

# Getting Started

## WHEN TO GO

When deciding when to go to Iran you must first work out where you'd like to go. Temperatures can vary wildly: when it's -5°C in Tabriz it might be 35°C in Bandar Abbas, but for most people spring and autumn are the most pleasant times to visit. At other times, the seasons have advantages and disadvantages depending on where you are. For example, the most agreeable time to visit the Persian Gulf coast is during winter, when the humidity is low and temperatures mainly in the 20s. At this time, however, the more elevated northwest and northeast can be freezing, with mountain roads impassable due to snow. Except on the Persian Gulf coast, winter nights can be bitterly cold, but we think the days (often clear and about 15°C in much of the country) are more pleasant than the summer heat.

And when we say 'heat', we mean it. Between May and October temperatures often rise into the 40s, and in the deserts, southern provinces

See Climate Charts (p376) for more information.

## DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...READING THIS FIRST

The best preparation for visiting Iran is to read as much of the front and back chapters in this guide as you can. If you can't read everything, at least read the following:

- How do I get a visa and how long can I stay? (p393)
- Credit cards and travellers cheques don't work. Bring cash. (p387)
- This money is confusing. Rials or toman? (p387)
- Prices will be higher than what we have in this book; see p25 and p388.
- How do Iranians think? Read about the National Psyche, p45.
- Is he really giving me that for free? See the boxed text Ta'arof (p45).
- As a woman, what should I wear? (p398)
- Books to take with you (see Reading Up, p17).

There is not much you can't buy in Tehran or the other big cities, though the selection can be limited. Things you should consider bringing:

- Sunscreen and a hat
- A head-lamp
- A short-wave radio
- A universal plug
- A small stash of toilet paper (to be replenished throughout the trip)
- A phrasebook and pictures of your family to better communicate with your new Iranian friends
- A couple of decent books to soak up the free hours at night and on transport (but nothing with pictures of scantily clad women on the cover)
- Earplugs for when you've finished reading and want to sleep, or if you'd prefer to sleep than watch that Bollywood flick on the overnight bus
- Tampons: they're hard to find, so if you use them it's worth bringing enough to last the trip

There's just one more important thing: try, as much as possible, to leave your preconceptions at home.

and along the Gulf coast, very little is done between noon and 4pm or 5pm. For women, who need to wear head coverings whenever they're outside (see p398), summer can be particularly trying.

### Seasons & Holidays

Iran has two main seasons. High season begins with the mass national movement accompanying No Ruz (p385), the Iranian New Year holiday that begins on March 21 and runs for two weeks. During this period cities such as Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd are packed. Hotels in these cities and resort destinations, such as Kish Island, charge their rack rates, and finding a room can be harder than finding a stiff drink in Qom. But it's a great time to be in Tehran, which is virtually empty.

No Ruz also marks the annual government-mandated price rise in hotels, usually about 20%, and in most of the country a change in opening hours. For the sake of clarity, in this book when you see 'summer' opening hours it refers to the period from March 21 to mid-October. Mid-October until mid-March is 'low season' (referred to as 'winter' in this book) in most of Iran, and brings shorter opening hours at sights and hotel prices about 10% to 20% lower, or much more in holiday destinations.

Some travellers prefer not to visit Iran during Ramazan (p384), the Muslim month of fasting, when many restaurants close between dawn and dusk, and tempers can be strained. However, most people (including us) think travelling during Ramazan isn't as tough as reputation would have it: restaurants in hotels and bus terminals still operate and while buses might be less frequent, Ramazan is the least-crowded time on trains and planes.

### COSTS & MONEY

It's not quite Zimbabwe, but inflation is running at about 25% in Iran, so expect just about every price in this book to rise – repeatedly – in the coming years (for details, see p25). Inflation or no inflation, Iran remains an eminently affordable place to travel and great value by Western standards.

Backpackers can get by on as little as IR150,000 to IR200,000 (US\$16 to US\$22) a day, even less if all luxuries are foregone. To do this, however, 'surviving' is the operative word; you need to stay in basic lodgings, such as a dorm or basic hotel, known as a *mosaferkhaneh* (p371, from about IR50,000/US\$5.50), eat the simplest food in local restaurants (preferably only twice a day) and take the cheapest, slowest transport.

