

# Persian Gulf

## خلیج فارس



Whether you're watching the sun set over the Gulf, scrambling over the ruins of the Portuguese castle at Hormoz, or just dropping down several gears to the ultra-relaxed pace this region operates, you can't escape the fact that the Persian Gulf offers a different experience to the rest of Iran. There's the geographical contrast – the coast and islands of the Gulf itself – but the major difference comes from the variety of people and how they live.

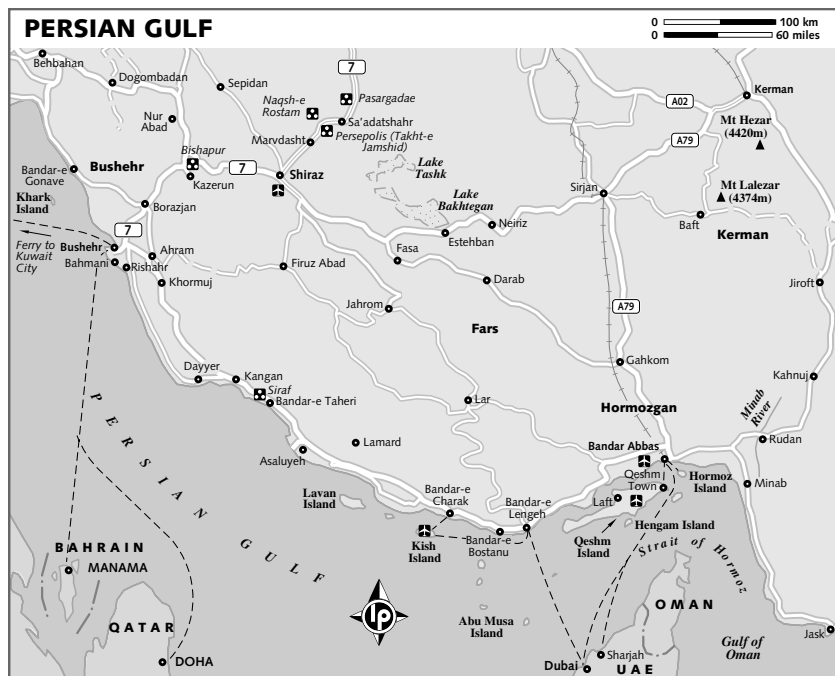
The history of the Gulf is tied inextricably to trade. Africans, Arabs, Indians and Europeans as far back as Alexander the Great have passed by this way, some finding business so good they've set up shop and stayed. The result is a rich hybrid of ancient Persia and Arabia that is best seen in Bandari communities, such as Bushehr, Hormoz and Minab. These communities are unusual in Iran, with most Bandaris being Sunni Muslims, speaking Arabic at home and wearing more colourful clothes. They're known as Bandaris because they live in *bandars* (ports). Qeshm Island is probably the highlight of the Gulf, and its tiny village of Laft is the jewel in its sun-scorched crown. Sitting with the locals as the sun sets over the forest of *badgirs* (windtowers) and *lenges* (traditional wooden boats) is almost worth the trip to the coast by itself.

Unfortunately, most travellers avoid the coast because of inconvenient transport times, relatively expensive accommodation, the distance from Iran's mainstream destinations and the enervating heat. Winter days often enjoy clear skies and 25°C, but it's hot by March and diabolically hot – like, 50°C – in summer.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Take an early morning speedboat to sleepy **Hormoz Island** (p306) and climb through the silent history of the **Portuguese Castle** (p307)
- Enjoy a delicious meal in the converted stone water cistern that is **Ghavam Restaurant** (p291) in Bushehr
- Watch the sun set behind wooden *lenges* in the unfeasibly photogenic Bandari village of **Laft** (p306), on Qeshm Island
- Become one of the few people to have dived on the reefs and wrecked tankers off **Qeshm Island** (p305)
- Shop and shoot photos 'til you drop at Minab's colourful **Thursday Market** (p309)





## BUSHEHR

بوشهر

☎ 0771 / pop 176,000

Visitors tend to rave about or revile the old city of Bushehr, Iran's main seaport in the northern Gulf. Readers have described the once-elegant Bandari architecture, twisting mud-brick lanes and peninsular situation as both 'a living museum' and a clapped-out ruin resembling 'Grozny after the third Russian war'. Both descriptions are partly right.

The Bushehris like to talk to foreigners and are welcoming of the few travellers who make it this far, though anyone white will likely be mistaken for a Russian. That is because more than 1000 Russians have been working in Bushehr for several years to complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor (see also The Nuclear Issue, p42). Some locals blame the reactor, or at least the threat that it will be bombed, for poor services and an overall lack of investment in their city. Whether that is fair or not is impossible for us to say, but it's certainly true that almost nothing is being done to maintain or restore Bushehr's crumbling heritage.

In short, if you like to go where others don't, have an interest in Bandari culture or plan on working your way along the Persian Gulf coast, then Bushehr is worth a visit. If not, it's a long way to come for silly heat and expensive hotels.

## History

Much of Bushehr's history lies in the town of Rishahr, 12km to the south, which dates back as far as the Elamite era. Rishahr was one of the chief trading centres of the Persian Gulf from the 7th to 16th centuries, but dwindled in importance after Bandar Abbas was established in the early 17th century.

In 1734 Nader Shah chose the village of Bushehr to become Persia's principal port and naval station. Its prosperity was assured when, in 1759, the British East India Company, then the power in the Persian Gulf, moved to Bushehr after the French destroyed its factory at Bandar Abbas.

In the mid-19th century Bushehr was important enough to become the seat of the British political residency on the Persian Gulf. However, Bushehr's long, slow

decline began in the 1930s when it was bypassed by the trans-Iranian railway in favour of the ports in Khuzestan province. The British closed their consulate in 1951. Bushehr was an important naval base during the Iran-Iraq War, but most of its commercial activities were relocated to the less-exposed Bandar Abbas.

## Orientation

Bushehr is built on a peninsular jutting into the Persian Gulf. The Old City is at the northern tip and the town centre is Enqelab Sq. The interesting parts of Bushehr are easy enough to explore on foot. Most attractions, hotels and restaurants are in the northern part of Bushehr, which is circled by Khalij-e Fars St (the esplanade). The new bus terminal is about 6km southeast of town.

## Information

**Amaken** (Leyan St; ☎ 6am-9pm)

**Bank Melli** (Leyan St) Exchange on the first floor.

**Coffeenet** (Leyan St; internet per hr IR10,000;

☎ 8.30am-1.30pm & 4-11pm Sat-Thu)

**International telephone office** (Imam Khomeini St;

☎ 7.30am-2pm & 3-11pm)

**Main hospital** (☎ 252 6591; Siraf St) Not the best hospital in Iran.

**Money exchange** (Leyan St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) Better hours, less paperwork.

**Police headquarters** (☎ 253 0027/0799; Qods Sq;

☎ 8am-2pm) The English-speaking major on the ground floor is a pleasant enough chap and will extend your visa

without too much hassle. It takes one or two days, and 30-day extensions are common. For more on extending visas, see 'More Time, Please' (p395).

**Post office** (Valiasr St)

**Setar-e Bandar Travel Agency** (☎ 252 8878; Imam Khomeini St) Handles domestic and international air tickets, in English.

## Sights

Whether or not you are enchanted by decaying Bandari buildings and winding *kuches* (alleys), Bushehr's **Old City** is a rarity among the ports of the region in that it offers glimpses of a fast-disappearing way of life. There is little of the traffic and noise found in Bandar Abbas, for example, and as we found it's easy to lose yourself in the Old City only to end up drinking *chay* (tea) and eating oranges in the home of a local family.

The densely packed wooden struts that overhang some of the narrow lanes are unique to Bushehr. Of particular interest are the door-knockers shaped like human hands in the northwestern quarter of town. Also check out the pillars and white façade of the **Amirieh Edifice** (Khalij-e Fars St), which was once home to a rich merchant and more recently a museum.

The crumbling seaside ruins of the **British consulate** (Khalij-e Fars St) are worth a look for a hint of Bushehr's former grandeur.

## Sleeping

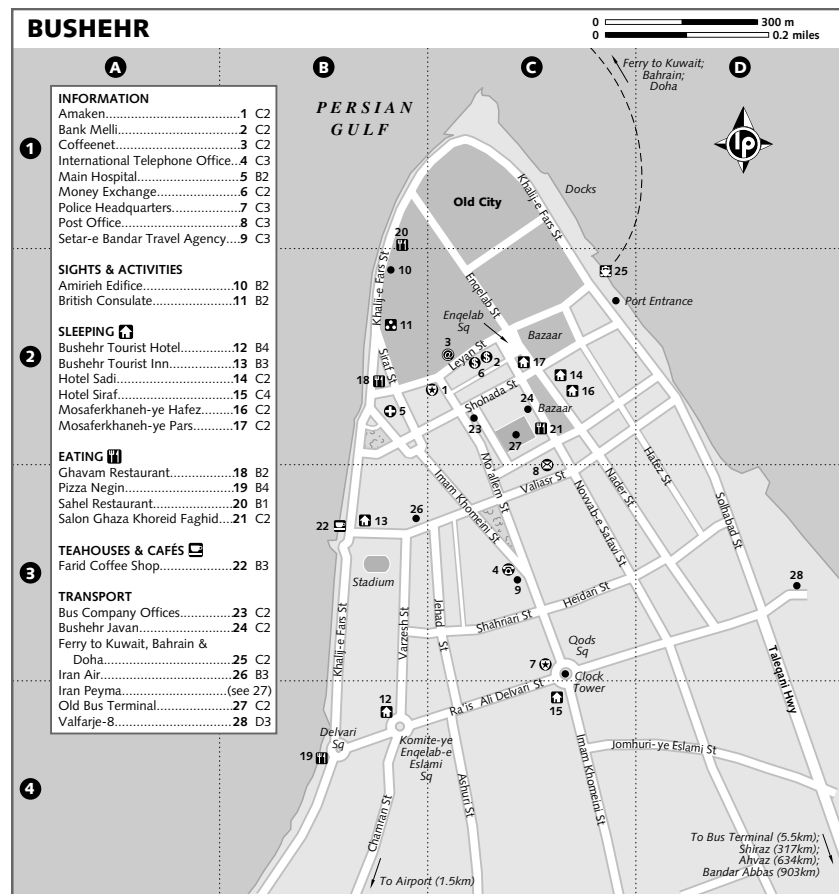
Bushehr has a chronic shortage of decent accommodation. Making things worse,

## KHALIJ-E FARS

The body of water dividing Iran and the Arabian Peninsula has been known as the Persian Gulf, or Khalij-e Fars in Farsi, since the Greeks called it this more than 2000 years ago. But the rise of Arab nationalism during the 1960s saw that begin to change. Governments and map-makers in Arab countries started referring to the Arabian Gulf, and slowly the name has gained traction.

