

# Tehran تهران



With its relatively short history, ugly masks of concrete and smog, and manic streets flowing hot with machines, many travellers and no small number of Tehranis will tell you there's no reason to hang around in the capital. But to take their advice is to miss out. For while Esfahan or Persepolis could mount a convincing case for being the soul of Iran, Tehran is indisputably its big, loud, chaotic, dynamic and ugly beating heart.

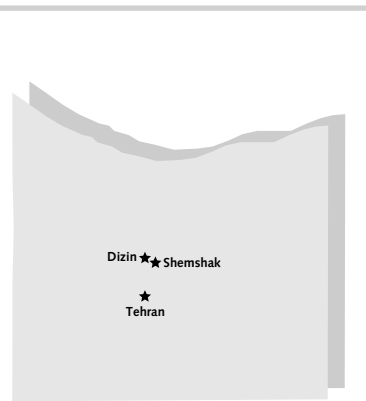
This tightly packed city of about 15 million is where change happens first. Politically and socially it's Iran's cutting edge, and from the relatively bold fashion statements of its youth to the range of restaurants, cafés and art galleries, as a visitor you can't help but notice.

However, Tehran is also a city of contrasts that play out on geographic lines. It is modern and traditional, secular and religious, rich and poor – north and south. Most of the spark comes from the affluent north, but wander through southern Tehran and you'll see a contrastingly conservative, religious and poor city with little of the north's brashness.

At a practical level, Tehran has a decent choice of hotels and the best range of restaurants in Iran. There are enough museums to keep you interested, and compared with residents of many capitals, Tehranis are surprisingly welcoming. Certainly, some travellers will find Tehran's traffic, smog and uncontrolled urban sprawl overwhelming. But persist – or better, make short repeat visits – and you'll find it opening up to you in ever more-rewarding ways.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the over-the-top opulence of the **Golestan Palace** (p101), a monument to Qajar excess
- Gaze in wonder at the 51,366-gem Globe of Jewels in the **National Jewels Museum** (p105)
- Ski the slopes of **Dizin** (p133) and **Shemshak** (p133) for a fraction of what you'd pay at home
- Relax Tehran-style by taking a mountain walk from **Darband** (p113) to **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (p113), enjoying the views, food and company en route
- Gird your loins and climb aboard a **motorcycle taxi** (p99) for a trip across peak-hour Tehran – a white-knuckle ride you're unlikely to forget



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 021

■ POPULATION: ABOUT 15 MILLION

## HISTORY

Archaeologists believe people have lived in this area since Neolithic times, but apart from 11th-century AD records suggesting the village produced high-quality pomegranates, little was written about Tehran until the 13th century. In his book *Mo'jamol Boldan*, writer Yaqoot Hamavi described Tehran as a village of Rey, then the major urban centre in the region, where 'rebellious inhabitants' lived in underground dwellings. He went on: 'They not only disregard their governors, but are in constant clashes among themselves, to the extent that the inhabitants of its 12 quarters cannot visit each other'.

In 1220 the Mongols sacked Rey as they swept across Persia (see p32), executing thousands in the process. Most of those who escaped wound up in Tehran and the future capital's first ever population explosion turned the village into a small, moderately prosperous trading centre.

In the mid-16th century Tehran's natural setting, many trees, clear rivers and good hunting brought it to the attention of the early Safavid king, Tahmasb I. Under his patronage, gardens were laid out, brick houses and caravanserais built and a wall with 114 towers erected to protect the town and its merchants. As it continued to grow under later Safavid kings, European visitors wrote of Tehran's many enchanting vineyards and gardens.

Threatened by the encroaching Qajars, regent Karim Khan Zand moved his army to Tehran in 1758. At the same time he refortified the city and began constructing a royal residence. Perhaps he had intended to move his capital here, but when Qajar chieftain Mohammed Hasan Khan was killed and his young son Agha Mohammed Khan taken hostage, Karim Khan decided the threat was over and abandoned the unfinished palace to return to Shiraz.

But things didn't work out quite as Karim Khan would have liked. By 1795 he was long dead and his one-time prisoner, Agha Mohammed Khan, declared this dusty town of around 15,000 souls his capital.

As the centre of Qajar Persia, Tehran steadily expanded. By 1900 it had grown to 250,000 people, and in the 20th century into one of the most-populous cities on earth. With this growth has come an influ-

ence far greater than most people realise. The capital has fomented and hosted two revolutions, two coups d'état and much intrigue. As the setting for the CIA's first coup in 1953 (p37), it had a profound impact on post-WWII world politics; and as pronouncements from Tehran have been the driving force behind the growth of radical Islam since 1979, that influence has not waned.

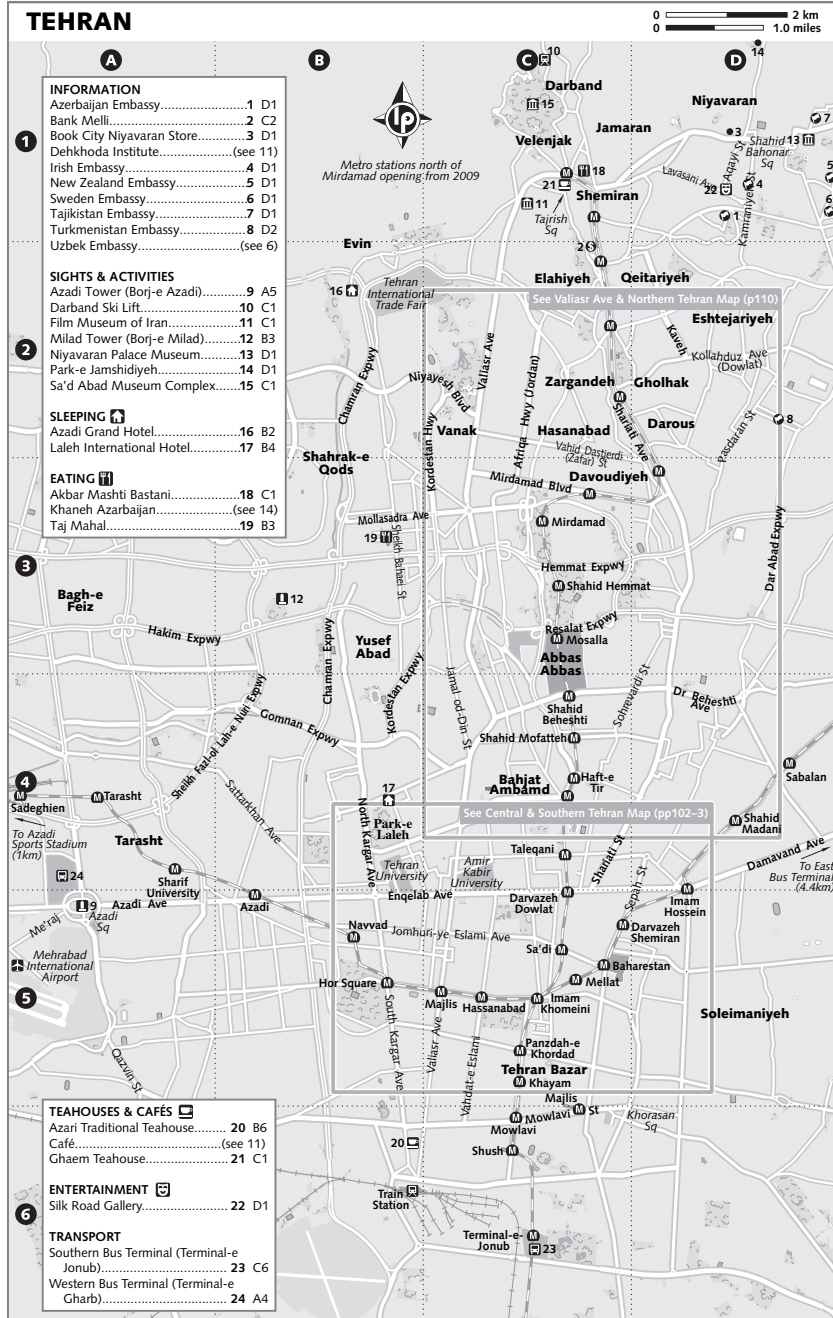
Today it is fascinating to walk in the footsteps of that modern history: you can see the White Palace at Sa'd Abad (p109), where the last shah hosted the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt as they plotted the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh; visit the former US embassy now called the US Den of Espionage (p107); gaze up at the Azadi Tower (p114), where hundreds of thousands of people gathered to mark the 1979 revolution; or visit the haunting Behesht-e Zahra cemetery (p131), where the faces of soldiers who died in the Iran–Iraq War stare out from endless fields of glass boxes.

## ORIENTATION

Tehran is so vast and so congested that getting lost here is inevitable. Thankfully, most of the streets you're likely to visit have signs in English, though there are still some areas without signs in any language.

As you move through the city the huge social and economic gaps between northern and southern Tehran are plain to see. The south is older, cheaper, more congested and generally less appealing. However, it has almost all the budget hotels, especially around Imam Khomeini Sq, which also hosts the main station on the growing Tehran Metro and has a local bus terminal nearby. The north is more inviting, more expensive, has cleaner air and a range of better hotels and more exotic restaurants.

The main street and top shopping strip is Valiasr Ave, which runs from Rah-Ahan Sq and the train station in poorer southern Tehran all the way to Tajrish Sq in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains in the north – a distance of more than 20km. It's a great street to find when you're lost. One of the main east–west thoroughfares is Azadi Ave, which starts at the Azadi Tower, near the Mehrabad International Airport, and becomes Enqelab Ave east of Enqelab Sq.



It's handy to remember that the Alborz Mountains are known locally as the North Star of Tehran for a reason – yes, they're in the north. And as the whole city slopes down from these mountains, if you're walking uphill that usually means you're going north.

If you plan to use public transport – or any transport – it helps to learn the names and locations of the main squares as soon as you can; see Getting Around (p126) for transport options.

Tehran has two international airports (p123): the older Mehrabad airport on the western edge of the city near Azadi Sq; and the new Imam Khomeini International Airport 35km south of the city. If you're coming or going by bus, you'll need to use one of four bus terminals (p124). The western terminal, adjacent to Azadi Sq, and the southern terminal, near the train station, are the largest. The central (Arzhantin) terminal in the city centre and the eastern terminal have fewer services and serve fewer destinations. All are connected to the rest of Tehran by bus, taxi, shuttle taxi and, increasingly, Metro.

## Maps

If you're only stopping in Tehran for a few days and seeing the major sights, the maps in this chapter – redrawn from aerial photographs – should be adequate. You'll need a more detailed map if you want to visit remote suburbs, or – if you have an uncontrollable yearning for danger – drive. Your best bet is to get the latest Tehran map from **Gita Shenasi** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 9335; www.gita.shenasi.com; 15 Ostad Shahrivar St, Razi St, Valiasr Crossroads, Enqelab-e Eslami Ave; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Wed & 8am-1pm Thu). It will be big and comprehensive, and is updated most years – push the buzzer to be let in.

## INFORMATION Bookshops

For English-language books, the Book City chain is your best option. Elsewhere, the dozens of bookshops on Enqelab Ave opposite Tehran University – one of the longest stretches of bookshops on earth – have a few English titles among their mainly Farsi stock. Most top-end hotels sell books (mainly pictorials) about Iran, as do the

## A REVOLUTION IN STREET NAMES

Across Iran you'll find streets named after the same few martyrs of the revolution, historical figures and revolutionary buzzwords. In many places the government has conveniently painted a huge mural or erected a mosaic likeness of the person beside the street that bears his (it's almost always a man) name. So who are these dead men?

**Ayatollah Beheshti** Founded the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) in 1979. He took part in the negotiations over the US embassy hostages but was killed a year later by a bomb planted in IRP headquarters by the Mojahedin Khalq Organisation (MKO).

**Ayatollah Taleqani** A much-admired cleric who was repeatedly exiled and later tortured by the last shah. He led the first Friday prayers after the revolution but died soon afterwards.

**Amir Kabir** This was the nickname of Mirza Taghi Khan, a reformist prime minister (1848–1851) who was put to death at the command of Nasser al-Din Shah in Fin Gardens near Kashan.

**Dr Ali Shariati** Returned to Iran from France in 1964 with a doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne. He combined radical political thought with socially conscious traditionalism and became an inspiration to many women. Barred from teaching, he went to England in 1977, but was found dead in his apartment three weeks later – apparently a victim of the shah's secret police.

**Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari** Was a close confidant of Ayatollah Khomeini who railed against communism and the effect it would have on Islam. He became president of the Constitutional Council after the revolution, but was assassinated by a rival Islamic group in May 1979.

Streets are also named after buzzwords of the revolution and key Islamic phrases. These include Valiasr, which means 'Prince of this Time' and is a nickname for Mahdi, the 12th imam, who will one day return as the messiah; Azadi, which translates to 'freedom'; Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which means 'Islamic Republic'; and Enqelab, which means 'revolution'. For more on these and other Iranian personalities, see [www.iranchamber.com/personalities](http://www.iranchamber.com/personalities).

## TEHRAN IN...

**Two Days**

Start early in the **Tehran Bazar** (p100) watching the hustling, bustling and haggling of the country's biggest market. Stop in **Imam Khomeini Mosque** (p100) at prayer time for a taste of Islam in action, then walk up to **Park-e Shahr** (p104) for some head space and lunch at the **Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag** (p121). Spend the afternoon looking at the ancient wonders of the **National Museum of Iran** (p104), then take a shuttle taxi down to Rah Ahan Sq and the **Azari Traditional Teahouse** (p120) for some well-earned *chay* (tea) and a special meal. On day two, check out the **Golestan Palace** (p101), then after a coffee with the paper at **Cafe Naderi** (p121), head down for the 2pm viewing of the **National Jewels Museum** (p105). Round the day out with some alternative cuisine in northern Tehran.

**Four Days**

Follow the two-day plan, then head north to check out the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex** (p109) before hiking from **Darband** (p113) across to **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (p113). Use your last day to take in the relaxed **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art** (p108) and **Park-e Laleh** (p107), perhaps take in an **art gallery** (p122) to meet young Tehranis and chill out in the cafés of **Gandhi Ave** (p121).

National Museum of Iran and Sa'd Abad Museum Complex.

**Book City Hafez Store** (Map p110; ☎ 8880 5735; 743 Nth Hafez St) The biggest store of the best chain of bookshops. A decent range of fiction and nonfiction in English (mostly on the 3rd floor), and plenty of pictorials on Iran (1st floor).

**Book City Niyavaran Store** (Map p94; ☎ 2228 5969; Shahid Bahonar St, near Kamranieh Crossing) Some people like this store even more than the Hafez store, though the fun police have closed the attached café.

**Di Rouz Em Rouz Ancien Livres** (Map p110; ☎ 8888 8844; Khoddami St, off Valiasr Ave; ☎ by appointment or by chance) Old books in English, French, German and Italian. Some rare works on Iran. Mr Afshar is stimulating conversation.

**Jahanelm Institute** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6695 0324; Enqelab Ave) Magazines ranging from the *Economist* to *Vogue*. It's on the floor below ground level in a large arcade with red-painted trim.

**Emergency**

If your emergency is not life threatening, your embassy or your hotel's front desk should be able to send you to the most appropriate hospital or police station and perhaps help with translation. If that is impossible, call one of these numbers:

**Ambulance** (☎ 115)

**Fire Brigade** (☎ 125)

**Police** (☎ 110)

**Internet Access**

Internet cafés, or *coffeenets* as they're called here, open and close at a remarkable rate

in Tehran – and that's even before the government steps in with regular crackdowns. However, the following places have been around for years and hopefully will not have disappeared into cyberspace by the time you arrive. They have webcams, burning facilities and headphones. For other *coffeenets* look around major squares, usually upstairs, where the rent is cheaper.

**Ferdowsi Coffeenet** (Map pp102-3; Ferdosi Sq, Enqelab Ave; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 9am-9.30pm) Upstairs past the fruit seller on the southeastern corner of the square; good connections and plenty of software.

**Pars Internet** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3392 4173; 369 Ferdosi St; per hr IR9000; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the British embassy, these guys have relatively fast machines; they sell phonecards and offer cheap international calls at IR1500 a minute.

**Rahyabnet Cafenet** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8880 1316; 4th fl, 40 Keshavarz Blvd; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sat-Thu) Near the Iranian Traditional Restaurant.

**Valiasr Commercial Centre** (Map p110; Valiasr Sq; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 9am-9pm) Several small, fast and busy *coffeenets* on the ground floor.

**Vanak Coffeenet** (Map p110; ☎ 8878 5192; Vanak Sq; per hr IR15,000; ☎ 9am-midnight) On the 1st floor, southeast corner of Vanak Sq.

**Internet Resources**

There are few English-language websites devoted to Tehran.

**Payvand** (www.payvand.com) Hard to navigate, but has some good restaurant reviews.

**Tehran 24** (www.tehran24.com) Regularly updated photographs of Tehran.

**Tehran Avenue** (www.tehranavenue.com) Well-written café, restaurant, film, music, theatre and art reviews. Unfortunately, though, there is often no address for the places reviewed.

**Tehran Metro** (www.tehranmetro.com) Everything underground; includes connecting bus routes and numbers.

**Laundry**

The city is not overrun with laundries and dry-cleaning services, although your hotel should be able to arrange something for you.

**Left Luggage**

Most hotels are happy to hold luggage, usually at no cost. Alternatively, there are reasonably priced left-luggage offices at Mehrabad and Imam Khomeini International Airports (about IR15,000 to IR20,000 a day).

**Medical Services****DENTISTS**

Dentists regularly advertise in the *Tehran Times* and are very inexpensive by Western standards.

**HOSPITALS**

Tehran has by far the largest concentration of doctors and hospitals in all of the country, and the quality of medical care is reasonably high by international standards. Many of the doctors have Western training, and it shouldn't be too difficult finding one who speaks English (or French or German).

Your embassy will usually recommend a doctor or hospital. Alternatively, the following hospitals are accessible, clean and reputable:

**Day Hospital** (Map p110; ☎ 8879 7111; cnr Valiasr Ave & Tavanir St)

**Mehrad Hospital** (Map p110; ☎ 8874 7401; Miremad St, off Motahhari Ave)

**Tehran Clinic** (Map p110; ☎ 8871 2931; Farahani St)

**PHARMACIES**

Tehran is well stocked with pharmacies, and medications (often generic brands) are cheap. For a 24-hour pharmacy ask your hotel reception to phone the **pharmacy line** (☎ 191) to find the nearest one, or head for **Ramin Drug Store** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 5301; southeast cnr Ferdosi Sq).

**Money**

Tehran has perhaps the greatest concentration of bank branches of any city on earth; along or just off a 1.5km stretch of Enqelab Ave there are more than 20 branches! Unfortunately, few of these can change your money and none deal with credit cards or travellers cheques (see also Banks, p388).

Instead, the easiest and most common way of changing money is in an official moneychanging shop around Ferdosi Sq or on Ferdosi St south of there. They won't smile, but neither (usually) will they rip you off and it's all done in about 30 seconds.

Chances are you'll be asked to 'change' on the street before you ever reach an official shop. If you're desperate, this is convenient. But if not, the street changers are best avoided unless you know the rates and count your money carefully – both their rates and their mathematical skills are dodgy.

If you must use a bank, the following branches will help, or look for an 'exchange' sign in the window of any other branch. Banks open from 7.30am to 1.30pm but don't change before 9am; the process is tedious (don't forget your passport).

As usual, hotels and their diabolical rates will be your last resort, though some top-end places have attached bank branches; Homa Hotel is one, and they *might* be able to change travellers cheques if you're desperate.

**Bank Mellī** (Map p110; Shariati St, Elahiyeh) If you're in the far north.

**Bank Mellī Central Branch** (Bank Mellī Markazi; Map pp102-3; Ferdosi St) If you've run out of cash, speak to these people about getting a transfer from home; see p389 for details.