If you're not a complete ascetic you'll be looking at about IR250,000 to IR400,000 (US\$27 to US\$43) a day. This will usually be enough for budget or simple midrange accommodation (with a bathroom), one good cooked meal a day, transport by Volvo buses (see the boxed text, p408) or savari (p415), chartered taxis around town (and sometimes in the countryside) and visits to all the important tourist attractions.

For about IR400,000 to IR500,000 (US\$43 to US\$54) a day you could take a couple of internal flights, eat at restaurants serving 'exotic' Western fare, and lodge in midrange hotels with Western toilets and satellite TV.

#### THE END OF DUAL-PRICING IN HOTELS?

As this book went to press, Iran was in the midst of a fight about the future of dual pricing in hotels – where foreigners pay significantly more for hotel rooms than Iranians do. Dual pricing has been in force for years, but in early 2008 the government tourism organisation ordered all hotels to use one rate for everyone. For full details, see p388.

If you prefer upper midrange or top-end hotels you'll be looking at somewhere more than IR700,000 (US\$76) a day. Single and twin/double rooms cost virtually the same, so couples should expect to pay considerably less than double the figures quoted here.

Getting around Iran is cheap; comfortable buses work out at less than IR9200 (US\$1) per 100km, while a bed on an overnight train starts at IR92,000 (US\$10). Domestic flights are no longer as ridiculously cheap as they were, but you can still fly from Tehran to Esfahan, for example, for only IR245,000 (US\$27).

In 2004 the government ended dual-pricing at museums and historical sites, so admission fees won't hurt too much either – between about IR1500 and IR6000 for most places.

Remember that travellers cheques and credit cards don't work in Iran, so bring all the money you'll need in cash (see p387).

### READING UP

Travellers have been writing about Iran for millennia so there are plenty of evocative travelogues worth hunting down. And while English-language fiction is scarce, Iran has been the subject of dozens of political and historical books in recent years. For books by Iranian writers, see p73.

Most of these books are not available or are banned in Iran, but bringing them or any other book into the country shouldn't be a problem. Notable exceptions are *Not Without My Daughter*, which is despised by most Iranians, or anything by Salman Rushdie. For more on customs restrictions, see p377.

### Travel Literature

*In the Land of the Ayatollahs Tupac Shapur is King: Reflections from Iran and the Arab World*, by Shahzad Aziz, combines travelogue and humour in its often insightful observations of the modern Middle East.

*Journey of the Magi*, by Paul William Roberts, is the author's thought-provoking, spiritual and often humorous account of his own journey 'in search of the birth of Jesus'.

*Neither East Nor West*, by Christiane Bird, is an American woman's sometimes painfully honest account of her travels in Iran, and does a decent job of getting behind the veil.

*Persia Through Writers Eyes*, edited by David Blow, gathers together some of the best descriptive writing about Iran from throughout history. Extracts from works by Herodotus, Xenophon, Freya Stark, Robert Byron, John Chardin, Isabella Bird and EG Browne, among others, make this like a sample bag of largely hard-to-find works.

*Searching for Hassan*, by Terence Ward, recounts the author's return to Iran with his family in search of Hassan, the family's 1960s housekeeper. However, looking for Hassan is really a subplot to a revealing look at the history and culture of Iran. Some have criticised Ward's soft approach to the Islamic government.

*The Road to Oxiana*, by Robert Byron, is a classic. A vividly observed travel diary of the author's 1930s passage from England to Afghanistan via Iran. Famous for its descriptive prose and often biting sketches of local people, its tone can verge uncomfortably close to racism by today's standards.

*The Valleys of the Assassins: and Other Persian Travels*, by Freya Stark, was first published in 1934 but remains the archetypal travelogue – adventurous, challenging perceptions and illuminating reality.

