m

Iran's second-holiest city after Mashhad, Qom (Ghom) is home to both the magnificent Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine and the headline clerics who have ruled the country since 1980. The genesis of the 1979 revolution can be credited to Qom, from where clerics had railed against the shah's regime since well before Ayatollah Khomeini was exiled in 1964. Today it remains one of Iran's most religious and conservative cities, where Shiite scholars and students come from across the world to study in the madrasahs.

The 'peoplescape' of Qom is absorbing in its contrasts. Mullahs and religious students mix with a steady flow of pilgrims, and everywhere you look women wear the head-to-toe chador. But even Qom is seeing some change, and the odd figure-hugging manteau and made-up face. Still, travellers should be discreet and dress conservatively, particularly around the Hazrat-e Masumeh. The best place to sit and watch all this is at Astane Square, behind the shrine.

قم

Despite the ever-present scaffolding the shrine is magnificent. And if you are not going to Mashhad and have an interest in the kind of devotion that is a hallmark of Shiism, then Qom is worth a quick visit. Note that little English is spoken in Qom.

Orientation

Hotels, restaurants and countless souvenir shops coalesce around the Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine and neighbouring Qom River. The 'river', however, is so dry that it has been concreted over and is usually used as a car park, market and late-night raceway. Buses stop at Haftdad Sq, 4.5km from the shrine, en route to and from Tehran.

Information

Bank Melli (Mar'ashi Najafi St) Slow as a wet week.
Coffeenet (Mo'allem St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 10am-10pm)
International Telephone Centre (Mar'ashi Najafi St; ☎ 7am-11pm)
Money Exchange (Mar'ashi Najafi St; ☎ 9am-8pm)
SabaCenter Internet (☎ 774 7711; A Khoshraftar Alley, off Mar'ashi Najafi St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 10am-10pm) Good place to meet young people.

Sights

Pilgrims come to Qom to see the shrine, and that's pretty much it. Southeast of the shrine the unremarkable **Khan-e Khomeini** (Ruhollah Sq), where Ayatollah Khomeini lived before being forced into exile, is of interest if you're staying in the midrange hotels nearby, though it's not open to visitors. It's the single-storey place with rendered mud walls.

HAZRAT-E MASUMEH حضرت معصومه

At the physical and spiritual centre of Qom is the **Hazrat-e Masumeh** (☎ 24hr), the burial place of Imam Reza's sister Fatemeh, who died and was interred here in the 9th century AD. It's an impressive sight, with one enormous tiled dome and another golden dome flanked by exquisite minarets. Much of what you see today was built under Shah Abbas I and the other Safavid kings who were anxious to establish their Shiite credentials and provide a counterweight to the sect's shrines at Karbala and Najaf (in modern-day Iraq), then under Ottoman occupation. The magnificent golden cupola was an embellishment built by Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah, and today's 'shahs', the Ayatollahs of Qom, have embarked on a massive project to expand the complex.

Nonmuslims are allowed into the grounds (women must wear a chador, available at entrance No 3 on Eram St), but not to see the shrine itself. However, several readers report wandering around either with an escort or alone. Cameras are banned unless you can convince the stewards otherwise.

Sleeping

Qom's sleeping options are conveniently gattered by budget range. Most budget places are in or near Haramnema Lane, a small alleyway just north of the Ahanchi Bridge, opposite the shrine. There are also some lower midrange places in the lane, but their foreign prices are so high that they aren't worth it – without a big discount. Shop around. Three new midrange places have opened about 2km southwest of the shrine. During religious festivals Qom is packed, and it's busier most Fridays.

The next two places are about a 2km walk from the shrine. A third, the larger Olympic Hotel, should open in 2008.

Mosaferkhaneh-ye Haram (Haramnema Lane; r per person IR50,000) There's no English spoken,

no English sign, and the rooms and shared bathrooms are uberbasic. But it's the cheapest in town and the welcome is warm. Popular with families, it's a reasonable choice for lone women travellers. Guests can use the utilitarian kitchen.

Etmian Hotel (☎ 660 9640; cnr Haramnema Lane & Imam Musa Sadr Blvd; s/d IR150,000/190,000) Some of the small but functional rooms with bright-pink squat bathrooms offer fine views of the holy shrine, and double-glazing keeps most of the noise out. There's a kitchen, and hefty discounts are possible.

Negin Hotel (☎ 663 0246; neginhotel2006@yahoo.com; Haramnema Lane; s/d/tr IR120,000/150,000/200,000; ☎) The Negin is a step up from its neighbours and fair value.

Aria Hotel (☎ 774 8450; Astane Sq; s/tw/apt IR150,000/200,000/500,000; ☎ ☎) With its front-row spot overlooking Astane Sq, the Aria's rooms, some with six beds, are good value, especially in low season. Popular with Arab pilgrims.

Safa Apartment Hotel (☎ 773 2499; Mo'allem St; r US\$49-80; ☎ ☎) It's busy, but the rooms are tired – and when we visited, staff seemed tired of seeing so many guests. Head here only if Ghasr is full. Don't confuse this with the budget Safa on Imam Musa Sadr Blvd.

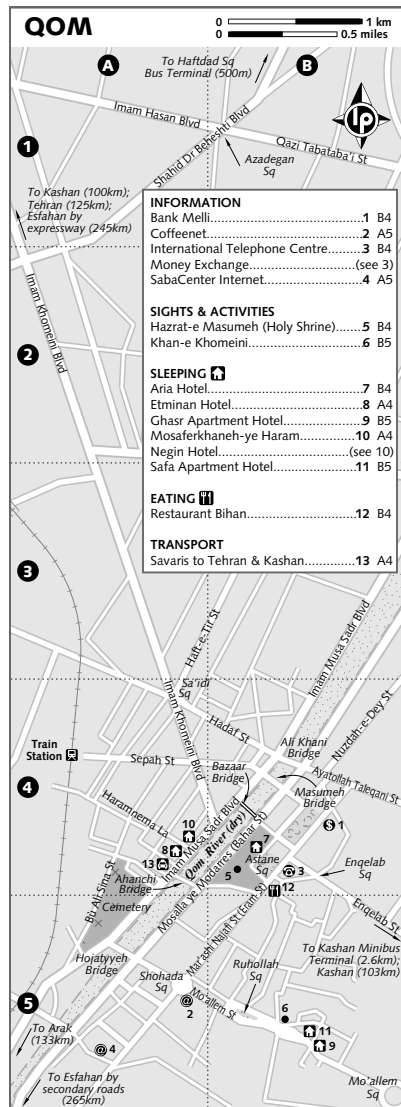
Ghasr Apartment Hotel (☎ 783 1151; fax 783 1154; Mo'allem St; ste/apt with breakfast US\$50/94; ☎ ☎) This new, modern-styled hotel has good-sized rooms and facilities at fair prices. Double beds are available; apartments have two bedrooms.

Eating

The dining in Qom is about as diverse as the range of faiths: standard Iranian cuisine with felaful to meet the Arab-pilgrim demand. Not surprisingly, most of the independent eateries are lined up along busy Mar'ashi Najafi St, opposite the shrine and square, and include *kababis* (kabab shops), pizza and barbecued chicken joints, drink shops and a couple of restaurants.

Qom is famous for *sohun*, a sinfully delicious pistachio-and-ginger brittle, which is often sold in attractive tin boxes and makes a good gift.

Restaurant Bihan (☎ 774 3433; Mar'ashi Najafi St; meals IR35,000; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6.30-11pm) Of the options along this strip the Bihan is consistently good, with tasty kababs and large serves of *zerehsh polo ba morgh* (chicken and rice with barberries).



here as they wait for the dozens of buses passing through en route to or from Tehran. Buses to Tehran (IR10,000, 1½ to two hours) stop several times an hour. Southbound services to major destinations are frequent, including Esfahan (IR20,000/30,000, five to six hours), Kermanshah (IR22,500/50,000, seven to eight hours), Yazd (IR22,500/35,000, eight hours) and Shiraz (IR35,000/65,000, 11 to 14 hours). Competition for seats can be positively unholy.

For Kashan, minibuses (IR7000, two hours) leave the Terminal-e Kashan at the eastern end of Enqelab St roughly every hour, or pick up a big bus (IR10,000, 1½ hours), at Haftdad Sq.

Savaris to Tehran and Kashan leave from Haftdad Sq and, more conveniently, from the end of the Ahanchi Bridge opposite the holy shrine.

TRAIN

Trains run from **Qom train station** (☎ 441 7151) to Tehran (2nd class IR4250, 2½ hours) a couple of times a day, but most people opt for a bus.

Getting Around

Most sights are easily reached on foot. To get to or from Haftdad Sq or Terminal-e Kashan, ask for a shuttle taxi (approximately IR1500) near the Ahanchi Bridge or go to the corner of Imam Khomeini Blvd and Hadaf St.

KASHAN

☎ 0361 / pop 320,000 / elev 935m
Kashan and its surrounds have been home to human settlements since at least the 4th millennium BC. However, much of what is known of Kashan's history is interwoven with legend (see A Sting in the Tail, opposite). What is certain is that Kashan was twice destroyed by invading armies. The city walls were rebuilt, and during the Seljuk period (AD 1051–1220) it became famous for its textiles, pottery and tiles.

Shah Abbas I was so enamoured with this delightful oasis city on the edge of the Dasht-e Kavir that he insisted on being buried here rather than in Esfahan. Much of Kashan was destroyed by an earthquake in 1779 but the subsequent Qajar period saw building on a lavish scale. The most notable survivors are the fine covered bazaar and

A STING IN THE TAIL

While there is no written history of Kashan before the Seljuk period, there is an entertaining oral history. One story has the Bible's 'Three Wise Men' setting out from Kashan to pay their respects to the newborn Christ, an event that is distinctly possible given the 'Wise Men' were magis (Zoroastrian priests), hence the 'Adoration of the Magi'. Nearby Saveh also claims the three.

Another legend tells of Abu Musa al-Ashari's novel method of taking the city during the Arab invasion of the 7th century AD. When the Arab general found the city's walls impregnable, he ordered his men to gather (somehow?) thousands of scorpions from the surrounding deserts. Armed with these stingers, he attacked the city by having them thrown over the walls. According to the tale the poor Kashanis, who could never have expected an attack of such diabolical genius, soon capitulated.

several meticulously restored mansions that have become synonymous with the city. The bazaar is deceptively large and has an enchantingly lethargic atmosphere that serves as the perfect counterfoil to the frantic bustle of Tehran and the sightseeing intensity of Esfahan.

Accommodation options might be limited and the populace very conservative, but you'll still need a very good excuse for skipping Tehran – it just might be one of the unexpected highlights of your trip.

Orientation

The centre of town is Kamal-ol-Molk Sq, from where most sites can be reached on foot. For sites along the northeast–southwest main road to Fin Gardens (variously known as Fin Rd and Amir Kabir Rd), you will need a take a taxi or take a bus. The bus terminal is located about 2.5km northeast of the centre but most buses stop instead at Valiasr Sq.

Information

Amir Kabir Exchange (☎ 444 0616; Mir Ahmad St; ☎ 8am–2pm Sat–Thu) Short hours but no paperwork.
Bank Tejarat (Ayatollah Kashani St) Changes money... slowly.
Central City Cafenet (Shahid Mohammad Ali-ye-Raja'i St; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am–10pm)
Milad Hospital (Dr Beheshti St) Try here first.
Police (☎ 110)
Safar Doostan Travel Agency (☎ 445 7040; Ayatollah Kashani St; ☎ 8.30am–8pm Sat–Thu)
Sepanta Coffeenet (Ayatollah Kashani St; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 2–9pm Sat–Thu) Run by helpful women; popular with young Kashanis. It's unsigned, downstairs in a green-tiled building.
Telephone office (Abazar St; ☎ 8am–2pm & 4–9pm Sat–Thu, 10am–1pm Fri) International calls at the usual rates.

TOURS

Kashan is full of driver-guides looking to take you to Abyaneh (usually about IR150,000), Abyaneh and Natanz (IR200,000), or those two and on to Esfahan (IR250,000).

Ahmad Pourseyedi (☎ 533 0321, 0913 264 3012; ahmad_pourseyedi@yahoo.com) 'Charming old rogue' Ahmad's septuagenarian legs have seen better days and his history is sometimes awry, but he's delightful company as he recalls anecdotes while driving sedately around the Kashani hinterlands.

Cheap Taxi Reza (☎ 444 9581, 0913 361 1136) Reza Shoghi is a nice guy, a safe driver and has enough English.

Mahdi Galekhan (☎ 0913 261 3530; mgalekhan@yahoo.com) Works in historical houses, generous and engaging.

Mohammad Fatehi (☎ 0913 363 1796; mr_fatehi2006@yahoo.com) Easygoing, very knowledgeable and reliable. Also works in historical houses.

Sights

BAZAAR (☎ Sat–Thu) Kashan's **bazaar** (☎ Sat–Thu) is one of the most enjoyable in Iran. Busy but not hectic, traditional but with a wide variety of goods, large enough to surprise but not to get lost in, it is a great place to wander for a couple of hours, especially before lunch and in the late afternoon. The multidomed roof of the bazaar dates from the 19th century, but the site has been the centre of trade in Kashan for much longer. If you step off the main thoroughfare, you'll find yourself in ancient caravanserais, mosques or the refreshingly unrenovated Hammam-e Khan (p230).

The best way to appreciate the extent of the bazaar is to climb to its roof. There are tiny staircases throughout and it's fun to ask a *bazari* (bazaar shopkeeper) to lead you up. If that doesn't work, head to the magnificent **Timche-ye Amin al Dowleh**, a high dome with

Getting There & Away

Transport to Qom is packed on Fridays and on any religious holiday.

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

Qom's main bus terminal is actually a huge roundabout in the north of town called Haftdad Sq. Touts pester potential passengers

lavish interior mouldings completed in 1868. Beneath the dome, in a square dominated by carpet shops, ask the guys at the Chaykhaneh Caravan Sara (p230) to show you to the roof (they might ask for a payment, but not if you eat there). You can climb all the way to the top of the dome, from where the views over the brown town and bulbous roofscape of

the bazaar are inspired. Look for the just-dyed wool drying in the sun.

TRADITIONAL HOUSES خانه های سنتی
Hiding behind the high mud-brick walls of Kashan are hundreds of once-grand traditional houses. Built during the 19th century, most have long-since been carved up

or are literally turning to dust, but several have been restored and, mercifully for the city, the idea is catching. Those that can be visited are monuments to the importance of Kashan as a Qajar-era commercial hub, embellished with fine stucco panels, ostentatious stained glass and lofty *badgirs* (windtowers), all set around a series of interlinked courtyards.

Khan-e Ameriha خانه عامری ها

The oldest of Kashan's restored houses, **Khan-e Ameriha** (Alavi St; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-sunset) is also the most impressive. It was built at the end of the 18th century when Agha Ameri decided his father's house wasn't nearly big enough for one of the country's wealthiest men and needed a little extension. Ameri was Kashan's governor and made his money supplying the shah with war material and providing security along the trade route between Tehran and Kerman. By the time work finished, his was the largest home in Persia, encompassing a staggering seven courtyards over 9000 sq metres.

All this, however, was fast returning to dust by the time restoration work began in 1999. So far more than €2 million has been spent, and one by one the courtyards and surrounding buildings are returning to their extravagant best. Highlights include the two *hammams* (bathhouses), one of which was built specifically for local pregnant women, and the *naghieb* (mask room), which leads to a secret escape tunnel...and ask to be let onto the roof.

Parts of the home should have been open as a top-end traditional hotel in the next few years.

Khan-e Tabatabaei خانه طباطبایی

Built around 1880 by wealthy carpet merchant Seyyed Ja'far Tabatabaei, the **Khan-e Tabatabaei** (☎ 422 0032; off Alavi St; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-sunset) is renowned for its intricate stone reliefs, fine stucco and wonderful mirror and stained-glass work; photographers will love it. Larger than the Borujerdi house, it covers 4730 sq metres, has 40 rooms and more than 200 doors. It consists of three sections: the *andaruni* (internal area), where family members lived; the *biruni* (external area), used for entertaining

guests; and the *khadameh* (servants' quarters). They are set around four courtyards, the largest of which boasts a fountain pool. From mid-afternoon (depending on the month), sunlight and stained glass combine to bathe some rooms in brilliant colour.

To get here, walk south past the Khan-e Borujerdi towards the blue conical tower of the Imamzadeh-ye Sultan Mir Ahmad, turn right and the entrance is on the left. There is a handicraft shop selling locally made silks, but the more alluring courtyard teahouse has been closed down.

Khan-e Borujerdi خانه بروجردی ها

Legend has it that when Sayyed Jafar Natanzi, a merchant known as Borujerdi, met Sayyed Jafar Tabatabaei to discuss taking his daughter's hand in marriage, Agha Tabatabaei set one condition: his daughter must be able to live in a home at least as lovely as his own. The result – finished some 18 years later – was the **Khan-e Borujerdi** (off Alavi St; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-sunset).

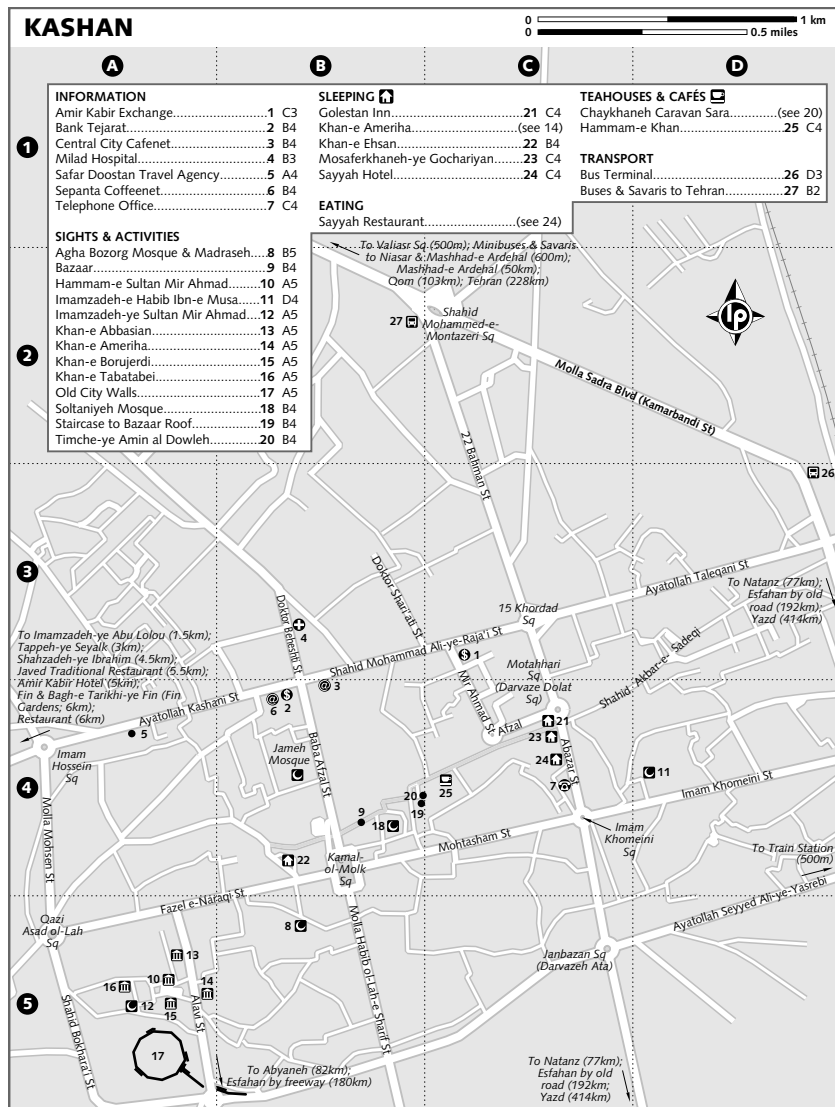
The home originally consisted of two sections, an *andaruni* and a *biruni*, but today only the *andaruni* is open to the public. What you see is an ornately decorated courtyard, laid out around a central fountain pool. At its far end is a two-storey reception hall sumptuously decorated with splendid motifs above the *iwān* entrance, intricate stalactite mouldings, fine glass and mirror work and frescoes painted by Kamal ol-Molk, the foremost Iranian artist of the time. In one of the smaller adjoining rooms, a carpet design is carved on the ceiling.

If you ask nicely you might be allowed to climb to the roof for views over the courtyard and the distinctive six-sided, domed *badgirs*, which have become the symbol of Kashan.

Follow the signs from Alavi St up a small incline opposite the Khan-e Ameriha.

Khan-e Abbasian خانه عباسیان

Famous for its ground-breaking design, the **Khan-e Abbasian** (off Alavi St; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-sunset) is a bewildering complex of six buildings spread over several levels. Unusually, the numerous courtyards are designed to enhance the sense of space by becoming larger as they step up, culminating in an open courtyard on top. The high porticos and reception halls are decorated as



extravagantly as you'd expect, with the usual plaster reliefs, fine mirror work and exceptionally beautiful and detailed stained-glass windows.

It's down a lane parallel to Alavi St, starting opposite the Sultan Mir Ahmad Hammam.

HAMMAM-E SULTAN MIR AHMAD

حمام سلطان میراحمد

A few metres from the entrance to the Khan-e Borujerdi, **Hammam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad** (☎ 422 0038; off Alavi St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5pm, to 7pm summer) is a superb example of an Iranian bathhouse, built around 450 years ago. A recent restoration has stripped away 17 layers of plaster (look just inside the second room to see them) to reveal the original *sarough*, a type of plaster made of milk, egg white, soy flour and lime, which is said to be stronger than cement. There is usually an English-speaking guide at the door who can show you around. The *hammam* no longer operates as a teahouse.

OLD CITY WALLS

دیوارهای قدیمی شهر

As one of the few remnants of the ancient city of Kashan, this circular **wall** and an attractive park to the southeast are worth a quick look if you're visiting the nearby traditional houses. Enter the interior of the circular walls from the southeast and climb the northeastern part of the wall for some city views.

AGHA BOZORG MOSQUE & MADRASEH

مسجد و مدرسه آقا بزرگ

Arguably the finest Islamic complex in Kashan and one of the best of the mid-19th century, **Agha Bozorg Mosque & Madrasah** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm, to 5pm summer) is

famous for its precise architecture, including four storeys beginning in a large sunken courtyard, an austere dome and unusual lofty *badgirs* above the entrance. It also has a fine portal and mihrab (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) at the back. The imposing dome is flanked by two minarets adorned with coloured tiles in geometric designs. Quranic inscriptions and mosaics stand out against the mud-brick used for much of the construction. The wooden front door is said to have as many studs as there are verses in the Quran.

IMAMZADEH-E HABIB IBN-E MUSA

امامزاده حبیب ابن موسی

The revered Shah Abbas I might well be turning in his grave at the senseless destruction wrought on what was once a fine Seljuk-era **shrine** (off Imam Khomeini St). Shah Abbas chose to be buried here because he revered the saint Habib Ibn-e Musa. The king's low, black porphyry tombstone is near the shrine's entrance, but almost everything else from the original tomb has been cleared away and replaced by a bigger, uglier concrete monstrosity.

Two of the highlights, a magnificent lustre mihrab and a carpet woven for the shah's tomb, are in the National Museum of Iran (p104).

SOLTANIYEH MOSQUE

مسجد سلطانیه

Lost in the midst of the labyrinthine bazaar is the Seljuk-era **Soltaniyeh Mosque**. The current structure was built in 1808 by Fath Ali Shah and now houses a madrasah, which is not open to women.

ALONG THE FIN ROAD

There are several sights worth a quick look on the road to Fin Garden. If you decide to walk, it's all downhill if you start at Fin. Otherwise, jumping on and off buses is easy enough, or hire a taxi.

Imamzadeh-ye Abu Lolou

امامزاده ابو لولو

Off the left of the road as you come from Kashan, the **Imamzadeh-ye Abu Lolou** (Amir Kabir Rd; ☎ 9am-4pm) is the shrine to the man believed to be the assassin of Omar, the second Muslim caliph. It dates to the Seljuk or Mongol periods, though it has been heavily renovated since. The shrine is notable for its fine, slender dome.

Shahzadeh-ye Ibrahim

شاهزاده ابراهیم

The delightful **Shahzadeh-ye Ibrahim** (Amir Kabir Rd; ☎ 9am-4pm) shrine was built in 1894 and boasts European-style painted ceilings, colourful tiles, tall minarets and a pretty courtyard. The conical, tiled roof is distinctive to this area and chances are you'll have seen it on posters long before you arrive. It's clearly visible from the main road to Fin.

Tappeh-ye Seyalk (Sialk)

تپه سیلک

One of the oldest and richest archaeological sites in central Iran, the **Tappeh-ye Seyalk** (Sialk, Seyalk Mound; off Amir Kabir Rd; ☎ 7.30am-sunset) has given up a plethora of interesting pottery pieces, metal tools and domestic implements made from stone, clay and bone. They date from as early as the 4th millennium BC. More significant, perhaps, is the structure itself – what is emerging from the dust is clearly a ziggurat (stepped pyramidal temple), and some Iranians are claiming this predates those of the Mesopotamians.

It is still a (seasonal) working dig and, while visitors are welcomed, there are few facilities. Most finds have been moved to museums, including the National Museum of Iran in Tehran (p104) and the Louvre in Paris. There's no charge, but if you are shown around, a tip is appreciated.

Seyalk is halfway between Kashan and Fin – that's 4.5km from either – on the north side of the road.

Bagh-e Tarikhi-ye Fin (Fin Garden)

باغ تاریخی فین

Designed for Shah Abbas I, **Bagh-e Tarikhi-ye Fin** (Fin Garden; Amir Kabir Rd; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-sunset) is a classical Persian vision of paradise and is renowned as one of the finest gardens in Iran. It's famous for its spring water, which flows into the garden via the **Lasegah**, an octagonal pool behind the garden. From here the water, which has unusually high levels of mercury, is channelled through several pools and fountains, watering the garden's orchards and tall trees, before continuing on down the road in *jubs* (canals, pronounced 'joobs').

At the centre of the garden is **Shotorgalu-ye Safavi**, Abbas' two-storey pavilion. At the rear is the Shotorgalu-ye Qajari, built by the Qajars, with ornately painted ceilings and walls. Nearby is a delightful **teahouse** (☎ 8am-4pm, to 6pm summer), which sells cheap tea and kababs.

But it is the **bathroom** that is most historically significant as the place where Iranian nationalist hero Amir Kabir was murdered. Mirza Taqi Khan, known as Amir Kabir, served as prime minister under Nasir od-Din Shah from 1848. He was a moderniser who instituted significant change, especially in the fields of education and administration. But his popularity proved unpopular in the royal court and the shah's mother eventually persuaded her son that he had to go. Amir Kabir was imprisoned in Fin Garden and eventually murdered in the bathroom, though some say he slashed his own wrists.

The gardens are in the village of Fin, 9km southwest of central Kashan at the end of Amir Kabir St. You can get here by shuttle taxi (IR2000), taxi *dar baste* (closed door; IR10,000) or minibus (IR500) from central Kashan.

Sleeping

Kashan has so few hotels and so little competition that the overall standard is shockingly low and value for money is poor. There is, however, some cause for hope, with the city's first traditional hotel having opened in 2007. The cheapest places can be found around Motahhari Sq (Darvaze Dolat Sq) near the entrance to the bazaar.

Mosaferkhaneh-ye Gochariyan (☎ 444 5495; Abazar St; s/d IR40,000/80,000) This bare-bones *mosaferkhaneh* has small, Spartan rooms with rock-hard beds. The share bathrooms could be cleaner and no English is spoken, but it's cheap.

Golestan Inn (☎ 444 6793; Motahhari Sq; s/d IR100,000/150,000) The friendly owners don't speak much English, but the location and small, primitive, but clean, rooms keep it popular with backpackers, despite the typically hard beds and shared bathrooms. Some rooms have vaulted ceilings and windows looking down on the bazaar.

Khan-e Ehsan (☎ /fax 444 6833, 0913 276 2561; www.kajweb.com; off Fazel-e Navaji St; ☎) At long last Kashan has its first traditional hotel, and it was worth the wait. The house is run by friendly Mr Sater, who aims to use money from the rooms to help fund his NGO, which promotes the arts, and is based in the house. There is a small performance space (poetry the night we stayed) and a museum, and staying here is a great way to meet young, educated Iranians. Rooms come in a variety

WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?

As you wander around the narrow streets of Kashan look carefully at the doors. Most have two knockers: one round and fat, the other long and thin. These were designed to give off different sounds so that those in the house would be able to tell whether a man or woman was knocking and so decide who should go to the door – vital in a society where women lived in *purdah* (in seclusion or behind a veil).

of shapes and sizes, some with raw, arched earthen ceilings, others more modern. We were the very first guests and prices had yet to be set, but expect to pay about €7 to €10 for a dorm bed and €20 to €35 for a room. It's easy to miss, down a small lane opposite the street leading to Agha Bozorg Mosque. All up, *kheyli khub* (very good)!

Sayyah Hotel (☎ 444 4535; www.sayyahhotel.com; Abazar St; s/tw US\$27/33, r without shower US\$20/27; (P) (♿) (♿)) Sayyah is well located and has small, green, uninspiring rooms, some of which have fine views of the old city. Service varies from friendly and engaging to disinterested, depending on who is working. Prices include breakfast.

Amir Kabir Hotel (☎ 530 4091-95; fax 530 4090; Amir Kabir Rd; s/tw US\$35/53; (P) (♿) (♿)) Way out near Fin Gardens, the overly large Amir Kabir claims to have had a makeover but if that's true then they should be asking for a refund. The rooms are still tired and overpriced, though discounts are usually possible. Minibuses to town run past the front door, or a taxi will cost IR10,000.

