

# Southeastern Iran

## ایران جنوب شرقی



This is frontier territory. And like the best frontiers it combines harsh landscapes, periodic banditry and warm welcomes to form a unique and exotic travelling experience. There are real dangers, so it's important to read the boxed text (p325) before heading this way. The region stretches east across ancient Kerman province, through high deserts scarred by brown snowcapped mountain ranges and coloured by occasional oasis towns and seasonal lakes. Kerman is the main city and is, in effect, the cultural border separating the Persians of the central plateau and the more eastern-oriented Baluchis, whose dress and customs feel more Pakistani than Iranian. Following ancient caravan routes southeast across the edge of the forbidding Dasht-e Lut, most travellers will stop in historic Bam and then Zahedan, the capital of Sistan va Baluchestan province (where smugglers criss-cross the deserts and the rule of law is tenuous).

For travellers, the region hasn't been quite so attractive since the Bam earthquake in 2003 flattened the city and wrought havoc upon the monumental adobe Arg-e Bam. Rebuilding work on the Arg is ongoing, and Bam's soothing date groves and strong tradition of hospitality still reward a visit. But taking in a few other places will round out your trip. Sleeping in the cave hotel in Meymand is a fun way to start, and Kerman itself is interesting, and an ideal base for day- and overnight-trips to the small but historic towns of Rayen and Mahan, excursions to nomad communities and camel-trekking trips. But the highlight is surely the journey to Shahdad and the Kaluts, where enormous 'sand castles' stand like broken teeth punctuating the earth for as far as the eye can see and you can sleep in a 'million star hotel'.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Sleep in a cave in **Meymand** (opposite), the troglodyte village without a million tourists
- Marvel at the gardens and historic mausoleum in **Mahan** (p319)
- Lunch in Kerman's **Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh** (p318)
- Watch sunset over the **Kaluts** (p321), then bed down under a million stars
- Wander through the **Arg-e Bam** (p322), still a highlight even after the earthquake
- Check out the less-imposing but more-intact 'new Arg' at picturesque **Rayen** (p321)



### MEYMAND

پیمند  
pop 60 in summer, 130 in winter / elev 2240m  
'This mosque is about 180 years old,' said the guide, 'it's the newest building in the village.' Welcome to Meymand, a troglodyte village about equidistant from Shiraz, Yazd and Kerman. Meymand has been continuously occupied for more than 3000 years and is thought to have originally been inhabited by sun-worshippers. The village consists of 2560 rooms in 406 cave homes dug into the walls of a valley, though most are now uninhabited. It's similar to Cappadocia in Turkey, albeit on a much smaller scale...and without the hordes of tourists.

Meymand isn't exactly busy, but it sees enough day-trippers that the elderly village women have taken to selling locally woven baskets, wild herbs and traditional nomad hats (about IR60,000) made of *namad* (wool soaked and pressed until it mats together). If you have someone to translate for you, the herbs are pretty interesting, too. Dentally challenged Salma prescribed us herbs to treat diabetes and headache, and told us their medicinal use has been understood

by her family for generations. Given her mother is 97 and her father 115, she might be onto something. A university project has built an interesting cave museum and the village *hammam* (bathhouse) was being restored when we visited.

### Sleeping & Eating

To get the most from Meymand it's best to stay overnight, sleeping in a cave house that has barely changed in thousands of years. On the west side of the valley near the entrance to town, eight rooms of various size have been converted into the **Meymand Guesthouse** (☎ 0913 356 3442 for Mr Hajirahimi, or 0351 622 5857 in Yazd; [www.meymandtour.com](http://www.meymandtour.com); per person full board first/subsequent nights IR350,000/200,000). With *namad* carpets on the floors, beds carved into the walls and warm lighting, it's easy to be transported to another time. Bathrooms are shared but clean, with steaming showers. Mr Hajirahimi is the manager and speaks enough English to answer most questions.

The three meals are prepared by village women and often involve ingredients grown locally.

## Getting There & Away

To get to Meymand you first have to get to Shahr-e Babak. Two buses leave Shahr-e Babak every day for Yazd (IR20,000, 4½ hours) at 6.30am and 7.30am, returning about 1pm and 2pm; savaris (IR35,000, three hours) leave from Abuzar Sq in Yazd. One or two buses leave every day from Shiraz and Kerman – check times in advance. Savaris from Kerman cost IR40,000, or a taxi *dar baste* (closed door) should cost about IR300,000 to IR350,000 from Yazd, Shiraz or Kerman – Mr Hajirahimi (contact ☎ 0913 356 3442) can help to organise these.

Meymand is 35km from Shahr-e Babak and unless you get very lucky with a hitch or rare savari, you'll have to hire a taxi *dar baste* (IR35,000).

## SIRJAN

سيرجان

☎ 0345 / elev 1730m

Sirjan is not really worth a detour, but it's a useful place to break a journey from Kerman to Bandar Abbas or Shiraz, or a staging point en route to Meymand. Sightings are few, but if you do stay you might want to see the **Mir-e Zobair mausoleum**, which contains some ancient calligraphy, and the ancient **Firuz Fire Temple**.

For accommodation, the basic **Hotel-e Kasra** (☎ 422 5172; s/tw IR70,000/80,000), down a lane between the main branches of Bank Mellat and Bank Melli, is in the centre of town. Alternatively, the midrange **Sirjan Tourist Inn** (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 322 7878; sirjan@ittic.com; Khayyam St; d US\$25; ♿) offers a little more comfort.

Savaris run to Kerman (IR30,000) and back, most frequently before about 2pm, or take a direct bus to or from Kerman, Yazd, Shiraz or Bandar Abbas.

There is no bus terminal, and the individual bus companies are spread all over town. It is best to take a private taxi and ask, for example, for the *terminal-e Yazd* (or wherever you want to go). Trains between Yazd and Bandar Abbas stop here. Trains between Bandar Abbas and Tehran also pass through.

## KERMAN

کرمان

☎ 0341 / pop 508,000 / elev 1754m

The desert trading city of Kerman has long been a staging point for people passing between Persia and the Indian subcontinent

and today it remains the best place from which to explore southeastern region of the country. Sheltered from the vast Dasht-e Lut by the barren Payeh Mountains to the north, its position and elevation make the weather relatively mild in summer, but cold in winter. The city is something of a melting pot, blending Persians with the more subcontinental way of life of the Baluchis (for details see p315). This mixing is most evident in the historic and very lively bazaar, which is the highlight of any visit. There are enough other sights to keep you for a day or two.

Kerman's environs are extremely dry and the city – and province to which it gives its name – are highly dependent on *qanats* (underground water channels; see the boxed text, p260).

