

# Northeastern Iran

## ایران شمال شرقی

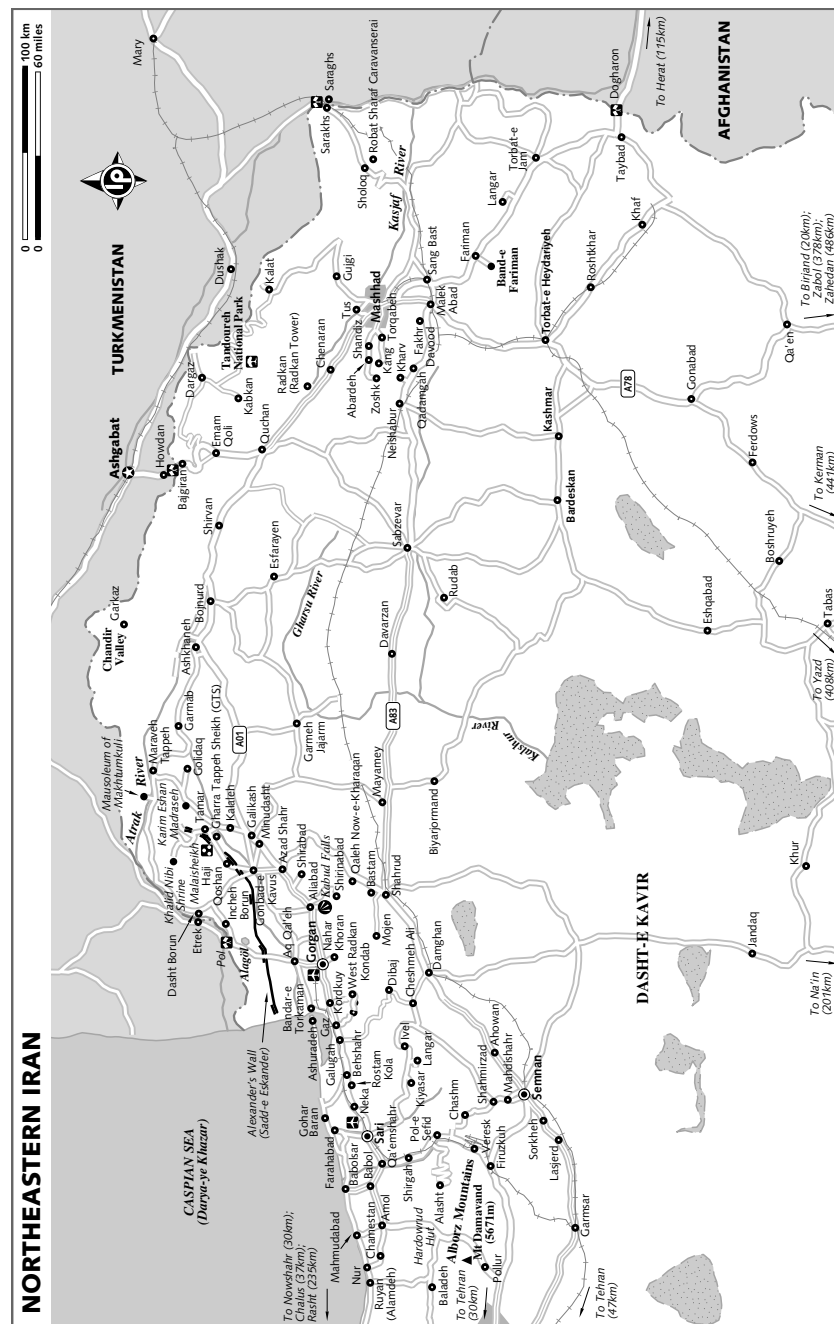


Sandwiched between the vast desert emptiness of the Dasht-e Kavir and the steppes of Central Asia, northeastern Iran has a spine of mountains that become more lushly forested as you head west. East of Minudasht the wilderness has been declared the Golestan (Paradise) National Park. Above the overdeveloped Caspian coast rise more forests and the grand Alborz Mountains. A trio of beautiful but busy roads take you across that dramatic range but there are lesser-known alternatives that get you into more remote, less spoilt zones around Alasht and Baladeh. Historically, the area developed as Khorasan (Where the [Iranian] Sun Rises) and Tabarestan/Mazandaran (the southeastern Caspian littoral). Millennia of culture reached a zenith here around 1000 years ago, producing many of the era's great scientists and poet-philosophers. But the 13th- and 14th-century ravages of the Mongols and then Tamerlane were so complete that Tabarestan's settled civilisation was virtually wiped out. Even now the sites of several once-prosperous cities are mere undulations in the steppe. A few marvellously over engineered towers, most astonishingly at Radkan and Gonbad-e Kavus, are the last witnesses of former glories.

The 16th-century Safavid regime's move towards formal state Shiism was a major factor in the growth of Mashhad from a shrine-village to the region's foremost city. Mashhad's extraordinarily grand Haram-e Razavi complex surrounding the tomb of Imam Reza remains Iran's holiest site and draws millions of pilgrims each year. Mashhad is also the logical staging point for visiting Afghanistan or Turkmenistan. But rather than face the bureaucratic hassles of the latter, consider exploring northeastern Iran's own culturally Turkmen areas north of Kalaleh or Gorgan.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Feel the emotion of pilgrims at Mashhad's glorious **Haram-e Razavi** (p354), the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza
- See the magnificent Alborz Mountains at their peaceful best by driving the little-known mountain road through **Baladeh** (p334) to Pol-e Zanguleh
- Go horse-riding and sleep in a Turkmen öy (yurt) tent at the **Gharra Tappeh Sheikh** (p343) stud farm
- Ask yourself if a forerunner of NASA didn't help build the incredible 1000-year-old tower Mil-e Gonbad in **Gonbad-e Kavus** (p342)
- Hike across the bald Binalud mountains to the splendid stepped village of **Kang** (p363), nicknamed 'Mashhad's Masuleh'
- Enjoy an incredible Caspian panorama as you wind up through ridge-top forests towards a 'secret valley' hiding the lonely **West Radkan Tower** (p341)



## WESTERN MAZANDARAN

A traffic-clogged semi-urban sprawl follows the Caspian's south coast virtually without interruption, except for a fairly pitiful forest reserve at Sisingan. Iranian tourists love the area's rainy climate but few Western tourists find the coast's drizzle and dirty dark-sand beaches a great attraction. The lush green mountain hinterland is contrastingly attractive, with white-top Alborz peaks forming an impressive if distant panorama viewed between Qa'emshahr and Amol (clouds permitting).

### Amol

☎ 0121 / pop 204,000

This drearily characterless sprawl was the capital of Tabarestan (ancient Mazandaran) for a millennium. Sadly, today it retains just a sprinkling of half-forgotten old tomb towers hidden away in unexciting suburban lanes north of the bazaar. **Gonbad Mir Heydar Amoli** (off Andisheh 49th Alley) is prettier than the bigger 1623 **Gonbad Mir Bozorg Qarameddin Marashi** (off Mofateh St; admission free). Near the old bridge, the ageing **Mehmankhaneh Tehran** (☎ 222 4534; Beheshti St; s/tw/tr/q IR40,000/70,000/90,000/100,000) is basic but clean-enough. Transport to Tehran, Babol, Sari and Baladeh (IR12,000, two hours, 8am and 2pm only) uses the **terminal** (near Hezar Sangat Sq), way out at Imam Reza St's eastern end. For destinations west, savaris use **Istgah Mahmudabad** (Talib Ahmoli St).

### Around Amol

#### TEHRAN TO AMOL

The tiresomely busy **Haraz mountain road** is less spectacular than the Karaj–Chalus route but skirts right around Fuji-shaped Mt Damavand, which is very briefly visible from west-facing windows when passing through **Pollur** (65km from Tehran). A long, dramatic canyon follows. Above **Vana** (65km before Amol), a long waterfall pours out of cleft cliffs topped by what look like ancient fortress ruins.

### BALADEH

☎ 0122 / pop 9000

A peaceful, lonely road leaves the Haraz road at an isolated tea-shack called Hardowrud. Passing close to Azad Kuh's awesomely vertical north face near **Kalak**, the road zigzags up through some of Iran's very

finest mountain scenery before eventually meeting the Chalus–Tehran road at the lonely Pol-e Zanguleh restaurant.

Baladeh is the only village en route to have accommodation or shops. A 15-minute scramble above Nuri Blvd, 8th Alley, the reasonably extensive towers and fortifications of **Baladeh Castle** offer a fabulous panorama across the fine mountain-backed valley.

Some 10km west in **Yush**, the intriguing **Nima Yushi House** (☎ 433 3491; admission IR3000) has been partly restored, safeguarding fireplaces, chunky plaster-work designs and some multicoloured *orosi* windows. **Saeed Jamshidi** (☎ 433 3315) has the key.

The route west of Yush is spectacular and delightfully peaceful (only 9km is un-asphalted). Azad Kuh's vertical north face is spectacularly visible from **Kalak** (closest approach) and **Khisen**. Between these hamlets, there's a wonderful panorama that incorporates **Mt Damavand** as a conical jewel among a whole collection of mountain peaks: look east approaching **Pil** (28km west of Baladeh). After Khisen the road zigzags up a pass and into an astonishingly vast bowl of white-topped mountains. Fine scenery continues to Pol-e Zanguleh, an isolated restaurant at the junction with the Chalus–Karaj road (p176).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Mehmanpazir Saeed** (☎ 422 3426; Nuri Blvd; s/tw/tr IR50,000/70,000/80,000) Very basic rooms are attached to a sporadically open restaurant in Baladeh village centre. No showers.

**Mehmankhaneh Nima** (☎ 422 4992; Yush rd; d/tr/ste IR150,000/200,000/500,000) A rural restaurant-teahouse set idyllically above the fork of two mountain streams 3km west of Baladeh. However, its poorly maintained rooms with grotty shared bathrooms are vastly overpriced.

### Getting There & Away

Baladeh to Amol buses (IR12,000, two hours) leave at 9am and 1.30pm, with buses to Tehran (via Hardowrud) departing at the same times. The only public transport along the dramatic road via Pil is the daily Tehran–Yush bus leaving Tehran's Chahara Sirus at 5am and returning from Yush around 10am. Rates offered by Baladeh's **taxi agency** (☎ 422 3342; Nuri Blvd) include Yush (single/return IR20,000/30,000), Pol-e Zan-

guleh (IR120,000), Chalus (IR200,000) and Nur (IR140,000). Very sparse traffic makes hitch hiking unreliable.

### Babol

☎ 0111 / pop 208,000

If passing through this busy commercial centre, you could visit **Babol Museum** (☎ 229 2877; Modarres St; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am–2pm & 4–8pm), an attractive colonial-style mansion containing a few ethnographic displays, antique saddles, and dervish paraphernalia. **Marjan Hotel** (☎ 225 0433; fax 225 2189; Keshvari Sq; s/d/tr/q US\$30/40/47/54) is a well-tended midrange place, albeit with slightly ageing bathrooms. Eastbound savaris depart from outside once the **Sari terminal** (Qa'emshahr Blvd) closes after

6pm. Westbound, use **Istgah Amol** (Amol Hwy), 2km west of the centre.

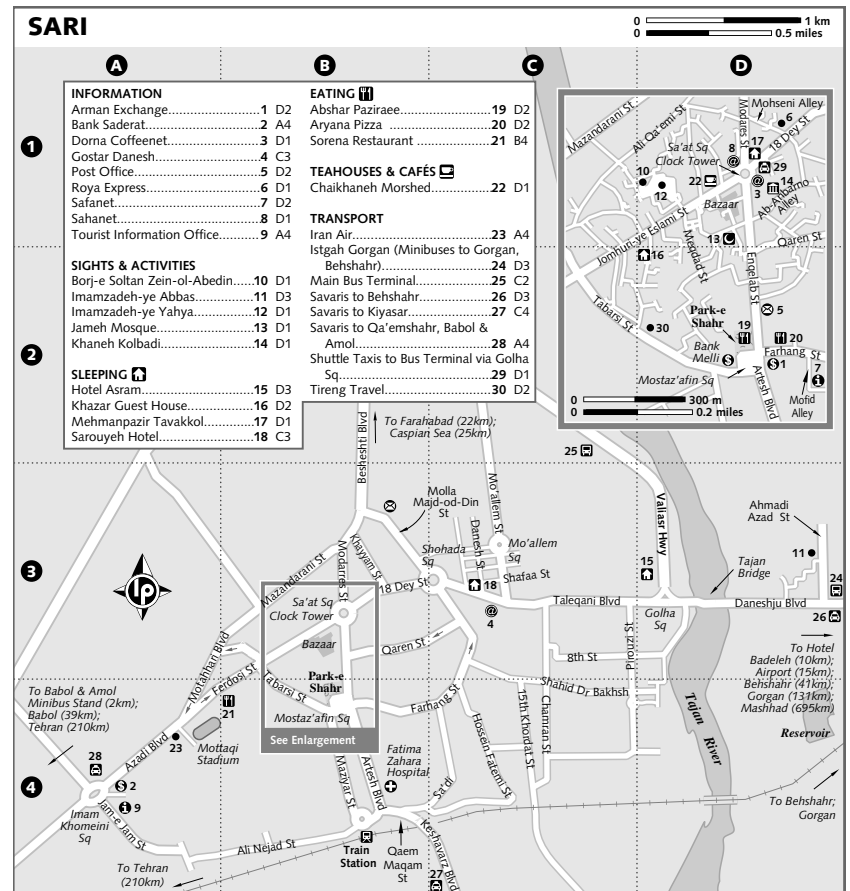
### SARI

☎ 0151 / pop 262,000

Large but manageable and gently attractive, Sari spent much of the 1st millennium AD as the capital of Tabarestan. After losing ground to Amol, Sari returned to prominence following the building of the railway from Tehran, and became Mazandaran's provincial capital in 1937.

### Orientation

The town radiates out from Sa'at (Times) Sq, named for its whitewashed clock tower that looks particularly cute when floodlit



at night. A few remnant gabled homes in traditional Mazandarani style (*sofal*) are to be found in nearby lanes.

## Information

**Arman Exchange** (Farhang St; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) No-fuss moneychangers.

**Bank Saderat** (Imam Khomeini Sq; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) Exchange desk.

**Dorna Coffeenet** (Sa'at Sq; per hr IR8000; ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri) Faster internet connection than nearby Safanet across the square.

**Gostar Danesh** (Taleqani Blvd; per hr IR8000; ☎ 8am-9pm) Good connection; type to the sound of fizzing neon.

**Post office** (Enqelab St; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-1pm Thu)

**Roya Express** (☎ 325 7720; Mohseni Alley; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu) Laundry.

**Sahanet** (☎ 221 0978; Mofid Alley; per hr IR7000; ☎ 9am-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri) Downstairs with excellent internet connection.

**Tourist information office** (Edareh Miras Ferhangi; ☎ 229 1001; Jam-e Jam St; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Some guide pamphlets are available, mostly in Farsi.

## Sights

### TOMB TOWERS

Sari has three famous 15th-century brick tomb towers, all active places of worship. Tucked behind the bazaar, **Imamzadeh-ye Yahya** is a round Rhenish-looking tower onto which a discordant rectilinear new building has been carelessly appended. Within are monstrous chandeliers over a glassed-in sarcophagus. Just behind, **Borj-e Soltan Zein-ol-Abedin** has a square plan and more impressive exterior. **Imamzadeh-ye Abbas**, 2km east of central Sari, has fine inner doors, a wooden sarcophagus and an attendant to sprinkle you with rose water.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The restored 125-year-old **Khaneh Kolbadi** (Ab-Anbarno Alley) is reminiscent of an 18th-century khan's palace. Thick walls kept the lower floor warm in winter while the light, bright upper floor could be opened to through drafts for hot summers. Its *orosi* windows (wood-framed puzzles of multicoloured glass) supposedly disorientated mosquitoes. The building is slated to become a museum incorporating the historic **Vasir-e Hamam** (bathhouse) behind.

The unusual **Jameh Mosque** (in the bazaar area) has traditional Mazandarani tiled roofs, but

from outside looks more like a medieval Italian prison.

## Sleeping

**Khazar Guest House** (☎ 222 7231; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; s/d/tr/q IR35,000/48,500/57,500/71,000) The backyard location looks initially pleasant but walls, ceilings and especially the upper-balcony are all twisted alarmingly off-line. Pillowcases desperately need laundering and whiffy squat toilets are shared.

**Mehmanpazir Tavakkol** (Sa'at Sq; tw/tr/q IR70,000/100,000/150,000) Clean shared facilities include a shower that sometimes runs hot. Rooms are predictably basic with rock-hard beds and a tap in some rooms. It's friendly, if 100% male, and very central, accessed upstairs from Modarres St. There's Road noise.

**Sarouyeh Hotel** (☎ 324 5600; Danesh St; s/tw/tr from IR12 0,000/140,000/160,000; ☎ ☎) The Sarouyeh's hotel section has overpriced air-conditioned apartments (twins/triples IR410,000/470,000) with kitchenettes and droopy curtains. However, the good-value guesthouse section (where the check-in booth is unexpectedly hidden) has sensibly priced fan rooms with small attached bathrooms, towels and top-sheets.

**Hotel Asram** (☎ 325 5090; fax 325 5092; Valiasr Hwy; s/tw/tr/ste US\$35/45/50/55; ☎ ☎ ☎) Behind a mirrored-glass façade, this professionally managed hotel has good, motel-style rooms with lift, three restaurants and a sauna under construction. Some English is spoken.

**Hotel Badeleh** (☎ /fax 422 2548; Gorgan Hwy, Angilasam; tw/ste US\$65/90; ☎ ☎ ☎) Sari's best hotel (for now) sits in a lush garden amid ivy-draped palm trees, 10km east towards Gorgan. The varnished-wood lobby looks slightly dated but a new glass elevator takes you to fully refurbished rooms. The suites are truly luxurious with remarkably grand bed-heads in part-gilded hardwood. Bathrooms are OK but less impressive. Very friendly.

Two new hotels are under construction on the Qa'emshahr-Gorgan highway. The very grand-looking Hotel Navid is around 10km west of Sari; the more modest Hotel Arab is 4km east.

## Eating

Downmarket snack-bars and *kababis* (kabab shops) line Jomhuri-ye Eslami St near the

bazaar. Several nicer restaurants lie around a kilometre further on along Azadi Blvd.

**Chaikhaneh Morshed** (Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; qalyan from IR5000; ☎ 9am-midnight) Easily-missed steps southeast of Dadgar Alley lead up to this semi-traditional teahouse. Décor is tasteful apart from the cigarette-smoking stuffed lamb. The boisterous clientele of rockabilly-style 20-something males might get over-excited by a female presence.

**Abshar Pazirae** (Park-e Shahr; snack meals IR5500-12,000; ☎ 8am-11pm) Marked with a neon swan and a goofy Mr Bean mural, this simple, sunny snack bar is ideal for fresh juices or ice creams while watching the park fountains.

**Aryana Pizza** (☎ 222 0322; Farhang St; pizzas IR23,000-30,000; ☎ 11am-midnight) This inviting, larger-than-average, new fast-food restaurant has pizzas with excellent, light crusts. For dessert, try the grand pastry-shop eatery next door.