Khan-e Ameriha (Alavi St; (♿)) When completed, parts of this wondrous traditional house will be open as a lavishly furnished and decorated traditional hotel. Expect to pay more than US\$100 a night. Also see p227.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

With the much-loved Delpazir recently closed, finding a memorable (for the right reasons) meal in Kashan can be a trial. If something good opens, do let us know.

Sayyah Restaurant (☎ 444 4535; Abazar St; meals IR40,000; (♿) 7am-9pm) Under the hotel of the same name, the standard Iranian fare here gets mixed reviews but none of them has criticised the size of the serves.

The garden restaurants lining the road before Fin Garden are the best places to eat and are hugely popular with Kashanis, especially in the evenings. Most have water running soothingly through the eating area and the whole experience is quite social.

Jawed Traditional Restaurant (☎ 533 7123; Amir Kabir Rd; meals IR35,000-60,000; (♿) 11.30am-3pm & 6-11pm) Arguably the best of the garden restaurants, Jawed serves several varieties of delicious kababs and some less meaty dishes, all washed down with *chay* (tea) and *qalyan* (water pipe).

TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS

Hammam-e Khan (☎ 445 2572; Bazaar; (♿) 8am-9pm) Down a few stairs from the bazaar (look for the sign), this old bathhouse is now a genuinely local teahouse, complete with tweeting birds, neon lights, disco ball, plastic-covered cushions and...locals (plus the odd Iranian tourist). Be sure to specify if you only want tea, not the accompanying biscuits and dates, which cost extra.

Chaykhaneh Caravan Sara (Timche-ye Amin al Dowleh, in the Bazaar; (♿) 8am-8pm) This tiny place under the cavernous dome is rightly famous for its richly flavoured *dizi* (soup-stew meal) and tea, and you can go onto the roof (buy something first).

Getting There & Away

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

As with Qom, most buses that pass through Kashan are going to or from Tehran. They are supposed to stop at the **bus terminal** (Molla Sadra Blvd) north of the city but often will leave from Montazeri Sq, where an office on the south corner sells tickets. There are regular Volvo services to Esfahan (IR21,000, four hours) and Tehran (IR25,000, 3½ hours) via Qom (IR10,000, one hour), and *mahmooly* (normal, usually old Mercedes) buses leave less frequently for about half the price.

Minibuses to Qom (IR7000, two hours) leave from the southwestern corner of Vali-asr Sq (Madkhal Sq; it's the one with the New Age ziggurat in the middle) about every hour. You might also find *savaris* to Tehran here.

TRAIN

There are at least three trains a day between Kashan and Tehran (IR16,500, 3½ hours, 217km), but they generally pass in the middle of the night. There are also daily trains to Esfahan (four hours, 270km), and a daily nonluxury service to Kerman (10 hours, 711km), via Yazd (six hours, 475km), which passes Kashan at about 9pm and arrives in Kerman after 7am.

The **train station** (☎ 446 0010; Molla Sadra Blvd) is about 2km north of the city centre.

Getting Around

Taxis, shuttle taxis and buses run regularly between Fin and 15 Khordad Sq, or a taxi within town should cost about IR6000. For longer-term drivers, see Tours (p225).

AROUND KASHAN

Several villages can be visited on day trips from Kashan. The most interesting are detailed in the following sections, though if you want to get off the track, **Niasar** (at 1710m above sea level) is an easy 35km *savari* or minibus trip away in a picturesque mountain setting. The sights include a well-preserved Sassanian-era fire temple, a unique, Parthian-era cave built as a Mithraist temple, the Niasar waterfall and famous rose fields, which bloom during late spring.

About 50km west of Kashan, **Mashhad-e Ardehal** is home to a once-magnificent Seljuk-era tomb that has suffered badly at the hands of what one reader accurately described as a 'megalomaniac religious building program'. Shame. The tomb is for Sultan Ali ibn Mohammad, the son of the Fifth Imam, who was murdered here. It's only really worth the trip for the carpet-washing ceremony (see below).

Namak Lake (Salt Lake) is about 60km east of Mashhad at the western edge of the Dasht-e Kavir. Guides in Kashan offer desert day trips to sand dunes near **Maranjab** (where there is also a restored caravanserai) and the cracked white surface of the lake.

Abyaneh

آبیانه
☎ 0362 / pop – a few old ladies most of the time / elev 2235m

The ancient village of Abyaneh is the perfect antidote to Iran's bustling, traffic-clogged cities. Serenely situated at the foot of **Mt Kar-kas** (3899m), Abyaneh's steep, twisting lanes of mud and stone wind through a maze of

red mud-brick houses with lattice windows and fragile wooden balconies. It's testament to both the age and isolation of Abyaneh that the elderly residents speak Middle Persian, an earlier incarnation of Farsi that largely disappeared centuries ago.

The village is at least 1500 years old and faces east across a picturesque valley. It was built this way to maximise the sun it receives and minimise the effects of howling gales in winter. And if you come here in winter you'll understand why – it's freezing! In summer, however, it's refreshingly cool and Abyaneh is most lively, filled with residents returning from winter in Tehran and tourists haggling with colourfully clad, toothless old women over the price of dried apples (they take no prisoners).

Abyaneh is best appreciated by just wandering, but do look for the 14th-century **Imamzadeh-ye Yahya** with its conical, blue-tiled roof, and the **Zeyaratgah shrine** with its tiny pool and views. Probably the most beautiful building is the 11th-century **Jameh Mosque** (Masjed-e Jameh), with its walnut-wood mihrab and ancient carvings. Abyaneh's houses are mainly two-storey; people live downstairs in winter and upstairs in summer.

It's fun to cross the river and climb up to the high walls of a **castle**, from where the views (and photos) of the valley and the village are spectacular.

SLEEPING & EATING

Abyaneh Hotel (☎ 436 2223-25; fax 436 2226; s/tw/tr with breakfast IR330,000/550,000/690,000; (P) (♿) (♿)) Located on a hill above Abyaneh, this

THE CARPET-WASHING CEREMONY OF ARDEHAL

On the second Friday of the Iranian month of Mehr (usually early October, unless there is a clashing religious festival), the *qali shuran* (carpet-washing ceremony) is held at Mashhad-e Ardehal. The ceremony commemorates the assassination of Sultan Ali ibn Mohammad, the son of the Fifth Imam, who had settled in Fin (near Kashan) to bring Shia Islam to the people. After living in Fin and Ardahal (during summer) for several years, jealous officials plotted to assassinate him because he had become too powerful. He was attacked, but with support arriving from Fin was able to hold out for 10 days. Legend has it that it was only concluded after the desperate plotters sent 40 naked women ahead of them. It was too much for the Sultan, who led his men away to begin praying on carpets. They were murdered as they prayed. Later, followers from Fin placed the Sultan's body on a carpet, washed it in accordance with tradition and buried it. They also washed the carpet.

On the anniversary of his murder, thousands of locals, joined by visitors from Kashan, Qom and as far away as Yazd, carry a symbolic carpet from the crypt, beat it to symbolise their hatred of the murderers, and then wash it in a local spring.

multi-storey place is the only hotel and restaurant in town. It's taken years to complete and the finished product is very comfortable. Rooms are modern, well-equipped and some have panoramic views, and the family who runs it are friendly. Rates are high, but given how the place is often empty, negotiation is eminently possible. The huge restaurant (open noon to 4pm and 8pm to 10pm) serves a long menu of generous Persian dishes (IR35,000 to IR70,000).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Abyaneh is 82km from Kashan and not easy to reach. Minibuses (IR6500) run directly between Abyaneh and Kashan once or twice a day, depending on demand. The bus usually returns to Kashan in the early afternoon, or you could try hitching back. Alternatively, take a minibus from Kashan towards Natanz and tell the driver to let you off at the turn-off. Then wait for a lift from whatever is passing for the remaining 22km. The Natanz nuclear facility is near here; *do not* get caught taking photos of it.

Most people just hire a taxi. See p225 for recommended driver-guides; they charge about IR150,000 for the trip plus two or three hours in Abyaneh.

Natanz

نطنز

☎ 0362 / pop 12,000 / elev 1655m

The old, well-treed village of Natanz, on the lower slopes of Mt Karkas, has two main attractions – neither of which is an underground uranium enrichment plant, which is several kilometres away. The magnificent **Jameh Mosque** (Masjed-e Jameh; ☎ 8am-noon & 2pm-sunset) and **Imamzadeh-ye Abd al-Samad** stand side by side in what was an important early Islamic complex. The tomb belongs to a renowned local Sufi mystic of the 11th century, while the mosque is one of the best-preserved of all Ilkhanid-era buildings. The highlight is a tall, exquisite portal with turquoise, black-and-white tiled calligraphy that is satisfyingly symmetrical without being over the top. The nearby entrance to the mosque has an intricately carved wooden door. It's a good 2km walk (mainly downhill) from where the buses usually stop; walk north, turn east at the roundabout, then north again at the tree-lined avenue; or just ask '*koja imamzadeh?*'.

Natanz's two hotels are usually quieter than a small-town mortuary.

Hotel Shahin (☎ 424 2402; s/tw US\$15/30; 🏠), in a small square about 300m from the Jameh Mosque, is a modest little place with clean, bright rooms and a welcoming owner.

Hotel Saraban (☎ /fax 424 2603; r US\$30; 🏠), on the main road near where the buses stop, has unexciting but functional rooms, most with a balcony. You'll want to bargain, but it will almost certainly be a futile endeavour. There's a similarly unexciting restaurant in the hotel and *kababis* nearby.

Regular slow buses between Esfahan (IR11,000, two hours) and Kashan (IR6000, one hour) pass through Natanz – wait outside the Saraban.

ESFAHAN

اصفهان

☎ 0311 / pop 1,630,000 / elev 1574m

Esfahan is Iran's masterpiece, the jewel of ancient Persia and one of the finest cities in the Islamic world. The exquisite blue mosaic tiles of Esfahan's Islamic buildings, its expansive bazaar and its gorgeous bridges demand as much of your time as you can spare. It is a city for walking, getting lost in the bazaar, dozing in beautiful gardens, and drinking tea and chatting to locals in the marvellous teahouses. More than anything else, though, Esfahan is a place for savouring the high refinements of Persian culture most evident in and around Imam Sq – the Imam Mosque, Sheikh Lotfolah Mosque, Ali Qapu Palace and Chehel Sotun Palace.

Such is Esfahan's grandeur that it is easy to agree with the famous 16th-century half-rhyme 'Esfahan nesf-e jahan' (Esfahan is half the world). Robert Byron was slightly more geographically specific when he ranked 'Esfahan among those rarer places, like Athens or Rome, which are the common refreshment of humanity'. Today it is a Unesco World Heritage site.

There are, however, some less-than-refreshing elements to the city of Esfahan. This is the country's third-largest city and capital of Esfahan province, and the outskirts are home to plenty of heavy industry, including a much-discussed nuclear facility. So Esfahan has traffic jams and air pollution; the long-awaited underground railway should help – if indeed it is ever finished.

History

Little is known of Esfahan's ancient history, but the Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan (Esfahan Fire Temple; p244) and pillars of the Shahrestan Bridge (p243), both from the Sassanid period, attest to its longevity. The Buyid period saw an explosion of construction and by the late 10th century the walled city of Esfahan was home to dozens of mosques and hundreds of wealthy homes. In 1047 the Seljuks made Esfahan their capital and during the next 180 years it was adorned with the magnificently geometric Seljuk style of architecture, several prominent parts of which remain.

The Mongols put an end to that, and it wasn't until the glorious reign of the Safavid Shah Abbas I (also revered as Shah Abbas the Great), which began in 1587, that Esfahan was again Iran's premier city. After moving the capital from Qazvin to Esfahan, Abbas set about transforming it into a city worthy of an empire at its peak. His legacy is the incomparable Imam Sq (p238) and artistic advances – particularly in carpet weaving – that were celebrated and envied as far away as Europe. Subsequent Safavid rulers also contributed to Esfahan's skyline, but little more than a century after Abbas' death the dynasty was finished and the capital transferred first to Shiraz and later Tehran.

Orientation

The main street, tree-lined Chahar Bagh (Four Gardens), was built in 1597 and was once lined with many palaces and the four gardens after which it is named. Although it's over 5km long, most travellers base themselves along the middle section of the street, called Chahar Bagh Abbas St, between Si-o-Seh Bridge (Pol-e Si-o-Seh) and Takhti Junction. Most of the sights, shops, offices and hotels are within easy walking distance from this part of Esfahan. The few outlying attractions are easily visited by shuttle or private taxi.

The Zayandeh River starts in the Zagros Mountains, flows east through the heart of Esfahan and eventually peters out in the Dasht-e Kavir. It separates the older and low-rise northern part of the city from the Armenian quarter in Jolfa, southwest of Si-o-Seh Bridge, and the fast-growing southern part of town where there is no restriction on building heights.

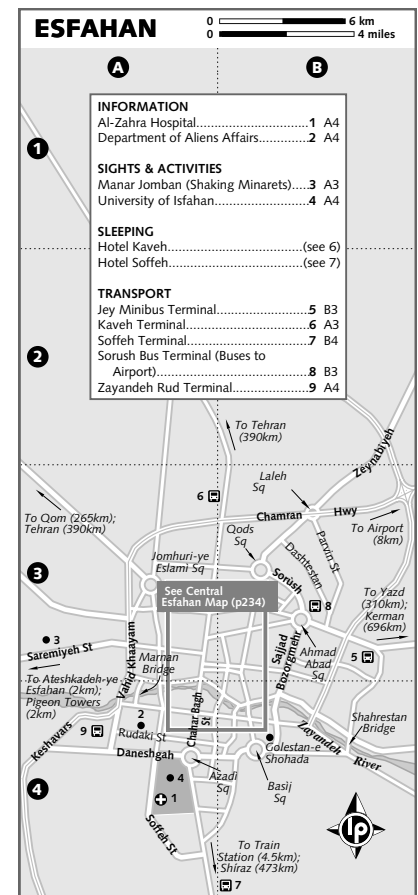
The main Kaveh bus terminal is a few kilometres north of town along Chahar Bagh St; the smaller Soffeh terminal in the south caters to more southerly destinations.

MAPS

Gita Shenasi's *New Map of Esfahan* (IR15,000; 2006) is available in bookstores. There is also a free tourist map available at the tourist information office (see p236) in several languages.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Bookshops in the complex opposite the Ab-basi Hotel also sell a few English-language books on Iran.



ESFAHAN IN...

Two days

Start by taking the **'Half of the World' Walking Tour** (p245), which will take up most of your first day. Dinner at the traditional **Sofreh Khaneh Sonnat** (p248) on the square is a good option. On the second day, head back to **Imam Square** (p238) in the morning for a more leisurely look around and to suss out the **carpet shops** (p250) for something that might look good on your floor. After lunch, wander down to the **Zayandeh River** (p242) for a bridge-appreciation walk, stopping for tea and poetry recitals along the way.

Four days

On the third day, take the bus out to **Manar Jomban** (Shaking Minarets; p244), then walk up to the **Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan** (p244) for a (hopefully clear) view over Esfahan. Walk back into town along the riverbank, watching the cloth-makers drying their wares on the river-bed and stopping for tea with the locals. Get back to **Jolfa** (p243) in time to see the striking frescoes of **Vank Cathedral** (p244), then spend the evening eating in the relaxed Armenian quarter.

On day four, just chill out in the square, on a bridge, in the garden around the **Hasht Behesht Palace** (p242); or in your favourite teahouse with a book, or renew your visa.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (Map p238; ☎ 221 3840, 221 6831; Imam Sq; 🕒 8.30am-5pm Sat-Thu & 2.30-6pm Fri) Under the Ali Qapu Palace; helpful English-speaking staff have maps and brochures on city and province. The Esfahan Tourist Guides Association operates from here; see Tours (below).

TOURS

Several carpet shops offer trips into the Zagros Mountains to visit nomads. In our experience, however, none is worth recommending specifically. Be very specific about what you want to see and what you're paying for, and don't pay more than half upfront. The following are probably better options: **Azade Kazemi** (☎ 0913 327 9626; azadekazemi@hotmail.com) Highly knowledgeable Spanish- and English-speaking guide.

Esfahan Tourist Guides Association (Map p238; ☎ 221 3840, 221 6831; Imam Sq) Based at the tourist information office; has 150 guides speaking English, Spanish, Arabic, French and German. Guides can lead a variety of trips; contact them a day ahead if you want anything more than a local day trip. Full day's guiding costs IR210,000.

Maryam Shafiei (☎ 0913 326 6127; marie13572002@yahoo.fr) French- and English-speaking guide with a good reputation; Esfahan and beyond from €20 a day.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Iran Travel & Tourism Tour (Map p234; ☎ 222 3010; irantravel1964@yahoo.com; Shahid Medani St) Opposite Abbasi Hotel; efficient English-speaking staff book plane, train and even ferry tickets. Car hire and local tours can be arranged (per day with driver and guide IR280,000).

VISA EXTENSIONS

Department of Aliens Affairs (Map p233; ☎ English-speaking officers at Tourist Police 221 5953; Rudaki St; 🕒 7am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7am-noon Thu) Esfahan is not the express extension it once was. The Department of Aliens Affairs is in a large, drab-looking government building. Show your passport at the gate, pick up the paperwork at the office in the courtyard and follow pointed fingers from there. It normally takes three days, but several travellers have reported getting same-day service if they arrived by 8am and showed a pre-booked plane/bus ticket. To get here, walk or take a shuttle taxi 1.7km south from the southern end of Si-o-Seh Bridge (IR700) to Shariati St, then take another shuttle taxi (IR1500) 3km west. The building is about 400m after the third major intersection and a slight bend right and left, on the right (north) side of the road. Alternatively, get the Tourist Police on Chahar Bagh Abbasi St to help – they can put you on a bus that stops outside the office or give a taxi directions; very helpful! For more on extending visas, see 'More Time, Please' (p395).

Sights

These sights are listed roughly north to south.

JAMEH MOSQUE

The **Jameh Mosque** (Masjed-e Jameh; Map p234; Al-lameh Majlesi St; admission IR5000; 🕒 8-11am & 1-5pm) is a veritable museum of Islamic architecture and still a working mosque. Within a couple of hours you can see and compare 800 years of Islamic design, with each example near to the pinnacle of its age. The range is quite stunning: from the geometric elegance of the Seljuks, through to the

Mongol period and on to the refinements of the more baroque Safavid style. At more than 20,000 sq metres, it is also the biggest mosque in Iran.

Religious activity on this site is believed to date back to the Sassanid Zoroastrians, and the first sizable mosque was built by the Seljuks in the 11th century. Of this, the two large domes above the north and south *iwans* (rectangular halls opening onto a courtyard) have survived intact, with most of the remainder destroyed by fire in the 12th century. The mosque was rebuilt in 1121, with later rulers making their own enhancements.

In the centre of the main courtyard, which is surrounded by four contrasting *iwans*, is an attractive **ablutions fountain** designed to imitate the Kaaba at Mecca; would-be haji pilgrims would use it to practise the appropriate rituals. The two-storey porches around the courtyard's perimeter were constructed in the late 15th century.

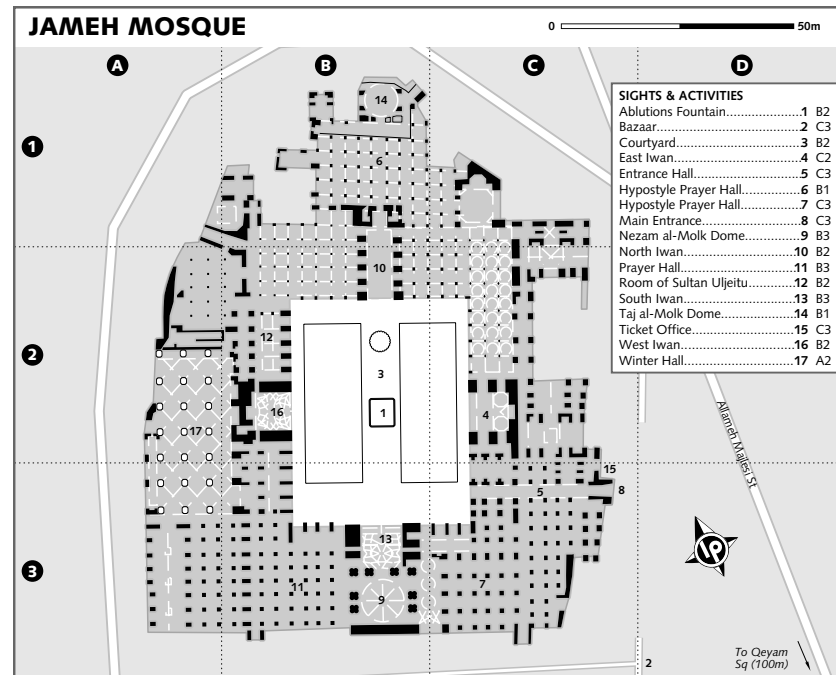
The **south iwan** is the most elaborate, with Mongol-era stalactite mouldings, some splendid 15th-century mosaics on the side

walls, and two minarets. The **north iwan** has a wonderful monumental porch with the Seljuk's customary Kufic inscriptions and austere brick pillars in the sanctuary.

The **west iwan** was originally built by the Seljuks but later decorated by the Safavids. It has mosaics that are more geometric than those of the southern hall. The courtyard is topped by a *maazeneh*, a small raised platform with a conical roof from where the faithful used to be called to prayer.

To fully appreciate this mosque you must go into the fine interior rooms. The **Room of Sultan Uljeitu** (a 14th-century Shiite convert) is home to one of the mosque's greatest treasures – an exquisite stucco mihrab awash with dense Quranic inscriptions and floral designs. Next door is the Timurid-era **Winter Hall** (Beit al-Sheta), built in 1448 and lit by alabaster skylights – ask the caretaker to turn off the neon (or do it yourself) to see the full effect.

The room beneath the grand **Nezam al-Molk Dome** and the Seljuk-era hypostyle **prayer halls** either side just breathe history, while at the other end of the complex the



IMAM SQUARE

0 100 m
0 0.1 miles

INFORMATION
 Esfahan Tourist Guides Association... (see 2)
 Post Office 1 A2
 Tourist Information Office 2 A3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES
 Ali Qapu Palace 3 A3
 Qeysarieh Portal 4 A2
 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 5 B3

EATING 🍴
 Aboozar Restaurant 6 B1
 Bastani Restaurant 7 B4
 Mikhak Restaurant 8 B2
 Sofreh Khaneh Sonmati 9 B3

TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS ☕
 Azadegan Teahouse 10 B2
 Qeysarieh Tea Shop 11 A2

SHOPPING 🛍️
 Aladdin Carpets 12 B2
 Fallahi Miniatures 13 A4
 Nomad Carpet Shop 14 A3

TRANSPORT
 Local Bus Stop 15 A2

See Imam Mosque Map (p239)

Taj al-Molk Dome is widely considered to be the finest brick dome ever built. While relatively small, it is said to be mathematically perfect, and has survived dozens of earthquakes with nary a blemish for more than 900 years. To reach it you walk through a forest of imposing pillars. These domes are among the oldest parts of the mosque.

The **ticket office** is at the **main entrance** and once you've paid admission the gatekeeper will summon an English-speaking guide to show you around.

BAZAR-E BOZORG

Esfahan's **Bazar-e Bozorg** (Great Bazaar; Map p234; 🕒 approximately 9am-8pm Sat-Thu) links Imam Sq with the Jameh Mosque, 1.7km northeast. The bazaar's arched passageways are topped by a series of small domes, each with an aperture at its apex spilling shafts of light onto the commerce below. While the oldest parts of the bazaar, around the Jameh Mosque, are more than a thousand years old, most of what you see today was built during Shah Abbas' aggressive expansions in the early 1600s.

The bazaar is a maze of lanes, madrasehs, caravanserais and *timcheh*, arcaded centres of a single trade (eg carpet). It can be entered at dozens of points, but the main entrance is via the **Qeysarieh Portal** (Map p238) at the northern end of Imam Sq. The high gateway is decorated with tiles and, higher up, frescoes by the great Reza Abbasi depicting Shah Abbas' war with the Uzbeks. These paintings have deteriorated over the centuries and a slow restoration is continuing.

Industries tend to congregate in certain areas of the bazaar. Among the more prominent are the carpet sellers, off to the west. Trade is busiest in the mornings. Undoubtedly the best way to discover the bazaar is to just wander; if you get lost, ask anyone for 'Naqsh-e Jahan' or the 'Masjed-e Jameh'.

IMAM SQUARE (NAQSH-E JAHAN SQUARE)

When French poet Renier described Esfahan as 'half of the world' in the 16th century, it was the myriad wonders of the square called Naqsh-e Jahan that inspired him. The description wouldn't be out of place today, because while it is now officially called **Imam Square** (Map p238) few people use that name and it remains home

to 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 jewels of the Safavid empire – the incomparable Imam Mosque, the supremely elegant Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and the indulgent and lavishly decorated Ali Qapu Palace and Qeysarieh Portal. At 512m long and 163m wide, this immense space is the second-largest square on earth – only Mao Zedong's severe Tiananmen Sq in Beijing is bigger.

The square has changed little since it was built. The upper level of arched arcades surrounding the square is empty these days, though long-talked-about plans to restore it for use as a museum of Esfahan's history are still being discussed. The open space has been reconstituted several times, most recently by the Pahlavis, who added the fountains. At either end of the square, you can still see the goal posts used in regular polo matches depicted on miniatures for sale around the square.

The square is best visited in the late afternoon and early evening when local families flood in to outnumber the Iranian and foreign tourists. This is also when the fountains are turned on, the light softens and the splendid architecture is illuminated; you can't beat the view from the Qeysarieh Tea Shop (p249).

Imam Mosque

The **Imam Mosque** (Masjed-e Imam; Map p239; admission IR4000; 🕒 8am-sunset, 8am-11.30am & 12.30pm-sunset summer, closed 11am-1pm Friday) is one of the most beautiful mosques in the world. 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 and the ability of his architect. The sumptuous decoration of the mosque perfectly complements the architectural elegance.

Work started on the magnificent entrance portal in 1611, although it took four years to finish – look for mismatches in its apparent symmetry, intended to reflect the artist's humility in the face of Allah. It was

not until 1629, the last year of the reign of Shah Abbas, that the high dome, and therefore the mosque, was completed. Little has changed since.

Although each of the mosque's parts is a masterpiece, it is the unity of the overall design that leaves a lasting impression. The original purpose of the **entrance portal** had more to do with its location on the square than with the mosque's spiritual aims. Its function was primarily ornamental, providing a counterpoint to the Qeysarieh Portal at the entrance to the Bazar-e Bozorg. The foundation stones are of white marble from Ardestan and the portal itself, some 30m tall, is decorated with magnificent *moarraq kashi* (mosaics) featuring geometric designs, floral motifs and calligraphy by the most skilled artists of the age. The splendid niches contain complex stalactite mouldings in a honeycomb pattern, each panel with its own intricate design.

Although the portal was built to face the square, the mosque is oriented towards Mecca and a short, angled corridor neatly connects the square and the **inner courtyard**,

IMAM MOSQUE

0 100 m

East Iwan 1 B2
East Sanctuary 2 B2
Entrance Portal 3 B1
Inner Courtyard 4 A2
Madrasah 5 A2
Madrasah 6 B2
Main Sanctuary 7 A2
Mihrab & Minbar 8 A2
North Iwan 9 B2
Ritual Ablutions Pool 10 B2
South Iwan (Entrance to Main Sanctuary) 11 A2
Ticket Office 12 B1
Toilets 13 B2
West Iwan 14 A2
West Sanctuary 15 A2

with its pool for ritual ablutions and four imposing **iwans**. The walls of the courtyard contain the most exquisite sunken porches, framed by painted tiles known as *haft rangi* (see p66) of deep blue and yellow. Each *iwana* leads into a vaulted sanctuary. The **east** and **west sanctuaries** are covered with particularly fine floral motifs on a blue background.

The **main sanctuary** is entered via the **south iwan**. Find yourself a quiet corner in which to sit and contemplate the richness of the domed ceiling, with its golden rose pattern (the flower basket) surrounded by concentric circles of busy mosaics on a deep blue background. The interior ceiling is 36.3m high, but the exterior reaches up to 51m due to the double-layering used in construction. The hollow space in between is responsible for the loud echoes heard when you stamp your foot on the black paving stones under the centre of the dome. Although scientists have measured up to 49 echoes, only about 12 are audible to the human ear – more than enough for a speaker to be heard throughout the mosque. The marble **mihrab** and **minbar** are also beautifully crafted.

The main sanctuary provides wonderful views back to the two turquoise **minarets** above the entrance portal. Each is encircled by projecting balconies and white geometric calligraphy in which the names of Mohammed and Ali are picked out over and over again. Each is topped by an elegant dome.

To the east and west of the main sanctuary are the courtyards of two madrasas. Both provide good views of the main **dome** with

its tiles every shade of turquoise. Cameras are welcome.

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque مسجد شیخ لطف الله
A study in harmonious understatement, this mosque is the perfect complement to the overwhelming richness of the larger Imam Mosque, and is arguably the most fabulous mosque in Iran. Built between 1602 and 1619, during the reign of Shah Abbas I, the **Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque** (Masjed-e Sheikh Lotfollah; Map p238; admission IR4000; ☞ 8am-sunset, 8am-11.30am & 12.30pm-sunset summer) is dedicated to the ruler's father-in-law, Sheikh Lotfollah, a revered Lebanese scholar of Islam who was invited to Esfahan to oversee the king's mosque (now the Imam Mosque) and theological school.

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). The signature blue-and-turquoise tiles of Esfahan are evident only around the dome's summit.

The pale tones of the cupola stand in contrast to those around the **portal**, where you'll find some of the best surviving Safavid-era mosaics. The exterior panels contain wonderful arabesques and other intricate floral designs; those displaying a vase framed by the tails of two peacocks are superb. The portal itself contains some particularly fine stalactite work with rich concentrations of blue and yellow motifs.