## History

Kerman is one of Iran's oldest cities and has always been an important centre on the trans-Asian trade routes. Believed to have been founded in the early-3rd-century AD by Ardashir I, founder of the Sassanian dynasty, its history is a tale of prosperity and plunder, but not that much in the way of peace. From the 7th century Kerman was ruled in turn by the Arabs, Buyids, Seljuks, Turkmens and Mongols, and then until the Qajar dynasty by a further succession of invaders and regional despots. Kerman only gained security under the central government in Tehran during the 19th century.

Kerman's continuity was its commerce, the evidence of which can still be seen in the many caravanserais around the bazaar. As trade moved more to the sea in the 16th century, so Kerman relied more on the production of carpets, a trade that remains important today.

## Orientation

The two main squares in Kerman are Azadi Sq to the west and Shohada Sq to the east. Most important offices and sights are on or close to the road between these two squares, or in the bazaar near Shohada Sq. Be on the lookout for that Iranian traffic hazard, the contraflow bus lane along which buses hurtle in the *opposite* direction to the rest of the traffic, particularly along Dr Beheshti St.

## DRUG-RUNNING DROMEDARIES

Camels. They're unassuming, a bit thick and no-one seems to care where they go or what they do...sounds like the perfect description for undercover work. And so it is that these ships of the desert have been trained to ship drugs across the deserts of southeast Iran.

Like a homing pigeon, but a lot slower, the camels are trained to know where their home is. They are walked for several days from somewhere near the border to a predetermined place beyond Kerman, thus avoiding the most concentrated police and military surveillance. The process is repeated, with the camels being fed each time they arrive to build an attachment to the destination. When they know where they're going, kilograms of opiates are surgically inserted into their humps and they're left to wander 'home'. Even the government's US\$400 million annual war on drugs cannot account for every wandering camel in the desert.

It's a war that's been running for almost 30 years and seen more than 3300 soldiers die in battles with heavily armed smugglers. Iran has erected electric fences, dug desert ditches (to dissuade after-hours motorcyclists) and stationed 30,000 men on the Afghan border, but still an estimated 85% of all Europe's opiates pass through Iran en route from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**24-Hour Pharmacy** (☎ 245 760; Imam Jameh St)

**Police headquarters** (☎ 110, 211 3068; Adalat St)

**Seyed Shohada Hospital** (☎ 252 6280; Esteghlal St)

The best in town.

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are several other *coffeenets* (internet cafés) between Azadi and Valiasr Sqs.

**Alpha Cafe Net** (☎ 226 7270; Valiasr Sq; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-10pm, closed Fri) The best option, with webcams, mics and disc burning available.

**Café Net Raap** (☎ 244 4917; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Sat-Thu & 4-10pm Fri) Just west of Azadi Sq; it's below ground level.

### MONEY

Changing money in Kerman isn't fun. If these options don't work, Akhavan Hotel (p318) changes money at slightly lower rates.

**Bank Melli Central Branch** (Adalat St) Nightmare on Adalat St...five signatures, 30 minutes.

**Exchange Shop** (Qods St) One of two small shops near the corner of Dr Shariati St, easily the best and quickest place to change money.

### POST

**Post office** (Adalat St)

### TELEPHONE

**Telephone office** (Tohid Sq; ☎ 7am-10pm)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

An information office is planned for a restored caravanserai at the east end of Ganj Ali Khan Courtyard.

**Tourist information office** (☎ 245 5151, 222 8115; cnr Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd & Al Qadir St; ☎ 7.30am-2pm, closed Fri) Helpful staff have brochures etc, but it's too far out of town.

### TOURS

These two operators can arrange tours within Kerman and to the surrounding areas, including the Kaluts, Mahan and Rayen. Both charge similar prices and have had mainly positive feedback, though they're not perfect. For desert trips, specify whether you want to sleep in camp or in the desert.

**Jalal Mehdizadeh** (☎ 271 0185, 0913 142 3174;

jalalguesthouse@yahoo.de) Jalal, who also owns Jalal Guesthouse (p317), has a car, speaks German and English and is better organised, but not as fun as, Hossein Vatani.

**Vatan Caravan Tours & Travel Agency** (☎ /fax 223 7591 0913 343 5265; vatan\_caravan@yahoo.com; Ganj Ali Khan St) Hossein Vatani's ancient Jeep seems permanently incapacitated, but he's good fun and can arrange trips to nomad encampments, camel treks and his speciality, trips into the Kaluts to sleep in the 'million star hotel'. Cost depends on the transport you choose.

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Parse Owj** (☎ 244 6002/3; parsehowj@yahoo.com; 7 Ayatollah Saduqi St) English-speaking staff sell air, train and bus tickets. Reliable.

**Raya Travel Agency** (☎ 247 2214; Ferdosi St)

### VISA EXTENSIONS

**Management of Foreigners Affairs Office** (☎ 272 5798; Police Bld No 14, Abbas Pour St; ☎ 7am-1.30pm, closed Fri) The office is efficient enough but usually only



**Bazar-e Vakili**; both are about 150 years old. After about 600m the covered bazaar ends and the 700-year-old open-air **Bazar-e Mosaf-fari** begins, though there is little evidence of such antiquity. The Jameh Mosque can be entered from this bazaar, and you can then walk through to Shohada Sq.

#### JAMEH MOSQUE

مسجد جامع

The well-preserved **Jameh Mosque** (off Shohada Sq) is entered from both Shohada Sq and the bazaar. Its four lofty *iwans* (rectangular halls opening onto a courtyard) and shimmering blue tiles date from 1349 but were extensively modernised during the Safavid period and later. Interestingly, this mosque has no minaret. Instead there is a squat clock tower atop the main entrance (off Shohada Sq).

#### MOSH-TARI-YE MOSHTAQ ALI SHAH

مشتري مشتاق علی شاه

The attractive **Mosh-tari-ye Moshtaq Ali Shah** (Shohada Sq; ☎ 8am-noon & 2pm-sunset) is the mausoleum for Sufi mystic Moshtaq Ali Shah, and other Kerman notables. Mosh-taq Ali Shah was renowned for his singing and ability with the *setar* (a four-stringed instrument), and is apparently responsible for adding the fourth string to the *setar* (which literally means 'three strings'). He eventually fell so far out of favour with the local religious community that he was stoned in the Jameh Mosque. Most of what you see, including the prominent blue-and-white-tiled roofs, are from the late Qajar period.