For Iranians, it's an outrage. When the Louvre in Paris started referring to the Arabian Gulf a few years ago, and America's National Geographic Society included Arabian Gulf as an alternative name in its 2004 atlas, Iran responded with a high-level campaign to have them changed back. Historians were wheeled out, ancient maps reproduced and conferences held to support the 'Persian Gulf' case. But with Iran not exactly topping any international popularity contests, and the Arab states sitting on much of the world's oil supply, winning support was not easy. At home it became a nationalist issue and politicians of all stripes railed against the historical injustice. To press home the point they renamed almost every intercity road in the country Khalij-e Fars Hwy. Ordinary Iranians were right behind them.

Eventually, the campaign paid off. While the Arab states will continue to refer to it as the Arabian Gulf, at least independent institutions, including the Louvre and National Geographic relented. The success was celebrated as a national victory in Iran.



Bushehr's police still insist that foreigners wanting to stay in a *mosaferkhaneh* (lodging house) first get a letter of permission from the police. Thankfully it's a fairly painless process. Go to the Amaken (p289) where, if your experience is anything like ours, you'll shake several hands, drink some tea, be asked how you like Iran and after about 10 minutes be issued with a stamped slip of paper, *kheyli mamnun*. The bad news (which we can also report first-hand) is that buses to Bushehr have an unhappy habit of arriving in the middle of the night. For us, no amount of pleading at *mosaferkhanehs* or at the Amaken worked. Our taxi driver even suggested we sleep in his car until 6am! Nice offer, but we grudgingly forked

out for the grossly overpriced midrange option instead... The three cheap options are near Enqelab Sq; go to the Amaken first.

**Mosaferkhaneh-ye Pars** (☎ 252 2479; Enqelab Sq; dm/s/tw IR20,000/60,000/70,000) This ultra-basic place has small, clean rooms and shared bathrooms and a rooftop dorm overlooking the old town. The dorm is big, bright and noisy, but cheap – not great for women. Welcoming manager, but no English.

**Mosaferkhaneh-ye Hafez** (☎ 252 5783; Nader St; r IR60,000) Two-storey place with rainbow-coloured sign in Farsi; no-frills rooms (some with four beds) and shared bathrooms.

**Hotel Sadi** (☎ 252 2605; Nader St; r IR200,000-300,000; 🛏) More comfortable than the first two, but the foreign price (IR200,000 with-

out a bathroom!) is ridiculous; a bathroom costs another IR100,000.

**Hotel Siraf** (Hotel Reza; ☎ 252 7171; Imam Khomeini St; s/d with breakfast US\$40/50; 🛏) The large, tired rooms need an overhaul and could be much cleaner. They're not worth the money, but are better than the Bushehr Tourist Inn. Bargain as hard as you can.

**Bushehr Tourist Inn** (Sadra Inn; ☎ 252 2346; cmr Valiasr & Khalij-e Fars Sts; r US\$42; 🛏) Great location, pity about the rooms/price ratio. Your last resort.

**Bushehr Tourist Hotel** (Delvar Hotel; ☎ 284 0910; delvar@ittic.com; Komite-ye Enqelab-e Eslami Sq; tw/ste with breakfast US\$70/119; 🛏) Rising like a modern-day ziggurat out of central Bushehr, this is easily the best place in town. Most of the semi-luxurious rooms have Gulf views, the restaurant is reasonable and rooms on the second floor have wifi.

## Eating

You can usually find simple, cheap food along the Bushehr waterfront, particularly near the seafront building housing the **Farid Coffee Shop** (Khalij-e Fars St; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 5-10pm), where the view is better than the coffee, and in the park near the Ghavam Restaurant. This is a great area for people-watching, especially on Thursday or Friday evenings when the whole of Bushehr seems to be promenading along the esplanade with the cool sea breezes.

**Salon Ghaza Khoreid Faghid** (☎ 252 5755; Novvab-e Safavi St; meals IR15,000-30,000; ☎ 7.30am-8pm) There isn't an English sign and there's nothing fancy about this little place near the bazaar, but the local speciality *ghalye mahi* (a richly flavoured fish stew) is delicious.

**Sahel Restaurant** (☎ 252 1279; Khalij-e Fars St; meals IR20,000-45,000; ☎ 11.30am-2pm & 7-10.30pm; 🛏) The Gulf-side location makes Sahel a good place to interrupt your Old City wanderings. And the kababs, fish and *ghorme sabzi* (stewed beans, greens and mince, served with rice) are pretty tasty.

**Pizza Negin** (☎ 258 0079; Delvari Sq; large pizzas IR35,000; ☎ 11am-11pm; 🛏) This trendy place, inside a concrete boat 'sailing' along the seaside esplanade, is super popular and the pizzas are relatively good.

**Ghavam Restaurant** (☎ 252 1790; Khalij-e Fars St; meals IR35,000-65,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Once a cistern used to store Bushehr's water, Ghavam is now one of the best restaurants on the Persian Gulf coast. The underground

## ARABS

About 3% of Iranians are Arab and most of these live in Khuzestan, Bushehr and Hormozgan provinces, near or on the Persian Gulf coast. They have traditionally lived in the Gulf ports (known as *bandars*) and are often called *bandari*. Arabs in Khuzestan are mostly Shiite, many having arrived from Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, while those along the Persian Gulf are mainly Sunni.

Arabs are different enough that they are considered exotic by many Iranians. They speak a dialect of Arabic, usually have darker skin, include a significant number of black-skinned people with forebears from Africa, and dress differently. Women's clothes are refreshingly colourful (see *Bandari Burqas*, p297), while men wear the *abba*, a long sleeveless tunic, usually in white, with sandals and perhaps an Arabic turban. Elsewhere you will see men in *dishdash*, the traditional floor-length shirt-dress, with the long headscarf known as *gutra*.

Iranian Arabs have their own music, characterised by the *ney ammoon* (a sort of bagpipe) and a strong, faster beat often accompanied by a shimmying dance similar to belly dancing.

location offers relief from the heat, and the vaulted ceilings, antique photographs and live traditional music (dinner only) create a warm, convivial, enjoyable atmosphere. The menu includes a range of local specialities, including boiled rice with broadbeans and fish.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 252 3925; Valiasr St) has flights between Bushehr and Tehran (one way IR433,000, 90 minutes, twice daily), Shiraz (IR245,000, one hour, weekly) and Esfahan (IR283,000, 70 minutes, weekly). **Iran Aseman** (www.iaa.ir) flies to/from Dubai (one way IR1,265,000, one hour, three days weekly). Setar-e Bandar Travel Agency (p289) sells tickets.

### BOAT

Apart from enterprising fishermen, there are no domestic boat services from Bushehr. However, the Valfajre-8 shipping company

operates (in theory, though not always in practice) to Qatar (one way US\$50, Mondays), Bahrain (US\$45, seven to eight hours, Mondays) and Kuwait (US\$70, seven to eight hours, Wednesdays).

For information on impending departures go to the **Valfajre-8 office** (☎ 253 0246/7; Solhabad St; ☎ 7am-5pm).

## BUS

Bushehr's big new bus terminal is about 6km southeast of town near Meydan-e Borj. It's a private taxi (about IR20,000) or shuttle taxi (IR3000) ride away, but most bus companies maintain offices at or nearby the old bus terminal in town, including **Iran Peyma** (☎ 252 4575). For Kazerun (IR10,000) take any bus heading to Shiraz; for Kangan, **Bushehr Javan** (☎ 253 0930; Novab-e Safavi St) has a dedicated bus daily at 10.30am. Prices in the table here are for Volvo buses except Esfahan and Shiraz (where fares indicate *mahmooly/Volvo*).

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR55,000	7hr	6am, 7am, 2pm, 2.30pm
Bandar Abbas	IR85,000	13-15hr	3am, 3.30pm
Bandar-e Lengeh	IR60,000	9-11hr	5pm
Esfahan	IR30,000/ 55,000	13-16hr	3.30-6pm
Kermanshah	IR95,000	14hr	4.30pm
Shiraz	IR14,500/ 30,000	5hr	regular
Tehran	IR108,000	18-21hr	10.30am, 1-5pm

## Getting Around

A private taxi between Bushehr airport and town costs about IR10,000 (you'll undoubtedly be asked for more). Alternatively, take a shuttle taxi from Komite-ye Enqelab-e Eslami Sq for about IR2000.

Shuttle taxis around town cost IR500 to IR2000; trips *dar baste* (closed door) cost about IR5000, except to the airport or new bus terminal (IR20,000).

## FROM BUSHEHR TO BANDAR-E LENGEH

There are some charming towns dotted along the long, quiet road that skirts the Persian Gulf coastline. About 250km south-east of Bushehr, **Kangan** is a pretty fishing village that's well worth exploring. **Bandar-e**

**Taheri**, a little further southeast, boasts the ruins of an 18th-century sheikh's fortress; the views from the *badgir* over the Gulf are superb and the town itself is quite picturesque. Nearby on the rocky coastline are the ruins of the ancient town of **Siraf** and some well-preserved stone graves. **Bandar-e Bostanu**, 18km west of Bandar-e Lengeh, has some great *badgirs*.

Without a vehicle this area is difficult to fully explore. Most traffic just races by and there are no hotels. However, unless you arrive during the long summer siesta you'll probably get a warm welcome from the locals, who are unlikely to have seen another tourist for quite some time. If you are not found by someone who insists on putting you up for the night (probable if your bus passes at 3am), then your best bet is the local town mosque (which will usually have a room with a roll-out bed on the floor).

## KISH ISLAND

☎ 0764 / pop 20,000

'Oh, but have you been to Kish? You absolutely must go.' Travelling in Iran you'll likely hear this more than once. And when you ask what is so special about Kish, you're told: 'But Kish is wonderful; everything works there. It is clean, shopping is cheap, you can swim...and there are no Paykans!'

Yes, all of this is true. Kish, the desert island that the last shah started transforming into a playground for the rich and famous during the 1960s, is now seen by Iranians the way Americans view Hawaii. The island is both a novelty – for most Iranians this is the only beach resort they'll ever be able to visit – and more liberated than the rest of Iran. Kish is a free-trade zone and, as one islander told us, many Iranians understand the 'free' to apply to social activities as well.

Kish is booming. Hotels, shopping centres and theme parks are emerging from the sand to cater to migrant workers on 'change visa' runs and more than one million Iranians a year. But for foreigners, used to swimming and sunbathing with their partners and with no interest in duty-free DVD players, the appeal isn't so great. And it's expensive.

However, there are reasons to visit Kish. The resort water-sports make a pleasant diversion, there are a few ancient sights and cycling around the island on the coastal

bike path is fun. More than anything else, though, it's the relaxed atmosphere that appeals to Iranians, many of whom treat the island as something of a mental-health break – it's not a bad approach.

Arriving after 2009 you should see the distinctive tower of the Flower of the East Hotel ([www.floweroftheeast.com](http://www.floweroftheeast.com)), part of an enormous resort being built on Kish's northeast corner; and the 500-room Cyrus Hotel, said to be both 'seven-star' and the world's first fully solar-powered hotel.