**Sorena Restaurant** (☎ 222 7069; Ferdosi St; meals IR30,000-60,000; ☎ 11am-3pm & 7-11.30pm) Bright, spacious middle-class *kababi* with big fireplaces and fake roses on the tables. Fish dishes are sizeable but laced with bones. Vampires should avoid *zirtoshi*, a side-dish of whole pickled garlic (IR5000).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 226 9400; Azadi Blvd; ☎ 7.30am-4pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) flies thrice-weekly to both Tehran (IR315,000) and Mashhad (IR345,000). Tickets are also sold by friendly, English-speaking agency **Tireng Travel** (☎ 222 7973; tirengsary@yahoo.com; Tabarsi St; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu).

### BUS & MINIBUS

From the **main terminal** (northeastern ring rd) regular buses run to Rasht (IR40,000, seven hours) via the coastal cities and to Tehran (IR40,000, five hours) via Amol. Most services to Mashhad (Volvo IR60,000, 11 hours) depart around 7am or 6pm. There's one Taavoni 2 bus to Semnan (via Kiyasar) at 8am. Alternatively, savari-hop via Qa'emshahr.

Savaris to Qa'emshahr (IR2000), Babol (IR5000) and Amol (10,000) leave from Imam Khomeini Sq.

Minibuses/savaris to Gorgan (IR8000/20,000) and Behshahr (IR2500/6000, 45 minutes) use **Istgah Gorgan** (Daneshju Blvd).

Savaris for Kiyasar start across the railway on Keshavarz Blvd. From Kiyasar to

Damghan you'll usually have to pay *dar baste* (closed door).

## TRAIN

To travel the trans-Alborz line in daylight, take the 9.10am train *from* Tehran. Trains *to* Tehran run overnight (IR13,750 to IR32,500).

## Getting Around

The airport is 15km northeast (IR15,000 by taxi). Shuttle taxis (IR750) start from relevant points around Sa'at Sq. For the bus terminal, use eastbound cars along 18 Dey St that swing north at Golha Sq. For the train station, jump out at the southern end of Artesh Blvd where southbound vehicles turn left.

## AROUND SARI Sari to Tehran

From formless **Qa'emshahr**, another over-busy mountain road climbs up towards the Iranian plateau via Firuzkuh. Scenery starts lush and forested with distant white-topped peaks on the horizon. South of **Pol-e-Sefid** it rises through deep valleys and many a tunnel, shadowing the incredible **trans-Alborz railway**. Building that line was one of the most incredible engineering achievements of the 1930s, as much a political statement by Reza Shah as a means of transport. Arguably it's more attractive to look *at* the line switchbacking up the steep valleys than to actually take the train. The classic glimpse is the 66m-span stone bridge, 110m above **Veresk** village.

Around 15km south of Pol-e Sefid, a peaceful side road branches off towards Shahmirzad (p348). Scenery is lovely apart from a few unsightly quarries, but there's an unpaved section and a single, rather deep ford. No public transport.

## Alasht

☎ 0124 / pop 4000

Commanding a wonderfully wide panorama of wooded ridges and peaks across a deep mountain valley, **Alasht** is an increasingly popular summer retreat. It gets deep snows in winter but looks great in spring blossom or autumnal blaze. Alasht's unusual **mosque** has contemporary twin minarets but its central fluted cone-spire tops a central tower that supposedly started life as an ancient church.

آلاشت

Towards the base of the village amid lanes of partly mud-and-timber homes (some with timber-shingled roofs held down by rocks) is the **Khaneh Shah**, a slightly grander house in which Reza Shah Pahlavi was born (1877). Several of the photogenic, moustachioed old men who ride donkeys around the village claim family links with the ex-shah.

Right beside the mosque, the comfortable new **Mosafekhaneh Dareh** (☎ 533 2022; tw/apt IR250,000/500,000) has great if partly wire-cut views across the valley. The upper apartment includes a spacious sitting room and balcony with barbeque.

Alasht is 35km off the Qa'emshahr-Tehran road, starting 4km south of Pol-e-Sefid, from which taxis want IR60,000/90,000 one way/return. The nicest way to reach Pol-e Sefid from Sari is on the 7.30am local train (IR2000, 1½ hours). Pay onboard.

## Behshahr

بهشهر

☎ 0152 / pop 78,000

Marginally interesting **Behshahr** was once an R&R getaway for Safavid Shah Abbas I, who built the town's perky little **Safiabad Palace** (Kakh-e Safi Abad; ☞ closed to public) and central **Bagh-e-Shahr** (Shah's Garden; ☞ dawn-6pm). All that remains of his **Abbasabad** pavilion is an arched brick platform in a landscaped lake amid pretty wooded hills (8km east, then 3km inland). In otherwise unprepossessing **Rostam Kola village** (7km west), you could seek out the well-preserved **Farahi Hosseinieh**, a private traditional Mazandarani homestead.

Savaris to Sari (IR6000) and Gorgan (IR10,000) leave from opposite ends of Behshahr town. With your own transport, avoid the thundering main road east of Galugah by using the quietly attractive 'old-road'. For information on Kordkuy, see p341.

## GORGAN

گرگان

☎ 0171 / pop 253,000

This appealing city has a colourful, ethnically mixed population and an attractive location where the green Alborz Mountains stoop to meet the northeastern steppe. Gorgan was the birthplace of 'eunuch-king' Aga Mohammad who founded the expansionist Qajar dynasty (1779-1925). Architectural heritage is relatively limited but Gorgan makes a fine base for visiting the Turkmen steppes, Golestan's forested mountains or the remote Mil-e Radkan tower (p341).

## Orientation

From the bazaar area around Shahr-dari (Vahdat) Sq, vibrant Valiasr St leads several kilometres southeast towards Nahar Khoran, an appealingly semi rural scattering of woodland restaurants and hotels. **Honar Stationery** (☞ 7am-2pm & 5-9.30pm Sat-Thu, 7am-2pm Fri) sells reasonably detailed city maps (IR12,500).

## Information

**Arpa Coffeenet** (Valiasr St; internet per hr IR7000; ☞ 9am-3.30pm & 5.30-10.30pm) Near Edalat 10th St.  
**Golestan Miras** (☎ 226 1802; Taqavi House, Taqavi Lane; ☞ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Cultural-tourist office. Occupies a splendid, part-renovated 19th-century merchant's house. Plentiful colourful brochures.  
**Hoshkshuye Asia** (☎ 222 6420; Beheshti St; ☞ 8am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu) Laundry. Corner of Beheshti 7th Alley.  
**International telephone office** (Beheshti 2nd Alley; ☞ 7am-9.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-2pm & 4-9.30pm Fri)  
**Police Foreign Affairs Department** (Niwendistad Atbeye Khoreji; ☎ 218 2648; Molaghaty St; ☞ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Visa extensions. Staff are helpful despite being sometimes overloaded with Central Asian applicants. Apply by 9.30am; collect around noon. The office is two short blocks from the big Bank Melli tower where you need to pay the IR100,000 fee.  
**Tourist Exchange** (☎ 232 1929; Valiasr St at Edalat 23rd St; ☞ 9am-1pm & 5-9pm) Painless moneychanging.

## Sights

Built around a quadrangle in the **bazaar**, the attractive 15th-century **Jameh Mosque** (off Aftab 27th Lane) has blue-tiled portals, sections of traditionally tiled roof and a distinctive Mazandarani-style capped minaret.

**Imamzadeh-ye Nur**, accessed via Aftab 15th Alley, is a 15th-century brick tomb tower of relatively minor interest, but finding it is a great excuse to poke around Gorgan's most interesting old alleys. The magnificent **Taqavi House** (Taqavi Lane) houses the Golestan Miras cultural-tourist office. Ask to peep inside the 'eight-wife' harem building.

**Gorgan Museum** (☎ 222 2364; Shohoda St; admission IR3000; ☞ 8am-6pm) has limited, dusty ethnological exhibits, and displays sparse finds from local archaeological sites such as Jorjan (Gonbad-e Kavus) and Turang Tappeh (a large tumulus 22km northeast of Gorgan). The still-growing **Imamzadeh Abdollah** (Shohoda Sq) contains dazzling mirror work. Its large blue dome looks especially photogenic viewed through trees from near the bus terminal against a distant backdrop of seasonally snow-topped ridges.

The forest paths of **Nahar Khoran** offer an easy clean-air escape, albeit crowded with weekenders and adorned with litter. The road continues several kilometres through **Ziyarat**. This once-picturesque village has suffered an extensive building boom but remains idyllically set with views up through a cleft green valley to high ridges behind.

## Sleeping

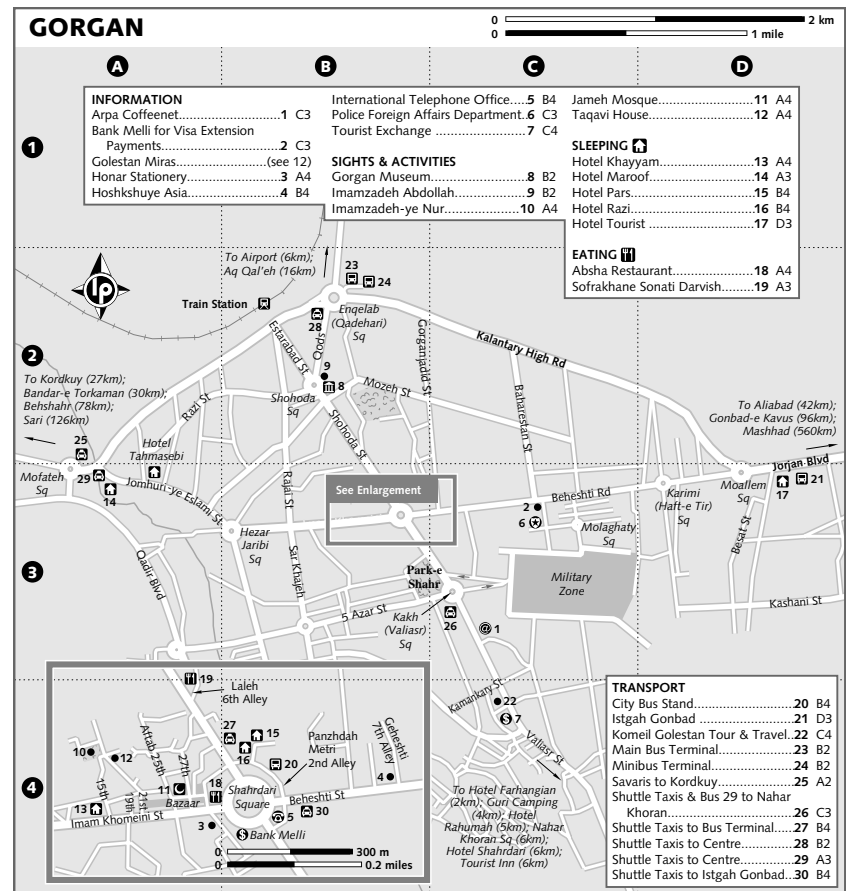
### BUDGET

**Guri Camping** (☎ 553 0248; Valiasr St km6; pre-erected tents IR3000; ☞ No Ruz & summer only) Outside the Guri restaurant-teahouse, a row of seasonal tents are filled on a first-come, first-served basis: there are no reservations. Bring mat and sleeping bag.

**Hotel Pars** (☎ 222 9550; First Alley, off Panzhdah Metri 2nd Alley; s/tw/tr/q IR52,000/71,000/85,000/100,000) Set around a pleasant courtyard of orange trees, this clean, central yet surprisingly peaceful *mosafekhaneh* (cheap hotel) lies just a minute's walk from Shahr-dari Sq. Ali, the gregarious, philosophical owner, speaks great English, having lived in the UK for nine years.

**Hotel Razi** (☎ 222 4613; s/tw/tr IR50,000/70,000/80,000, tw with shower IR89,000) Opposite Hotel Pars, this is almost as good.

**Hotel Tourist** (☎ 335 3797; Jorjan Blvd; tw/tr IR100,000/120,000) These simple, newly tiled rooms have sinks, slightly musty shower booths and ageing beds. Squat toilets are shared. It's close to Istgah Gonbad and rather noisy.



**Hotel Khayyam** (☎ 222 4924; Aftab 15th Alley, Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr/q IR104,000/218,000/248,000/282,000) A cosy *mosaferkhaneh* whose small but relatively pleasant rooms have attached showers but ageing shared squat toilets. Comparatively overpriced.

### MIDRANGE

Most are off Valiasr St, well south of the centre in the Nahar Khoran woodlands.

**Hotel Maroof** (☎ 442 5591; Jomhuri-ye Eslami St; s/d US\$24/32) Although slightly scrappy this is the cheapest option to have en-suite toilets, some Western-style. It's better value than the nearby Hotel Tahmasebi, despite road noise and underlit corridors.

**Tourist Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 552 0034; fax 552 2279; Valiasr St km8; tw/bungalow US\$42/55) This long-established place has the most magical location of several Nahar Khoran forest places. Compact, tastefully furnished bungalows are fairly closely packed through pines and palms that twinkle merrily in multicoloured evening lights. Avoid the tired, cheaper rooms above the restaurant. Pleasant outdoor teahouse.

**Hotel Shahrdari** (☎ 552 4077; Nahar Khoran Sq; tw US\$42) This has a faint grandeur and some rooms are decently equipped. Six have a private bathroom and a Western toilet lurking in what looks like a wardrobe. Absurdly, there's no discount for rooms with shared bathrooms. It's 250m north of the Tourist Inn.

**Hotel Farhangian** (☎ 552 1652; Valiasr St km4; tr/q/5-bed IR315,555/420,760/525,925; ♿) Rooms in this family-oriented hotel aren't quite as smart as the very professional lobby might suggest, but they're new, spacious and fully equipped. No English sign.

**Hotel Rahumah** (☎ 552 0050; Valiasr St km7; r IR400,000-450,000; ♿) The 10 rooms above this Nahar Khoran restaurant are small suites with little kitchenettes and there's a modish bar-style area. Back rooms face the woods with the murmur of streams. It's approximately opposite Coffee Soufi café. No English sign.

### Eating

**Sofrakhane Sonati Darvish** (☎ 226 8581; Laleh 6th Alley, off Shohoda St; meals IR25,000-45,000; ☎ 11am-11pm) In a 300-year-old domed chamber hung with ships' wheels and lanterns, the Darvish is by far Gorgan's most intriguing restaurant...if you can find it. Menus are

limited but the kababs are superlatively succulent. Around 9pm most evenings there's live traditional Persian music from owner-manager Ahmad Morshe who speaks fluent Romanian plus a little English.

**Absha Restaurant** (☎ 222 2993; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR20,000-50,000; ☎ noon-4pm & 7.30-10pm) The smartest of many eateries around Shahrdari Sq for decent *palo-morgh* (chicken and rice) and *ghorme sabzi* (green mix of diced meat, beans and vegetables, served with rice). An unpretentious place next door serves ice cream and fresh-squeezed fruit juice.

For pizzerias, head down Valiasr St. Continue all the way to Nahar Khoran for outdoor teahouses, some nicer restaurants and the eccentric **Guri** (☎ 552 4891; Valiasr St km6; kababs IR15,000; ☎ 4pm-1am), whose main building is shaped like a giant samovar topped by a big concrete teapot.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

There are daily flights to Tehran (IR315,000) on Iran Air and Iran Aseman. Iran Air flies to Mashhad (IR324,000) thrice weekly. English-speaking **Komeil Golestan Tour & Travel** (☎ 232 6664; komeilgolestan@samopardaz.com; Valiasr St, cnr Edalat 21st St; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-2pm Thu) sells the tickets.

#### BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

From the big **main terminal** (Enqelab Sq), bus destinations include the following (prices are for *mahmooly/Volvo*):

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Esfahan	IR32,000/ 80,000	16hr	2-3.30pm
Mashhad	IR31,000/ 50,000	11hr	6-10am & 6-10pm
Rasht	IR20,000- 22,000	9hr	hourly 7.30-1.30am & 8.30-10.30pm Seiro Safar
Shahrud	IR14,000	3hr	7.30, 8am, 1.30pm, 2.30pm Taavoni 14
Tabriz	IR90,000	14hr	3pm Taavoni 5 & (Volvo) Seiro Safar
Tehran	IR22,000/ 50,000	8hr	Frequent am & 10-11.30pm
Zabol	IR75,000	25hr	6-7am Taavoni 14
Zahedan	IR42,500	26hr	6am Taavoni 14

Many through-buses to/from Mashhad don't bother with the terminal, instead

dropping-off and picking-up passengers at Enqelab Sq and/or just east of Mofateh Sq. A well-organised minibus terminal directly east of the bus terminal has frequent as-full services to Aq Qal'eh (IR1000, 20 minutes), Bandar-e Torkaman (IR2000, 40 minutes), Behshahr (IR3500), Kordkuy (IR1500) and Sari (IR6000, two hours). Savaris to Aq Qal'eh leave from the central reservation at Enqelab Sq.

Minibuses/savaris for Aliabad (IR1750/6000), Azad Shahr (IR3000/12,000) and Gonbad-e-Kavus (IR4000/15,000, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Gonbad** (Blvd Jorjan), a small yard at the eastern edge of town.

#### TRAIN

Gorgan-Tehran services (IR27,000 to IR40,000, 11 hours) travel overnight in both directions.

### Getting Around

Convenient shuttle taxis (from IR750) run from predictable points near Shahrdari Sq. Most city buses start from Panzhdah Metri 2nd Alley. However, for Nahar Khoran Sq and upper Valiasr St, savaris (IR1500) and bus 29 (pre-paid ticket IR250, every 20 minutes) start from Valiasr Sq. Getting shuttle taxis back from Nahar Khoran isn't always easy so pre-buy a bus ticket in case.

### AROUND GORGAN

#### Kordkuy

کردکوی

☎ 0173 / pop 31,000

Attractive **Park Jangal** is a popular picnic site 5km behind Kordkuy (locally pronounced *Kord-koo*). However, the main reason to visit is to organise a beautiful if arduous 4WD ride across the impressive forest escarpment to the Mil-e-Radkan tower.

The relatively high-class new **Bahman Hotel** (☎ 322 1501; www.bahmanhotel.com; Sari Hwy; s/d/ste US\$45/65/85) tries a little too hard to be colourfully grand but is comfortable despite the road noise. It's 150m west of Shahrdari Sq where very frequent Gorgan savaris arrive (IR2000, 20 minutes).

#### Mil-e-Radkan (West Radkan)

میل رادکان

An awkward but highly rewarding 4WD trip takes you right across the near-vertical mountain ridge behind Kordkuy on a seemingly unending ladder of hairpin bends.

Glimpsed Caspian views are fabulous from the top near scruffy Drazno village. Scenery remains appealing as you wind back down out of the forests into a secret valley of traditional mud-and-timber hamlets. **Kondab** and **Latkueh** villages, each requiring a slight detour, are especially quaint. Eventually you find **Mil-e-Radkan**, sitting upon an astoundingly lonely knoll, wistfully gazing at the cliff-edged valley. In English it's sometimes called West Radkan Tower to differentiate it from the better-known Radkan Tower (p364). It was built for a military commander in AD 1020 by the Bavend dynasty of Tabarestan. Along with a small band of Arabic inscriptions it has some stylised Pahlavi letters, virtually the last known use of that ancient script in Iran. Just getting here is a thrill.

Dry-weather 4WD tracks continue from the Radkan Valley to Dibaj (1½ hours) from where you could take a savari to Damghan (IR8000). However, finding transport from Dibaj to Radkan is very tough. Better start in Kordkuy.