**Bank Tejarat** (Map pp102-3; Nejatollahi St) Handy to Iran Air and the travel agencies.

**Melli Iran Exchange** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 0924; Ferdosi St) Beside Bank Mellī Markazi (Central Branch), the most official of the exchange shops.

**Newsstands**

Pavement newsstands can be found all over Tehran, selling an ever-changing selection of Farsi newspapers (they're only one critical story away from being closed down) and, in some, the four English-language dailies. The following two also stock a random selection of ageing secondhand books.

**Enqelab Newsstand** (Map pp102-3; Enqelab Ave)

**Ferdosi Newsstand** (Map pp102-3; Ferdosi St) Just north of Manucherī St.

## Post

**DHL** (Map p110; ☎ 8871 5906-9; 353 Dr Beheshti Ave; ☎ 5.30am-9pm Sat-Thu & 9am-2pm Fri)

**Main post office** (Map pp102-3; Sa'di St; ☎ 8am-7pm) About 100m south of Amir Kabir St; come here to post packages.

**Post office** (Map p110; Valiasr Sq) Northwest corner of Valiasr Sq; for ordinary mail.

## Telephone

Telephone cards for local calls can be bought at most newsstands, as can some cards for international calls. Public telephones are plentiful and conveniently dotted along the main streets where traffic noise is loudest. It's quieter, and usually easier, to use an internet café (many have Skype) or a telephone office, though these are surprisingly hard to find in Tehran. See p391 for more on telephones.

**Pars Internet** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3392 4173; 369 Ferdosi St; international calls per min IR1500; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Sat-Thu)

**Telephone office** (Map pp102-3; Ban Hamayoon St, off Imam Khomeini Sq; per min IR1700; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) Convenient to the cheap accommodation. It's 10m down an alley.

## Toilets

Almost all museums, palaces and other buildings open to the public have clean toilets, as do all but the smallest restaurants. In an emergency, duck into the grounds of the nearest mosque or into a park, where the state of cleanliness or otherwise will depend upon the local caretaker. And remember that old maxim of Iranian travel: 'The wise traveller carries an emergency stash of paper; the unwise can use this paper'.

## Tourist Information

Incredibly, the capital of Iran – a country that wants to attract 20 million tourists by 2020 – has no tourist information office. Ask your hotel instead.

## Tours

For personalised tours or advice from private operators, the following are recommended:

**Houman Najafi** (☎ 0912 202 3017; houman.najafi@gmail.com) Specialises in advice on ecotourism around Iran.

**Leily Lankarani** (☎ 0912 150 8519; llankarani@yahoo.co.uk) Experienced and interesting guide and fixer with extensive media experience.

## Travel Agencies

Travel agencies abound in Tehran but for choice and quality the best place to look is along Nejatollahi St in central Tehran. Most agencies sell tickets for domestic and international flights and seats on trains. For local tour operators, see p415.

**Asia2000 Travel Agency** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8889 6949; asia2000@samapardaz.com; Nejatollahi St) This professionally run place has English-speaking staff and, in our experience, has been consistently good.

**Simorgh Travel Agency** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3397 1525; Baharestan Sq) On the north side of Baharestan Sq, handy to the budget accommodation.

## Universities

At the centre of political change in Iran, **Tehran University** (Map pp102-3; Enqelab Ave) is a fascinating place to wander around. There is, however, a ban on foreign nonstudents entering but its enforcement is haphazard. If you're worried, just hang around the front gate (the entrance is on Enqelab Ave) for a few minutes and you'll be 'adopted' by someone keen to practise their English.

## Visa Extensions

Extending tourist visas in Tehran is much easier than it used to be, but it still takes a whole frustrating week! The **Foreign Aliens office** (Map pp102-3; Sepah St, off Sepah Sq; ☎ 7.45am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.45am-noon Thu) is walking distance from Taleqani Metro station. The best option is to stop at the nominated **Bank Melli** (Map pp102-3; Sepah Sq) on the way, tell the teller 'visa' and hand over your IR100,000. He'll do the paperwork and in a couple of minutes hand you the all-important deposit slip. Continue to Sepah Sq, turn right (downhill) and enter the green-glass building on your right, about 150m along (look for the uniforms). The visa extension office is on the 1st floor. When we extended here the whole process only took a few minutes, but even after the 30-day extension was approved we had to wait seven days to collect the passport. Yes, annoying. For more on extending, see p395.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

### Traffic

Even for the experienced Asia hand, the chaotic traffic in Tehran is likely to come as quite a shock. Almost anything goes on these roads and often does. It's not unusual to see

### BAD DRIVING? IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

The physical danger notwithstanding, the main problem you face as a visitor on Tehran's streets is mental: how to deal with this manic mass of metal. After much testing, we believe the following attitudinal adjustments will not only free you of some of the traffic-induced anxiety, but make your Tehran experience all the more memorable.

*Try not to think of Tehrani drivers as 'hopeless', 'crazy' or 'stupid'; it will just make you more scared.*

Instead, look at all the tiny gaps your taxi driver is negotiating without recourse to the brakes, the countless sticky situations from which he extricates himself, and you start to realise these guys are actually *good* drivers.

Watch your driver closely: he almost never uses his mirrors (if he has any); he drapes his seatbelt across his chest only when driving onto an expressway, where he can be fined; he rarely indicates; and he happily makes U-turns in the middle of major roads – all without raising his heartbeat.

Then think of how well you'd have to drive to get through this nightmarish traffic without being involved in an accident. That's right, don't fight it, you know these guys are actually *very good!*

Finally, embrace the chaos! Head to the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St and engage a motorbike taxi for a trip across town. Tell him you're in a hurry, and hold on. At Disneyland you'd pay good money for this kind of white-knuckle ride; in Tehran it's just part of life.

motorcycles weaving between pedestrians on the footpath in an attempt to escape the gridlock; Paykans reversing at speed along an expressway to reach that missed exit; and all manner of cars and buses hurtling towards each other in a Darwinian game of chicken where, however, the biggest and fastest don't always survive.

The sheer volume of traffic can be overwhelming and makes crossing the street seem like a game of Russian roulette, only in this game there are fewer empty chambers. Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the risk of an accident, whether you're in a vehicle or on foot.

However, after the initial shock, visitors are often surprised there are not more accidents. You might feel as if you've had three near-death experiences in the course of a single cab ride, but in reality drivers are adept at getting you near to death without actually killing you (see the boxed text, above). As a pedestrian, the best way to ensure a safe negotiation of Tehran's streets is to do what the locals do. Safety in numbers is the usual tactic – wait for one or two other road-crossers to appear and, with them between you and the traffic, step boldly out into the flow. Be aware of contra-flow bus lanes, which turn relatively harmless one-way streets into a far more dangerous street-crossing challenge.

But perhaps the most reassuring thing of all is to remember that no matter how 'crazy' a driver appears to be, he will do everything

he can to avoid running you over simply because doing so is just too much hassle. For more on Iran's traffic, see p380.

### Pollution

Tehran is one of the most polluted cities on earth. And according to the government, more than 70% of the smog that covers Tehran for about 200 days a year comes straight out of the exhaust pipes of the city's 3 million cars, trucks and motorbikes, with the ultra-inefficient Paykans more culpable than most (see the boxed text, p414). When pollution levels reach crisis point – often during winter – schools are closed and radio warns the old and unwell to stay indoors. Reports say almost 10,000 people die every year as a result of the atrocious air quality.

However, there is some light filtering through from the end of this foggy tunnel. By 2008 Tehran was halfway through a 10-year plan to try and curb pollution. Paykan numbers were falling, and petrol rationing has reduced (slightly) vehicle emissions. Clean air, however, remains a long way off. If the pollution really starts to hurt your throat, or you have asthma, head for the hills and relative purity of Darband or Park-e Jamshidiyeh.

### Scams

There are many more dangerous places in the world than Tehran, where crime against foreigners (especially violent crime) is rare.

There is, however, the odd bag snatch, pick-pocketing and scam, most notably the bogus police scam – see p378 for details.

## SIGHTS

It's not that long ago that southern Tehran was the centre of the city. Today, the area south of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave is the oldest and poorest part of town and is home to many of Tehran's best museums, including the National Museum of Iran and the glittering National Jewels Museum, as well as the Golestan Palace complex and the Tehran Bazar. A little north of here is the area loosely referred to as central Tehran, on the edge of which is Park-e Laleh – home to the Carpet Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Most locals refer to anywhere north of Valiasr Sq as northern Tehran. Much of this area was semirural until about 35 years ago, but frenetic expansion has spread apartment buildings all the way to the foothills of the Alborz Mountains, engulfing the last shah's opulent Sa'd-Abad and Niyavaran Palaces in the process.

In this guide we have included central and southern Tehran on one map (pp102–3); the area either side of Valiasr Ave heading north of Valiasr Sq on the Valiasr Ave & North Tehran map (p110); while places that don't fall in these two areas can be found on the Tehran map (p94). Places are listed starting at the Tehran Bazar in the south and heading north from there.

## Central & Southern Tehran

### TEHRAN BAZAR

بازار تهران

The maze of bustling alleys and the *bazaris* that fill them make **Tehran Bazar** (Map pp102-3; main entrance, 15 Khordad Ave; ☎ 7am–5pm Sat–Wed, 7am–noon Thu) a fascinating, if somewhat daunting, place to explore. Traders have been hawking their wares on this site for nearly a thousand years, but most of what you see today is less than 200 years old; it's no architectural jewel. The *bazaris* are a conservative bunch (see the boxed text, opposite) and there will be far more chadors than bleached hair.

The bazaar encompasses more than 10km of covered stores and has several entrances, but it's worth using the main entrance, in a square opposite Bank Melli. The warren of people and goods is a city within a city and includes several mosques,

guesthouses, banks, a church and even a fire station. Most lanes specialise in a particular commodity: copper, paper, gold, spices and carpets, among others.

You'll also find tobacconists, shoemakers, tailors, broadcloth sellers, bookbinders, flag sellers, haberdashers, saddlers, tinsmiths, knife-makers and carpenters. The carpet, nut and spice bazaars might be the most photogenic, but the lane of stores selling fake designer labels also catches the eye.

In our experience there are two ways to visit the bazaar, a place that cartographers seem never to have fully conquered. One is to simply wander the labyrinth of streets and alleys, taking whichever direction you fancy and just going with the flow. You'll almost certainly get lost but will soon enough be found and directed by any number of helpful Iranians.

The other is to allow yourself to be befriended by one of the carpet salesmen – don't worry, they will find you near the front entrance. Tell them what sections of the bazaar you'd like to see (the gold bazaar, spices bazaar, the mosque etc), and they will take you there. When you're done, they will expect you to visit their carpet shop, drink some tea and view a few rugs – which in itself is often quite fun, and prices here are probably the best in Iran. If you do choose to buy a carpet, even better, but no-one is forcing you.

Try and visit in the morning, when business is brisk but not yet frantic, as it becomes at lunchtime and between about 5pm and 7pm. During these times, the chances of being mowed down by some piece of fast-moving haulage equipment are high.

### IMAM KHOMEINI MOSQUE مسجد امام خمینی

Tehran has surprisingly few interesting mosques and mausoleums but one that's well worth visiting is the **Imam Khomeini Mosque** (Shah Mosque; Map pp102-3), right inside the bazaar. This is very much a working mosque and one of the largest and busiest in Tehran. The building itself dates from the early 18th century but the real reason you come here is to see Islam in action. The courtyard is accessed from several parts of the bazaar and hundreds of people pass through here, so it's usually possible for non-Muslims to stand and watch the faithful performing their ablutions and praying, though photography is less welcome.

## THE BAZARIS

In Iran a bazaar is much more than just a place to stock up on a few essential shopping items. The *bazaris*, the men who run the stalls in the bazaar, are frequently very wealthy and wield enormous political power. They are usually conservative, religious people who have a long history of standing against authority. In an attempt to weaken their power the last shah bulldozed new roads through parts of the bazaar, gave subsidised credit to competing supermarkets and set up state purchasing bodies to handle sugar, meat and wheat. Not surprisingly, the Tehran *bazaris* hit back during the Islamic Revolution when the closure of the bazaar wrought havoc on the economy. They were equally influential in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the coup that ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 (for details, see p37).

It has been estimated that Tehran Bazaar controls a third of Iran's entire retail and trade sector. Prices here set the standard for prices across the country, and the carpet dealers and other merchants can supply loans almost as readily as the banks. However, the power of the *bazaris* is waning. Competition from new supermarkets and the time it takes for most Tehranis to reach the bazaar has slowly bled money away from this traditional market, and with it the power of its merchants.

## GOLESTAN PALACE

کاخ گلستان

In what was once the heart of Tehran is this monument to the glories and excesses of the Qajar rulers. A short walk south from Imam Khomeini Sq, the **Golestan Palace complex** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3335-8; www.golestanpalace.ir; Ark Sq; admission several tickets; ☎ 9am–3.30pm Fri, Sat & Mon–Wed) is made up of several grand buildings set around a carefully manicured garden. Admission isn't expensive but, annoyingly, you must buy a separate ticket for each building, and all at the front gate. If you ask, they might also give you an informative printed guide.

Although there was a Safavid-era citadel on this site, it was the Qajar ruler Nasser al-Din Shah (r 1848–96), impressed by what he'd seen of European palaces, who built it into the fine complex you see today. Originally it would have been much bigger, with inner and outer sections to encompass offices, ministries and private living quarters, but several surrounding buildings were pulled down under the Pahlavis.

The following description assumes you start your visit at the Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar, then continue in a clockwise direction around the courtyard.

Walk straight ahead from the entrance to the **Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar** (Marble Throne Veranda; admission IR3000), a mirrored, open-fronted audience hall dominated by a magnificent throne. The throne is supported by human figures and constructed from 65 pieces of yellow alabaster from mines in Yazd. It was

made in the early 1800s for Fath Ali Shah, a monarch who managed a staggering (and quite likely very tiring) 200-odd wives and 170 offspring. This hall was used on ceremonial occasions, including the Napoleon-style self-coronation of Reza Shah in 1925.

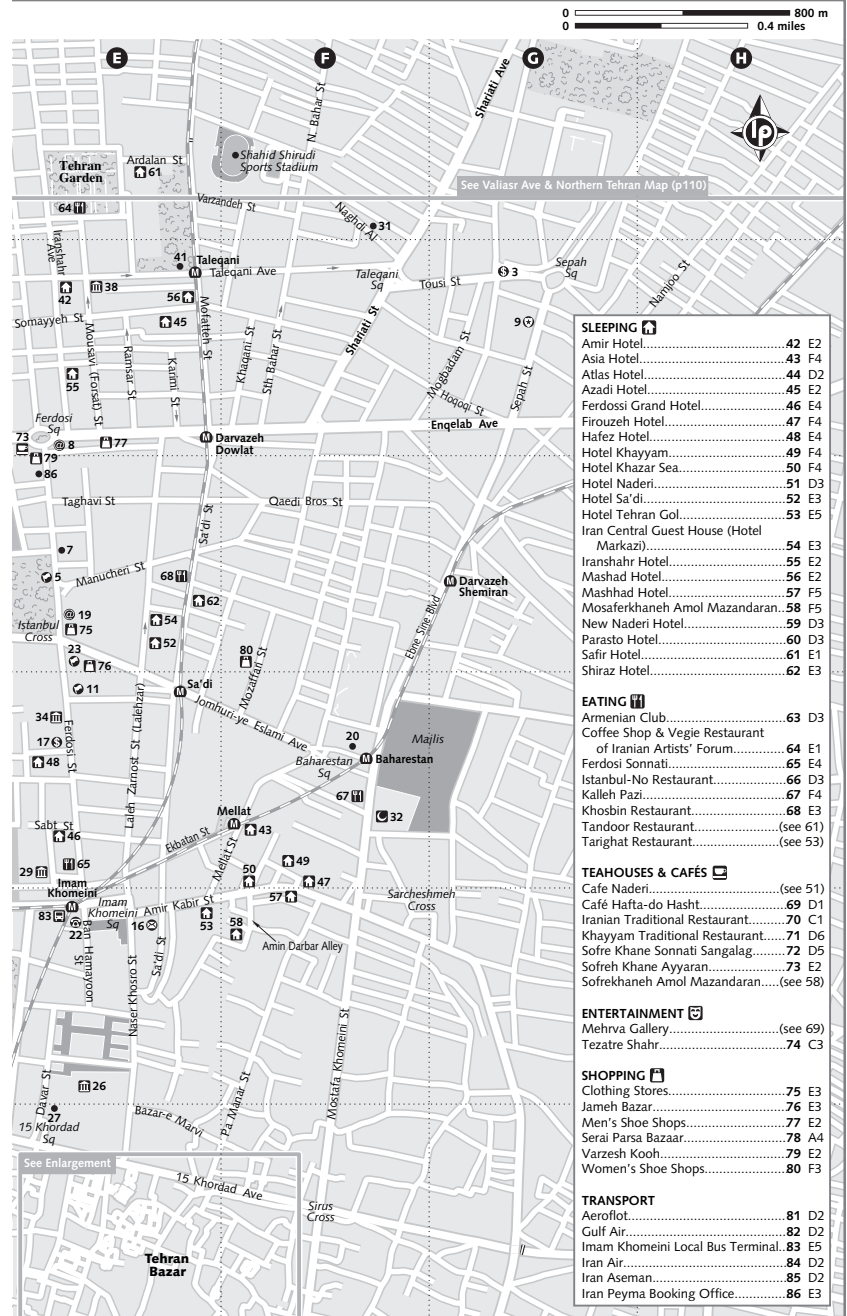
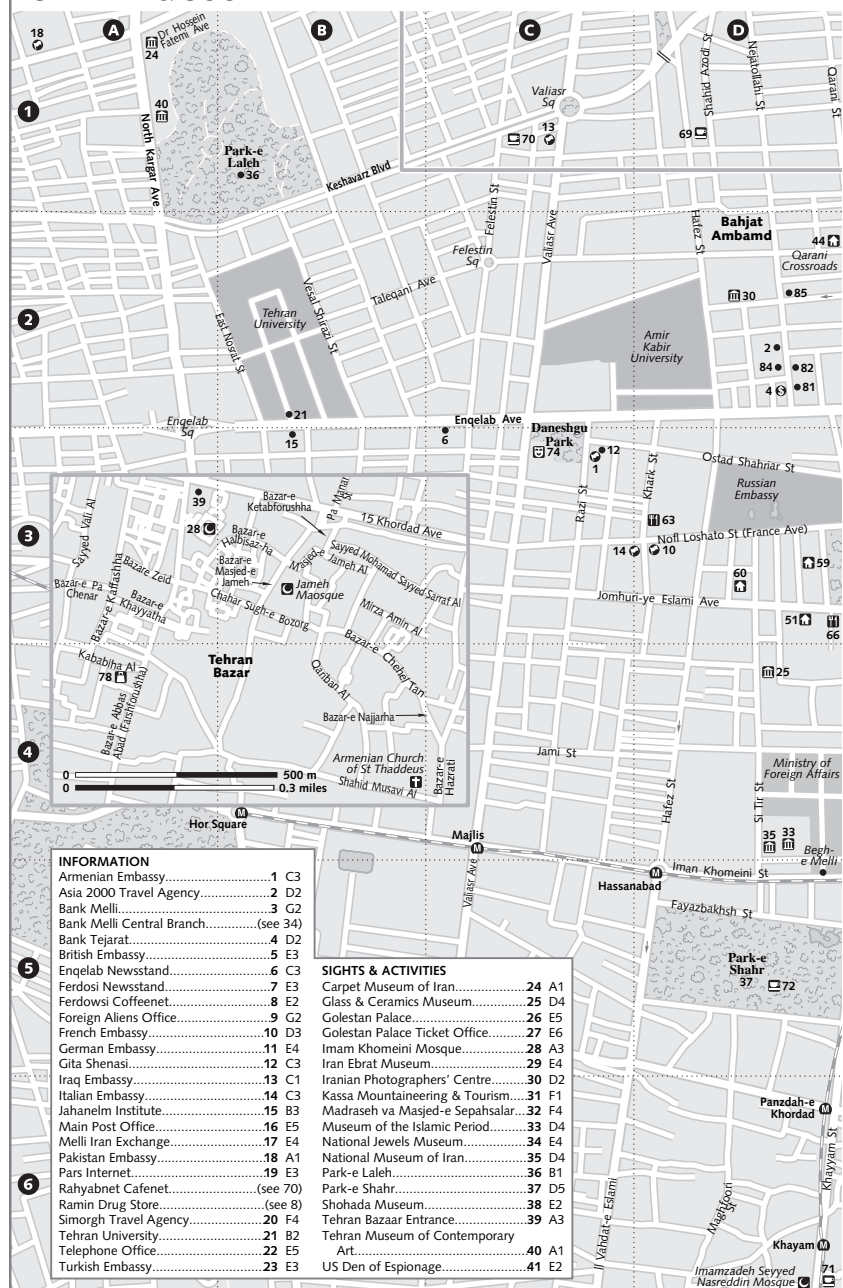
A narrow corridor leads off to a side room covered with murals of the fictional kings described in Ferdosi's *Shahnamah* – look for Zahhak, the king with a snake on his shoulder that had to be fed with human brains. Don't miss the painting of Fath Ali Shah above the fireplace – he's the one with the beard so thick you'd swear it was a falsie!