#### JAMEH MOSQUES

Although every Iranian town has several mosques, the most important one is the Masjed-e Jameh, or Congregational Mosque. This is where men gather for prayers at noon every Friday and where they will listen to the Friday prayer leader preach. In small towns he may be a simple imam (prayer leader) but in bigger towns he might be an *hojattol-Eslam* or even an *ayatollah*, a religious expert who may have studied the Quran for 20 years or more. Jameh also means 'Friday' and Westerners often refer to the Masjed-e Jameh as the 'Friday Mosque'.

#### IMAM MOSQUE

مسجد امام

The expansive **Imam Mosque** (Imam Khomeini St) is worth a look specifically if you're interested in the process of rehabilitating old buildings. Dating from the early Islamic period, the mosque has suffered considerable damage over the years, not least the destruction of a minaret during an earthquake in the 1970s. But the painstaking restoration goes on with the twin aims of uncovering and restoring early inscriptions while leaving no trace of the recent work. It's quite a challenge. If you get chatting with the architects in charge they might (no guarantees here) let you take a look at the remains of a fine mihrab believed to date from the early Islamic period, locked away in the southwest corner. Also worth finding are the reliefs in the rooms high above the main *ivan*.

#### SANATI MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

موزه صنعتی هنرهای معاصر

This newly renovated **museum** (☎ 222 1882; Dr Shariati St; admission IR20,000; ☎ 9am-6pm Oct-May, 9am-noon & 3-8pm summer) is a pleasant surprise in a town that can otherwise feel a long way from modern cultural pursuits. In a Qajar-era building set around an attractive courtyard, the museum houses paintings, sculptures and stone inlays by famous local artist Sayyed Ali Akbar Sanati (1916–2006). It also has exhibitions by younger Iranian artists and even a bronze hand by Auguste Rodin. Not surprisingly, it's a good place to meet open-minded young Kermanis.

#### MOAYEDI ICE STORE

یخچال معایدی

The Safavid-era **Moayedi Ice House** (Abu Hamed St) is a well-preserved, conical adobe structure that was used to store ice. The ice store was, and in some part still is, surrounded by gardens. The gardens would fill with water during winter, and when the water froze the ice would be slid into the Moayedi. It was being transformed into a theatre when we passed and wasn't open to the public.

#### KERMAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

کتابخانه ملی کرمان

The **Kerman National Library** (Shahid Qarani St; ☎ 7am-8pm) modestly bills itself as the 'greatest informatic research center in the country', but it's the architecture – a forest of columns supporting vaulted ceilings – that is the real attraction. Built in 1929, the style

is a harmonious variation on late-Qajar-era design that was purpose built as, wait for it, a textile factory! If only Manchester had been so blessed.

#### MUSEUM OF THE HOLY DEFENCE

موزه دفاع مقدس

The **Museum of the Holy Defence** (Felestin St; admission IR3000; ☎ 7am-12.30pm & 3.30-6pm) commemorates the eight-year Iran–Iraq War. Symbolism abounds, although much of it won't be obvious without an English-speaking guide. Inside is a gallery of gruesome photos, artefacts, letters and documents from the war, and an animated model re-enacting the Karbala V, a famous battle. Outside, along with a line-up of tanks and missile launchers, is a battlefield complete with bunkers, minefield and sound effects recorded from the actual war. Well worth a look.

#### PALAEONTOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Located underground in green Park-e Sangi, about 500m east of Shohada Sq, the **Palaeontological Museum** (Park-e Sangi; admission IR5000; ☎ 4-8pm most days) is the passion and life's work of local mountaineer Mohsen Tajrobekar. Mohsen has collected a stunning array of fossils from the mountains around Kerman and his finds have caused scientists to reassess the origins of some present-day species. They include a perfectly petrified fish believed to be 530 million years old.

#### GONBAD-E JABALIYE

گنبد جبلیه

At the edge of town is the mysterious, octagonal **Gonbad-e Jabaliye** (Mountain of Stone; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun), which houses a mildly interesting and poorly labelled museum of old gravestones. It's mysterious because its age and original function remain unknown – a Kerman Tourism brochure sums it up as 'A big, strange dome in the eastern part of Kerman'. Quite! Some scholars date it to the 2nd century AD and think it may have been an observatory. Others say it was a tomb. Whatever its function, it is remarkable because it is constructed of stone rather than the usual brick; though the double-layered dome, added 150 years ago, is brick. When taking photos (outside only) be careful to point your camera away from the neighbouring army base.

The setting, at the foot of the Payeh Mountains, is picturesque. To get here, try to find

a shuttle taxi from Shohada Sq (IR2000), though you might need to go *dar baste*.

#### Sleeping

Kerman isn't that big but its hotels are scattered inconveniently around town. The rules of supply and demand, or a lack thereof, keep prices relatively low.

#### BUDGET

Kerman is not blessed with an abundance of good budget options.

**Omid Inn** (☎ 222 0571; Shahid Qarani St; s/tw/tr IR50,000/70,000/90,000; ☎) Set around a courtyard (which is ideal for overlanders), the Omid is spartan but provides a warm welcome from the English-speaking manager and his wife. Rooms are basic but they and the shared bathroom and kitchen are clean.

**Reza Guesthouse** (☎ 226 4012-13; Qods St; s/tw/tr IR60,000/85,000/105,000) This clean, simple guesthouse is ideally located near Tohid Sq. Unadorned rooms have overhead fans; all bathrooms are shared. No English is spoken.

These next two are a longer walk into town.

**Guest House Milad** (☎ 245 0617; Ayatollah Saduqi St; s/tw IR60,000/90,000; ☎) Drab, functional rooms and shared bathrooms are clean and staff is friendly. Guests can use the kitchen.

**Jalal Guesthouse** (☎ 271 0185, 0913 142 3174; jalalguesthouse@yahoo.de; 11 Gharbi 3 St, off Ashura Sq; per person €12; ☎ ☎ ☎) About 3km north of the bazaar, local guide Jalal Mehdizadeh (p313) and his wife have two rooms in their house they open to foreign travellers. It has convenient little luxuries like washing machine, internet and more than 1000 channels of TV, and is a good choice for lone women travellers. Breakfast is IR20,000. Jalal speaks English and German. Book ahead.

**Guest House Saedi** (☎ 252 0802; Ayatollah Saduqi St; s/tw/tr IR70,000/110,000/140,000; ☎ ☎) Friendly, functional but Spartan; if the others are full.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Amin Hotel** (☎ 222 1954; aminhotel@yahoo.com; Dr Chamran St; s/tw/q US\$25/30/50; ☎ ☎ ☎) Well located near the bazaar, the long-running Amin has larger-than-average rooms with Western bathrooms and soft beds. Front rooms might be noisy.

**Naz Hotel** (☎ 244 6786; fax 245 0498; Ayatollah Saduqi St; tw with breakfast IR290,000; (P) (☺)) The rejuvenated Naz has new, English-speaking management. The 28 largish rooms are very clean, very pink and fair value. It's opposite the Akhavan and comparing is easy.