The mosque is unusual because it has neither a minaret nor a courtyard, and because steps lead up to the entrance. This

was probably because the mosque was never intended for public use, but rather served as the worship place for the women of the shah's harem. The **sanctuary** or prayer hall is reached via a twisting **hallway** where the eyes become accustomed to the darkness as subtle shifts of light play across deep blue tilework. This hallway is integral to both the design and function of the mosque because it takes the worshipper from the grand square outside into a prayer hall facing Mecca, and thus on a completely different axis.

Inside the sanctuary you can marvel at the complexity of the mosaics that adorn the walls and ceiling, which is extraordinarily beautiful with its shrinking, yellow motifs drawing the visitor's eye into the exquisite centre. The shafts of sunlight that filter in through the few high, latticed windows produce a constantly changing interplay of light and shadow.

The mihrab is one of the finest in Iran and has an unusually high niche; look for the calligraphic montage that names the architect and the date 1028 AH.

Photography is allowed but flashes are not.

Ali Qapu Palace کاخ عالی قاپو
Built at the very end of the 16th century as a residence for Shah Abbas I, the majestic six-storey **Ali Qapu Palace** (Map p238; admission IR4000; ☞ 8am-sunset) also served as a monumental gateway (Ali Qapu means the 'Gate of Ali') to the royal palaces that lay in the parklands beyond. Named for Abbas' hero, the Imam Ali, it was built to make an impression and at six storeys and 48m tall it did. French traveller Sir John Chardin described it as 'the largest palace ever built in any capital'.

The highlight of the palace is arguably the **elevated terrace** with its 18 slender columns. The terrace affords a wonderful perspective over the square and one of the best views of the Imam Mosque. If you look up, you'll see an attractive wooden ceiling with intricate inlay work and exposed beams, reminiscent of the nearby Chehel Sotun Palace.

Many of the valuable paintings and mosaics that once decorated the small rooms, corridors and stairways were destroyed during the Qajar period and since the 1979 revolution. However, some remain in the **throne room**, which leads off the terrace.

On the upper floor, the **music room** is definitely worth the climb. The stucco ceiling is riddled with the shapes of vases and other household utensils cut to enhance the acoustics. This distinctive craftsmanship, considered by some to be one of the finest examples of secular Persian art, extends to the walls.

CHEHEL SOTUN PALACE کاخ چهلستون
One of the only surviving palaces from the royal parklands between Imam Sq and Char Bagh Abbasi St, Safavid-era **Chehel Sotun** (Map p234; Ostandari St; admission IR5000; ☞ 8am-5pm, 8am-noon & 2pm-sunset summer) is today most famous for its frescoes. It was built as a pleasure pavilion and reception hall, using the Achaemenid-inspired *talar* (columnar porch) style. There are historical references to the palace dating from 1614; however, an inscription uncovered in 1949 says it was completed in 1647 under the watch of Shah Abbas II. Either way, what you see today was rebuilt after a fire in 1706.

The palace is entered via the elegant *talar* terrace, which perfectly bridges the transition between the Persian love of gardens and interior splendour. Its 20 slender, ribbed wooden pillars rise to a superb wooden ceiling with crossbeams and exquisite inlay work. Chehel Sotun means '40 pillars' – the number reflected in the long pool in front of the palace.

The Great Hall (Throne Hall) contains a rich array of frescoes, miniatures and ceramics. The upper walls are dominated by historical frescoes on a grand scale, sumptuously portraying court life and some of the great battles of the Safavid era. From right to left, above the entrance door, the armies of Shah Ismail do battle with the Uzbeks; Nader Shah battles Sultan Mahmud (astride a white elephant) on an Indian battleground; and Shah Abbas II welcomes King Nader Khan of Turkestan with musicians and dancing girls.

On the wall opposite the door, also from right to left, Shah Abbas I presides over an ostentatious banquet; Shah Ismail battles the janissaries (infantrymen) of Sultan Suleiman; and Shah Tahmasp receives Humayun, the Indian prince who fled to Persia in 1543. These extraordinary works survived the 18th-century invasion by the Afghans, who whitewashed the paintings to

SHAH IN A HURRY

When the Imam Mosque was begun, Shah Abbas the Great probably didn't think it would be 25 years before the last of the artisans left the building. He was already 52 when work began, and as he grew older he grew ever-more impatient to see his greatest architectural endeavour completed.

Legend has it Abbas repeatedly demanded that corners be cut to hasten the progress, even insisting work on the walls be started despite the foundations having not yet set. His architect, Ali Akbar Esfahani, was having none of it. He flatly defied his boss before making himself scarce until Abbas calmed down. After all, Abbas was notoriously insecure and had killed two sons and blinded another, so Esfahani was understandably nervous. He eventually returned to the court where, because the wisdom of his decision had been demonstrated, he was welcomed back with a royal pardon.

Some of the time-saving techniques were quite innovative: rather than covering the entire complex with millions of individual mosaic tiles, larger prefabricated patterned tiles called *haft rangi* were created – they've been standard ever since.

show their disapproval of such extravagance. Other items, including Safavid forebear Safi od-Din's hat, are kept in a small **museum**.

In the garden there is a small teahouse and a bookshop. Early morning is the best time for photos (flash not allowed inside).

MUSEUMS

Near the entrance to the Chehel Sotun Palace are three museums. The **Decorative Arts Museum of Iran** (Map p234; Ostandari St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu) is in a building that once served as stables and warehouse to Safavid kings. Today it contains a fine collection from the Safavid and Qajar periods, including miniatures, glassware, lacquer work, ancient Qurans, calligraphy, ceramics, woodcarvings, traditional costumes, weapons and horse gear.

Just to the north (right) the **Museum of Contemporary Art** (Map p234; Ostandari St; admission IR3000; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-7pm Sat-Thu, 5-8pm summer) shows temporary exhibits, mainly of Esfahani artists; while on the corner a large 15th-century building is home to the **Natural History Museum** (Map p234; Ostandari St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm, 4-9pm summer), where the fibreglass dinosaurs out front are not that enticing. The exhibits inside are better but won't have you rushing off to write home about them.

HASHT BEHESHT PALACE کاخ هشت بهشت
Once the most luxuriously decorated in Esfahan, the interior of the small **Hasht Behesht Palace** (Map p234; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-8pm) has been extensively damaged over the years. However, it retains a seductive tranquillity, with the soaring wooden columns on its open-sided terrace seeming to mirror the trees in the surrounding park.

Hasht Behesht, meaning 'eight heavens', was built in the 1660s. The interior boasts some impressive mosaics and stalactite mouldings and ceilings cut into a variety of shapes – similar to the music room in the Ali Qapu Palace.

MADRASEH-YE CHAHAR BAGH

مدرسه چهارباغ
The **Madrased-ye Chahar Bagh** (Madrased-ye Mazar-e Shah or Theological School of the Shah's Mother; Map p234; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ No Ruz only) was built between 1704 and 1714 as part of an expansive complex that included a caravanserai

(now the Abbasi Hotel) and the Bazar-e Honar. Revenues from these buildings paid for the upkeep of the madrasah.

Entry is through an imposing wood-and-silver door but this, unfortunately, is mostly closed to visitors. Apart from the two-week No Ruz period (admission IR30,000), you'll need to befriend a student to get in. If you do, you'll find a tree-filled courtyard surrounded by two-storey porches leading to the students' rooms. Around it are a prayer hall with a superb mihrab, two of the finest Safavid-era minarets in Esfahan, some exquisite mosaics and an attractive dome.

HAMMAM-E ALI GHOLI AGHA حمام علیقلی آقا
In the historic district of Bid Abad, the recently restored **Hammam-e Ali Gholi Agha** (Ali Gholi Agha Bathhouse; Map p234; Ali Gholi Agha Alley, off Masjed-e Sayyed St; admission IR10,000; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sat-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri) is now a well-maintained (but poorly signed) museum to bathhouses. Fortunately there is information at the entrance, explaining the Qajar-era history and uses of the *hammam*. English-speaking guides are also available. It's worth a look, especially if you didn't see Hammam-e Sultan Mir Ahmad in Kashan.

To get there, walk west from Takhti Junction on Masjed-e Sayyed St, and turn right (north) down Ali Gholi Agha St, 50m beyond the junction with Tayab St. Walk about 250m and turn right inside a covered bazaar, then left at the mosque.

ZAYANDEH RIVER BRIDGES پل‌های زاینده رود
There are few better ways to spend an afternoon than strolling along the **Zayandeh River** (Map p234), crossing back and forth using the old fairy-tale bridges and listening to Esfahanis reciting poetry and just chilling out. Such a stroll is especially pleasant at sunset and early evening when most of the bridges are illuminated. In total, 11 bridges (six are new) cross the Zayandeh. All but one of the historic Safavid-era crossings lie to the east of Chahar Bagh St – the exception is the shorter **Marnan Bridge** (Pol-e Marnan; Map p233) – but most people satisfy themselves with the walk from Si-o-Seh Bridge to Khaju Bridge, and back.

Si-o-Seh Bridge سی و سه پل
The 298m-long **Si-o-Seh Bridge** (Pol-e Si-o-Seh, Bridge of 33 Arches or Allahverdi

Khan Bridge; Map p234) was built by Allahverdi Khan, a favourite general of Shah Abbas I, between 1599 and 1602 to link the upper and lower halves of Chahar Bagh St. It served as both bridge and dam, and is still used to hold water today. Until recently there were teahouses at either end of the bridge, both accessed through the larger arches underneath, though only the northern one remains (see p249).

Chubi Bridge

پل چوبی
Nearly 150m long, and with 21 arches, **Chubi Bridge** (Map p234) was built by Shah Abbas II in 1665, primarily to help irrigate palace gardens in the area. Chubi and the two parlours within were for the exclusive use of the shah and his courtiers. Until recently one of these parlours was one of the most atmospheric teahouses in Iran; hopefully it will be again.

Khaju Bridge

پل خواجه
Arguably the finest of Esfahan's bridges, the **Khaju Bridge** (Map p234) was built by Shah Abbas II in about 1650 (although a bridge is believed to have crossed the waters here since the time of Tamerlane). It also doubles as a dam, and has always been as much a meeting place as a bearer of traffic.

Its 110m length has two levels of terraced arcades, the lower containing locks regulating water flow. If you look hard, you can still see original paintings and tiles, and

the remains of stone seats built for Shah Abbas II to sit on and admire the views. In the centre, a pavilion was built exclusively for his pleasure. It was a teahouse, but not anymore. Vendors at the end of the bridge sell tea and snacks.

Shahrestan Bridge

پل شهرستان
This is the oldest of Esfahan's bridges (Map p233). Most of the 11-arched stone and brick structure is believed to date from the 12th century, although the pillars themselves remain from a much earlier Sassanian bridge. Although it's almost 4km east of Khaju Bridge, it's a pleasant walk.

JOLFA: THE ARMENIAN QUARTER

کلیسای ارمنه
The Armenian quarter of Esfahan is **Jolfa** (Map p234). It dates from the time of Shah Abbas I, who transported this colony of Christians from the town of Jolfa (now on Iran's northern border; see p156) en masse, and named the village 'New Jolfa'. Abbas sought their skills as merchants, entrepreneurs and artists – a look at the walls of Vank Cathedral reveals what he was after. The Armenian Christians had their religious freedom respected, but they were restricted to this area across the river and kept away from the Islamic centres.

Today there are 13 Armenian churches and an old cemetery scattered around Jolfa, serving a Christian community of about

MOURNING ZAYANDEH RIVER TEAHOUSES

One of the great joys of any visit to Esfahan used to be walking along the Zayandeh River and stopping in the atmospheric teahouses in the Khaju, Chubi and Si-o-Seh Bridges. These teahouses were loved by locals and visitors alike, places to socialise over tea and qalyan (water pipe) just as Esfahanis have been doing since the bridges were built more than 300 years ago. But one by one they have been closed and only the teahouse at the northern end of Si-o-Seh Bridge remains (see opposite).

Various reasons have been offered for closing these wonderful teahouses. Some cite the crack-down on the highly unhealthy qalyan. Others say the tobacco smoke was damaging the bridges, though given that people have been smoking in these stone places for centuries this seems unlikely. Others are convinced the rise of religious conservatives in the provincial government is to blame and the antismoking campaign is just a smokescreen – after all, they say, you can still smoke cigarettes almost anywhere. The result is that places where young men and women might get together and do dangerous things – like looking at each other – have been forced to close.

Whatever the reason, the city that likes to think of itself as the 'Venice of the Middle East' and (rightly) thinks it deserves a bigger share of international tourists, has lost some of its best attractions. With luck, the city will see to it that the teahouses are reopened – even without the qalyan.

7000. It's worth heading out here (it's not far) in the afternoon, seeing the sights and staying around for dinner in the relatively liberal village atmosphere.

Vank Cathedral

کلیسای وانک

Built between 1606 and 1655 with the encouragement of the Safavid rulers, **Vank Cathedral** (Kelisa-ye Vank; Map p234; ☎ 624 3471; Kelisa St; adult/student IR30,000/16,000; 🕒 8am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm, to 6.30pm summer) is the historic focal point of the Armenian church in Iran. The church's exterior is unexciting, but the interior is richly decorated and shows the curious mixture of styles – Islamic tiles and designs alongside Christian imagery – that characterises most churches in Iran. The frescoes are truly magnificent, and sometimes wonderfully gruesome.

The attached Vank Cathedral museum contains, among other things, more than 700 handwritten books and a disturbing display covering the Armenian genocide in Turkey.

Other Churches

Of the other 12 churches in Jolfa only these two are open (sometimes). The frescoes on the walls and ceilings of the **Church of Bethlehem** (Kelisa-ye Bethlehem; Map p234; Nazar St; admission IR10,000), built in 1628, are arguably of a higher quality than those in Vank Cathedral. The interior of the high dome is decorated with swirling black motifs on a golden background, while the base is surrounded by paintings of Biblical scenes. The **Church of St Mary** (Kelisa-ye Maryam; Map p234; Jolfa Sq) is similarly decorated, though with less flair. If the churches are closed, as they often are, and door-knocking doesn't work, ask for help at the cathedral.

MANAR JOMBAN (SHAKING MINARETS)

منار جنبان

The 14th-century tomb of Abu Abdullah, a revered dervish, is 7km west of central Esfahan in Kaladyn. The tomb is popularly known as **Manar Jomban** (Shaking Minarets; Map p233; Saremiyeh St; admission IR5000; 🕒 8.30am-1pm & 3-5pm, to 6pm summer) because pushing hard against one minaret will start it, and the other minaret, swaying back and forth. The minarets were added during the 17th century. Attendants climb up to shake them once an hour, on the hour. Iranians love this sight, but it's only barely worth the

trip – and on slow days they might not be shaken at all.

Many buses (IR250, 20 minutes) going west along Baha'i St from near the corner of Chahar Bagh Abbasi St run past Manar Jomban; the man in the ticket booth will point you to the right one. Chartering a taxi for an hour to include the nearby Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan fire temple is another alternative (about IR40,000).

ATESHKADEH-YE ESFAHAN آتشکده اصفهان

Dating from Sassanian times, the crumbling mud bricks of the **Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan** (Esfahan Fire Temple; off Map p233; Saremiyeh St; admission IR2000; 🕒 8.30am-5pm, to 6pm in summer) stare out over the Zayandeh River and the city from a low hill on its outskirts. The 10-minute scramble uphill is worth the effort on a clear day. It's about 2km west from the Manar Jomban, along the same road.

PIGEON TOWERS کبوتر خانه

For centuries Esfahan relied on pigeons to supply guano as fertiliser for the city's famous fields of watermelons. The guano was collected in almost 3000 squat, circular pigeon towers, each able to house about 14,000 birds. Today they are unused, made

A SHAKE TOO FAR?

Ask guides why the shaking minarets shake and they are likely to embark on a lengthy explanation of vibration theory. Some who have studied a bit might even quote a geologists' report suggesting the sandstone used in the minarets contains something called felspar, which dissolves over time, leaving stone flexible and liable to shake. The geologists say their theory is supported by the fact there are no historic references to the minarets shaking. There are, however, conflicting views. Another expert points out that other buildings in Esfahan were constructed from the same sandstone and yet show no propensity to shake.

Then again, there's another theory. As the minarets are made of brick and timber, it seems more feasible that it's the timber that bends and is the connection between the two minarets. It's a theory supported by one traveller, who wrote: 'Flexible stone – pull the other leg.'

redundant by chemical fertiliser, but more than 700 of the mud-brick towers remain in the city's environs.

The best place to see them is dotted along the Zayandeh River south of the Ateshkadeh. The 10km walk back into Esfahan makes a great afternoon, and you're also likely to see locally made cloth being laid out to dry.

'Half of the World' Walking Tour

Esfahan is often described as 'half of the world', and this walking tour takes you through several of the city's highlights. Starting at Imam Hossein Sq, walk north along Chahar Bagh Abbasi St and turn right (east) down quiet Golbahar St. Walk past the Russian Consulate and into a covered bazaar, then turn left (north) when you reach Hakim St, crossing under the bazaar roof. About 150m along you'll come to the **Hakim Mosque (1)** on the right. The western entrance should be open, but if it's not continue north and turn west along Hakim Alley to reach the northern entrance. This is Esfahan's oldest mosque, but only the beautiful portal (beside the northern entrance) has survived from the Buyid-dynasty structure built about 1000 years ago. The dome beneath the southern *ivan* has an impressive echo and, if you climb the stairs in the southeastern corner, you'll enjoy fine views over the rooftops of the bazaar.

Exiting through the northern entrance you'll enter the narrow, attractive lanes around the bazaar. Continuing east on Hakim Lane, you'll pass through the quieter alleys of the **Bazar-e Bozorg (2)**, p238), with vendors selling household goods and at least one male-dominated but charismatic little **chaykhaneh (3)**. The bazaar veers northeast and becomes busier, with domestic goods shops, mosques, madrasahs, teahouses, banks, bathhouses and even the occasional garden.

At a fork the main bazaar veers right, but keep straight for about 40m to get to the **Madrash-ye Nimurvand (4)**, where the students normally welcome visitors (though women shouldn't loiter too long). Rejoin the main bazaar and follow it across Jamal-od-Din Abdolrazagh St to the imposing **Jameh Mosque (5)**, p236 – give yourself time here and remember it's closed between about 11am and 1pm.

From the mosque, skirt around Qeyam Sq, stopping for a look at the **bird market (6)**, and head down Haruniyeh St. You'll soon see the

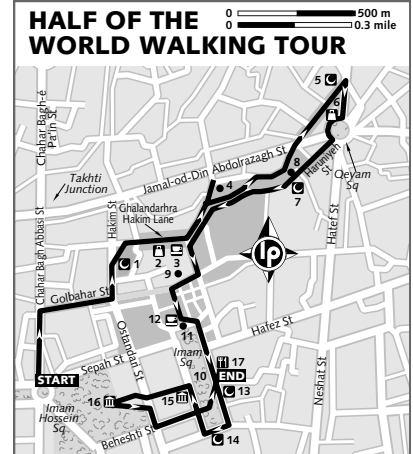
WALKING TOUR

Start Hakim Mosque

Finish Sofreh Khaneh Sonnati

Distance about 7km

Duration four to seven hours, depending on how often you stop and for how long



attractive, 48m-high **Minaret of the Mosque of Ali (7)**; Manar-e Masjed-e Ali). Inside the mosque, which was rebuilt in 1522, are some impressive Safavid paintings that until recently were hidden under Qajar-era decoration. Opposite the mosque and back about 20m is the 16th-century **Mausoleum of Harun Vilayet (8)**; Bogh-e Harun Vilayet), an important pilgrimage site containing some high-quality frescoes depicting the son of the 10th, or perhaps the 11th, Shiite Imam (no-one is quite sure). The courtyard also contains big, photogenic mosaics of Khomeini and Khamenei.

Continuing west keep right to rejoin the main bazaar and wander southwest through the shafts of sunlight and spice-filled air towards Imam Sq. En route, the **Madrash-ye Sadr (9)** has a large, green courtyard that can provide momentary respite from the bustling bazaar. On entering **Imam Square (10)**, p238) through the grand **Qeysarieh Portal (11)**, p238), go straight upstairs to the delightful **Qeysarieh Tea Shop (12)**, p249), overlooking the square. After tea, launch into the square by either following the covered bazaars or by setting off to explore the jewels of Esfahan:

the **Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque** (13; p240), **Imam Mosque** (14; p239) and the **Ali Qapu Palace** (15; p241).

If you still have the energy, exit through the rear of Ali Qapu Palace and cross to the **Chehel Sotun Palace** (16; p241) on Ostandari St. If not, just head back up to the Qey-sarieh Tea Shop (yes, there's no better viewing spot!) to watch the light play softly over the square as the sun goes down and the lights come up. Sublime! Round off the day with a meal at the traditional **Sofreh Khaneh Sonnati** (17; p248).

Sleeping

Much of Esfahan's accommodation is relatively expensive and rather lacking in character. However, in recent years the city's first traditional hotels have opened, so things are improving in the midrange area especially. Esfahan is best discovered on foot and most of these places are within walking distance of Imam Sq.

Esfahan's high season runs from mid-March until the end of June, when rooms can be scarce. At other times, bargain your head off.

BUDGET

Amir Kabir Hostel (Map p234; ☎ 222 7273; mrziaee@hotmail.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; dm/s/tw/tr IR35,000/75,000/120,000/150,000; 📺) For years the Amir Kabir has been Esfahan's backpacker base and, for lack of competition, it still is. The managers, Ziaee brothers, might not like spending money, but they're helpful enough with advice on timetables, booking onward tickets and some reasonably priced tours. Rooms and the dorm are basic, and cleanliness is not as consistent as it could be. Breakfast is served for an extra IR15,000.

Kakh Inn (Map p234; ☎ 222 5650; omid_anvary@yahoo.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/tw/tr with breakfast IR90,000/160,000/180,000) Small rooms here have shortish beds, bathrooms (most of them) and that's it. But manager Omid creates a good feel.

Shad Hostel (Map p234; ☎ 221 8621; fax 220 4264; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/d US\$11/18) A good-value, central option, with small, clean two- and three-bed rooms and sometimes whiffy shared bathrooms. Front rooms are noisy.

Sahel Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 222 1702; www.sahelhotel.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s US\$16-21, tw US\$22-29; 📺) Fresh paint, soft beds and bathrooms

make this central place fair value by Esfahan standards. English-speaking manager is helpful and there's the atmospheric Bame Sahel Teahouse (p250) upstairs. Ask for a quiet room.

Saadi Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 3881; saadi_hotel@yahoo.com; Abbas Abad St; s with breakfast US\$15-20, tw US\$21-28; 📺) Quiet location, alright rooms, nice price.

Hotel Totia (Map p234; ☎ 223 7525; Masjed-e Sayyed St; tw/tr with breakfast IR250,000/300,000; 📺) Another welcoming, family-run place with spotless rooms at fair prices. Adjoining rooms are available and the overhead fans are a bonus if you hate air-con. Discounts for single travellers.

Everything's full? Try these:
Persia Hotel (Map p234; ☎/fax 220 4062; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St, near Takhti Junction; s/tw US\$20/28; 📺) Family-run; very clean, relatively spacious rooms with bathroom; dubious plumbing.

Tous Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 222 1599; toos@yahoo.com; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/tw/tr IR180,000/260,000/315,000; 📺 📺) Rooms are bigger than some, and noisier than many.

If you have an early bus, functional **Hotel Kaveh** (Map p233; ☎/fax 442 5440; s/d US\$21/27; 📺) is at the northern end of Kaveh terminal, and **Hotel Soffeh** (Map p233; ☎ 668 6462; s/d US\$21/27; 📺) is at Soffeh bus terminal.

MIDRANGE

All the rooms in this range have bathrooms, air-con, fridge and TV, though there's no guarantee on English-language channels.

Bekhradi Historical Residence (Map p234; ☎ 448 2072; Sonbolestan Alley, off Ebn-e Sina St; r IR250,000-900,000; 📺 📺) This quiet, modest-sized *khan-e sonnati* (traditional house) is the real Safavid-style deal; five wonderfully restored rooms, some with bathrooms, some not – like the old days. Set around two garden courtyards, there is also a restaurant. It's beside the Masjed-e Dawazeh-Noh.

Hasht Behesht Apartment Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 221 4868/9; hotel8behesht@yahoo.com; Ostandari St; apt from IR350,000; 📺 📺) The family-run Hasht Behesht offers reliable, comfortable-if-not-desperately-stylish two-, three- and four-bed apartments in a wonderfully central location. English-speaking Mohammad is efficient, engaging and informative, and (don't fall over) charges everyone the same price. Great value!

Iran Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 2740; www.iranhotel.biz; off Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; s/d with breakfast US\$28/43; 📺) Not desperately charismatic, but the bright rooms with double-glazed windows are not bad in this price range. Bathrooms have squat toilets.

Pol and Park Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 667 4785-7; park_pol_hotel@yahoo.com; A'ineh Khuneh Blvd; s/d US\$34/43; 📺 📺) With half the 35 rooms sporting balconies overlooking the Si-o-Seh Bridge and an overall friendly feel, you can forgive the ageing but clean rooms. Excellent value.

Tourist Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 4437; www.esfahantouristhotel.com; Abbas Abad St; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$30/44/66; 📺) Helpful English-speaking management has transformed this place into a reliable, if not exciting, lower mid-range place. The suite has a kitchenette.

Hotel Melal (Map p234; ☎ 222 4532-4; Kemal Esma'il St; s/d with breakfast US\$41/64; 📺 📺) Overlooking the river east of Si-o-Seh Bridge, Melal is so professionally managed that staff refused all our attempts to actually see a room because it was full. However, several readers have reported the three-star standard rooms and top-floor restaurant (with views) are both excellent value.

Zohreh Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 223 1060; www.zohrehhotel.com; Ferdosi St; s/d/tr/ste with breakfast US\$46/67/92/150; 📺 📺) The new, 50-room Zohreh is a temple to classic Persian kitsch – think lots of odd-shaped mirrors, gold paint, moulded plaster, chandeliers and portraits of colourfully clad maidens. Then there's the Achaemenid motifs. Rooms are more restrained and a fair size. Some have bathtubs, and all have ADSL internet.

Safavi Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 8600; Felestin St; s/d from US\$49/72; 📺) Nearer to Imam Sq than the Zohreh, the Safavi seems to have used the same stylists as the Zohreh with the head-spinning basement restaurant the *pièce de résistance!* Rooms are modern and mercifully less psychedelic to look at. Don't miss the views from the rooftop teahouse.

Dibai House (Map p234; ☎ 220 9787, 0912 154 6964; www.dibaihouse.com; 1 Masjed Ali Alley, Harunieh; s/tw/tr with breakfast €35/60/75) Dibai House is Esfahan's most atmospheric hotel. Hidden away off a narrow, vaulted alley deep in the Bazar-e Bozorg district, the colourful, painstakingly restored traditional house and the chilled, interesting and arty female owners set a paradoxically modern-yet-

traditional Iranian tone. For pure facilities the 10 rooms are overpriced – bathrooms are outside and there are few modern luxuries – but what you're paying for is the ambience. Children under 14 are not allowed. It's hard to find: from Qeyam Sq, walk southwest towards the tall minaret at the Ali Mosque, take the alley about 10m along on the left, follow this around to the left, take the first right and right again, into a tunnel-like passage. The door is unsigned inside this passage, on the right. Prices are €10 less in low season.

Isfahan Traditional Hotel (Hotel Sonnati Isfahan; Map p234; ☎ 223 6677, 0913 305 1556; www.isfahanhotel.com; Bagh-e Ghalandarhra Alley, off Hakim St; s/d/ste with breakfast €32/45/160; 📺 📺) Deep in the Bazar-e Bozorg area, this attractive traditional hotel is set around two courtyards in adjoining Safavid- and Qajar-period homes. The 16 rooms are spacious, comfortable and most have attached modern bathrooms. The stunning royal suite would make a memorable splurge. The service, however, was very raw when we stayed. It's about 75m east of the entrance to the Hakim Mosque.

Sadaf Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 2988; Hafez St; s/d US\$63/90; 📺 📺) A super location near Imam Sq, professional management and impressive rooms with satellite TV and fridge make this an excellent choice. The rooftop restaurant is delightful in summer. Discounts are available in the low season. Family rooms available.

The following are 'solid' fall-back options: clean, comfortable enough, fair value but largely devoid of character.

Julfa Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 624 4441; www.julfahotel.com; Hakim Nezami St; s/d US\$28/43; 📺 📺) A few metres from Vank Cathedral, with 72 small rooms and unhelpful service. Khangostar Restaurant (p248) is downstairs.

Pardis Apartment Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 0308; fax 222 7831; Takhti Junction; apt from US\$50; 📺) No frills apartments in two- to five-bed (US\$77) varieties. Discounts very possible; good, cheap food in the restaurant.

Safir Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 222 2640; www.safirhotel.com; Shahid Medani St; s/d/ste US\$63/87/95; 📺 📺) Professionally run place popular with businesspeople. Central location, several languages, tired rooms.

TOP END

There are surprisingly few top-end options in Esfahan considering it is such a tourist drawcard, so it's worth booking ahead.

Kowsar International Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 624 0230-39; www.hotelkowsar.com; Mellat Blvd; tw/d US\$108/\$158; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Portraits of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei on the wall confirm this one-time Sheraton is now government owned. Mercifully, however, professional management, a recent facelift, exceptional restaurants and facilities, including wi-fi and a kids playground, have transformed it from state-run disappointment to quality luxury hotel. Ask for a 5th- or 6th-floor front room.