Leaving the Ivan-e Takht-e Marmar, turn left and you'll come to the **Negar Khane** (Art Gallery; admission IR4000), which displays a fine collection of Qajar-era art. It was the brainchild of Nasser al-Din Shah, who'd been particularly captivated by European museums. Especially interesting are the portraits of the shahs wearing the jewels and crowns you can see in the National Jewels Museum, and pictures of everyday life in 19th-century Iran by Kamal ol-Molk and Mehdi. Women were certainly wearing chadors back then, too. The difference is that the men were also swaddled in three layers of clothing. Well worth a look.

Continue in a clockwise direction around the courtyard and you'll come to the **Howze Khaneh** (Pool Room; admission IR3000), named for the small pool and fountain in the centre of the room. It houses a collection of



**CENTRAL & SOUTHERN TEHRAN**



paintings and sculptures of 19th-century European royalty – generously given to their Qajar counterparts by the same European monarchs.

At the end of the garden is the imposing **Shams-Al Emarat** (Edifice of the Sun; admission IR4000), the tallest palace of its day and designed to blend European and Persian architectural traditions. Born of Nasser al-Din Shah's desire to have a palace that afforded him a panoramic view of the city, it was designed by master architect Moayer al-Mamalek and built between 1865 and 1867. A sequence of mirrored and tiled rooms display a collection of photographs, together with furniture and vases given to the shahs by European monarchs, especially the French.

Next door you'll see four soaring *badgirs* (traditional air-conditioning units; see the boxed text, p257), rising above the recently restored **Emarat-e Badgir**, first erected in the reign of Fath Ali Shah. The interior has typically ostentatious mirror work and is worth a quick look, though upstairs no longer seems to be open. In the basement the **Aks Khaneh** (Historic Photograph Gallery; admission IR3000) is one of the highlights of the Golestan complex. The photographs depicting Qajar court life are fascinating; look particularly for the picture showing the inside of a Zoroastrian tower of silence, with bodies in varying states of decay, and the shot of 'freaks and dwarfs'.

Next up, the tiny **Talar-e Almas** (Diamond Hall; admission IR3000) displays a range of decorative arts – especially 18th- and 19th-century French ceramics – in a room with red walls and a tiled floor. It's not the most riveting room in the palace. The teahouse underneath was closed when we visited.

After wandering back through the gardens, avoiding the sometimes fractious swans, you'll come to the **Ethnographical Museum** near the main entrance. The world's slowest renovation has lasted more than three years so far, but staff told us it should be open in 2009, *insh'Allah* (if God wills it).

#### PARK-E SHAHR

پارک شهر

If you're staying in southern Tehran and need a break from the traffic, head straight for **Park-e Shahr** (Map pp102-3) where you can go ice skating (when it's cold enough), take a boat trip on the tiny lake (in summer) and enjoy tea or qalyan (water pipe) year-

round at the laid-back Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag (p121). It's also a great place to just sit and watch Tehranis relaxing.

#### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRAN

(موزه ملی ایران (موزه ایران باستان)

The modest **National Museum of Iran** (Iran Bastan Museum; Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 2061-6; www.nationalmuseumofiran.ir; Si Tir St; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun, to 5.45pm summer) is no Louvre, but it is chock-full of Iran's rich history and should be on every visitor's list of things to see in Tehran. The contents will probably mean more to you if you come here after you've seen the main archaeological sites, particularly Persepolis, so you might want to wait until the end of your trip.

Designed by French architect André Godard, it's one of the more attractive modern buildings in Tehran, blending Sassanian principles such as the grand *ivan*-style entrance, with Deco-style brickwork. Inside you'll find a marvellous collection, including ceramics, pottery, stone figures and carvings, mostly taken from excavations at Persepolis, Ismail Abad (near Qazvin), Shush, Rey and Turang Tappeh. Unfortunately, the presentation of these treasures is less than inspired and the lack of thorough explanations can be frustrating. There is some English labeling and an English-speaking guide is available, though you'll probably have to wait around to get one. If you can't wait, be sure to ask for the informative 'brochure' when buying your ticket.

Among the finds from **Shush**, there's a stone capital of a winged lion, some delightful pitchers and vessels in animal shapes, and colourful glazed bricks decorated with double-winged mythical creatures. A copy of the stone detailing the Code of Hammurabi found at Shush is also displayed – the original being in Paris.

Exhibits from **Persepolis** include a magnificent human-headed capital; a cuneiform inscription from the Talar-e Bar proclaiming the might and godly affinity of Xerxes; and a striking frieze of glazed tiles from the central hall of the Apadana Palace. Also on display are a famous trilingual inscription from the time of Darius I; a bull-headed capital and carved staircase; a statue of a sitting dog that looks like it was carved just weeks ago; and four foundation tablets inscribed in cuneiform.

One of the more startling exhibits is the **Salt Man** from Zanjan. He's thought to have been a miner who died in the 3rd or 4th century AD, but whose white-bearded head, leg in a leather boot and tools were also preserved by the salt in which he was buried. Rather more comical is a **bronze statue of a prince**, perhaps Parthian, whose huge bristling moustache looks out from a head obviously made separately from the body and better suited to a smaller monument. Look also for the impressive selection of **Lorestan bronzes** (see the boxed text, p207), dating back to the 8th century BC.

Entry is from Si Tir St – it's behind the small park on the corner of Imam Khomeini Ave. There's a small **coffee shop** (☎ 9am-6pm) in a courtyard behind the National Museum of Iran.

#### MUSEUM OF THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

موزه دوره اسلامی

Next door to the National Museum and part of the same complex, this **museum** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 2061; Si Tir St; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun, to 5.45pm summer) had been closed for some time when we passed, but staff assured us it was due to reopen in 2008. When it does, you'll find a modern building containing two floors of exhibits from a selection of Islamic arts, including calligraphy, carpets, ceramics, woodcarving, stone carving, miniatures, brickwork and textiles. Don't miss the silks and stucco work from Rey, portraits from the Mongol period, a collection of Sassanian coins and gorgeous 14th-century wooden doors and windows. Look also for the beautiful **Paradise Door**, a 14th-century lustre-painted mihrab (niche in a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca) from Qom, and a 19th-century inlaid door from Esfahan.

Captions should be in English, and – in theory – English-speaking guides will be there to show you around. In the past there was no printed guide, but a plastic-coated page of explanations was available if you asked.

To see both museums you should probably allow two to three hours.

#### IRAN EBRAFAT MUSEUM

موزه عبرت ایران

There is nothing subtle about the **Iran Ebrat Museum** (Map pp102-3; www.ebratmuseum.ir; off Sabt St; negotiable admission IR50,000; ☎ tours starting 10am

& 2pm Wed-Mon), a one-time prison of the shah's brutal secret police that now exhibits that brutality with an equal measure of pro-revolution propaganda. The prison is an incongruously attractive building, with wings radiating from a circular centre. But what went on here was not attractive at all.

During the 1970s, hundreds of political prisoners – including several prominent clerics and postrevolutionary figures whose names you will recognise from street signs – were held in tiny cells and, in many cases, tortured by the Anti Sabotage Joint Committee, a branch of the despised Savak internal security agency. The various functions of the prison are dramatically recreated with waxwork dummies and liberal doses of red paint. The shah's henchmen are invariably depicted wearing neckties (a pro-Western symbol in modern Iran) and looking cruel and brutish (check out the eyebrows). The propaganda element is emphasised by the photos of members of the former royal family prominently displayed throughout – just in case you forgot who was responsible.

Propaganda aside, this prison was undoubtedly a very bad place to end up and the people running it guilty of some heinous crimes. It's just a pity that the abhorrence of torture and politically motivated incarceration expressed here are not shared by the ruling regime; stories from Tehran's notorious Evin Prison are just as horrifying.

All visitors must follow the one-hour, 45-minute tour, conducted in Farsi by a former prisoner. Some exhibits have brief explanations in English, though little interpretation is required. The tour includes a film that might not be suitable for young children.

#### NATIONAL JEWELS MUSEUM

موزه جواهرات ملی

Through a large iron gate at the northern end of Bank Melli, past a couple of well-armed guards, you'll find the cavernous vault that is the **National Jewels Museum** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6646 3785; Ferdosi St; admission IR30,000, child under 12 yr not permitted; ☎ 2-4.30pm Sat-Tue). Owned by the Central Bank but actually housed underneath the central branch of Bank Melli, this museum is probably the biggest tourist drawcard in Tehran. If you've already visited the art gallery at the Golestan Palace, you will have seen the incredible

jewellery with which the Safavid and Qajar monarchs adorned themselves. Come here to gawp at the real things.

Believe it or not, at least one war has been fought over these jewels. Most of the collection dates back to Safavid times, when the shahs scoured Europe, India and the lands of the Ottoman Empire for booty with which to decorate the then capital, Esfahan. However, when Mahmud Afghan invaded Iran in 1722, he plundered the treasury and sent its contents to India. On ascending the throne in 1736, Nader Shah Afshar despatched courtiers to ask for the return of the jewels. When their powers of persuasion proved unequal to the task, he sent an army to prove that he was serious. To get the soldiers off his back, Mohammed Shah of India was forced to hand over the Darya-ye Nur and Kuh-e Nur diamonds, a Peacock Throne (though not the one you'll see here) and other assorted treasures. After Nader Shah's murder in 1747, Ahmed Beg plundered the treasury and dispersed the jewels. The Kuh-e Nur diamond found its way into the sticky fingers of the colonial British and has been locked up in the Tower of London since.

You can pick up a guidebook for IR6000 at the shop as you enter, or take one of the regular and professional tours in English, French, German, Arabic or Turkish – it's included in the ticket price, and worth waiting for, as there are no descriptions in English. Make sure you don't miss the **Darya-ye Nur** (Sea of Light), a pink diamond weighing 182 carats and said to be the largest uncut

diamond in the world; the **Peacock (Naderi) Throne** outside the vault door (see the boxed text, below); the tall **Kiani Crown** made for Fath Ali Shah in 1797; the crowns worn by the last shah and his wife, Farah; and the incredible 34kg **Globe of Jewels**, made in 1869 using 51,366 precious stones – the seas are made from emeralds and the land from rubies (with Iran, England and France set in diamonds).

Not surprisingly, cameras and bags must be left at reception and, unless you can hide it under your *manteau* (overcoat), you'll be forced to leave this book outside too. Be careful not to touch *anything* or you'll set off ear-piercing alarms.

#### GLASS & CERAMICS MUSEUM

موزه آبیگنه و سرامیک

North of the National Museum of Iran is the impressive **Glass & Ceramics Museum** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 8153; Si Tir St; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun, to 6pm summer), housed in a beautiful Qajar-era building. Built as a private residence for a prominent Persian family, it later housed the Egyptian embassy and was converted into a museum in 1976.

The building marks a move away from purely Persian traditions, successfully blending features of both Eastern and Western styles. The graceful wooden staircase and the classical stucco mouldings on the walls and ceilings are particularly delightful, and there are many delicate carvings and other decorations.

The museum itself is probably the best-designed in Iran. It has hundreds of exhibits,

mainly from Neishabur, Kashan, Rey and Gorgan, dating from the 2nd millennium BC. They're organised chronologically into galleries, with explanations of the periods in English, plus other relevant details such as the Persian glass-blowing tradition. The pieces are all lovingly displayed and it's easy to spend an hour or more reading and looking your way through the museum. The ground floor shop sells an English guidebook to the museum.

#### MADRASEH VA MASJED-E SEPAHSALAR

مدرسه و مسجد سپهسالار

The **Madrasedeh va Masjed-e Sepahsalar** (Masjed-e Motahari; Map pp102-3; Mostafa Khomeini St, off Baharestan Sq; ☎ Fri only), at the eastern end of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, is one of the most noteworthy examples of Persian architecture of its period, as well as one of the largest. Built between 1878 and 1890, it's famous for its multiple minarets and poetry inscribed in several ancient scripts in the tiling. It still operates as an Islamic college and is usually open to male members of the public on Fridays only. Photography is not encouraged, especially outside where the Majlis building is just to the north.

#### IRANIAN PHOTOGRAPHERS' CENTRE

کانون عکاسان ایرانی

The **Iranian Photographers' Centre** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8889 5054; Somayyeh St; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Sat-Thu) has rolling exhibits of the work of local and, occasionally, international photographers. The adjoining shop sells and processes slide film and sells pro equipment. Not surprisingly, it's a good place to meet Iranian photographers.

#### US DEN OF ESPIONAGE

لانه جاسوسی آمریکا  
More than any other single building in Iran, the former US embassy in Tehran (and the events emanating from it) have had a dramatic and profound influence on the recent history of this country and, indeed, the whole Middle East. From a bunker beneath the embassy building at the junction of Taleqani Ave and Mofatteh St, CIA operatives orchestrated a coup d'état in 1953 that brought down the government of Mohammad Mossadegh (see the boxed text, p37).

For the next 25 years, US support for and influence over Shah Mohammad Reza was implemented largely from this build-

ing. When the shah was finally pushed out, students who feared a repeat of the 1953 coup stormed the embassy and held 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days (see p39). The rest – the birth of the Islamic Republic and the rise of fundamentalism throughout the region – is history.

Today, the former embassy is known as the **US Den of Espionage** (Map pp102-3; Taleqani Ave) and is used by the Sepah militia, a headline group dedicated to defending the revolution. The interior of the chancery is preserved as a museum, with incriminating documents that had been pieced together after being shredded among the exhibits. Unfortunately, it's rarely open to the public – usually only from 1 to 10 February.

Despite this, the embassy's colourful history and more colourful murals along the Taleqani Ave wall mean most travellers come for a look. The murals pronounce the evil of the 'Great Satan' (the USA) and Israel, including one in which the face of the Statue of Liberty is rendered as a skull. There's no sign saying you can't take pictures of these highly photogenic murals but try to be discreet. We've had reports of travellers asking and being allowed, while others have been told not to take photos. We've photographed the wall several times without trouble, but on the last visit we were briefly apprehended and led away before persuading our half-hearted captors that we hadn't, in fact, taken any photos at all and were just dumb tourists.

Diagonally opposite the US Den of Espionage is the **Shohada Museum** (Martyrs' Museum; Map pp102-3; cnr Taleqani Ave & Forsat St; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Sat-Thu), which has rolling exhibitions of photographs, usually from the Iran-Iraq War or the 1979 revolution.

#### PARK-E LALEH

پارک لاله

Near the centre of Tehran, **Park-e Laleh** (Map pp102-3; Keshavarz Blvd) is one of those places that is more than the sum of its parts. Certainly, it is a well-designed green space, but its location amid so much traffic makes the park a real oasis. As you wander through, perhaps on your way to the adjoining Carpet Museum or Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, you'll notice plenty of young Tehranis refining their flirting techniques over soft-serve ice creams. It's a great place for people-watching.

#### THE PEACOCK THRONE

There has long been confusion about the origins of the Peacock Throne that now sits at the entrance to the National Jewels Museum. The real story is this: In 1798 Fath Ali Shah ordered a new throne to be built. His artists made quite a job of it, encrusting the vast throne that looks more like a bed with 26,733 gems. Set into its top was a carved sun, studded with precious stones, so the throne became known as the Sun Throne. Later Fath Ali married Tavous Tajodoleh, nicknamed Tavous Khanoum or Lady Peacock, and the throne became known as the Peacock Throne in her honour.

Fath Ali certainly had a taste for gems, but one of his predecessors, Nader Shah, liked the finer things too. So much, in fact, that he invaded India in order to recover the Kuh-e Nur diamond. During the expedition he also bagged the Moghuls' famous Peacock Throne. But during the haul back to Persia, this piece of booty fell into the hands of rebellious soldiers, who hacked it up to spread the wealth among themselves. In the intervening years the stories of the Peacock Thrones have become muddled, so you might still hear people say (erroneously) that this Peacock Throne originally came from India.



**TEHRAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

موزه هنرهای معاصر تهران

On the western side of Park-e Laleh, the **Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8896 5411; www.tehranmoca.com; Kargar Ave; admission IR4000; 🕒 9am-6pm Sat-Thu & 2-6pm Fri, to 7pm summer) is in a striking concrete modernist building constructed during the shah's rush to build modern landmarks in the 1970s. Contrary to preconceptions of Iran, here's a collection of art (not always modern and rarely contemporary) by Iranian artists and some of the biggest names of the last century. Established during the '70s under the direction of the progressive Queen Farah Diba, the museum holds arguably the greatest collection of Western art in Asia – worth between US\$2 billion and US\$5 billion. It includes works by Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, Miró, Dali, Bacon, Pollock, Monet and Warhol, among others.

During the Ahmadinejad years, however, this collection has been locked away in the museum vaults, deemed to be symbolic of a Western liberalism that is decidedly out of favour among the ruling classes. While this is disappointing, it does put a lot more Iranian art on display and it's still well worth visiting. Part of the museum's charm is its distinctively modern design, with gallery after gallery appearing in an ever-descending and circling pattern, with plenty of comfy seats from which to take it all in. It's a good place to meet arty Tehranis, especially in the café (which serves real coffee!).

**CARPET MUSEUM OF IRAN** موزه فرش ایران

Just north of the Museum of Contemporary Art, the two floors of the **Carpet Museum** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8896 7707; http://carpetmuseum.ir; cnr Fatemi Ave & Kargar Ave; admission IR5000; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun, to 6pm summer) house more than a hundred pieces from all over Iran, dating from the 17th century to the present day; the older carpets are mostly upstairs. The museum itself was designed by Queen Farah Diba and mixes '70s style with carpet-inspired function – the exterior is meant to resemble threads on a loom, which cool down the main building by casting shadows on its walls. You will often see weavers working on a loom on the ground floor and questions are welcome. Inside, a shop sells postcards and books and there's a pleasant café. Flash photography is not allowed.

**Valiasr Ave & North Tehran**

Almost everything along Valiasr Ave and the surrounding parts of northern Tehran has been built in the last 50 years, so there aren't many actual 'sights'. Instead, this is modern Tehran, home to hip coffee shops, fancy restaurants and embassies.