#### HOW MUCH?

Meal in a cheap restaurant IR20,000

One hour online IR10,000

Short taxi ride IR6000-10,000

Average museum ticket IR4000

Two-pack of toilet paper IR700

# TOP 10



## GREAT READS

Iran's complex culture and long history have seen plenty of words written about them, with most authors finding the truth far more interesting than fiction – there aren't many novels. Check out the following titles.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>1</b> <i>All the Shah's Men</i> by Stephen Kinzer (p37)</p> <p><b>2</b> <i>In Search of Zarathustra</i> by Paul Kriwaczek</p> <p><b>3</b> <i>Journeys in Persia &amp; Kurdistan</i> by Isabella Bird</p> <p><b>4</b> <i>My Uncle Napoleon</i> by Iraj Pezeshkzad (p38)</p> <p><b>5</b> <i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood</i> by Marjane Satrapi (p73)</p> | <p><b>6</b> <i>Persian Fire</i> by Tom Holland (p30)</p> <p><b>7</b> <i>Reading Lolita in Tehran</i> by Azar Nafisi (p39)</p> <p><b>8</b> <i>Shah of Shahs</i> by Ryszard Kapuscinski (p39)</p> <p><b>9</b> <i>The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom</i>, by Afshin Molavi</p> <p><b>10</b> <i>We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs</i> by Nasrin Alavi (p54)</p> |
|---|---|

## MUST-SEE MOVIES

These are a few standout Iranian films. For more general information on Iranian cinema, see p75.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>1</b> <i>A Moment of Innocence</i> (1996) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf</p> <p><b>2</b> <i>The Apple</i> (1998) by Samira Makhmalbaf (p76)</p> <p><b>3</b> <i>Bashu, The Little Stranger</i> (1986) by Bahram Beizai (p40)</p> <p><b>4</b> <i>Children of Heaven</i> (1997) by Majid Majidi (p77)</p> <p><b>5</b> <i>Gabbbeh</i> (1996) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (p50)</p> | <p><b>6</b> <i>Offside</i> (2006) by Jafar Panahi (p51)</p> <p><b>7</b> <i>A Time for Drunken Horses</i> (2000) by Bahman Ghobadi (p50)</p> <p><b>8</b> <i>Taste of Cherry</i> (1997) by Abbas Kiarostami (p77)</p> <p><b>9</b> <i>Turtles Can Fly</i> (2004) by Bahman Ghobadi (p50)</p> <p><b>10</b> <i>The White Balloon</i> (1995) by Jafar Panahi (p77)</p> |
|---|--|

## WHERE NOTHING IS EVERYTHING

The warmest welcomes and most memorable experiences are often found in the little villages in the middle of nowhere. These few have at least one place to stay but are just a guide – countless more are waiting to be found...

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>1</b> Abyaneh (p231)</p> <p><b>2</b> Baghestan-e Olia (p255)</p> <p><b>3</b> Bavanat Area (p285)</p> <p><b>4</b> Garmeh (p254)</p> <p><b>5</b> Gazor Khan (p182)</p> | <p><b>6</b> Kalat (p366)</p> <p><b>7</b> Paveh (p194)</p> <p><b>8</b> Masuleh (p171)</p> <p><b>9</b> Meymand (p311)</p> <p><b>10</b> Toudeshk (p253)</p> |
|--|--|

## Other Books

As well as the books recommended in Great Reads (opposite), the following works are worth considering.

- *Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, edited by Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak
- *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in the West's War on Militant Islam* by Mark Bowdeno
- *My Father's Notebook* by Kader Abdolah
- *The Prince* by Hushang Golshiri
- *Tehran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran* by Kaveh Basmenji
- *The Shia Revival*, by Vali Nasr, includes an insightful and highly readable introduction to the complexities of Shia Islam.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Easypersian** ([www.easypersian.com](http://www.easypersian.com)) Learn a few words of Farsi and have a better trip.

**Iran Chamber Society** ([www.iranchamber.com](http://www.iranchamber.com)) Historical and cultural summaries about Iran.

**Iranian Visa** ([www.iranianvisa.com](http://www.iranianvisa.com)) Detailed feedback on visas from applicants across the globe.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Destination information plus the latest feedback from travellers on the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

**Parstimes** ([www.parstimes.com](http://www.parstimes.com)) Encyclopaedia of links to sites on just about everything you need to know before you go to Iran.

**Tehran Times** ([www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com)) English-language newspaper and archive.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF EMPIRE

Two Weeks / Tehran to Tehran

Two busy weeks is just long enough to get a taste of the jewels of Iran's rich history. Fly into **Tehran** (p92) and spend two days seeing the major sights, including the **Golestan Palace** (p101), **National Museum of Iran** (p104) and **Tehran Bazar** (p100). Fly to **Shiraz** (p267), where in three days you can see the Zandera mosques, gardens and bazaar, and magnificent **Persepolis** (p279).