## History

Kish Island is first recorded in the memoirs of Nearchus, the Greek sailor commissioned by Alexander the Great to explore the Persian Gulf in 325 BC. In the Middle Ages Kish became an important trading centre under its own powerful Arab dynasty and at one time supported a population of 40,000. The main town was Harireh, which is believed to be the town referred to by poet Sa'di in his famous work, *Golestan* (Rose Garden).

Kish was known for the quality of its pearls; when Marco Polo was visiting the imperial court in China, he remarked on the beauty of the pearls worn by one of the emperor's wives and was told they had come from Kish. In the 14th century Kish fell into decline and remained obscure until the 1970s, when it was developed as a semi-private retreat for the shah and his guests – complete with international airport, luxury hotels and even a grand casino.

## GULF TIME

Most of the Persian Gulf coastline is hotter than Hades between about mid-April and late October and, not surprisingly, life adjusts accordingly. No-one wants to work in the scorching early-afternoon heat so you'll find most businesses start early and then shut up shop from about noon to 5pm – including air-conditioned *coffeenets* (internet cafés) and shopping malls. Air-conditioned government offices work regular hours, and transport still operates, though less frequently. The best part of the day is invariably the evening, when temperatures drop and everyone sits outside drinking tea and thanking Allah for sea breezes.

## Orientation

Kish is 15km long, 8km wide and rises just 45m at its highest point. You'll find many of the offices, banks, shops and hotels between Sanaee and Siri Sqs along the eastern coast, which also has the best beaches. Most residents live in this area or in the Arab settlements of Saffein, on the northern coast, and tiny Baghu, in the southwest.

## Information

Most government offices work from 8am until 1.30pm or 2pm Saturday to Thursday. There are busy *coffeenets* attached to the Farabi and Salar Kish Hotels, catering to visa runners.

**Bank Mellī** (Sanaee St; ☎ 7.30am-1.30pm) Changes money with less paperwork than normal.

**Customs** (☎ 452 2578) Buying duty-free goods can be more trouble than it's worth as the customs paperwork can be tedious in the extreme. Call for the latest rules before deciding to buy.

**Kish Hospital** (☎ 442 3711; Hormuz Sq)

**Kish Tourism Organisation** (☎ 442 2434; [www.kto.ir](http://www.kto.ir); Kish Tourism Organisation Bldg, Sanaee Sq; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) Maps and brochures in English and French; English-speaking staff are on the 2nd floor.

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kish office** (☎ 442 0734; 1st fl, Kish Tourism Organisation Bldg, Sanaee Sq; ☎ 8am-2.30pm) Kish is the only place in Iran that foreigners can visit without needing a visa. If you're arriving by air or boat from outside Iran, you get a free 14-day 'Kish visa' on arrival. Once on Kish, the ministry can issue normal tourist visas and you can continue into Iran, making this a handy back door. We know of several travellers who have come in this way and when we asked in the office this time they told us 'yes, no problem'. Visa fees vary by nationality and take four to five days to issue, or two days if you pay a reasonable 'urgent' fee.

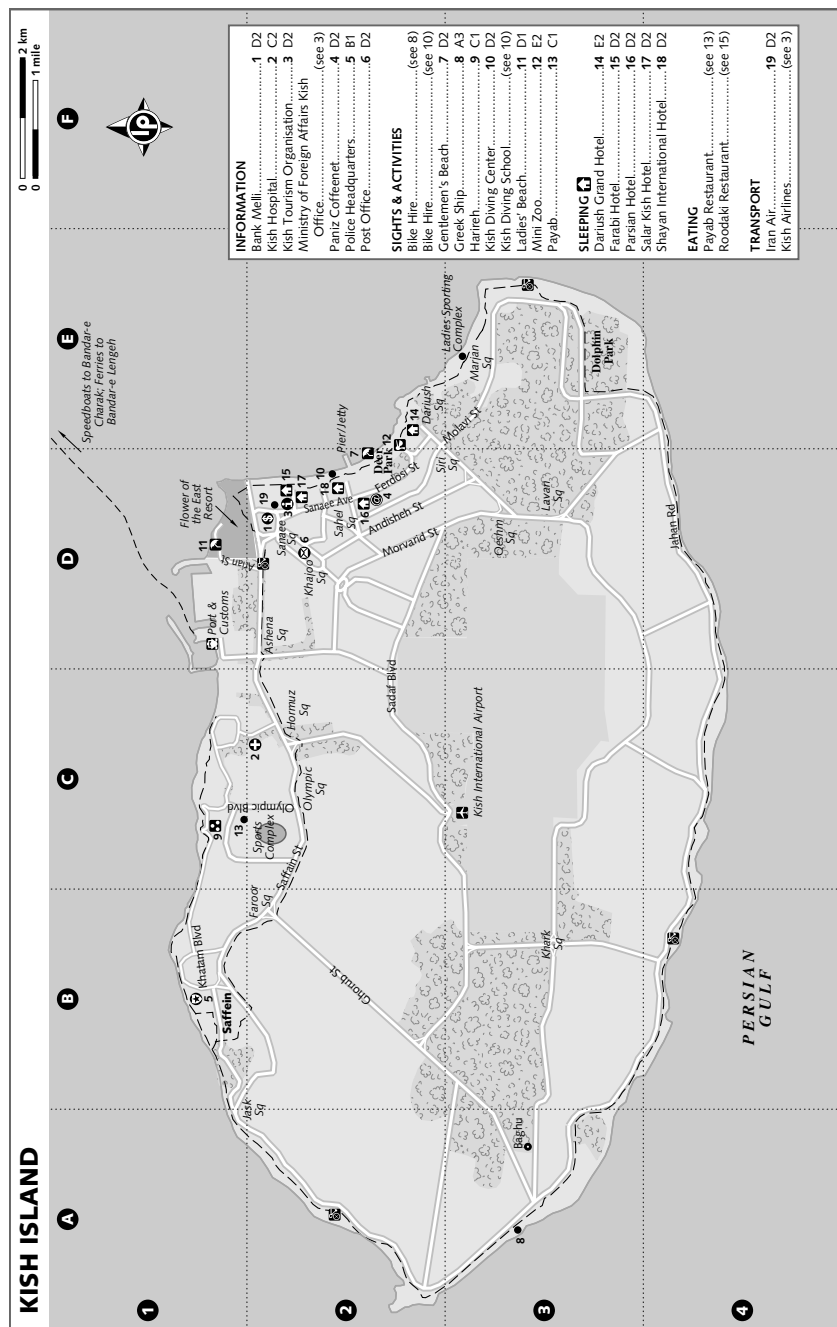
**Paniz Coffeenet** (Paniz Bazar; internet per hr IR12,000; ☎ 9.15am-1pm & 5-11.30pm)

**Police headquarters** (☎ 442 2143; Khatam Blvd)

**Post office** (Khajoo Sq)

## Sights & Activities

Between November and March the best way to see Kish's sights is by bicycle (see p295). The most interesting is the restored and mercifully cool underground water reservoir called the **Payab** (off Olympic Sq; admission IR20,000, including guided tour; ☎ 10am-6pm). Worth a quick look are the crumbling remains of ancient **Harireh** (☎ 24hr). Otherwise, the **Greek ship** that ran aground here on a clear night in 1966 lures photographers at sunset.



Kish is one of the very few places in Iran where swimming is actively encouraged. There are sandy, uncrowded beaches around most of the coast, but women must use the **Ladies' Beach** (admission IR25,000; Arian St, off Sanaee Ave; ☎ 8am-6pm). For now this remains hidden away east of the port, but a 25,000-sq-metre **Ladies Sporting Complex** on the east coast might be finished by the time you arrive. There's also a **Gentlemen's Beach** on the east coast near the hotels, though men can in theory swim anywhere (except the Ladies' Beach, of course). Other activities include diving, horseback riding, glass-bottomed boats and several 'themed' parks, including **Deer Park** (Park-e Ahovan; Ferdosi St; admission IR20,000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm), a **mini zoo** and **Dolphin Park** (www.dolphinparkkish.com; admission US\$30, ☎ 9am-8pm). Jet-skiing (IR200,000 for 15 minutes) and snorkelling (IR200,000 per trip) are also available; both these activities are run by the diving schools (see below).

### CYCLING

Cycling the flat, approximately 40km-long Special Bicycle Route around Kish is a great way to spend a day. Bikes can be hired (for about IR15,000 an hour) from outside the dive shops near the Shayan International Hotel and at the Greek ship.

### DIVING

Kish has a fairly well-developed diving scene, with nearby reefs and islands well-stocked with fish. However, prices have sharply increased recently and winds often mean the choice of dive site can be limited. One unimpressed reader told us his three-day diving trip saw him dive the same spot each day. Qeshm might be better (see p305).

**Kish Diving Center** (☎ 442 2757; www.kishdivingcenter.com; ☎ 7am-sunset), and **Kish Diving School** (☎ 442 4355; ☎ 7am-sunset), both found on the beach outside Shayan International Hotel, charge about IR350,000 for a one-hour dive with equipment. A four-day PADI open-water course costs IR3,500,000 – and would make you one of a very small group who could say: 'Where did I learn to dive? Iran!'

### Sleeping & Eating

Kish has 46 hotels (and counting) and prices are significantly higher than elsewhere in Iran, though still reasonable by Western standards. Prices do vary by season – these are mid-

season rates – and top out during No Ruz (Iranian New Year) when the island is totally mental. At non-peak times the hotel desk at the airport offers good midrange deals.

There are no *mosaferkhanehs* on Kish. The only cheap beds are in apartment hotels packed full of migrant workers renewing their visas. Farabi and Salar Kish Hotels serve this market, as do cheap restaurants in the area.

**Farabi Hotel** (☎ 442 3417; Sanaee Sq; bed IR70,000; ☎ ☎) Sprawling, busy place beside Kish Airlines. Apartments are a bit worn but fine.

**Salar Kish Hotel** (☎ 442 0111; Sanaee Sq; per bed/IR70,000/500,000; ☎ ☎) Smaller than Farabi but with bigger apartments; usually four or five beds in each.

**Parsian Hotel** (☎ 442 4991; Ferdosi St, off Sahel Sq; tw/tr/ste with breakfast US\$63/74/125; ☎ ☎ ☎) One of the many new, three-star options. Well-located, spacious rooms that are more like mini apartments. Discounts possible.

**Shayan International Hotel** (☎ 442 2771; Sahel Sq; r/ste with breakfast US\$110/280, cabana US\$75; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Shayan means 'gorgeous' and when it opened as the Shah's beachfront hotel in 1973 it was the best on the Gulf. It hasn't changed much and the angular architecture and sea of sprayed concrete have acquired a bit of retro cool. Rooms, most with balcony, are holding up fairly well.

**Dariussh Grand Hotel** (☎ 444 4900-95; www.dariusshgrandhotel.com; Dariush Sq; r/from US\$145; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This ostentatious, Achaemenid-style monument in marble is arguably Iran's best hotel, though if don't fancy Vegas-like theme places it might feel over the top. The service, 192 rooms and suites, restaurants and facilities are all very good.