If all goes perfectly, a return trip from Kordkuy to Mil-e Radkan is just about possible in four hours. Seven hours will be more realistic if transporting an assortment of hitch hiking villagers and their livestock to their diverse destinations en route (an ideal way to visit the valley villages). Forget the trip altogether after snow or heavy rain. To find a suitably sturdy 4WD (preferably with food supplies, snow chains and a shovel packed for eventualities), head to the second *meydan* (town square) south of Kordkuy's central Shahrdari Sq. Getting a shared place on an over loaded early-morning Toyota truck from here is the cheapest way into the Radkan Valley villages. To charter, ask around the surrounding market for a Kordkuy resident who has both 4WD and family in the valley. We've previously had good experiences with humorous, if vaguely manic, **Ali Fagoni** (with relatives in Kondab), and **Mohammad Reza** (who runs a small Kordkuy carpet shop).

#### Bandar-e Torkaman

بندر ترکمن

☎ 0173 / pop 44,000

This flat, low-rise market town is architecturally tedious and despite the vibrant colours of the Turkmen costumes, the famous Monday morning **market** is just a glorified

car-boot sale. Nonetheless, the tiny *eskeleh* (port) has picturesque views over the Gorgan Gulf from its ultra-basic jetty-side tea-house. From here, occasional motorboats speed across the lagoon to fishing village **Ashuradeh** (IR50,000 each way). The *eskeleh* is 4km west of central Bandar-e Torkaman, behind some oil storage tanks: follow the old train tracks. During holidays this normally peaceful site becomes packed with local tourists browsing through Turkmen scarves at a ramshackle bazaar or getting photographed with colourfully saddled camels.

Frequent Gorgan minibuses (IR2000, 40 minutes) terminate just behind central Kariya Sq, with its copper-coloured statue of Turkmen poet Makhtumkuli. Minibuses to Kordkuy (IR1000, 20 minutes) leave from the southern edge of town.

### Other Turkmen Areas

The Turkmen town of **Aq Qal'eh**, 16km north of Gorgan bus terminal, has a celebrated Thursday morning **market**, and a four-span **Safavid Bridge** (Pol-e Safavi) in the town centre. Several tumulus-style **mounds** rise from the flat surrounding fields of rapeseed and wheat. The best known is **Turang Tappeh**, 17km northeast of Aq Qal'eh. Less famous

**Shah Tappeh** (12km west of Aq Qal'eh, then 4km south) looks more dishevelled, an appearance that locals blame on WWII excavations after which Nazis supposedly carted off crates of treasure to Berlin. Very Indiana Jones.

The Aq Qal'eh-Incheh Borun road passes within 2km of **Alagöl**, a large if relatively un-spectacular lake that's immensely popular with local picnickers at weekends. In season you might see flamingos or Turkmen herders' öy tents. Semi-wild camels roam the fast, desolate Incheh Borun-Maraveh Tappeh road, which passes within 3km of the **Makhtumkuli mausoleum** (30km west of Maraveh Tappeh). The modernist mausoleum looks like a gigantic four-stemmed concrete umbrella rising discordantly from the hilly steppe. It commemorates the (disputed) birthplace of Turkmenistan's 'national' poet Fargo Makhtumkuli (aka Pyragu Magtymguly; 1733–83), whose statue appears in virtually every Turkmen town. During No Ruz the monument is over-run by truly vast hoards of patriotic Turkmens. However, it's very peaceful on normal weekdays when humans are heavily outnumbered by scorpions.

Charming, ethnic-Turkmen savari-driver **Abul Halim Qarei** (☎ home 0171-225 4049, call evenings) usually does the Gorgan–Aq Qal'eh run but offers very fair prices on day trips into the Turkmen hinterlands. He speaks a little English.

### GONBAD-E KAVUS

☎ 0172 / pop 134,000

Until utterly obliterated by the Mongol and Tamerlane rampages, Jorjan was the region's foremost ancient city. All that remains today of Jorjan are a few lumpy **excavations** behind the huge, ornate **Imamzadeh Yahya** (West Mihaan St), 3km west of central Gonbad-e Kavus. This predominantly Turkmen town grew up around Jorjan's one surviving building, the utterly magnificent **Mil-e Gonbad** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am–8pm). Soaring, 55m tall on 12m-deep foundations, this astonishing tower has the cross-section of a 10-pointed star, and looks like a buttressed brick spaceship. It was built in 1006 for poet-artist-prince Qabus ibn Vashmgir but is so remarkably well preserved that one can scarcely believe it's 100, let alone 1000 years old. Qabus (Kavus), the Zeyarid ruler of surrounding

Tabarestan, had just six years to marvel at his creation before an assassin put him in it permanently. Well, not so permanently, actually. His glass coffin, which originally hung from the tower's dome, vanished long ago. Now there's nothing to see inside, although it's well worth the entry fee for the remarkable echoes both within and even more spookily from the marked circular spot some 40m in front of the tower. Mil-e Gonbad is hard to miss in a park 2½ blocks north of the central Enqelab Sq.

On Friday the hippodrome at the eastern end of town holds *savar kareh* **horse races** (☎ 1pm spring & autumn).

On hot summer days you might want to retire behind the heavy bronze doors of the swish, full-sized indoor **swimming pool** (☎ 555 6909; Peyam St; per hr with/without sauna IR30,000/20,000; ☎ 11am–11pm, Tue, Thu & Sun for women, other days men). It's one block east of Daneshju Blvd near its southern end.

The bearable, central **Mosaferkhaneh Khayyam** (☎ 222 7663; off Imam St; tw/tr/q IR46,000/67,000/79,000, showers IR5000) is just south of Enqelab Sq before East Mihaan St. It's signed in Russian as гостиница хям. There's better accommodation in Minudasht (p345) or Azad Shahr (p344).

There are *kababis* and a pizzeria off Enqelab Sq. Facing the great tower, **Safa Café** (☎ 222 0208; ☎ 8am–midnight; ☎) offers ice-cream sundaes (IR4000 to IR9000), floats, espresso (IR7000) and freshly squeezed seasonal juices.

### Getting There & Away

Busy Istgah Gorgan, towards Imam St's southern end, has minibuses and savaris to Azad Shahr, Aliabad and Gorgan. For Minudasht and Kalaleh, savaris leave from Basij Sq, 2km directly east of Enqelab Sq. Change in Minudasht for Bojnurd. Change in Azad Shahr for Shahrud.

### AROUND GONBAD-E KAVUS

East of Gonbad, the limited-access Golestan National Park includes partly cultivated steppe and contrastingly thick mountain forests of 500-year-old trees in which you half expect to meet Asterix and his cohorts. The region is indistinctly littered with clues to the once vibrant Tabarestan civilisation that lasted from the Neanderthal era right up until the 13th century. Then Genghis Khan's hordes brought it all to an abrupt end.

### IRAN'S TURKMEN PEOPLE

Turkmen people (2% of Iran's population) have a truly extraordinary range of facial features from Asiatic (Kazakh–Mongolian) to startlingly blue-eyed Caucasian. Their clans are predominantly Sunni-Muslim and speak their own Turkic dialects. Turkmen women have little patience with black chadors, favouring heavy, full-length dresses in bright colours over trousers and shawls with floral designs. Some older men wear white turban-like headscarves but once-iconic *telpek* hats of shaggy sheepskin are pretty rare these days, as are traditional yurt-style nomad-tents called *öy*. In the last generation most Turkmens have become settled, swapping their famous horses for motorbikes. Although sheep farming remains an economic mainstay, pasture-lands have increasingly been ploughed up by Zaboli immigrants, leaving Turkmen villages amongst the most disadvantaged in post-revolutionary Iran. See [www.turkmensahra.com](http://www.turkmensahra.com) for more about their region.

Much of the steppe population is ethnically Turkmen so if you're lucky you might find yourself invited to a horse milking or for tea in one of the increasingly rare reed-ringed felt *öy* tents. For a hefty fee it's possible to take unique spring and autumn **horse treks** in this fascinating area; book through [www.inthesaddle.com/iran.htm](http://www.inthesaddle.com/iran.htm). For a riders' experience, read [www.equitrek.co.m.au/iran.html](http://www.equitrek.co.m.au/iran.html).

### Gharra Tappeh Sheikh (GTS) قهره تپه شيخ ☎ 0172

A unique stud-farm in the minuscule ethnic-Turkmen village of GTS is home to philosophical US-born Louise Firouz (nee Laylin). Famous for 'rediscovering' (ie selectively back-breeding) the miniature Caspian horse, she also rears classic Turkmen horses, thought to be the genetic forerunners of the thoroughbred. She has lived in Iran for more than 40 years and has an endless wealth of fascinating tales to tell.

By advance arrangement it's possible to stay in a genuine Turkmen *öy* tent on **Louise's farm** (☎ 229 7679; [firouz@pinarnet.com](mailto:firouz@pinarnet.com); per person US\$60). This is a unique, very personal experience and the deliberately high price is

### CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT INCHEH BORUN

The border known as 'Incheh Borun' is actually at Pol. That's 4km off the Gorgan road: turn north, 12km before Incheh Borun village. On the Iran side peddlers sell felt rugs and the nearby lakes are popular with picnickers on Fridays, but there's no public transport. On the Turkmenistan side, 1.5km across no-man's land, there's just a lonely gateway where the queues of Turkish LPG gas trucks wait. You're really in the middle of nowhere, with even the small town of Etrek around 20km distant. There is reputedly a bus to Balkanabat (formerly Nebit-Dag) in the late afternoon but don't count on it. Lonely Planet has only received one report of travellers crossing here in recent years, although they described officials as 'utterly charming'. It's much more common to cross the Turkmenistan border at Sarakhs (p365) or Bajgiran (p345).

گنبد کاووس

designed to keep it that way. Bring a sleeping bag and don't expect luxury: shared facilities include an out door long-drop toilet. The village's flat, steppe position gives a magnificent big-sky panorama edged with a near horizon of high woodland ridges. GTS makes an ideal base for visiting Alexander's Wall and Khalid Nibi Shrine. Louise can arrange transport to these and many other intriguing, little-visited marvels.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Gonbad-e Kavus, the shortest route is via Haji Qoshan, once home to ubiquitous Turkmen writer Makhtumkuli. By public transport it's easier to go via Kalaleh. From Kalaleh's Ahmedi Sq, take a Tamar-bound savari, then pay an extra IR20,000 to continue *dar baste* to GTS (20 minutes).

#### Alexander's Wall

سد اسکندر

Like the Great Chinese and Hadrian's equivalents, **Alexander's Wall** (Sadd-e Eskander) was built to keep out war-like raiders from the north. For the Iranian world it marked the very real edge of civilisation. Being banished beyond was equivalent to capital punishment. Called *Qezel Alam* (Red Snake) in Turkmen, it stretched over 160km between the Golestan Mountains and the Caspian and probably dates from the 6th century, making any reference to Alexander the Great mere romantic fiction. Comprehensively cannibalised for building materials over the centuries it's now little more than a muddy undulation. However, a relatively recognisable section, conveniently marked by orange concrete bollards, runs along the northern side of the Tamar-GTS road. Raised some 5m above the fields, the outline of a large, square-planned wall-fort is still easy to make out at **Malaisheikh**, around 10km west of GTS.

#### Khalid Nibi Shrine

آرامگاه خالد ننبی

Dramatically perched above a breathtaking sea of badlands sit three small **mausoleums** commemorating Khalid Nibi. Although he was a 5th-century Nestorian Christian, the place now attracts Muslim pilgrims during spring and early summer. From the central shrine, a fairly obvious footpath leads down, then right in about 10 minutes to a grassy knoll dotted with remarkable **pagan grave-markers**. Ancient but of unknown age, these markers include 2m-long spindly phalluses

for men and butterfly-shaped stones for women.

From Tamar (off the Kalaleh-Maraveh Tappeh road), Khalid Nibi is 30km by un-surfaced road (allow 90 minutes). Taxis from Minudasht want around IR170,000 return, but they struggle with the steep last kilometre. A 4WD from GTS costs around IR200,000 return.

#### Aliabad

علي آباد

☎ 0173 / pop 45,000

Fan-shaped **Kabud Waterfall** is accessed by a 20-minute streamside walk through pretty woodlands starting from a clutch of tea-houses, 4km south of Aliabad. However, the path becomes a treacherous mudslide when wet.

From **Shirabad**, 8km off the Aliabad-Azad Shahr road (turn at Khanbebin), an essentially similar but quieter (and less steep) path passes gorgeous mossy rocks and limpid forest pools for a 20-minute stroll to a vertical 20m-chute **waterfall** in a grooved cliff. Less accessible falls continue above.

Don't confuse Shirabad with tiny **Shirabad**, the last village of an attractive 30km forested valley with tantalising glimpses up to high mountain-pasture settlements in the side valleys. A tough, summer-only track crosses the high mountains from Shirinabad to Qal'eh Now-e-Kharaqan near Bastam (p351), but finding anyone to rent you a suitable 4WD vehicle is a challenge.

The clean, basic **Mehmanpazir Resalat** (☎ 622 2108; Azadshahr Rd; s/tw/tr/q IR50,000/70,000/80,000/90,000) is above a restaurant about 150m east of Aliabad's Velyat Sq, almost opposite the attractive park. Sign reads 'Well Come'.

**Hotel Kaniyar** (☎ 623 0002; tw/tr/q IR300,000/400,000/450,000), 2km west, has a stylish open-plan lobby-restaurant and Jacuzzis in some rooms. Standards are high but some décor is overly colourful.

#### Azad Shahr

آزادشهر

☎ 0174 / pop 38,000

Connecting between Shahrur and Gorgan you'll probably change savari at this friendly town, formerly known as Shahparsand. At the western end of town, **Hotel Park** (☎ 672 2545; Beheshti Blvd; s/tw/tr/ste IR140,000/180,000/240,000/300,000; P ☎) is one of the region's best-value hotels, with an understated elegance and very well-kept, fully equipped rooms.

#### Minudasht

مینوداشت

☎ 0174 / pop 24,000

Backed by beautiful green hills, Minudasht is a useful transport junction between Gonbad-e Kavus and Bojnurd. On the northern ring road, the new **Mehmanpazir Minu** (☎ 522 3188; Mashhad Hwy; s/tw/tr/q IR52,000/79,000/84,000/97,000, with private bathroom IR62,000/89,000/104,000/119,000; ☎) is great value, with fancy Achaemenid-motif bed-heads on the hard beds and air-conditioning in most rooms. The ageing **Hotel Esteghlal** (☎ 522 2314; Mashhad Hwy; s/tw/tr/q US\$47/55/60/65; ☎) is hopelessly overpriced and feels spookily like a set from *The Shining*.

#### BOJNURD

بجنورد

☎ 0584 / pop 201,000

Capital of newly established North Khorasan province, Bojnurd sits in a bowl of gentle mountains surrounded by mildly attractive rural villages. If changing buses here, check out **Ainekhane** (Dochenar/Shariati St; admission IR3000), a psychedelically coloured Qajar-era mansion. Get the key from **North Khorasan Tourism** (☎ 224 5388; Dochenar/Shariati St; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) directly opposite the rather grand **Emarat Mofarkham building**.

Clean, fresh **Mosaferkhaneh Naghizadeh** (☎ 222 2193; Falakeh Kargat, Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr IR56,000/64,000/76,000, showers IR4000) is simple but very well kept.

At the far eastern end of town, the plush new **Hotel Negin** (☎ 225 5737; Imam Reza Sq; d with breakfast IR360,000) has fully equipped modern rooms off smart, if slightly underlit, corridors.

Mashhad-bound savaris (IR30,000, 2½ hours) start from Falakeh Mehman Sara (aka Azadegan Sq) in front of a conspicuously marked 'Guesthouse'. The main **bus terminal** (Beit-ol Moqqadas Sq), on the western side of town, has regular buses to Gorgan (IR17,000, five hours), Mashhad (IR12,000, four hours), Quchan (IR6000, 2½ hours), Sabzevar (IR8000, 3½ hours) and Tehran (IR50,000, 12 hours). Savaris to Sabzevar (IR25,000, 2½ hours) and Esfaran (IR10,000, 45 minutes) depart from Chahara Khoshi at the west end of Beheshti St.

#### QUCHAN

قوچان

☎ 0581 / pop 116,000

If you're heading to Turkmenistan via Bajgiran, you'll probably need to transit Quchan, where a sweet little **Ethnographic**

**Museum** (☎ 223 2757; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun) and a big new hotel (nearing completion) are both on Azadi Sq on the main Mashhad-Bojnurd road.

From here, Sabzevar Bazaar St runs 1.5km north to central Imam Khomeini Sq (*meydan*) where it continues as Eshkabad St through the commercial centre. It ends at Felestin Sq (1.5km further) from which savaris leave for Bajgiran (IR15,000) and Dargaz (IR20,000).

A short walk north of Imam Khomeini Sq, turn right down a quiet side road to find **Mosaferkhaneh Noor** (☎ 222 3464; Nasser Khosrow St; tw/tr IR50,000/60,000), 150m east of Eshkabad St. Simple rooms around a central courtyard are very clean, but there's no shower and doors are usually locked by 10pm. Three blocks further north off Eshkabad St are eateries and an internet café.

Quchan region is famous for *koshti Quchani*, a kind of **wrestling** that's a bit like sumo minus the bellies. However, competitions are rare and mostly held in remote villages, notably at Ravar (1 to 2 April).

Bojnurd-Mashhad buses and some savaris (back/front IR15,000/20,000) use relevant points on Azadi Sq. However, Mashhad-Quchan buses (IR6000, 2½ hours) arrive at the main bus terminal, 1.6km east, then 300m south of Imam Khomeini Sq.

#### AROUND QUCHAN

##### Bajgiran

باجگیران

☎ 0582 / pop 920

If you're heading to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's surreal capital, consider sleeping here to get an early start for crossing the nearby border (see the boxed text, p346). Bajgiran village isn't an attraction but a few huddles of archaic mud-houses look faintly attractive amid the arid mountain ridges and communication towers. Savaris from Quchan (IR15,000/60,000 per person/car, 1¼ hours) terminate at the lower border gate. That's 800m beyond the nine-room **Hotel Bajgiran** (☎ 372 3212; tw IR80,000), which has survivable but rather bare rooms with shared toilets.

The prettier of two possible routes from Quchan uses a degraded old road via Emamqoli, descending through a narrow canyon, and rejoining the main new road just beyond the timeless mud-block village of **Dorbadam**.



### CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT BAJGIRAN HOWDAN

From Bajgiran's lower border gate, it's a steady 1.7km climb to the **immigration posts** (☎ 7.30am-3.30pm Iran time, 9am-5pm Turkmen time); taxis want IR10,000. Before crossing the border, change at least US\$10 into Turkmen manats (US\$1=23,500M) either with traders in Bajgiran village or at the small (slightly hidden) office marked 'taxi' to the right of the Iranian immigration building. Iranian formalities are swift as long as you don't sneeze at the 'Human Quarantine' desk. Turkmenistan immigration is just 50m away. As at any Turkmen entry point you'll need US\$12 (in US dollars) to pay for the hologrammed entry card. If arriving on a tourist visa your voucher must be with the immigration officers and the agency representative should be waiting so be sure to synchronise your watches. That's not required if you're on a transit visa.