Abbasi Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 222 6010; www.abbasihotel.com; Shahid Medani St; s/d from US\$110/165; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) In the remains of a 17th-century caravanserai, the Abbasi has a reputation as one of the best hotels in Iran. Reputations, however, can be misleading. While the central garden courtyard is sublime, most of the rooms are plain (neither luxurious nor historic looking), the service can leave you feeling more like a sheep than a shah, and the prices are double what Iranians pay. If you do stay, 'special' rooms (US\$179) are in the original building and have garden views. Anything cheaper is in the drab 'new wing'.

Eating

Esfahan has its fair share of good restaurants and some memorable teahouses, but if it's culinary variety you seek, then prepare for disappointment. Most places listed here are walking distance from the hotels, though it's also worth venturing to relatively relaxed Jolfa one night. Most midrange and top-end hotels have restaurants, and remember that most teahouses (opposite) also serve food.

Esfahan's famous speciality is *gaz*, a delicious nougat usually mixed with chopped pistachios or other nuts. It's available pretty much everywhere, but especially in confectionery shops along Chahar Bagh Abbasi St and around Imam Sq.

RESTAURANTS

Mikhak Restaurant (Map p238; ☎ 222 3291; meals IR15,000-50,000; ☎ noon-4pm Sat-Thu) Just off the northeast end of the bazaar, the Mikhak serves quality Iranian comfort food that seems to comfort half of the *bazaris* every day. Vegetarians should look elsewhere.

Aboozar Restaurant (Map p238; ☎ 222 0654; Bazar-e Bozorg; meals IR20,000-35,000; ☎ 11am-3pm)

The rest of the *bazaris* seem to come here for fast, cheap and tasty meals. Arrive early or the best food will be gone.

Restoran-e Sa'di (Map p234; ☎ 222 0237; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; meals IR20,000-35,000; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) Down the mirrored staircase opposite Amir Kabir Hostel, this place is a classic lower middle-class Esfahani restaurant, with a cheapish, not that stylish, small menu with only half the dishes available.

Nobahar Restaurant (Map p234; ☎ 221 0800; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; meals IR25,000-45,000; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-10pm) Nobahar Restaurant has been around forever because it serves reliably good, reasonably priced staples like kababs and *zereshk polo ba morgh*. It's not stylish and service isn't great, but that's not what you're here for.

Sadaf Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 220 2988; Hafez St; meals IR35,000; ☎ dinner only for rooftop) The Sadaf Hotel's restaurant is especially recommended between June and October when you can eat on the rooftop. The food, including steak with mushroom sauce (IR30,000), and the usual range of tasty kababs, is consistently good and complements the rooftop views (when you stand up) across the Old City. It opens indoors during the rest of the year.

Arabo (Map p234; ☎ 624 7119; Kelisa St, Jolfa; meals IR30,000-45,000; ☎ noon-4pm & 6-11pm) This popular underground pizza joint-cum-café offers heavily made-up, crimson-clad waitresses and pizza that's tasty despite the usual Iranian-pizza limitations.

Sofreh Khaneh Sonnati (Traditional Banquet Hall; Map p238; ☎ 221 9068; Imam Sq; meals IR25,000-50,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10.30pm) Just off Imam Sq, this restaurant uses stained glass, colourful tiles and *takhts* (day beds) to create a Qajar-era (if slightly touristy) ambience. The food makes it memorable, with Esfahani biryani and *khoresht-e bademjan* (aubergine or eggplant stew) some of the well-prepared and reasonably priced recommendations. To find it, walk out the square north of Lotfollah Mosque, turn left, left again, and up the stairs.

Khorshid (Map p234; ☎ 624 7536; Khorshid St, Jolfa; meals IR40,000; ☎ 6.30-11.30pm) This modern Iranian place appeals to upwardly mobile young Esfahanis with its relaxed atmosphere and reasonably priced Iranian food.

Khangostar Restaurant (Map p234; ☎ 627 8989; Hakim Nezami St, Jolfa; meals IR60,000; ☎ noon-

3.30pm & 7.30-10.30pm) Located in Julfa Hotel, Khangostar Restaurant offers probably the best food in Esfahan – locals, our own experience and overwhelmingly positive reader feedback can attest to this. Servings are enormous here, (even by Iranian standards!) and the menu large and varied, but mainly Iranian. It's busy rather than romantic, and the salad and dessert bars might seem a bit Sizzler, but hey, you won't complain when you get there.

Bastani Restaurant (Map p238; ☎ 220 0374; Imam Sq; meals IR45,000-80,000; ☎ 11.30am-4.30pm & 6.30-10.30pm) In the shadow of the Imam Mosque, the Bastani is the best-located restaurant in Esfahan. That, however, is where the compliments end. In recent years the quality of the food has been less consistent. Which is a pity, as the menu is full of interesting-sounding dishes. If you do eat here, the billing can be confusing so check it carefully. It's a pity, as the menu is full of interesting-sounding dishes and it used to be good. Hopefully it will pick up.

Restaurant Shahrzad (Map p234; ☎ 220 4490; Abbas Abad St; meals IR50,000-70,000; ☎ 11.30am-10.30pm) The opulent Qajar-style wall-paintings, stained-glass windows and mirror work contribute to the Shahrzad's reputation as the best restaurant in Esfahan. And on a good night, it's excellent – strip lights notwithstanding. Too often, however, it's packed with tour groups and the service (and food) feels factory produced.

Restoran-e Khayyam (Map p234; Nazar St, Jolfa; meals IR25,000) Cheap, popular, very local and justifiably busy little kabab, rice and bread place.

QUICK EATS

The lower end of Chahar Bagh Abbasi St has the greatest concentration of Iranian fast food joints, selling pizza, sandwiches, burgers, ice cream and, occasionally, real kababs. The roads leading into Imam Sq also have a few options, but not the square itself. The small but growing café scene is best in the streets around Vank Cathedral, where several atmospheric little places compete for business.

For genuinely Iranian fast food, try the following places.

Kalleh Pache (Map p234; Bazar-e Bozorg; ☎ 7am-5pm) If you take the 'when in Rome' philosophy seriously, or just like the taste of

sheep brains, then this tiny shop is for you. Turn east off Hakim St where the bazaar roof crosses the street, and look for the men about 20m along.

Azam Beryani (Map p234; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; biryani IR18,000; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu) Biryani is an Esfahani speciality and this modest little place is a favourite of Esfahanis. Join the queue.

Fereni Hafez (Map p234; Hafez St; ☎ 8am-midnight) For an Iranian breakfast experience (at any time of day) head for where you can enjoy a delicious bowl (or two) of *fereni* (made of rice flour, milk, sugar and rose-water) for IR2000; look for the red sign.

TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS

Sitting in an Esfahani *chaykhaneh* (teahouse), sipping tea through sugar and puffing on a qalyan, is a quintessentially Iranian experience. The Qeysarieh Tea Shop is probably the highlight, and stopping for tea as you wander along the river is something Esfahanis have been doing for centuries (see the boxed text, p243). The bazaar is also a good place to discover tiny local places where grizzled but welcoming old fellas puff away on the qalyan with nary a care for modern antismoking legislation.

Abbasi Hotel Teahouse (Map p234; Shahid Medani St; ☎ 4-11pm) The setting at the back of the hotel's courtyard is a delight, and while you might need to start singing to get a waiter's attention it's worth the effort after 6pm, when you can tuck into the famous *ash-e reshte* (noodle soup with beans and vegetables; IR9000).

Si-o-Seh Bridge (Map p234 Enqelab-e Eslami Sq; ☎ 8am-11pm) This teahouse at the north end of Si-o-Seh Bridge is an Esfahani institution (and it's not touristy) and the last of the bridge *chaykhanehs*; see the boxed text, p243). The teahouse is typically male dominated, but foreign women do get honorary male treatment and it is invariably a boisterous atmosphere, especially under the pylons.

Qeysarieh Tea Shop (Map p238; Imam Sq; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) Sitting at the outdoor tables, sipping tea (IR5000 per person) and puffing qalyan (IR10,000), is the perfect way to soak up this beautiful 'half of the world', especially when the colours and moods of the square change in the late afternoon. And

despite its position, the Qeysarieh Tea Shop is often pretty quiet. The tea shop is up a steep staircase to the left of the Qeysarieh Portal.

Azadegan Teahouse (Chaykhaneh-ye Azadegan; Map p238; ☎ 221 1225; off Imam Sq; ☎ 7am-midnight) In a lane off the northeastern corner of Imam Sq, this is the classic old-style teahouse, with an astonishing collection of teahouse-junk hanging from the walls and ceiling and grumpy men lined up opposite each other sipping tea and smoking...ahm, hang on... It's just sipping and eating before 6pm; the qalyans come out after that.

Bame Sahel Teahouse (Map p234; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) On the top of Sahel Hotel, Bame Sahel is a bit rough around the edges and very local, and all the better for it. Escape the traffic for tea, or enjoy a good *dizi* dinner (IR27,000). There's also a breakfast buffet (IR20,000).

Teria Ani (Map p234; Vank Kalisa Alley, near Vank Cathedral; ☎ 9am-midnight) This is allegedly the oldest café in Esfahan and with its dim interior, regular clientele and oddball characters, it feels like an inner-city dive bar.

Shopping

Esfahan has probably the widest selection of handicrafts in Iran. The best buys are carpets, hand-painted miniatures on camel bone (many of the artists run the stores themselves and are happy to give demonstrations), intricate metalwork and lacquerware. Prices can be higher than elsewhere but there's more choice and it's certainly more pleasurable to shop here than in Tehran. For gold, head directly to **Bazar-e Honar** (Map p234; Chahar Bagh Abbasi St; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu).

The Bazar-e Bozorg (Map p234) and the arcades around Imam Sq (Map p238) are literally full of shops. You will find postcards and junk souvenirs for sale in one store, and expensive works of art in the next. Stores vary by price, quality and honesty, with competition among the carpet dealers particularly fierce (and sometimes nasty), so don't pay too much attention to what one shop owner says about his competitor. For more information, see p64.

Some places do employ high-pressure sales tactics, but most are friendly and willing to chat over a *chay* without twisting your arm too much. It can actually be quite enjoyable as long as you remember that you

don't *have* to buy anything. Nevertheless, whatever you're shopping for, check prices in several stores and bargain hard (see What A Bargain, p392).

A few Imam Sq shops recommended by readers:

Aladdin Carpets (Map p238; ☎ 221 1461; aladdin_shop@yahoo.com; Imam Sq) Small shop, interesting range of carpets, experienced salesmen, underwhelming nomad tours.

Fallahi Miniatures Shahid Medani St (Map p234; ☎ 222 4613); Saadi St (Map p238; ☎ 222 6733; off Imam Sq) Charming and internationally renowned Hossein Fallahi's works are excellent.

Nomad Carpet Shop (Map p238; ☎ 221 9275; nomad_shop@yahoo.com; Imam Sq) Almost-comatose approach to selling, mainly tribal range of carpets and kilims.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **Iran Air office** (Map p234; ☎ 222 8200; www.iranair.com; Shahid Medani St) is in the shopping complex opposite the Abbasi Hotel. See the following table of domestic services; Iran Air also flies twice a week to Dubai and three times to Kuwait City. Kish Air flies to Kish and Dubai.

Destination	Fare	Frequency
Ahvaz	IR245,000	5 per week
Bandar Abbas	IR454,000	2 per week
Bushehr	IR283,000	Wed only, via Shiraz
Mashhad	IR476,000	4 per week, via Shiraz
Shiraz	IR246,000	6 per week
Tehran	IR245,000	several daily
Zahedan	IR512,000	Fri only, via Kerman

BUS

Esfahan has two main bus terminals: Kaveh terminal (Map p233) in the north is the busiest and is the terminal you're most likely to use; while Soffeh terminal (Map p233) is in the south. Except at the busiest times it's easiest to just get your tickets at the terminal before you depart. Alternatively, accommodation such as the Amir Kabir Hostel (p246) and the Negareh Internet Café (p235) can book tickets for a small commission.

See the following table for routes from Kaveh; fares are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses, or just Volvo. As there are no bus offices in town, it's a good idea to ask about departure times of buses when you first arrive in Esfahan.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Bandar Abbas	IR45,000/ 75,000	14-16hr	frequent
Bushehr	IR30,000/ 55,000	13-16hr	4-7pm (Soffeh)
Hamadan	IR38,500	8hr	7.30am-10am & 9-10pm
Kashan	IR12,000/ 21,000	2½-3½hr	very frequent
Kermanshah	IR60,000	9hr	evenings
Khorramabad	IR40,000	8hr	Pars Peyma 7-10am & 7-10pm
Mashhad	IR95,000	17-19hr	1-8pm
Orumiyeh	IR95,000	18-20hr	evenings
Sanandaj	IR36,000	9hr	evenings
Shiraz	IR20,000/ 38,000	8hr	frequent
Tabriz	IR70,000	17hr	2-5pm
Tehran	IR26,500/ 50,000	5-7hr	very frequent
Yazd	IR12,500/ 30,000	4-5hr	1-2pm Kaveh, or Jey minibus terminal
Zahedan	IR90,000	16-19hr	infrequent, book ahead

For the Kaveh terminal, take a shuttle taxi north along Chahar Bagh St for IR2500; to get to Soffeh, take one from just south of the Si-o-Seh Bridge (IR3000). A private taxi to either terminal will cost between IR10,000 and IR30,000 depending on your bargaining prowess. The Esfahan Metro will (one day) link the two terminals via Chahar Bagh St.

MINIBUS & TAXI

For destinations around Esfahan there are two minibus terminals. The Zayandeh Rud terminal (Map p233) has services to Shahr-e Kord (IR5000, two hours, 107km), with departures every hour or so. To get to Zayandeh Rud terminal, take a shuttle taxi west from just south of the Si-o-Seh Bridge (IR3000).

From the Jey minibus terminal (Map p233), there are at least five departures each day to Yazd (IR10,000, six hours, 316km). Minibuses also go to Na'in (IR5000, three to four hours, 138km) and Ardestan (IR6000, 132km). To get to the Jey minibus terminal, take a shuttle taxi from Takhti Junction (IR1500).

Savaris leave from outside the terminals far more frequently than minibuses but for about three times the price, such as the service to Shahr-e Kord (IR15,000, 80 minutes).

TRAIN

There is a daily train between Esfahan and Tehran (six-berth IR35,15, 7½ hours) that leaves at 11.30pm and stops at Kashan. Trains also run to Mashhad (Ghazal/six-berth IR199,000/92,850, 18½ hours, 5.50pm daily) and Bandar Abbas (six-berth/six-seat IR66,100/41,700, 2.25pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday). The new line to Shiraz will open in 2010 at the earliest.

The **Raja Trains ticket office** (Map p234; ☎ 222 4425; Enqelab-e Eslami Sq; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu) is on the northeast side of the square. Alternatively, **Iran Travel & Tourism Tour** (Map p234; ☎ 222 3010; irantravel1964@yahoo.com; Shahid Medani St) has a dedicated train ticket desk.

The **train station** (off Map p233; ☎ 668 8001) is way out to the east of the city. To get here, catch a bus from outside Kowsar International Hotel; ask for the *'istgah-e ghatah'* and you'll be put on the right bus. Be at the bus stop well over an hour before your train is due to depart. A private taxi (IR45,000) can cost almost as much as the train ticket to Tehran. Alternatively, take a shuttle taxi south from the south end of Si-o-Seh Bridge.

Getting Around

Esfahani taxi drivers have a bad reputation, but in reality they're not much worse than taxi drivers anywhere else in the universe – if they see someone fresh off the plane, train or automobile, they'll try to take you. The cartel at Kaveh terminal will ask IR30,000 for a trip to a central hotel, but you should laugh at this and offer IR10,000. If you're lucky, you might get it for IR15,000. Either way, settle the price before getting in. Alternatively, take a shuttle taxi or bus – traffic passing on the terminal side of the road is heading south into town. Getting from town to Kaveh is cheaper.

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport (off Map p233) is about 25km northeast of town and there is no airport bus service. To get there, take any bus heading east along Jamal-od-Din Abdolrazagh St from Takhti Junction. Get off the bus at Ahmad Abad Sq where the small Soroush bus terminal (Map p233) has buses to the airport. From the airport, ask around for any shuttle taxis heading into the city, from where you might need to get another to your hotel. A private taxi will cost about IR50,000.

BUS & MINIBUS

Buses and minibuses leave the local bus terminal, near Chehel Sotun Palace, every few minutes. Just ask – and keep asking – for one heading your way. Elsewhere in town ask at a bus stop and you will soon be pointed to the correct conveyance. Rides cost IR200 to IR500 and you buy books of tickets at booths along the routes. One very handy bus links the Kaveh and Soffeh bus terminals (IR500).

TAXI

Depending on the distance – and your negotiating skills – a fare in a private taxi around inner Esfahan costs anything from IR6000 to IR15,000. Luckily there are so many taxis that it's easy to negotiate by threatening to find another one. Avoid the taxi drivers hanging around Imam Sq as they can spot tourists a mile off. To hire a private taxi for an hour costs between IR20,000 and IR40,000, and can be a good way to see the Ateshkadeh-ye Esfahan and Manar Jombar.

The long Chahar Bagh St is the city's main thoroughfare, and every couple of seconds a shuttle taxi goes *mostaghim* (straight ahead) for about IR1000 per kilometre or so. To outlying destinations such as the transport terminals, look for taxis heading in the right direction from the following places: Takhti Junction, Laleh, Qods and Ahmad Abad Sqs (for anywhere to the east); Imam Hossein and Shohada Sqs (for the north); and the southern end of Si-o-Seh Bridge and Azadi Sq (for the south and west); or just ask anywhere.

ESFAHAN TO SHIRAZ VIA THE ZAGROS MOUNTAINS

If the idea of a direct bus or flight between Esfahan and Shiraz sounds like a missed opportunity, then consider an alternative jaunt through the Zagros Mountains, where the sharp folds of barren ridge and flowing valley stretch like a giant crocodile's back for 1500km from the Turkish border in northwestern Iran southeast to the Persian Gulf coast. The population is made up of Persian, Lori, Kurdish and a vast number of nomads, primarily Bakhtiari and Qashqa'i.

As a travelling experience, this trip definitely qualifies as 'off the beaten track'. Few people speak English, transport can be infrequent and accommodation basic. Sum-

mers are pleasantly mild but during winter snows often block roads. But tourists are rare, welcomes are warm and the scenery absolutely breathtaking.

Shahr-e Kord

شهر کرد

☎ 0381 / pop 137,000 / elev 2061m

The first leg is from Esfahan to Shahr-e Kord (see p251 for transport details). Nestled between two mountain ranges, the sleepy capital of Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiyari province is a staging post rather than a destination. The main sights are the **Atabakan Mosque** and the **Imamzadeh Khatoon**, near the bazaar, but even the province's own literature doesn't mention them.

For lodgings, the super basic **Hotel Mohammad** (☎ 0912 455 3306; Valiasr St; tw IR60,000), unmarked in English opposite the Imamzadeh, is not the sort of place you'll stay more than one night. Better but overpriced is the government-run **Shahr-e Kord Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 222 1077; Dr Shariati St, north of Basij Sq; r US\$40; ☎ ☎); while the best available is the **Shahr-e Kord Azadi Hotel** (☎ 333 0020; r/stc US\$49/64; ☎ ☎), a taxi-ride up the hill at the edge of town. The **Ferdosi Soffrehkaneh** (☎ 225 4355; Ferdosi Sq; ☎ 8am-10pm), just west of the bazaar, is one of the most atmospheric, original teahouses in Iran, and serves cheap *dizi* and kababs with its *chay* and *qalyan*; it's highly recommended.

Transport radiates out from the Terminal-e Azadi, southwest of the Imamzadeh. One minibus departs for Chelgerd (IR6000; two hours) at 8am, returning after lunch. In the late afternoon buses head south to Shiraz (*mahmooly*/Volvo IR22,000/35,000), but it's much easier to take a savari towards Yasuj (IR50,000) and get out wherever takes your fancy.

Chelgerd

چلگرد

Chelgerd is the home of skiing in this part of the Zagros range and is also the ideal base for climbing some of the many surrounding peaks of just less than 4000m. The Kuhrang Ski Resort has a single 800m-long T-bar running up a slope near the Kuhrang Tunnel; the snow is skiable between late December and early March, and you'll often have it to yourself on weekdays. There are a couple of cheaper places, but the **Hotel Kuhrang** (☎ 0832-762 2301; hotelkuhrang@parsonline.net; r US\$50) is the place to stay because the English-speaking

and statesman-like manager Mr Raisi is an absolute mine of information about the whole region. Alternatively, the guys in the Esfahan office of the **Mountaineering Federation** (Map p234; Shams Abadi St) have climbed most of these peaks and have photo albums to prove it; they can arrange guides, insurance, equipment, transport and permissions. As little English is spoken, they are usually contacted through the Ziaee brothers from Amir Kabir Hostel (p246).

Farsan to Yasuj

There is no tourist infrastructure whatsoever between Farsan and Yasuj, but the road is one of the most spectacular in the country. Winding through villages and gorges and steep-sided valleys hosting fast-flowing rivers, you won't soon forget the trip. The first two hours is most interesting.

Sepidan

سپیدان

pop 15,000

Sepidan is a sort of alpine resort village with rental accommodation and a handy information office on the main road. It's the jumping-off point for Poolad Kaf, a ski slope about 15km uphill from Sepidan. There are four lifts, one being 2100m long and climbing to 3400m. There is no regular transport to Poolad Kaf from Sepidan, but stand around the information office and you'll soon have a ride. From Yasuj, savaris (IR15,000), buses and minibuses (IR5000) run frequently to Sepidan and on to Shiraz.

Activities such as horse riding, cross-country skiing, trekking and rock climbing can also be arranged; Mr Raeesi from **Iran Sightseeing** (☎ 0711-235 5939, 0917 313 2926; www.iransightseeing.com) has had good reports.

There are, of course, several other routes through the Zagros and we don't have space to cover them all. To read about a 2006 bicycle trip from Hamedan to Esfahan, see www.travelblog.org/Middle-East/Iran/Es-fahan/blog-76174.html.

INTO THE DESERT

'A great silence overcomes me, and I wonder why I ever thought to use language.'
Great Persian poet Rumi may never have been to these towns, but this oft-repeated line could have been written specifically for

them. Dasht-e Kavir, the northern of the two deserts that lay themselves across Iran like slowly dehydrating camels, is a mix of sand and salt that is as blinding in its whiteness as the desert is deafening in its total, unimaginable silence. Within these desolate environs exist oases, and among these oases are some sweet spring villages.

Toudeshk

تودشک

☎ 0312

Most people take a bus or savari straight through to Na'in, but it's well worth stopping in on Mohammad Jalali and the villagers at Toudeshk, 95km – or one day's cycling – from Esfahan. This classic desert village of mud-brick buildings, *badgirs* and hospitable locals has been hosting cyclists for years. And now Mohammad and co are eager to welcome others so they too can experience the real Iran and dispel the stereotypes.

English-speaking Mohammad works for a cultural heritage NGO called Miras-e Yarane Jadeye Abrisham (Heritage of Silk Road Followers). It's hard to summarise exactly what they do, but visitors to Toudeshk will live desert life as it's been lived for centuries. That includes a guided walk through the ancient town, *chay*, eating a local meal, *chay*, bathing *hammam*-style and sleeping desert-style, *chay*, and if you've got more time, visiting the Gavkhuni Wetland 70km away. Oh, and that traditional desert activity – free internet. All this for US\$8 a night. Sounds good? Contact **Mohammad Jalali** (☎ 0312-637 2586, 0913 365 4420; silkroadngo@yahoo.com) for details.

If you're not pedalling, take any bus, minibus or savari from Esfahan or Na'in, and ask to get off at Toudeshk.

Na'in

نائین

☎ 0323 / pop 26,300 / elev 1557m

Slumbering Na'in is an important transit point at the geographical centre of Iran and the start of the desert road to Tabas and Mashhad. The ancient town has long been famous for its carpets and 10th-century **Jameh Mosque**. This mosque has no *iwān* and is especially notable for its fine mihrab and innovative yet simple use of stucco decoration, which is remarkably well preserved. Watch out also for the restored **traditional houses** dotted around town. For local

knowledge, seek out enthusiastic computer shop owner-cum-freelance guide **Mahmood Mohammadipour** (☎ 225 7930; greenmemoryna@yahoo.com), who will happily show you around.

There are two sleeping options. Budgeters should try good-value **Mosaferkhaneh Gholami** (☎ 225 2441, 0913 223 4667; r IR70,000), about 300m east of Imam Sq towards the Imamzadeh; there's no English sign but it's a three-storey place above a bakery. Alternatively, the government-run excellent **Na'in Tourist Inn** (Jahangardi Inn; ☎ 225 3088; fax 225 3665; Shahid Rajaie St; r US\$40; 📍) has stylish split-level apartment-style rooms, 150m south-west of Imam Sq.

Food and internet cafés are concentrated on or near Imam Sq, including **Keliza Pizza** (Imam Sq; ☎ 11.30am-10pm) and **Teria Torang Coffee Shop** (Imam Sq; ☎ 10am-8pm Sat-Thu).

Regular buses run from Esfahan (IR5000, 138km, two hours), Kashan (2½ to three hours) and Yazd (1½ to two hours) to Na'in. There is also a direct minibus from Esfahan's Jey minibus terminal (IR7000, three to 3½ hours). Buses usually stop at the roundabout a few hundred metres from Imamzadeh Sultan Said Ali. For Garmeh, wait here at about 4pm for buses en route to Mashhad, which stop at Khur (IR20,000, four hours).

Garmeh

☎ 0324 / pop – about 260 people & two camels / elev 857m

The tiny oasis village of Garmeh is everything you'd imagine an oasis village to be. More than 25 varieties of date palm spread out from a small spring, and where the palms finish the 1600-year-old mud-brick village begins. In the midst of this village is **Ateshoni** (☎ 443 2156, 0913 223 0874; www.ateshooni.com; per person IR220,000), where Tehrani artist Maziar Ale Davoud and his family have renovated their 265-year-old home into an oasis of the soul in this oasis in the desert. Rates include all the food (such as wonderful dates, pomegranates and the to-die-for cooking of Hadi and Sarra) you can eat.

Part of the beauty of Garmeh is its total, overwhelming silence. When you're not chilling out in the quiet, for a few extra dollars you can hike to hot-water springs, take a desert mountain walk, visit the salt deserts or go camel riding. Accommodation is in the traditional style, with basic mattresses unfolded on the floor of your room.

Ateshoni's popularity means you should book ahead, especially for weekends. You can stay at any time of year, but during summer it gets ridiculously hot.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Getting to Garmeh is not easy. From Esfahan take the 1pm bus to Khur, 38km to the north of Garmeh on the Na'in to Tabas road. Or meet the bus in Na'in at about 4pm. From Tehran, buses come direct from Terminal-e Jonub to Khur (14 hours) on Sunday and Wednesday. On other days, the bus to Birjand stops in Khur.

From Tehran, five or six buses (Taavonis 8 and 10) depart every day Terminal-e Jonub for Birjand between 2.30pm and 5pm. All of them stop at Khur about 10 hours later; call Ateshoni to arrange to be met in Khur. From Esfahan, a bus leaves daily at 1pm for Khur, or you could get on any bus to Mashhad (though these usually leave later so arrive at inconvenient times).

A bus leaves Yazd for Khur at 7am Saturday and Monday, and 3pm on Thursday. On other days, take any bus to Na'in and connect with the bus from Esfahan at the big roundabout just outside town (the driver will drop you at the right place).

Khur is pretty quiet, but even at 9.30pm you will probably be able to find someone to drive you out to Garmeh. Just say 'Maziar'. Expect to pay about IR30,000 for the trip. If you call ahead, Ateshoni will arrange for someone to collect you.

Leaving Garmeh, you'll first need to get a lift to Khur. From there, a daily bus to Na'in and Esfahan at 1pm; link to Yazd from Na'in. There are also buses direct to Yazd via the desert route on Sunday and Wednesday at 7am, and Friday at 3pm. These stop at Kharanaq, if you want to stay there – ask Hadi for all the details.'

Tabas

☎ 0353 / pop 35,000 / elev 678m

Once known as the jewel of the desert, the oasis town of Tabas is the largest in Iran's two vast deserts and, as such, is an important hub. Tabas's palm-lined roads and public gardens in vividly painted colours are in stark contrast to the surrounding sands. But most of the evocative architecture that made the town famous was flattened by a massive earthquake in 1978 that killed 26,000.

Today the highlight is the **Bagh-e Golshan** (Imam Khomeini Sq), with water surging through its lush variety of tropical plants, though the small cages of local fauna will appeal mainly to people who don't like animals. The garden is well signed. The ruined 11th-century citadel, the **Arg-e Tabas**, is also worth a look.

Hotel Bahman (☎ 422 5951; tw/apt IR150,000/300,000; 📍), on the street leading east from the enormous new Imamzadeh Hossein Nebn Musa (at the northern entrance to town), has ancient, overpriced and unpleasant rooms.

Imam Khomeini Sq is home to the **Restaurant Khatam** (☎ 7am-midnight), which serves tasty food in large portions and offers the only (uberbasic) budget rooms in town (for about IR60,000).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tabas is not exactly a bus hub. Most services are going to or from Mashhad, including to Yazd (IR38,000, eight hours, 419km) at about 11.30pm; Mashhad (IR45,000, 10 hours, 521km) via Ferdows (IR8000 to IR15,000, three hours); Esfahan (IR60,000, nine to 10 hours, several from 8pm to midnight). Try to check departures ahead of time at the traffic circle-cum-bus terminal beside the Imamzadeh Hossein Nebn Musa. Savaris run to Ferdows (IR40,000, two hours) and Khur (IR40,000, two hours), also from near the 'terminal'.

Baghestan-e Olia

☎ 0534 / pop – not many / elev 1594m

Two hours' drive east of Tabas is Ferdows, a largish town at the edge of the desert flanked to the north and east by rocky mountains. Ferdows is of little interest really, but in the garden village of Baghestan-e Olia 15km north, architect Noushin Ghiassi has built two modern homes and has opened them to visitors.