**Roodaki Restaurant** (off Sanaee Sq; meals from IR15,000; ☎ 11am-2.30pm & 6-10.30pm) Between the cheap apartment hotels and the beach, the Roodaki serves cheap, pre-prepared curries and Philippine cuisine.

**Payab Restaurant** (☎ 0934 769 1213; Olympic Blvd; meals IR45,000-70,000; ☎ 8pm-1am) Above the underground water reservoir, the Payab is cool and romantic in the evenings and the food is delicious. It offers fresh bread, big serves of fish, kabab or *dizi* (soup-stew). Extras (like *chay*) are expensive.

### Getting There & Away

Most people fly into Kish, but you can get there by boat from Bandar-e Charak

or Bandar-e Lengeh; see Boat (below) for details.

#### AIR

Several airlines fly to/from Kish. Book ahead and reserve your onward ticket before you arrive.

**Kish Airlines** (☎ 442 3922; Sanaee Sq; ✈ 8am-8.30pm Sat-Thu & 9am-12.30pm Fri) flies to Bandar Abbas (IR245,000; 40 minutes, six times weekly); Tehran (one way IR567,000, 90 minutes, at least twice daily); Esfahan (IR417,000, one hour, daily) and Shiraz (IR253,000, 45 minutes, three weekly) and has occasional flights to Mashhad. It also flies six times daily to Dubai (one way US\$80, 30 minutes), plus regular flights to Abu Dhabi and Sharjah.

**Iran Air** (☎ 442 2274; Sanaee Sq) has less-frequent flights to Shiraz, Esfahan and Tehran, and **Mahan Airlines** (www.mahan.aero) flies twice weekly to Kerman.

#### BOAT

Leaving Kish by boat is ridiculously bureaucratic. On this trip it took us 30 minutes to get questioned at passport control, get the paperwork allowing us to leave, have it photocopied three times in the restaurant, then go outside to the car park to buy a ticket on the speedboat to Bandar-e Charak. And we didn't even have any goods to declare.

Valfajre-8 shipping links Kish with Bandar-e Lengeh (one way IR120,000) – when Kish is busy enough to warrant it. As we have discovered, this means there are as many as six packed boats (with families in tents on deck) during No Ruz, but just a few weeks later no services at all. When they run, catamarans make the trip in about two hours, but the bigger Ro Ro ferries take about five hours. Catamarans usually leave about 10am, *insh'Allah* (if God wills it). Buy tickets at the port or a travel agency.

The alternative, often the only alternative, is the open speedboat to/from Bandar-e Charak (IR40,000, 45 minutes). For details of the Charak end, see p298. From Kish, they leave from sunrise until about 4pm, though most are in the mornings when conditions are usually better.

#### Getting Around

You will probably need to charter a taxi from the airport for about IR15,000.

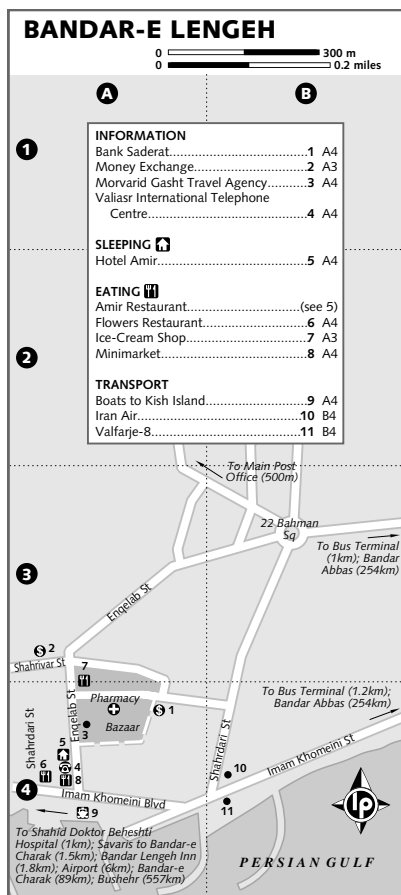
Excellent air-con minibuses (IR1000) cruise the northern and eastern roads. (Buses are for seated passengers only, ie standing is not allowed.) From the boat terminal, you can crowd onto a local minibus or take a private taxi. Chartering a taxi costs about IR60,000 per hour.

#### BANDAR-E LENGEH

بندر لنگه

☎ 0762 / pop 23,000

Bandar-e Lengeh (or 'Lengeh') to the locals is a lethargic place and most travellers stop only long enough to get the boat to Kish. It is typical of the mixed Arab and Persian communities of the southern Persian Gulf, with Sunnis and Shiites speaking Arabic, Farsi and often both. This diversity is reflected in the



#### BANDARI BURQAS

In the Persian Gulf provinces, and particularly in Bandar-e Lengeh, Bandar Abbas and Minab, you will see Bandari women wearing the burqa. This inflexible mask differs depending on the region; in Lengeh it is usually a metal frame jutting from the face but hiding very little of the face itself – vaguely reminiscent of the structure of Darth Vader's mask. In Minab it is often bright red with multicoloured stitching along the border, covering all of the face that's not already hidden by the chador (except for two tiny slits for the eyes). Ethnologists do not believe these masks have any religious links, but were a fashion accessory introduced during the period of Portuguese rule.

Bandari women have traditionally worn tattoos on their faces and, sometimes, their hands, though these are becoming less common. They wear eye-catchingly colourful pants, often in red or green, which are worn tight around the ankle and usually have elaborate gold patterns stitched above the hem. Some Bandari women wear the *shamat*, a finely patterned, gauze-like chador that comes in pale colours; usually blue, orange, cream, beige and pink. It's draped Indian-style around the body and head. Others wear chadors that look more like those found in other Arab parts of the Gulf, with several fine cloths in black, one folded over to hang down from the head with another fastened above the ears, meaning their eyes can be uncovered or, with a flick of the cloth, the woman can disappear completely behind this black curtain.

If you think your mother-in-law might look good in a burqa, head for the market in Minab and ask around. The locals will think you're mad, but a burqa could make a, well, provocative gift.

hybrid architecture and clothing of the locals (for more information, see above).

The main streets are Imam Khomeini Blvd (the coastal road and esplanade) and Enqelab St, opposite the port. This is not a town where foreigners are expected; few signs are in English, but it would be hard to get lost.

#### Information

Pretty much everything shuts down between about 12.30pm and 5pm or 6pm. To change money, head to **Bank Saderat** (Shahrdari St) or the **Money Exchange** (☎ 224 4373; 17 Shahrivar St; ✈ 8am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu). Make phone calls from **Valfajre International Telephone Centre** (Enqelab St; ✈ 7.30am-1pm & 4-9pm).

#### Sights

During the day, especially in summer, there's little to do except observe the obligatory five- or six-hour siesta. By late afternoon it's a lovely place to wander when the setting sun turns the town a soft shade of yellow. Sights include several pale-stone **mosques**, with single minarets decorated in the Arab style, and a few old and largely derelict **Bandari buildings** made of mud brick with squat *badgirs*.

#### Sleeping & Eating

There's a total of two hotels in Lengeh. Lengeh's eating scene has improved since we first came here, but you'll still have the typical Iranian options – kabab, burger, pizza and,

thankfully, fish. Enqelab St is home to the fast-food places, a well-stocked minimarket and an oh-so-welcome ice-cream shop.

**Hotel Amir** (☎ 224 2311; Enqelab St; r IR70,000; ☎) A short walk from the port, the Amir has simple but clean rooms and shared bathrooms; and some staff are helpful. Guests can use the kitchen.

**Bandar Lengeh Inn** (Mehmar Sara Jahangardi; ☎ 222 2566; d with breakfast US\$35; ☎ (P)) Most of the plain but clean rooms have Gulf views though you'll need big biceps to get the windows open. It's 1.8km west of town down a lonely side road but the position, literally on the water's edge, justifies the trip.

**Flowers Restaurant** (☎ 224 0421; Imam Khomeini Blvd; meals IR25,000-40,000; ✈ 11am-4pm & 6-11pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the port, Flowers serves a reasonable selection of Iranian fare in a surprisingly inviting little restaurant; good value.

**Amir Restaurant** (☎ 224 1370; Enqelab St; meals IR40,000-60,000; ✈ 12-4pm & 6-11pm) Underneath the hotel of the same name, this no-frills restaurant and teahouse serves delicious Iranian fare. We can vouch for both the *khoresht* (stew; IR25,000) and chicken kabab (IR50,000). A cosy teahouse adjoins and it will store bags if you're waiting for a boat.

#### Getting There & Away

For air and boat tickets and local information in English, see **Morvarid Gasht Travel Agency** (☎ 224 0026; Enqelab St).

**AIR**

Looking at the size of the huge office of **Iran Air** (☎ 222 2799; Imam Khomeini Blvd; ⏰ 7.30am-1.30pm & 5.30-8.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) you'd think you were in Tehran or Esfahan, but a total of four flights a week to Tehran (IR522,000, 2½ hours) via Shiraz (IR256,000, 30 minutes) puts paid to that idea.

**BOAT**

Catamaran and ferry services run to Kish (IR120,000, catamaran/Ro Ro ferries two/five hours) in season, though departure times are elastic and services often cancelled due to lack of interest or rough seas. Tickets can be bought at the ticket office of **Valfajre-8** (☎ 222 0252; Imam Khomeini Blvd; ⏰ 7am-2pm & 3-6pm Sat-Thu, 7.30am-1.30pm Fri, when boats are running).

Assuming the seas aren't too rough, it's quicker to take an open speedboat (IR40,000, 45 minutes) from Bandar-e Charak (89km west of Lengeh). To do this, take a savari (IR25,000, one hour) from Lengeh to Charak, where it will drop you at the beach from which the boats leave when full (10 passengers). Most people travel this route between about 6am and 10am.

If you want to get an early start on the trip to Kish (perhaps make a day-trip of it), head to Charak (see Bus & Savari, below) the night before and stay at the **Hotel Khorshid Jonub** (Southern Sun; ☎ 0764-422 2369; r IR85,000; 🍷), a simple but clean family-run place about a 10-minute walk east of where the speedboats leave. Do check the sea conditions before heading to Charak, lest you get there and find the boats are not running.

Valfajre-8 also runs a passenger-only catamaran to Dubai (IR450,000 one way, three to four hours) most Saturdays and Wednesdays.

**BUS & SAVARI**

Lengeh's bus terminal, about 2km east of town on the right (south) just before a large square, is not our favourite place. In four visits over the years, we've been misled each time about when the bus would leave, how long it would take and where it would stop. Savaris are a better option. If you must use the bus, they leave regularly to Bandar Abbas (IR20,000, three to four hours, 255km) and much less often

to Bushehr (IR70,000, eight to 10 hours, 656km), usually at about 10am and 4.30pm. There are a couple of buses a day to Shiraz (IR33,000/70,000 *mahmooly/Volvo*).