Take a bus or taxi and stop in **Abarqu** (p267) on the way to **Yazd** (p255). Spend a day wandering the maze of lanes in this ancient desert city, gazing at the **Jameh Mosque** (p259) and taking in the Zoroastrian **Towers of Silence** (p262). On your second day, tour **Meybod** (p266), the Zoroastrian pilgrimage site at **Chak Chak** (p266) and the mud-brick village of **Kharanaq** (p266).

Catch a bus to **Esfahan** (p232), Iran's most architecturally stunning city, and explore Shah Abbas' **Imam Sq** (p238), the **Bazar-e Bozorg** (p238), the sublime **bridges** (p242) across the Zayandeh River and the Armenian community at **Jolfa** (p243). An easy bus trip brings you to **Kashan** (p224), where you can scramble over the roofs of both the bazaar and the opulent Qajar-era **traditional houses** (p226), and take a day trip to **Abyaneh** (p231), before heading back to Tehran.

This 1500km-long loop takes in most of Iran's highlights. Without getting too far off the beaten track, you'll get a taste of manic Tehran, Persia's glorious pre-Islamic legacy, and the stately former capitals. Most journeys are along busy transport routes; still, it pays to plan your next leg as soon as you arrive.



### EAST BY SOUTHEAST

One Month / Turkey to Pakistan

Travellers with an adventurous bent have been following this classic overland route from Europe to subcontinental Asia for centuries. A month is the minimum time needed to do it justice. **Maku** (p136) makes a pleasant introduction on the way to **Tabriz** (p146), from where you can spend three days and check out **Jolfa** (p156) and **Kandovan** (p155), before heading for **Zanjan** (p184) for a look at **Soltaniyeh** (p184).

Historic **Qazvin** (p176) is the staging point for excursions into the spectacular Alamut Valleys to walk among the ruined **Castles of the Assassins** (p182). Head north of Qazvin via Rasht to lush **Masuleh** (p171), a charming village ideal for chilling out before dashing along the dreary Caspian Coast. From **Chalus** (p173) or **Kelardasht** (p175) zigzag up through the dramatic Alborz Mountains to Tehran. Spend three days in **Tehran** (p92) seeing the museums and taking in the hustle and bustle, and then head south for two days in **Kashan** (p224) and **Abyaneh** (p231). Bus it to **Esfahan** (p232) where you'll need at least three days to see the sights, and then head off to **Shiraz** (p267), where one of your three days will be spent gazing at the ruins of magnificent **Persepolis** (p279). You could spend a night in **Abarqu** (p267) en route to **Yazd** (p255), where three days should include a trip to the historic towns of **Meybod** (p266) and **Kharanaq** (p266), plus the spectacular Zoroastrian pilgrimage site at **Chak Chak** (p266).

Splurge on a night in the restored **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** (p267) on the way to **Kerman** (p312), where three days will be enough to see **Mahan** (p319) the 'New Arg' at **Rayen** (p321) and maybe the **Kaluts** (p321). Stop in **Bam** (p322) to see what remains of the Arg and just chill out a bit before the long trip to Quetta in Pakistan, and blast through **Zahedan** (p326), en route to the border at **Mirjaveh** (p330).



En route you'll absorb and appreciate Iran's diversity: this 4420km-long traverse passes through rocky mountain gorges, green hillsides, the grand cities of central Iran and the great expanse of the arid south-east. Check the security situation before travelling beyond Kerman.

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### CANYONS, FORESTS & PADDYFIELDS...IN IRAN?!

10 Days /  
Tabriz to Masuleh

Challenge Iran's desert image in the lush and rarely visited mountains of northwestern Iran. In the remotest sections you'll need to charter taxis, but with rides at about US\$6 per hour they're an affordable luxury.

Start in **Tabriz** (p146), where you can explore the brilliant covered **bazaar** (p150) and the contrasting **Valiasr District** (p151). Allow a day or two for an excursion to the quaint troglodyte village of **Kandovan** (p155). Head to **Jolfa** (p156) and spend the afternoon at the ancient **Church of St Stephanos** (p157) and in nearby canyons. In Jolfa arrange a taxi for the next morning's early start: reaching **Kaleybar** along the fascinating **Aras River Valley** (p157) will take a long day. Unwind in **Kaleybar** (p159) after hiking up the soaring crag of nearby **Babak Castle** (p159).