**Akhavan Hotel** (☎ 244 1411-2; akhavan-hotel@yahoo.com; Ayatollah Saduqi St; s/d with breakfast US\$24/34; (P) (☺) (☑)) Staying with the Akhavan brothers is a pleasure. Their rooms are very comfortable at this price and when low-season discounts of up to US\$10 are thrown in it's an absolute bargain. They can help with information on visa renewals and organise day trips. Secure parking is popular with overlanders, who use the hotel showers for US\$2 per person per day. The restaurant (right) serves delicious food. Highly recommended.

**Kerman Tourist Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 244 5203-05; www.ittic.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; s/d/ste US\$41/50/80; (P) (☺)) A fair way from the bazaar, the small, recently renovated rooms are OK but the whole place is a bit soulless. Try Akhavan first.

**Kerman Pars International Hotel** (☎ 211 9301-32; www.pars-hotels.com; Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd; s/d with breakfast US\$72/103; (P) (☺) (☑)) This 200-room behemoth on the edge of town is easily Kerman's best. Rooms are quite luxurious and from the foyer to the facilities – including gym, pool, sauna and three restaurants – it's very much an upmarket business hotel. Good value.

## Eating

For cheap eats, there are *kababis* (kabab shops) ice-cream and fruit-shake places, and a pizza place or two on Dr Beheshti and Dr Shariati Sts, particularly around the squares.

**Chelo Kabab Rahimi** (Tohid Sq; meals IR25,000; ☎ 11am-3pm & 5-9pm) No-frills place true to its name that also offers a decent *khoresht* (thick meaty stew with rice).

**Restaurant Ganjali Khan** (☎ 222 7716; Tohid Sq; meals IR20,000-35,000; ☎ 8am-10pm) This underground place near the bazaar entrance is not nearly as charming as the Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh, but delicious food at very reasonable prices makes it a local favourite. You can also just sit and drink tea. There is no English sign.

**Hamam-e Vakil Chaykhaneh** (☎ 222 5989; Bazar-e Vakil; admission IR5000 incl tea; meals IR40,000; ☎ 9am-

7pm Sat-Thu, until 7.30pm summer, 9am-2pm Fri) This architecturally magnificent subterranean teahouse built in 1820 is easily the most atmospheric dining option in Kerman. It's better known for its elegant arches and superb vaulted ceilings than its food (lunch only), though it's not bad. A traditional band plays most days.

**Khayyam Restaurant** (☎ 245 1417; Ayatollah Saduqi St, off Azadi Sq; meals IR35,000-55,000; ☎ noon-11pm) This faux-traditional place is convenient to the Ayatollah Saduqi St hotels, though the food quality is inconsistent.

**Akhavan Hotel Restaurant** (☎ 244 1411-2; Ayatollah Saduqi St; meals IR30,000) What it lacks in atmosphere (it looks like a hospital ward) is amply made up for with the delicious, varied, plentiful and cheap Iranian food; try a bit of everything for the IR50,000 buffet dinner. For a little more romance get it served in your room.

**Pepe Nero Italian Food** (☎ 244 9716; Dr Beheshti St; meals IR30,000-40,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm) More than 700 years after Marco Polo swung by, Kerman finally has a restaurant (not a pizzeria) serving foreign flavours. And while it's a way off any Michelin stars, the pasta and lasagne we had were surprisingly good.

## Shopping

Kermani carpets have been famous for centuries (see p64). The bazaar is a good place to shop for them and if you hunt around a bit you should be able to find good carpets at reasonable prices. The bazaar is also the place to look for Kermani *pate*, a brightly coloured square of cloth with intricate embroidered designs that is unique to Kerman.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Iran Air** (☎ 245 7770; Dr Mofatteh St) and **Mahan Air** (☎ 245 0542; Dr Beheshti St) both fly daily to Tehran (one way IR457,000) and Mahan Air also flies to Esfahan (IR335,000, weekly), Kish (IR362,000, twice weekly) and Zahedan (IR258,000, weekly).

### BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

The bus terminal is in the southwest of Kerman but Taavoni 7 (Volvos only) has an office on Azadi Sq, Taavoni 4 has an office on Tohid Sq. All the other main bus companies have offices at the bus terminal, where Taavoni 15 is the best bet if you want

a *mahmooly* bus. The following services are for *mahmooly*/Volvo buses.

Destination	Fare	Duration
Bam	IR12,000/20,000	3-4hr
Bandar Abbas	IR35,000/55,000	7-9hr
Esfahan	IR26,000/55,000	10-12hr
Mashhad	IR85,000 (Volvo)	14-16hr
Shahr-e Babak	IR17,000 ( <i>mahmooly</i> )	4-5hr
Shiraz	IR23,000/55,000	7-9hr
Tehran	IR90,000 (Volvo)	14-16hr
Yazd	IR15,000/35,000	4½-6hr
Zahedan	IR21,000/55,000	6-8hr

Taavoni 4 has most services to Shahr-e Babak; for Bandar Abbas, see Taavoni 7 first. Minibuses to Mahan (IR1000) leave from around Khaju (Kermani) Sq, though it's worth asking around near Shohada Sq as well. For Shahdad, take a minibus or savari (IR15,000) from Imam Khomeini St, just south of Shohada Sq.

Savaris to Bam (IR25,000) and Rayen (IR15,000) leave from Sarasiyab Sq (about 5km east of Khaju Sq), and to Sirjan from Azadi Sq for IR30,000. Savaris to Mahan (IR5500) leave from Khaju (Kermani) Sq.

If you hire a taxi or guide (see Tours, p313) it makes sense to see Rayen, Mahan and Bagh-e Shahzde as a day trip from Kerman, or en route to/from Bam.

### TRAIN

The 1106km line from Tehran has recently been extended to Bam and should run all the way into Pakistan by 2009. The daily train to Tehran (1st class IR63,150; 15 hours) leaves at 4.45pm and stops at Yazd, Kashan and Qom, but not Esfahan. There are also daily 2nd-class trains to Bam (IR10,000, about two hours, 7.30am) and Yazd (IR16,000, five to six hours, 1pm), which make a pleasant break from all the bus travel.

Train tickets can be bought from Parse Owj (p313) or other agencies, saving you the trip to the **train station** (☎ 211 0762), 8km southwest of town. Shuttle taxis (IR2000) leave from Azadi Sq for the station, or go *dar baste* for IR10,000.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There is no airport bus. You can take a shuttle taxi along Jomhuri-ye Eslami Blvd

from Azadi Sq, or a taxi *dar baste* for about IR15,000, depending on traffic.