Savaris (IR40,000, three hours) to Bandar Abbas leave regularly between 6am and 8pm from outside the bus terminal. Savaris to Charak leave from outside the NIOPC petrol station, about 1.5km east of the port.

Buses from Bushehr often arrive in the middle of the night. If you're staying in the Hotel Amir (p297) ask to be dropped at the port entrance (other locals will get out here), or near Bandar Lengeh Inn (p297) if you're staying there.

**BANDAR ABBAS**

☎ 0761 / pop 365,000

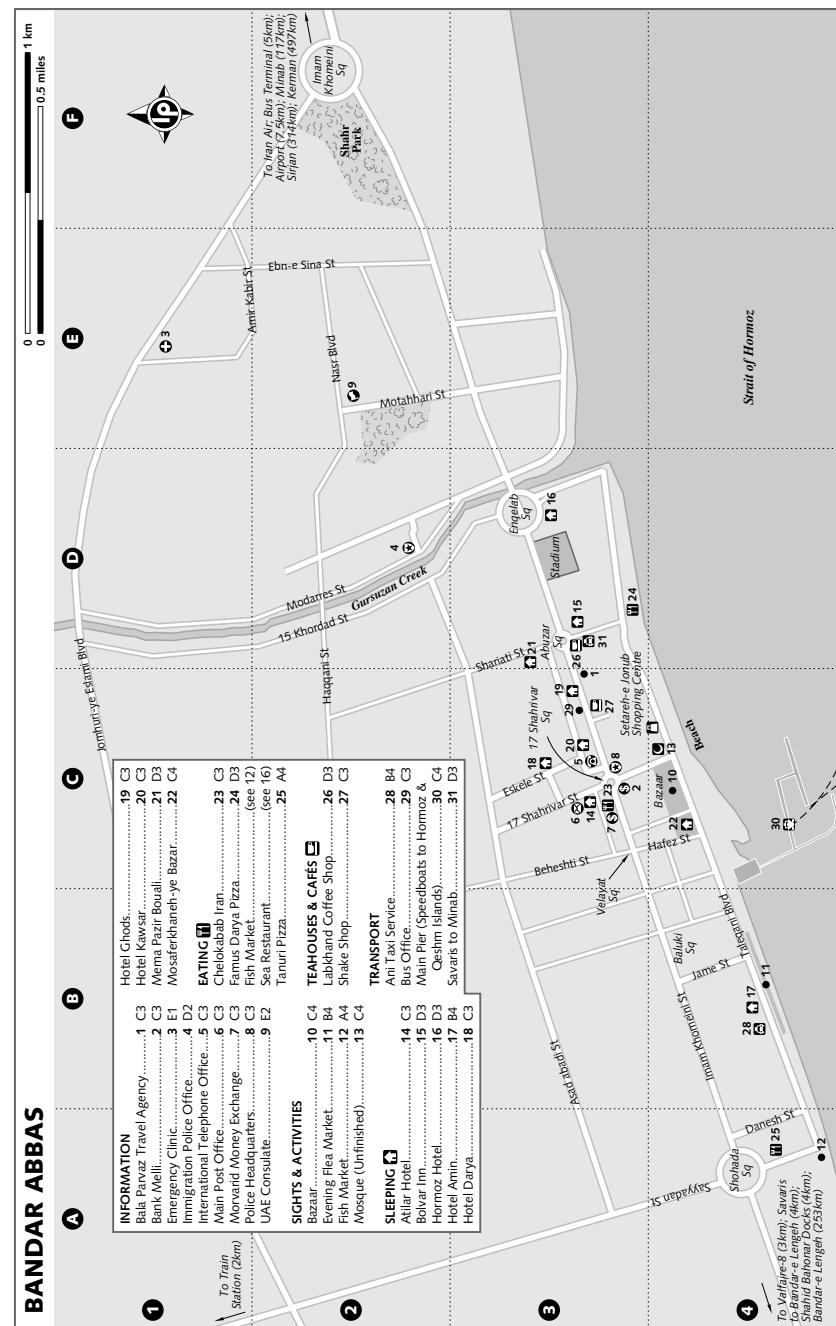
بندر عباس

For a city founded by one of Persia's greatest kings, Shah Abbas I, and named in his honour, the bustling 'Port of Abbas' is less charismatic than you might expect. Strategically positioned overlooking the Strait of Hormoz and the entrance to the Persian Gulf, the city, known to most Iranians simply as 'Bandar', is home to Iran's busiest port. Smuggling is big business – everything from cars to carpets circumnavigates the customs inspectors in these parts. Needless to say, if you're walking along the seafront at night and notice boxes being hurriedly unloaded from a dark-coloured speedboat, resist the temptation to offer to help with the haulage.

Bandar's fast-growing population is a mix of Persians, Bandaris, Arabs and Africans, with a large Sunni minority and a long-established Hindu community. Depending on your perspective, Bandar Abbas is either delightfully seedy with the audible whisper of smugglers, or an uninspiring and overpriced stepping-off point for the more languid nearby islands.

**History**

The rise, fall and rise again of Bandar Abbas over the last five centuries has been directly linked to the role of meddling European powers. Once a tiny fishing village called Gamerun, it was chosen as Persia's main southern port and naval dockyard after Shah Abbas I defeated the Portuguese on nearby Hormoz Island in 1622 (see The Portuguese on Hormoz, p307). The British East India Company was granted a trading concession,



as were Dutch and French traders, and by the 18th century Bandar had become the chief Persian port and main outlet for the trade in Kermani carpets.

The port went into decline following the end of the Safavid dynasty and the withdrawal in 1759 of the British East India Company. The Sultan of Oman took control of Bandar in 1793 and held sway until 1868. Its role remained peripheral until the Iran–Iraq War, when Iran’s established ports at Bush-ehr, Bandar-e Imam Khomeini and Khorramshahr were either captured or became too dangerous for regular shipping. With the help of road and railway links to Tehran and Central Asia, it hasn’t looked back.

## Orientation

Bandar Abbas is stretched along a narrow coastal strip. The main east–west thoroughfare changes its name from Beheshti Blvd (in the eastern suburbs) to Imam Khomeini St (through the centre of town), ending as Pasdaran Blvd (towards the docks to the west). The city is well signposted in English. Apart from the top-end options, most accommodation is on or just off Imam Khomeini St, between Velayat Sq and Abuzar Sq – all within an easy walk of the bazaar, the old quarter to the north and the boats to Hormoz and Qeshm. The airport is about 8km east of the bazaar.

## Information

Imam Khomeini St has several internet cafés, and the arcade in the Setareh-e Jonub Shopping Centre, on the seafront Taleqani Blvd, has several more. The bazaar has a black market in UAE dirhams and other Gulf State currencies.

**Bala Parvaz Travel Agency** (☎ 222 4500; moridiprz@yahoo.com; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 7am–8.30pm Sat–Thu, 8am–1pm Fri) Don’t go anywhere else. Helpful, English-speaking staff – especially the delightful Ms Marjan Naemi – book air, train and ferry tickets.

**Bank Melli** (17 Shahrivar Sq) The only bank to change money officially, and only between 10am and 12.30pm. It’s a nightmare at lunchtime.

**Emergency Clinic** (☎ 553 1001; cnr Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd & Amir Kabir St)

**Immigration police office** (☎ 218 2620; Modarres St) Visa extensions are possible, if not encouraged at this office. The officers here don’t see too many tourists, and didn’t exactly welcome us with open arms, so choosing another city is a good idea. See p393 for details on extending your visa.

**International telephone office** (☎ 224 8350; Mahan Alley; ☎ 7am–10pm winter, 8am–1pm & 4–10pm summer) Down an alley about 30m east of 17 Shahrivar Sq.

**Main post office** (Shahrivar St) About 50m north of 17 Shahrivar Sq.

**Morvarid Money Exchange** (☎ 222 7446; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 7.30am–1pm & 4.30–8.30pm Sat–Thu) Much, much easier than changing money at Bank Melli. Good rates and no hassle. In an arcade just west of 17 Shahrivar Sq.

**Police headquarters** (☎ 222 7676; 17 Shahrivar Sq)

## Sights

Bandar isn’t blessed with a lot of must-see sights – actually, none – but it’s not totally devoid of flavour. The lively **bazaar** (Taleqani Blvd) rambles its way across two blocks just back from the seafront, and is probably the most colourful part of town. A seafront promenade leads east and has an **evening flea market**. At its end, the busy **fish market** (p302) is full of charismatic old salts happy to pose for pictures with their catch. Work on the huge **mosque** a few metres east of the bazaar seems to have restarted despite local concerns that the engineering is not good enough for a major earthquake zone. If it is ever finished it will have one of the tallest *iwans* (rectangular hall opening onto a courtyard) in Iran.

If you fancy just wandering about, walk north from downtown to the older part of town, which has more of a Bandari feel with its old buildings and narrow lanes.

## Sleeping

Accommodation in Bandar isn’t the best value in Iran, and for the third trip in a row we found bargaining here about as effective as looking for a stiff drink in a mosque. Most accommodation is centrally located, an easy walk from 17 Shahrivar Sq. In summer air-con is a very good idea – without it you run the risk of melting, to be discovered the next day as nothing more than a grease spot.

## BUDGET

**Mosaferkhaneh-ye Bazar** (☎ 222 2303; cnr Taleqani Blvd & Hafez St; dm/s/tw/tr IR25,000/51,000/69,300/82,100) If you’re on a budget, this busy, clean but ultra-simple place above the bazaar is the cheapest in town. In summer, beds on the covered rooftop (just IR15,000) afford wonderful views of the smugglers and sunset over the Persian Gulf. It’s social, male-dominated and unashamedly downmarket, with shared

bathrooms. Relaxed security and lots of glass walls mean it’s not great for women.

**Mema Pazir Bouali** (☎ 222 2516; Shariati St, near Abuzar Sq; tw/tr IR70,000/80,000) The faded-yellow awning and anonymous staircase don’t promise much, and the noisy, no-frills rooms and shared bathrooms don’t deliver much. But the welcoming mother and daughter, who will practise their English with you – and the price – make it worth a look.

**Bolvar Inn** (☎ 222 2625; Abuzar St; r IR105,000; ☎) We liked the atmosphere in this unpretentious, family-run place set around a courtyard filled with the din of air-conditioners. Rooms and toilets are clean, but there’s only one shower.

The next two places are tricky to find. It’s best to get a taxi to 17 Shahrivar Sq, then walk east about 40m from the square, turn left down an alley beside a multi-storey building (look for the wooden beams protruding from the wall), past the international telephone office and turn right. The Kawsar is there, and the Darya another 150m down the street opposite Kawsar.

**Hotel Kawsar** (☎ 224 2389; Eskele St; s/tw IR150,000/200,000; ☎) The big, clean rooms and shared bathrooms (all rooms) are aging, but acceptable. Staff don’t speak English.