Take a savari from nearby **Ahar** (p158) via **Meshgin Shahr** (p160) to Ardabil for impressive views of Mt Sabalan. While in **Ardabil** (p160) visit the **Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum** (p162), one of western Iran's finest monuments. Descend to the Caspian Sea coast either via **Astara** (p165), or through nomad country via **Kivi** and **Khal Khal** (both p164). Stop in **Bandar-e Anzali** (p170) or **Rasht** (p165) to enjoy the garlic-stoked food, then escape through paddyfields and thick forests to the mountain village of **Masuleh** (p171).

This intriguing 1000km-long meander through alternative Iran is ideal for those who've already seen the main desert city sites and who are confident in navigating through areas unaccustomed to foreign visitors. A sizable chunk (265km) is covered during one long day on the splendid taxi ride between Jolfa and Kaleybar.



### DESERT DETOUR

10 Days / Esfahan to Kerman

After a few days in bustling cities, the wide open spaces, ancient mud-and-straw towns and tiny oasis villages in and around the Dasht-e Kavir desert are a tonic for the soul. Start this detour when you've finished in **Esfahan** (p232) and take a short bus trip to **Na'in** (p253), on the edge of the desert.

From Na'in hitch or take the bus east to Khur, and a taxi or any transport you can find to take you the last 38km to **Garmeh** (p254). The silence in this oasis village is profound, and the hospitality at **Ateshoni** (p254) heartfelt; you'll likely be here longer than planned.

Take a bus to **Yazd** (p255) and check into one of the atmospheric traditional hotels in the old town. Explore the old city, visit the Zoroastrian **Towers of Silence** (p262) and a **qanat** (p260), the underground water veins that keep these desert cities alive.

Take a day trip to **Meybod** (p266), **Chak Chak** (p266) and the mud-brick ghost town of **Kharanaq** (p266), and if you're fit perhaps a one- or two-day trek into the deserts around Yazd. Continue south and – having called ahead – stop in for one night of Safavid-era luxury in the restored **Caravanserai Zein-o-din** (p267), a wholly unforgettable experience that's worth the money.

Move to **Kerman** (p312), where you can arrange camel or 4WD tours to the beautiful sand castles at **Kaluts** (p321).

Do not even think of doing this trip during summer. October to April is the best time to travel, carrying something warm for the cold nights.



If you've ever dreamt of the oasis towns of the 1001 Nights, or are drawn to the vast expanses of emptiness, this 1330km-long trip is for you. Transport isn't always frequent, so try to plan ahead and brace yourself for some long waits – or consider renting a taxi.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### THE CRADLE OF PRE-ISLAMIC RELIGIONS

Fire your imagination with millennia of religious history and myth. Start in ancient **Shush** (p214), visiting the tomb of the Jewish hero Daniel as well as the nearby **Choqa Zanbil** (p215), a magnificent 3000-year-old Elamite ziggurat (stepped pyramid). Climb into the mountains along the Babylonian 'Royal Road' via **Kermanshah** (p195) to **Hamadan** (ancient Ecbatana; p200) to see the tomb of biblical Jewish Queen Esther. Alternatively, from Kermanshah (via Paveh) roller-coaster the bumpy hairpins of the valleys of **Howraman** (p194), where the spectacularly set **Howraman-at-Takht** (p194) holds the last extant Mithraic midwinter festival. Further north, amid idyllic rural villages, explore the lonely ruins of **Takht-e Soleiman** (p187), once the world's greatest Zoroastrian fire-temple complex.

### Two Weeks / Off the Beaten Track in Western Iran



David Rohl's book *Legend* claims that the area around bustling **Tabriz** (p146) is the historical Garden of Eden, and that Mt Sahand, above the lovely village of **Kandovan** (p155), is the Old Testament's Mountain of God. Northwest of Tabriz is **Bazargan** (p136), from where Mt Ararat (Noah's Ark crash-landing spot) is clearly visible. Nearby **Jolfa** (p156), in the beautiful valley of the **Aras River** (the Bible's Gihon; p157), charming **Church of St Stephanos** (p157) was originally founded just a generation after Christ. To the east of Tabriz, around **Ardabil** (p160), is Genesis' Land of Nod guarded by the magnificent volcanic peak of **Mt Sabalan** (p163), the metaphorical fire-sword of the Cherubim.