To get here, shuttle taxis head north from Valiasr Sq so it's probably simplest to just jump in and out as you need. If you're heading somewhere near to or north of Mirdamad Blvd, however, consider taking the Metro to Mirdamad station and a shuttle taxi the short hop across to Vanak Sq or up to Tajrish.

**SARKIS CATHEDRAL** کلیسای سرکیس

In case you assume that Islam has a monopoly on Iranian life, visit **Sarkis Cathedral** (Map p110; ☎ 8889 7980; cnr Nejatollahi & Karim Khan-e Zand Sts; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Sat). Built between 1964 and 1970, it's interesting not so much for its beauty but because of what it is and where it is. Sarkis Cathedral is by far the most visible and important non-Islamic religious building in Tehran. The area immediately to the south is the Armenian quarter, the centre of a still-thriving community.

Although most of the Christians in Iran are Armenians, there's also a sprinkling of Protestants, Assyrians, Catholics and Orthodox Christians, all of whom have churches in Tehran, most behind large walls in the same district as the Sarkis Cathedral.

**PARK-E MELLAT** پارک ملت

Many Tehranis say **Park-e Mellat** (Mellat Park; Map p110; Valiasr Ave) is their favourite in-town getaway, and if you're here around dusk on any spring or summer afternoon you'll find plenty of people enjoying the shaded areas around a small lake. On weekend nights you'll find just as many young people cruising up and down Valiasr Ave, several to a car, showing off their new noses as they flirt and swap phone numbers through car windows.

**Greater Tehran**

This section covers those places that don't appear on our larger scale maps. For sights in the far north, head first to Tajrish Sq, from where shuttle taxis leave almost continuously for the Sa'd Abad and Niyavaran Palaces; the popular walking trails at Dar-

**NATION OF NOSE JOBS** Andrew Burke

I was at dinner in Esfahan when the conversation turned to nose jobs. After prattling on about how many people I'd seen in Tehran wearing a tell-tale plaster across the bridge of their nose, I asked my friend Behzad whether he knew anyone who had actually had a nose job.

When he looked at me like I had, well, two noses, I should have known. 'She has,' he said, pointing across the table to his sister.

'Oh. Right,' said I, embarrassed that I hadn't noticed the change, before desperately trying to recover with: 'I never would have known.' Mahnaz, to her credit, dealt with it like someone who has had the nose job conversation a thousand times before. Barely skipping a beat, she began explaining that while I might never have known, she didn't really like her new nose. She was hoping to get it done again.

'It's not a big deal,' she explained. Plenty of people have nose jobs in Iran.

But I had to know: 'How much does it cost?' Well, the cheapest nose jobs could be had for less than US\$1000, she said, but that was a bit risky because it might turn out badly. A decent surgeon would cost more, but they were cheaper in Esfahan than in Tehran. 'But the best surgeons are in Tehran, and they cost about US\$4000.'

Despite Iran being a country where the average yearly wage is far less than that, Tehran is the plastic surgery capital of the universe. Surgeons report that more than 90,000 noses are remodelled in Iran every year. Tehran alone has about 3000 plastic surgeons, and their clients are not just women looking for a cutesy ski jump. A growing number of men are also spending big on taking the bump out of their proboscis.

The contrast with the West, where people disappear on 'holidays' for weeks so they can be remodelled without anyone knowing, is stark. In Tehran, the nose job has become such a status symbol that some people have taken to wearing plasters on their noses just so they can look like they've had the job done. Which might be taking it just a little too far...

band and Darakeh; the cable car to Tochal at Velenjak; and Park-e Jamshidiyeh.

**FILM MUSEUM OF IRAN** موزه فیلم ایران

Housed in a Qajar-era mansion built by Shah Nasir od-Din for his daughter, the **Film Museum** (Map p94; ☎ 2271 9001; www.film-museum.ir; Bagh-e Ferdows, off Valiasr Ave; admission IR10,000; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Thu, Sat & Sun, 2-5pm Fri) has well-displayed exhibits of equipment, photos and posters from Iran's century-old movie industry. It's interesting, even if you are not well-versed in Iranian film, and the building is fascinating.

The highlight is a sublime 121-seat cinema with moulded plaster ceilings. New and classic Iranian films are screened here at 3pm, 5pm, 7pm and 9pm daily. Seats are IR15,000 and if you ask nicely they will turn on subtitles in the language of your choice (assuming languages are available); call ☎ 2272 3535 to see what's on. A shop also sells hard-to-find Iranian films on DVD (IR40,000), and the chic café (p120) is the ideal place for post-film contemplation.

Look for the street with a garden down the middle and a sign to Bahoner Library.

**SA'D ABAD MUSEUM COMPLEX**

مجموعه موزه سعد آباد

Set on 104 hectares of spectacular mountainside parkland, the **Sa'd Abad Museum Complex** (Map p94; ☎ 2228 2031; www.saadabadpalace.org; Valiasr Ave, Taheri St; several tickets required; 🕒 8.30am-4pm, to 5pm summer) was once the royal summer home. There are more than 10 buildings scattered around the site and to see them all you'll need at least three hours; combining a visit here with lunch in nearby Darband is a good idea.

Today, most of the buildings at Sa'd Abad house museums. Some museums are more interesting than others but the individual tickets are only sold at the front gate, so you'll need to decide where to go in advance. For example, be sure to buy a ticket for the Nation's Art Museum, or you won't be able to see the basement of the White Palace. The ticket sellers should give you a map-cum-guide to the site – in barely intelligible English – though you might need to ask. Note too that it's well worth taking the free minibus from outside the White Palace up to the Green Palace, then walking down.



What is now called the **White Palace** (Palace of the Nation; admission IR5000) was built between 1931 and 1936 and served as the Pahlavi summer residence. The two bronze boots outside are all that remain of a giant statue of Reza Shah – he got the chop after the revolution. The 5000-sq-metre, 54-room palace is no Versailles. Instead it's a modern building filled with a hodge-podge of extravagant furnishings, paintings and vast made-to-measure carpets. The tiger pelt in the office, among other things, reveals the shah as a man of dubious taste, though in fairness pelts were more in vogue in the 1950s.

Whatever you think of the furnishings, the White Palace was the height of luxury in its day. Look for the discreet air-conditioning units that fold away into the walls; or the shah's 20 cues in the billiards room – little has changed since the revolution. In the upstairs Ceremony Hall is a 143-sq-metre carpet that is said to be one of the largest ever woven in Iran. The nearby Dining Hall contains a similar carpet, and it is here that the shah, convinced the palace was bugged, dragged a table into the middle of the room and insisted both he and the American general he was entertaining climb on top of it before they spoke. Don't miss the trippy stainless steel staircases at the back of the ground floor, which spiral down to the **Nation's Art Museum** (admission IR3000) in the basement.

At the uphill end of the complex, the more classical-looking **Green Palace** (Shahvand Palace; admission IR5000) was built at the end of the Qajar era and extensively remodelled by the Pahlavis. Shah Reza lived here for only a year and apparently found the bed, if not the mirror stalactites on the ceiling, a little too soft. It was later used as a private reception hall (upstairs) and residence (downstairs) for special guests. The design is over-the-top opulent, with wall-to-wall mirrors in the appropriately named Mirror Hall, and the bedroom. Be sure to go around the back to take in the view.

There are several other small, specialist museums in the complex, including the **Abkar Miniature Museum** (admission IR3000), displaying miniatures by the artist Clara Abkar; the **Farshchian Museum** (admission IR3000), with works by Mahmoud Farshchian; the **Bihzad Museum** (admission IR3000), containing paintings by the artist Bihzad; the **Museum of Ethnological Research** (admission IR3000) with a few waxworks and ethnology artefacts; and the **Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum** (admission IR3000), with samples of Iranian calligraphy from different periods.

The **Museum of Fine Arts** (admission IR3000) is in one of the more impressive buildings and houses some charming Persian oil paintings dating back to the 18th century and some beautiful inlaid furniture. The **Military Museum**

#### INFORMATION

Afghanistan Embassy.....	1	B5
Australian Embassy.....	2	A4
Book City Hafez Store.....	3	A6
Canadian Embassy.....	4	B5
Day Hospital.....	5	A4
DHL.....	6	A5
Di Rouz Em Rouz Ancien Livres.....	7	A3
Dutch Embassy.....	8	C2
Georgian Embassy.....	9	C1
Indian Embassy.....	10	B5
Japanese Embassy.....	11	A5
Lebanon Embassy.....	12	A6
Mehrad Hospital.....	13	B5
Post Office.....	14	A6
Swiss Embassy.....	15	B1
Syrian Embassy.....	16	B2
Tehran Clinic.....	17	B5
UAE Embassy.....	18	A2
Valiasr Commercial Centre.....	19	A6
Vanak Coffeenet.....	20	A3

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Araz Adventure Tours.....	21	B6
Arg-e Jadid.....	22	B5
Caravan Sahara.....	23	B6

#### Mountaineering Federation of

Iran.....	24	D1
Park-e Mellat.....	25	A1
Reza Abbasi Museum.....	26	C4
Sarkis Cathedral.....	27	A6
Skiing Federation.....	(see 24)	

#### SLEEPING

Bolour Hotel.....	28	B6
Homa Hotel.....	29	A3
Melal Apartment Hotel.....	30	B2
Raamin Residence Hotel.....	31	A5
Simorgh Hotel.....	32	A5

#### EATING

Ananda Vegetarian Restaurant & Coffee Shop.....	33	D2
Bistango.....	(see 31)	
Bix.....	(see 38)	
Gilac.....	34	A3
Hiland Supermarket.....	35	A5
Jaam-e Jam Food Court.....	36	A1
Market.....	(see 38)	
Monsoon.....	(see 38)	
Sofre-Khaneh Sonatee Ali		
Chapoo.....	37	A3

#### TEAHOUSES & CAFÉS

Gandhi Shopping Centre.....	38	A4
Gandi 35.....	39	A3
Sanaee Coffee Shop.....	40	B6

#### ENTERTAINMENT

Seyhoun Art Gallery.....	41	A5
--------------------------	----	----

#### SHOPPING

Dusto-e.....	42	A2
Jaam-e Jam Shopping Centre.....	(see 36)	

#### TRANSPORT

Air France.....	(see 46)	
Air India.....	43	B5
Ariana Afghan Airlines.....	44	A5
Azerbaijan Airlines.....	45	A5
British Airways.....	46	A2
Bix.....	(see 38)	
Central Bus Terminal (Terminal-e Arzhanthi).....	47	B4
Emirates.....	48	A4
KLM.....	(see 46)	
Lufthansa & Austrian Airlines.....	49	B5
Qatar Airways.....	(see 46)	
Turkish Airlines.....	50	B5

(admission IR3000) is inside and around another palace that belonged to the shah's nephew Shahram; just look for the helicopter.

If pushed for time, the White and Green Palaces are the most highly recommended. The **bookshop** (☎ 2794 0373; ☎ 8am-5pm) at the entrance boasts a good range of tourist-oriented and English-language books about Iran.

### Getting There & Away

To get to the museum complex, either walk or take a taxi (IR6000 *dar baste* – closed door) the 1.5km northwest from Tajrish Sq, beginning on Ja'fari St and turning left and right (ask anyone for 'Musee Sa'd Abad').

### NIYAVARAN PALACE MUSEUM

موزه کاخ نیاوران  
About 6km east of the Sa'd Abad Museum complex is the **Niyavaran Palace Museum** (Map p94; ☎ 2228 2050; www.niyavaranpalace.ir; Niyavaran Ave, off Shahid Bahonar Sq; individual tickets required; ☎ 8am-4pm winter, 9am-5pm summer), the complex where Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his family spent most of the last 10 years of royal rule. It's set in five hectares of landscaped gardens and has four separate museums – tickets must be bought individually at the main gate.

After entering and buying tickets to the various museums, we recommend going straight through to **Sahebqaraniieh** (King's Special Office; admission IR5000), which was built at the end of the Qajar period but extensively remodelled by the last shah's wife, Farah Diba, and used as his office. It contains a very fine collection of paintings and other furnishings, including several colourful Qajar-era works that Farah rescued from Shiraz and now adorn the ceilings.

But it is the insight into the shah's daily life that makes it most fascinating. Some of the very attractive rooms include a private basement teahouse, private dental surgery and a bar decorated with Shirazi painted beams. Keep an eye out for the shah's golden phone and gold-coloured pistols, and for photos displayed in the Ambassador's Waiting Room; the mixed bunch sees Mao Zedong share space with Pope Paul VI, while Hitler, Queen Elizabeth II, Richard Nixon, Kemal Ataturk and Dwight Eisenhower (who was a guest at the shah's last wedding), stare out from the past nearby.

The custodians will make you join a guided tour, which on our most recent visit was conducted by a wonderfully well-informed, English-speaking woman.

Adjoining Sahebqaraniieh is the **Jahan-Nama Museum & Gallery** (Queen's Private Museum; admission IR3000). Two main rooms here are filled with a small but well-displayed example of the eclectic collection of modern and ancient art gathered by Farah Diba, mainly during the 1970s. Works by Warhol, Picasso and Joan Miró share space with Iranian archaeological artefacts and finds from sites in Mexico and Egypt, and rotating exhibits of modern Iranian art.

Head up the hill to the actual **Niyavaran Palace**, which has been closed since 2004 but, our guide told us, should reopen sometime in 2008, *insh'Allah*. It was built between 1958 and 1968 and has a decidedly '60s look – clean-lined functionality on the outside contrasting with elaborate furniture and carpets inside. The jarring styles, over-the-top opulence and plethora of royal junk are almost a caricature of the classic royal palace and leaves you wondering whether the shah felt his position brought with it a need to be surrounded by the trappings of European palaces, or whether it was, as the guide explained, just 'normal for royals at that time'. If you manage to get inside, don't miss the magnificent Kerman carpet showing Iranian kings right back to the Achaemenids, as well as some European sovereigns, including Napoleon Bonaparte. Adjoining to the east is a private cinema and tennis courts, and in front of the palace, the modest family swimming pool.

To the west of Niyavaran Palace is the **Ahmad Shahi Pavilion** (admission IR3000), an attractive two-storey kiosk dating from the late Qajar period (early 20th century), which was last used as the residence of the crown prince Reza. When we visited the upstairs was closed, but downstairs the prince's white leather-themed living quarters are on display. It's a fascinating display of the prince's belongings, from childhood drawings to model planes (he was a pilot), a rock collection (with a moon rock gifted by Richard Nixon) and a polar bear skin (a gift of the Canadian government), among others.

In front of the Ahmad Shahi Pavilion is the pleasant **Coffee Palace** (☎ 9am-9pm), which serves pastries and very drinkable coffee.

### Getting There & Away

Take a shuttle taxi east of Tajrish Sq (IR2500), and ask to be dropped off at Shahid Bahonar Sq, near the museum entrance.

### DARAKEH & DARBAND

درکه و دربند

On a sunny day few things could be nicer than fleeing the traffic fumes for the foothills of the Alborz Mountains and the **walking trails** of Darakeh and Darband. Both the trails strike north, passing waterfalls and crossing streams. They are crowded on Thursday afternoon and Friday and make a great place to meet Tehranis in a relaxed, social atmosphere.

The lower reaches of both trails are lined with teahouses and stalls selling food and drinks, which are hugely popular in the evenings – some close mid-week and in winter. A dish of *dizi* (stew), a kabab or two, a cold drink or a huff and a puff on a qalyan by the stream will soon help you forget the Tehran traffic. Among other tasty treats to sample on the way up are dates, apricots, pickled walnuts, *lavashak* (sheets of pressed dried fruit), fresh mulberries and steamed lima beans.

Darband also has a **ski lift** (Map p94; ☎ 6am-5pm Sat-Thu, to 7.30pm summer), with tickets costing IR6000/12,000 one way/return to the only station.

### Getting There & Away

The starting point for getting to either trail is the northern side of Tajrish Sq. For Darband, either walk 2.5km uphill along Fana Khosrow St (or take a shuttle taxi), or leave the grounds of Sa'd Abad Palace from the rear, cross Meydan-e Darband and continue uphill to where you see the ski lift on the left. The walking trail starts at the end. A visit to Darband can easily be combined with a visit to Sa'd Abad, or you can walk all the way to Jamshidiyeh Park from a trail starting further east.

To get to Darakeh take a shuttle taxi from Tajrish Sq. At the end of Darakeh St you'll be dropped in a square; the trail leads off from the northeastern corner. A private taxi costs about IR15,000.

### PARK-E JAMSHIDIYEH

پارک جمشیدییه

Meaning Stone Garden, **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (Map p94; ☎ 7am-midnight) climbs steeply up the lower reaches of the Alborz Mountains and

offers a clean and relatively quiet atmosphere in which to enjoy the views and escape the smog. It's the sort of place you could happily while away an entire afternoon sipping tea and watching the lights of this huge city slowly come to life – though the prices of food might give you indigestion.

If you're feeling energetic, a steep trail leads from the northwest corner of the park (beyond the Turkomen restaurant) along the side of the mountain for about 5km to Darband, making a pleasant, relatively pollution-free hike.

### TOCHAL TELECABIN

تله کابین توچال

Tehran's popular **Tochal Telecabin** (Velenjak Telecabin; Map p130; ☎ 2240 4001-5; www.tochal.org; Velenjak Ave; full journey IR90,000; ☎ going up 8am-1pm, coming back 2-3.30pm Wed-Fri, closed Sat-Tue) runs 7.5km up Mt Tochal (3957m), stopping twice along the way. It's a popular and easily accessible ski-field that has snow for between six and eight months a year (due to its height, it's the fourth-highest ski field on earth).

The telecabin is busy on Friday but can be virtually empty other days. You can buy one-way/return tickets to whichever station you want. The first stop is **Station 2** (IR15,000/30,000, 12 minutes one way), then **Station 5** (IR30,000/45,000, 25 minutes), where there is an easy ski run, and it finishes at freezing **Station 7** (IR55,000/80,000, 25 minutes), from where a Poma chairlift links to Tochal Hotel. From there, a T-bar works the short runs and a Doppel Mayr lift goes to the mountain summit. It's possible to ski down from Station 7 to Station 5, assuming there is enough snow. Skis can be rented at Station 7. Prices here are for weekends; it's IR5000 or more cheaper each way on weekdays. Ski passes are IR60,000/80,000 per weekday/weekend, sold at Station 1.

While the telecabin runs fairly limited hours, you can choose to torture your thighs and climb the mountain at any time, as locals like to do on Fridays. Teahouses at the stations will help to ease your recovery.

### Getting There & Away

From the northern side of Tajrish Sq, ask for a shuttle taxi (IR2000) to Tochal Telecabin. From the entrance you can walk (10 minutes) or catch a bus (IR1000) to the telecabin ticket office.

**REZA ABBASI MUSEUM** موزه رضا عباسی  
Named after one of the great artists of the Safavid period, the **Reza Abbasi Museum** (Map p110; ☎ 8851 3002; www.rezaabbasimuseum.ir; 972 Shariati Ave; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am-4.45pm Tue-Sat) showcases Iranian art from ancient times and the Safavid-era paintings of Abbasi himself. If you like Iranian art, it's one of the best and most professionally run museums in the country. The museum is organised chronologically starting with the top-floor Pre-Islamic Gallery, where you'll find **Achaemenid gold** bowls, drinking vessels, armlets and decorative pieces, often with exquisite carvings of bulls and rams. Here, too, you'll find fine examples of **Lorestan bronzes** (see the boxed text, p207). The middle-floor Islamic Gallery exhibits ceramics, fabrics and brassware, while the ground-floor Painting Gallery shows samples of fine calligraphy from ancient Qurans and illustrated manuscripts, particularly copies of Ferdosi's *Shahnamah* and Sa'di's *Golestan*.