Turkmen immigration staff are friendly but procedures can be appallingly ponderous, even when everything's in order (two hours to clear six people when we crossed). Beware that Howdan (the Turkmen-side upper customs post, pronounced hovdan) is not a village, has zero facilities and is 25km from the Turkmen lower border gate (Berzhengi Tamozhna). Smart VW minivans charging 150,000M (or US\$10 if you've forgotten to exchange money in advance) shuttle across this no-man's land, departing once they have a handful of passengers. After further passport checks here, less plush shared taxis charge 25,000M per person to any address in Ashgabat (whose city limits start 7km further north).

## SEM NAN

☎ 0231 / pop 129,000

Capital of an eponymous region, booming Semnan lies on the northern edge of the vast Dasht-e Kavir desert, 240km east of Tehran. Since Sassanian times it has been a key stop on the silk route, attracting wealth and regular destruction in equal measure. At first glance it's a diffuse, nondescript city of low-rise modern buildings and wide boulevards. But around the appealing covered bazaar is an interesting complex of historical buildings. A short drive to Shahmirzad reveals an impressive hinterland of arid mountain peaks.

### Information

**Aras Coffeenet** (Qods Blvd; internet per hr IR6000;

☎ 10am-7pm Sun-Wed)

**Semani Coffeenet** (☎ 333 8010; internet per hr IR6000; ☎ 8am-10pm Sun-Wed, 8am-8pm Thu) Separate male and female sections.

**Semnan Miras** (☎ 332 1602; www.semnanmiras.ir; Tadayon House, Taleqani St, btwn 3rd & 5th Alleys; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sun-Wed, 8am-1.30pm Thu) They speak minimal English but offer bilingual pamphlets and Farsi-only maps from a lovely Qajar-era mansion with Semnan's finest surviving wind tower.

### Sights

#### OLD SEMNAN

The key sites can all be accessed from within the unusually tall **covered bazaar** via the log-pillared **Takiyeh Market Hall**. Most

## سمنان

impressive is the **Imam Khomeini (Sultani) Mosque** founded under Fath Ali Shah in the 1820s. It's one of Iran's finest surviving buildings from the Qajar period. Two of its four courtyard *iwans* offer perfectly measured use of restrained coloured brickwork. There's no such restraint in the dazzling blue tiling of the contemporary **Imamzadeh Yahya**. The extraordinarily high, if austere, west *iwan* of the **Jameh Mosque** dates from a 1424 rebuild, but the mosque's most lovable feature is the gorgeous 21m brick minaret (11th century?). Leaning and kinked it still dominates the town and is floodlit at night in incongruous electric green.

Between vaguely comical tilework portraits of Qajar warriors in the northwest corner of Takiyeh Hall, a doorway leads into an attractive 1452 bathroom. Within is the **Hazrat Museum** (☎ 333 1204; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-noon & 3.30-6pm Sat-Thu) displaying 3000-year-old pottery from the nearby archaeological site of Hissar, plus some pretty photos of Semnan Province.

Around the bazaar area, the construction of makeshift car parks and somewhat brutal redevelopment has bulldozed heart-breaking holes into the fabric of the old city. Only a small percentage of mud-built **traditional homes** remain, mostly in back alleyways. Several of these have crumbling Yazd-style wind towers (Taleqani 1st and 13th Alleys, Hafez 31st Alley, Ghafari 30th Alley, Abuzar Sq).

Near Abuzar Sq, Ghafari 9th Alley leads down to the lumpy ruins of the city's ancient mud **fortress**.

### OTHER SIGHTS

Spiked with blue-tiled baby minarets, **Darvaza-e Arg** (Arg Sq, Taleqani St) is Semnan's dinky but iconic Qajar-era city gate. Around 500m northeast there's an old **cistern** (Qods Blvd) beside what appears to be a fortress **tower**, but was actually a decorative element from a now demolished cotton factory.

### Activities

Some 5km east of Semnan, the **Shabdiz Tourist Complex** (☎ 335 3123; Damghan Hwy) is a 20-horse equestrian centre where tourists can rent horses and guides for trips into the nearby desert and mountains (around US\$100 per day; call ahead). A futuristic, eco-friendly five-star hotel plus restaurant, skating rink and sports complex are planned. The knowledgeable, intelligent owner, **Madjid Dadvar** (☎ 0912 231 1077; dadvar.madjid@yahoo.it), speaks decent English and better Italian.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Kormesh** (☎ 332 3647; Imam Khomeini 18th Alley, off Imam Khomeini Sq; tw/tr/q IR100,000/140,000/170,000) Facing Imam Khomeini Sq across a children's play area, the basic Kormesh is very central but easy to miss: find an unmarked door (usually covered with a towel), go inside then knock on the glass door to the right. Apathetic staff do their best to deter customers, suggesting randomly high prices, hiding the shower room and locking the doors at 10pm. Squat toilets are shared. The cheaper Mosaferkhaneh Chaharfazl, diagonally across Imam Khomeini St, is only open sporadically. Look for the Pepsi sign.

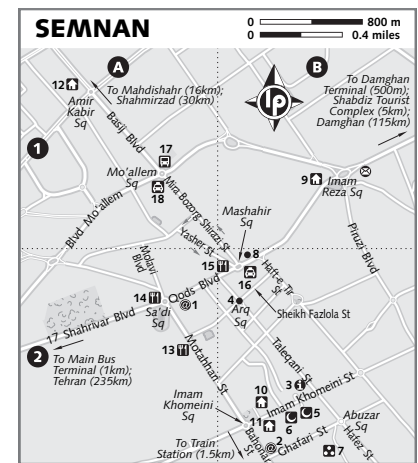
**Ghods Hotel** (☎ 332 2177; Imam Reza Sq; d US\$30; ☎ ☎) Some rear rooms have cracked windows and worn furniture. Front rooms are better with TV and fridge but suffer more from road noise. Overpriced.

**Semnan Tourist Inn** (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 444 1433; Basij Blvd; tw US\$37; ☎ ☎) Behind a dowdy exterior, this friendly 36-room hotel offers international standard rooms with new furniture, curtained showers, toiletries and freshly laundered towels: good value but 3km from the old-city core.

### Eating

**Ghandil Sabz** (☎ 334 0129; Motahhari St; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 4-11pm) There's a grotto theme in this curious ice-cream shop about 700m north of Imam Khomeini Sq after 21st Alley.

**Sofrakhaneh Sonati Haft Khan** (☎ 333 0463; Mashahir Sq; breakfast/kabab meals IR10,000/30,000; ☎ 9am-11pm) The menu is a very short list of ordinary kababs but the décor is unique. Achaemenid figures lead down to a cane-vaulted cavern



### INFORMATION

Aras Coffeenet.....	1	A2
Semani Coffeenet.....	2	B2
Semnan Miras.....	3	B2

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Darvaza-e Arg (City Gate).....	4	B2
Hazrat Museum.....	(see 6)	
Imam Khomeini (Sultani) Mosque.....	(see 5)	
Imamzadeh Yahya.....	5	B2
Jameh Mosque.....	6	B2
Mud Fortress Ruins.....	7	B2
Tower & Cistern.....	8	B2

### SLEEPING

Ghods Hotel.....	9	B1
Hotel Kormesh.....	10	B2
Mosaferkhaneh Chaharfazl.....	11	B2
Semnan Tourist Inn.....	12	A1

### EATING

Ghandil Sabz.....	13	A2
Pizza Max.....	14	A2
Sofrakhaneh Sonati Haft Khan.....	15	B2

### TRANSPORT

Damghan Savaris.....	16	B2
Shahmirzad Minibuses & Savaris.....	17	A1
Shuttle Taxis to Imam Khomeini Sq via Yasser St, Qods Blvd & Sadi Sq.....	18	A1



full of tea-beds, Corinthian columns and an artificial grotto. If that looks fanciful, wait till you see the incredible party room accessed through a secret door between the two gold suits.

**Pizza Max** (☎ 332 7012; Sa'di Sq; pizzas IR23,000-30,000; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 6pm-midnight) Good if typically Iranian pizza, mostly for takeaway.

### Getting There & Away

The main bus terminal is 3km west of Sa'di Sq, 100m beyond Imam Hossein Sq. Between 5.30am and midnight, buses leave every half hour or so for Tehran (IR20,000 to IR25,000, three hours). Taavoni 2 has a 6am bus to Mashhad (IR60,000) and a 7am service to Sari (IR20,000, four hours) via Kiyasar, passing through seasonally beautiful valleys full of sunflowers. Alternatively, go to Qa'emshahr (IR13,500 to IR22,000, 3½ hours, 10 daily). For savaris to Qa'emshahr (back/front seat IR35,000/40,000, three hours) or Tehran (IR35,000/45,000, two hours), sign up at a special office in the terminal.

To Damghan, hourly buses (IR9000 to IR12,000, three hours) use a terminal 100m south of Standard Sq (3km east of the centre). The last is at 6pm. Savaris leave more conveniently from Mashahir Sq.

For Shahmirzad via Mahdishahr, minibuses (IR1200) and savaris (IR3500, 25 minutes) start from Mo'alem Sq.

Three Mashhad-Tehran trains (stopping at Semnan) and two Semnan-Tehran local services (three hours) operate daily. The train station is 1.5km south of Imam Khomeini Sq.

### AROUND SEMNAN Caravanserais

Several partly renovated **caravanserais** lie close to the main Mashhad-Tehran highway either side of town, notably at **Lasjerd** (36km west) and **Ahowan** (42km east). Semnan Miras can get you in by advance arrangement.

### Into the Mountains

#### MAHDISHAHR

مهدي شهر

☎ 0232

Sprawling in arid rocky folds, **Mahdishahr** (16km from Semnan) is dominated by the impressive if mostly contemporary blue-domed **Al-Mahdi Hosseinieh**. The town's other notable building is the 40-year-old Kakh Pal-

ace, now used as the remarkably good-value **Sangesar Hotel** (☎ 362 4280; fax 362 4380; Saheb Zaman St; d/ste US\$30/41) with blue tiling, grand lobby and two-storey chandelier of 1970s rope-glass. Take the best suite for full effect.

#### SHAHMIRZAD

شهميرزاد

☎ 0232

This popular weekend getaway for Semnanis is a quietly charming oasis amid spiky rock ridges. Gushing streams and a few remnant mud-compound houses grace the upper parts of town around Imam Sq. There's enough snow on the ridges 8km behind town to allow impromptu sledging until mid-April. Between Shahmirzad and Mahdishahr, **Darband** is a somewhat scraggy picnic spot behind which a path leads up to a locally famous **cave** in the cliff.

Excellent value even at foreigner prices, **Moshtameh Ferhangi** (☎ 366 4114; local/foreigner d IR70,000/150,000) is a modern, four-storey octagonal tower hotel set in a garden at the top edge of town. It's unmarked but very obvious: follow Motahhari St up from Imam Sq (10 minutes' walk). Rooms are big and although a little bare, have smart bathrooms and good views.

By the chairlift and art-park directly above Imam Sq, a basic **teahouse** spills out into pretty gardens on warm afternoons.

Minibuses (IR2000) and savaris (IR3500) to Semnan leave from Imam St, 500m downhill from Imam Sq. For the picturesque direct route to Pol-e Sefid you'll need to find a taxi driver gutsy enough to ford the unbridged river en-route.

### DAMGHAN

دامغان

☎ 0232 / pop 55,000

This historic caravan town sits on the edge of the great desert plateau, attractively backed by parched rocky ridges (the highest are discordantly snow-covered well into April). Damghan's timelessly crumbling mud-walled buildings are rapidly being replaced by modern constructions. However, several ancient religious structures in expertly faceted brick are within easy walking distance of the central area.

The covered bazaar hugs the town's central east-west axis (Imam Khomeini St) for the block between Chaharshir Sq (with its four gilded lions) and Imam Khomeini Sq, where Bank Tejarat changes US\$, Euros and

UK pounds. From here, Beheshti St continues northeast towards Mashhad, Motahhari St heads southeast past Tarikhneh Mosque (400m) to the train station (2km), while the narrow lane due east passes the Jameh Mosque (200m) and Pir Amadar (300m).

Attractive Azadi Blvd leads north from Chaharshir Sq, a pine-lined stream running down its middle. It quickly passes an old (but out-of-bounds) caravanserai to the west and shopping mall (Bazaar Khandaq) to the east. The latter contains friendly but slow **Coffeenet Novin** (internet per hr IR6000; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri).

### Sights

The **Tarikhneh Mosque** (Motahhari St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-1.30pm & 3pm-dusk Sat-Thu) is a unique, partly ruined mud-brick structure whose 18 extraordinarily sturdy rear columns date from about AD 760. That reputedly makes this the second oldest mosque in Iran, possibly starting life as a Zoroastrian palace-temple. The broken columns and part-renovated arches of a colonnaded courtyard are similarly massive and undecorated. But in striking contrast, the 30m-high AD 1038 brick **minaret** is very finely detailed. Now slightly leaning it's within the yard of a new mosque next door.

The **Jameh Mosque** looks outwardly new but was founded a millennium ago. It has another fine brick **minaret** probably dating from the mid-11th century. Continue walking along the same lane to find the round **Pir Alamdar** tower. Dating from the AD 1020s, its original conical roof has been replaced by a newer brick dome but the Kufic inscriptions are remarkable and if you can get in (hit-and-miss) the interior is reputedly even finer.

The similar **Chehel Dokhtar Tower** hides behind the very photogenic **Imamzadeh Jafar** (Chaharshir Sq), a splendid ancient brick building with round side-towers, arched false-windows and a five-levelled dome culminating in a brick cone. It looks like a movie-set North African castle.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Amir Hotel** (☎ 523 1776; Varzesh Sq; tw/tr IR120,000/130,000; ☎) Above a popular restaurant, the good-value Amir has small, comfortable rooms with bathrooms and a friendly reception in the cosy lobby. Varzesh Sq is identifiable by its 'sport monument' dis-

playing huge footballs in a giant cup. It's 1.5km from Chaharshir Sq, one large block north, then three east.

**Hotel Danesh** (☎ 523 1121; Beheshti St; s/tw IR200,000/300,000; ☎) If other hotels are full, the Danesh's unfussy, well-maintained rooms are quite acceptable, with fridge, central air-conditioning and new (if slightly uncomfortable) beds. Little balconies offer nice views from east-facing rooms but road noise is a slight problem. It's 1km east of Imam Khomeini Sq.

**Damghan Inn** (☎ 524 2070; fax 524 6800; Azadi Blvd; r US\$27; ☎) With multiple-domed roofs, this remarkably swish hotel is designed to faintly resemble a caravanserai while offering full midrange facilities. It's beside Park-e Shahr-dari, five minutes' walk north from Chaharshir Sq.

**Caffe Sun City** (☎ 524 8131; Beheshti St; coffees IR500-800; ☎ 9am-midnight; ☎) Thirty metres northeast of Imam Khomeini Sq, this is an appealing spot for a decent Turkish coffee. Or for a real espresso if they ever fix the machine.

Of several pizza and burger joints around lower Azadi Blvd, the most appealing is **Konj** (Kandagh St; ☎ noon-10.30pm; ☎) facing Bazaar Khandaq.

### Getting There & Away

Damghan's quiet terminal looks more like a covered bazaar. It's 1km west on 17 Shahrivar St, a IR500 shuttle-taxi hop from outside Imamzadeh Jafar. Buses/savaris run to Semnan (IR1,000/25,000, three hours) and Shahrud (IR3500/14,000, 75 minutes). Arriving in Damghan, incoming transport often leaves passengers obligingly at central Chaharshir or Imam Khomeini Sqs.

### AROUND DAMGHAN

Local picnickers love **Cheshmeh Ali** where the skeleton of a lovely Qajar-era pavilion sits amid willow trees in a spring-fed reflecting pool. It's almost worth the taxi fare (IR30,000 each way from Damghan, 30km) for the scenic contrasts en route: high snow-topped ridges, dry rocky outcrops and mud-walled plum orchards.

Along the slowly degenerating ex-asphalt north of here there are some fabulous 360-degree views of a wide mountain-ringed bowl-valley just beyond lonely **Dibaj**. To reach Mil-e Radkan (p341), you'll need a

4WD to get through deep squirming mud around Chamansovar village.

## SHAHRUD

☎ 0273 / pop 135,000

Shahrud is a pleasant small town with leafy streets squeezed against dusty ridges rising abruptly from the Dasht-e Kavir. It's a useful hub for visiting Bastam (7km northeast) and the stepped village of Mojen (35km west).

Shahrud's axis, 22 Bahman St, leads 1.3km from central Jomhuri Sq to Azadi Sq, passing **Coffeenet Almas** (☎ 223 8419; 22 Bahman St; per hr IR8000; ☎ 9am-11pm), easily missed downstairs, after one short block.

Imam Sq (nicknamed simply 'falakeh') is 300m north of Jomhuri Sq. Here winding Ferdosi St leads up to the small but beautifully presented **Shahrud Museum** (☎ 222 1784; Ferdosi St; admission IR3000; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 4-6pm Sat-Thu), housed in the 1927 former town hall.

Northwest from Jomhuri Sq, Sadeghi St leads towards leafy **Abshar Park** (1km) closely paralleled by the covered **bazaar**, which is lively if less than photogenic.

Southwest of Jomhuri St, Tehran St passes very close to the **tourist office** (Miras Ferhangi; ☎ 223 0760; off 8 Shahrivar St; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri) after 500m. Look for the wind tower in the side lane (left) behind a shop marked 'Iran Plast'.

## Sleeping

**Mehmankhaneh Islami Noh** (Inn Islam New; ☎ 222 2335; Shohoda St; s/d/tr/q IR48,350/65,900/77,800/89,900; ☎) Barely 15m southeast of Jomhuri Sq, the location is very handy but the rooms range from bearable (with tap) to highly dishevelled (without). Friendly but no showers.

**Hotel Azadi-Sharif** (☎ 222 8454; Bahar St; tw/tr/q IR120,000/170,000/220,000, with bathroom IR153,000/220,000/270,000) Rooms are a very mixed bag: some ageing with tight-packed beds and shared toilets; others neat and relatively spacious with newer tiled floors. There's a shared kitchen, family feel and an effusive welcome in approximate-English. To find it, walk 400m down Azadi Blvd from Azadi Sq, take a short block left on Khaqani St, turn left again and it's on your right.

**Hotel Nader** (☎ 333 2835; fax 333 2836; Daneshju St; s/d/tr/IR140,000/160,000/180,000, with shower 180,000/210,000/240,000; ☎) Simple but very clean rooms with monogrammed sheets. Toilets are shared. Head two blocks down Tehran

شاهرود

St from Jomhuri Sq, right on Madani Blvd, then take the first left and it's on the right before Daneshju curves left.

**ITTC Shahrud Tourist Inn** (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 222 6078; fax 222 4008; Saderian St; d/tr US\$35/40; ☎) Freshly painted walls and nice new curtains contrast with archaic old bathrooms and a strange mix of old and new furniture. It's peacefully set amid pine trees 300m from Azadi Sq on a street that runs parallel to Ferdosi.

## Eating

Note that none of the following have English on their signs. Let alone their menus.

**Coffee Shop Soorena** (off Azadi Sq; sundaes IR12,000-16,000, coffees IR7000-16,000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-10pm Sat-Thu, 5-10pm Fri) Though tiny, this mood-lit ice-cream parlour-café is the most stylish of several eateries around the south side of Azadi Sq. Mocha comes thick with chocolate sediment.

**Ayaran Restaurant** (☎ 224 2540; Abshar Park; meals IR20,000-50,000; ☎ 10.30am-midnight) Unusually good *jufe kababs* (grilled chicken pieces) are served in a timber-roofed rotunda constructed around a living tree or outside at tables in the pine woods.