### THE TRANSIT-VISA DASH Five Days / Turkey to Pakistan

The days of extendable transit visas are over. But if a transit visa is all you can get, overnight buses mean that you can still get a taste of Iran's two

gem-cities while crossing the country for barely US\$30 all in. On day one, leave Van (Turkey) in the early morning, cross the border at **Sero** (p139) to arrive in **Orumiyeh** (p140) by early afternoon. At 3.30pm take the overnight bus to glorious **Esfahan** (p232), avoiding Tehran. Spend two days in Esfahan then on the third evening take a night bus (six hours) to wonderful **Yazd** (p255). Book the next night's ticket to Zahedan before spending the day exploring Yazd. With luck you're not too tired to enjoy its splendid alleys and *badgirs* (windtowers). You'll arrive in unpleasant **Zahedan** (p326) early and head straight through to the Pakistani border.



# Snapshot

Andrew Burke

'Come, come, drink *chay*,' says Reza, seating me and settling cross-legged on the carpet nearby. 'So, what do you think about Iran?'

*I love Iran, Reza. But what do you think about Iran?*

'I love Iran too, of course, this is my land and it is a great country. But I tell you, we have many problems. Especially with this president. Many people from other countries think we're crazy, and sometimes when I look at the TV, I think Ahmadinejad is crazy, too. All this rhetoric he spouts when he is overseas, talking about Israel all the time and saying Iran has no...you know...homosexuals. Hah! Who does he think he is kidding? Sure, the Arabs might like what he says and in some ways it is good to see him standing up to arrogant George Bush. But I ask you, how different is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? A couple of my friends like him; they say he's honest and he is not part of the revolutionary establishment. But most of us Iranians have heard enough promises from him and his government to know better. He promised to be different from all the mullahs of the last 25 years, who have just become rich on oil. He said he'd put oil money on the dinner tables of ordinary Iranians. I tell you, there's no oil on my table. My wife is still making *ghorme sabzi* and the cooking oil costs more than ever. Do you know what is the inflation in Iran? It's 25%! *Bist o panj!* The government says 13% but you can't trust them, they're worse than the *bazaris*.'

*Yes, I can relate to you on that one, sounds like politicians everywhere. But what about this nuclear program? I see the Bushehr reactor is opening soon and everyone in America and Europe is worried about it...even the Chinese are unhappy. What do you think? Does Iran really need nuclear energy? I mean, you have the second-largest reserves of oil and gas of any country on earth, isn't that enough to keep all those Paykans running? And as for nuclear weapons, do you think they are really trying to build a bomb?*

'They have the oil, not us...remember. But anyway, Iran absolutely has the right to nuclear power. Absolutely! Lots of other countries have nuclear power so why shouldn't Iran have it? We might have a lot of oil but the refineries are so old that a lot of it actually gets drilled here, then exported, and then we have to buy it back as petrol. Ridiculous, isn't it? And you know how dirty those Paykans are, look at the pollution. If nuclear energy

## FAST FACTS

Population: about 70 million  
 Part of population aged under 30: 70%  
 Surface area: 1,648,000 sq km  
 Highest point: Mt Damavand (5671m)  
 Lowest point: Caspian Sea (-28m)  
 Rate of inflation: 13/25% (official/unofficial)  
 Per capita GDP: US\$2440/8700 (nominal/PPP)  
 Population living in towns and cities: 70%  
 University places taken by women: 65%  
 Women as a percentage of paid workforce: about 13%

## INFLATION, RISING PRICES & YOU

Whether you choose to believe the official inflation rate of 13% or the more widely agreed 25%, the reality for Iranians – and for travellers – is that prices are rising steadily and look likely to continue to do so through the life of this book. As much as we'd love for our prices to be exact, they won't be. All prices are a guide, not gospel. The reality is that many transport, hotel and food prices will have risen before this book has even been published.

The good news for travellers is that costs in Iran are very reasonable by Western standards, so rises shouldn't break the bank. And with the Iranian rial losing value against most other currencies (yes, even the US dollar), 25% inflation shouldn't mean a full 25% rise in dollar/euro/pound terms. Within a short time you'll know approximately by how much prices have risen and can factor that into negotiations for whatever goods or services you're seeking.