To reach the museum you can take a shuttle taxi from the junction of Shariati and Enqelab Aves, but not all of them continue as far north as this so you might be better going by private taxi. Alternatively, take Metro Line 1 to Mosalla and then a shuttle taxi down the Resalat Expressway to Shariati Ave.

**AZADI TOWER (BORJ-E AZADI)** برج آزادی  
Way out west at the end of Azadi Ave is the inverted Y-shaped **Azadi Tower** (Borj-e Azadi or Freedom Tower; Map p94; Azadi Sq; admission IR6000; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Sun-Fri), built to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971. After being closed for years the underground gallery, Quran museum, cinema and, best of all, the viewing platform finally reopened in 2006.

Like the City Theatre, Carpet Museum and Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the 50m-high structure is a mix of '60s modern architecture with traditional Iranian influences, such as the *iwān*-style of the arch. The exterior is clad with more than 8000 cut stones, while inside you can see architect Hossein Amanat's complex structural engineering in concrete. The park surrounding the monument is a relative oasis compared with the surrounding maelstrom of traffic. It was the scene of much protest during the 1979 revolution

and remains a focal point for (progovernment) demonstrations today.

You can reach the top by stairs or lift, and will probably be accompanied. To get here, take a bus or shuttle taxi west and ask for 'Azadi' or take Metro line 2 (dark blue) to Azadi and walk from there.

**MILAD TOWER (BORJ-E MILAD)** برج میلاد  
Ten years in the making, **Milad Tower** (Borj-e Milad; Map p94; www.miladtowerteheran.com) is the fourth tallest tower and (in early 2008) 12th-tallest freestanding structure in the world. Standing 435m high, including 120m of antenna, the tower bears a striking resemblance to Toronto's CN Tower, with the octagonal concrete shaft tapering from the base to a pod with 12 floors. The pod was due to open in 2008 and will be home to an observation deck, a revolving restaurant, a 'sky dome' and various TV, radio and traffic control functions.

The tower forms part of the Tehran International Trade and Convention Centre, a vast expanse of ground that includes the 500-room Yadman Hotel, though when it will open is unknown.

## SLEEPING

Tehran's accommodation largely follows the city's social breakdown, so budget places are in the poorer south, and the options get more expensive as you go north. Capital-city syndrome means room rates are generally higher than elsewhere in Iran.

The business district is between Enqelab Ave and Keshavarz Blvd, where you'll also find several three-star standard business hotels. Tehran's pre-Revolution era 'five-star' hotels are most interesting for the disco-era décor and ornamental outdoor swimming pools. Service and everything else isn't great. The best top-end places are boutique-sized affairs on Valiasr Ave, Tehran's main north-south artery, in the north of the city. They are not exactly Ritz standards, but they're good value.

If you don't have a booking, try telephoning your chosen hotel when you arrive and bargaining, then taking a taxi to check it out. Your taxi will usually wait until you're satisfied, and if you're not, will take you to the next place on your list. Listings here are ordered by price, from cheapest to most expensive.

## Budget

**Mashhad Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3062; www.mashhadhotel.homestead.com; 416 Amir Kabir St; dm/s/tw IR40,000/60,000/80,000; ☎) The rooms and shared bathrooms are tiny, but the mainly helpful management have long made it the choice for those on the tightest budgets. There's only one shower, however, and front rooms are horrendously noisy. Don't confuse this Mashhad with the midrange Mashhad Hotel, near the former US embassy.

**Mosaferkhaneh Amol Mazandaran** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3394 1630; www.amolmazandaran.com; Amin Darbar Alley, off Amir Kabir St; s/tw/tr IR60,000/80,000/120,000; ☎) Set around a small courtyard away from the noise of Amir Kabir St, this 22-room place is one of the best deals in the area for its price, friendly managers and location above a very local *chaykhaneh* (teahouse). Rooms are simple, but clean, as are the shared bathrooms. It's about 150m south of Amir Kabir St, on the right. There's no English sign.

**Hotel Khazar Sea** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3860; Ohadi Alley, off Amir Kabir St; s/tw IR65,000/80,000) If you don't mind a bit of peeling paint and a walk to the bathroom, this no-frills place set around a courtyard is welcoming, quiet and good value. The manager speaks some English. It's in the second lane on the left as you head east of the intersection of Amir Kabir and Mellat Sts.

**Hotel Tehran Gol** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3477; Amir Kabir St; s/tw IR70,000/100,000) The basic rooms here have a basin inside and are marginally more spacious than the hotel's neighbours, though front rooms are still very noisy. There's not much English. Bathrooms are shared.

**Firouzeh Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3508; www.firouzehhotel.com; Dowlat Abad Alley, off Amir Kabir St; s/tw with breakfast IR110,000/160,000; ☎ ☎) If ever there was a hotel whose atmosphere revolved around one man, this is it. Mr Mousavi is the very personification of Persian hospitality, and his enthusiasm, useful information, help with bookings (including day trips to the ski fields) and wonderful guest book make an otherwise unremarkable little hotel in cheap southern Tehran worth the stay. The smallish rooms come with cable TV, fridge and bathrooms with shower and basin; toilets are shared. The best budget option.

**Iran Central Guest House** (Hotel Markazi; Map pp102-3; ☎ 3391 4798; cnr Zavareian & Lalehzar Sts;

s/tw IR100,000/160,000, with bathroom IR180,000/225,000) The small, recently renovated rooms are clean and the welcome is friendly enough. Toilets are squats and some rooms don't have bathrooms.

**Hafez Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 9063; hafez hotel@yahoo.com; Bank Alley, off Ferdosi St; s/d with breakfast US\$20/27; ☎) In a lane beside the big Bank Melli, the modern rooms here are quiet, clean and have fridge, fan and pokey bathroom. It's conveniently located and fair value.

**Hotel Naderi** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 1872; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d/tr US\$15/30/45; ☎) If service and fastidious cleanliness are important to you, stop reading now. But if you fancy '50s-era bakelite telephones, a manual switchboard, decades-old furnishings and the bohemian Cafe Naderi (Map pp102-3) downstairs, read on. The history is certainly unusual and maybe even unique in Tehran. But this is not a renovated faux-historic hotel (though it could be!); it's just old. So the attractions of the big rooms with their high ceilings are somewhat tempered by broken beds, leaky plumbing, grubby floors, mosquitoes and no toilet paper. And apart from Davoud, the service is mainly unsmiling. Still, we quite like it, and the price is fair, especially for single travellers, and location good. If you do stay, be sure to ask for a rear room (room numbers 107 to 112 or 207 to 212), because the front rooms are frightfully noisy.

If the others are full:

**Asia Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 8320; Mellat St; s/tw with breakfast & bathroom IR150,000/200,000; ☎) Metres from Metro Mellat.

**Hotel Khayyam** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3311 3757; www.hotelkhayyam.com; 3 Navidy Alley, Amir Kabir St; s/tw/tr US\$22/37/46; ☎ ☎) Quiet place with helpful, engaging service but worn, overpriced rooms and squat toilets. Long-discussed renovation can't come soon enough.

## Midrange

Most of the midrange hotels are in central and northern Tehran. You'll have to walk further or take a taxi to most of the museums in the south, but will be closer to decent restaurants, parks and cafés. Prices in this range start at about US\$30 for a twin or double room. All rooms have a fridge, TV and air-con, and bathrooms with thrones. Reception staff should speak English and there will be a restaurant.

**Parasto Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6672 0839; hotel\_parasto@yahoo.com; Mohammad Buyk Alley, off Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; s/d with breakfast US\$25/39; (P) (Q) (L)) Style? Ahm, no. The Parasto is as no-frills as it gets but the rooms are spotlessly clean and staff welcoming, making it a reliable lower-midrange choice. There is also a reasonably priced restaurant.

**Shiraz Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3392 5342; www.shiraz-hotel.com; cnr Jaber Zadeh Alley & Sa'di St; s/d with breakfast US\$35/52; (Q) (L)) The Shiraz offers clean, compact but comfortable and well-equipped rooms with double-glazing to keep out the noise. Good value; shame about the hectic location.

**New Naderi Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 9530; new\_naderihotel@hotmail.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, 53 Gohar Shad Alley; s/d US\$35/55; (P) (Q) (L)) If the 'old' Naderi (p115) is a product of the '50s, this place is certainly a '70s child. The rooms aren't quite as vast as the lobby, but they're cleaner than those in the Naderi and come with breakfast. The restaurant is good value but service can be disinterested.

**Atlas Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8890 6058; www.atlas-hotel.com; 206 Taleqani Ave, near Qarani Crossroads; s/d US\$38/58; (Q) (L)) Right in the heart of Tehran, the spacious, comfortable, well-maintained and quiet rooms in the Atlas's main building (out the back away from the street) are excellent value. Some overlook a colourful courtyard and the combination of decent service, space and facilities makes it a real oasis. The Indian-Pakistani-Iranian restaurant is reasonably good. Recommended.

**Safir Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8830 0873; www.indianhotelsafir.com; 10 Ardalan St, off Mofatteh Ave; s/tw with breakfast US\$39/60; (Q) (L)) Located behind the old US embassy grounds, the Safir is probably better known for its subterranean Indian restaurant. But the three-star standard rooms in this long-running little hotel won't disappoint and nor will the service.

**Iranshahr Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8883 4976; www.hotel-iranshahr.com; Iranshahr Ave; s/d with breakfast US\$47/72; (P) (Q) (L)) Reliable. That pretty much sums up the Iranshahr, where the rooms are reliably clean and the service is reliably well-disposed. Solid.

**Mashad Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8883 5120; 190 Mofatteh St, near Taleqani Ave; s/d with breakfast US\$55/65; (Q) (L)) A recent facelift has transformed the Mashad into a good-value, well-located mid-range option. Rooms are smallish but attractively furnished, and those on the 4th floor

and above have some views into the old US Embassy compound. Service is so so.

**Ferdossi Grand Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6671 9991-3; www.ferdossigrandhotel.com; 24 Sabt St, off Ferdosi St; s/d US\$65/85; (Q) (L) (L)) Within an easy walk of the museums, Golestan Palace and bazaar, the Ferdossi is the best midrange choice in this part of Tehran. The whole place has recently been renovated, there's professional service and facilities, and the quiet, spacious rooms are fairly priced. The restaurant and coffee shop aren't bad, either.

**Amir Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8830 4066; www.amirhotel.ir; Taleqani Ave, near Iranshahr Ave; d/ste with breakfast US\$83/93; (Q) (L)) In the midst of the business district, the Amir is a modern business hotel with 70 reasonably sized, clean rooms boasting wood-panelling, soft beds and satellite TV. Service is professional and prompt, and the foyer coffee shop serves real coffee! In-room internet is planned.

These hotels in central Tehran share a pre-revolution heritage and everything about them screams 'make me over, now'.

**Azadi Hotel** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8884 2479; info@azadihotel.net; Somayyeh St; r US\$48) Rooms at the back are best.

**Bolour Hotel** (Map p110; ☎ 8882 3080; 191 Qarani St; r with breakfast US\$52; (Q) (L)) Large rooms, larger bathrooms but little atmosphere; ask for a room away from the road.

## Top End

Tehran has a few 'five-star' hotels, most of them built in the '70s by big chains and renamed after the revolution. Those places have experienced a supernova or two (that is, the stars have burst), but a couple of boutique-sized hotels offer the sort of service and comfort more familiar elsewhere. Following is a selection of places that are comparatively central and reasonable value.

**Raamtin Residence Hotel** (Map p110; ☎ 8872 2786; www.raamtinhotel.com; 1081 Valiasr Ave; d with breakfast from US\$140; (Q) (L)) White leather couches might not be your thing, but the Raamtin's 50 spacious rooms are otherwise very well-equipped. There's free wi-fi internet, DVD players and double-glazing, which keeps out the noise of Tehran's main commercial strip. Service is efficient and professional, the location ideal for business and the classy Bistango restaurant downstairs a centre of lunchtime deal-making.

**Simorgh Hotel** (Map p110; ☎ 8871 9911; www.simorghhotel.com; 1069 Valiasr Ave; r with breakfast from US\$170; (Q) (L) (L)) Virtually next door to the



## VOICES OF IRAN: FARAHNAZ TAHERI

**Age:** 44

**Lives in:** Western Tehran

**Occupation:** Housewife

'My husband is a driver and sometimes he brings his foreign passengers home. We Iranians don't see many foreigners so it's very interesting when they come to visit. Some of our customs are unusual for them and we get to see some of their culture, too.

For example, when we eat we sit on the floor – on the carpet – but some foreigners can't sit that way and it's funny to see them with their legs stuck out. Some foreigners forget to take their shoes off, but it's not a problem for us as we understand that they have different customs.

If they come for dinner, the foreigners eat what we normally eat, though I might go to some extra effort to make sure they have good memories of our house. I am from the Caspian Sea region so I like to cook dishes from that area, such as *mirza ghasemi*, *fesenejun*, *khashke bademjan*, fish and *gheyme*. Among the foreigners, *fesenejun*, *ghorme sabzi* and fish are probably the favourites – I think because they are sick of eating kababs all the time!

The men and women who come here always ask how to cook the dishes and I'm happy to tell them. This is funny, too, because Iranian men never cook...although, to be fair, [my husband] Ali has recently been learning how to make an omelette. But that's normal in Iran. I don't know any husbands who can cook, and my two sons aren't much better. Iran is a man's country and a man who cooks is a 'lady man', so I'm not expecting things to change anytime soon. For sure I think it would be good if the men cooked...but we'd all be waiting a long time for dinner.'

Raamtin, this modern-looking 69-room hotel is also popular with business visitors for its stylish, well-fitted rooms (free wi-fi internet throughout) and well-trained staff to go with facilities including gym, Jacuzzi and pool.

**Melal Apartment Hotel** (Map p110; ☎ 8879 0543; www.melal.com; 68 Naseri St, off Valiasr Ave; s with breakfast US\$190-290, d US\$225-325; (Q) (L) (L)) The Melal's luxurious apartments are a taste of how the wealthy live in Tehran. For your bundles of cash (just imagine the rials!) you get large spaces with two or three bedrooms, all decorated with Persian motifs, such as copper fireplaces adorned with Achaemenid soldiers. Facilities include a terrace swimming pool (men only, summer only), gym, café (yes, with real coffee) and two classy restaurants. All rooms have ADSL internet. Melal Group has three other apartment hotels in Tehran, all of a similar standard if slightly different in style; see them on the website.

If ever there was an argument for the management of an international chain, the following three orphans of the '70s are it. Service can be a bit public service, and prices reflect glories past rather than

the wrinkled present. Fortunately, very reasonable rates can be had online.

**Azadi Grand Hotel** (Map p94; ☎ 2207 3021; www.azadigrandhotel.com; Chamran Expressway, near Evin Crossing; s/d US\$120/145; (P) (Q) (L)) The Hyatt in its previous life; location in far north Tehran is a long way from anywhere except the International Trade Fair Ground.

**Laleh International Hotel** (Map p94; ☎ 8896 5021; www.lalehhotel.com; cnr Dr Hossein Fatemi Ave & Hejab St; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$130/145/254; (P) (Q) (L) (L)) North of Park-e Laleh, the ex-Inter-Continental is ideally located and rooms have fine views.

**Homa Hotel** (Map p110; ☎ 8877 3021; www.homahotels.com; 51 Khoddami St; d/ste with breakfast US\$183/245; (P) (Q) (L) (L)) Former Sheraton that's almost, but not quite, worth it for the *Saturday Night Fever* flashbacks. Tired, overpriced rooms, though all have free internet.

## EATING

Tehran is a long way from being one of the world's culinary capitals, but its range of foreign cuisines make a refreshing change from the Iranian staples. Like the city itself, Tehran's food scene draws on a broad selection of cultural influences and caters to both ends of the budget spectrum. Sleek modern restaurants take a more Western approach to



presentation and price, but even something as exotic as Thai curry will probably cost less than you'd pay for a couple of beers back home.

Not surprisingly, Iranian food is available all over Tehran, but for non-Iranian food you'll almost certainly have to head to the wealthier north. Note that most of the places listed under Teahouses & Cafés (p120) also serve excellent Iranian food. All listings here are ordered by price, from cheapest to most expensive. For more on Iranian food, see Food & Drink (p78).

## Restaurants

Many Iranian restaurants are hidden away underground, so be on the lookout for anonymous-looking stairwells.

## IRANIAN RESTAURANTS

The most atmospheric Iranian restaurants are actually teahouses (see p120).

**Istanbul-No Restaurant** (Map pp102-3; off Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; meals IR20,000-30,000; ☎ 11am-5pm) Tucked away 20m down a lane near the Hotel Naderi, this hole-in-the-wall serves a surprising range of lunchtime dishes, with the usual kababs sharing space with huge pots of *khoresht* (any kind of meaty stew), *ghormeh sabzi* (stewed beans, greens and mince) and *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg). Recommended particularly for budgeteers.

**Ferdosi Sonnati** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6671 4503; Ferdosi St; meals IR15,000-30,000; ☎ 11am-9pm) The Ferdosi is a popular place that is especially busy at lunchtime, when its well-priced classic Persian dishes attract traffic from busy Imam Khomeini Sq.

**Tarighat Restaurant** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3391 3097; Amir Kabir St; meals IR35,000; ☎ noon-4pm Sat-Thu) Handy to the budget accommodation, this lunchtime place serves reliably good interpretations of the standard kababs and *zerehsh polo ba morgh* (roast chicken served with rice and barberry).

**Khosbin Restaurant** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3390 2194; 406 Sa'di St; meals IR15,000-35,000; ☎ 11.30am-3pm & 7.30-10.30pm) If you can't face another kabab – or are looking for some vegetarian (not vegan) fare – the no-frills Khosbin serves a refreshing range of Gilani food. Vegetarians should ask for the delicious *mirza ghasemi* or *baghli* (a broad bean dish), or perhaps the *zeytoun parvardeh* (olives marinated in

pomegranate juice with crushed walnuts). There's no English sign; look for the red writing on the front window.

**Sofre-Khaneh Sonatee Ali Ghapoo** (Map p110; ☎ 8877 7803; Gandhi Ave; meals about IR85,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7.30-11pm) This big, noisy subterranean restaurant is where Iranians go for a boisterous group meal. Waiters in traditional dress set the tone and the atmosphere is as enjoyable as the Iranian food. The fun is expensive by Tehran standards and gets more so after the traditional band starts at 9pm.

**Gilac** (Map p110; ☎ 8804 8291; 15 Park des Prices, off Kordestan Hwy; meals IR70,000-130,000; ☎ noon-4pm & 7pm-midnight Sun-Fri) The ambience, décor, music and food presentation at Gilac are more reminiscent of Europe than Iran. But the delicious food is wonderfully Caspian. It's a favourite of vegetarians, with the *mirza ghasemi* (IR22,000), *borani bademjan* (IR25,000) and *dokhtar-e luce* ('spoilt girl', IR27,000) starters all delicious; in combination, they'd happily make a meal on their own. The fish and veal dishes are also excellent. To find it, get to Vanak Sq, walk about five minutes west on Molla Sodra St, under the expressway, then take the first right, go one block north and it's in what looks like a housing estate on your left.

**Armenian Club** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 670 0521-2; 68 Khark St, cnr France Ave; meals IR80,000-150,000; ☎ 8pm-midnight daily & noon-3pm Fri) The Armenian Club is almost a one-off in Tehran. Because it's a Christian establishment, women can legally eat or just hang out sans hejab, and if you can get your hands on something harder than Fanta, it's fine to BYO and drink it with your meal (sorry, no advice on where to find it). The barbecued sturgeon (IR100,000) and beef stroganoff (IR50,000) are both winners, and the range of kababs goes all the way to 'Mexican'. The club doesn't advertise its existence – look for a yellow awning and a tiny buzzer – but welcomes guests. Note that Muslims (at the government's direction) cannot enter.