**Ferdosi Restaurant** (☎ 222 2958; 22 Bahman St; pizzas from IR22,000, kabab meals IR25,000-40,000; ☎ noon-3.30pm & 7-10.30pm) Facing the bazaar entrance the Ferdosi is handy for Jomhuri Sq. Its pine ceilings and wood-effect walls come close to stylish minimalism, and it has a wide-ranging menu.

## Getting There & Around

Iran Peyma, Taavoni 3 and Seiro Safar all have handy ticket offices on or near Jomhuri Sq but most long-distance buses actually depart from the hopelessly inconvenient main bus terminal 5km south down Tehran St (IR1500 by shuttle taxi). Iran Peyma services include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Esfahan	IR60,000 (V)	13hr	5pm
Mashhad	IR16,700	10hr	1pm, 10pm
Gorgan	IR14,000	3hr	10am, 2.30pm
Sari	IR33,000	9hr	3pm via Damghan
Tehran	IR20,000/40,000	8hr	fairly frequent

Savaris to Azad Shahr (IR30,000) and Sabzevar leave from relevant points on Imam Reza Sq, 300m northeast of Azadi

Sq. Just beyond (northeast of the Atlantic Petrol Station) is **Terminal-e Shomal** (☎ 222 3201; Bastam Hwy), a small, hidden yard from which minibuses leave when full to Azad Shahr (IR6000, 1½ hours; IR10,000 2¼ hours back) plus at 9.30am to Gonbad-e Kavus (IR7000) and at 8am, 9am and 2pm to Gorgan (IR10,000). Savaris and occasional minibuses to Bastam (15 minutes) leave from 17 Shahrivar St just off Imam Sq. Savaris and minibuses to Mojen (30 minutes) leave from 15 Khordat St just off Sadeghi St, two blocks northwest of Jomhuri Sq.

Shahrud train station, on the Tehran-Mashhad train line, is about 3km southeast of Jomhuri Sq.

## AROUND SHAHRUD

### Bastam

Ancient Bastam is now a modest village 7km from Shahrud. It's centred on the quietly photogenic **Bayazid Historical Complex** (Imam Khomeini Sq; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk), 300m off the main Shahrud-Azad Shahr road up Taleqani Blvd. This collection of mostly 13th-century blue-tiled buildings surrounds the simple grave of Bayazid Bastami (AD 804-874), a philosopher nicknamed 'Sultan of gnostics' who fused Muslim, Mithraic and Zoroastrian ideas in formulating a poetic form of Sufism. Behind the grave, **Imamzadeh Mohammad** has an attractive almost Art Nouveau floral interior. The associated **Bayazid mosque** has a remarkable grey mihrab, glass-protected carved wooden doors and timber pillars supporting a fine log ceiling.

One block behind the complex, the mud-daub walled 1285 **Jameh Mosque** (off Madiyeh St) backs onto the fine 1313 **Borj Kashani**, a circular tomb-tower that possibly doubled as an astronomical observatory like that at Radkan (p364). The mosque reportedly contains superb stucco-work but getting in can be hit-and-miss.

Informal shared taxis pick up passengers outside the historical complex for rides into Shahrud (IR1250).

## MASHHAD

☎ 0511 / pop 2,965,000

Mashhad is Iran's holiest and second biggest city. Its *raison d'être* and main sight is the beautiful, massive and ever-growing Haram (shrine complex) commemorating

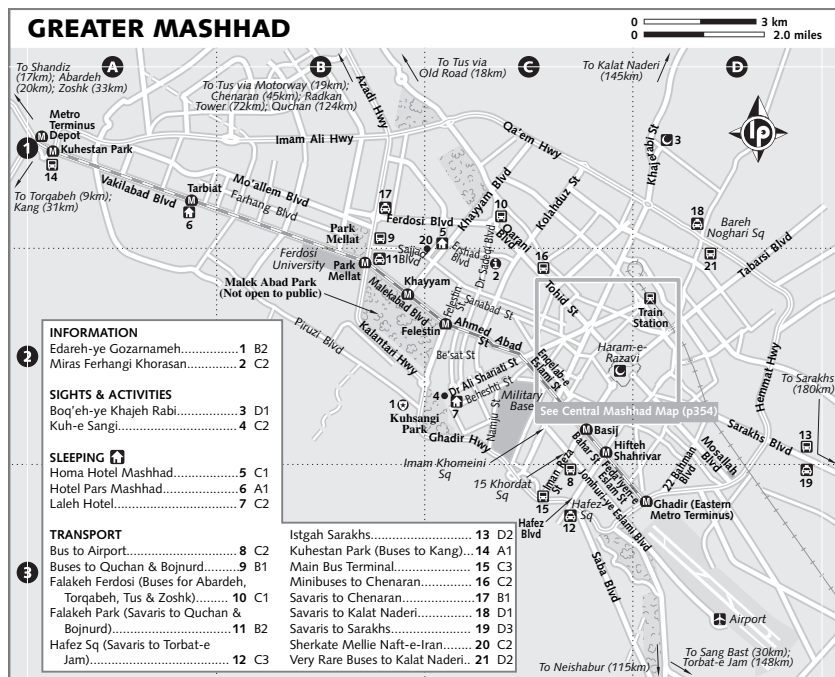
the AD 817 martyrdom of Shia Islam's eighth Imam, Imam Reza. The pain of Imam Reza's death is still felt very personally over a millennium later and around 20 million pilgrims converge here each year to pay their respects (and no small amount of money) to the Imam. Witnessing their tears is a moving experience, even if you're not a Muslim yourself. If you notice a lot of lovey young couples, that's because the city's also a haven for honeymooners, who believe sharing it with the Imam will bless their marriage. Away from the Haram Complex there are few sights, but Mashhad is a good place to buy carpets, it's a natural staging post for travel to Turkmenistan or Afghanistan, and offers many interesting excursions into little-touristed Khorasan.

Be aware that during major pilgrim seasons, almost all accommodation and transport will be booked out months in advance (see the boxed text, p358). Contrastingly, at other times Mashhad offers about the best-value accommodation in Iran. Winters can be very cold, with snow on the ground for up to five months a year. Summers are contrastingly hot. April is ideal.

## History

Following Imam Reza's burial here, the small village of Sanabad began to attract Shiite pilgrims and soon became known as Mashhad (place of martyrdom). Tus remained a more significant town until 1389 when Timur sacked the whole area. But thereafter it was Mashhad that eventually limped back to life as the new capital of Khorasan. The shrine was enlarged in the early 15th century by Timur's son, Shah Rokh, and his extraordinary wife, Gohar Shad, for whom the Haram's main mosque is named. Once the Safavids had established Shiism as the state creed, Mashhad became Iran's pre-eminent pilgrimage site and Shah Abbas I rebuilt the Holy Shrine's new core around 1612. Politically, Mashhad reached its zenith under Nader Shah (p35) whose empire was focused on Khorasan. Even though Nader was a Sunni of missionary zeal, he continued to sponsor the Haram.

In 1928, nonreligious buildings within 180m of the Holy Shrine were flattened to make way for the Haram's biggest enlargement to date. Prior to the 1979 revolution this religious 'island' was further expanded



to 320m and construction has continued apace ever since. When historians look back on the era of the Islamic Republic, they will point to the Haram as its greatest architectural achievement. Meanwhile, the charitable foundation that manages the shrine, **Astan-e Qods e Razavi** ([www.aqrazavi.org](http://www.aqrazavi.org)), has become a business conglomerate, managing enterprises from baking to carpets, and minerals to transport. But most of the money comes from donations, bequests and the selling of grave-sites: to be buried near the Imam is a great honour and suitably expensive (see Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi, p357).

During the Iran-Iraq War, Mashhad's population ballooned as it was the furthest Iranian city from the front line. Many stayed on and the metropolis is now Iran's second biggest, a huge, unwieldy and rather polluted sprawl.

## Orientation

The Haram is Mashhad's physical as well as spiritual centre. Beneath it is a subterranean circular highway loop. A key junction just south of the Haram is Falakeh

Ab, marked on maps as Beit-ol-Moqaddas Sq. Construction around the Haram never seems to end: eventual enlargement plans supposedly include the partial destruction of Andarzgu St's north side.

## Information BOOKSHOPS

Several bookshops stock maps, dictionaries and the old English book, notably those in **Mahtab Passaj** (Map p354; Sa'di St). The **Friday book market** (Map p354; Modarres St, south side; ☞ 8am-2pm Fri) is good for English-language magazines including the *Economist* (IR10,000). Blind peddlers outside the Haram near Falakeh Ab sell excellent city maps (IR6000).

## CONSULATES

**Afghanistan** (Map p354; ☞ 854 1653; Do Shahid St; ☞ 8am-noon Sat-Wed) An unruly queue of Afghans snakes round the building but foreign visa applicants can walk straight through an unmarked white door part-way down the queue. Apply early with a copy of your passport and two mugshots and in principle the 30-day tourist visa should be ready the same day for a flat €75 fee. However, a few travellers report being refused for no apparent reason.

**Pakistan** (Map p354; ☞ 222 9845; Imam Khomeini St; ☞ 9am-noon Sat-Wed) Occupies the former British consulate. Unlikely to issue visas.

**Turkmenistan** (Map p354; ☞ 854 7066; Do Shahid St, off Dah-e Dey Sq; ☞ 8.30am-noon Mon-Thu & Sat) All business is conducted through a tiny hole-in-the-wall window and no English is spoken so if you don't understand Farsi, Turkmen or Russian consider going with a translator. For a five-day transit visa you'll need an onward visa (Uzbek is best, Azerbaijani sometimes accepted). Photocopy that visa and your main passport page, facing each other onto a single sheet of A4 paper. Hand this in, stating the entry and exit points by which you'll transit Turkmenistan (inflexible). Then come back after five days by which time, *insh'Allah*, an approval letter will have arrived for you from Ashgabat. If it has, you may now apply for the visa. This requires two more passport copies and two photos. It normally takes four days but since you'll need your passport for hotel accommodation in Iran, they'll usually handle applications for foreigners within 24 hours (for double the fee; fees vary by nationality). There's a handy photocopy shop three doors from Baghoi Exchange.

## EMERGENCY

**Imam Reza Hospital** (Map p354; ☞ 854 3031-9; Ibn-e Sina St) Good, accessible hospital with 24-hour pharmacy.

## INTERNET ACCESS

**Aftabshargh Coffeenet** (Map p354; Imam Khomeini St; per hr IR5000; ☞ 9am-9pm)

**Attar Coffeenet** (Map p356; Falakeh Ab; per hr IR7000; ☞ 24hr) Three floors up. Very central.

**Coffeenet Dalahoo** (Map p356; Imam Reza St; per hr IR6000; ☞ 24hr) Good connection but tends to overheat in the daytime.

## THE MARTYRDOM OF IMAM REZA

Within Mashhad's holy shrine, pilgrims break into conspicuous, heartfelt outpourings of grief for murdered Imam Reza as though his assassination (with poisoned grapes and pomegranate juice) were only yesterday. In fact it was in AD 818.

The story starts 20 years earlier with Haroun ar-Rashid, immortalised as the great caliph in the *Arabian Nights* fairy-tales. Less fictionally, Haroun ruled the Abbasid caliphate and was very influential in bringing Greek-style analytic thinking and cosmopolitan sophistication to Arab-Muslim society. His temporal power was unassailable. But he coveted the spiritual pre-eminence of Musa, the seventh Shiite Imam. Musa was eventually slapped into Haroun's Baghdad jail, then killed.

Musa's 35-year-old son Ali al-Raza (Razavi) inherited his father's pious mantle becoming Imam Reza. Meanwhile, after Haroun's death, Haroun's sons Ma'mun and Amin slugged out a civil war to succeed their dad as caliph. Ma'mun, based temporarily in Merv, emerged victorious but needed Reza's help to calm a series of revolts. Having failed to entice the Imam to support him voluntarily in this effort, Ma'mun's agents dragged Reza forcibly across rebellious regions as a symbol of imperial power. However, the play appeared to be backfiring. The Imam's charismatic presence captivated the royal court, leaving Ma'mun worried that he'd be upstaged. So out came those deadly grapes. Ma'mun disguised the crime by honouring Reza's body with burial in Sanabad (today's Mashhad) close to Ma'mun's own father (and Reza's father's nemesis) Caliph Haroun.

## MONEY

Banks with foreign-exchange counters are relatively common but the exchange counters are faster and give fair rates.

**Baghoi Exchange** (Map p354; Imam Khomeini St; ☞ 9am-1.30pm & 5-7pm Sat-Wed, 9am-1pm Thu)

**Saraf Exchange** (Map p354; Imam Khomeini St; ☞ 9am-2pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu)

**Sepehri Exchange** (Map p354; Pasdaran Ave; ☞ 9am-6pm Sat-Wed & 9am-2pm Thu)

## PETROL RATION CARD OFFICE

**Sherkate Mellie Naft-e-Iran** (Map p352; ☞ 7633011; Janbaz Blvd at Blvd Sajjad)

## POST

**Main post office** (Map p354; Tavala'i St) Use for parcels.  
**Post office** (Map p354; Imam Khomeini St) Opposite Bank Mellie. OK for stamps, but not parcels.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Information room** (bus terminal arrivals area; ☞ 24hr) Library-style sitting room gives you space to think after a long journey. OK free maps indicate several museums that don't yet exist.

**Miras Ferhangi Khorasan** (Map p352; ☞ 725 9311; Sadeghi Blvd; ☞ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Officially you need a letter from these folks before visiting some out-of-the-way sights like Robat Sharaf (p365). They print lavish bilingual brochures for each district in Khorasan.

## TOUR GUIDES & TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Adibian Travel Agency** (Map p354; ☞ 859 8151; [www.adibiantours.com](http://www.adibiantours.com); 56 Pasdaran Ave; ☞ 7.30am-8pm) Very

professional English-speaking agency that sells air and train tickets, provides assistance with visa-extension applications and offers tours in Mashhad (half day with/without guide US\$40/30) and well beyond (around US\$75/65 per day). Guides speak English, French and Arabic.

**Towhid Foroozanfar** (☎ 893 7025, 0915 313 2960; towhidfroozan@yahoo.com) A well-informed, engaging driver-guide who has been recommended by readers.

**Vali Ansari Astaneh** (☎ 851 6980, 0915 100 1324; vali32@imamreza.net) Offers very inexpensive low-tech walking and public-transport based city tours, village visits, mountain walks and a budget homestay.

**VISA EXTENSIONS**

**Edareh-ye Gozarnameh** (Map p352; ☎ 218 3907; 45 Metri-ye Reza St, Piruzi Blvd; ☎ 8am-1pm Sat-Wed, 8am-10.30am Thu) Behind fortified green fencing, this

inconveniently located place would look like a prison except that the mad crush of inmates (mostly Central Asians) are all trying to get in. Not the best place to apply. For an additional US\$25 service charge, Adibian Travel (p353) can handle the processing for you.

**Sights**

**HARAM-E RAZAVI**

Imam Reza's Holy Shrine is enveloped in a series of sacred precincts collectively known as the **Haram-e Razavi** (Map p356; ☎ 24hr), or Haram for short. This magical city-within-a-city sprouts dazzling clusters of domes and minarets in blue and pure gold behind vast fountain-cooled courtyards and magnificent arched arcades. It's one of the marvels of the Islamic world whose moods and glories

should be fully savoured more than once at varying times of day. Compare the orderly overload of dusk prayer-time to the fairy-tale calm of a floodlight nocturnal wander.

**Information**

No bags or cameras are allowed within the complex, though curiously snapping photos with mobile phones is accepted. There are left-luggage offices near most entrances. Men and women enter through different carpet-draped portals and are politely frisked. Women must wear a chador: it's sometimes possible to borrow one from your hotel. Dress for either sex should be conservative and clean.

Non-Muslims are allowed in most of the Haram's outer courtyards. They are NOT allowed inside the complex's two holiest buildings, the Holy Shrine and the Gohar Shad Mosque. Technically, non-Muslims are also excluded from the magnificent Enqelab and Azadi courtyards, but you can peep in through relevant gateways. At quieter times, those who act suitably (demure, respectful and soaking up the spiritual rather than the aesthetic) are rarely challenged and might wander through 'by mistake'. However, be particularly careful not to upset Muslim sensibilities: remember, it's a privilege for non-Muslims to be allowed to visit the Haram complex at all.

Friendly, multilingual staff at the **Foreign Pilgrims Assistance Office** (☎ 221 3474; intlrela@mail.dci.co.ir; ☎ 7am-6pm) can show you a 20-minute video about the shrine and shower you with books on all things Shiite. However, once you've visited this office there's no escape from the free, friendly but over-protective guide/minder they assign you.

**Outer Courtyards**

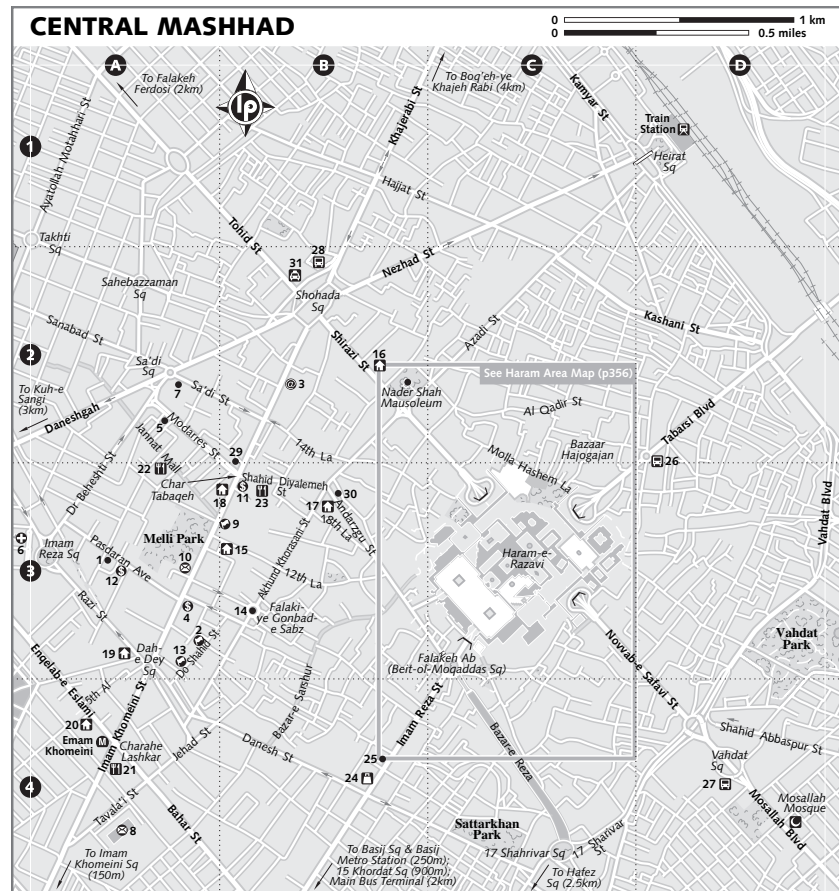
A good starting point for nonpilgrim visits is Falakeh Ab from which several of the domes and minarets are tantalisingly visible in the middle distance. Enter through the vast, part-constructed **Razavi Grand Courtyard**, which should become grander once the blue, white and gold tiling has been affixed to the courtyard's façades and concrete minarets. Curving east you'll pass the Haram's **museums** (p357) after the unfinished **Imam Khomeini Courtyard** site. Beyond, look northwest across the gorgeous **Azadi Courtyard** to glimpse the exterior of the Holy Shrine building.