The experience is totally different to Garmeh or Toudeshk. Rather than mud-bricks, the richly decorated contemporary-style **Moonlight House** (☎ 223 3096, 0912 314 5200; in Tehran gnoushina@yahoo.com; per person incl food €45) feels sophisticated but homely. Noushin speaks Italian and English.

The surrounding hills are home to steep-sided valleys, fast-flowing streams and orchards of pomegranate, walnut and almond

that are spectacularly green between about April and July, when the valleys are filled with the smell of exotic herbs. Noushin can arrange reasonably priced half- and full-day walks with a guide or just a map, and trips to villages such as tiny Koreshk (see the boxed text, p256). Advance bookings are essential as Noushin is not always there. Moonlight House and a neighbour's home sleep a maximum of 15 people, in beds and on carpets, and the food is absolutely delicious.

From Mashhad, buses (IR25,000, four hours) pass between about 6pm and 10pm en route to Esfahan and Yazd. Ask to be dropped at the police check point in Baghestan; taxis opposite here will take you the last 5km. From points west, buses en route to Mashhad pass late at night. A savari from Tabas to Ferdows (IR40,000, two hours) is easier, then take a taxi. Alternatively, Iran Air flies daily between Tehran and Birjand, from where a taxi service costs about IR170,000 – Noushin can arrange it.

YAZD

☎ 0351 / pop 533,000 / elev 1213m

With its winding lanes, forest of *badgirs*, mud-brick old town and charismatic accommodation, Yazd is one of the highlights of any trip to Iran. Wedged between the northern Dasht-e Kavir and southern Dasht-e Lut, it doesn't have the big-ticket sights of Esfahan or Persepolis, but as a whole, and in the context of its relationship with the desert, it is at least as enchanting. It is a place to wander and get lost in the maze of historic streets and lanes (and your imagination), before returning to a hotel that is itself a piece of Yazd's history. It's also an ideal base for day trips to several evocative villages and towns.

Yazd has been known for its silks and other fabrics since before Marco Polo passed through. And while weaving remains an important industry, it is tourism on a far grander scale than Polo would have imagined that has been booming since the traditional hotels began opening. While nothing like Qom, Yazd is a fairly conservative town, especially in the older parts. It is also home to Iran's largest population of Zoroastrians (see the boxed text, p261). Yazd can be quite cold in winter and is boiling hot in summer, but not humid.

گرمه

طیس

یزد



VOICES OF IRAN: ZOHREH ZAMBE

Age: 15

Lives in: Koreshk, South Khorasan Province, at the edge of the Dasht-e Kavir

'Koreshk is a very small village and there are only about 50 people living here, in 20 families. I am the youngest in my family and I have three sisters and two brothers – for some reason there are always more girls than boys in this village. We're in the mountains and most people farm for fruit, walnuts and almonds. Everyone works here and we daughters help all the time. Last night we were up at 2am to change the water channels.

We also grow roses and sell the petals to be used in rose water and in medicines, though I don't know which ones. Oh, and carpet weaving! It's hard work! And we don't like it, but it's important. All the girls who make carpet have to get eye glasses when they're young because they are always looking so hard! Everyone in the village is related somehow and we all work together. When we don't have enough bread we ask the neighbours, and when they don't have enough, they ask us. That's how it works here.

I like the village, but it gets very cold and icy here in winter. Definitely, in winter the city is better. My brother lives in Tehran and I like to visit him. When I'm there I am with my brother all the time so I don't see so much traffic, but we do visit Qom.

There are no jobs here so most of the young people leave for the city, either to Gonabad or Tehran. I'd like to go but the parents won't allow me to leave until I get married. My mother was married when she was 13! And she had her first baby when she was 14! My father is seven years older. But I don't want that. I want to be 20 or 25 when I get married, and my husband should be not more than four years older. But then, it is hard to find a husband here...'

History

Yazd is said to be the 'oldest living city on Earth'. This might be a difficult claim to verify, but it is widely believed the site has been continually inhabited for about 7000 years. Its position on important trading routes and a tendency towards diplomacy go some way to explaining Yazd's longevity. The fact that commercial prosperity never really translated into real political power is probably another reason. When Marco Polo passed this way in the 13th century, he described Yazd as 'a very fine and splendid city and a centre of commerce'. It was spared destruction by Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, and flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, with silk, textile and carpet production the main home-grown industry. Like most of Iran, Yazd fell into decline when the Safavids were defeated and remained little more than a provincial outpost until the last shah extended the railway line to Yazd.

Orientation

Yazd is laid out on a very loose northeast-southwest grid, the centre of which is Beheshti Sq. Within this grid, however, lies the

mud-brick old city, a warren of *kuches* (lanes) and covered walkways and bazaars. Expect to get lost when walking around the old city – when you want to get out, just ask for directions or orient yourself by climbing until you can see the minarets of the Jameh Mosque.

Most of the hotels listed are in the old city and it's easy enough to explore the town on foot. Imam Khomeini St is the main street, running northeast from Beheshti Sq. It's crossed by Qeyam St, from where the bazaar fans out.

The airport is on the western fringe of the city while the train station and bus terminal are about 2.5km southwest of Beheshti Sq.

Information

EMERGENCY

Dr Mogibiyani Hospital (☎ 624 0061; Kashani St) For urgent problems.

Police headquarters (☎ 110; Azadi Sq)

Tourist police (☎ 621 4444; ☎ 24hr) Opposite the Heidarzadeh Coin Museum.

INTERNET ACCESS

Both of the following places can burn photos to either CD or DVD.

Friendly Internet (Masjed-e Jameh St; per hr IR8000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-10pm) 'Is everything alright?' Eager to please.

Issatis.net (☎ 623 1425; www.issatis.net; Kashani St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 5-9.30pm Thu) Not so convenient, but the services here include international calls, writing DVDs and the sale of pre-paid internet access and international phonecards.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Chamran 24-hour Pharmacy (☎ 626 6900; Farrokhi St)

MONEY

Banks in Yazd take a commission of about US\$2 on exchanges.

Bank Melli Central Branch (Shohada Crossroads)

Exchange is upstairs.

Bank Tejarat (Qeyam St) Also upstairs.

Yazd Exchange (☎ 624 7220; www.yazdexchange.com; Kashani St; ☎ 8am-10pm) Opposite the Ateshkadeh, these guys have a good reputation for the best rates; call them and they'll deliver the cash to your hotel. Also has an office at the airport and can safely store luggage.

POST

Main post office (Ghasem Abad St; ☎ 7.30am-2pm)

It's out of town but you'll have to come here if you're looking to turn your rug into a flying carpet.

Post office (Imam Khomeini St) Near Bank Melli.

TELEPHONE

Far Away International Telephone (Imam Khomeini St; calls per min IR2500; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-10pm)

Main telephone office (Motahhari St)

Shohada Telephone Office (Amir Chakhmaq Sq;

☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 8am-2pm & 5-10pm Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 621 6542-5; info@caravansalar.ir; Ziaee Sq; ☎ 9am-6pm, to 8pm summer) A few maps and brochures, but mainly about selling tours. There should usually be an English-speaker there.

TOURS

Most hotels can arrange tours but using an independent guide can be more rewarding. The following can lead tours to almost anywhere in Yazd province, and further, and have been recommended. The most common tour is the Kharanaq-Chak Chak-Meybod loop (about US\$40 for three or less people, US\$55 with breakfast and lunch), which is impossible on public transport. Other options include camel tours (about US\$25 per person for a half-day, US\$75

overnight, more for groups comprised of fewer than five people) and desert walks (one day and one night about US\$20 per person). Old city tours are also popular. Silk Road Travel (p258) also runs these tours.

Hossain Bagharian (☎ 0913 352 0370) Hossain has been guiding for years and is a straight-shooter. He could talk under wet cement, so rest assured he'll tell you everything he knows... and a bit more.

Massoud Jaladat (☎ 0913 352 4752; fravahar_m@yahoo.com) Massoud is the energy behind Fravahar Ecotours, a fledgling group of Yazdis running mainly desert tours. There are all sorts of reasonably priced options, mainly involving desert trekking; email or call for options and ask about the desert guide.

Mohsen Hajisaed (☎ 0913 351 4460; yazdguide@yahoo.com) Young, highly organised Mohsen speaks excellent English, leads tours in Yazd, Kerman, Fars and Esfahan provinces (including Bavanat), and can arrange hotel discounts.

Keykhosro Lorian (☎ 0913 353 3343; mrlorian_tourdriver@yahoo.com) Mr Lorian is an English-speaking Zoroastrian driver who has excellent access to the Zoroastrian community.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The following are good for plane and train tickets.

THE BADGIRS OF YAZD

Any summer visitor to Yazd will understand immediately why the city's roovescape is a forest of *badgirs* (windtowers or wind catchers). These ancient systems of natural air-conditioning are designed to catch even the lightest breeze and direct it to the rooms below. To appreciate the effect, just stand beneath one.

Badgirs range from standard two-sided versions to elaborate six-sided models and all but the simplest consist of at least four parts: the body or trunk that contains the shafts; air shelves that are used to catch some of the hot air and stop it entering the house; flaps to redirect the circulation of the wind; and the roof covering. The currents that enter the house often do so above a pool of cool water, thereby cooling the air, while the warm air continues its circular path, redirected upwards and out of the house through a different shaft. Genius! And while not quite as cold as modern air-con, the *badgir* is a whole lot healthier.

THE QANAT

For at least 2000 years Iranians have been digging *qanats* (underground water channels) to irrigate crops and supply drinking water. To build a *qanat* you first need to find an underground water source. This source could be more than 100m deep, but as the whole system is reliant on gravity the source must be higher than the final destination. Then you dig a tunnel just wide and tall enough to crawl along, so the water can flow across an extremely shallow gradient to its destination. The mounds of soil you'll see in long lines across the desert are the top of wells, dug to dispose of excavated soil and allow ventilation. Because of the hazards and expense of constructing a *qanat*, complex laws govern every aspect of their use and maintenance. Iran is thought to have more than 50,000 *qanats*. While modern irrigation projects now take priority, *qanats* and other traditional methods of supplying water are still very important. And as hundreds of towns and villages – including Bam, Kashan and Mahan – still rely on *qanats* for water, the highly skilled and well-paid *qanat* builders of Yazd won't be picking up redundancy cheques for many years yet.

For the lowdown on *qanats*, head for the impressive **Yazd Water Museum** (☎ 626 8340; Amir Chakhmaq Sq; admission IR10,000; ☎ 8am-7pm), located in a restored mansion that happens to have a *qanat* or two underneath. The displays are clear and mostly in English.

Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin

بقعه سيد ركن الدين

The beautiful blue-tiled dome of the **Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin** (Mausoleum of Sayyed Roknaddin; off Masjed-e Jameh St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 10am-noon Fri), the tomb of local Islamic notable Sayyed Roknaddin Mohammed Qazi, is visible from any elevated point in the city. Built 700 years ago, the dome is notable but the deteriorating interior stucco and other decoration remains impressive. The door is often closed but a knock should bring the caretaker.

Khan-e Lari

خانه لاری

The 150-year-old **Khan-e Lari** (admission IR2000; ☎ 7am-6pm, to 8pm summer) is one of the best-preserved Qajar-era houses in Yazd. The *badgirs*, traditional doors, stained-glass windows, elegant archways and alcoves mark it out as one of the city's grandest homes. The merchant family who built it have long gone, and it's now home to architecture students and cultural heritage officers. It's signposted west of Zaiee Sq; see the walking tour (p262) for directions.

Alexander's Prison

زندان اسکندر

This 15th-century domed school is known as **Alexander's Prison** (Zaiee Sq; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-sunset, 8am-1pm & 4pm-sunset summer) because of a reference to this apparently dastardly place in a Hafez poem. Whether the deep well in the middle of its courtyard was in fact built by Alexander the Great and used as a dungeon seems doubtful, no matter what your guide tells you. Recently

renovated, the building itself is worth a look for the small display on the old city of Yazd, the clean toilets, the overly fluorescent but mercifully cool subterranean teahouse and the studio-shop of sitar-maker and -player **Moslem Mirzazadeh** (☎ 0913 351 5452; moslemmirzazadeh@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm).

The early-11th-century brick **Tomb of the 12 Imams** is almost next door to Alexander's Prison. The once-fine (but now badly deteriorated) inscriptions inside bear the names of the Shiite Imams (see The 12 Imams, p56), though none are actually buried here.

Amir Chakhmaq Complex

مجموعه امير چخماق

The stunning three-storey façade of the *takieh* (a building used during the rituals to commemorate the death of Imam Hossein) in the **Amir Chakhmaq Complex** (Amir Chakhmaq Sq; admission IR3000; ☎ No Ruz only) is one of the largest Hosseinihs in Iran. Its rows of perfectly proportioned sunken alcoves are at their best, and most photogenic, around sunset when the light softens and the towering exterior is discreetly floodlit. Recent work has added sides, though their exact purpose wasn't clear when we visited (hopefully not shops!). During the No Ruz holiday it's possible to climb up for spectacular views across Yazd, but at most other times it's closed.

Underneath the complex is a lacklustre **bazaar**, where *kababis* and souvenir shops open only when there is sufficient interest. In front of the *takieh*, look out for the huge wooden palm *nakhl*, an important centre-

piece for the observance of the Shiites' passionate Ashura commemorations.

Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh

زور خانه صاحب الزمان

Just off the north side of Amir Chakhmaq Sq is the **Saheb A Zaman Club Zurkhaneh** (admission IR10,000; ☎ workouts 5pm & 8.30pm Sat-Thu), which is worth seeing both for its Iranian brand of body building and because it's a quite amazing structure. The modern club is inside a cavernous *ab anbar* (water reservoir) built about 1580. Looking like a 29m-high standing egg from the inside, and crowned with five burly *badgirs*, the reservoir stored water for much of the town. The hour-long workouts in the Zurkhaneh are an interesting window on Iranian culture; see (p52).

BAGH-E DOLAT ABAD

باغ دولت آباد

Once a residence of Persian regent Karim Khan Zand, **Bagh-e Dolat Abad** (admission IR30,000; ☎ 7.30am-5pm, to 6pm summer) was built about

1750 and consists of a small pavilion set amid quiet gardens. The interior of the pavilion is superb, with intricate latticework and exquisite stained-glass windows. It's also renowned for having Iran's loftiest *badgir*, standing over 33m, though this one was rebuilt after it collapsed in the 1960s. The entrance can be reached from the western end of Shahid Raja'i St.

ZOROASTRIAN SITES

اماکن زرتشتی

Yazd is home to the largest and most active Zoroastrian community in Iran; see (below).

Ateshkadeh

آتشکده

Zoroastrians come from around the world to see this **Ateshkadeh** (Sacred Eternal Flame; ☎ by appointment), often referred to as the Zoroastrian Fire Temple, said to have been burning since about AD 470. Visible through a window from the entrance hall, the flame was transferred to Ardakan in 1174, then to Yazd in 1474 and to its present site in 1940. Above the entrance you can see the Fravahar symbol.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism was the main religion across the Iranian plateau until the Arab Conquest brought Islam to the fore. Zoroastrians are followers of Zoroaster (Zartosht or Zarathustra), who was probably born between 1000 BC and 1500 BC, possibly near present-day Lake Urmiyeh or further north in Central Asia – no-one is sure. Zoroastrianism was one of the first religions to postulate an omnipotent, invisible god. The supreme being, Ahura Mazda, has no symbol or icon, but he asked that followers pray to him in the direction of light. The only light the ancients controlled was fire, so they created fire temples to keep the flame burning eternally.

Very little of what Zoroaster wrote has survived, though the teachings in the Avesta (sometimes referred to as the Zoroastrian bible) are attributed to him. The core lesson is dualism: the eternal battle of good and evil. Zoroaster believed in two principles – Vohu Mano (Good Mind) and Ahem Nano (Bad Mind), which were responsible for day and night, life and death. These two opposing 'minds' coexisted within the supreme being, Ahura Mazda, and in all living things.

Since Zoroastrians believe in the purity of the elements, they refuse to bury their dead (pollutes the earth) or cremate them (pollutes the atmosphere). Instead, the dead were exposed in 'towers of silence', where their bones were soon cleaned up by the vultures. Nowadays, deceased Zoroastrians are usually buried in graves lined with concrete to prevent 'contamination' of the earth.

Many Zoroastrian temples are adorned with bas-relief winged figures that symbolise Fravahar, the part of the spirit that reaches Ahura Mazda after death. The old man symbolises experience and wisdom, the three layers of feathers on the wings symbolise purity of thought, word and deed, and the semi-long tail in front represents Vohu Mano, while the rear tail is Ahem Nano.

Of the 150,000 or more Zoroastrians in the world, the number in and around Yazd has dwindled to about 5500. Zoroastrian women can be recognised by their patterned headscarves and embroidered dresses with predominant colours of white, cream or red. They never wear chadors, but do follow the strict hejab laws governing women's dress.

Zoroastrianism is also known as Mazdaism from the name of its supreme god, Ahura Mazda, and as Magism from the name of its ancient priests, the magi. The Three Wise Men of the Bible are believed to have been Zoroastrian magi, hence the Adoration of the Magi.

Getting in is difficult as the caretaker is often not around. Try knocking at the small gate in a side alley, but if that doesn't work your best bet is a Zoroastrian guide (p257). In the northeast of Yazd, the **Fortress of Lions** (Ghal'eh-ye Asadan) houses another Zoroastrian eternal flame. It is also usually closed.

Towers of Silence

برج خاموشی

Set on two lonely, barren hilltops on the southern outskirts of Yazd are the evocative Zoroastrian **Towers of Silence** (Dakhmeh-ye Zartoshtiyun). In accordance with Zoroastrian beliefs about the purity of the earth, dead bodies were not buried but left in these uncovered stone towers so that vultures could pick the bones clean. Such towers have not been used since the '60s. At the foot of the hills are several other disused Zoroastrian buildings, including a defunct well, a water cistern and two small *badgirs*, a kitchen and a lavatory. The modern **Zoroastrian cemetery** is nearby. The easiest way to get here is by chartering a private taxi for about IR30,000 return, including waiting time of 45 minutes or so. Ask for Dakhmeh-ye Zartoshtiyun.

Get Lost In Yazd Walking Tour

Start at the **Amir Chakhmaq Complex** (1; p260), and check out the nearby **Amir Chakhmaq Mosque** (2) and, on the opposite corner, the **Yazd Water Museum** (3; see The Qanat, p260). From here, head up Imam Khomeini St, take a quick look at the **Hazireh Mosque** (4), and turn left up Masjed-e Jameh St. Before you reach the imposing mosque, turn down a lane to the right to see the stunning portal of the turquoise-domed **Bogheh-ye Sayyed Roknaddin** (5; p260). If you're hungry, you could now stop at the **Orient Hotel** (6; opposite) for lunch and a spectacular view, or continue into the **Jameh Mosque** (7, p259). Exit the mosque through the northeastern door (near the *qanat*), turn right, then left, and keep straight for about 75m to a junction with several arches and open ceilings. Turn left here and you'll reach an open space with a playground. Stay on the right (eastern) side and keep heading northeast. After about 250m on Fazel St a small lane leads off to the right, where a **water reservoir** (8) surrounded by four *badgirs* stands next to a shaded park. Continue left (northeast), parallel to Fazel St, and you'll pass the Kohan Hotel. Stay straight another

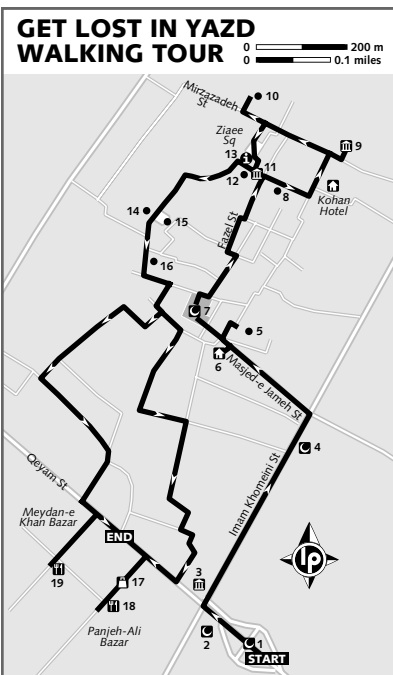
WALKING TOUR

Start Amir Chakhmaq Complex

Finish Hammam-e Khan Restaurant

Distance about 5km

Duration three to five hours, depending on how often you get lost



100m or so and you'll come to Mirzazadeh St. To the right is the **Heidarzadeh Coin Museum** (9), which is actually more interesting than it sounds. Heading northwest, walk past Ziaee Sq and keep straight for about 150m. Turn right down a small alley to the **Khan-e Lari** (10; p260). Head back to Ziaee Sq and turn right. Ahead is the dome of **Alexander's Prison** (11; p260) – which has a clean bathroom – and just beyond is the **Tomb of the 12 Imams** (12; p260). You can stop for a drink or directions at the **tourist information office** (13; p257) opposite. From the tomb, turn left and follow a sweeping bend until it comes to a dusty space with a concrete table-tennis table. Then head left (southwest) under a domed passage for about 70m until you come to a square with

a three-storey white façade (*takieh*) on the left. If you're very lucky, the green-and-white metal door on the right will be unlocked (reach through to try it from the inside), and you'll be able to climb to the domed roof of the **Hosseinieh** (14) for quite splendid views of the old city. If not, you could carefully climb the stairs at the back of the **takieh** (15) for almost-as-good views. Continue southwest for about 150m. On your left is the untiled domed roof of the now-closed **Madrasesh-e Kamalieh** (16). Keep along the same lane and you'll see the minarets of the Jameh Mosque. Using these as a guide, you're now on your own. Wend your way through the old city, heading roughly southwest, until you reach Qeyam St. Cross into the **Panjeh-ali Bazar** (17) and head for either **Malek-o Tojjar** (18; p264) or the **Hammam-e Khan Restaurant** (19; p265) for some well-earned sustenance.

Sleeping

Yazd has quite simply the most charismatic, historic bunch of hotels in Iran, and possibly the entire Middle East. More than 10 *khan-eh sonnati* (traditional houses) have now been transformed into hotels. The result is 24-hour cultural immersion; see the sights of this historic city by day, and then sit on the *takhts* (daybeds), sip tea and eat local food as Iranians have for centuries. Compare this with the sense of place you get in the usual cookie-cutter hotels. Even better, your money contributes to the preservation and renaissance of this historic Silk Road city.

Not surprisingly, the old city is the most atmospheric area to stay in. Almost all hotels offer day trips to Chak Chak, Meybod and Kharanaq (see Around Yazd, p266), and prices are in proportion to room rates.

BUDGET

Hotel Amir Chakhmagh (☎ 626 9823; Amir Chakhmaq Sq; s/tw/tr IR50,000/80,000/120,000; 🍽️ 🚿) The Amir Chakhmagh is not a historic hotel, though at this rate in a few years it will be...very old indeed. It's in a great location beside the Amir Chakhmaq complex, but rooms can be noisy and the shared bathrooms could be cleaner. The dorms listed in any of the following places are probably better.

• **Silk Road Hotel** (Jada-e Abrisham; ☎ 625 2730; www.silkroadhotel.ir; 5 Tal-e Khakestary Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh Ave; dm €4, s/d/tr with breakfast €14/22/30; 🍽️ 🚿) Two minutes' walk from the Masjed-

e Jameh, the Silk Road's mix of traditional courtyard setting, delicious food, laid-back vibe and fair price has made it the most talked about travellers' stop in Iran. With 15 simple but attractive rooms (no TVs) and a seven-bed underground dormitory (no bathroom), it caters to backpackers, flashpackers and even the odd ambassador. The buffet breakfast is both delicious and wonderfully social. Owners Ali and Sebastian can offer discounts for longer stays.

• **Kohan Hotel** (Kohan Kashaneh; ☎ 621 2485; www.kohanhotel.com; off Imam Khomeini St; dm IR50,000, s/tw with breakfast IR170,000/250,000; 🍽️ 🚿) Owner Taslim and his family have renovated the family home and given it a relaxed, welcoming ambience. The 18 traditional but unadorned rooms are set around a lush garden courtyard, while two six-bed dorms (each with bathroom) open off a long stairway to a *qanat*. A restaurant should be open when you arrive. To find it, head northeast on Imam Khomeini St, past Masjed-e Jameh Ave, and follow the stencil signs along a lane on your left. If you get lost, it's near the Coin Museum.

• **Rose Traditional Hotel** (☎ 622 5790-92; Farhang Alley, off Imam Khomeini Ave; s/d IR220,000/300,000; 🍽️ 🚿) Deep in the Old City, this unpretentious little place has comfortable and fair-value if not-exactly-inspiring rooms. A restaurant is attached.

If the others are full (or you need the parking), the following two oldies are cheap but uninspiring.

• **Aria Hotel** (☎ 626 0411; 10 Farvardin St; r IR80,000-150,000; 🍽️ 🚿) Overpriced rooms, some without bathroom, around a courtyard. Communal kitchen. No English is spoken.

• **Beheshty Hotel** (☎ 626 5517; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr IR60,000/80,000/110,000; 🍽️ 🚿) Simple, clean rooms. Only the triple has attached bathroom. Secure parking for overlanders.

MIDRANGE

All of the following are traditional hotels in renovated or converted homes in Yazd's old city.

• **Soroush Guesthouse** (☎ 626 5159; off Basij Ave; s/tw/tr US\$27/38/50; 🍽️ 🚿) The attractive-looking Soroush has rooms on two levels around a sunken courtyard, though for size, cleanliness and value they are not fantastic; try others first.

• **Orient Hotel** (☎ 626 7783; orient_hotel@gmail.com; 6th Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh St; s/d/tr with breakfast €20/30/40; 🍽️ 🚿) From the same owners as the Silk Road Hotel, the Orient is set

around two high-sided courtyards and is a more family-oriented place. The convivial service, comfortable rooms, unbeatable location beside the Masjed-e Jameh and rooftop Marco Polo Restaurant (opposite) make this a top choice. Discounts possible.

Malek-o Tojjar (☎ 622 4060; www.malek-o-tojjar.com; Panjeh-ali Bazar, Qeyam St; dm US\$5, s US\$20-25, tw US\$35-40, tr US\$45-60, f US\$75; 🍴) Down a narrow, lamp-lit passage from the Panjeh-ali Bazar is Yazd's original traditional hotel, where you'll soon be lying around drinking tea, eating fine food and feeling transported to a different time. This Qajar-era home was converted, not completely renovated, which means everything is original. Rooms are cobbled together from odd spaces connected by low doorways and steep stairways, bathrooms are tiny and plumbing can be inconsistent. Still, the atmosphere, delicious food (see right) and homely service make it a good choice. There's also a fine dorm, though it can be cold in winter. Coming from Qeyam St, look for the sign and small doorway on the left.

Yazd Traditional Hotel (☎ 622 8500-09; www.yazdhotel.com; Amir Chakhmaq Sq; s/d/tr/f US\$50/70/85/100; 🍴 🍷 📺) At the top of the midrange, this 215-year-old mansion was recently restored and is run by enthusiastic young Yazdis who deliver above-average service. The 24 attractive rooms retain their odd shapes, stained glass and low doorways, and there's even a sauna and two small Jacuzzis, to be used one-sec-at-a-time, of course.

Mehr Traditional Hotel (☎ 622 7400; www.mehrhotel.ir; Labe Khandaq Alley, off Qeyam St; s/d/tr/ste with breakfast US\$35/50/70/95; 🍴 🍷 📺) The 250-year-old Khan-e Zargar-e Yazdi has been lovingly restored and converted and is an excellent traditional choice. Signposted from Qeyam St, the rooms here are bigger and better equipped than some, the food is delicious, service responsive and rooftop views expansive.

Moshir Caravanserai Yazd Hotel (☎ 622 7050-54; www.caravanseraihotel.com; Imamzadeh-ye Ja'far Blvd; tw/ste IR600,000/1,000,000; 🍴) This Moshir, not to be confused with the Mamalak Moshir, is a good choice deep in the Old City. The 22 mid-sized rooms are set around a two-storey restored caravanserai. It has a welcoming feel, and big low-season discounts make it particularly worthwhile.

Dad Hotel (☎ 622 9444; www.hoteldadint.com; 214 Favardin St; s/d US\$30/60, ste US\$100-120; 🍴 🍷 📺) Dad is not named for anyone's father,

though as the brainchild of an 84-year-old patriarch it could be called 'great granddad'. The 54 spacious, modern and well-equipped rooms are reasonably stylish, though there is not much natural light and, well, they don't feel as real as the genuinely old places. Still, they're good value, especially when you can take a dip in the sparkling underground pool (women AM, men PM).

TOP END

Jumping on the *khan-e sonnati* bandwagon are these two faux-traditional places, purpose built as hotels.

Hotel Mamalak Moshir (Moshir Gardens; ☎ 523 9760-65; www.hotelgardenmoshir.com; Enqelab Ave; s/d/tr/ste with breakfast US\$65/85/100/140; 🍴 🍷 📺) The largest hotel in Yazd, the Mamalak Moshir is a faux-traditional place set around an expansive, attractive garden. Rooms are a mix of subterranean and above-ground affairs, all very attractively decorated with bright colours and stained glass. The restaurant is also quite good. For Iranians, this is the place to stay in Yazd, but the location away from the Old City is inconvenient and the service disorganised.

Laleh Hotel (☎ 622 5048; www.yazdlalehhotel.com; opposite Anbar Golshan, off Basij Ave; s/d US\$70/95; 🍴 🍷 📺) Laleh is undoubtedly one of the most stunning of the restored homes, with 40 luxurious rooms set around three courtyards. It's not, however, the best place to stay. Service, especially in the restaurant, is very one-star, and that's before we even mention the food. Better value elsewhere.