Literally on the side of a mountain, **Park-e Jamshidiyeh** (Stone Park; Map p94; Feizieh Ave, Niya-Varan St, Tajrish; ☎ all restaurants about 10am-midnight) is home to four restaurants perching on the slope. The first one you'll see is **Khaneh Azarbajjan** (☎ 2282 0114), which is also the best value, with *ash-e reshte* (IR10,000), *dizi* and *koft-e Tabriz* (both IR35,000) fair value if you don't add too many extras. Unfortu-

nately, the other three seem to take pride in overcharging tourists, with the Iranian food, which has barely discernible Kurdish and Turkmen influences, overpriced (more than IR100,000 a meal) and extra costs soon inflating the bill to twice what you anticipated – you'll be charged for everything they put on the table. The park is worth a visit, but think about bringing a picnic lunch – even the tea costs IR45,000.

On balmy evenings in summer, Tehranis head for Darband and Darakeh, where the walking trails are lined with cafés and restaurants serving everything from full kabab meals to generous helpings of *dizi*, *ash* (yogurt and barley soup) or just snacks.

## OTHER CUISINES

By the time you get to Tehran you might be desperate for something a little more exotic than kababs – even a little spicy! Fortunately, Tehran has it. Foreign food is expensive by Iranian standards, but you'd probably pay much more for far less at home. See the English-language newspapers for other foreign restaurants. It pays to book on weekend nights.

**Market** (Map p110; ☎ 8879 1959; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; sandwiches IR40,000-50,000; ☎ noon-11pm Sat-Thu & 6-11pm Fri) Part café, part gourmet sandwich shop, part delicatessen and salad farm, Market and its fare would be common in Western cities but is new to Tehran. The food is fresh and filling.

**Jaam-e Jam Food Court** (Map p110; Jaam-e Jam Shopping Centre, cnr Valiasr Ave & Taheri St) You don't come here for the fast food, though the coffee isn't bad. You come to see the closest thing to a Western-style pick-up bar in Iran, complete with designer clothing and inches of make-up.

**Taj Mahal** (Map p94; ☎ 8803 5444; Vanak Sq, Mollasadra Ave, 29 Sheikh Bahaei St; meals IR55,000) In the hotel of the same name, the Taj has a reputation for serving the best Indian food in Iran. The curries here are mouth-watering and there is a good range of vegetarian options. Pity about the location.

**Monsoon** (Map p110; ☎ 8879 1982; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; meals IR80,000; ☎ closed Fri) Monsoon has been around for several years now and has a reputation for the best Asian food in Tehran. The fare ranges from Thai curries to sushi, served in an intimate setting and complemented by exceptional service.

It's smart, sophisticated, relatively expensive and very new Tehran – menus only come in English.

**Tandoor Restaurant** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8830 0873; Ardalan St; meals IR80,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Under the Safir Hotel, the Tandoor has been popular in Tehran since before the revolution and is the most convenient place in the south to find a decent curry (when we ate, the lamb was far superior to the chicken), though if you want it hot, ask. There are a few vegetarian dishes for about IR35,000 each.

**Bix** (Map p110; ☎ 8878 8272; Gandhi Shopping Centre, Gandhi Ave; meals IR70,000-100,000; ☎ 12.30-4.30pm & 7pm-midnight Sat-Thu, 7pm-midnight Fri) Bix calls itself a Californian-Italian pizzeria, and that's not far from the truth. The indoor-outdoor setting, well-trained waiters and limited menu of gourmet pizzas and well-presented pastas, salads and meat dishes draw plenty of north Tehran's young and well-heeled.

**Bistango** (Map p110; ☎ 8855 4409; www.bistan-gorestaurant.com; Raamtin Residence Hotel, 1081 Valiasr Ave; meals about IR200,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Arguably Tehran's best restaurant, Bistango's air of sophistication, refined service and relatively adventurous international cuisine keep Tehranis coming despite the wads of rial it costs them. For food, think honey Dijon salmon with garlic roasted potato and ratatouille (IR170,000). Lunchtime specials are just IR110,000.

## VEGETARIAN RESTAURANTS

Some Tehranis have just said 'no' to kabab. Check out the www.iranvegetarians.com site for any new options.

**Coffee Shop & Veggie Restaurant of Iranian Artists' Forum** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8831 0462; Batulshan St, off Iranshahr Ave; meals IR15,000-35,000; ☎ 11am-10pm) This dedicated vegetarian restaurant is excellent value and a good place to meet young, educated and artistic Tehranis. It's in a brick building at the southern edge of Park-e Tehran, and has an informal, busy ambience with young people coming and going. Owner Aman promised there would be no mystery meat in the salads (less than IR10,000), sandwiches (IR20,000), pizzas (IR25,000) or *khoresht* (IR18,000), among others.

**Ananda Vegetarian Restaurant & Coffee Shop** (Map p110; ☎ 2255 6767; South Ekhtiyariyeh St, off 10th Behestan St, off Pasdaran St; meals IR35,000-60,000; ☎ 12.30-10.30pm) Way up in north Tehran the Ananda is a gem if you're a vegetarian, and

delightful even if you're not. Run in association with the **Iranian Society of Vegetarians** ([www.iranvegetarians.com](http://www.iranvegetarians.com)), there's no chance of finding rogue bits of meat here and the food is both delicious and cheap. We can recommend the Ananda lasagne (IR35,000) and Ananda calzone (IR33,000), the freshly made salad (no plastic wrap!) and the service and setting. Come by taxi and ask for Pasdaran PTT – it's just next door.

### Quick Eats

The *kababi* (kabab shop) might be under pressure from such foreign influences as the burger joint (Boof is the big Iranian chain) and pizzeria, but head to almost any major square and you'll find both a *kababi* and, usually, at least one fast food joint selling burgers, pizza and meat sandwiches. The area around Tehran Bazar also has *felafel* places.

**Akbar Mashti Bastani** (Map p94; Shahid Bahonar Ave; ☎ 10am-midnight) Akbar Mashti became famous for his ice cream in the 1950s and today his son continues to sell what he modestly describes as 'the most famous ice cream in Iran and the world'. Try the pistachio bastani (IR7000) and you'll probably agree. It's next to Bank Melli, about 150m east of Tajrish Sq.

For breakfast, you'll notice some low-key looking places selling big boiling pots full of *kalleh pache* (sheep brain and other offal). One such **kalleh pazi** (Map pp102-3; Mostafa Khomeini St) worth checking out is conveniently near to Amir Kabir St, off Baharestan Sq.

### Self-Catering

No matter where you are, fresh fruit and vegetables and various types of flat bread won't be far away (see p79 for different types of bread). Small grocery stores stocking food such as tinned fish, Iranian feta cheese, yogurt, fruit juices, cold meat, pasta, rice and shelves stacked with other staples are also common, except around Amir Kabir St. If you're in southern Tehran, head for the bazaar and Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, east of Ferdosi St.

More extravagant options exist in northern Tehran, including the luxury foods underneath the **Jaam-e Jam Shopping Centre** (Map p110; Valiasr Ave) and the tiny **Sanaee Coffee Shop** (Map p110; St 13, off Sanaee St) for a huge range of imported coffee.

**Hiland Supermarket** (Map p110; ☎ 8850 5701; Ahmed Qasir St, off Arzhanin Sq; ☎ 10am-10pm) This place is full of hard-to-find Western goods, such as coffee, baby products, pads and tampons, condoms, magazines and plenty of baby products. Look for the green façade just south of Arzhanin Sq.

### Teahouses & Cafés

Almost all Iranian teahouses (*chaykhaneh*) also serve food, and in Tehran several of the best restaurants are actually teahouses. Tehran's café scene is also improving, with no shortage of trendy places attracting the Tehrani youth, mainly in the northern suburbs. In contrast to the traditional ambience of the *chaykhaneh*, most of Tehran's cafés are modern places serving an educated, relatively sophisticated youth who look for their influences in Europe more so than the Middle East. Which makes them fun places to hang out, meet people (many of whom will speak English) and get under the skin of modern Iran. Gandhi Ave is probably the café capital of Tehran, thanks in no small part to one complex full of cafés...

**Sofrekhaneh Amol Mazandaran** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 3394 1630; Amin Darbar Alley, off Amir Kabir St; ☎ 9am-10.30pm) Under the *mosaferkhaneh* of the same name, this underground place is the classic south Tehran local, with men eating cheap *dizi* (IR13,000), drinking tea (IR500) and smoking qalyan (IR10,000). A genuine working-class Tehran experience.

**Ghaem Teahouse** (Map p94; ☎ 0912 320 0113; Tajrish Sq; meals IR35,00-65,000; ☎ noon-midnight) Behind a curtain and up an unmarked stairwell on the southeastern corner of Tajrish Sq, this is an ideal, if somewhat pricey, place from which to watch the people and traffic carnage over tea, qalyan and dates (IR40,000, 4pm to midnight only). It also does the usual range of kababs.

**Azari Traditional Teahouse** (Azari Coffeehouse; Map p94; ☎ 5537 6702; Valiasr Ave, near Rah-Ahan Sq; meals IR30,000-65,000; ☎ 7am-4.30pm & 8pm-midnight) About 250m north of Rah-Ahan Sq, this restored 'coffeehouse' in south Tehran is wonderfully atmospheric because it remains popular with locals, who use it as an unofficial community centre. The *dizi* and chicken kababs are rightly popular. A traditional band plays most evenings when the boisterous atmosphere is best enjoyed with a group, and bookings are recommended.

**Iranian Traditional Restaurant** (Agha Bozorg; Map pp102-3; ☎ 8890 0522; 28 Keshavarz Blvd; meals IR45,000; ☎ noon-midnight) This underground place is modern Iranian social interaction in microcosm, and full of young Iranians flirting, smoking and eating (in that order) under attractive vaulted and tiled ceilings. The *dizi* (IR24,000) and kababs are reliably good and well-priced for this location, though at busy times you won't be allowed to linger. It's tucked away down an ornately tiled staircase, just east of the Canon/Konica shop.

**Sofre Khane Sonnati Sangalag** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6673 1075; Park-e Shahr; meals IR40,000-60,000; ☎ 9am-11pm) If you're visiting the museums or Golestan Palace, this is the place to stop for lunch (or tea). The green setting in Park-e Shahr, coupled with the relatively quiet space embellished with antique photographs, set the tone. *Dizi* and the *bademjan* (eggplant) dishes are recommended. Musicians sometimes play between noon and 3pm.

**Sofre Khane Ayyaran** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6676 0376; Enqelab Ave, off Ferdosi Sq; meals IR60,000; ☎ 11.30am-midnight) This subterranean *chaykhaneh* makes an attractive escape from the fumes of Ferdosi Sq, though prices are aimed at tour groups (ie, high). However, the large Iranian menu has some hard-to-find dishes and a couple that you might not expect in your standard Tehran basement, such as 'Submissive: IR25,000'. Apparently it's eggplant, master.

**Khayyam Traditional Restaurant** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 5580 0760; Khayyam St; meals IR60,000; ☎ lunch & dinner) About 200m south of the Khayyam Metro station and opposite the Imamzadeh Seyyed Nasreddin Mosque (look for the dome), this beautifully decorated restaurant is an oasis amid the chaos of the bazaar area. Originally part of the mosque, the 300-year-old building was separated when Khayyam St intervened. It was restored in 2002. The typically Iranian food (mainly kabab, chicken and fish) is well prepared and plentiful. But on this visit we felt service had dropped and the 15% service charge on top of all the extras you have to pay for is irritating. Still, for tea, qalyan and sweets (IR25,000) after an outing in the bazaar, it's hard to beat.

**Gandhi Shopping Centre** (Map p110; cnr Gandhi Ave & 4th St; ☎ 10am-11pm) Home to several cool little cafés peopled largely by young and

fairly liberal Teheranis, this is your one-stop café-society stop. It's a fun place to hang out in the afternoon and evening; just choose a café you like, settle in and then perhaps eat in one of the centre's upscale restaurants.

**Gandhi 35** (Map (Map p110; ☎ 8878 1646; Gandhi Ave; ☎ 11am-11pm Sat-Thu, 5-11pm Fri) A few blocks north of the shopping centre, this hip café is equally popular and serves tasty and fair-value light meals with its range of coffee.

**Cafe Naderi** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 6670 1872; ☎ 10am-7.30pm Sat-Thu) Underneath the Hotel Naderi, this café has long been a favourite of intellectuals and artists. One traveller said the Naderi managed to perfectly create a bustling, yet disinterested, atmosphere, well suited to reading alone, people-watching and lingering over coffee. The décor is circa 1940s Paris. The fare is limited to Turkish and French coffee and perhaps a pastry or two. Don't expect any change from the grumpy-grandad waiters.

**Café Hafta-do Hasht** (78; Map pp102-3; ☎ 8891 9862-3; [www.cafe78.com](http://www.cafe78.com); 78 South Aban St [Shahid Azodi St], off Karim Khan Zand Ave; ☎ 4-11pm) One of the best places to get in touch with Tehran's hip young artistic community is this café. The coffee, wide range of teas and snacks are all good, and the downstairs Mehrva Gallery (p122) has regular exhibitions of Iranian contemporary art.

**Café** (Map p94; Bagh-e Ferdos, off Valiasr Ave; ☎ 2-11pm) In the lovely gardens of the Film Museum of Iran (p109), this chic café serves a wide range of expensive but very drinkable Italian coffees and light meals. It's an artsy, international scene.

**Sanaee Coffee Shop** (Map p110; St 13, off Sanaee St) Around the corner from Ikea, Sanaee makes and sells all manner of imported bean, and some of the richest and best chocolate milkshakes on earth (you be the judge).

### ENTERTAINMENT

Although Iran has loosened up considerably since 1997, no-one's singing 'Tehran, Tehran... a city that never sleeps' just yet. All those nightclubs and discos lovingly described in guidebooks published before the revolution have long-since disappeared, and are unlikely to reappear anytime soon.

The one time when there is quite a lot of organised entertainment is over the 10 Days of Dawn (1 to 11 February), when you will be able to attend plays, films and concerts

of traditional Iranian music as well as music from around the world.

At other times, keep your eyes on [www.tehranavenue.com](http://www.tehranavenue.com) for upcoming theatre, cinema and arts events.

### Cinema

For cinema Iranian-style, head for one of the old movie halls along southern Lalehzar St or eastern Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave, in southern Tehran, or around Valiasr Sq, where films are shown about every two hours between 10am and 8.30pm for about IR5000 a show. All films will be in Farsi or dubbed into Farsi, and forget about seeing anything Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf or anything else remotely controversial.

You can see Iranian classics (with subtitles) at the Film Museum of Iran (p109). See [www.tehranavenue.com](http://www.tehranavenue.com) for news on recent releases and p75 for more on Iranian film.

### Galleries

The following are some of the most respected galleries in Tehran, with a rotating roster of mainly contemporary artists that reflects the growing local and international profile of Iranian contemporary art. Check the websites for the latest exhibitions.

**Seyhoun Art Gallery** (Map p110; ☎ 8871 1305; [www.seyhounartgallery.com](http://www.seyhounartgallery.com); No 6, 4th St, off Khaled Eslamboli; ☎ 10am-6pm) In its 4th decade as a sponsor of young Iranian contemporary artists, Seyhoun has regular exhibitions of painting, photography, sculpture and graphic art in its distinctive, black-fronted gallery.

**Mehrva Gallery** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8893 9046; [www.mehrva-gallery.com](http://www.mehrva-gallery.com); 78 Shahid Azodi St, off Karim Khan Zand Ave; ☎ 5-9pm) Below the popular Café Hafta-do Hasht (p121), English-speaking Mehrva's gallery exhibits contemporary art in a mix of media, but primarily painting and photography.

**Silk Road Gallery** (Map p94; ☎ 2272 7010; [www.silkroadphoto.com](http://www.silkroadphoto.com); 112 Lavasani Ave, Farmanieh; ☎ 11am-7pm Sat-Wed, 5-8pm Thu) Silk Road's primary focus is photographic art, but it also delves into other media. It's professionally run and a pleasure to visit.

### Music

There is still much debate in Iran about the religious eligibility of organised public performances of modern music, so getting approval for a rock concert, for example, is

prohibitively hard. They do sometimes happen but it's tough to find out where or when. Traditional and classical music is easier to find, though again dates are infrequent and not widely advertised in the English media. Your best bet is to call **Tezatre Shahr** (City Theatre; Map pp102-3; ☎ 6646 0595) and keep your eye on trusty [www.tehranavenue.com](http://www.tehranavenue.com).

For a guaranteed performance, head to a traditional restaurant or teahouse (see p117 for possibilities).

### Nightclubs

Dream on.

### Theatre

**Tezatre Shahr** (City Theatre; Map pp102-3; ☎ 6646 0595; cnr Valiasr & Enqelab Aves) The huge, circular Tezatre Shahr is Tehran's biggest and most impressive theatre and the place you're most likely to see Iranian stage actors at work – performing in Farsi, of course. The booking staff speak English so call them to find out what's coming up. Performances are normally at 6.30pm or 7.30pm and cost about IR25,000.

### Sports

Iran's favourite sport is football (soccer), which is played at several smaller stadiums and the giant-sized, 100,000-capacity **Azadi Sports Stadium** (off Map p94; Karaj Hwy). Matches are normally played on Thursday and Friday but to find out where, your best bet is to ask a man working in your hotel. If you can make it to the big Tehran derby between Esteghlal and Persepolis, then do (see p50) – assuming you are not a woman, that is.

The Azadi complex also stages wrestling and even motor racing – though for the latter you could save your time and money and just sit in the middle of any Tehran traffic circle. Most other sports are played behind high walls in small stadia around the city.

### SHOPPING

Souvenir shopping in Tehran is not as enjoyable as working your way through the atmospheric bazaars of Esfahan and Shiraz. However, the range in Tehran is bigger and the prices usually smaller. It's well worth giving yourself a half-day to wander through the Tehran bazar (p100), where if you can't find what you're looking for, a

carpet salesman will almost certainly find it for you – after you've stopped for tea, of course.

The bazaar is an excellent place to shop for carpets, in particular, and buying here usually means you won't have to carry it around. Qalyans are also a good buy in the bazaar, where you'll get the genuine working article rather than the more elaborately decorated and expensive souvenir shop variety.

Souvenir shops, of course, can be found near or inside most midrange and top-end hotels. Other souvenir shop strips include Ferdosi St around Ferdosi Sq and Taleqani Ave (opposite the US Den of Espionage). Prices are 'fixed' but fall fast if you show any bargaining form.

Locals claim that Valiasr Ave is the world's longest thoroughfare and it's one of Tehran's major shopping districts. Ladies, this is also a good place to start looking for a *manteau* (overcoat). Stores around Valiasr Sq and Vanak Sq sell a decent selection, both in the long, conservative style and more trendy, shorter modes. You can expect to pay about IR150,000 for a standard *manteau*, up to IR2,000,000 for something 'sexier' in the boutiques of Afriqa Hwy, near Vanak Sq. Further south, both sides of Dr Labafinezhad St, just west of Valiasr Ave, are lined with women's clothing stores.

It might be surprising, but Tehran is a good place to shop for European-style clothes and shoes, which sell for a fraction of their cost back home. For shoes, women should head for the boutiques along Mozaffari St (Map pp102-3) in southern Tehran, while men can see the head-spinning choice on Enqelab Ave (Map pp102-3), east of Ferdosi Sq. For threads, see the stores on the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St (Map pp102-3).

**Hossein Hosseiny** (☎ 0912 388 5994; [tribe\\_carpet\\_hosseiny@yahoo.com](mailto:tribe_carpet_hosseiny@yahoo.com)) If you can, catch Hossein Hosseiny between buying missions; we found this young man from a family of carpet *bazaris* to be straight up and offering fair prices on his mainly nomadic carpets. His small store is in the interesting little Serai Parsa bazaar (Map pp102-3), off Kababihah Alley, with merchants who usually supply to larger shops, so prices can be good – ask for directions.