### TAXI

Shuttle taxis use Azadi and Shohada Sqs. From Azadi Sq, they run to the bus terminal (IR1500), Bazar-e Vakil and Shohada Sq (IR1000). Taxis all to yourself cost IR10,000 to most destinations around town and at least IR25,000 per hour.

## AROUND KERMAN

Mahan and Rayen are easily reached by public transport, but services to Shahdad are less frequent and nothing at all runs to the Kaluts. Some travellers take a tour or hire a taxi for the day. Depending on how far you go, you can expect a half/full day to cost about IR120,000/220,000. Some drivers might charge by the kilometre – IR1000 at the time of writing.

### Mahan

ماهان

☎ 0342

Mahan, 35km southeast of Kerman, is a picturesque and low-key town that has long been famous as a summer retreat for the wealthy, and for its two main attractions, the Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali shrine and Bagh-e Shahzde gardens. Fed by *qanats* and surrounding natural springs, before the 1979 revolution it was also known for the quality of the locally produced opium. Not any more.

### ARAMGAH-E SHAH NE'MATOLLAH VALI

آرامگاه شاه نعمت الله ولی

The splendid dome over the **Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali** (admission to museum & roof IR25,000; ☎ 8am-5pm, to 8pm summer), the mausoleum of a well-known Sufi dervish, is one of the most recognisable images of eastern Iran. The mausoleum dates from the early 15th century, when it was built by an Indian king who was an adherent of Shah Ne'matollah Vali's teachings. However, many of the other religious buildings in the surrounding complex were built during the reign of Shah Abbas I and during the 18th century. The mausoleum is renowned for its tiles, the seven Indian doors throughout the building, some inlaid with ivory, and its stunning blue-tiled domes. But we like the small, tranquil prayer room where a dervish, who is said to have stayed in this

room on his regular visits, has painted the walls and ceiling with calligraphy in spiral wheel pattern – ask nicely to be let in.

You can see most of the complex without paying, but the entrance ticket allows you into a small **museum** and then up to the roof. The views from here are superb and, assuming the repair work is finished, photographers will be rather excited by the vast (and dented) Safavid-era cupola and Qajar minarets, which can be climbed. There is a decent **bookshop** in the courtyard.

The mausoleum is smack bang in the middle of Mahan, and minibuses (IR1000) and savaris (IR5500) from Kerman will take you straight to it.

### BAGH-E SHAHZDE

باغ شازده

Arriving at the handsome **Bagh-e Shahzde** (admission IR4000; ☎ 9am–6pm, 8am–11pm summer) is like being beamed onto a different planet. One second you're in the arid semidesert, the next it's all flowing *qanat* water and tall green trees. The beautifully maintained grounds, built in 1873, contain a series of split-level fountains leading to a dilapidated palace that was once the residence of Abdul Hamid Mirza, one of the last princes of the Qajar dynasty. To the left of the palace there is a well-preserved bathhouse.

The palace itself has been converted into a restaurant (open for lunch and dinner), though it was being renovated when we visited this time. As the sun disappears, the fountains and palace are floodlit, which is a wonderful sight. Occasional music festivals are held in the grounds.

The gardens are a 5km-long walk up Mahan's main road from the mausoleum, and the turn-off is signposted in English. Alternatively, it's easy to get a private taxi.

### SLEEPING & EATING

When Robert Byron travelled through Iran in 1934, he stopped in Mahan and stayed in the caravanserai adjoining the Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali. According to the caretaker, no foreigners have stayed there since. But that is set to change with the opening, in late 2007, of that same caravanserai...

**Aramgah-e Shah Ne'matollah Vali Caravanserai** (☎ 0913 340 9375; r about IR70,000) The 170-year-old caravanserai should become one of the most atmospheric – and good value – places

to stay in the region. The small rooms have been faithfully restored, which means all bathrooms are shared, but it adds up to a genuine taste of what travel must have been like years ago. Call English-speaking Hamed Azad Pour, who works at the mausoleum, to book and check the prices.

**Mahan Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 622 3555; mahan@ittic.com; Gharani Sq; d/tr US\$18/22; ☎ ☎) The big, tidy rooms here are good value, staff is friendly and the restaurant is decent. The hotel is at a roundabout, a couple of blocks west of the mausoleum and public transport from Kerman takes you past the hotel.

**Sultan-e Shabha** (☎ 10am–11pm) Opposite the entrance to the mausoleum, a quiet lane leads to this attractive and atmospheric garden teahouse, on the left side. At the end of this lane (about 200m) is a once-grand home called Shotor Galou (Camel Neck), which was built about 200 years ago and served as a home to Qajar period VIPs. It's in a terrible state, but it's fun to wander around and think of how wonderful it could be if it's properly restored – as is the plan.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

About every hour, savaris (IR5500) and minibuses (IR1000) travel the 35km between Khaju (Kermani) Sq in Kerman and Ne'matollahi Sq in Mahan, right in front of the mausoleum.

### Shahdad & Around

شهاداد

Sleepy Shahdad is the largest town in the Takhab area, a group of about 30 oasis villages wedged between the Payeh Mountains to the south and the vast emptiness of the Dasht-e Lut to the north. Shahdad is fiercely hot in summer, but its oranges (harvested in October) are reputedly the best in Iran.

About 75 minutes northeast of Kerman, Shahdad is mainly of interest as a gateway to the desert. It's only-if-I've-got-plenty-of-spare-time sights are limited to the Safavid-era **Imamzadeh-ye Mohammed Ebn-e Zaid** mausoleum and, to the east of town, two prehistoric archaeological sites: the **Tappeh-ye Kohne**, the archaeological remains of a village settled about 5000 years ago; and 1km further the **Shahrak-e Kotuluha** (City of the Little People) – the name refers to a local Lilliputian legend but its origin is unknown. There's not much to see.

**Shafi Abad**, an oasis village a few kilometres north of Shahdad, boasts several crumbling caravanserais. The most prominent of these, from the Seljuk-era, has been partially restored and it's possible to climb above the grand gatehouse and the northwest tower, and check out the lodgings along the northern wall where rooms are linked by an unusual arched corridor.

Leaving the Takhab behind, the road to Birjand heads north into the **Kaluts**, a 145km-long and 80km-wide stretch of desert dominated by long lines of five- to 10-storey high 'sand castles'. This stunning landscape is unique on earth and no-one we met was quite sure how it was formed. Theories ranged from simple wind erosion (but why just this north-south stretch?) to the idea that a giant meteorite glanced here, leaving this graze – look at Google Earth (N 30°38'34.63", E 58° 0'58.48") and make your own theory. Whatever the cause, the reality is simply spectacular, especially at dawn and sunset when light and shadows paint a shimmering canvas of gold and brown.