Eating

Most of the traditional hotels use one of their courtyards as a restaurant. We're listing some of the better options here, but rest assured that if you're staying in a traditional hotel, food won't be too far away. Yazd is famous for *baghlava*, which is similar but thicker than classic Turkish baklava, and *pashmak*, a solid type of fairy floss or cotton candy.

RESTAURANTS

Malek-o Tojjar (☎ 622 4060; www.malek-o-tojjar.com; Panjeh-ali Bazar, off Qeyam St; meals IR35,000) The evocative surrounds and fine Iranian dishes here are complemented with several regional classics, including some delightful soups, *bademjan* and other vegetarian dishes. And it's very reasonably priced considering the surrounds.

Marco Polo Restaurant (☎ 626 7783; off Masjed-e Jameh Ave; meals IR35,000-65,000) Set like a crown atop the Orient Hotel, this glass-sided restaurant serves up sumptuous views of the Masjed-e Jameh and surrounding blue-tiled domes and delicious Iranian food that's fit for the setting. Ideal for a romantic dinner.

Silk Road Hotel Restaurant (☎ 625 2730; 5 Tal-e Khakestary Alley, off Masjed-e Jameh Ave; meals IR30,000-65,000) While the Iranian food here is very good, the delicious (if not super-hot) sub-continental curries are the most popular dishes among travellers who can't face another kabab. Relaxed, social atmosphere.

Mozaffar Traditional Restaurant (☎ 622 7664; Khalf Bagh Alley, off Motahari Ave; meals IR35,000-60,000; 🍴 noon-3pm & 6-11pm) A recent addition to the *sonnati* scene, the Mozaffar is set in and around a particularly large courtyard, with both private rooms and *takhts*. To the standard Iranian menu, add (brace yourself) pizza. Expected to open rooms by 2009.

Hammam-e Khan Restaurant (Chaykhaneh-ye San'ati; ☎ 627 0366; Meydan-e Khan Bazar, off Qeyam St; meals IR35,000-60,000; 🍴 11.30am-3.30pm & 7.30-11pm) Deep in the heart of the old city, this restored underground *hammam* is one of the original historic restorations in Yazd and deserves its ongoing popularity. The interior is all tranquil pools, arched ceilings and fine tilework, and the food is delicious (as long as it's not too busy). Follow the signs from Qeyam St.

Pizza Gole Sorkh (☎ 725 7519; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; pizzas IR20,000-50,000; 🍴 6-11pm) After working for almost 30 years as a pizza chef in Australia, the owner returned home to open a modern, busy restaurant serving arguably the best pizzas in Iran and a range of Italian classics. His serve of Aussie slang is pretty good, too.

Baharestan Restaurant (☎ 622 5107; Beheshti Sq; meals IR25,000; 🍴 11.30am-5pm) Forget atmosphere and style, the Baharestan is about tasty staples at tasty prices; the *khoresht* is best.

QUICK EATS

Amiran Paludeh (Favardin St, off Beheshti Sq) This tiny place specialises in delicious *paludeh*, a type of sorbet made of rice flour, grated fruit and rose-water (IR1500 a bowl).

Yazd Traditional Cookie (☎ 525 3673; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; 🍴 8am-4pm) Sweet shop extraordinaire! A huge array of *shirin* (sweets) is made in front of you by a team of busy men who will happily let you taste a few offerings; the pistachio-flavoured *loz-e peste* is supreme!

Nemoner Sandwich (Imam Khomeini St; camel burgers IR8000; 🍴 Sat-Thu) Fancy a camel burger? This modest little place can knock one up in about three minutes. There's no English sign, but it's directly opposite the camel butchery.

Sito Coffee Shop & Pizza (☎ 622 0888; Amir Chakhmaq Sq; pizzas IR30,000; 🍴 11am-11pm) The modern Iranian mix of pizza and miscellaneous other dishes won't have you writing home, but the views from the rooftop (in summer) just might.

Shopping

The old city bazaars are probably 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. If you have a sweet tooth, don't forget to try *pashmak* (Iranian fairy floss), available in many shops around Beheshti Sq.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Yazd airport (☎ 199) is not the busiest in Iran. **Iran Air** (☎ 622 2080; Motahari St) flies to Tehran (IR316,000, 70 minutes, twice daily).

BUS & MINIBUS

All buses leave from the **main bus terminal** (Rah Ahan Blvd), about 3km southwest of the centre, and accessible by shuttle taxi from Beheshti and Azadi Sqs.

Fares are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses, though Volvos are more frequent:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Bam	IR50,000(V)	7-9hr	4pm service, usually a few others
Bandar Abbas	IR36,000/60,000	9-11hr	frequent
Esfahan	IR12,500/30,000	4-5hr	frequent
Kerman	IR16,500/30,000	4-5hr	frequent
Mashhad	IR42,000/80,000	14-16hr	3-6pm
Shiraz	IR18,000/45,000	5-7hr	8am, 2pm & 8.30pm
Tabas	IR37,000	8hr	3-6pm
Tehran	IR33,700/45,000	10hr	frequent
Zahedan	IR65,000(V)	14hr	4pm service, usually a few others

The 4pm Zahedan service gets you there with time to continue to the border for a morning crossing. Any bus to Zahedan will drop you in Bam. For Garmeh, see p254.

TRAIN

There are three trains daily from Yazd to Tehran (though berths can be hard to come by): two with six-berth couchettes (IR48,550, eight hours), via Kashan and Qom, departing at 9pm and 10.10pm; and a four-berth couchette at about 2am en route from Bandar Abbas. From Tehran, trains leave at 8.35pm and 10.20pm. For Kerman the train from Tehran stops at about 2.20am, but the 2nd-class train (IR15,950, five hours) departing at 6.10am is a better choice. For Bandar Abbas (1st class only, IR53,000, nine hours) there is a daily train at midnight, and on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 7.10pm. Trains to Mashhad (Ghazal 1st class IR149,000) leave at 4.50pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, arriving at 6.10am.

The **train station** (☎ 139; 🕒 8am-1.30pm & 7-11pm) is next to the main bus terminal. Get here by shuttle taxi from Beheshti or Azadi Sqs, or charter a taxi for about IR10,000. Oddly, train tickets are much easier to buy from agencies (p257) than at the station.

Getting Around

To the airport take a shuttle taxi from Enqelab-e Eslami Sq for about IR2000, or a private taxi for IR20,000. Taxis *dar baste* start at about IR6000 for short trips, and cost IR10,000 to the terminals.

AROUND YAZD

Kharanaq, Chak Chak, Meybod and Ardakan are best seen as part of a looping day trip from Yazd. It's a long day (about 7am to 6pm) and you can either hire a taxi from the street (about IR250,000) or take a guided tour (p257), which is much more rewarding but more costly. Minibuses run to Meybod or Ardakan from the main bus terminal in Yazd, but there's no public transport at all to Chak Chak. The irregular bus to Garmeh (p254) passes Kharanaq, and you can sleep there – either en route to/from Garmeh or as a destination in itself.

Kharanaq

خرانق

The virtually deserted and crumbling mud-brick village of Kharanaq, in a valley about

70km north of Yazd, is believed to be more than 1000 years old and the site occupied in some form for more than 4000 years. The Qajar-era **mosque**, 17th-century **shaking minaret** and **caravanserai** on the edge of town have all been restored. You'll need a key to get into these, however, and you'll need a guide (or the folks at Silk Road Kharanaq) to arrange that.

Many of the buildings are falling down and we've seen at least one tourist fall through the roof, so watch your step. Walk into the valley below to see an ancient aqueduct, built to irrigate the surrounding fields. Photographers will love it mid-afternoon. **Silk Road Kharanaq** (dm/s/d €5/10/15) is run by the Silk Road guys in Yazd (p263), and all bookings should be made through them. The modest adobe building has been extensively renovated but remains as simple – and appropriate – as you'd expect in a virtual ghost town. Rates include breakfast and dinner, and guidance for onward transport.

Chak Chak

چک چک

Chak Chak is Iran's most important Zoroastrian pilgrimage. About 72km northwest of Yazd and deep in the desert, legend has it that after the Arab invasion in AD 637 the Sassanian princess Nikbanuh fled to this site. Short of water, she threw her staff at the cliff and water began dripping out – *chak*, *chak* means 'drip, drip'. The steep, cliff-side location is impressive even if most of the buildings are not. The exception is the **Pir-e-Sabz fire temple**, home to the drip, which has a brass door embossed with the likeness of Zoroaster. The dramatic views make it worth the climb.

Chak Chak attracts thousands of pilgrims for an annual festival held between 14 and 18 June.

Meybod

میبود

About 52km north of Yazd, Meybod is a sprawling mud-brick town that is at least 1800 years old. It has three main sights near each other in the west of town, all open from 9am to 5pm, or 7pm in summer. They include a 300-year-old **post house** (admission IR3000) that served as a relay station on, as it says above the door, the 'King's Road, Rey to Kerman'; a **caravanserai** with a covered *qanat*; and a huge Safavid-era **ice house** (*yakh dan*) across the street. Crumbling **Narein castle** (admission

IR2000; 🕒 9am-5pm, to 7pm summer), in the centre of town, dates from Sassanian times and affords desert-rooftop views across town.

As you enter town, stop at the circular **pigeon tower** that once housed 4000 pigeons whose guano was collected as fertiliser. The tower has been meticulously restored and today about 100 pigeons swing from strings in a crude celebration of the taxidermist's art. Avoid taking anything mind-altering before coming here... It's on government property so ask at the gate before entering.

Ardakan

اردکان

Now almost merging with Meybod, Ardakan is another ancient desert city and a regional agricultural centre courtesy of its amazing *qanat* irrigation system (see The Qanat, p260). Ardakan's desert setting, rather than specific buildings, makes it worth a detour on the way to or from Chak Chak. There are some attractive old lanes and *badgirs* around the **Jameh Mosque** (Masjed-e Jameh). Ardakan is famous for its camels and you can sample delicious camel kababs in almost any *kababi*.

Saryazd

سریزد

Saryazd means 'head of Yazd' and its two caravanserais were the last stop before Yazd for hauliers heading north. About 6km east of the highway, the sleepy village has zero tourist infrastructure. What it has is the crumbling but still largely intact, Safavid-era **Robat-e Noh** (New Caravanserai), complete with three floors of rooms, some with ancient pots scattered around the dusty floors, and fine rooftop views. And the village is just a fun place in which to wander a bit.

Infrequent minibuses come here from Abuzar Sq in Yazd, though most people come with a taxi *dar baste* (one way IR40,000).

Zein-o-din

زین الدین

Blink and you'd miss Zein-o-din, where the sole structure and *raison d'être* is a 400-year-old caravanserai built on the orders of Shah Abbas I. Located two days' camel ride south of Yazd (that's 60km) in a vast desert plain flanked by mountains, the caravanserai was part of a network of 999 such hostels built to promote trade. Of those, it's one of only two circular caravanserais (the other, near Esfahan, is largely destroyed).

Thankfully, this one was built to last and today **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** (☎ 0351-824 3338, 0912 306 0441; zeinodin2003@yahoo.com; per person incl two meals €48; 📍) is a serendipitous, romantic taste of a caravan traders' life on the Silk Road. A three-year renovation, during which 13,000 pumice stones were used to scour centuries of grime from the walls, saw the simple accommodation restored to almost its original state: the raised rooms offer mattresses on top of carpets with just a curtain separating you from the corridor. Where it differs is in the stylish and clean communal bathrooms, the service and the delicious food. Zein-o-din's isolation means food and excursions need to be planned ahead, so advance booking is essential. Prices are negotiable in summer and December.

Apart from just chilling out Safavid style, desert walks to a mountain spring can be arranged – with notice.

Take any bus heading south to Kerman (pick one up at Abuzar Sq) and ask to be dropped at Zein-o-din, or take a savari *dar baste* for about IR80,000 one way; add IR30,000 per hour waiting time.

ABARQU

☎ 0352 / elev 1510m

ابرقو

This historic town on the road between Yazd and Shiraz is a good off-the-tourist-trail stop. There are several attractions, including a huge **ice house**, the 11th-century **Gonbad Ali dome**, the Jameh Mosque and a 4000-plus-year-old **cypress tree**. The main draw, however, is the **Khan-e Aghazadeh**, a restored Qajar-era mansion that might one day be a hotel; look for the distinctive two-storey *badgir*.

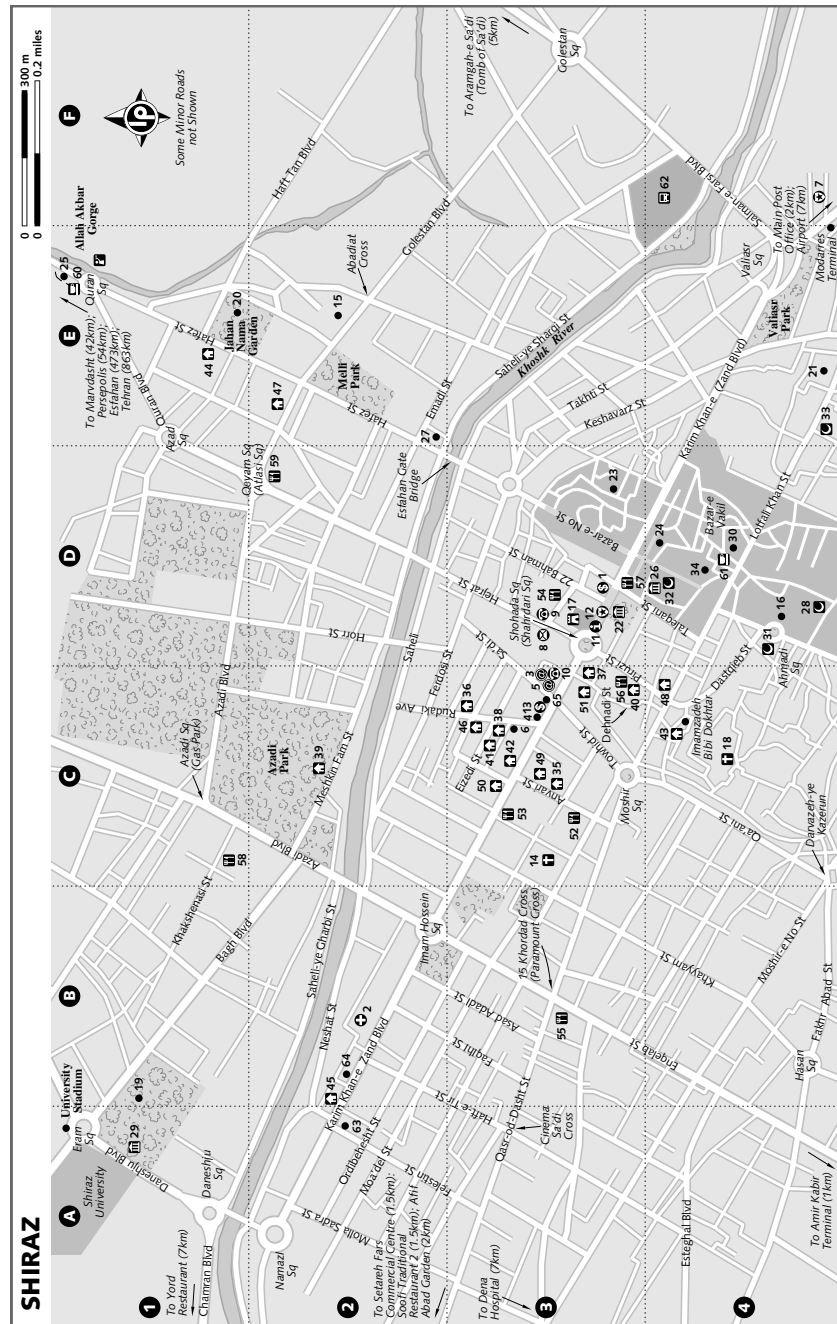
The **Hotel Pouya Abarkuh** (Mehmansar Jahangardi; ☎ 682 1030; s/d US\$36/48; 📍 🚗 🚲), on the left as you come into town from the east, has a decent restaurant and will often charge local rates. Get off any bus between Yazd and Shiraz.

SHIRAZ

☎ 0711 / pop 1,750,000 / elev 1531m

شیراز

Shiraz is a city of sophistication that has been celebrated as the heartland of Persian culture for more than 2000 years. Known as the Dar-ol-Elm (House of Learning), the City of Roses, City of Love and City of Gardens, Shiraz has become synonymous with education, nightingales, poetry and wine.



CENTRAL IRAN

CENTRAL IRAN

It was one of the most important cities in the medieval Islamic world and was the Iranian capital during the Zand dynasty (AD 1747–79), when many of its most beautiful buildings were built or restored.

In his 1893 book *A Year Amongst the Persians*, Edward Browne described Shirazis as ‘...amongst all the Persians, the most subtle, the most ingenious, the most vivacious’. And even in Iran, where regional onepmanship is common, everyone seems to like Shirazis. This is a city of poets and home to the graves of Hafez and Sa’di, themselves major pilgrimage sites for Iranians. Shiraz is also home to splendid gardens, exquisite mosques and whispered echoes of ancient sophistication that reward those who linger longer than it takes to visit nearby Persepolis (p279).

There are the usual Iranian bazaar issues, but Shiraz’s agreeable climate, set as it is in a fertile valley once famed for its vineyards, makes it a pleasant place to visit (except at the humid height of summer or the freezing depths of winter).

History

Shiraz is mentioned in Elamite inscriptions from around 2000 BC and it was an

important regional centre under the Sassanians. However, Shiraz did not become the provincial capital until about AD 693, following the Arab conquest of Estakhr, the last Sassanian capital (8km northeast of Persepolis, but now completely destroyed). By 1044 Shiraz was said to rival Baghdad in importance and grew further under the Atabaks of Fars in the 12th century, when it became an important artistic centre.

Shiraz was spared destruction by the rampaging Mongols and Tamerlane because the city’s rulers wisely decided that paying tribute was preferable to mass slaughter. Having avoided calamity, Shiraz enjoyed the Mongol and Timurid periods, which became eras of development. The encouragement of enlightened rulers, and the presence of Hafez, Sa’di and many other brilliant artists and scholars, helped make it one of the greatest cities in the Islamic world throughout the 13th and 14th centuries.

Shiraz remained a provincial capital during the Safavid period, when European traders settled here to export its famous wine. But by the mid-17th century it had entered a long period of decline. This was worsened by several earthquakes, the

INFORMATION				
Aramgah-e Hafez Bookshop... (see 15)	Bazar-e Nou.....	23 D3	Saadi Hotel.....	48 C4
Bank Melli.....	Bazar-e Vakil.....	24 D4	Sasan Hotel.....	49 C3
Dr Faqih Hospital.....	Bogh’-ye Sayyed Mir	2 B2	Shiraz Eram Hotel.....	50 C3
Maral Coffeenet.....	Mohammad..... (see 16)	3 C3	Zand Hotel.....	51 C3
Pars Tourist Agency.....	Darvazeh-ye Quran (Quran	4 C3		
Paytakht.....	Gateway).....	25 E1	EATING	
Persepolis Bookshop.....	Hammam-e Vakil.....	26 D4	110 Hamburgers.....	52 C3
Police Department of Aliens	Imamzadeh-ye Ali Ebn-e		Gavara Restaurant..... (see 48)	
Affairs.....	Hamze.....	27 E2	Haji Baba Restaurant.....	53 C3
Post Office.....	Jameh-ye Atigh Mosque.....	28 D4	Mahdi Faludeh.....	54 D3
Telephone Office.....	Kakh-e Eram (Eram Palace).....	29 A1	Pat Traditional Restaurant.....	55 B3
Telephone Office.....	Madrash-ye Khan.....	30 D4	Restaurant Hatam.....	56 C3
Tourist Information Office.....	Martyr’s Mosque (Masjed-e	31 D4	Sarve Naz Restaurant..... (see 50)	
Tourist Police.....	Shohada).....	31 D4	Sharzeh Traditional	
Zand Exchange.....	Masjed-e Vakil (Vakil Mosque).....	32 D4	Restaurant.....	57 D3
	Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque.....	33 E4	Shater Abbas Restaurant 1.....	58 C1
	Serai Mushir.....	34 D4	Yavar Restaurant.....	59 D2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS	
Anglican Church of St Simon the	Anvari Hotel.....	35 C3	Aramgah-e Hafez	
Zealot (Kelsiya-ye Moqaddas-e	Aryo Barzan Hotel.....	36 C3	Teahouse..... (see 15)	
Sham’un-e Ghayur).....	Esteghlal Hotel.....	37 C3	Aroosh Khorshid..... (see 37)	
Aramgah-e Hafez (Tomb of	Hadish Apartment Hotel.....	38 C3	Khajo Teahouse.....	60 E1
Hafez).....	Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh.....	16 D4	Seray-e Mehr Teahouse.....	61 D4
Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh.....	Homa Hotel.....	39 C2		
Arg-e Karim Khan.....	Hotel Sina.....	40 C3		
Armenian Church (Kelsiya-ye	Jaam-e-Jam Apartment Hotel... 41 C3		TRANSPORT	
Aramaneh).....	Kowsar Hotel.....	42 C3	Carandish Bus/Minibus	
Bagh-e Eram.....	Mehmunsara Fadagh.....	43 C4	Terminal.....	62 F4
Bagh-e Jahan Nama.....	Park Saadi Hotel.....	44 E1	Iran Air.....	63 A2
Bagh-e Naranjستان & Khan-e Zinat	Pars International Hotel.....	45 B2	Iran Aseman.....	64 B2
ol-Molk).....	Parsian Hotel.....	46 C3	Iran Peyma Office.....	65 C3
Bagh-e Nazar & Pars Museum... 22 D3	Persepolis Hotel.....	47 E2	Park Taxi Service..... (see 10)	

Afghan raids of the early 18th century, and an uprising led by Shiraz's governor in 1744, which was put down in typically ruthless fashion after a siege by Nader Shah.

At the time of Nader Shah's murder in 1747, Shiraz was squalid and its population had fallen to 50,000, a quarter of the number 200 years earlier. But the city soon returned to prosperity. The enlightened Karim Khan, the first ruler of the short-lived Zand dynasty, made Shiraz the national capital in 1750. Despite being master of virtually all of Persia, Karim Khan refused to take any higher title than *vakil* (regent). He was determined to build Shiraz into a worthy capital, the equal of Esfahan under Shah Abbas I.

Karim Khan founded a royal district in the area of the Arg-e Karim Khan and commissioned many fine buildings, including what was the pre-eminent bazaar in Persia. After his death, however, things fell apart. The Qajars, longtime enemies, attacked and destroyed the city's fortifications and by 1789 had moved the national capital – and the remains of Karim Khan – to Tehran.

Shiraz remained prosperous due to its position on the trade route to Bushehr, but this role was greatly diminished with the opening of the trans-Iranian railway in the 1930s. Much of the architectural inheritance of Shiraz, and especially the royal district of the Zands, was either neglected or destroyed as a result of irresponsible town planning under the Pahlavi dynasty. Lacking any great industrial, religious or strategic importance, Shiraz is now largely an administrative centre, though one famous for its universities.

Orientation

The main street of Shiraz is the wide, tree-lined Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd (shortened simply to Zand). This boulevard runs about as far east and west as you would want to go without leaving Shiraz. Most of the things to see, and nearly all the hotels, are on or within walking distance of Zand.

The old city or nearby is where you'll spend most of your time. The city centre is Shohada Sq (still widely known as Shahr-dari Sq), within walking distance of most hotels, the bazaar and the major mosques and shrines. To the north is the Khoshk River, and north of that the tombs of Hafez and Sa'di and the major gardens. To the west and northwest of

town are the smarter residential areas and, on a hill, many university buildings. The airport and two major bus terminals are short taxi trips from the centre.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Aramagh-e Hafez Bookshop (☎ 9am-5pm) Wide range of Hafez books at tourist prices.

Persepolis Bookshop (☎ 233 8200; Rudaki St) Opposite the new Shahreraz Hotel, a good range of pictorials and postcards.

EMERGENCY

Shiraz is famous for its medical training so it's a good place to get sick.

Dena Hospital (☎ 628 0411-18; www.denahospital.com; Dena Alley, Motahari Blvd) Best in Shiraz.

Dr Faqih Hospital (☎ 235 1091; Zand Blvd) The most central hospital; public.

Tourist Police (Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd) Outside the Arg-e Karim Khan. There's rarely anyone here outside peak season.

INTERNET ACCESS

You won't need GPS technology to find one of Shiraz's many *coffeenets*, which include the following:

Maral Coffeenet (Park Hotel Lane; per hr IR8000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm)

Paytakht (☎ 222 7989; Sa'di St; per hr IR8000; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm & 4.30-9pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-2.30pm Fri) English-speaking and very helpful.

MONEY

The central branches of the major banks have foreign exchange facilities. However, the exchange offices along Zand are simple, safe and your best option.

Bank Melli (Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd) Next to the Arg-e Karim Khan. Exchange on 1st floor.

Zand Exchange (☎ 222 2854; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) Good rates, no commission, fast, and longer hours.

POST

Main post office (☎ 726 9070; Modarres Blvd) On the road to the airport, for big items only.

Post office (☎ 224 1516; Hejrat St)

TELEPHONE

Local calls are free from public phones in Shiraz. For international calls:

Telephone office Park Hotel Lane (☎ 8am-9pm Sat-Thu; Hejrat St (☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 224 1985; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd; ☎ 8am-8pm) Outside the Arg-e Karim Khan. Helpful English-speaking staff will give you a free map and/or directions, and have useful brochures on individual sights.

TOURS

Travellers commonly hire a taxi or driver for trips to Persepolis or other attractions around Shiraz; see p280 for details. Tours can also be arranged through almost every hotel.

Arash Sadeghzadeh (☎ 0917 317 1652; www.trip.topersia.com) Young, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and highly organised guide and fixer. Recommended.

Hossein Soltani (☎ 0917 713 1517; h-soltani-n@hotmail.com) Hossein works in the Shiraz Eram hotel and moonlights as a (safe) driver and fixer.

Kazem Salehi (☎ 0917 113 0858; ilovetourists@yahoo.com) Kazem is not a guide as such, but he's a lovely guy and good fun. He works with Pars Tourist Agency or independently.

Morteza Mehrparvar (☎ 0917 314 6124) More driver than tour guide, Morteza has nonetheless been recommended by several readers who have used him across Iran.

Park Taxi Service (☎ 222 5544; Park Hotel Lane; ☎ 24hr) Long-running, reliable and recommended taxi service. Note that they're drivers, not guides.

Pars Tourist Agency (☎ 222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) Pars runs probably the most diverse, well-organised, good-value and – best of all – enjoyable tours of any Iranian agency. The 100 options include: half-day group trips to Persepolis for US\$8 per person, leaving daily at 8am; Pasargadae for US\$50 per car; also Firuz Abad, Bishapur, Bavanat, skiing, trekking, climbing and nomad tours. All prices are fixed and listed online. They also rent bikes (US\$1 per hour) and on Friday take a bus full of interested Iranians for walking and a picnic lunch (US\$10)... it's a great way to meet the locals. Guides cost about US\$25 a day, or US\$50 a day for overnight trips; several languages can be arranged.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Pars Tourist Agency (☎ 222 3163; www.key2persia.com; Zand Blvd; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri; ☎) As well as tours, the multilingual team do the usual travel agency jobs: air, bus and train ticketing, visa extensions etc. In the event of an emergency, owner Masoud Nematollahi can be contacted to help sort things on ☎ 0917 111 8514. Highly recommended.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Police Department of Aliens Affairs (off Valiasr Sq; ☎ 7.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-noon Thu) When we were here, Shiraz was the best place in Iran for visa ex-

tensions. Arrive before 9am and you should be able to pick up a 30-day extension the same day. To get there, take a shuttle taxi (about IR1000) east along Zand Blvd to Valiasr Sq, walk another 300m or so east, then take the third lane heading north at an angle. It's another 70m along, behind the light green door – it's on the 3rd floor. Your cash must be deposited at Bank Melli Markazi (Shohada Sq); ask Pars Tourist Agency (left) for the account number and deposit before going for the extension to save doubling back. For more on extending visas, see More Time, Please (p395).

Sights

ARG-E KARIM KHAN

ارگ کریمخان

Dominating the city centre, the burly **Arg-e Karim Khan** (Citadel of Karim Khan; ☎ 224 7646; Shohada Sq; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-sunset, to 8pm summer) was built in the early Zand period and formed part of the royal court that Karim Khan had hoped would develop to rival Esfahan. The exterior is fairly mundane, with high walls punctuated by four 14m-high circular towers. The southeastern tower has a noticeable lean, having subsided onto the underground sewerage system that served as the Arg's bathhouse.

Inside the Arg is a large, open courtyard filled with citrus trees and a pool. More interesting are the exhibition of photos taken in Shiraz in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, starting inside the north wall, and the museum of the Zand period, with wax figures in traditional dress. These recent additions mean you might now agree with the sign at the entrance, which has for years been proclaiming: 'The exalted stature of the Karim Khan citadel amuses every new traveller for a long time who arrives in Shiraz'.

BAGH-E NAZAR & PARS MUSEUM

باغ نظر و موزه پارس

Bagh-e Nazar (Eye-catching Garden; Zand Blvd) and the octagonal **Pars Museum** at its centre are other notable Zand-era additions. It's possible to walk around the garden and view the delightfully decorated pavilion where Karim Khan received foreign dignitaries. The interior is stunning, with the stalactite ceiling a particular highlight. Exhibits include Karim Khan Zand's sword and indeed, his grave. Photography is not allowed.