Prices *will* rise. Accepting and expecting it will make your journey less argumentative, suspicious and much more enjoyable.

Reza isn't real, but this conversational snapshot of issues in Iran comes from dozens of encounters with real people in Iran and is broadly representative of opinion – and of course like any country there is a range of ideas.

In the 1980s Iranian women had an average of six children each and the population doubled. Today that average is just 1.7 and population growth is the lowest in the region, and similar to many European countries.

For two sides of political debate in Iran, see and contribute to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's blog at [www.ahmadinejad.ir](http://www.ahmadinejad.ir), and search for dissident Akbar Ganji's manifesto for the alternative view.

is cleaner isn't that good? You know, what annoys me most is that despite all the president's rhetoric, Iran has not actually broken the rules of this Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty we keep hearing about; but still the Americans and Europeans impose sanctions that make the economy even worse. I don't want a nuclear bomb and I don't think we should have one – it's too dangerous. Now that the CIA says we're officially not making one, do you think they'll lift the sanctions?

*I don't know, Reza, not everyone in the US and Europe is convinced, though at least now a military attack seems less likely. If America and Iran started talking a bit more that could help, and maybe then the sanctions could be lifted, which would help the economy. Being so isolated must be a big problem, especially for a country where millions of kids are finishing school and looking for jobs every year.*

'Yes, there are not enough jobs for the young people – and two thirds of the population are young people. Look at my children. My son is doing military service in Kermanshah, thankfully, because for now I don't have to pay for him and he's not going to get shot like those poor boys fighting drug smugglers on the Afghanistan border. My daughter is studying engineering at university. I wanted her to get married and give us some grandchildren, but the women today are different. She was smart enough to get into university and that is not easy, so if she really wants to study then I suppose I should support her – that's what my wife says, anyway. But I do worry about her because it's harder for women to find good jobs than it is for men. I don't want her to have to emigrate to find a job. Already too many young people are going off to Canada, America and Europe, and it's always the smartest who leave. Still, she is a good girl, she hasn't been arrested for showing too much hair yet and hasn't asked me to buy her a new nose...I'm serious, that's what my friend's daughter did.'

*But, they're not just leaving to find work, are they? My friends here tell me a lot of the strict old laws about how people dress and what they say have come back. Newspapers and bookshops are being closed, editors and dissidents sent to jail, the Majlis even passed a bill promoting Islamic fashion. Is that what young people want from the Islamic Republic?*

'You must remember that this country is not all black and white. Yes, it is 30 years since the revolution and most of us want to move on. But a lot of less influential people, like my cousin who lives in a village, have better lives thanks to the revolution. Though I am worried. These crackdowns are taking us back 10 years. Even some ayatollahs in Qom are saying that arresting women for showing a bit of hair, all in the name of the Islamic Revolution, is ridiculous and will only turn more people away from Islam. But, what can we do? We must solve our own problems – we certainly don't need George Bush to solve them for us – and we must hope that the Guardian Council will allow good candidates to run in the next elections. That is all we can do.'



# On the Road



## ANDREW BURKE *Coordinating Author*

It was at the end of a long day exploring ancient Sassanian cities that Kazem suggested we stop for a picnic by a lake south of Shiraz. 'A picnic? What with?' I asked. 'Don't worry, I have everything in the car,' he replied. And he did. Kazem proved to be a veritable professor of the picnic, producing a plastic blanket, hot water, tea, coals, qalyan, biscuits, sugar and a wire cage in which he swung the coals until they lit in a sea of sparks. We sat, smoked, sipped tea and just enjoyed life as the sun settled behind the hills...it was pure Iranian hospitality.



**MARK ELLIOTT** Arriving in Paveh, I'd been invited home by a delightful fellow savari-passenger. 'Lunch' had turned into a whole day of feasting, meeting families, smoking qalyan and – as the evening wore on – dancing in a whirl of Kurdish cummerbunds. We got to sleep at 4am, making next morning's 7am departure something of a tall order. But the dawn was spectacular and not a cloud blemished the sky as my chartered taxi lurched and bounced through the spectacular valleys towards Howraman-at-Takht (p194). En route a passing pedestrian wanted to be photographed with the odd-looking stranger. Guess which one is me.

Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally © restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying 'the above' - 'Do the right thing with our content'