There are no official lodgings in Shahdad, but a desert camp has been set up at the edge of the Kaluts. This is where most people stay, but the bright lights and paved spaces are rather less appealing than real desert camping, which can be arranged (in advance) on a tour with Hossein Vatani (p313). Note that midday temperatures rise to an almost unimaginable 65°C in summer.

Semi-regular minibuses and savaris (IR15,000 per seat) travel between Shahdad and Imam Khomeini St, just south of Shohada Sq in Kerman, but there is no public transport to Kaluts. You can, however, charter your savari to take you to the Kaluts and back to Kerman for about IR120,000 (return), or, as one enterprising traveller did, just go by minibus to Shahdad and put yourself in the care of the locals. Take your passport as there is a checkpoint in Shahdad.

### RAYEN

☎ 0342

راین

The demise of Bam has been the rebirth of the **Arg-e Rayen** (admission IR5000; ☎ 7am–sunset), an ancient adobe 'citadel' in Rayen, a small town sitting in the lee of Mt Hezar (4420m) 111km from Kerman. On a hill overlooking the town, the Arg's hotchpotch of archi-

tectural styles suggests it is well over 1000 years old, though its exact age is unknown. It had been abandoned for about 150 years before restoration began in 1996.

The structure itself is a story of muscles made of mud, with **outer walls** 3m thick at the base and 1m thick at the top supporting most of the Arg's 15 towers. The entrance leads straight onto the **bazaar** and from the gatehouse you can climb a narrow staircase to the **ramparts** for spectacular views. Coming back down, turn right and you'll come to the **'main walkway'**. About halfway along a door on the left leads to the remains of **public houses** (the sign says 'kommon people'), some of which stood three storeys high and would have been home to several families.

The **governor's complex**, entered from the square, is the highlight. The four separate houses here have been restored (and labelled) and reflect the relative luxury the governor and his family enjoyed; note the subtly different shades of the mud and straw render, reflecting different earth used for each *khan* (home). Climb to the roof for views over the Arg and the mountains beyond. Covered *kuches* (lanes) weave their way through the rest of the Arg, look for the small **zurkhaneh** (literally 'house of strength'; see p52).

**Hamid Reza** (☎ 662 3644) is the caretaker of the Arg and if you find the doors closed, call him. He is also a sword maker and has a simple workshop just inside the main gate.

### Sleeping & Eating

Options are limited.

**Rayen Arg Tourist Hotel** (☎ 662 3578; s/tw IR60,000/80,000; ☎) This small, new hotel has nine compact but clean rooms above a restaurant, each with bathroom and squat toilet. As you enter town, turn right (west) at the roundabout and it's about 300m along on the right – look for the green façade.

**Restaurant Arg** (☎ 662 3931; meals IR25,000–35,000) The tasty food here comes in typically large portions. It's about 50m down the hill from the Arg, opposite a park.

### Getting there & away

Rayen is 23km south of the Kerman–Bam road, the turn-off being 88km from Kerman. Buses (IR5000) leave Kerman bus terminal every hour or so; Taavonis 3 and 16 are your best bet. Savaris (IR15,000) are

more frequent, leaving from Kerman's Sar-asiyab Sq and stopping at a square in Rayen about 1km from the Arg, from where they also return to Kerman.

## BAM

☎ 0344

Having been all but flattened by a massive earthquake in 2003, Bam is not the tourist attraction it once was. A few years later much of the rebuilding is complete, but the city has undoubtedly changed. Mud-brick homes have been replaced by steel-framed two-storey buildings that are safe but boring. The main attraction, the Arg-e Bam, is obviously a less evocative place than it once was. For all this, however, Bam's thousands of date palms remain and with them the desert oasis feel. If you have the time, Bam is still worth the trip.

## Orientation

Bam's bus terminal is in the south of the city near Arg Sq and unless you're packing light you'll need a taxi to get you to any of the lodgings. Once in town, Bam is easy enough to walk around, though taxis make much more sense in summer. What remains of the ancient Arg-e Bam is about 2km north of the centre of town, which is Imam Khomeini Sq. The new bazaar should be finished by the time you arrive, though in earthquake-proof concrete it's unlikely to have the same atmosphere as before.

The Arg-e Jadid free-trade zone is about 14km east of Bam.

## Information

**Arg-e Bam Reconstruction Headquarters** (Arg St)

**Bank Sepah** (Shahid Sadoqi St) Bank manager changes cash 10am to 12.30pm only, with IR17,000 commission.

**Jonub-e Shahr Coffeenet** (Pasdaran St; internet per hr IR14,000; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-9pm) Look out for a building with a green and red façade, the *coffeenet* is on the first floor.

**Post office** (Shahid Sadoqi St)

**Telephone office** (Shahid Sadoqi St)

## Dangers & Annoyances

A Japanese traveller was abducted from the street in Bam by drug smugglers in September 2007 (see p325). Check the latest situation with other travellers and on the Thorn Tree ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thornree)) before you arrive.

## Arg-e Bam

The ancient mud city of Bam is the largest adobe structure on earth and, until the 2003 earthquake, it was one of the jewels in Iran's tourism crown. The site has been occupied for almost 2000 years and post-earthquake analysis has revealed the walls were first built using Sassanian-style mud-bricks. Bam was a staging post on the trade routes between India and Pakistan at one end and the Persian Gulf and Europe at the other. Visitors, including Marco Polo, were awestruck by the city's 38 towers, huge mud walls and fairy-tale citadel – the **Arg-e Bam** (admission free; ☎ 24).

Today the Arg is the largest adobe building project on earth. Teams of Iranian and

foreign archaeologists, architects and engineers are working to first understand how and when the Arg was built, and then to rebuild it using mainly traditional methods. As team leader Nima Naderi explained, it's a dauntingly complex job.

'We cannot look at the Arg as a single structure,' he told us. 'Every building is different, built at different times using different materials. We must try to rebuild each building using materials as close as possible to those they were originally built with.' In the laboratory opposite the collapsed gate

tower, engineers are working to develop a range of mud bricks in line with the differing sizes and densities used in the original buildings. At the same time they are experimenting with different compositions of mud, straw and palm mulch to determine which is the strongest and most flexible.

About 150 people are working on the Arg and its reconstruction is scheduled to take 15 years. But with less than 1000 bricks being made each day, and countless millions being required, Nima's statement that 'the project has no deadline' seems more realistic.