Notice the **Naqqareh Khaneh**, a blue-tiled bandstand platform perched above a clock tower gateway. Twice daily (before dawn and dusk) a mesmerising 10-minute fanfare is performed here by drummers and a heptet of gentlemen-hornblowers in faintly comical Salvation Army-style peaked-caps.

Non-Muslims aren't supposed to transit the spectacular **Enqelab Courtyard** with its two gold minarets and fabulous tile-work. So to reach **Jomhuri Courtyard**, the setting for massed evening *namaz* (prayers), infidels should double back via **Qods Courtyard**, which features a miniature version of Jerusalem's 'Dome of the Rock'.

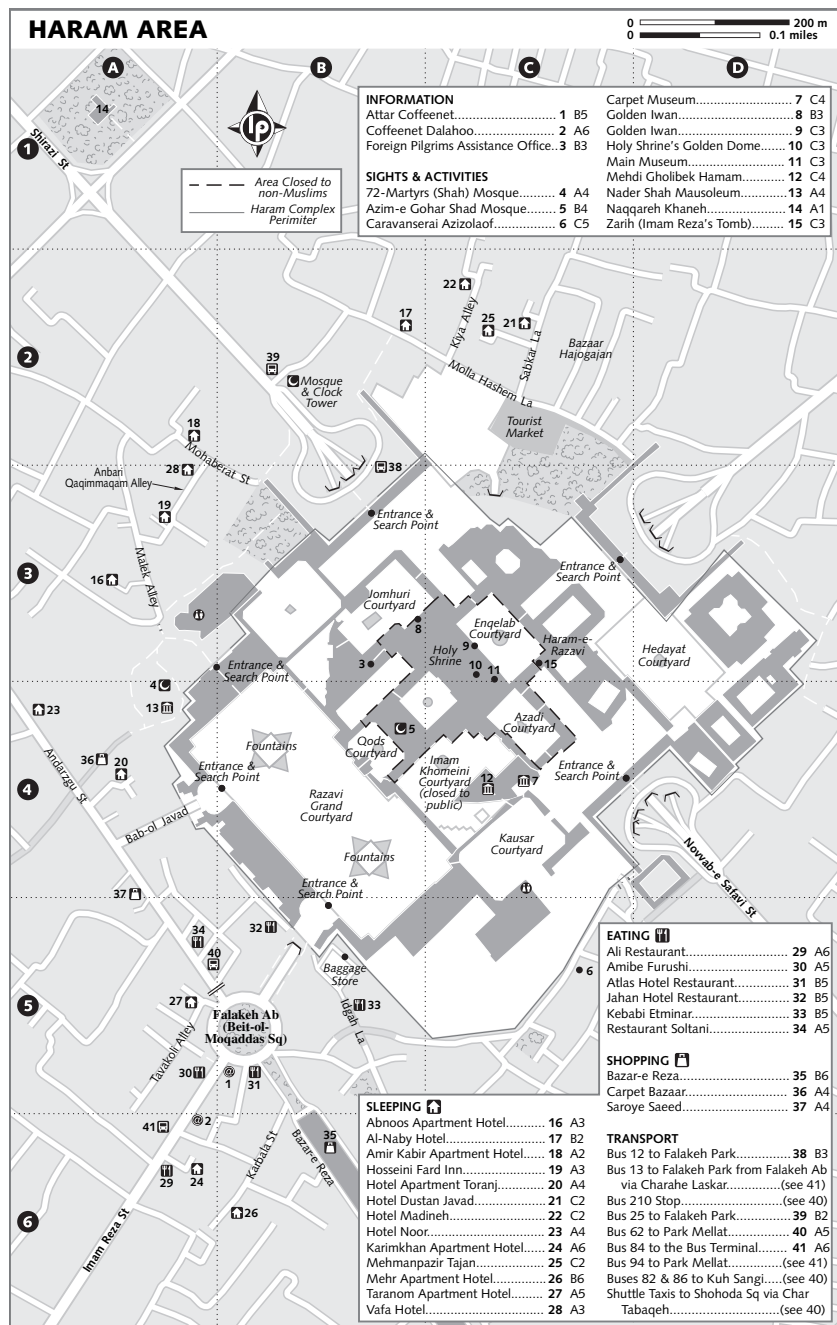
**Inner Sanctuaries (Muslims only)**

The gold-domed centrepiece of the Haram complex is the revered 17th-century **Holy Shrine** building. Amid tearful prayer and meditation, the emotional climax to any Mashhad pilgrimage is touching and kissing the *zarih* (gold-latticed cage), which covers **Imam Reza's tomb** in the shrine's spectacular interior. The current *zarih*, the fifth, dates from 2001. Non-Muslims are excluded, but



INFORMATION	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	SHOPPING
Adibian Travel Agency.....1 A3	Gonbad-e Sabz.....14 B3	Bazaar-e Fash.....24 B4
Afghanistan Consulate.....2 A3		
Aftabsharg		
Coffeeent.....3 B2		
Baghoi Exchange.....4 A3		
Friday Book Market.....5 A2		
Imam Reza Hospital.....6 A3		
Mahtab Passaj.....7 A2		
Main Post Office.....8 A4		
Pakistan Consulate.....9 B3		
Post Office.....10 A3		
Saraf Exchange.....11 B3		
Sepehri Exchange.....12 A3		
Turkmenistan Consulate.....13 A3		
	SLEEPING	TRANSPORT
	Hotel Pars.....15 B3	Binalood Travel.....25 B4
	Hotel Tara.....16 B2	Bus 210 Stop.....(see 16)
	Iran Hotel.....17 B3	Bus 34 to Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi.....26 D2
	Pardis Hotel.....18 B3	Bus 64 to Istgah Sarakhs.....27 D4
	Razi Hotel.....19 A3	Central City Bus Stand, Bus 10 to Kuhestan Park.....28 B2
	Vali's Non-smoking Homestay.....20 A4	Iran Air.....29 B2
		Iran Aseman.....30 B3
		Shuttle Taxis to Falakeh Ferdosi.....31 B2
	EATING	
	Hafez Restaurant.....21 A4	
	Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse.....22 A3	
	Vitamin Sara.....23 B3	





can see the previous *zarih* in the Haram's main museum (see below).

You might catch a glimpse of the 50m blue dome and cavernous golden portal of the classic Timurid **Azim-e Gohar Shad mosque** (built from 1405 to 1418). However, non-Muslims aren't allowed within to appreciate its splendid interior hosting the minbar (pulpit) where, according to Shiite tradition, the Mahdi (12th 'hidden' Imam) will sit on the Day of Judgement.

### Haram Museums

Bequests and donations from the faithful fill the Haram's fascinatingly eclectic museums. The **Main Museum** (Muze-ye Merkezi; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) kicks off with chunks of now-superseded shrine-décor interspersed with contemporary sporting medals presented by pious athletes. The basement **stamp collection** includes a 1983 commemorative featuring the 'Takeover of the US Spy Den'. The 1st-floor **Visual Arts Gallery** offers you the opportunity to shower money (or hats) down onto the top of the Holy Shrine's fourth *zarih* tomb encasement (replaced in 2001). Amid seashells and naturalistic landscape-paintings of Surrey, notice Mahmood Farshchian's modern classic *Afternoon of Ashura*. It's a grief-stricken depiction of Imam Hossein's horse returning empty to camp after the Imam's martyrdom. That's an image you'll find repeated as both carpet and giant wood-inlay works in the separate **Carpet Museum** (admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm Sat-Wed, 8am-11.30am Thu), where rugs range from beautiful classics through to garish coral gardens and a Tabriz-made carpet-portrait of WWI bogey-man Kaiser Wilhelm II. Tying the staggering 30 million knots for *Seven Beloved Cities* took 14 years. Upstairs, beside the shoe-deposit counter, is a two-room **Calligraphy Gallery** displaying priceless Korans, many dating back over a millennium.

### OTHER SIGHTS

Just outside the complex's official limits is the splendid 15th-century **72-Martyrs (Shah) Mosque**. In its shadow, **Mehdi Gholibek Hamam** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri) is one of Iran's most interesting and spacious bathhouse museums. The main delight is the wonderful central dome re-painted for centuries in multiple levels – most recently

in 1922 with naive murals that feature anthropomorphic figures gallivanting between giant bicycles, a Russian vintage car, an early biplane and a curiously unconcerned-looking victim facing a firing squad.

Lanes around the Haram's various entrances are full of tourist trinket sellers but also a selection of real markets. The rundown, century-old **Caravanserai Azizolaof** contains down-market electronics stalls run by Afghans. Hurry to see this area before it's all demolished as the Haram precinct plans to expand yet again.

### SIGHTS BEYOND THE SHRINE COMPLEX

**Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi** آبچهووجه ربیع  
This beautifully proportioned, blue-domed **mausoleum** (Map p352) commemorates an apostle of the prophet Mohammad. Coming to pay respects here was said to have been Imam Reza's 'main consolation' in coming all the way out to Khorasan. The tower took its present form after a 1612 rebuild, which added a band of interior Kufic inscriptions by master-calligrapher Ali Reza Abbasi. The jolly floral motifs around it date from a Qajar redecoration. Surrounding the mausoleum is a large cemetery paved with thousands of tombstones. Burial here currently costs from IR8,500,000. That gets you stacked four bodies deep for 30 years before you're dug up again; pay four times that amount per body if you want a 'family room' within

### MASHTI

Although slightly less significant than pilgrimages to Mecca, Najaf or Karbala, a pilgrimage to Mashhad remains a deeply significant expression of faith for any Shiite Muslim. After *wudu* 'ablutions', the supplicant humbly enters the Holy Shrine asking 'permission' from Imam Reza through specific prayers and recitations. Following tearful meditations and Quranic readings, the pilgrimage culminates with the recitation of the *Ziyarat Nameh* prayer in front of the *zarih* (tomb) of Imam Reza.

In the same way that hajj pilgrims are respectfully known as *haji*, those who have fulfilled the pilgrimage to Mashhad are entitled to attach the prefix *Mashti* to their names.

surrounding arched colonnades. That's still only half what you'd pay to deposit a corpse beneath the Haram.

Get here on bus 34 from Tabarsi Blvd or 38 from Kuh-e Sangi.

**Nader Shah Mausoleum** آرامگاه نادر شاه  
Elsewhere in the Middle East, Nader Shah is considered something of a historical tyrant. But here he's a local hero for briefly returning Khorasan to the centre of a vast Central Asian empire. Nader's horseback statue crowns his otherwise rather dour 1950s grey-granite **mausoleum** (Map p356; ☎ 222 4888; cnr Shirazi & Azadi Sts; admission IR3000; 🕒 8am-6.30pm), which was designed to emulate the lines of a tent (reputedly Nader was born and died under canvas). A small **museum** displays guns, a rhino-hide shield and four-pointed hats that must have made Afshar-dynasty courtiers look like jesters.

**Kuh-e Sangi** کوهسنگی  
This small but abrupt **rocky hill** (Map p352; admission free, 🕒 24hr) rises near Mashhad's southern ring road (the 'Kabul to Paris highway'). Sweeping views show just how huge Mashhad has become. Tastefully set rock steps lead up from a large 'recreation complex' featuring ponds, over-priced ice creams and lots of souvenir shops selling soapstone *dizi* pots and awful porcelain figurines. **Horsecart rides** (IR30,000) do NOT take you up the mountain as they might imply but on a pointless eight-minute trot down some side streets. Within the park there's a sweetly naive loop of **pedal-car monorail** (rides per person IR3500; 🕒 9am-1am) for kids.

Buses 86 and 82 run between Kuh-e Sangi and Falakeh Ab. Bus 38 links Kuh-e Sangi to Borq-e Khajeh Rabi.

**Gonbad-e-Sabz** گنبد سبز  
In its own little traffic roundabout, Sheikh Mohammed Hakim Mo'men's modest, Safavid-era **mausoleum** (Green Dome; Map p354; Falakeh-ye Gonbad-e Sabz; donation appreciated; 🕒 8am-11am) isn't very green but makes a useful landmark.

## Sleeping

Timing is everything. In peak season, accommodation is jam-packed: prices can rise up to 800% in some cases (especially apartment hotels), though others stay stable. We quote both base rates (April) and peak rates. Some hotels discount in mid-winter.

## WHAT ARE MASHHAD'S PEAK SEASONS?

- No Ruz
- summer pilgrim season (June–July)
- the Muslim months of Moharram, Safar and Ramazan
- any major Islamic festival

## BUDGET

**Vali's Non-smoking Homestay** (Map p354; ☎ 851 6980, 0915 100 1324; vali32@imamreza.net; 6th Alley, off Enqelab-e Eslami St, house 277; dm/s/tw IR30,000/50,000/100,000; 🕒 🍷) Vali is an eccentric and ever-enthusiastic carpet merchant-cum-multilingual guide who offers a twin-bedded guest room in his charming home along with communal carpeted sleeping spaces, some on the open-air terrace. This is the nearest Mashhad gets to a backpacker hostel but it's vastly more personal and inviting. Great home-cooked meals cost only IR15,000 (often vegetarian). Prices stay the same all year. Take bus 85 from near the main terminal or 13 from Falakeh Ab, either way getting off at Charahe Lashkar (Metro Emam Khomeini).

**Mehmanpazir Tajan** (Map p356; ☎ 222 3243; Baqat-avuz Alley, off Sabkar Lane; tw/tr IR50,000/60,000, peak season IR195,000/219,000) Showers are rusty and furniture ageing but for the off-season price this is truly remarkable value. Mehdi speaks very limited English and has a gravity-defying grey-bouff haircut.

**Hosseini Fard Inn** (Map p356; ☎ 222 5334; Anbari Qaqimmaqam Alley; tw/tr IR80,000/120,000; d/tr/q with private bathroom IR150,000/200,000/300,000) The ensuite rooms are very tatty. Bed-only rooms aren't much better. However, there's a remarkable Haram view and manager Abulfaz can manage a little English. Add 50% in peak season. Other cheaper, ultra-basic options are available nearby.

**Hotel Pars** (Map p354; ☎ 222 4030; fax 221 4944; Imam Khomeini St 26th Alley; s/d IR100,000/150,000; 🕒 closes low-season) Mashhad's oldest hotel, the Pars occupies a 1935 brick building and its manager lived nine years in England. Rooms have ageing en-suite bathrooms but are just as good as many midrange equivalents. The basement *sofrakhane sonati* is a lovely vaulted teahouse (qalyan IR10,000; open 24 hours in season) with a tandoori oven providing fresh bread to accompany meals.

**Vafa Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ /fax 225 8179; Anbari Qaqimmaqam Alley; tw IR100,000-150,000, peak season IR200,000) Modest but new rooms have small, fresh showers and squat toilets.

**Razi Hotel** (Map p354; ☎ 854 1122; fax 854 4099; Razi St; s/tw with breakfast s/d IR110,000/200,000, peak season IR170,000/300,000; 🍷) Characterless, partly-renovated 1960s place with lugubrious front-desk service, ageing bathrooms and pictures akimbo. Passable value in peak season.

## Apartment Hotels

Outside peak season many apartment-hotels are often fabulous value but standards vary considerably and pricing is pretty random, rising up to 800% at peak times (when 'standard' hotels are often better value). Save a bundle by seeking out those in forgotten smaller alleys. All those reviewed have hot shower and kitchenette.

**Al-Naby Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 222 6981; Molla Hashem Lane; tw IR120,000, peak season IR230,000) This six-storey tower has fewer frills than many apartment hotels, lacking the obligatory waterfalls and columns (do you care?). But the smallish rooms are new and very adequate with absolutely fabulous views across the Haram complex from front-facing upper levels.

**Taranom Apartment Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 859 5761; Tavakoli Lane; s/d IR200,000/250,000, peak season r from IR800,000; 🍷) Handily right on Falakeh Ab, this very professional eight-storey tower has a cosy mini-atrium with modernist fireplace and comfortably appointed mini-suites with fluffy towels, brilliant hot showers and Western toilets with soft paper.

**Hotel Apartment Toranj** (Map p356; ☎ 222 0963; Andarzgu St, 11th Alley; s/d/tr IR200,000/250,000/310,000, peak season IR450,000/500,000/600,000; 🍷) The lobby has a big modern chandelier and waterfall feature. Rooms are slightly less grandiose but fine value with fully equipped kitchen, choice of toilet-types in some bathrooms and elegant sash curtains.

**Amir Kabir Apartment Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 223 1643; Mobarat St; ste IR250,000, peak season IR360,000; 🍷) Despite the chandeliers and bulging Corinthian columns this high-service option has great-value if sickly-green suites and fifth-floor views of the shrine complex (for now).

**Mehr Apartment Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 851 4797; mehr-apt-hotel@yahoo.com; Karbala St; tr IR250,000, peak season IR550,000; 🍷) Bright and somewhat

modernist with reception staff in smart suits and corridors edged in pink marble. Apartments sleep three (double-plus-single) and have a big sitting room but comparatively small bathrooms. *Careless Whispers* plays in the lift.

**Karimkhan Apartment Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 854 4077; fax 854 2844; www.karimkhanhotel.8k.com; off Imam Reza St; d/apt IR300,000/450,000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Rooms and corridors attempt something of a retro, semi Art Deco look and bathrooms are impressive with curtained, seat-showers but there's some wear on the sitting room furniture.

## MIDRANGE

In high season this category is usually the best value as prices are comparatively stable year-round.

**Hotel Dustan Javad** (Map p356; ☎ 223 3791; fax 225 9794; Shahid Golabki Alley, off Sabkar Lane; s/tw/tr IR12 0,000/150,000/180,000, peak season IR210,000/240,000/270,000) Sweet little suites in a small, family pension-style hotel off a lively but mostly pedestrianised shopping street.

**Hotel Madineh** (Map p356; ☎ 221 2214; Zeiya Lane; tw/tr IR300,000/350,000 year-round) This 100-room bed-factory wallows in nouveau-riche foibles including aquarium, fountain-grotto, musical elevators and Art Deco-effect coffee shop. Overpriced in the low season but good value at peak times.

**Hotel Noor** (Map p356; ☎ 223 2970; fax 223 2976; Andarzgu St; d IR350,000) The gently trendy 1st-floor lobby is bright and open with highly professional English-speaking staff. Rooms are unfussy business-class affairs with bagged-towels and choice of toilets. Winter discounts 30%, splendid value in peak season.

**Iran Hotel** (Map p354; ☎ 222 8010; www.irhotel.com; Andarzgu St; s/d/tr/q with breakfast IR331,500/550,000/995,000/1,204,000; 🍷 🍷) This hotel with friendly, English-speaking staff gets it right with a restrained elegance that's personable and not over formal. Bathrooms are small but new and sparkling clean. Excellent value for singles during peak season, if you can get a room.

**Hotel Tara** (Map p354; ☎ 221 6100; fax 225 9595; www.hotel tara.com; Shirazi St; s/d US\$35/55; 🍷) Relatively spacious rooms with hints of bed canopy have bath tubs in their slightly outdated bathrooms. In season this is an OK mid-range choice with some English spoken.



**Pardis Hotel** (Map p354; ☎ 222 8095; fax 222 3831; Imam Khomeini St; d/tr US\$50/60; 📶 🚿) The friendly multilingual reception is the only real attraction of this overpriced 1970s throwback with antiseptic corridors and dreadfully dated bathrooms.