MASJED-E VAKIL

مسجد وکیل

The beautiful **Masjed-e Vakil** (Vakil Mosque; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-8pm) was begun by

Karim Khan and is the only major mosque surviving from the late Zand period. Beside the entrance to the bazaar, it has two vast *iwans* to the north and south, a magnificent inner courtyard surrounded by beautifully tiled alcoves and porches, and a pleasingly proportioned 75m-by-36m vaulted prayer hall supported by 48 carved columns. Inside the prayer hall are an impressive mihrab and 14-step marble minbar, carved from a monolith carried all the way from Azerbaijan. Much of the tiling, with its predominantly floral motifs and arabesques, was added in the early Qajar era.

HAMMAM-E VAKIL

حمام وکیل

After years as one of the most popular traditional restaurants in Iran, the **Ham-mam-e Vakil** (Taleqani St) was closed because the kitchen was damaging this classic old building. Shame. In early 2008 it reopened as a modest carpet museum, but its future remained uncertain. If it is open in some form, it's worth popping in for a look at the classic old bathhouse.

THE BAZAARS

بازار وکیل

Shiraz's ancient trading district is comprised of several bazaars dating from different periods. The finest and most famous is the **Bazar-e Vakil** (Vakil Bazaar; ☞ dawn-dusk Sat-Thu), a cruciform structure commissioned by Karim Khan as part of his plan to make Shiraz into a great trading centre. The wide vaulted brick avenues are masterpieces of Zand architecture, with the design ensuring the interior remains cool in summer and warm in winter. Today, it's home to almost 200 stores selling carpets, handicrafts, spices and clothes and is one of the most atmospheric bazaars in Iran, especially in the early evening when it is fantastically photogenic. As usual, it's best explored by wandering without concern for time or direction, soaking up the atmosphere in the maze of lanes leading off the main thoroughfares.

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.

On the north side of Zand is the less touristy but still pleasingly proportioned **Bazar-e Nou** (New Bazaar), built during the Qajar era.

MARTYR'S MOSQUE

مسجد شهیدا

One of the largest ancient mosques in Iran, the rectangular courtyard of the **Martyr's Mosque** (Masjed-e Shohada; Ahmadi Sq; ☞ Fri) covers more than 11,000 sq metres. Founded at the start of the 13th century, the mosque has been partially rebuilt many times and now has very little in the way of tiling or other decorations, though it does boast some impressive barrel vaulting. It lives under acres of unsightly corrugated fibreglass and is only open on Fridays, when it is still used for prayer. Entry is through a gate off Ahmadi Sq.

ARAMGAH-E SHAH-E CHERAGH

آرامگاه شاهچراغ

Sayyed Mir Ahmad, one of Imam Reza's 17 brothers, was hunted down and killed by the caliphate on this site in AD 835. His remains are housed at the glittering **Aramgah-e Shah-e Cheragh** (Mausoleum of King of the Light; ☞ 222 2158; Ahmadi Sq; ☞ variable, often 24hr). A mausoleum was first erected over the grave during the 12th century but most of what you see dates from the late-Qajar period and the Islamic Republic; expansion is ongoing.

The expansive courtyard is a great place to sit and take in the bulbous blue-tiled dome and dazzling gold-topped minarets while discreetly observing the pious at what is one of the holiest Shiite sights in Iran. In the shrine itself, countless minute mirror tiles reflect the passion within.

In theory, however, non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the shrine. Enforcement seems to be mixed, but if you are polite and in a small group you should be fine. Women must wear a chador, which can be borrowed from the entrance. Cameras are forbidden inside the shrine but permitted in the courtyard.

Hidden away in the northwestern corner of the courtyard is a small museum housing some highly prized old Qurans that have been on the site for centuries. When we visited, however, it was closed for repairs.

In the southeastern corner is the **Bogh'e-ye Sayyed Mir Mohammad** (Mausoleum of Sayyed Mir Mohammad; ☞ variable, often 24hr), which houses the tombs of two brothers of Mir Ahmad. The shrine has the typical Shirazi bulbous dome, intricate mirror work and four slender wooden pillars, leading some to describe it as more beautiful than Shah-e Cheragh.

MASJED-E JAMEH-YE ATIGH

مسجد جامع عتیق
Walking through the southeastern (back) entrance to the Shah-e Cheragh courtyard and turning right after about 50m leads to the ancient **Jameh-ye Atigh Mosque** (Masjed-e Jameh-ye Atigh; ☞ variable). Dating from 894 this is Shiraz's oldest Islamic structure, though most of what you see is from the late Safavid period onwards.

While the dome of the north *ivan* and the hypostyle columns in the ancient prayer hall in the southeast corner are impressive, the highlight is the rare turreted **Khodakhaneh** (House of God). It was built in the mid-14th century (or perhaps earlier) to preserve valuable Qurans; poet Hafez is believed to have worked here. The Khodakhaneh bears an uncanny likeness to the Kaaba at Mecca, and bears a unique Sassanid-style *Tholth* inscription in raised stone characters on a tiled background.

MADRASEH-YE KHAN

مدرسه خان

In 1615, Imam Gholi Khan, governor of Fars, founded the serene **Madrased-ye Khan** (Dastqeb St; ☞ knock on the door) theological college for about 100 students. The original building has been extensively damaged by earthquakes and only the impressive portal at its entrance has survived; watch for the unusual type of stalactite moulding inside the outer arch and some intricate mosaic tiling with much use of red, in contrast to the tiles used in Yazd and Esfahan. The college (still in use) has a fine stone-walled inner courtyard and garden.

The building can be reached via a lane off Lotfali Khan St. The doors are usually closed but if you get lucky the caretaker will open it; a tip is appreciated. If you get in, ask to be shown to the roof for panoramic views over the bazaar.

NASIR-OL-MOLK MOSQUE

مسجد نصیر الملک
Down the road from the Madraseh-ye Khan, **Masjed-e Nasir-ol-Molk** (Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque; off Lotfali Khan St; admission IR15,000; ☞ 8am-1pm & 3.30-5pm, to 6pm summer) is one of the most elegant and photographed mosques in southern Iran. Built at the end of the 19th century, its coloured tiling (an unusually deep shade of blue) is exquisite. There is some particularly fine stalactite moulding in the smallish outer portal and in the northern *ivan*, but it is the stunning stained glass, exquisitely

carved pillars and polychrome faience of the winter prayer hall that are most eye-catching. Photographers should come as early as possible in the morning for shots of the hall lit up through the glass (you might have to tip the caretaker to open the curtains). A museum in the opposite prayer hall opens into the **Gav Cha** (Cow Well), in which cows walked downhill to raise water. The structure has survived numerous earthquakes, due in part to its construction using flexible wood as struts within the walls – look for the wooden bricks in the *ivan* columns.

BAGH-E NARANJESTAN & KHAN-E ZINAT

باغ نارنجستان خانه زینت الملک
Ol-Molk (Orange Garden; Lotfali Khan St; admission IR30,000; ☞ 7.30am-6pm, 8am-7.30pm in summer) is Shiraz's smallest garden and is famous as the setting for the opulently decorated **Naranjestan-e Ghavam** pavilion, built between 1879 and 1886, as part of a complex owned by one of Shiraz's wealthiest Qajar-era families. The pavilion's mirrored entrance hall opens onto rooms covered in a breathtaking combination of intricate tiles, inlaid wooden panels and stained-glass windows. Ceilings in the upstairs rooms are particularly interesting, with the beams painted with European-style motifs, including Alpine churches and busy German frauleins.

Down a small lane beside the garden is the **Khan-e Zinat ol-Molk** (Fars History Museum; ☞ 224 0035; ☞ 9am-7pm), which was originally the private, *andaruni* area of the complex and is named after its last owner, the daughter of the builder Qavam. Today most of the finely decorated rooms are stuffed with exhibits in the Fars History Museum, while others serve as galleries for young Shirazi artists. The gardens are in a walled compound 400m south of the Nasir ol-Molk Mosque.

CHURCHES

The **Anglican Church of St Simon the Zealot** (Kelisaye Moqaddas-e Sham'un-e Ghayur; کلیسای مقدس شمعون غیور), built by R Norman Sharp in 1938, is very Iranian in character and even contains stone tablets with biblical stories incised on them in cuneiform, probably by Sharp. According to local tradition, St Simon was martyred in Persia together with St Thaddeus, another of the 12 Apostles. The great metal door bearing a Persian cross is usually closed – ring the doorbell.

The 17th-century **Armenian Church** (Kelisa-ye Aramani; کلیسای ارمنه; Nohahar Alley, off Qa'ani St), is famous for its frescoes and flat, painted ceiling. However, knocking might not be enough to get you in.

IMAMZADEH-YE ALI EBN-E HAMZE

امامزاده علی ابن حمزه

The **Imamzadeh-ye Ali Ebn-e Hamze** (☎ 222 3353; Hafez St, near Hamzeh Bridge; ☞ dawn-dusk) stands as the tomb of Emir Ali, a nephew of Shah Cheragh who also died here while en route to Khorasan to help Imam Reza. The existing shrine was built in the 19th century after earthquakes destroyed previous incarnations. It has an eye-catching bulbous Shirazi dome, dazzling mirror work, stained-glass windows and an intricate, ancient wooden door. The tombstones around the courtyard, for which families of the deceased paid a small fortune, are also interesting. Unlike some other shrines, the caretakers here are very welcoming of foreigners; women are happily handed a chador, and in you go!

ARAMGAH-E HAFEZ

آرامگاه حافظ

Iranians have a saying that every home must have two things: first the Quran, then Hafez (see p74). And many would reverse that order. Hafez the poet is an Iranian folk-hero – loved, revered and as popular as many a modern pop star. Almost every Iranian can quote his work, bending it to whichever social or political persuasion they subscribe to. And there is no better place to try to understand Hafez's eternal hold on Iran than here, at **Aramgah-e Hafez** (Tomb of Hafez; ☎ 228 4552; Golestan Blvd; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-10pm), his tomb.

Set in a charming garden with its two pools, the whole scene is restful despite the ever-present traffic noise. The marble tombstone, engraved with a long verse from the poet, was placed here, inside a small shrine, by Karim Khan in 1773. In 1935, an octagonal pavilion was put up over it, supported by eight stone columns beneath a tiled dome. Plan to spend a couple of hours sitting in a discreet corner of the grounds, at sunset if possible, to watch the way Iranians react to what is, for many, a pilgrimage to his tomb.

You might see people performing the *faal-e Hafez*, a popular ritual in which you seek insight into your future by opening a volume of Hafez – the future is apparent in his words. After sunset, with the tomb floodlit and sung

poetry piped over the public address system, it is difficult not to feel transported back to the magic of ancient Persia. The charming teahouse in the walled garden at the back of the grounds was closed when we passed, but should be open by the time you arrive.

To get here from the centre of town you can walk (about 2km); take a shuttle taxi from Shohada Sq to Ghaem Sq, then walk; or take a private taxi (about IR7000).

ARAMGAH-E SA'DI

آرامگاه سعدی

While not as popular as Hafez's tomb, the **Aramgah-e Sa'di** (Tomb of Sa'di; ☎ 730 1300; Bustan Blvd; admission IR3000; ☞ 7.30am-9pm, to 10pm summer) and its generous surrounding gardens are appropriate for a man who wrote so extensively about gardens and roses. It's a tranquil place, with the tombstone housed in an open-sided stone colonnade, inscribed with various verses from Sa'di and supporting a tiled dome (see p74 for more on Sa'di). Nearby is an underground teahouse (p278) set around a fish pond that is fed by a *qanat*.

It's easy to visit the tombs of both Hafez and Sa'di in a single afternoon. From Golestan Blvd (outside Hafez's tomb), take a shuttle taxi three squares southwest (IR1000) to Sa'di Sq, then walk about 800m uphill to the tomb. Food and drink is available near the entrance.

BAGH-E ERAM

باغ ارم

Famous for its tall cypress trees, the delightful **Bagh-e Eram** (Garden of Paradise; ☎ 627 3647; Eram Blvd; admission IR40,000; ☞ 8am-noon & 2-5pm, to 7pm summer) will impress budding botanists and social anthropologists – the many hidden corners of the gardens are popular with young Shirazis. The gardens are centred around a pretty pool beside a Qajar-era palace, the **Kakh-e Eram** (Eram Palace), which is not open to the public. The gardens are managed by Shiraz University, which chooses to charge foreigners 10 times the local price. The gardens are easy enough to reach by taking any shuttle taxi going along Zand towards the university.

BAGH-E JAHAN NAMA

باغ جهان نما

After being closed for years, the lovely **Bagh-e Jahan Nama** (Jahan Nama Garden; Hafez St; admission IR1500; ☞ 8am-noon & 2-5pm, to 7pm summer) was reopened in 2005. It doesn't have the reputation of Bagh-e Eram, but if you just want



VOICES OF IRAN: MAJID PIROOZMAND

Age: 28

Lives in: Shiraz

Occupation: Architect, consultant to Miras Feranghi (Cultural Heritage Organisation)

'I like Shiraz more than anywhere in the world. My childhood was here in these *kuches* (lanes) and the city has a very rich history. Until now it still doesn't have the terrible traffic you have in other cities, people are especially friendly and the weather is perfect – not too hot and not too cold.

I work with Miras Ferhanghi and we want to preserve the cultural heritage.

Now Shiraz is ready to grow and advance, but we are still working to preserve the history. There are many threats; we have to pay attention to every detail and if a plan threatens the heritage, we reject it. To keep the old city alive we have programs to help the old places pay for themselves. The traditional hotels in Yazd are a good example, and we know how important tourism is in making this endeavour a success. When tourists spend money in historic buildings it helps to keep that building alive, and that's important. In Shiraz, I love the gardens the most. We have some of the most famous gardens in Iran. Shirazis specialise in going out and we love to go out on the weekend, find some spare grass and sit, especially in summer.

The gardens are important for another reason, too. Usually, a girlfriend and boyfriend have a problem because they want to go somewhere to enjoy themselves – nothing illegal, just to be together – but there is nowhere to go. The garden is a great place for this, much better than restaurants or cafés. I used to go with my girlfriend and now we are married we still go.

I love to travel and with my work I travel about one week every two months, to Esfahan, Yazd, Kashan, Kerman, Mahan or Bam. Maybe it's because I'm an architect, but Kashan is my favourite; I love the old houses and Madraseh-ye Khan.

to hang out in the greenery, don't want to spend IR30,000 for the privilege and want it to be within walking distance of your hotel, come on down.

DARVAZEH-YE QURAN

دروازه قرآن

At the northern and main entrance to Shiraz is a ravine known as the Allah Akbar Gorge because people would praise Allah when they looked from here down to Shiraz below. This is also home to the **Darvazeh-ye Quran** (Quran Gateway; Quran Sq), a modern and not desperately impressive structure built in 1949 to replace two earlier gateways. The gateway holds a Quran and travellers have traditionally passed underneath it before undertaking any journey. The fine original Quran, installed during the Zand period, was stolen from the Pars Museum in 2003.

Those with good leg muscles might want to climb up Mt Baba Kuhi in search of two more tombs and some **bas-reliefs**, from where the views of Shiraz are breathtaking. There are three teahouses here that are popular with young people hanging, especially at sunset. To get here, take a shuttle taxi to Quran Sq or walk

up from either the Aramgah-e Hafez (opposite) or the Bagh-e Jahan Nama (opposite).

Sleeping

Shiraz has probably the best range of hotels, in the most confined space, of all Iranian cities. Unless otherwise stated, they are located in streets leading off Zand Ave and are a short walk to the main sights. They tend to be clustered by price range, making comparisons a breeze. The main downside is that hotels on Zand can be noisy – ask for a room away from the street. Competition is keen so most managers will be happy to knock a few rial off the price out of season. And if you're arriving by plane, the reservation desk at the airport offers discounts of up to 20% on many hotels. Almost every hotel in Shiraz can arrange trips to Persepolis and Pasargadae.

BUDGET

The cheapest places are mainly concentrated in neighbouring Dehnadi and Pirouzi Sts; a couple of better budget options are on Anvari St.

Mehmunsara Fadagh (☎ 222 5135; Kuche Mohan-dase; dm/tw IR20,000/60,000) Deep in the old city, this mehmunsara in a 200-year-old building is the cheapest, most interesting hotel in town; note we didn't say atmospheric. It's owned by the Sepah militia and mainly used by male pilgrims (not great for solo women), who like the enormous dorm. But the small, clean twins are good value and the courtyard, with its underground teahouse (open 8am to 8pm), is good for chilling. There's no sign in English and it's hard to find; walk past the Imamzadeh Bibi Dokhtar, turn right and follow the signs to the Meshkinfam Museum of Art – it's about 15m before the museum.

Zand Hotel (☎ 222 2949; alvanch@yahoo.com; Dehnadi St; tw with/without shower IR100,000/80,000; (P) (☎) (♿)) Zand has ultra-basic, reasonably clean rooms with or without showers (toilets are shared). It's popular with overlanders because it has (limited) courtyard parking, a kitchen for guests and a free washing machine.

Esteghlal Hotel (☎ 222 7728; Dehnadi St; tw with/without bathroom IR140,000/115,000; (☎) (♿)) Opposite the Zand Hotel, the Esteghlal has long been popular with budgeteers but not, it must be said, for the quality of the small, boxy rooms. They're adequate, but note that while all rooms with 'bathrooms' cost the same, some don't have a toilet – look at several. English-speaking manager Reza can advise on transport and flogs the usual day trips.

Anvari Hotel (☎ 233 7591; Anvari St; tw IR160,000; (☎) (♿)) There's nothing fancy about the modest, four-storey Anvari, but almost all like the place. It's clean, comfortable enough for the money and, most importantly, has a consistently convivial atmosphere. Ideal for solo women travellers and the place you're most likely to meet other travellers.

Sasan Hotel (☎ 233 7830; sasanhotel@shirazsport.com; Anvari St; s/d/tr US\$15/20/24; (☎) (♿) (♿)) Next door to the Anvari, Sasan has slightly better rooms, with softer beds and more furniture, for slightly more money. The manager is a friendly old guy who could, as one reader reported, talk 'all four legs' off a billiard table. Good upper budget choice.

If the other places are full, no-frills hotels line noisy Piruzi St (ask for a back room): **Saadi Hotel** (☎ 222 5126; s/tw/tr IR70,000/110,000/130,000) Boxy, noisy but clean rooms and shared bathrooms, lumpy beds.

Hotel Sina (☎ 222 5665; Piruzi St; tw with/without bathroom IR180,000/150,000; (☎) (♿)) Good beds, fridge and squat toilets; clean relatively large rooms.

MIDRANGE

Rudaki Ave and the adjoining Eizedi St are the places to look for midrange options. Rates include breakfast and, at most, bargaining is worthwhile.

Shiraz Eram Hotel (☎ 230 0814-16; www.eramhotel.com; Karim Khan-e Zand Blvd; s/d US\$45/55; (P) (☎) (♿)) For years we've been getting letters and emails complimenting the Eram's relaxed but professional service, and it's the guys at reception who set the tone. Rooms in the new wing (specify them) are big, quiet and reasonably well-equipped with phone, minibar and satellite TV. Buffet breakfast in the Sarve Naz Restaurant (meals IR35,000 to IR70,000; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) is refreshingly varied, and the mains here are also good. In short, the Eram is comfortable, dependable, friendly, central and good value – and has embraced some energy-saving measures.

Aryo Barzan Hotel (☎ 224 7182-4; www.aryohotel.com; Rudaki Ave; s/d/ste US\$45/65/97; (☎) (♿)) The Aryo is a favourite among readers for its intelligent, smiling and extravagantly coiffed service, fair prices and modern rooms. The small but tastefully furnished rooms are set around an atrium and have correspondingly small and spotlessly clean bathrooms, with Mini Me-sized bathtubs. Significant discounts are possible off season.

Park Saadi Hotel (☎ 227 4901-19; parksaadi_hotel@yahoo.com; Hafez St, s/d/ste/apr US\$45/65/110/150; (P) (☎) (♿)) The Saadi's 52 newly refurbished rooms are in a quiet location opposite lovely Bagh-e Jahan Nama. It's solid three-star through and through, with large, bright rooms (some with wi-fi), a decent restaurant and experienced management.

Jaam-e-Jam Apartment Hotel (☎ 230 4002; www.jaamejamhotel.com; Eizedi St, 1/2-bed apt from US\$60; (☎) (♿)) Choose between the sprawling apartments in the four-year-old 'old' wing and smaller rooms in the Persepolis-inspired new wing, opened in 2007. The location is quiet, and management and service are professional. Be nice and a big discount might come your way; we were offered an apartment for US\$40. Great value.

Persepolis Hotel (☎ 229 5370-73; www.persepolis-hotel.com; Azadi Blvd, off Ghaem Sq; s/d US\$65/95;

(☎) (♿) (♿)) Opened in 2006, this has modern-looking and well-equipped, if not huge, rooms. Service is enthusiastic and the pool can be 'booked' after 11pm. Discounts are available; if not, try Aryo Barzan first.

If those are full:

Kowsar Hotel (☎ 230 0207; kowsarhotel@yahoo.com; Zand Blvd; s/d US\$27/40; (☎) (♿)) Old but reasonable value. Discounts are possible.

Parsian Hotel (☎ 233 0000; www.parsian-hotel.com; Rudaki Ave; r/ste US\$66/100; (P) (☎) (♿)) Compact rooms, good beds, decent service.

TOP END

Hadish Apartment Hotel (☎ 235 1988; www.hadishhotel.com; Rudaki Ave; 1/2-bed apt US\$100/150; (P) (☎) (♿)) The big apartments here are a bit austere but have fully equipped kitchens. They're most appealing for the value and friendly staff, who at most times are happy to discount (rates were halved after about 10 seconds' bargaining).

Pars International Hotel (☎ 233 2255; www.pars-international-hotel.com; Zand Blvd; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$81/117/186; (P) (☎) (♿)) This four-star business hotel is probably the best in town. Rooms are well equipped (though there's no internet; it's only available in the lobby) and those upper floors offer panoramic views.

Homa Hotel (☎ 222 8000-09; www.homahotelgroup.com; Meshkin Fam St; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$90/120/175; (P) (☎) (♿)) The '70s-era Homa is showing its age and the rooms – and indeed some of the staff – look tired. But the location, restaurants, front-desk service and views over the city, and Park-e Azadi in particular, make it a decent choice. The pool is men-only.

Eating

Shiraz is noted as a culinary capital but Shirazis have embraced Western-style fast food with an almost embarrassing relish. We've listed the best places and will mostly leave you to find the pizza and burger joints on your own. Sadly the world-famous Shiraz (Syrah) grape is no longer made into the wine that inspired Hafez to poetry.

RESTAURANTS

There are some excellent Iranian restaurants.

Gavara Restaurant (☎ 222 7211; Piruzi St; meals IR20,000-40,000; (☎) 11am-10pm) The subterranean Gavara is an old-style local – an unpretentious, neon-lit hall divided into sections for men, and women and families. The menu is big and the food unsophisticated but very

tasty; kababs, *khoreshts*, fish (sometimes) and a decent *ghorme sabzi*. Look for the Achaemenid-style staircase beneath the Saadi Hotel.

Haji Baba Restaurant (☎ 233 2563; Zand Blvd; meals IR25,000-50,000; (☎) 7am-11pm) Not exactly atmospheric, but the food is delicious, location and opening hours convenient and prices reasonable.

Yavar Restaurant (☎ 228 7728; Ghaem Sq; meals IR30,000; (☎) 11.30am-3.30pm & 6.30-11pm) For traditional Shirazi food, local prices and character, the Yavar is excellent. The *eslamboli* (rice and tomato) and *khoresht bademjan* (eggplant stew) make a refreshing alternative to kababs (which it also has). There's no English sign; look for Hossein riding a white horse across the front wall.

Restaurant Hatam (☎ 222 1709; Piruzi St; meals IR35,000; (☎) 11am-9pm Sat-Thu) No frills, soulless cheapie with a limited range of decent Iranian food.

Yord Cultural Complex (☎ 625 6774, 0917 715 2059; Mansour Abad, Dinakan St, after Maliabad bridge; meals IR55,000; (☎) lunch & dinner, dinner only in winter) In an enormous colourful *yord* (tent) about 8km northwest of town, this complex not only offers the chance to enjoy some fine Iranian-nomad food, but also to experience the Qashqa'i culture. The warm atmosphere, colourful costumes, live music and delicious food afford a dreamy escape from modern life into a Qashqa'i tented embrace. Yord is almost impossible to reach by public transport, so ask your hotel to write the name in Farsi and get a taxi (about IR25,000); it is also worth paying the taxi to wait for you (about IR70,000 total) as taxis out here are rare indeed. We heard a second Yord has opened, and that both are periodically closed because of licensing issues, so always call ahead and get the address sorted.

Sharzeh Traditional Restaurant (☎ 224 1963; Vakil St, off Zand Ave; meals IR65,000; (☎) 11am-3pm & 8-11pm) Talk about atmosphere! The night we ate at the Sharzeh it was going off like the proverbial frog in a sock, with diners singing and clapping along with musicians playing traditional music in the centre of the two-level space. Great fun! The Iranian food was well-prepared, tasty and plentiful. It's diagonally opposite the entrance to the Vakil Bazaar. There's no English sign; look for the man in costume outside an arcade.

Shater Abbas Restaurant 1 (☎ 229 1440; Khakshenasi St, off Azadi Blvd; meals IR80,000; (☎) 11am-4pm & 6-11.30pm)

The low light, open kitchen, bustling staff and modern design touches create an atmosphere that is hugely popular with middle-class Shirazis. The menu mixes the classic range of kababs with some less familiar dishes – turkey kabab and mushroom steak, for example. Prices seem to have climbed with demand, sharply. Look for the flame torches outside.

Other recommendations:

Soofi Traditional Restaurant 2 (☎ 626 1573; Afif Abad St; meals IR50,000-80,000; ☎ noon-3.15pm & 7-11.15pm) Beside the Setareh Fars shopping centre; popular with young, wealthy Shirazis; live music at night.

Pat Traditional Restaurant (☎ 235 4186; Paramount Cross; meals IR55,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Subterranean, traditional place with live music.

QUICK EATS

Shiraz might just be the pizza capital of the world. Dozens of new pizza joints have opened here serving the usual array of thick-crust, tomato-less pies topped with too much tasteless sausage. Zand is packed with places selling pizzas, burgers, hot dogs, *saucis* (sausage) sandwiches, soft-serve ice cream and other such delicacies.

110 Hamburgers (Anvari St; meals IR25,000; ☎ 11am-midnight) The best, however, is this place to which Shirazis come like moths to a neon flame (two glowing palm trees). Their version of the *shwarma*, with meat sliced off a spit and shovelled into a bread roll with healthy bits like tomato and pickle (IR18,000), is good.

Mahdi Faludeh (Naser Khosrow St; ☎ 2-10pm) The most famous faludeh (IR3000 a cup) shop in Shiraz that does a good line in *bastani*, too. It's opposite the Arg and beside the mosque entrance.

TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS

There are some cracking teahouses in Shiraz, and a few decent cafés too. Unfortunately, the historic and popular Hammam-e Vakil has closed as a teahouse.

Aroosh Khorshid (Dehnadi St; meals IR25,000-45,000; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thur) Convenient to the cheap accommodation, the Aroosh has plenty of old paraphernalia hanging about and the big space can have a decent atmosphere when it's busy. The food is decent if unadventurous; check the bill carefully.

Seray-e Mehr Teahouse (☎ 222 9572; Seray-e Mehr, Bazar-e Vakil; meals IR35,000-50,000; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thur) This is a serendipitous place to find after wandering through the Bazar-e Vakil.

Hidden away through a small door behind the Serai Mushir Bazar, the split-level teahouse has a small menu of tasty favourites (think *dizi*, *kubideh*, *zereshk polo*) and a delightfully relaxed atmosphere in which to sit, sip tea and puff on qalyan.

Khajo Teahouse (Darvazeh-ye Quran; ☎ 11am-10pm) One of three little places selling tea and qalyan on the side of the rocky slope above the Quran Gate. Panoramic city views at sunset.

Aramgah-e Hafez Teahouse (☎ 228 4552; Golestan Blvd) Set at the back of the ground of Hafez's tomb, this teahouse is a great place to chill out with some live traditional music and a cup of *chay*, though the man himself might have preferred a glass of Shiraz. At the time of writing the teahouse was closed, but should be back by the time you arrive.

Sa'adi Teahouse (☎ 727 2300; Aramgah-e Sa'di) This subterranean *chaykhaneh* isn't quite as atmospheric as the Hafez version, but it's still plenty of fun.

Shopping

Good buys in the Bazar-e Vakil include metalwork and printed cottons, especially tablecloths and rugs woven by Fars nomads. Shiraz can be a good place to buy kilims and *gab-behs* (traditional rugs), though the selection is not as great as in Esfahan. For handicrafts, head to Serai Mushir in the Bazar-e Vakil, where you'll find some excellent shops and a great atmosphere. For a taste of modern Iran, head for the Setareh Fars Commercial Mall, a shopping mall (lots of labels), games complex (10-pin bowling IR40,000 a game!) and top-floor food court (Mexican and Chinese, open 4pm to midnight) where the young and hip hang out. Come in the evening for a taste of modern, consumer Iran.

Getting There & Away

AIR

It's easy to start or finish a trip to Iran in Shiraz because several airlines operate between Shiraz and gulf cities. **Iran Aseman** (☎ 230 8841; Zand Blvd; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thur) flies between Shiraz and Dubai (one way IR820,000, daily) and Kuwait (IR882,000, daily), while other Gulf cities are served by Gulf Air (Bahrain) and Iran Air (Bahrain, Doha).

Shiraz International Airport (☎ 722 5020; http://shirazairport.ir) has a handy **flight information number** (☎ 199; ☎ 8am-9pm) and a hotel booking counter offering hefty discounts.

Iran Air (☎ 233 0041; cnr Zand Blvd & Felestin St; ☎ 8am-3.30pm) flies the following domestic routes.