## A TOWN BORN OF DUST IS REBORN *Andrew Burke*

When I arrived in Bam on 27 December 2003 to report on the earthquake that had just devastated the city, it was like stepping into a scene from hell. The quake, measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale, had reduced this ancient city of mud-brick homes to dust and rubble. Death was everywhere.

Those Bamis who had survived were in a state of shock. 'After this house collapsed,' one old man told me, pointing to a pile of rubble that was once his home, 'five people were dug out without any injury. But 15 or 16 members of my [extended] family are dead.'

A few metres away, a woman wailed as another body was carted past in a blanket and loaded onto a pink suburban bus, to be taken to the cemetery. As I followed the bus through a grid-lock of people trying desperately to escape the carnage, the horror was summed up in a single image. Four large men sat crying in a white Kia Pride while two bodies and two shovels hung out of the boot.

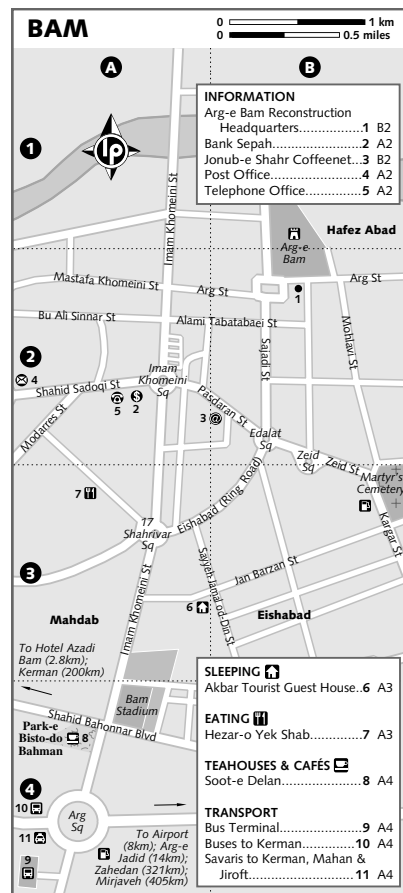
The scene was repeated across Bam. Women wailing and beating themselves; men scrambling through broken concrete in an effort to extract the dead – even then few held out hope of finding anyone alive. That day, and the next, Bam buried most of the 31,000 people who died when their homes had collapsed atop them at 5.30am that bitterly cold morning. With the burying done, the grieving began amid freezing nights spent under Red Crescent canvas.

During several visits since then I've seen Bam deal with an event whose magnitude would have been barely imaginable before it actually happened. Progress has been frustratingly slow, but several years later Bam continues to emerge from the dust and death and depression. Physically, at least.

Bam's progress can be summed up in the progress of the Akbar Tourist Guest House (p324). Manager Panjalizadeh Akbar saw his business flattened and his son's best friend and two guests die in the earthquake, but has rebuilt bit by bit. From the tent on the street I stayed in a few weeks after the quake, to demountable buildings and, as money has become available, a new, two-storey and heavily engineered concrete and brick hotel. As in the rest of Bam, the only constants have been the date palms.

The emotional scars will take longer to heal. When I interviewed a grandmother who had lost all but 11 of her 96-member extended family, I couldn't even imagine such a loss, let alone begin to come to terms with it. For many Bamis, who don't have the luxury of getting on the next bus out of town, solace has come through an opium pipe and addiction has become a serious problem.

Bam is far from perfect, but most people have had their homes rebuilt in some fashion and have their lives back on some sort of track. The loss of tourism has had an impact on the local economy and the loss of the Arg has had an impact on the local identity. But even that is slowly being attended to. As the head of the Arg-e Bam reconstruction project, Nima Naderi, told me: 'What we have here is not just an industrial workshop, re-creating bricks and buildings. This is a psychological workshop for the people of Bam. For them, the Arg is the symbol of their town and as they see us rebuilding it brick by brick, we are also rebuilding their pride.'



For the visitor, it's possible to walk a dusty brown lane from the entrance to the foot of the citadel itself. It's a haunting walk, but even after the *zelzele* (earthquake) the sheer scale of the Arg and the remaining ramparts, arches and supporting walls mean it's not too difficult to imagine its majesty.

There is no shade available, so go early morning or late afternoon.

### Sleeping & Eating

The earthquake claimed most of Bam's hotels and restaurants and few have been rebuilt.

**Akbar Tourist Guest House** (☎ 231 4843; mr\_panjali@yahoo.com; Sayyeh Jamal od-Din St; dm €5, r with/without bathroom €15/10; 🍴) Akbar's has long been the meeting place for overlanders heading to or from Pakistan. And after four years of struggle in tents and prefabricated buildings following the earthquake, a new, earthquake-proof 15-room affair is due to open in 2008. Dorms and a range of rooms with and without bathroom will be available. The easy, social ambience is the main attraction, while laundry, phone and tours to nearby desert and mountain locales often keep people longer than they expect. It's a good place to just hang out and recharge. A restaurant is anticipated during the life of this book.

**Hotel Azadi Bam** (☎ 221 0095; argbam.2005@yahoo.com; Jahad Blvd; s/d/ste €40/50/70; 🍴 📺 📺) The earthquake damage is fixed and you'll find spacious, clean and comfortable rooms that are fair value, even if the location of about 6km from the Arg means you'll need a taxi to go anywhere. It's off the left of the main road into Bam from Kerman. The restaurant (meals IR40,000 to IR70,000; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) is one of the best in town.

**Hezar-o Yek Shab** (meals IR15,000-40,000; 🕒 4-10pm) The name means '1001 nights', and eating on the *takhts* (daybed-style tables) in the rear garden is a favourite Bami experience. The food is excellent, especially the juicy chicken kabab, and it's *bastani* (ice cream) is famous.

**Soot-e Delan** (Park-e Bisto-do Bahman; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-10.30pm) This indoor/outdoor *chaykhaneh* (teahouse) is a fun place to sit and socialise over *chay* (tea) and *qalyan* (water pipe) with the young men of Bam. The location deep in a park is not great for solo women.

### Getting There & Away

Iran Aseman flies daily between Tehran and Bam's small airport east of town.

Bam's bus terminal is just south of Arg Sq but Arg Sq itself is where most services stop en route to or from Zahedan. Buses to Kerman (*mahmooly*/Volvo IR12,000/18,000, three hours, 204km) leave frequently. The few regular services from Bam include Esfahan (IR70,000, 11 hours, 703km) at 2.30pm and Tehran (IR100,000, 21 hours, 1258km) at 3.30pm. For Zahedan (IR16,000/25,000, four hours, 321km) buses pass intermittently, including one soon after 6am – ask at Akbar Tourist Guest House (left) for schedules.

Savaris for Kerman (IR30,000, two hours), Mahan (IR30,000, 1¼ hours) and Jiroft (IR25,000, 90 minutes) leave Arg Sq when they fly.