**Laleh Hotel** (Map p352; ☎ 840 8047; fax 842 3892; Kuhsanghi St; d US\$54 year-round; 📶 🚿) Handy for Kuh Sangi but not the shrine, the Laleh's Eastern European idea of style is so outdated that it's almost an attraction. Bed-side TV-control panels are worthy of a *Dr No*-era James Bond movie.

### TOP END

**Abnoos Apartment Hotel** (Map p356; ☎ 221 5576; fax 221 5581; apt IR450,000-500,000, peak season IR900,000-990,000) Hidden in a peaceful mini-garden off a tiny alley, the high-class Abnoos offers unusually spacious apartments sleeping four or five people. There are fine Haram views from the roof and from rooms 301 and 302. Manager Mousa Delshad speaks excellent English.

**Homa Hotel Mashhad** (Map p352; ☎ 761 1001; www.homahotels.com; Khayyam Blvd; s/d/ste US\$101/116/140; 📶 🚿 🚿) Mashhad's inconveniently located top hotel has a shopping mall-sized lobby whose blue-glass pyramid roof mimics the Louvre's. Rooms are very large and well kept but lack any real style. Women can only use the indoor pool-spa four mornings a week.

**Hotel Pars Mashhad** (Map p352; ☎ 868 9201; fax 868 9200; Vakilabad Blvd; d/ste US\$126/262; 📶 🚿 🚿) The main draw of this sprawling, upmarket complex is the full-sized swimming pool (open Sunday to Friday, women 8am to 1pm, men 3.30pm to 10pm), so avoid Saturdays when it's closed. The location, some 8km west of the centre, is awful for the Holy Shrine but comparatively handy for visiting Kang.

### Eating

There are plenty of cheap eateries in the lanes off Imam Reza St and pleasant stream-side restaurants can be found on rural roads around Torqabeh, Shandiz and Zoshk. Upmarket, traditional dining options are limited because most visitors eat production-line hotel dinners provided as part of their tour package.

**Kebabi Etminar** (Map p356; Idgah Lane; meals IR7000-18,000; 🍷 5am-midnight) Bog-standard local eatery whose IR7000 *nun-o panir*

breakfast includes walnuts, raisins and unusually tasty cheese with bread and tea. Kababs from IR4400.

**Vitamin Sara** (Map p354; ☎ 222 7998; Shahid Diyalemeleh (Bahonar) St; 🍷 9am-11pm Sat-Thu, 4pm-11pm Fri) Come to this unpretentious juice-shop for Mashhad's best *maajum* (IR12,000), a fabulous mush of crushed walnuts, pistachios, ice cream, cream, banana and honey, all whizzed through the orgasmatron to form one of Iran's most spectacular desserts. Cheaper but inferior versions are available from Amibe Furushi (Map p356; desserts IR10,000) is open 24 hours on Imam Reza St.

**Ali Restaurant** (Map p356; ☎ 851 6601; Imam Reza St; meals IR23,000-45,000; 🍷 10am-4pm & 7-10pm) Cavernous downstairs pay-first diner with a giant spoon-and-fork looming above the cashier. The menu is typical but available in English. Fast turnover. Nearby Restaurant Soltani across Falakeh Ab on Andarzgu St is similar in a glittery mirror-tiled basement.

**Hafez Restaurant** (Map p354; ☎ 754 0768; meals IR25,000-55,000; 🍷 11.30am-3pm & dusk-10pm Sat-Thu) With attractive wrought iron and copper-work, this new, high-ceilinged eatery is a fine choice in the consulate area. For a taste of Central Asia, try their *chelo estanboli* (IR17,000), virtually identical to *plov* (an archetypal if fatty Uzbek lamb-and-rice dish).

**Jahan Hotel Restaurant** (Map p356; ☎ 225 0085; top fl, Jahan Hotel, Hozeino Alley; meals IR42,000-68,000; 🍷 12.30-2.30pm & 7.30-9.30pm) Kababs, schnitzels or trout (IR49,500) are unremarkable but truly phenomenal views across the Haram make lunch-time dining here a must. Enter via the hotel, easily missed beneath a Bank Mellat sign. Don't be late!

**Atlas Hotel Restaurant** (Map p356; 1st fl, Hotel Atlas, Falakeh Ab; meals IR50,000-90,000; 🍷 noon-3pm & 7-10.45pm) For steak and chips in a middle class setting, this comfortable hotel restaurant opens longer than most and the coffeehouse downstairs has an espresso machine.

**Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse** (Map p354; ☎ 222 2943; Jannat Mall; meals IR60,000-140,000; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Hezardestan is one of Iran's most beautiful teahouse-restaurants. Carpets, samovars, antique qalyans, cushions and wooden benches are surrounded by walls adorned with scenes from Ferdosi's *Shahnamah*. There's live music most nights, the manager speaks fluent English and the food is pretty good including vegetarian pos-

### WORTH ITS WEIGHT

Cleopatra added it to her mare's-milk baths. Indian Buddhists dyed their robes with it. Romans slapped it on to cure scabies. And Alexander the Great used it to patch up his battle scars. Today saffron adds flavour and colour to Cornish saffron cake and Spanish paella as well as to *chelo* (rice) in Iran where it remains Persia's classic 'spice'. Saffron comes from the delicately dried stigmas of *Crocus sativus* flowers, grown extensively in southern regions of Khorasan. But producing a kilogram of saffron requires around 200,000 flowers. No wonder it's often so staggeringly pricey.

sibilities. Just be prepared for hefty 'service' and 'tea' charges that can double the bill.

### Shopping

Mashhad is a great place to buy carpets. Half hidden through deceptively small doorways, both **Bazaar-e Fash** (Map p354; Imam Reza St; 🍷 8.30am-1.30pm & 4-8.30pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-1pm Thu) and **Saroye Saeed** (Map p356; Andarzgu St; 🍷 8am-2pm & 4-7pm) are multi-unit carpet markets mostly aimed at bulk dealers so prices can be excellent. Both places have interesting top-floor repair workshops and remarkably there seems to be no sales pressure.

The wobbly, wooden-ceilinged old **carpet bazaar** (Map p356; 13th Alley, Andarzgu St) is more commercial minded but slated for eventual demolition if the shrine's expansion continues.

Upstairs in the 800m-long **Bazar-e Reza** (Map p356; 🍷 8am-8pm Sat-Thu), jewellery stalls proffer turquoise (mined at nearby Neishabur) but their sales pitch is often more impressive than their gems.

Around Falakeh Ab, shops sell comparatively inexpensive saffron (see the boxed text, above) in a range of qualities: a highly portable souvenir.

The Haram is surrounded by bazaars and shopping arcades flogging tacky pilgrimage souvenirs. Try to resist the considerable temptation to buy an over saturated photograph of yourself superimposed upon the Holy Shrine.

### Getting There & Away

During peak seasons long-distance transport can be booked up months ahead.

### AIR

#### International Services

**Iran Aseman** (Map p354; ☎ 225 8200; Andarzgu St) has flights to Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan, single/return IR2,350,000/3,664,000, Tuesday). Dushanbe (Tajikistan, IR2,020,000/2,840,000, Tuesday), Kuwait (IR1,050,000/1,850,000, Wednesday and Friday) and Kabul (IR1,820,000/2,300,000 Monday). **KamAir** (www.flykamair.ca) also flies to Kabul (IR1,334,000/2,330,000, Saturday). To go further afield, use connections via Bahrain with Gulf Air (IR1,817,000/3,129,000, twice weekly) or Doha with Qatar Airways (IR2,135,000/3,578,000, thrice weekly). Check out **Jazeera Airways** (www.jazeeraairways.com) for budget flights from Kuwait (Wednesday and Friday in season), starting at 15 Kuwaiti dinars (US\$52).

#### Domestic Services

To Tehran there are 63 weekly flights (IR433,000) on six different airlines, including Saha Air, which uses the world's last Boeing 707s still in passenger service. Other direct flights from Mashhad:

Destination	Fare	Flights per week (airline)
Ahvaz	IR625,000	2 (IA)
Bandar Abbas	IR588,000	2 (IA)
Esfahan	IR476,000 (IA)	6 (Eram), 3 (Aria), 2 (Caspian), 2 (Taban)
Gorgan	IR324,000	3 (IA)
Kerman	IR434,000	2 (Mahan)
Kermanshah	IR624,000	(Aria), 2 (As)
Kish	IR714,000	14 (Kish)
Nowshahr	IR329,000	2 (IA)
Rasht	IR497,000	2 (IA)
Sari	IR345,000	3 (IA)
Shiraz	IR540,000 (IA)	7 (As)
Tabriz	IR638,000	2 (IA), 2 (Caspian), 2 (Eram)
Yazd	IR401,000	2 (IA)
Zabol	IR320,000	1 (Taban)
Zahedan	IR436,000	4 (IA)

IA=IranAir, As=Iran Aseman

Arriving in Mashhad by air, the useful hotel reservation counter inside the arrivals hall can book midrange and top-end places. It's well worth using during high season.

#### BUS, MINIBUS & TAXI

All of Mashhad's numerous transport terminals are well out of the centre. However,

most long distance bus services can be pre-booked at relatively central **Binalood Travel** (Map p354; ☎ 852 5580; Imam Reza St).

### Main Terminal

Useful services from the bustling **main bus terminal** (Map p352; end of Imam Reza St):

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures (company)
Birjand	IR21,000/ 40,000	8hr	8am, 8pm-10pm
Esfahan	IR95,000*	22hr	7am, 3pm, 6-8pm
Gorgan	IR26,000/ 50,000	10½hr	6-10am & 6-9pm
Herat (Afghanistan)	IR60,000	7hr	8am, 10am
Kerman	IR70,000*	16hr	3pm Taavoni 14
Sari	IR32,000/ 60,000	12hr	6-8am, 5-7pm
Shahrud	IR17,400	10hr	10pm, Iran Peyma
Tabas (via Birjand)	IR25,100	10hr	7.30pm Saadet Peyma
Tehran	IR40,000/ 70,000	14hr	Frequent
Yazd	IR42,000/ 80,000	16hr	4pm, 5pm, 6pm Saadet Peyma
Zahedan	IR45,000/ 75,000	15hr	9.30am, 7pm Towfik Peyma

\*Volvo

For Tabas you'll get many more options by taking a Yazd bus (probably paying full fare). Likewise, consider taking a Tehran bus for Shahrud, Damghan or Semnan.

Check the security situation before taking Mashhad-Zahedan or Mashhad-Kerman buses, which are subjected to frequent drug searches en-route. For Neishabur (IR6000, two hours), Fariman (IR3500, 1½ hours), Torbat-e Jam (IR10,000, 2½ hours) and Taybad (IR15,000, 3½ hours), buses leave when full from 'stations' five and six within the terminal. Pay on board. Savaris to those destinations usually depart from Hafez Sq.

### Other Terminals

For Sarakhs, infrequent buses (IR10,000, three hours) leave from the new **Istgah Sarakhs** (Map p352; Sarakhs Blvd), about 700m east of Sarakhs Sq. More regular savaris (IR30,000, two hours) depart from a point somewhat further east. Get to either by bus 64 from Mosallah Blvd.

For Kalat Naderi, savaris (IR25,000, two hours) leave from Barih Noghari Sq on the northern ring road, reached by bus 35 from Tabarsi St. Very rare buses to Kalat (IR8000, 3½ hours) leave from a hidden yard 300m to the southeast (Map p352). Savaris to Quchan (back/front IR15,000/20,000, 1½ hours) and Bojnurd (IR30,000/35,000, three hours) leave from Falakeh Park (Map p352), a 15-minute ride on buses 12 or 25 from the Haram, or on bus 13 from Falakeh Ab via Charahe Lashkar. Buses to Quchan (IR6000, two hours) and Bojnurd (IR12,000, four hours) start 500m further north up Azadi Hwy (beyond Sajjad Blvd) and also pick up at a spot 6km further northwest along the motorway.

Change in Quchan for Bajiran (and then Turkmenistan).

Buses for Tus (frequent), Torqabeh (122), Abardeh (122, regular) and Zoshk (124, rare) leave from Falakeh Ferdosi (Map p352). That's most conveniently reached by bus 210 from Falakeh Ab or by shuttle taxi (IR1250) from Tohid Blvd at Shohoda Sq. Buses to Kang leave from Kuesthan Park (Map p352) five times daily.

For Radkan Tower, start by heading to Chenaran. Savaris leave from the west end of Ferdosi Blvd, minibuses from the old TBT garage on Garani Blvd (the western extension of Tohid St).

### TRAIN

The train offers a wonderfully comfortable alternative to flying, especially if you pamper yourself with a first class berth (comfortable beds, flat screen TV, full meal service included). Book as far ahead as possible.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR110,000	30hr	11.30pm, 5 weekly
Bandar Abbas	IR220,000	22½hr	3.30pm Wed, Fri, Sat
Esfahan	from IR100,000	24hr	6.30pm Mon, Wed, Sat
Sarakhs	IR8500	3hr	10am, 6pm local services
Tabriz	IR210,000	26hr	3.30pm
Tehran	IR200,000	7hr	7am express
Tehran	IR37,000	12hr	10.30am, 2pm old trains
Tehran	from IR72,000	12hr	8 daily, 4-10.30pm
Tehran	IR200,000	12hr	7pm 'Green' train
Yazd	from IR160,000	12hr	9.15pm Mon, Wed, Fri

### Getting Around

#### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A semi regular public bus runs between the airport terminal and Basij Mustazafin Sq. Taxis cost IR35,000.

#### BUS

Pre-buy shiny IR300 tickets from **ticket booths** (☎ 6.30am-8.30pm) to use the excellent but complex network of city buses. Most buses stop running after 9pm. A few (eg bus 10) continue later, requiring two tickets at night. From stops near Falakeh Ab (Map p356), southbound bus 84 runs to the bus terminal, buses 13, 62 and 94 wiggle towards Park Mellat. Useful bus 210 passes the Nader Shah mausoleum (first stop), Shohoda Sq (second stop) and Falakeh Ferdosi (one stop beyond the big Saba Hotel). For Kuesthan Park, take bus 10 from Shohoda Sq (Map p354) or Park Mellat.

#### METRO

The new 19-station metro starts from Ghadir Hwy in the southeast, runs beneath Feda'iyyen-e Eslami, Bahar, Enqelab-e Eslami and Ahmedabad Sts to Park Mellat, then overground down the middle of Vakilabad Blvd rendering that thundering highway almost uncrossable.

#### TAXI

Shuttle taxis on straight runs usually cost IR1000 (IR1500 for longer hops). However, any deviation requires payment *dar baste*: IR8000 for a short-ish hop, around IR20,000 to cross a larger chunk of the city.

### AROUND MASHHAD Kang

☎ 0512 / pop 2300

Photogenic **Kang** is 'Khorasan's Masuleh', a wonderfully homogenous **stepped village** of stacked mud-brick homes, most with porch-balconies and earthen roofs. Stairways duck beneath overhangs while steep slate-bottomed streamways run down the middle of alleyways. For the best **overall view**, fork left at the teahouse where the bus terminates, walk 400m, then cross the river and climb for about three minutes.

A very rewarding way to arrive in Kang is to walk (1½ hours) from the Shandiz-Zoshk road. The hike starts up Zoshk 14th Lane, to the left before Zoshk village, signed in yel-

low Farsi letters on green. This rough 4WD track crosses a bald, low-mountain pass that's lonely but easy-to-follow. Buses from Mashhad's Falakeh Ferdosi are fairly rare to Zoshk but relatively frequent to Shandiz or Abardeh (3km beyond); hitch hiking the last 13km to Zoshk is easy enough, passing a series of idyllic little **stream-side teahouse-restaurants** en route. Doing the trek with Vali Ansari Astaneh (p354), you'll also get to visit local family homes in Abardeh.

From Kang, five daily buses to Mashhad's Kuesthan Park leave at 7am, 11.30am, 2pm, 4pm and 6.45pm. Alternatively, hitch hike via pretty castle-village Noqondar to **Torqabeh** (22km) from which bus 114 (35 minutes, two IR300 tickets) runs to Mashhad's Falakeh Ferdosi every 20 minutes till 7pm. Torqabeh is famous for canework handicrafts, out-of-town riverside teahouse-restaurants and ice-cream sundaes served with nuts and lemon juice on a bed of noodles!

### Tus (Ferdosi)

طوس (فردوسی)

☎ 0512

Just as Stratford-upon-Avon in England is synonymous with Shakespeare, so Tus is inextricably linked with Persia's 11th-century epic poet Abulqasim Ferdosi (see p74). Domestic tourists flock to the **Ferdosi Mausoleum** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-6.30pm), set in its own park and topped by a classically styled stone cenotaph. The current mausoleum only dates from 1964 but there's been a tomb of sorts here since Ferdosi's death in AD 1020. He was originally interred in his own garden because the local Muslim cemetery considered his writings too anti-Islamic for burial there. Similar extreme feelings resurfaced very briefly during the earliest throes of the 1979 revolution during which the mausoleum was damaged.

Beneath the main monument a series of reliefs represent Ferdosi's works. A nicely presented but limited **Tus Museum** (☎ 266 3339; admission an additional IR2000; ☎ 8am-6pm), within the mausoleum's gardens, displays gory paintings, exhibits 'warlike equipment' and sells postcards. In the rear section of the park, the **Razan gate** shows how incredibly thick Tus's original mud-brick city walls once were. Tus had been Khorasan's foremost city before being so comprehensively sacked by Tamerlane's forces (1389) that it was effectively abandoned.

About 1km towards Mashhad, the **Boq'eye Hordokieh'** (Gonbad-e Haruniyeh; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-4pm) is a massive brick-domed 14th-century mausoleum that looks especially impressive when floodlit at dusk. There are several theories as to the structure's purpose. The most popular (and least likely) is that it was a prison for the assassin of Imam Reza. The rather bare interior displays models of other tomb towers including the impressive **Akhangan Tower** (12km northeast of Tus) with its recently added blue-scalloped 'roof'.

Tus village is now almost a suburb of Mashhad. City buses (two IR300 tickets, 40 minutes) and minibuses leave around three times hourly from Falakheh Ferdosi using two different routes. They terminate outside the mausoleum.

**Radkan** رادكان  
About 75km northwest of Mashhad, the mysterious 25m-high **Radkan Tower** has baffled visitors for centuries. A tomb? A coronation spot? According to Iranian archaeo-astronomer **Manoochehr Arian** (www.jamejamshid.com), it was actually a highly sophisticated instrument for studying the stars built in AD 1261 by astronomers led by Nasruddin Tusi (Nasir Al-Tusi; 1201-74). The round, conical-topped brick tower was designed so that the sun shines directly through its doors and niches on solstice and equinox days. It was possibly with data collected here and at his more famous observatory at Maraqeh (p145) that Tusi managed to calculate the earth's diameter and explain discrepancies between Aristotle's and Ptolemy's theories of planetary movement.

The tower is in a field, 1km northwest of Qiasabad hamlet or 3km down an unsurfaced road from Radkan village. Radkan village is itself surrounded by a quietly fascinating scattering of old mud ruins, 9km north of the Quchan-Mashhad highway (it's possible to hitch hike). The village taxi agency charges IR10,000 one way to the tower, or IR25,000 if continuing on to **Chenaran** afterwards. Chenaran-Mashhad savaris (IR5000) are very frequent. If you offer IR40,000 *dar baste*, they'll make a side-trip to Tus en route, stopping for long enough to visit the Ferdosi Mausoleum.