**Hotel Darya** (☎ /fax 224 1942-49; Eskele St; s/tw/apt IR160,000/220,000/600,000; ☎) Recently refurbished, the Hotel Darya is probably the pick of the half-decent budget places. Rooms here are clean and pleasant enough, with good beds, fridge and Iranian TV, but if you’re in a single you’ll have to share a bathroom. The seven flights of stairs can get tedious.

To check out these and a couple of other budget options not listed here, you should start at Abuzar Sq (Meydan-e Abuzar) and walk.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Amin** (☎ /fax 224 4305; Taleqani Blvd; s/tw/tr with breakfast IR280,000/350,000/500,000; ☎) On the seafront west of the bazaar, the glass-fronted Amin is a good-value mid-range hotel that has been praised by readers. The refurbished rooms are small but well-equipped (with overhead fans!), and the management has some concept of service.

**Hotel Ghods** (☎ /fax 222 2344; Imam Khomeini St, cnr Haleh Alley; s/d IR450,000/500,000; ☎) The

Ghods has the size and fittings you’d expect in a midrange hotel, but little of the personal charm you might like. Rooms are big and you can choose to squat or sit in the bathroom. The upper floors have city views, but the restaurant is overpriced.

**Atilar Hotel** (☎ 222 7420-25; 17 Shahrivar St; s/d/tr US\$45/65/80 with breakfast; ☎) Dominating the centre of town, this brand new multi-storey hotel has modern-looking, big and fairly stylish rooms; upper levels have views across town or to the Gulf. Staff speak English. Atilar is a good choice.

## TOP END

**Hormoz Hotel** (☎ 334 2201-5; www.hormoz-hotel.com; Enqelab Sq; s/d/site US\$88/123/193; ☎) Clearly the pick of Bandar’s lodgings, the enormous Hormoz is an international standard hotel with the look, facilities and most of the service that entails. Rooms are luxurious and most have a balcony – with either views or glimpses of the Gulf. There are four restaurants (for details of one option, see Sea Restaurant, p302) and cafés, and an indoor pool.

## Eating

Bandar is not noted as one of Iran’s culinary capitals, though the seafood is reasonably good. The local speciality is *chelo meigu* (battered prawns or shrimps with boiled rice), and the deep-fried theme extends to fish, too.

Fast food and *kababis* (kabab shops) can be found around Abuzar Sq on Imam Khomeini St and along the waterfront. Alternatively, go west to Sayyadan St for a fast-food extravaganza. This strip of more than a dozen pizza and burger joints is popular with students so is a good place to meet English speakers.

**Famus Darya Pizza** (Taleqani Blvd; pizzas IR20,000; ☎ 11am–10pm) Famus serves pizzas and burgers that you eat on the sea wall; it’s the one that looks like a giant concrete fire hydrant wearing a hat.

**Tanuri Pizza** (☎ 224 1988; Sayyadan St; pizzas IR20,000; ☎ 9am–2pm & 5pm–midnight) This pizza place is one of many along this strip that are reliably good.

**Chelokabab Iran** (☎ 222 3833; Imam Khomeini St, off 17 Shahrivar Sq; meals IR50,000; ☎ 11.30am–3.30pm & 7–10.30pm; ☎) Conveniently located, this unadorned little place serves standard Iranian



fare, plus a decent *chelo mahi* (fried fish on rice). Toothless owner Haji Hossain is a nice guy, speaks English and will probably try to tell you about his son the microscopic robot maker – or something.

**Sea Restaurant** (☎ 334 2205; Hormoz Hotel, Enqelab Sq; meals IR60,000-100,000; ☎ 5.30-11pm) This is the Hormoz Hotel's most interesting restaurant, with a menu loaded with seafood. The patio location is ideal in the cool of evening.

**Fish market** (cnr Taleqani Blvd & Sayyadan St; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) Self-caterers should head for this fish market for fresh Gulf fish, filleted if you ask. Even if you don't plan to cook, this is a fun place to wander round with a camera.

Come to the waterfront at sunset for *chay*, qalyan (water pipe) and conversation with the locals.

**Labkhand Coffee Shop** (Imam Khomeini St, off Abuzar Sq; ☎ 5-11pm; ☎) On the night we visited the stylish, second-floor Labkhand was going off like the proverbial frog in a sock. Good fun. It also serves some of the best coffee we drank in Iran.

For the best banana shake (IR4500) on the coast head for the unnamed **shake shop** (Imam Khomeini St), opposite and slightly west of Hotel Ghods.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Air Air** (☎ 333 7170; Beheshti St; www.iranair.com) is inconveniently located east of the centre; use Bala Parvaz Travel Agency (p300) instead. **Iran Aseman** (www.iaa.ir) and **Mahan Airlines** (www.mahan.aero) service international routes.

### Domestic Flights

Bandar is, mercifully, fairly well connected by domestic air services. Several smaller airlines fly to Tehran for the same price – ask at the agency.

Destination	Fare (one way)	Flights
Esfahan	IR454,000	3 weekly
Mashhad	IR588,000	2 weekly
Shiraz	IR289,000	daily
Tehran	IR603,000	20 weekly

### International Flights

For the short hop to Dubai, you can choose from Iran Aseman (one way IR620,000, 30

minutes, daily) or Iran Air (IR620,000, twice weekly). Mahan Airlines flies to Colombo in Sri Lanka twice weekly, and to Delhi once weekly.

### BOAT

#### Domestic Services

Boats from Bandar to the nearby islands of Hormoz and Qeshm leave from the *eskele* (main pier), near the bazaar.

For Qeshm (for more details see also opposite), you can make the 23km trip in an open fibre-glass speedboat (one way, IR14,000, 40 minutes) or a slightly larger, covered speedboat with padded seats (IR20,000, 25 minutes). If the seas are too rough for small boats try the ferry (IR25,000, 50 minutes, daily), which leaves from the chaotic Shahid Bahonar docks, 5km west of the town centre. You can buy tickets from travel agencies or from the office of **Valfajre-8** (☎ 555 5590; Eskeleh Shahid Bahonar Blvd, near Jahangardi Crossroads), about 1km east of the docks.

Speedboats to Hormoz Island (one way, IR10,000, 30 minutes) leave every 15 to 20 minutes in the morning, and less often as the day wears on. See also p308.

#### International Services

Valfajre-8 runs boats from Bandar Abbas to Sharjah (one way IR320,000, eight to 11 hours, 233km), usually on Saturdays and Mondays though schedules are notoriously changeable.

### BUS

Buses leave Bandar for almost every city in Iran. However, heavy truck traffic, poor facilities along the roads and punishing temperatures can make it an arduous journey. The bus terminal east of town is chock-full of locals who wish they could afford to fly. To join them you'll need to take two shared taxis; one to the corner of Ghadiri Blvd and another to the terminal itself. A taxi *dar baste* costs about IR12,000. There's a handy **bus office** (☎ 223 2917; Imam Khomeini Blvd) in town.

Many routes no longer have *mahmooly* services. The following fares are for Volvo buses except where two fares are listed (which refer to *mahmooly*/Volvo services). Departure times and durations are somewhat approximate.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Bam	IR30,000/ 40,000	6-8hr	2pm, 4pm, 6pm
Bandar-e Lengeh	IR15,000/ 25,000	3-4hr	hourly 6am-7pm
Bushehr	IR80,000	8-12hr	early morning, 3.30pm, 4pm, 5.30pm frequent
Esfahan	IR45,000/ 75,000	14-16hr	
Kerman	IR45,000	7hr	3pm, 4pm, 5pm, 7pm, 8.30pm, 10pm frequent
Shiraz	IR28,000/ 55,000	8-11hr	
Sirjan	IR30,000	3-4½hr	6 daily
Tehran	IR120,000	14-17hr	frequent
Yazd	IR34,500/ 46,000	11hr	6 daily
Zahedan	IR60,000	17hr	9.30am, 10am, 4pm, 6pm

### SAVARI

There are occasional buses to Minab, but most people travel by *savari* (IR18,000, 75 minutes, 97km). The *savaris* leave from just south of Abuzar Sq throughout the day. *Savaris* for Bandar-e Lengeh (Peugeot IR40,000, 2½ hours) leave from the north-eastern corner of the huge roundabout outside the Shahid Bahonar docks, about 5km west of the centre.

### TRAIN

From Bandar trains run to Tehran, Esfahan and Mashhad, via points in between. The daily 1st-class train to Tehran (IR90,000 for a berth in a six-bed couchette) departs at 2.15pm and, *insh'Allah*, arrives at 9am. It stops at Sirjan (IR29,600, five hours) and Yazd (IR53,000, nine hours), though the arrival time (around 11.15pm) isn't that convenient.

The Ghazal trains offer meals and more luxurious four-berth couchettes. They run to Tehran (IR230,000, 19 hours, 3pm) and Mashhad (IR230,000, 22 hours, 3.30pm), both three times weekly.

An entirely different train goes to Esfahan (IR41,700/66,100 1st/2nd class, Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday), departing at 5pm and arriving at a rather unusually civilised 8.30am.

The train station is 8km northwest of the centre and you'll probably have to charter a taxi (IR15,000). Buy tickets in Bala Parvaz Travel Agency (p300).

## Getting Around

It's easy enough to get around Bandar on foot, though shuttle taxis make good sense in summer.

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

It is easy enough to charter a taxi to or from the airport for about IR15,000. A shared taxi (which is harder to find to the airport) will cost about IR3000.

### TAXI

Shuttle taxis are easy to find and cost about IR1000 to IR2000 depending on the distance. To places like the bus terminal, train station and airport, it's far easier to charter one, especially in summer.

The professional **Ani Taxi Service** (☎ 555 5539; Taleqani Blvd; ☎ 7am-9.30pm) has air-con Peugeots for which it charges IR30,000 per hour (including driver) within Bandar Abbas. For a half-day beyond the city limits (eg Minab), expect to pay about IR230,000.

## QESHM ISLAND

جزیره قشم

☎ 0763 / pop 95,000

The largest island in the Persian Gulf at 1335 sq km, Qeshm boasts attractive beaches bounding an arid, sun-scorched interior of starkly beautiful hills and mountains. The coast is dotted with Bandari villages but the interior is largely deserted.

Qeshm is a duty-free zone – a sort of poor person's Kish – but in a Gulf increasingly full of gleaming skyscrapers it remains refreshingly attached to the traditional Bandari ways. Sure, Qeshm Town is developing pretty quickly. But elsewhere you can still visit boat-building yards turning out *lenges*, the large wooden cargo boats that have criss-crossed the Gulf for centuries. Fishing villages don't come much more traditional than Laft, with its supremely photogenic forest of *badgirs*. The west of the island has been declared Qeshm Geopark in recognition of the quite stunning geology, which includes the world's longest known salt cave.