**Dusto-e** (Map p110; ☎ 2205 0071; cnr Valiasr Ave & Saveh St; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 3-9pm) The mother

of all souvenir stores is Dusto-e, where the range is huge, prices high and quality probably better than average.

A car park near the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St is also the location for the **Jameh Bazar** (Map pp102-3; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave; ☎ mornings Fri), where hawkers from across Central Asia lay out their rugs and sell whatever they can on Friday mornings. Be sure to go up to the higher floors, in the carpark itself, where some bargains can be found.

For modern Iranian music, the small store upstairs in the Gandhi Shopping Centre (p121) has a good range, and you can combine a trip with a coffee or meal.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tehran is the hub of almost all bus, train and air services. Every town and city of any size is directly linked to Tehran – always by bus, usually by air and increasingly by train too. Tickets from Tehran can sell fast so book as soon as you know when you're leaving.

### Air

Tehran is Iran's main international hub. For information about routes and carriers, see p400. Every day there are flights between Tehran and almost every provincial capital in Iran. Iran Air flies most routes, with Iran's growing number of smaller airlines flying fewer routes, less often.

Almost all international services use **Imam Khomeini International Airport** (IKA; Map p130; [www.ika.ir](http://www.ika.ir)), 35km south of Tehran, the exceptions (for now) being flights from Damascus and some Saudi Arabian cities. Domestic flights use the old **Mehrabad International Airport** (Map p94; <http://mehrabadairport.ir>) on the western edge of the city. Taxi is the only link.

Routes and prices change regularly so check online before making firm plans. If you're in Iran, you're strongly advised to use a travel agency (p98) rather than an airline office.

### AIRLINE OFFICES

Airline offices are generally open from about 9am to 4pm, Saturday to Wednesday, and Thursday morning.

**Aeroflot** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8880 8480; 23 Nejatollahi St)  
**Air France** (Map p110; ☎ 2204 4498; 12th fl, Sayyeh Bldg, cnr Valiasr Ave & Sayyeh St)

**Air India** (Map p110; ☎ 8873 9762; Sarafraz St)  
**Ariana Afghan Airlines** (Map p110; ☎ 8855 0156; 1st fl, 29 Khaled Eslamboli St) Next door to Coco Restaurant.  
**Azerbaijan Airlines** (Map p110; ☎ 8855 3335; Khaled Eslamboli St)  
**British Airways** (Map p110; ☎ 2204 4552; 10th fl, Sayyeh Tower, cnr Valiasr Ave & Sayyeh St)  
**Emirates** (Map p110; ☎ 8134 1480; 1211 Valiasr Ave)  
**Gulf Air** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 2225 3284-7; Nejatollahi St)  
**Iran Air** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8880 8472; Nejatollahi St)  
 Sells only international tickets; use a travel agent for domestic flights.  
**Iran Aseman** (Map pp102-3; ☎ 8889 5568; www.iaa.com; Nejatollahi St)  
**KLM** (Map p110; ☎ 2204 4757; 12th fl, Sayyeh Bldg, cnr Valiasr Ave & Sayyeh St)  
**Lufthansa & Austrian Airlines** (Map p110; ☎ 8873 8701; 2 Sarafraz St, off Dr Beheshti Ave)  
**Qatar Airways** (Map p110; ☎ 2201 5217-18; 2nd fl, Sayyeh Bldg, cnr Valiasr Ave & Sayyeh St)  
**Turkish Airlines** (Map p110; ☎ 8874 8450; 239 Motahhari Ave)

### INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS

Customs and immigration procedures at IKIA are slow but generally hassle-free. Bags are usually X-rayed as you leave the baggage hall, but tourists are seldom hassled. Two banks in the arrivals hall can change money at good rates, which you'll need to do to pay for your taxi – there is no public transport from IKIA. The ladies at tourist information have simple maps but little else.

### INTERNATIONAL DEPARTURES

The hardest part about leaving Tehran is getting to the airport on time. Unless your flight is very early or very late, give yourself well over an hour to get through the traffic from central Tehran, then at least 90 minutes to get through customs and immigration. Be sure to tell your taxi driver the correct airport (most likely IKIA). If you have changed money legally at a bank, and have a receipt to prove it, you can convert unused rials into cash euros.

### Bus

Masses of buses link Tehran to just about every city and town in the country. Tehran has four bus terminals so you need to work out which station is best for your trip. For more general advice on bus travel, see p127.

Tickets are usually bought at the bus terminal, and with services to major destina-

tions leaving so frequently you don't usually need to book ahead. However, Iran's largest bus company **Iran Peyma** (Taavoni 1; Map pp102-3; ☎ 6671 9857; Ferdosi St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-noon Thu) does have a conveniently central office near Ferdosi Sq that sells tickets.

The following tables show services to major destinations on direct buses from Tehran. Where only one price is listed it will be for a Volvo bus or similar; two prices are for *mahmooly*/Volvo.

### CENTRAL TERMINAL (TERMINAL-E ARZHANTIN)

The **central terminal** (Arzhantin, Sayro Safar or Beyhaqi terminal; Map p110; ☎ 8873 2535; Arzhantin Sq) is accessible by taxis, shuttle taxis and local buses from around Tehran. All buses from this terminal are Volkswagens and prices are usually a little higher than other terminals. This list includes some departure times, though in most cases there will be more.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Bushehr	IR108,000	18-21hr	1.30pm
Esfahan	IR50,000	5-7hr	hourly
Kerman	IR74,000	15hr	3-8pm
Mashhad	IR71,000	14hr	4.30-7.30pm
Shiraz	IR75,000	13-15hr	2.45-8pm
Tabriz	IR60,000	9-10hr	9am, 8.30-10pm
Yazd	IR55,000	10hr	9pm

### EASTERN TERMINAL (TERMINAL-E SHARGH)

The compact **eastern terminal** (off Map p94; ☎ 7786 8080) has buses to Khorasan province and the Caspian region. Hopefully Metro Line 2 will soon reach the terminal; otherwise, take a shuttle taxi to Imam Hossein Sq, and then another shuttle taxi, or try the trolleybus directly to the terminal. A private taxi will cost about IR40,000 from central Tehran. Iran Peyma and Taavoni 14 have the most services from this terminal. Prices here are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Gonbad-e	IR24,000/ 55,000	9hr	frequent Kavus 5am-noon; 5pm, 9pm & 11pm
Gorgan	IR22,000/ 50,000	7-8hr	3 per day
Mashhad	IR40,000/ 70,000	13-14hr	hourly 7am-noon; 2pm & 6pm
Sari	IR21,000/ 40,000	5hr	5.30am, 1-6pm

### SOUTHERN TERMINAL (TERMINAL-E JONUB)

The huge, round **southern terminal** (terminal-e jonub; Map p94) has buses heading to the south and southeast of the city.

To get to the southern terminal take Metro Line 1 to Terminal-e Jonub (then walk about 300m) or grab a shuttle taxi south. Coming from here by taxi, prepare to spend some time negotiating a decent fare.

Departure times in the following table are the minimum you can expect, and where only one price is quoted it is for a Volvo or similar bus. Otherwise, prices are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR95,000	15hr	6pm (Iran Peyma)
Bandar Abbas	IR120,000	14-18hr	every 2hr 7.30am-6pm
Bushehr	IR120,000	18-21hr	10.30am, 2pm (Iran Peyma & T14)
Esfahan	IR26,000/ 50,000	7hr	hourly 6am-10pm
Kashan	IR15,000/ 25,000	3½hr	hourly
Kerman	IR90,000	14-16hr	6pm, 9pm 3pm, 4pm
Qom	IR6000/ 10,000	1½hr	hourly
Shiraz	IR37,000/ 85,000	13-16hr	hourly 3-9pm
Yazd	IR33,000/ 45,000	10hr	several 4-10pm
Zahedan	IR120,000	19-23hr	every 2hr 8am-6pm

### WESTERN TERMINAL (TERMINAL-E GHARB OR TERMINAL-E AZADI)

The **western terminal** (terminal-e gharb; Map p94; ☎ 4465 9695 ext 233) is the city's busiest terminal, catering for the Caspian region and western Iran, as well as international destinations including Ankara and Istanbul (in Turkey), Baku (in Azerbaijan) and Damascus (Syria).

To get here ask any westbound shuttle taxi 'Azadi?', then walk north to the huge terminal. Or take Metro Line 2 to Azadi and walk further from there. The terminal closes at 11pm.

Prices indicated in the following table are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ardabil	IR38,000/ 69,000	10hr	hourly 6am- 10.30pm
Astara	IR26,500/ 60,000	9hr	Ardabil bus
Chalus	IR18,500/ 40,000	6hr	every 15min
Hamadan	IR16,500/ 40,000	6hr	every 15-30min 6am-10.30pm
Kermanshah	IR27,000/ 60,000	9hr	every 30min 6am-8pm
Orumiyyeh	IR39,500/ 80,000	12hr	hourly 4-9pm
Qazvin	IR6500/ 12,000	2-2½hr	every 15min
Rasht	IR15,500/ 35,000	5hr	every 30min 6am-10pm
Sanandaj	IR27,000/ 60,000	6-8hr	hourly 7am- 10.30pm
Tabriz	IR26,500/ 60,000	9-11hr	hourly 6.30am- 10.30pm

### Minibus

A few towns in central Iran and nearby Caspian towns are linked to Tehran by minibuses. Minibuses are about the same price as a bus and slower, but depart more frequently. They leave from designated sections within the eastern, southern and western terminals, depending on the destination.

### Savari

Most towns within about three hours' drive of Tehran are linked by savari, including Amol, Sari, Kashan, Qom, Qazvin, Zanjan, Rasht and anywhere along the way. Prices are two to three times higher than the cheapest bus tickets, but are often worth paying so you can leave almost immediately (only four seats need to fill) and get there quickly; an excellent option for day trips. Savaris leave from designated sections usually just outside the appropriate bus terminals. For example, for Kashan they leave from the northeast corner of the southern terminal, savaris to Sari and Amol leave from outside the eastern terminal, and anything west to Qazvin or Zanjan from the Azadi terminal. Just say your destination and 'savari' and you'll soon be pointed in the right direction.

### Train

Tehran is Iran's rail hub and many services start and finish at the impressive **train station** (Map p94; Rah-Ahan Sq) at the south end of Valiasr

Ave. Destinations and arrival and departure times are listed in English, and staff at **tourist information** (☎ 139) are walking timetables. For planning, use the excellent [www.rajatrains.com](http://www.rajatrains.com) website, which has up-to-date schedules and prices. Departures are punctual.

The train station is easy to reach in a shuttle taxi heading west from Imam Khomeini Sq; just ask for 'Rah Ahan'.

### SCHEDULES

The prices and days of departure in the timetable listed here are liable to change; in particular, daily services in summer may well become much less frequent in winter.

Note that trains to Mashhad vary considerably in speed, comfort and price. The Ghazal train (IR198,000, three daily at 5pm, 7.50pm and 8.45pm, 11 hours) is best, followed by the oddly named Train Set (IR197,000, daily at 7am, allegedly taking only 7½ hours), Sabz (Green, IR179,000, daily at 6.55pm, 11½ hours), Simorgh (IR179,000, daily at 6pm, 11 hours), Turbo Train (IR148,000/128,000, daily at 8.25am, 8½ hours), Delijan (IR145,000, daily at 9.30pm, 11 hours), down through a range of sleepers to the all-seat service (IR26,150) at 10.45am, which doesn't arrive until 1am.

Prices shown are for 1st/2nd class unless stated on dedicated services only; it might also be possible to buy tickets to Yazd, for example, on the Bandar Abbas or Kerman trains – speak to the travel agent for details. For services to İstanbul and Ankara, see p404.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR104,600/ 23,400	15/17hr	5.15pm/ 10.40am
Bandar Abbas	IR88,700/ 215,000*	19hr	2.40pm/ 3.40pm
Esfahan	IR35,150	7½hr	11pm
Gorgan	IR39,750/ 26,500	10½hr	8.15pm
Kerman	IR63,150/ 158,000*	13hr	4.45pm, 3.40pm
Mashhad	see Schedules (above)		
Qom	IR4200	2½hr	3 daily
Sari	IR13,750	7hr	9.20am
Tabriz	IR139,000*/ 57,750/27,200	12hr	5.40pm, 7pm
Yazd	IR44,150	8hr	9pm, 10pm
Zanjan	IR14,500	4hr	4.40pm

\*Ghazal six-berth couchette, 2nd-class seats only

### BUYING TICKETS

You can buy tickets a month in advance at a travel agency – those on Nejatollahi St, among others, can sort you out. At the station you can only buy tickets for travel on the same day.

### GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Tehran's two airports have vastly differing transport infrastructures.

#### IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (IKIA)

After almost three years of operations, public transport remains a stranger to IKIA. You'll need to take a taxi. The price from the airport is a standard IR100,000, though hard bargainers might get it for a Khomeini (IR10,000) less. Going to IKIA the price depends on where you're coming from. From north Tehran, for example, you'll probably pay the full IR100,000, but from the south it should cost less. There are plans to extend Metro Line 1 (red) all the way to IKIA, but for now they remain just that – plans.

#### MEHRABAD INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

The main domestic airport is nearer to town and better served by public transport. If you're confident, public buses (IR500) leave every 15 to 20 minutes from immediately outside the domestic terminal for Enqelab and Vanak Sqs.

Unless you're travelling light and know Tehran, however, it's wise to bite the bullet and pay for a private taxi. Fares are fixed but it's still best to use the taxi dispatcher, where they can tell you exactly how much you should pay.

A taxi to southern or central Tehran should cost about IR50,000, and up to IR80,000 to northern and eastern Tehran. If it's peak hour, the price will be higher, which is fair considering the trip will probably take twice as long.

If you want a shuttle taxi (about IR12,000 from the airport to the city centre), ask around or tell a taxi driver *na dar baste* (no closed door), and he will look for other passengers going the same way; it costs more for door-to-door.

A final option is to take a taxi (about IR15,000) to Azadi Metro station and go underground from there.

### Car & Motorcycle

If you're driving in Tehran, try to put out of your mind everything you've ever learned about road rules – none of it applies here. Out of a basic instinct for survival you'll soon assimilate to the lawless aggression of the locals and be driving with 100% attention – and 180-degree vision – at all times; see p380 for details.

One adrenalin-inducing way to get across town in a hurry is on a motorcycle taxi. You'll see them loitering on corners all over town, though the corner of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave and Ferdosi St is a good place to look for one going north. They cost as much as taxis but take half the time. Good luck!

### CAR RENTAL

It's not only difficult to find a car without a driver, but usually unnecessary too. There is little incentive when you can get a car and English-speaking driver for less than a car alone. Any of the travel agencies listed under Tours (p415) will be able to lease you a car with driver. If you really must drive yourself, **Europcar** (☎ 5567 8316) at IKIA rents out cars from IR440,000 a day.

For private hire the cost depends on many variables, not least whether you want an English-speaking driver who can double as a guide – but reckon on paying between US\$50 and US\$80 a day.

One highly recommended driver-cum-translator is **Ali Taheri** (☎ 4443 1105, 0912-134 9345; [service\\_taheri@yahoo.com](mailto:service_taheri@yahoo.com)). Ali speaks English and knows Tehran (and much of its history) well. He and his air-con Peugeot will cost you €50 a day, and he can also arrange tours to other parts of Iran, in his or larger vehicles.

Just about any taxi (indeed, any car) in Tehran is available for hire (known locally as *taxi service*, *agence* or *dar baste*). To charter a newish Peugeot for the day would probably cost about US\$40 to \$50; to charter a Paykan in worse condition costs from about US\$25 to \$30 – it all depends on your bargaining skills, and how far you plan to go.

### Public Transport

#### BUS

Buses cover virtually all of Tehran, but as they're often crowded and slow, most travellers end up using taxis. Buses run from roughly 6am until 10pm or 11pm, finish-

ing earlier on Friday and public holidays. Tickets cost slightly more than nothing – IR200. You buy them from ticket booths near bus stops or at bus terminals, and then give them to the driver when you board the bus; see the boxed text (p413) for bus travel etiquette.

Buses normally travel from one local bus terminal to another, so you may need to take more than one. Major bus departure points you might use include Imam Khomeini Sq, from where buses go in all directions; the terminal on the opposite side of Imam Khomeini Ave from the National Museum of Iran, for the west (Map pp102–3); Arzhantin, Vanak and Valiasr Sqs, for the north; Azadi Sq, for further west; and Rah-Ahan Sq, for the far south.

Buses never show their destinations in English and numbering is inconsistent. However, if you ask at the station or bus stop, you'll be pointed to the right bus. Some handy routes going north-south include Arzhantin Sq to Tajrish Sq; Imam Khomeini Sq to Arzhantin Sq; Imam Khomeini Sq to Tajrish Sq; and Valiasr Sq to Tajrish Sq.

Private bus companies began operating in 2006, with newer, more comfortable and faster buses for a flat IR1000 cash fare. Azadi Sq to Tajrish was the first route, and expect more.

### METRO

Tehran's ambitious underground railway network, the **Tehran Metro** ([www.tehranmetro.com](http://www.tehranmetro.com)), will eventually service much of the city (see the boxed text, p128). However, at the time of writing only sections of Line 1 (or the red line), Line 2 (navy blue) and all of Line 5 (green) were operating,

Tickets cost IR1000 per journey and slightly more on Line 5. Tickets have magnetic strips and are valid for a single journey, 10 journeys (probably the best for travellers), one day, three days or seven days; longer stored-value cards are also available. Trains start at about 6am and stop around 10pm or 10.30pm, running most frequently at peak hours. Station announcements are in Farsi only, so keep an eye on the English maps inside the trains.

The Metro website has extensive information about bus links to its various stations around town.



**Line 1 (Red)**

For now, the red line is by far the most useful for travellers. It runs from Haram-e Motahar (Imam Khomeini's tomb) in the south to Mirdamad in the north, via the main junction of Imam Khomeini Sq. More importantly, the Metro PR people assured us the northern extension to Tajrish Sq would be completed in 2009, so getting up to the northern palaces and Darband will be much, much easier, cheaper and faster.

Heading south, Line 1 stops at Terminal-e Jonub, Rey and Shohada, for the Behesht-e Zahra martyrs cemetery, but not yet Imam Khomeini International Airport.

**Line 2 (Dark Blue)**

Line 2 runs from Tehran (Sadeghieh) in the west, where it connects with Line 5 to Karaj, to Dardasht in the east. It connects to Line 1 at Imam Khomeini Sq, and is handy to the Amir Kabir St cheap hotels (Mellat Metro station). The eastern extension should be completed by the time you read this, meaning it will run all the way to Terminal-e Gharame (the western bus terminal), pro-

viding a fast link to Imam Khomeini Sq and western Tehran, where Azadi station is within walking distance of Azadi Sq.

**Line 3 (Light Blue)**

Line 3 is the one Tehranis are praying for. Running from satellite town Islamsharh in the south to the far northeastern suburbs, Line 3 will be most useful for both Tehranis and travellers because it includes a section from the train station (Rah Ahan) north along mega-crowded Valiasr Ave before veering east underneath Dr Beheshti Ave. It will connect with Line 2, Line 4 and Line 1 (at Shahid Beheshti), and hopefully take thousands of cars off Valiasr Ave.

**Line 4 (Yellow)**

Work for Line 4 began in 2005 and the first stations are scheduled to open in 2008, with the whole line completed by 2013. This east-west line will eventually run from the western terminal (Azadi terminal) underneath Enqelab Ave to Tehran's eastern suburbs. The western leg will be most useful to travellers, with a spur running to Mehrabad airport.