### Mashhad to Neishabur

Two minor sites, each just 1km north of the busy Mashhad-Neishabur motorway,

are easy to tack on as short side visits when chartering a Mashhad-Neishabur savari *dar baste* (IR80,000).

**FAKHR DAVOOD** فخر داود  
Visible from the main road this Timurid **robat** (all-weather caravanserai; donation expected; ☎ 7am-4pm) has an impressive tower-flanked exterior that would make a great movie set. The less exciting domed interior displays a small selection of pottery and an incongruous table-tennis table. It was renovated as headquarters for the Binalud new-town extension, a vast housing development for workers of the Iran Khodro car plant 3km away. That's been shelved for now, sparing the quaint mud-homes of tiny Fakhr Davood village. No taxis available here.

**QADAMGAH RAZAVI** قدمگاه رضوي  
In Qadamgah village (98km from Mashhad), a two-block scattering of souvenir shops and *kababis* fronts this charming 17th-century octagonal **shrine** (admission free; ☎ 24hr) with fine blue dome and attractive tiling. It sits in a pretty garden of ancient plane trees and enshrines a black stone slab indented with what are believed to be the **footprints of Imam Reza**. Floods of pilgrims find the site very moving so questioning aloud the authenticity of the Imam's (remarkably large) prints would be rather bad form. Just beside the shrine, steps lead down to a subterranean spring, 'miraculously created' by Imam Reza himself. Behind the shrine, older mud-brick village houses rise up steeply. In front there's a partly restored **caravanserai**. Minibuses run sporadically to Neishabur. The handy **Fajr Taxi-office** (☎ 322 4141) will drive you to Fakhr Davood for IR30,000.

**Neishabur** نیشابور  
☎ 0551 / pop 231,000  
An early capital of Khorasan, Neishabur (Nayshaboor) was first settled around the 3rd century AD. By the Seljuk period it was a thriving literary, artistic and academic centre, notable as the birthplace of the 11th-century poet and all-round good egg, Omar Khayyam (see the boxed text, p74).

**OMAR KHAYYAM TOMB COMPLEX**  
Neishabur's main attraction remains **Khayyam's Tomb** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-9pm). Its present form is a distinctive 1970s-modernist

affair with diamond-shaped lozenges of calligraphic tiling (Khayyam's words, naturally) set in a curved, airy net of criss-crossed marble. Don't be surprised to find random Iranians bombarding you with recitations of Khayyam's verses as you ponder the monument. A big part of the tomb's attraction is its manicured garden setting, **Bagh-e Mahrugh**, with a gently appealing terrace on which to sip tea (IR10,000 per pot) with Neishabur's famous crystallised sugar while being serenaded by (caged) birds. Jewellery outlets compete to sell you Neishabur's equally famous turquoise. In the gardens' free southern section, the lovely **Imamzadeh-ye Mohammed Mahrugh** is a fine 16th-century domed mausoleum with an intricately tiled portal. The octagonal tomb tower of **Sheikh Attar** (admission IR3000; ☎ 7am-9pm) sits in another pretty garden, 1km west (a popular horse-and-carriage ride).

The tomb complex is 5km from Neishabur's central Khayyam Sq; take eastbound bus 10 to the end (IR300, 15 minutes).

### OTHER SIGHTS

Central Neishabur is a rather unexciting place, but very close to Khayyam Sq, the restored **Shah Abbas Caravanserai** (Imam Khomeini St) hosts souvenir shops, the **Sofrakhane Sonati Abshah** (☎ 222 5168; tea & qalyan IR15,000) traditional teahouse and a small **Nature Museum** (☎ 224 6690; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-6pm). Amid the latter's displays of stuffed birds, local animals, pinned insects and pickled snakes, notice the bottled human foetuses.

The single-alley Safavid-era **covered bazaar** (6th Lane, Imam Khomeini St) starts about 300m further west.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Just 30m north of Khayyam Sq, **Hotel Kamalalmolk** (☎ 224 4277; Modarres St; s/d/tr IR120,000/150,000/180,000) has five reasonably tasteful, en-suite rooms, the quieter back ones looking out across the brilliant little garden-café that is the place's trump card. You'd never guess it was there from the uninteresting front restaurant section.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Mashhad savaris (IR20,000) and buses (IR6000, two hours) leave when full from Neishabur's somewhat hidden **main bus terminal** (11th Alley, 22 Bahman St). That's 2km northeast of Khayyam Sq. Minibuses for Qadamgah

(IR1500, 25 minutes) leave sporadically from Bar Sq. Buses to Kashmar use a terminal that's a circuitous 2km drive south of the **train station** (Jafari St), itself about 1km south of Imam Sq. Coming by Mashhad-bound train from Tehran you'll arrive in Neishabur bright and early, allowing plenty of time for sightseeing before continuing to Mashhad the same day. However, getting train tickets FROM Neishabur can be tough.

Mashhad guide Vali Ansari Astaneh (p354) has pioneered a cross-mountain trip that allows a Mashhad-Tus-Neishabur-Mashhad loop by walking (around six hours) or using a 4WD (when conditions allow) between Zoshk and the attractive foothill village of **Kharv** near Qadamgah.

### MASHHAD TO SARAKHS

In spring, a miraculous green-grass fuzz dappled with red poppies enlivens the dusty badlands of the Mashhad-Sarakhs road (185km), providing April grazing for herds of sheep. **Nomad shepherds'** tent-camps are easiest to spot after **Mazdavand**, where the road climbs an escarpment, then follows a crag-sided valley of saw-toothed geological uplifts.

In several rural villages, **old mud houses** consist of three or four adobe domes. A few such structures still exist in Sarakhs, but a more impressive collection at **Abravan** is easily spied north of the main road.

A 7km side trip from tiny **Sholoq** village (130km from Mashhad) reveals the evocatively lonely 1128 **Robat Sharaf Caravanserai** with twin courtyards and a far *iwan* retaining some fine stucco patterning and calligraphy. Deep pits in chambers on either side once held the water supply. Note that Sholoq has no taxis. You could try to engage a cranky old motorcycle (*motor*) but while IR10,000 might be the 'fair price' it's a seller's market and drivers ask a whopping IR100,000. We finally settled for IR30,000 return.

Renting a one-way Mashhad-Sarakhs savari *dar baste* (IR120,000) and paying a little extra for stops and side trips makes sense.

### Sarakhs

☎ 0512 / pop 36,000

If heading for Merv and Mary, you can cross the Turkmenistan border in this strange, flat town where several redundantly large boulevards don't seem to lead anywhere. A useful landmark west of the town centre is the new,

### CROSSING THE TURKMENISTAN BORDER AT SARAGHS

Using this **border post** (☎ 8am–4pm Iran Time, 9.30am–5.30pm Turkmen time) allows the shortest cut between Iran and Uzbekistan. A shuttle (IR5000) crosses 2km of no-man's land to the Turkmen post. Bicycles are carried. Turkmen entry formalities are similar to those at Bajrgan (see the boxed text, p345), requiring US\$12 in US dollars (cash). From the border it's 3km away as the crow flies to the Turkmen town of Saraghs (no formal hotel) but 10km by a very circuitous road. From Saraghs occasional minibuses run to the fertiliser-factory town of Tejen (with very basic hotel) where you can change for Mary. Moneychangers on the Iran side sell Turkmen manats for nearly full black-market rates (currently US\$1=23,500, ie over four times the bank rate of US\$1=5200).

dolphin-fronted **Hotel Doosty** (☎ 5225518; Ghadir Sq; s/d/tr IR150,000/170,000/200,000; P ♻) whose best rooms are a decent midrange deal and whose restaurant is excellent value (meals IR18,000). From here, Customs Blvd forks right (southeast) off the main road and leads after 800m to the **border gate**. The main road passes the bus terminal (150m beyond the Hotel Doosty) and savari stand (400m) before reaching Pasdaran St (800m). Turn left and follow that street northwest then north for 3km to see the 1356 **Gonbad Sheikh Loghman Baba** (donation appreciated; ☎ 5.30am–4.30pm) in a wheat-field to your right. That domed brick tomb-tower has a massive, shattered arch support tower and an impressively vast three-storey interior with sections of disintegrating stalactite vaulting held in place by wooden staves.

Buses to Mashhad run roughly hourly till 4pm supplemented by sporadic but relatively regular savaris.

The inconvenient train station is 7km west of town. Trains leave to Mashhad at 6am and 2.30pm but no passenger services cross the Turkmenistan border (it's a different rail-gauge).

### KALAT (KALAT NADERI)

☎ 0512 / pop 8000

Admiring its near-vertical backdrop of mountain cliffs, you don't need to be a mili-

tary commander to see why Kalat has historically made the ideal last holdout for rebels on the run. It was one of the only places to have resisted the armies of Tamerlane. And it's still widely called **Kalat Naderi** for Nader Shah who retreated into its impregnable natural fortifications ahead of his considerable band of enemies. Many Kurds were settled here during the Safavid dynasty to guard against northern invaders, and some women still wear Kurdish costumes.

Spring is the best time to visit, when the countryside turns emerald green and nomad tents dot the foothill grasslands, especially along the Kalat–Dargaz road.

### Sights

Kalat's foremost site is Nader Shah's **Khorshid Palace** (Kakh-e Nader, Ghasr-e Khorshid; ☎ 272 2239; Imam Khomeini St; admission IR2000; ☎ 7.30am–6.30pm), 700m beyond the savari terminus. It's not really a palace at all but a distinctively fluted circular tomb-tower, on an octagonal base set in beautifully manicured lawns. The name Khorshid (literally 'sun') refers to one of Nader's wives, not some arcane astronomical purpose. It was never finished, hence the odd proportions and lack of a dome. Intricate exterior panels include pineapple and pear motifs. These fruits were unknown in 18th-century Khorasan suggesting that Nader Shah used foreign artisans he'd engaged (ie kidnapped) during his Indian conquests. The tower's magnificent interior uses gilt and ample colour to bring life to 16 stalactite-vaulted alcoves. Stairs beneath the rear terrace lead down into a graciously cool **ethnology museum** (admission included), graphically depicting Khorasan village life. A gift shop sells Naderabilia.

Facing the complex, an obvious 'Tourist Information' sign attracts visitors to Reza Mortezaabi's appealing little **herb shop** (☎ 272 3984; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 7.30am–noon & 4–8.30pm Sat–Thu). Reza speaks good English but 'information' means a photocopied page from a pre-historic Lonely Planet guide.

The beautiful blue dome, easily spied from the museum steps, belongs to the otherwise modest 1747 **Kabud Gonbad Mosque** (Imam Khomeini St).

To fully appreciate Kalat's natural impregnability, backtrack 3km to the Mashhad road tunnel. The cliffs here are otherwise only breached by a very narrow gully stream

guarded by the fortified **Borg-argavan Shah**, an iconic if small, round, mud-brick tower. Just beyond this (visible from the stream-side below) the **Katibeh Nader** is an inscription on the cliff-face praising Nader Shah with poetry in Turkish and Farsi. Climb to various rocky outcrops for spectacular views across the Darban village area ringed by bright-red laterite slopes.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Mosaferkhaneh Bahrami** (☎ 272 3298; Imam Khomeini St at 13th Alley; d/tr IR80,000/100,000) has pleasant rooms with decent bathrooms and freshly laundered sheets. It's above an unmarked but popular restaurant with black-and-white trim, 200m from the savari stand.

A few snack shops and an un-marked basement for *abgush*t (lamb stew made with lentils, potatoes and tomato paste) cluster round the savari stand.

### Getting There & Away

To Mashhad, savaris (IR25,000) are sporadic and buses (IR8000) are rare. For the pretty but very winding road to Dargaz (1¼ hours, 120km) you'll almost certainly need to hire a taxi (Paykan/Saipa IR100,000/120,000). **Talaydaran-e Khesht Taxi Agency** (☎ 272 2637; Imam Khomeini St) can oblige.

### DARGAZ

☎ 0582 / pop 39,000

Whether slithering down the endless hairpins from Quchan or winding past the 'Thousand Mosque' mountains west of Kalat, travelling to Dargaz (Daregaz) is much more interesting than arriving. The sprawling town has one specialist attraction, the **Bandiyan Archaeological Site** (Artyan rd, km 2; admission by invitation; ☎ 7am–7pm), where unusually well-preserved stucco mouldings in white gypsum depict faces and floral patterns on wall and column stumps. Experts believe it was once a particularly fine Sassanian fire-temple complex. Covered with corrugated sheet-roofing, the three adjacent dig sites sit in a cornfield 2km west of Dargaz's northern edge. Annoyingly the caretaker won't let visitors in without permission-letters from Dargaz's **Miras Ferhangi** (☎ 522 5247; Modarres St; ☎ 7.30am–2pm). Near the archaeological site, an abrupt tumulus-style mud hill called **Yarim Tappeh** possibly started life as a Zoroastrian 'tower of silence'.

One block east of central Imam Khomeini St, **Hotel Sarim** (☎ 522 5247; fax 522 5147; Imam Khomeini 29th Lane; s/tw/tr IR160,000/190,000/230,000) has accommodation that is comfortable and would be fairly appealing if they fixed the droopy curtains and threadbare corridor rugs.

### THE ROAD TO AFGHANISTAN

There are direct buses from Mashhad to Herat (Afghanistan) but you could add a little spice by doing the trip in bus/savari hops via Fariman, Torbat-e-Jam and Taybad. For intermediate stops you will generally need to pay a private taxi.

### Mashhad to Torbat-e Jam

In the scrappy railway-junction village of **Sang Bast** (40km from central Mashhad), you could climb the AD 1028 **Ayaz Minaret**. But don't hope to get inside the **caravanserai** in case your wish comes true: it's now the local prison.

Flat **Fariman's** unexotic **caravanserai** (Musa Sadr St, 14th Alley) isn't really worth the 2km walk north of central Imam Reza Sq but you might consider a IR20,000 return taxi trip to the **Band-e Fariman**, 10km south. This unusual **dam** was built in pseudo-Safavid style with multiple arches creating an opal-blue reservoir that contrasts strikingly with its arid surroundings. Swap from bus to taxi in Fariman if you want to visit **Langar** en route to Torbat-e Jam (IR40,000 *dar baste*). Pretty Langar village is an archetypal scattering of mud-walled courtyard houses (2.5km off the main road, initially following signs to Mahmoodabad). It's overlooked by the impressive, uncoloured **Imamzadeh Qasm Anvar** and an unusually large domed **abambar** (water cistern).

### Torbat-e Jam

☎ 0528 / pop 85,000

Where the last ripples of mountain ridge disappear into a vast dusty plain, you'll find this friendly, adamantly Sunni town. White beards and whiter turbans create a street-vibe that's more oriental than in most Iranian cities.

Imam Khomeini Blvd runs 4km from Imam Reza Sq (northwest) to Falakeh Sharak (southeast), passing Shahrdrari Sq halfway. The town's central Valiasr Sq is 600m east of Shahrdrari Sq along commercial Al Mahdi St. The culture-information

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درگز

office, **Miras Ferhangi** (☎ 222 4790; Robat Karim, Beheshti 3rd Alley; ☎ 7am-2pm) occupies a pretty, mini-caravanserai, two blocks south, then one west from Valiasr Sq, passing **E1 Technology** (☎ 222 8030; Beheshti/Modarres St; internet per hr IR5000; ☎ 8am-10pm) en route.

### JAMI MAUSOLEUM

آرامگاه جامی

Torbat-e Jam's highly impressive must-see sight is the beautiful **Jami mausoleum complex** (Aramgah St; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk). Here, 10 religious buildings intertwine around the grave of 12th-century Sunni mystic and poet Sheikh Ahmad Jami. His tombstone rests under a very old pistachio tree, above which soars a particularly impressive blue-tiled **main iwan**. In this *iwan* there are three doors. The one to the right is open to all visitors and leads through a small sanctuary into an inner courtyard across which is the AD 1442 '**New Mosque**'. Look for the magnificent vaulted ceilings and octagonal columns on either side of its prayer hall. It's 'new' compared to the 1302 **Atirgh Mosque** (☎ women-only at prayer times) behind you on the same courtyard, which has double-level arch-vaults and fragments of beautiful calligraphy.

The finest gems are hidden behind the other two locked doors in the main *iwan*. Gatekeeper Qolam Ali Keliddar (who you probably unwittingly met when bagging up your shoes on entering the complex) has the keys. Technically he's only supposed to open the chunky locks for VIPs or those with a letter from Miras Ferhangi. However, foreign tourists are so rare that you'll probably count as the former. The small door on the left leads to the 14th-century **Kermani Mosque**, named after Masoud Kerman who created the splendid mihrab and calligraphy inside. Through the heavy wooden main doors, the 1264 **Khaneh Ghe** sports ancient graffiti and domed ceilings with particularly well-preserved colourful frescoes.

The complex is 700m east of Valiasr Sq via Mirqaveh, then Maadan Sts.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Mosafekhaneh Me'at Dana** (☎ 222 7569; Natr St, Al Mahdi St, 2nd Alley; s/tw/tr IR50,000/68,000/80,000, with shower IR59,000/87,000/101,000) Clean simple rooms with camp beds and TV. Very close to central Valiasr Sq.

### CROSSING THE AFGHANISTAN BORDER AT DOGHARON

This old Hippy-Trail **border** (☎ 7.30am-4.30pm) is open and remarkably easy. Direct Mashhad-Herat buses run twice each morning either way. Or do-it-yourself in hops via Torbat-e Jam and Taybad. Westbound savaris to the border (135km, 150 Afghanis) leave from Herat's old bus terminal.

**Sima Hotel** (☎ 222 3377; Behesht 1st St, off Imam Khomeini Blvd; s/tw/tr IR57,000/72,000/82,000, with bath-room IR66,500/98,500/108,000) Very green rooms with ageing linen but the better rooms have private squat toilet and shower.

**Sakhteman Sefid** (☎ 222 0713; Al Mahdi St; tw IR150,000) At first glance the Sefid appears to have more style than the competition, but much is tatty, road noise can be annoying and the bathrooms are communal. Enter via side stairway. There's a restaurant downstairs and a semi traditional teahouse in the basement.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

For Mashhad, buses (IR10,000, 2½ hours) use a terminal near Imam Reza Sq, accessed by shuttle taxi along Al-Mahdi St from Valiasr Sq. Savaris (front/back IR35,000/25,000, two hours) depart till around 9pm from nearby.

Savaris to Taybad (IR10,000) leave from Falakeh Sharak.

### Taybad

تایباد

☎ 0529 / pop 49,000

Just 18km from the Afghanistan border post, Taybad's main attraction is the imposing 1444 **Molana Mosque** (☎ 7am-dusk), whose towering *iwan* is of a similar grandeur to that of the Jami complex in Torbat-e Jam. The male-dominated **Municipality Hotel** (☎ 422 2269; Gumruk Sq; tw/q IR120,000/150,000) at the northern edge of town has unsophisticated if fairly spacious box-rooms with bathroom, TV and much too much pink. From a point 300m further north, transport leaves for Mashhad (bus/savari IR12,000/40,000, three hours), Torbat-e Jam (savari IR20,000) and Dogharon, the Afghan border (savari/taxi (IR4000/15,000, 20 minutes). Transport to **Khaf** leaves from near Falakeh Molana, passing the dramatic **Karat Minaret** after 25km.

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