Qeshm seems destined to grow quickly as a tourist destination, but for now it feels untouched enough to reward the intrepid. And we do mean intrepid. Outside Qeshm Town there are few facilities and much of the southern coast is a naval military zone, evidenced by the hundreds of concrete bunkers being built when we took the road. Going

anywhere for longer than a day carries an element of uncertainty – there are no formal lodgings – but that adds to the fun. Just don't be tempted to camp in a military zone.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Qeshm is accessible by air, speedboat and car ferry.

#### Air

Qeshm International Airport is about 43km southwest of Qeshm Town. Iran Air has daily flights to Tehran (one way IR633,000, 80 minutes) and flies twice-a-week to Shiraz (IR315,000). **Iran Aseman** ([www.iaa.ir](http://www.iaa.ir)) flies daily to Dubai (35 minutes). A taxi from the airport will cost about 70,000, depending on your negotiating skills.

#### Boat

Regular speedboats (open/closed IR14,000/20,000, 40/25 minutes) run between Qeshm's Sangi Pier and Bandar Abbas. There is also usually one ferry everyday to/from Bahman Port (one way, IR25,000, one hour), at the south end of Qeshm Town.

With a vehicle, Qeshm is a good place to lose a couple of days wandering around the quiet roads. A car ferry crosses from Bandar-e Pol to Laft-e Kohneh, near Laft. Departures depend on demand.

### GETTING AROUND

Shared taxis, minibuses and occasional *pik-ups* (utilities) take passengers along the north

and south coastal roads. Chartering a taxi for about IR40,000 an hour or IR160,000 a day is recommended if you want to go anywhere beyond Laft, or if you plan a late return to Qeshm Town. Hitching is also possible.

### Qeshm Town

شهر قشم

Qeshm Town is the island's largest town and, apart from a single resort, is the only place with accommodation. The town has a long history but not that much to show for it. The main north-south road begins at Pasdaran Sq, near the Eskele Sangi (Sangi Pier) from where speedboats to/from Bandar operate. It's called Montazeri Ave but this road becomes Valiasr Ave and finally Imam Golikhan Blvd as it heads south.

### INFORMATION

**Bank Melli** (Pasdaran Sq; ☎ 9am-1.30pm for exchange) Change money upstairs.

**Coffeenet** (☎ 524 0575; Felestin St; internet per hr IR10,000; ☎ 10.30am-9pm) Under the Pardis Mall.

**Dr S Ahang Pharmacy** (☎ 522 8055; Montazeri Ave; ☎ 24hr) Outside Fatima Al Zahra General Hospital.

**International Phone Office** (Montazeri Ave; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri) Charges IR2000 a minute to most countries.

**Jazireh Money Exchange** (Valiasr Blvd; ☎ 8am-1pm & 6-8pm Sat-Thu) Under Pardis Mall.

**Post Office** (Valiasr Ave)

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The crumbling **Ghal'e-ye Portugaliha** (Portuguese Castle; admission free) is Qeshm Town's

best-known sight, but once you've photographed the palm tree through a curved hole in the ramparts (like everyone else) it won't detain you for long. We preferred the **Qeshm Geopark Museum** (☎ 522 5930; Valiasr Blvd; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-8pm Sat-Thu), with its mix of cultural, natural and geological exhibits. Turtles, Siamese twin goats and a pygmy white-toothed shrew ('the smallest mammal on earth'?!?) are among the exhibits.

The extensive **Bazar-e Bozorg** (off Pasdaran Sq) and the newer but uninspiring duty-free malls along this strip are the main attractions for Iranian visitors.

### Diving

The diving off Qeshm is reportedly far better than that off Kish. Impressive coral reefs in less than 10m can be dived off nearby Larak and Hengam Islands, and the wrecks of three ships sunk during the Iran-Iraq War, at depths of 27m to 43m. Water is flattest during April and May. Diving can be arranged through two operators that run beginners courses and charter dives.

**Dolphin Diving School** (☎ 021-7763 2085, 0912 193 4194) is a Tehran-based company run by English-speaking Siamak Derakhshan. Boat and shore diving is available. Dives with/without certificate cost from IR250,000/350,000, including equipment and depending on how far the boat needs to go. Contact the school several days in advance.

Alternatively, the Golden Beach Resort (right) has a dive shop that also runs diving courses.

### SLEEPING

All but one of the island's sleeping options is in Qeshm Town. The cheapest places are concentrated on Imam Khomeini Ave a short walk from the Eskele Sangi.

**Khalija Fars Hotel** (☎ 522 3027; cnr Imam Khomeini Ave & Imam Khomeini Sq; r IR100,000; ☎) One of a couple of cheapies nearby, this is nothing to write home about but the friendly management make up for basic rooms with hard beds. Bathrooms are shared.

**Golestan Apartment Hotel** (☎ 522 1707; Imam Khomeini Ave; s/tw IR150,000/200,000; ☎) There are only eight rooms that are relatively attractive (ie, they have attached bathrooms), are reasonably priced and thus often full. Book ahead.

Two midrange options are on a hill overlooking the town about 1km walk from Pasdaran Sq; head west along Imam Khomeini Ave to Jahed Sq, take Sayadan Blvd up the hill and follow Azadegan Blvd about 300m to the right.

**Diplomat Hotel** (☎ 522 5557; [diplomat.hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:diplomat.hotel@yahoo.com); Azadegan Blvd; s/tw/tr with breakfast IR150,000/200,000/250,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Diplomat has clean, attractive rooms, some of which are big and have views over the town and the sea. Staff are helpful and some speak English. Good value.

**Park Hotel** (Qeshm Hotel; ☎ 522 4689; Azadegan Blvd; s/tw/tr IR150,000/250,000/300,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Only if the Diplomat Hotel is full.

**Darya Hotel** (☎ 522 8362; Eskele St; r US\$35-75; ste US\$90-100; ☎ ☎) Just east of the Eskele Sangi, the Darya is Qeshm's best option for value, location, comfort and service. Rooms are spacious and come with kitchenettes; front rooms (US\$40) have water views.

**Golden Beach Resort** (Simin Beach Resort; ☎ 534 2900; [goldenbeach\\_hotel@yahoo.com](mailto:goldenbeach_hotel@yahoo.com); d/tr/q/ste with breakfast US\$35/45/60/70; ☎ ☎) A few kilometres southwest of town and alone on a sandy beach, for now this is the only (vaguely) resort-style place on Qeshm. The bungalows feel like beachside accommodation – which is good – but service isn't fantastic. A dive shop offers equipment and courses and there's a restaurant.

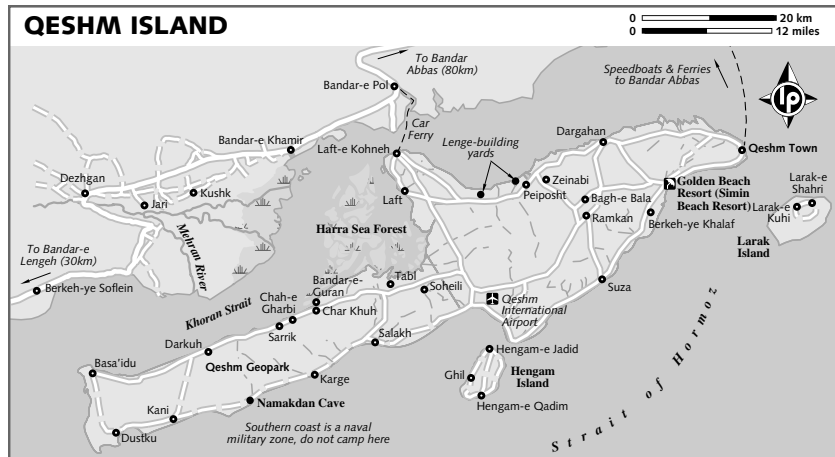
**Qeshm International Hotel** (☎ 255 4905; 22 Bahman Blvd; d/tr/ste with breakfast US\$45/60/100; ☎ ☎ ☎) This is supposed to be the best hotel on Qeshm, and for facilities it is. But while the rooms are nice enough they're uninspired and the location at the southern end of town isn't great.

### EATING

The midrange hotels all have restaurants. There are also restaurants in the shopping centres along Valiasr Blvd.

**Seafood Restaurant** (☎ 522 4765; meals IR30,000-45,000; ☎ 6pm-midnight) On the waterfront opposite the Ghal'e-ye Portugaliha, this simple indoor/outdoor restaurant serves Arabic seafood (no kabab!) in the cool of evening. There is no printed menu, but English-speaking owner Abdul will have shark, crab and/or shellfish dishes.

**Island Nights** (☎ 524 0458; cnr Valiasr Blvd & Felestin St; meals IR50,000-60,000; ☎ 11am-4pm & 6-11pm) On the top floor of Pardis Mall, this



Turkish-run place serves the usual range of kabab plus well-prepared fish and prawn dishes. Seating is both indoor and outdoor and the atmosphere fairly upbeat. Access is via the outside lift.

### Around Qeshm Island LAFT & HARRA SEA FOREST

جنگلهای دریای حرا و لافت

The fishing village of **Laft**, 52km west of Qeshm Town, is the best place in Iran to see the fast-disappearing traditional cultures of the Persian Gulf. Perched on a rocky slope overlooking the Khoran Strait, Laft's roovescape is a breathtaking and wonderfully photogenic forest of *badgirs* and minarets. Views are best from the hill near the Portuguese-built Naderi Fort. From here you'll also see dozens of ancient wells and a white-domed cistern, on which the town relied for water. It's a small town that's best seen on foot; there's no formal accommodation.

A few hundred metres north of Laft is one of Qeshm's many **lenge-building yards**. These traditional cargo boats are still used to carry goods back and forth across the Gulf. Other yards are found along the north coast, most notably around Peiposht, Zeinabi and Bandar-e Guran.

From Laft you can see the **Harra Sea Forest**, at 9000 hectares the Persian Gulf's largest mangrove forest. From the town of **Tabl**, south of Laft, it's possible to venture into the forest by rented motorboat or canoe. During spring more than 200 species of migrating birds can be found here.

**QESHM GEOPARK** پارک زمین شناسی قشم  
In 2006 most of the western half of Qeshm Island, including the Harra mangroves, was declared Iran's first Unesco Geopark (according to Unesco, a Geopark is an area of unique geoscientific significance). Whether you're driving through this area or looking at it on a Google Earth image, the geological significance is easy to see. Nature has carved steep-sided stone canyons, eroded flat-topped hills into sandy dunes and dramatic organ-pipe ridgelines, and dug deep into the island to form caves including **Namakdan Cave** (Khare Namaki), which at 6km is the longest known salt-cave system on earth.

There are plans to develop tourism facilities but for now there is little infrastructure.

Unless you have plenty of time to wait for infrequent transport, you'll need to hire a taxi to take you as these places are hard to find and reach on your own; ask your hotel to find a driver who knows the sights. It's worth doing a full loop (which takes a whole day), perhaps taking in Laft and the *lenge* building-yards on the way. Of particular note is **Char Khuh**, where you can climb up into the narrow canyon to a well that has been used by shepherds for centuries. Further west a dirt road leads south and then heads back along the southern coast. Namakdan Cave is off this road, but is almost impossible to find, so make sure the driver knows the way. Though virtually deserted, this stretch of coast is a naval military zone; you can come here, but be careful with your camera. The beach is also where green turtles lay their eggs.