**TEHRAN METRO: A CITY'S SAVIOUR**

It's no overstatement to say the Tehran Metro is the only hope of salvation for a city literally choking to death on chronic pollution and endless traffic jams.

Tehran's Metro was first proposed in 1974 and French companies had begun work when the revolutionary government cancelled the contracts in 1981, with just 2km of tunnel completed. It wasn't until 1999 that the first line (Line 5) was eventually opened. By then everyone agreed Tehran's congestion problems had become critical and, in some ways, even life-threatening. With four-hour commutes for trips of less than 20km not uncommon, traffic had begun to affect all aspects of Tehran life. By the early 2000s almost US\$600 million a year was being spent on new tunnels and stations.

In 2000 the first sections of Line 2 were opened, followed by sections of Line 1 in 2001 and 2002. Tehranis flocked to the Metro and a shortage of carriages meant that during peak hours just getting on was a test of strength (it's only marginally better today). Inside the carriages became a frotteur's paradise. But while women are free to ride in any carriage, the front carriage of every train is women only, allowing them to avoid groping men.

Despite the money and collective willpower of 15 million desperate Tehranis, progress has been slow. By 2008 Lines 1 and 2 had still not been completed, and work on Lines 3 and 4 had only just begun. The grand plan calls for more than 10 lines to eventually criss-cross the city.

When we dropped in for tea the urbane Metro guys explained that the full network would probably not be completed for another 20 years. But even at this relatively early stage, the benefits of the Metro are plain to see. Already more than 1 million people are using the Metro every day, saving countless millions on fuel, productivity and health costs, not to mention the reduced pollution and stress born of not being stuck in Tehran traffic. The Metro is expected to account for half of all journeys in metropolitan Tehran by 2015 and the plan is to have a staggering 370km of tunnel completed by 2020 – longer than the New York subway.

**Line 5 (Green)**

The completed Line 5 is largely above ground and is, in effect, an extension of Line 2. It runs from Tehran (Sadeghieh) out past Karaj to Golshahr.

**MINIBUS**

Crowded public minibuses are found in the suburbs and most travellers are unlikely to need them. If you do, finding the right minibus is not easy, so ask, ask and ask again. The place you're most likely to need one is going north of Tajrish Sq; for an idea of prices, the trip from Tajrish to Darakeh or Tochal costs IR1000.

**TROLLEYBUS**

An electric trolleybus runs between the eastern bus terminal and Khorasan Sq.

**Taxi**

Tehran taxis come in a variety of colours that, in theory, govern what services they can offer. In practice, however, it's anything goes. The vast majority of taxis are Paykans, many of them shitboxes of the first order. Then there is every other car on Tehran's roads, almost all of which have the potential to be a taxi if the driver needs the rial.

**PRIVATE TAXI**

Yellow taxis are supposed to be private taxis, but any empty car will usually take you *dar baste* if you ask; just say, for example, 'Meydan Azadi *dar baste*'. The alternative is to get your hotel to call a 'wireless taxi' (☎ 133), which cost a little more. You could also call the **Women's Taxi Company** (☎ 1821), whose green taxis are driven by women, for women passengers only, and when you call to book you'll speak only to women then, too.

Unless you're familiar with the going rates, agree on a price before setting out. In Tehran most drivers won't go anywhere for less than IR10,000, and will push prices up in lots of IR5000 or IR10,000 for longer trips. Negotiation is encouraged.

Sample fares include the following: Imam Khomeini Sq to Valiasr Sq for about IR15,000/25,000 in off-peak/peak hour; and Imam Khomeini Sq to Tajrish Sq about IR40,000/60,000. To hire a taxi for an hour or so to visit several sites should cost about IR50,000, so long as they're not too distant.

To get from southern Tehran to the north, even in a private taxi, takes a minimum of half an hour, much longer in peak hour when prices rise accordingly.

Meter taxis do exist, but we've yet to see a meter actually working.

**SHUTTLE TAXI**

Taxi fares in Tehran are higher than elsewhere in Iran. The minimum fare is IR1000 for one or two *meydans* (squares) of travel, climbing to about IR7000 for the longest trips. Watch what other passengers are paying and you'll soon get an idea of the going rate.

Shuttle taxis ply main thoroughfares between major *meydans* and the best way to use them is to learn the names of the *meydans* and know which one you want to go to. *Meydans* such as Imam Khomeini, Vanak, Valiasr, Tajrish, Arzhantin, Azadi, Ferdosi, Enqelab, Haft-e Tir, Rah-Ahan and Imam Hossein are major shuttle-taxi hubs. However, even these *meydans* may have several ministations for shuttle taxis heading in different directions. You might be lucky and get a shuttle taxi all the way from, say, Valiasr Sq to Tajrish Sq (IR6000), but often you will have to change at Vanak Sq. Metro stations also have plenty of loitering shuttle taxis.

When trying to hail a shuttle taxi, don't bother with anything in any language along the lines of 'Iran Hotel, on the corner of...': the driver will have lost interest after the word 'hotel', picked up someone else and be halfway there before you know it. Use a major landmark or a town square as a destination, even if you are getting off before then. Shout it quickly and loudly: 'FeDOSe!' will do for Ferdosi St or Sq; similarly, 'eHESHTe!' for Beheshti St or Sq; and so on. The driver will either ignore you, or give you a quick beep on the horn and pull over for half a second while you leap in. For more on shuttle taxis and where to sit, see p413.

**AROUND TEHRAN**

Away from the hyperactive streets of the capital are several easily accessible day trips and ski slopes, and the highest mountain in the Middle East.

## HOLY SHRINE OF IMAM KHOMEINI

حرم امام خمینی

When future generations look back on the historical periods of Iran, the early years of the Islamic Republic will be remembered as a time of great endeavour on the building front. This, the resting place of His Holiness Imam Khomeini, is the grandest of those endeavours. But while the scale of the **Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini** (Map p130; ☞ 24hr) is quite enormous, for the time being it looks more like a shoddily built and empty aircraft hangar than one of Iran's holiest sites.

The shrine is located between Tehran, the town that launched the 1979 revolution, and Qom, where the great man underwent his theological training. It's enormous and flanked by four 91m-high towers symbolising Khomeini's age when he died. The huge gold central dome is adorned with 72 tulips, which symbolise the 72 martyrs who fought and died with Imam Hossein in Karbala.

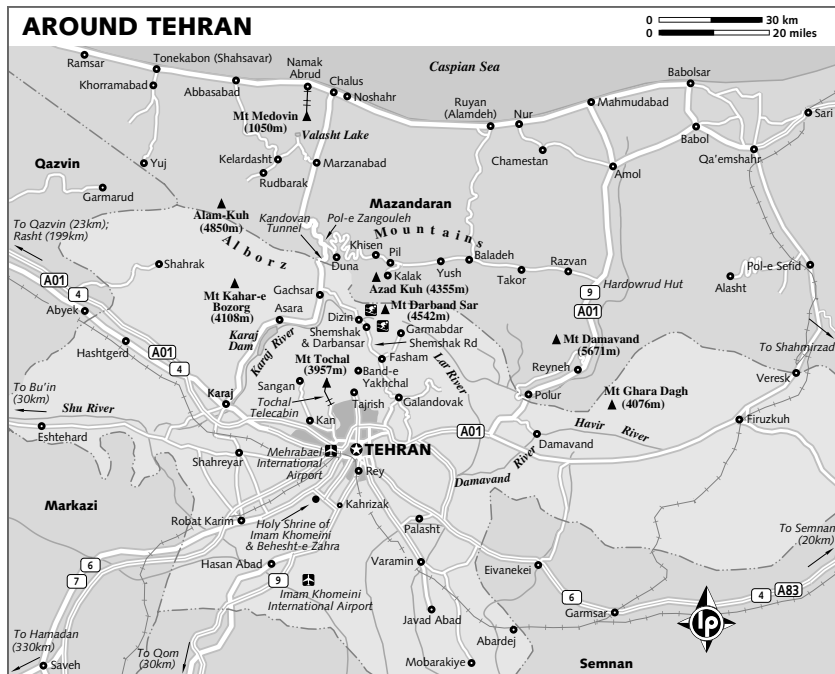
The shrine itself is inside a stainless steel *zarih*, a cage-like casing through which

pilgrims pay their respects and no small number of bank notes. Men and women must approach from different sides. It's surrounded by a vast empty expanse of concrete, that's often covered with large carpets, and where families have picnics, kids roll coins along the floor and homeless men sleep. The ayatollah wanted his shrine to be a public place where people could enjoy themselves, rather than a mosque where they must behave with reverence, and but for the megalomaniacal architecture, his wishes have largely been met.

Outside the shrine are a few shops selling simple food and souvenirs and an adjoining Islamic university.

### Getting There & Away

The last stop on Tehran Metro Line 1 (red) is Haram-e Motahar, the holy shrine, and at just IR1000 it is by far the best way to get here. Shuttle taxis and buses do make the trip, but why would you bother? The second last stop is Shohada, for the Behesht-e Zahra martyr's cemetery, and most people see both on one trip.



### THE FUNERAL OF AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI

In 1989, the Islamic Republic's final send-off for its founder and inspiration, Ayatollah Khomeini, culminated in the largest funeral ever held in the world – a crush of 10 million inconsolable mourners. It was a chaotic scene. As the hearse tried to move through the crowd towards the cemetery it was stopped repeatedly before the crowd eventually took the coffin and started passing it over their heads. By the time a helicopter was summoned it was too late and even the armed Komiteh guards couldn't stop the body falling out of the coffin, and the crowd trying to tear pieces off the shroud to keep as holy relics.

Unless you thrive on chaos, you're advised not to come here on or around 4 June, the anniversary of the ayatollah's death, when hundreds of thousands of mourners visit the shrine.

### BEHESHT-E ZAHRA

بهشت زهرا

**Behesht-e Zahra** is the main resting place for those who died in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). It is the sheer scale of the death represented here that is most moving. For some visitors, the roughly 200,000 glass boxes will be familiar from the TV and newspaper images from the '80s depicting hysterical mourners surrounded by countless portraits of the dead. Like windows into another time, these small, glass boxes on stilts contain a watch, a knife, maybe a letter that belonged to the lost father/son/husband staring out from a yellowed photograph. The pine trees have grown since then, but the faces remain. It's a haunting experience that brings home some of the horrific cost of war.

Right at the heart of the cemetery is a shrine to Iranian pilgrims killed during the annual haj (pilgrimage to Mecca), when Saudi Arabian soldiers opened fire on a crowd during the mid-1980s. Elsewhere, the graves of ordinary people stretch on for kilometres.

A visit here is usually combined with a trip to the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini. Behesht-e Zahra is packed on mourning days but is eerily empty at other times.

### REY

ری

One of the most historically important places in Tehran province is Rey. In the 11th and 12th centuries Rey was a major centre that was much larger than Tehran, but it was devastated when the Mongols swept through. These days it has been swallowed up by the urban sprawl of the capital, but retains enough history to give it a different sensibility – one best experienced by just wandering around on foot.

The main attraction is the **Imamzadeh Shah-e Abdal-Azim**, built for a descendant of

Imam Hossein. This mausoleum has elaborate tilework, a golden dome, a pool in the courtyard, a 14th-century sarcophagus with intricate carvings, constructed from betel wood, and enough mirror tiles to make you dizzy. In the same complex is a shrine to Imam Hamzeh (brother of Imam Reza). Women need to wear a chador, which are available at the entrance.

Rey's other attractions include the remains of the Sassanid **Qaf'e Tabarak**, a fortress on a nearby hill; the 12th-century **Gonbad-e Toghoral**, the 20m-high tomb tower of a Seljuk king in the town centre; and the **Cheshmeh Ali** mineral springs, with some Qajar-period carvings nearby.

### Getting There & Away

Shahr-e Rey (City of Rey) station is easily reached heading south on Metro Line 1. Taxis can be hired in Rey for a negotiable IR30,000 per hour, or take a tour organised by your hotel.

### MT DAMAVAND

کوه دماوند

Shaped like Mt Fuji, **Mt Damavand** (5671m) is the highest mountain in the Middle East. It's easily accessible from Tehran, although it is actually in Mazandaran province. Damavand has many mythological tales associated with it but in reality it is a dormant volcano that still belches out sulphuric fumes strong enough to kill unfortunate stray sheep. Its image is one of the most recognisable icons in Iran, appearing on the IR10,000 note, on bottles of Damavand spring water and numerous other commercial items.

Most people who go to Damavand do so to climb the peak, and start by heading to Reyneh. The climbing season is from June to September, or May and October for experienced climbers.

## Reyneh

رینه

The pretty village of Reyneh offers fine views of villages on the far side of the valley and makes a jumping-off point for local walking trails, even if you don't want to climb the mountain. There is no hotel, but if you ask around someone will put you up in their home for about IR65,000 per person and put you in touch with a local guide.

The best place to get information about routes and guides is the **Reyneh Mountain Federation Hut**, on the right (northeastern) side of the main road as you drive into town.

The excellent blog at <http://damavand.mt.blogspot.com> blog has more recent detail than we can include here because it is run by the Azad Group of Iranian mountaineers. It might have details of a new camp and jumping-off point planned for Polur, nearer to Tehran. It has maps, GPS points and links to tours.

## Climbing the Mountain

This section describes the classic southern route. From a technical point of view, Damavand is basically a walk-up. Climbing so far so quickly is the most dangerous aspect of this climb. As you ascend be sure to watch out for signs of altitude sickness – dizziness, headaches, nausea and swollen fingers – which kills people here every year. Most first-timers use a guide. One Reyneh-based guide recommended by readers is **Reza Faramarzpour** (☎ 0122-325 2270), who has climbed the mountain countless times and, while he speaks limited English, has a network of people to get you to the mountain and upwards. He charges about US\$200 for an all-inclusive two-day tour, excluding the US\$50 mountain fee foreigners must pay, during summer, at Gusfand Sara or Base Camp. See p372 for other reliable guides and companies.

Damavand can be climbed in two or three days, though readers report the three-day option is preferable as it allows more time for acclimatisation, and means fewer headaches.

Starting at Reyneh, you can walk (four or five hours) or take a pickup to 'Camp 2', aka Gusfand Sara or Base Camp (about IR25,000), where you can sleep in the Saheb Azaman Mosque. On a two-day itinerary, you'd drive here, then walk about four hours to Barghah-e-Sevvom (4250m), bet-

ter known as 'Camp 3'. Camp 3 has a mountaineers' hut and clean water is available. There's no water en route so you should bring some up with you. There's no way of booking the hut, and on Thursday nights and holidays it is packed with students from Tehran. Bringing a tent, sleeping bag and perhaps a stove (and leaving it there during the final ascent) is strongly recommended, though one reader reported hiring a tent at the shelter. Even in July, nights are freezing and it can be -10°C at the summit. A reader recommends filling water bottles in the evening since the water will be frozen when you get up.

In August you should be able to climb to the peak without special equipment. It's another four to five hours back to the hut from the peak. The summit doesn't require any technical gear but it does require fitness, warm clothes and good-quality hiking boots for the treacherously loose rocks. Bear in mind that the weather can change suddenly and snowfalls are a possibility, even in high summer. Most people return from the summit to Tehran, via a taxi from Reyneh, in one day.

## Hot Springs

After expending all that energy climbing Mt Damavand, you'll be pleased to know that just 4km east of Reyneh, at **Ab Karm**, several hotels have been built around hot springs. You can rent a room for the night for around US\$15, including breakfast, tea and a dip in one of the baths.

## Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Reyneh is by taxi *dar baste* for about IR165,000. Alternatively, take a savari or minibus from Tehran's eastern bus terminal towards Amol and get off at the junction to Reyneh (tell the driver 'Reyneh'). From the junction, where there is a decent restaurant, take a shuttle taxi to Reyneh.

## ALBORZ SKI RESORTS

Skiing in the Alborz Mountains above Tehran can be one of the most unexpected pleasures of a trip to Iran. There are four resorts within day-trip distance, all of which have equipment for hire and are extraordinarily cheap for a day on the slopes. **Darbansar** (day pass IR60,000; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Jan-Mar),

near Shemshak, has three easy slopes and is best for beginners; while the slopes and resort at **Tochal** (☎ 021-2240 4001-5; [www.tochal.org](http://www.tochal.org); day pass weekday/weekend IR60,000/80,000; r US\$40-120; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm) are accessed via the Tochal Telecabin (p113) in northern Tehran. The pick of the bunch, however, are Shemshak and Dizin.

## Shemshak

شمشک

☎ 0221 / elev 2450m

Just up the valley from Darbansar, **Shemshak Resort** (day pass IR140,000; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Jan-Mar) has the slopes that will get hardcore skiers most excited. There are six lifts, the longest being about 1450m with a vertical descent of about 500m (some of it at an adrenalin-inducing 45-degree angle) and plenty of moguls. Snowboards are welcome. Boots, skis and poles can be hired for IR100,000 a day.

The après-ski scene here has been described as 'out-of-control and mind-boggling', but this is Iran so you'll need to know someone, or meet someone on the slopes, to be invited to these private parties.

Shemshak is, in effect, a series of villages in a steep-sided valley. It has a lively café scene and lodging is usually in an apartment, which can be rented from local agents for about IR500,000/600,000 a night in summer/winter, or for more from agents in Tehran. Mid-week is cheaper.

## Dizin

دیزین

☎ 0262 / elev 2700m

The largest field in Iran and home to Iranian skiing, **Dizin Resort** (day pass IR150,000-400,000; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Dec-Apr) has more lifts than Shemshak but the runs aren't as difficult. Still, with a vertical drop of about 900m it should appeal to anyone feeling the need for speed. With base camp at about 2700m and the upper slopes about 3500m, skiing is usually possible from December until April. From the base, you take an antique-looking gondola to the mid-station, and another to the top. A third gondola ferries you to the eastern slopes. There are also six Poma lifts, two chairlifts and a T-bar around the mountain.

Pistes are sometimes groomed and there is plenty of scope for off-piste if you get a

fresh snowfall. Apart from Friday, waiting for lifts is not really an issue. Hiring skis can be a lottery, starting at about IR80,000 and climbing as high as IR250,000. If you do hire a guide, they will ensure you get decent skis.

Dizin boasts summer activities such as grass-skiing, hiking, horse riding and tennis, mainly on weekends.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Dizin Tourist Hotel** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 0262-521 2978; d/tr/5-bed r US\$53/71/119; ☎) This is one of only two hotels in Dizin itself – right at the bottom of the hill. The recently renovated rooms aren't bad and those in the main building have better views. Four-/five-bed villas are also available for US\$230/264.

**Gajereh Resort** (☎ 0261-521 2232; [www.gajereh-hotel.com](http://www.gajereh-hotel.com); r US\$60; ☎) About 2km down the road to Tehran, the Gajereh Resort is one of several unstylish resort-style places serving Dizin.

## Getting There & Away

Local travel agencies sell one- and two-day trips that include transport, accommodation and lift passes for reasonable prices (tours booked through foreign agencies are ludicrously expensive considering the costs). Look for trips advertised in English-language newspapers, or ask at your hotel; Hamid at the Firouzeh Hotel (p115) can help with budget trips.

Shemshak and Dizin are linked by an unsealed mountain road but it's closed for most of the time between late November and May. Instead, you'll need to take the Chalus road to get to Dizin, which is then 123km or roughly 2½ hours' drive from Tehran. In winter you'll need chains or a 4WD for the last 10km or so.

Shemshak and Darbansar are about 55km north of Tehran on much more direct Shemshak Rd, which links to Dizin via the aforementioned summer road. Getting to Shemshak by taxi should cost between IR80,000 and IR120,000, depending on how far away you are. Getting back to Tehran should be cheaper.

Shuttle taxis or minibuses also serve Shemshak from Tehran's eastern bus terminal.

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