Destination	Fare	Flights
Bandar Abbas	IR289,000	5 weekly
Bandar-e Lengeh	IR244,000	4 weekly
Esfahan	IR246,000	daily
Kish	IR253,000	5 weekly
Mashhad	IR540,000	6 weekly
Tehran	IR395,000	several daily

Iran Aseman, Mahan Air, Kish Airlines and other domestic carriers serve a mix of the same destinations, for the same prices; see a travel agency (p271) for tickets.

BUS & MINIBUS

Most long-distance buses operate from busy **Carandish bus terminal** (Terminal-e Bozorg; Salman-e Farsi Blvd). Prices are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses (or just Volvo), and the main (but usually not the only) departure times are noted.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR25,000/ 55,000	8-9hr	7pm-9.30pm
Bam	IR65,000	7-10hr	Zahedan buses
Bandar Abbas	IR26,500/ 55,000	10hr	5-9pm
Esfahan	IR20,000/ 38,000	8hr	regular
Hamadan	IR34,500/ 60,000	15hr	1.30pm (Fars Mihan)
Kerman	IR45,000	8hr	7.30am, 9.30am (T8), 1.30-10pm
Kermanshah	IR85,000	18hr	2.30pm (Fars Mihan)
Sanandaj	IR90,000		1.30pm (Fars Mihan)
Tabriz	IR115,000	20hr	1.30pm (Fars Mihan)
Tehran	IR37,000/ 75,000	13-18hr	hourly 4-11pm
Yazd	IR18,000/ 45,000	5-7hr	7.30am, (T8), 5-8pm 2pm, 3pm (Seiro Safar Jonub)
Zahedan	IR85,000	13-17hr	7am, 1pm, 6pm (T8)

If you're on a tight schedule it's worth booking ahead at the **Iran Peyma** (Taavoni 1; ☎ 222 3888; Zand Blvd; ☎ 7am-8pm Sat-Thur, 8am-noon Fri) office near the corner of Sa'di St, or nearby Pars Tourist Agency (p271).

Buses to towns west and southwest of Shiraz leave from Amir Kabir Terminal on the southern outskirts. Buses for Kazerun (IR10,000, two to three hours) and Bushehr (IR13,000/30,000, five hours) depart at least every hour; arriving from Bushehr, you'll probably be dropped here.

SAVARIS

Savaris for regional towns such as Bishapur, Firuz Abad and Marvdasht (for Persepolis) go from the southern edge of Carandish Terminal, near the river, on a semiregular basis.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A private taxi to or from the city centre should cost about IR15,000. Ask at the airport information desk if the public bus has resumed, and if it runs all the way into town.

METRO

The **Shiraz Urban Railway** (www.shirazmetro.ir) is being built and will eventually include three lines, with 40 stations on 47km of track, including a link to the new Esfahan-Shiraz mainline station. Line 1 will open in 2010 at the earliest, and will run from south-east to northwest, including a stretch along Zand Ave between Valiasr Sq (good for visa extensions) and Imam Hossein Sq.

TAXI

Shiraz's fleet of old, green-and-white Paykan taxis, known locally as *mas' khiyari* (yogurt cucumber) is slowly being phased out in favour of shiny yellow Prides. Shuttle taxis ply the streets for IR1000 to IR2000 per trip. Chartering starts at IR5000.

PERSEPOLIS

پرسپولیس

☎ 0728 / elev 1630m

Magnificent **Persepolis** (Takht-e Jamshid; admission IR5000; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Nov-Mar, 8am-6pm summer) embodies the greatest successes of the ancient Achaemenid Empire...and its final demise (see History, p27). The monumental staircases, exquisite reliefs and imposing gateways leave you in no doubt how grand this city was and how totally dominant the empire that built it. Equally, the broken and fallen columns attest that the end of empire was emphatic. Persepolis is a result of the vast body of skill and knowledge gathered from throughout the Achaemenids' empire.

It is Persian in ideology and design, but truly international in its superb architecture and artistic execution.

This multicultural concoction is alone in the ancient world, and while largely ruined it remains the greatest surviving masterpiece of the ancient Near Eastern civilisations. Respected scholar Arthur Upham Pope ably summed up the philosophy behind Persepolis in *Introducing Persian Architecture* (published by Tuttle in 1982):

Humane sentiments found expression in the nobility and sheer beauty of the building: more rational and gracious than the work of the Assyrians or Hittites, more lucid and humane than that of the Egyptians. The beauty of Persepolis is not the accidental counterpart of mere size and costly display; it is the result of beauty being specifically recognised as sovereign value.

Some historians believe the site of Persepolis was chosen by Cambyses II, son of

Cyrus the Great, but work did not begin until after Darius I (the Great) took the throne in 518 BC. It was added to by a host of subsequent kings, including Xerxes I and II, and Artaxerxes I, II and III, over a period of more than 150 years.

The ruins you see today are a mere shadow of Persepolis' former glory. But their very existence is due in part to the fact the ancient city was lost for centuries, totally covered by dust and sand. It wasn't until the 1930s that extensive excavations revealed its glories once again.

Note that there is little shade at Persepolis and from May until early October it can be sweltering, so bring a hat and water. For computer illustrations of Persepolis in all its glory, see www.persepolis3D.com.

Tours

Just about every hotel in Shiraz organises 'tours', with prices proportional to room rates; be sure about whether you'll have an actual guide who speaks your language (more expensive) or just a driver. For a list of reputable tour guides, see p271.

Many travellers opt for an English-speaking driver to ferry them around for a half or full day. The driver usually won't enter the site with you, so you'll have to rely on this book, or if you're lucky, a brochure from Persepolis. To Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam, it usually costs from about IR200,000 to IR250,000, while the full day to Pasargadae costs IR300,000 to IR350,000. For the best of these drivers, see our list (p271).

The Persepolis Complex

The following descriptions are set out like a walking tour in the order suggested on the map. This route is different to that taken by many guides, meaning you can avoid the throngs.

ENTERING THE CITY

As it always has been, entry to Persepolis is via the monumental **Grand Stairway (2)** at the northwest corner of the site. The stairs were carved from massive blocks of stone, but each step was shallow so Persians in long elegant robes could walk gracefully up into the palace.

Whenever important foreign delegations arrived, their presence was heralded by trumpeters at the top of the staircase; fragments of one of these bronze trumpets are on display in the museum. Acolytes then led the dignitaries through **Xerxes' Gateway (3)**; also known as the Gate of All Nations),

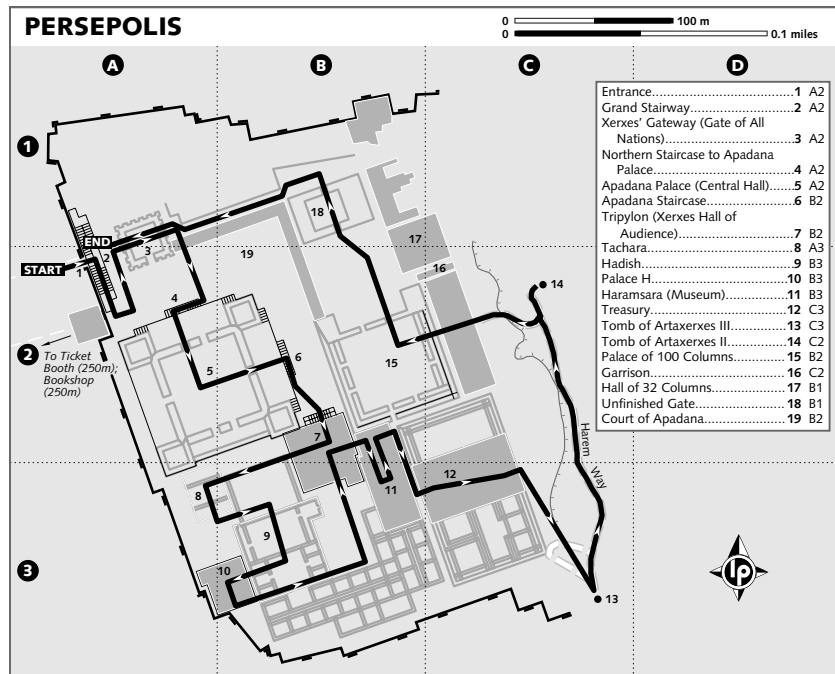
which is still a wonderfully impressive monument.

The gateway was built during the time of Xerxes I and is guarded by bull-like figures that have a strong Assyrian character. Above these, look for a cuneiform inscription in Old Persian, Neo-Babylonian and Elamite languages. It declares, among other things, that 'King Xerxes says: by the favour of Ahuramazda this Gate of All Nations I built. Much else that is beautiful was built in this Parsa, which I built and my father built.' Centuries of graffiti artists have also left their mark; look for explorer Henry Morton Stanley.

APADANA PALACE & STAIRCASE

Important Persian and Median notables were probably ushered to the **Apadana Palace (5)** to the south. Constructed on a terrace of stone by Xerxes I, the palace was reached via another staircase. Although it can be difficult to picture the grandeur of the palace from what remains, the bas-reliefs along the northern wall evocatively depict the scenes of splendour that must have accompanied the arrival of delegations to meet with the king.

Most impressive of all, however, and among the most impressive historical sights in all of Iran, are the bas-reliefs of the **Apadana Staircase (6)** on the eastern wall, which can also be reached from the Palace of 100 Columns. The northern panels recount the reception of the Persians in long robes and the Medes



PERSEPOLIS UNDER THE ACHAEMENIANS

In its heyday Persepolis spread over about 125,000 sq metres and was one of four cities at the heart of an empire that spread from the Indus River to Ethiopia. Its original name was Parsa and the first known reference to it by its Greek name of Persepolis – meaning both City of Parsa (City of Persia) and Destroyer of Cities – came after its sacking by Alexander the Great's army in 330 BC. Oddly, however, Persepolis is rarely mentioned by any name in foreign records, fuelling speculation among some archaeologists that the existence of the city was kept a secret from the outside world. The few remaining records focus instead on other Achaemenid capitals, including Babylon, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) and Shush.

More certain is that Persepolis was built on the slopes of Mt Rahmat (the Mount of Mercy) as a showcase for the empire, designed to awe visitors with its scale and beauty. It served this purpose during the annual No Ruz (New Year) celebration, when subjects came from across the empire to climb up from the level of the surrounding plain and pay homage – and tribute – to their kings. It's quite possible that at other times the business of the empire returned to Shush.

Persepolis was burned to the ground during Alexander's visit in 330 BC. If you're wondering how a palace built almost entirely of stone could be burned to the ground, the explanation lies in the roof. The ceilings of most buildings are believed to have been made from huge timber beams, and as these burned they heated, then melted, the iron and lead clamps that held it all together.

in shorter dress. The three tiers of figures are amazingly well preserved. Each tier contains representations of the most elite of the Achaemenid soldiers, the Imperial Guard and the Immortals. On the upper tier, they are followed by the royal procession, the royal valets and the horses of the Elamite king of chariots, while on the lower two tiers they precede the Persians with their feather head-dresses and the Medes in their round caps. The stairs themselves are guarded by Persian soldiers. The central panel of the staircase is dedicated to symbols of the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, symbolised by a ring with wings, flanked by two winged lions with human heads and guarded by four Persian and Median soldiers; the Persians are the ones carrying the indented shields. An inscription announces that the palace was started by Darius and completed by Xerxes and implores God to protect it from 'famine, lies and earthquakes'. The panels at the southern end are the most interesting, showing 23 delegations bringing their tributes to the Achaemenid king. This rich record of the nations of the time ranges from the Ethiopians in the bottom left corner, through a climbing pantheon of, among various other peoples, Arabs, Thracians, Indians, Parthians and Cappadocians, up to the Elamites and Medians at the top right.

Today, the staircase is covered by a permanent shelter and the only direct sunlight is early in the morning; it's worth heading straight here when the site opens.

TRIPYLON (XERXES' HALL OF AUDIENCE)

This small but handsomely decorated palace is known as both the **Tripylon (7)** and Xerxes' Hall of Audience. It stands at the heart of the city but what its exact function was remains unknown. One of the more widely accepted theories is that the king used it to receive notables and courtiers in a private area, possibly to make important political decisions. On the columns of the eastern doorway are reliefs showing Darius on his throne, borne by the representatives of 28 countries; the crown prince Xerxes stands behind his father. The 28 have their arms interlinked, representing a union of nations.

ROYAL PALACES

The southwestern corner of the site is dominated by palaces believed to have been

constructed during the reigns of Darius and Xerxes. The **Tachara (8)**; or Winter Palace) is easily the most striking, with many of its monolithic doorjambs still standing and covered in bas-reliefs and cuneiform inscriptions. The stairs on the southern side bear highly skilled reliefs and are some of the most photogenic. The palace opens onto a royal courtyard flanked by two palaces. To the east is the **Hadish (9)**, a palace completed by Xerxes and reached via another monumental staircase. Some scholars speculate that its wooden columns on stone bases might have served as kindling for Alexander's great fire – especially as it had been Xerxes who had put Athens to the torch. To the south of the square are the remains of an unfinished palace known as **Palace H (10)**.

HAREMSARA (MUSEUM)

Accessed via stairs east of the Tripylon, the **Haremsara (11)**; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the most argued about building at Persepolis. Despite the depictions around the door of the king defeating evil, scholars argue that it was either a harem for the king's consorts and concubines or a residence for visiting ambassadors (it has the same number of rooms as the number of subject nations). Restored in the 1930s, today it houses a museum and administrative offices. The museum contains a stone foundation tablet and a range of artefacts discovered during excavations: alabaster vessels, cedar wood, lances and arrow tips. Note the highly polished walls; almost every wall in Persepolis was finished in this expensive, labour-intensive fashion.

TREASURY & TOMBS

The southeastern corner of the site is dominated by Darius' **Treasury (12)**, one of the earliest structures at Persepolis. Archaeologists have found stone tablets in Elamite and Akkadian detailing the wages of thousands of labourers. When Alexander looted the Treasury it's reported he needed 3000 camels to cart off the contents. The foundations of walls and bases of more than 300 columns are all that remain. On the hill above the Treasury are the rock-hewn tombs of **Artaxerxes II (13)** and **Artaxerxes III (14)**. It's worth sitting on the hill for a while to get a feel for the enormous scale of Persepolis.

THE LAST SHAH'S TENT CITY

Outside the entrance to Persepolis, through the pine trees behind the toilets, are the remains of a luxurious tent city built by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy in 1971. The tents played host to a lavish and incredibly expensive party, attended by dignitaries including 60 monarchs or heads of state, but few Iranians. Food was flown in from Maxims in Paris, and many of the VIPs were put up in luxury tented apartments, complete with marble bathrooms. They were arranged on five streets, each representing a geographical area (Europe, Oceania, Asia, Africa and America), which came together to form a five-pointed star.

The celebration had two main objectives: to promote Iran to the rest of the world, and nurture Iranian nationalistic pride and love of their monarch. The first was a huge success, but the second was a public relations disaster. Opponents quickly pointed to the unnecessary extravagance, and some believe the party was a turning point from which the shah never recovered. It has stood rusting, with canvas slowly decaying, ever since.

In late 2007 it seemed the tent city, so long portrayed as a symbol of wasteful monarchy, would be rehabilitated through the uncomfortable mix of politics, pragmatism and ideology that is Iranian life. Reports suggested the city would be restored to its original luxury to house wealthy tourists. Talk about ironic...

PALACE OF 100 COLUMNS

With an extravagant square hall measuring almost 70m square and supported by 100 stone columns, the **Palace of 100 Columns (15)** was the second-largest building at Persepolis, built during the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. Some scholars believe it was used to receive the military elite upon whom the empire's security rested. An impressive array of broken columns remain, and reliefs on the doorjambs at the back (south) of the building show a king, soldiers and representatives of 28 subject nations. Little remains of the **Hall of 32 Columns (17)**, built at the end of the Achaemenid period. The arrival of Alexander and his armies stopped work on a larger version of the Gate of All Lands, in the wide courtyard in front of the Palace of 100 Columns, now aptly called the **Unfinished Gate (18)**.

SOUND & LIGHT SHOW

On summer Thursday and Friday nights a sound and light show (IR5000; usually in Farsi) lights up Persepolis at 8.30pm. You must enter the site by 6pm. Check that it's on at the Tourist Information in Shiraz (p271).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping in the parking lot at Persepolis is allowed, but otherwise the only sleeping option is **Persepolis Tourist Complex** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 447 4001; Takht-e Jamshid Blvd; /ste US\$24/50; ☎), about 1.5km west of Persepolis, where recently restored bungalows are fair value and the open-air teahouse is attractive.

Nearby, the best restaurant is the faux-grotto **Parsian Restaurant** (☎ 447 3555; Takht-e Jamshid Blvd; meals IR30,000-50,000; ☎ lunch & dinner). At Persepolis itself, snacks, drinks and ice creams can be bought near the ticket office.

Getting There & Away

Many travellers take tours or hire taxis (see Tours, p271), but it's not difficult to get to Persepolis by a combination of bus and local taxi from Shiraz. Take a minibus (IR4000, 42km, hourly) or savari (IR8000, or IR40,000 for the whole car to Persepolis) from the southern edge of Carandish Terminal to Marvdasht, where they stop at Basij Sq. From here you should be able to find a shuttle taxi (IR3000, 12km) or private taxi (IR15,000) to Persepolis. Alternatively, drivers in Marvdasht told us they would go *dar baste* to Persepolis and Naqshe-e Rostam, then back to Shiraz for IR120,000, including a couple of hours waiting time. Returning from the site, there are always plenty of vehicles lurking outside the entrance (about IR80,000 per car to Shiraz), or try hitching.

NAQSH-E ROSTAM & NAQSH-E RAJAB

نقش رستم و نقش رجب

Definitely worth visiting as part of a trip to Persepolis are these sites. The rock tombs of **Naqsh-e Rostam** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5pm winter, 7.30am-5.30pm summer) are magnificent. Hewn out of a cliff high above the ground, the four tombs are believed to be those of Darius II, Artaxerxes I, Darius I and Xerxes I (from

left to right as you look at the cliff) although historians are still debating this. The tombs of the later Artaxerxes above Persepolis were modelled on these. The openings lead to funerary chambers, where bones were stored after the vultures had picked them clean. The reliefs above the openings are similar to those at Persepolis, with the kings standing at fire altars supported by figures representing the subject nations below. The cruciform design of the tombs supposedly represents the cardinal points, but some historians wonder whether this religious symbol has any relationship to the Christian cross.

The eight Sassanian **stone reliefs** cut into the cliff depict scenes of imperial conquests and royal ceremonies; there are detailed descriptions in front of the tombs and reliefs.

Facing the cliff is the **Kaba Zartosht**. It was long thought to be an Achaemenid fire temple, but scholars now argue that it might have been an ancient calendar, or perhaps a treasury. The walls are marked with inscriptions cataloguing later Sassanian victories.

Naqsh-e Rajab (admission IR2000; ☞ 8am-5pm winter, 7.30am-5.30pm summer) is directly opposite the turn-off to Naqsh-e Rostam on the old Shiraz-Esfahan road and is worth a quick look. Four fine Sassanian bas-reliefs are hidden from the road by the folds of a rocky hill and depict various scenes from the reigns of Ardashir I and Shapur the Great. A man called Rajab once had a tea-house here, hence the name.

Getting There & Away

Most private taxi trips to Persepolis also stop at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab. If you don't have a vehicle and it's winter, you could walk the 6km from Persepolis to Naqsh-e Rostam, stopping off at Naqsh-e Rajab en route. In summer, this would be idiotic. Alternatively, negotiate with a taxi driver to take you to these places, perhaps en route back to Marvdasht.

PASARGADAE

elevation 1847m

Begun under Cyrus the Great in about 546 BC, the city of Pasargadae was quickly superseded by Darius I's magnificent palace at Persepolis. **Pasargadae** (admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-5pm, 7.30am-5.30pm summer) is about 50km north of Persepolis and some travellers have questioned whether it's worth the effort of get-

ting there. The site is not nearly as well preserved as Persepolis, but is beautiful in a lonely, windswept way.

The austere and awesomely simple **Tomb of Cyrus** stands proudly on the Morghab Plain. It consists of six stone tiers with a modest rectangular burial chamber above, and its unique architecture combines elements of all the major civilisations Cyrus had conquered. During the Achaemenid period it was surrounded by gardens and protected, but was plundered by the armies of Alexander the Great, an act that greatly distressed the Macedonian conqueror.

About 1km north of the tomb begin the insubstantial remains of the early Achaemenid empire. **Cyrus's Private Palace** is first, notable for its unusual H-shaped plan, central hall of 30 columns (the stumps of which remain), and wide verandahs front and back. About 250m southeast is the rectangular **Audience Palace**, which once had an 18m-high hypostyle hall surrounded by smaller balconies. Incredibly, one of the eight white limestone columns remains standing on its uncommon black limestone plinth. In both the Audience Palace and in Cyrus' Private Palace there is a cuneiform inscription that reads: 'I am Cyrus, the Achaemenid King'.

Another 500m north of Cyrus's Private Palace are the remains of the **Prison of Solomon** (Zendan-e Soleiman), variously thought to be a fire temple, tomb, sun dial or store. On the hill beyond is the **Throne of the Mother of Solomon** (Takht-e Madar-e Soleiman), which was actually a monumental 6000-sq-metre citadel used from Cyrus's time until the late Sassanian period. Local historians believe the references to Solomon date from the Arab conquest, when the inhabitants of Pasargadae renamed the sites with Islamic names to prevent their destruction.

By far the easiest way to get here is to charter a taxi from Shiraz; see p271 for options. Some travellers take a driver to/from Yazd, stopping here and at Persepolis.

By public transport, follow the instructions for Persepolis (p283), then walk another 1.5km and ask for the Sadahan Asenjan (taxi station), from where you take another savari to Sa'adatshahr (also known as Sa'adat Abad; IR10,000, 45 minutes), and then another to Pasargadae (IR5000). Alternatively, take a bus (IR11,000) from Carandish terminal in Shiraz to Sa'adatshahr, and a (very rare) taxi

IRAN'S NOMADS

The 20th century saw the Iranian government try repeatedly to settle Iran's many nomadic tribes. For all their efforts, however, there are still about a million people living as nomads in Iran. They are mostly Turkic Qashqa'i and Bakhtiyari, but there are also nomadic Kurds, Lors, Baluchis and smaller groups such as the Khamseh of Bavanat.

The Bakhtiyari are concentrated in an area extending southward from Lorestan province to Khuzestan province and westward from Esfahan to near the Iraqi border, moving their herds of sheep and goats between summer and winter pastures. They speak a dialect of Lori.

The Qashqa'i are based in central Iran where they move between summer and winter pastures in Fars Province. Their migration routes are among the longest and most difficult of all of Iran's pastoral tribes, as they are often on the road for 45 days. They have become famous for their production of simple rugs – the *gabbeh* – which have proved very popular with Westerners (Iranians are rather snobbish about *gabbeh*). You can usually spot Qashqa'i women in the Shiraz bazaar.

Nomadic women wear long, colourfully layered dresses with much jewellery and no chadors. The men sometimes wear tall hats with a rounded crown. To see them it's best to go with a guide, who can translate and just find them. Pars Tourist Agency (p271) in Shiraz has several nomad tour options, or try Bavanat Tours (below). Also see The Bakhtiyari, p218.

or (rare) minibus the remaining 30km. Easier is taking any bus towards Yazd or Esfahan (you may have to pay full fare), getting out at the turn-off to Pasargadae and walking or hitching the last 8km. Leave plenty of time to hitch/bus/whatever back to Shiraz or on to Abarqu/Yazd.

BAVANAT

In a quiet valley 230km northeast of Shiraz, the Bavanat region is a 20km-long walnut forest in a lush valley between the Zagros Mountains in the south and deserts to the north. The main town is Suryan, aka Bavanat, but the real destination here is the village of Shah Hamzeh Bazm (or just Bazm) 18km further east. The mountains near Bazm are home to Khamseh nomads, a confederation of five groups of Arabic, Turkish and Farsi-speaking people. From about April until October they pitch their tents in the hills and survive with few of the 'luxuries' you might see in the tents of Qashqa'i nomads north of Shiraz.

Abbas Barzegar, himself part Khamseh, opens his family home in Bazm to visitors and runs one- and two-day **Bavanat Tours** (☎ 0752-326 2357, 0917 317 3957; www.bavanattravel.com) tours to stay with the nomads (in summer, of course). He's a lovely guy, though his very basic English is a problem. Alternatively, you could just hang out in his place (price negotiable). Tours cost US\$40 for one person, US\$35 for two to five, and US\$30 each beyond that, including the

delicious food – his wife is an award-winning cook – and transport.

To get to Bazm, first come to Suryan. One bus leaves Abuzar Sq in Yazd (IR12,000, three hours) at 1pm, returning at 7.30am. From Shiraz (IR12,000, three hours), buses leave Carandish Terminal at 7.30am and 12.30pm, returning at the same times next day. There are no regular savaris to Suryan, but you can go *dar baste* to Shahr-e Babak (IR200,000 one way) if you're continuing to Meymand (see p311). From Suryan, you'll have to hire a taxi or hitch.

FIRUZ ABAD

☎ 0712 / pop 70,000 / elev 1330m

The monumental Sassanian-era remains around modern Firuz Abad are often missed by those in a rush to get to Persepolis. The palaces and city were built by the founder of the Sassanian empire, Ardashir Babakan, in the 3rd century BC. Firuz Abad was once an important stop on the Sassanid Roadway between Shiraz and the ancient port of Shiraf. Today, it's mainly a Qashqa'i farming town. Coming from Shiraz, the first site is **Qal'eh-e Doktor** (Maiden's Palace), sitting atop a steep hill with commanding views into the valley below. You'll know you're there when you see a footbridge crossing the road. Take the bridge and it's a 10- or 15-minute climb. This three-tiered palace made of rock and gypsum was Ardashir's first, and its position and fortification reflect the lingering Parthian threat of the time. While crumbling, it's not difficult

پاسارگاد

فیروز آباد

to imagine the palace's original layout, and the views from the top are magnificent.

About 2km towards Firuz Abad, a signed dirt road fords the Tang Ab river to reach **Ardashir's Palace** (admission IR3000; ☎ 7.30am-sunset), a much grander structure built beside a wonderfully refreshing spring once Ardashir felt more secure. Given it is almost 1800 years old, its domes, high *iwans* and clean, stable lines – which set the tone for all Sassanian architecture – remain hugely impressive. The *iwans* and domes, with their accompanying squinches, are some of the earliest surviving examples. In winter, the Tang Ab is impassable so you'll need to take a lengthy detour through Firuz Abad by taxi.

Beyond Ardashir's Palace is his city, **Gur** (N 28°51'2.66", E 52°31'58.52"), which in its current form is an archaeologist's dream, but requires plenty of imagination. With its perfectly circular plan, divided into equal sectors and separated by high walls, Gur was a hugely ambitious town-planning feat. The only existing building is the 30m-high 'minaret' that marked the centre of the circle. Gur is about 3km along the sealed road between Firuz Abad and Ardashir's Palace.

Sleeping

The only place to stay in Firuz is the overpriced **Firooz Abad Tourist Inn** (Mehmun Sara Jahangardi; ☎ 622 3699; s/d US\$25/35; 📍 🚻); most people wisely take a day trip from Shiraz.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses run from Shiraz's Carandish terminal to Firuz Abad (IR10,000, 2½ hours) several times a day, or take a savari (IR18,000, 80 minutes). Returning, the last savari leaves about 7pm. For Qal'eh-e Doktor, ask to get off when you see the overhead footbridge. Returning by savari you'll need to go to Firuz Abad, as they will be full when they pass Qal'eh-e Doktor. Or you could hitch. Alternatively, take a tour or driver (p271).

KAZERUN & BISHAPUR

کازرون و بی‌شاپور

Just off the ancient royal road between Shiraz and Bushehr are the small but fascinating ruins of another two ancient cities: Kazerun and, about 25km to the west, Bishapur. At

Kazerun (the name comes from an ancient word meaning 'people who wash cotton clothes') there are several Sassanian-era **bas-reliefs** most interesting to archaeologists for their unique inscriptions.

Bishapur (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-4pm, to 5pm summer), or 'Shapur's City', is better. It was the grand capital of possibly the greatest of the Sassanian kings, Shapur I. Shapur and his armies defeated the Romans three times, and much of Bishapur was built by Romans taken captive after their Emperor Valerian was defeated in AD 260; he lived his final years a captive at Bishapur. The site has been partly excavated, revealing the enormous **Palace of Shapur** and nearby **Anahita's Temple**, where a stairway leads underground to a pool around which the faithful once walked and prayed. Some fine Irano-Roman mosaics remain, but the best are now in the Louvre.

The city was originally approached along the Shapur River in the steep-sided Chogan Gorge. A short walk from Bishapur, its rocky walls bear six large **bas-reliefs** commemorating, among other historical moments, Shapur's investiture as king and his victory over Roman invaders. The deep groove running through the reliefs was caused by a powerful flood in the 1960s; the groove marks the high-water mark.

About 4km along the gorge is the **Tang-e Chogan** (Shapur Cave) and its awesome 7m-high **Statue of Shapur I**, one of the most impressive archaeological sites in Iran. Getting to the cave is easiest on a taxi tour, but you could walk the 5km or so from Shapur. Take the road along the river for about 4km to a village on your left, where one of the villagers will probably offer to lead you up the steep ascent to the cave (start very early in summer). A tip is appreciated.

Getting to Bishapur is easiest by charter taxi (at least IR200,000 from Shiraz), but public transport is viable with an early start. Take the bus to Kazerun from the Amir Kabir terminal in Shiraz (IR10,000, 2½ hours) or from Bushehr, or a savari. From Shiraz, keep an eye out en route for the 15-arch **Karim Khan Bridge**, a Zand-era bridge about 40km west of Shiraz.

Alternatively, take a guided tour; see p271 for guides and drivers.

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