### HORMOZ ISLAND جزیره هرمز pop approx 7000

A 30-minute boat ride from Bandar Abbas, delightfully sleepy Hormoz is a world away from the bustle of the regional capital. When your speedboat rounds the sea wall and the captain kills the motor you'll be engulfed by something almost completely unheard of in Bandar – silence.

The only settlement is tiny Hormoz Village, where a richly evocative Portuguese castle slowly erodes at its northern edge and the rest of the largely impoverished village nestles among palm trees, pale-stone mosques and dusty laneways rarely disturbed by traffic. The rest of the 42-sq-km island is virtually uninhabited. The rugged interior is a barren land of forbidding peaks seared by centuries of fierce Persian Gulf sun; not at all inviting.

Hormoz is a fun half-day trip for its mix of history and Bandari village atmosphere; a trip best begun early in the morning to avoid the enervating heat.

### History

Until the 14th century this was Jarun Island, while Hormoz was the name of a long-established commercial town on the mainland, probably on the Minab River. That changed when repeated bloody Mongol raids prompted the 15th Amir of Hormoz to seek a home where his head had a better chance of remaining on his shoulders. With many

of his subjects in toe the Amir moved first to Kish Island before settling on Jarun Island.

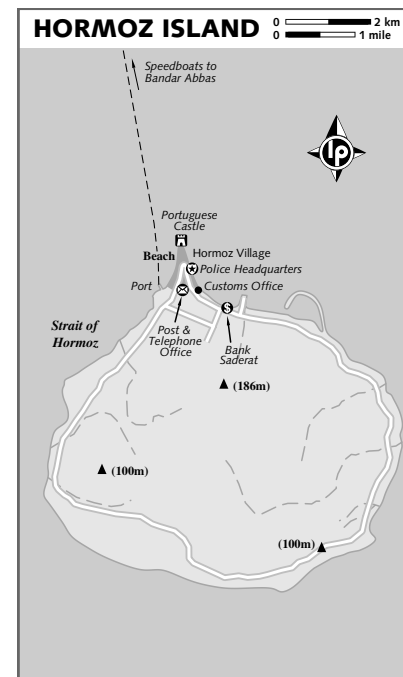
Standing sentinel over the narrow entrance to the Persian Gulf, this new Hormoz soon became a grand emporium attracting immigrants from the mainland and traders from as far away as India and Africa. Visitors to Hormoz described it as heavily fortified, bustling and opulent. European traders arrived and before long the Portuguese took over (below).

The Portuguese were eventually kicked out in the early 17th century and Shah Abbas I relocated the trading hub to the mainland fishing village of Gamerun, which he promptly named after himself. Without commerce the power of Hormoz was shattered and it began a long descent into ruin.

### Sights

**PORTUGUESE CASTLE** قلعه پرتغالیها  
Some 750m to the north of the harbour is the famous **Portuguese castle** (*ghal'e-ye Portoghalihā*), probably the most impressive and ambitious colonial fortress built in Iran (also see the boxed text, below). Centuries of neglect have seen much of the original structure crumble into the sea, but the thick, muscular-looking walls and rusting cannons give it a haunting beauty.

From the port, walk along the waterfront until you reach the castle walls then follow them anticlockwise as far as you can go. You'll come to a pair of rusting cannons and the low arched entrance right on the tip of the cape.



The archway opens onto a wide courtyard facing the sea. On the right as you enter is the ancient armoury. In the middle of the courtyard is a subterranean church that has some splendid vaulted ceilings. Before following the path marked by stones up onto the

### THE PORTUGUESE ON HORMOZ

In 1507, talented Portuguese admiral and empire builder Afonso de Albuquerque (also known as Afonso the Great) besieged and conquered Hormoz as part of his plan to expand Portuguese power into Asia. The castle of Hormoz (see above), which he started the same year, was completed in 1515.

With Hormoz Island as their fortified base, the Portuguese quickly became the major power on the waters of the Persian Gulf. Virtually all trade with India, the Far East, Muscat (Oman) and the Gulf ports was funnelled through Hormoz, to which the Portuguese, under an administration known for its justice and religious tolerance, brought great prosperity for over a century.

But Portugal's stranglehold over vital international trading routes could hardly fail to arouse the resentment of Persia and the other rising imperial powers. In 1550 Ottoman forces besieged the fortress of Hormoz for a month but failed to take the island. In the early 1600s Shah Abbas I granted the British East India Company trading rights with Persia through the mainland port of Jask, thus breaking the Portuguese monopoly. In 1622 Abbas, who had no naval power with which to challenge the Portuguese, cunningly detained the company's silk purchase until the English agreed to send a force to help liberate Hormoz. The Portuguese put up a brave defence, but ultimately were forced off the island.

ramparts, you can visit the ground-floor room of the watchtower if the door is open. Higher up is another door to the submerged 'water supply', a surprisingly deep and impressive cistern circled by an elevated interior walkway. The crumbling upper levels of the castle offer fine views back over the village to the starkly beautiful mountains, all surrounded by the blue Gulf waters; it's the perfect place to sit, soak up the silence and let your mind wander back a few hundred years.

Officially there is a IR2000 entrance fee, but in three trips we've yet to find anyone to take our money. Entrance fee or not, it's worth finding the old caretaker to let you into the locked doors of the tower and water supply – a tip is appreciated.

### HORMOZ VILLAGE

روستای هرمز

This pleasant little **village** is interesting, though there's nothing much to do except ramble through the maze of *kuches* (lanes). In the northern-most corner is the small Sunni **Jameh-ye Imam Shafe'i Mosque**.

There is nowhere to stay or eat on Hormoz Island, though we met two travellers who camped on the beach with some young Tehranis on holiday. Small grocery stores on the road between the castle and port sell bottled water, soft drinks, biscuits and ice creams.

### Getting There & Around

The only way to get to Hormoz is by speedboat (one way, IR10,000, about 30 minutes) from the main jetty in Bandar Abbas (p302). Except during winter, Hormoz is witheringly hot and there isn't much shade, so start as early as possible. Boats leave when full – every 15 or so minutes in the morning and less often later. The last boats usually return to Bandar about 4pm, but check this at the port.

Hardy souls who want to get into the island's interior can try talking a local into taking them by motorcycle or, more creatively, chartering a boat to circumnavigate the island. If you choose to do the latter, be wary of tides, leave a trip plan with the police and take enough food and water for a full day, plus a bit extra in case of emergency.

### MINAB

میناب

☎ 0765 / pop 81,000

Wedge between a line of rocky desert hills and luxuriant date-palm plantations, Minab was once the biggest town in the re-

gion. Today it has a *mañana* feel except on Thursday, when the famous **Thursday market** (see opposite) draws merchants and shoppers from far and wide. Bandari, Arabic and Indian influences are common, with both the burqa and colourful *shamat* (a finely patterned, gauze-like chador) particularly popular (see Bandari Burqas, p297). One reader described the women of Minab as: 'A truly intoxicating sight after the oppressive uniformity of black "tents" elsewhere.'

Minab is easy enough to navigate. The old town starts at Esteghlal Sq at the south end of the bridge, and stretches away with Imam Khomeini St as the main drag. The bazaar is the most lively part of town, and is mainly to the west of Imam Khomeini St, between Esteghlal Sq and Shohada Sq.

Banks in Minab don't change money, so bring as much as you'll need. **Kara Coffeenet** (Jahangir Amine St; internet per hr IR9000; ☎ 9am-2pm & 5-9pm) is in an arcade about 150m west of Shohada Sq.

The approach to Minab from Bandar Abbas is quite dramatic. As you enter town you'll see the crumbling but picturesque **Hazareh Castle** competing for space on a hill with hundreds of mud-brick houses. It is believed that Minab was built by two sisters, Bibi Minoo and Bibi Nazanin, and the castle is known locally as Bibi Minoo – Bibi Nazanin's castle long ago returned to dust. Traditional custom has couples from the town walk once around this fortress, in the company of their families, before taking their marriage vows.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Sadaf Hotel** (☎ 222 5999; s/d IR115,000/177,000; 📶) The Sadaf has large, clean rooms that are both comfortable and fair value; with squat toilets and bathrooms. The restaurant serves tasty food, though it's probably not quite good enough to warrant the prices. Sadaf is well signposted on the left about 500m before the main bridge into Minab arriving from Bandar.

**Minab Inn** (☎ 222 5863; fax 222 5322; Imam Khomeini St; r IR300,000; 📶) The location, about 2.5km past the main bridge as you come from Bandar, is a bit away from things, but the adjacent garden is pleasant and the rooms reasonable, though not much better than the Sadaf Hotel.

The restaurant is reliable if not exactly groundbreaking.

### THE THURSDAY MARKET OF MINAB

پنج شنبه بازارمیناب

Minab's **Thursday market** (*panjshambe bazar*) is one of the most colourful and well-known in the country; it's well worth timing your visit to include a Thursday. The main market is held on a patch of open ground along the banks of the seasonal Minab River 500m west (downstream) of the main bridge. Buyers and sellers come from surrounding villages, Bandar Abbas and sometimes further. You'll see many women wearing the burqa (p297), as well as bright headscarves and pants.

The *panjshambe bazar* is actually three separate markets. In the main one you'll find a motley array of makeshift stalls selling everything from fresh fruit, fish, vegetables and clothing to the distinctive *zaribafi* – a range of items made from local palm leaves including mats, fans, brooms and baskets – and the brocaded strips of cloth used by local women to adorn their clothing. Nearby is a livestock market, which is especially interesting early in the morning when the serious bargaining is done; and a small market for indigenous arts and crafts that is tucked away in the permanent bazaar.

Whether you're there to buy or not, arrive as early as possible to avoid the heat and soak up the atmosphere – a cross between the colour and vibrancy of an African market and the more discreet smiles of an Iranian bazaar.

Minab's range of cuisines is limited, with pizza, sandwich and kabab accounting for something close to all the options. Shohada Sq has several eateries, plus a couple of good ice-cream shops.

### Getting There & Away

Savaris to/from Bandar Abbas (IR18,000, 75 minutes, 97km) operate regularly from Esteghlal Sq, at the bazaar-end of the bridge into town, until after dark. If you're heading to Jiroft, first take a savari to Rudan (IR10,000, one hour, 70km).

Big buses leave Minab for Bandar Abbas, Shiraz, Yazd and anywhere else en route. They fill up fast so try to book in advance at the **bus office** (☎ 10am-4pm), opposite and about 200m north of Sadaf Hotel. Even with a ticket, arrive early because services are oversold and competition for seats and luggage space is fierce. Bandar Abbas has more services.

If you're heading to Sirjan, Kerman or Yazd, you could take a bus or savari to the big roundabout with the replica *lenge* as its centrepiece about 10km east of Bandar and connect with a passing bus.

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