### BAM TO MINAB

To avoid backtracking, a growing number of travellers are taking the road between Bam or Kerman and the Persian Gulf town of Minab (p308). The major stop along the way is **Jiroft**, which is surrounded by some of the most fertile land in Iran. The nearby Halil Rud Basin has been settled since at least 4000 BC, and two archaeological sites discovered in 2002 have given up thousands of artefacts (many smuggled out to Britain) from this little-understood period. The ziggurat-shaped mounds are 28km from Jiroft but for now it's not really worth the trip. Instead, the **Jiroft Archaeological Museum** (☎ 0348-221 7553; Halil St; admission IR2000; 🕒 9am-noon & 4-6pm), on the north bank of the river, houses several of the finds and has interesting explanations.

If you stay in Jiroft, the **Mosafekhaneh Valiasr** (Halil St; per person IR40,000; 🍴) is the very simple budget option about 100m east of the museum. On the main street, the **Hotel Jaam-e Jam** (☎ 0348-221 0340; Dowlat St, near Setat Sq; r IR180,000; 🍴) is a more comfortable, midrange-style place with a restaurant in the lobby.

Savaris to/from Bam (IR25,000, 90 minutes) stop at the central Farmondari Sq, one block south of Hotel Jaam-e Jam. Less-frequent buses to Bam cost IR15,000. Heading south, savaris and minibuses leave the Eskaa Khanuj (Khanuj Terminal) about 2.5km southeast of town. You go first to Khanuj (minibus/savari IR6000/20,000, 1½/one hour) then change for Minab (IR30,000, two hours) or Bandar Abbas via Rudan.

### EXTREMISTS & DRUG SMUGGLERS: TRAVEL ANNOYANCES

Sunni extremists operating from Pakistan and drug smugglers who kidnap tourists to use as leverage have added a large degree of annoyance and some danger to travelling in the south-east. The danger is tempered by the fact no tourists have yet been harmed, though that is little comfort to those who have been held.

#### The Extremists

In 2005 the Jundollah group of Sunni extremists emerged in Sistan va Baluchestan province and in the following years carried out several major terror attacks. First 22 Iranians were shot dead and several taken hostage after the group stopped traffic on the road between Zahedan and Zabol. Then 12 people were killed in a similar operation on the Kerman to Bam road. And in 2007 a Republican Guard bus was blown up in Zahedan, with at least 11 people killed.

So far, the extremists have not targeted tourists, but the government is worried they will and has tightened security in all areas east of Kerman. In Zahedan foreigners are forbidden from staying in cheap hotels and, as we found, are supposed to have a police escort whenever they leave the hotel. An armed police shadow is annoying. We were allowed out unaccompanied if we weren't going too far from the hotel, and even managed to sneak up to Zabol without an escort. The police, however, weren't happy when they found out. Though the threat of kidnap does justify some of their paranoia.

#### (Some of) The Drug Smugglers

In August 2007 a Belgian couple driving overland were abducted on the road between Bam and Zahedan. The kidnapers were not extremists, but a well-organised group of drug smugglers whose leader demanded the release of his imprisoned son. The woman was released after four days but the man, Stefaan Boeve, was held for 34 days in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan before finally being released. Stefaan told us by email he was treated relatively 'well, according to their standard, sleeping open air on hard rocks and with one blanket.' But he urged other travellers to be cautious and travel in groups.

While Stefaan was released, the smuggler's son was not, and three weeks later the smuggler abducted a Japanese traveller from a street in Bam. They again demanded the son's release. As we went to press Satoshi Nakamura was still being held several months later, though he was reportedly in good health.

#### What to do?

The road from Kerman to Bam, Zahedan and Pakistan is unavoidable if you want to travel overland to or from Pakistan. Clearly it's not completely safe, but people continue to do it, usually without trouble. The best plan is to do your research. Read the Thorn Tree ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thorn-tree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorn-tree)) and the message board (it's called HUBB) of [www.horizonsunlimited.com/hubb/middle-east/ferry-to-iran-oman-uae-21170-2](http://www.horizonsunlimited.com/hubb/middle-east/ferry-to-iran-oman-uae-21170-2) for updates, and ask again at each stop as you head east. If you're driving, you might want to link up with other vehicles in Kerman, or definitely in Bam, where Akbar's (see Akbar Tourist Guest House, opposite) is the place to meet other overlanders.

You could also get your hotel to inform the police and, assuming things are still dangerous, you'll get an armed escort. On our return from Zabol to Zahedan our savari travelled in an escorted convoy, which had the added benefit of keeping the savari driver down to a relatively sane 120km/h. If you're travelling by public transport, take the bus and keep a low profile.

Until there has been a prolonged period without a kidnapping, it's best to play it safe. If you plan to travel in your own vehicle beyond Bam, get an escort. If you're on public transport, try to keep a low profile.

Getting kidnapped can ruin your holiday (understatement alert), but if you do get very unlucky and it happens to you, take some comfort in the knowledge that, so far at least, all the travellers abducted by smugglers have eventually been released unharmed. Finally, help other travellers by writing about your trip on the Middle East branch of the Thorn Tree.



## ZAHEDAN

☎ 0541 / pop 534,000

Zahedan is capital of the desolate and near-lawless Sistan va Baluchestan province. It has few attractions of its own (very few), but its proximity to the only legal crossing point between Iran and Pakistan means most overlanders will stop here. Most travellers don't stay long, and restrictive security meant that when we passed there were even fewer reasons to hang around (see p325).

Outside Zahedan there are a couple of worthy day trips, notably to Zabol (p329) and Kuh-e Khajeh (p331). If you're very lucky you might be in town for a **camel race** (*mosabagheh-ye shotor-e davani*), a traditional Baluchi activity usually held in summer.

### Orientation

Zahedan is a flat, dusty, featureless town. Most visitors will only worry about getting from the airport or bus terminal to their hotel and back, which is easy to do. Although the whole of Zahedan seems to be one huge marketplace with no particular focus, Bazar-e Ruz is best considered the centre of town.

### Information CONSULATES

**Indian Consulate** (☎ 322 2337; off Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 2.30-5pm Sun-Thu) Visas issued in four to five days with a letter from your embassy.

**Pakistani Consulate** (☎ 322 3389; Pahlavani St; ☎ 9.30am-2.30pm Sat-Wed) No-longer issues visas to non-Iranians; will send you to Tehran.

زاهدان

### EMERGENCY

**Khatam Hospital** (☎ 322 0501; Motahhari Blvd)

**Police headquarters** (☎ 110) Near the bazaar.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Diba Coffeenet** (Motahhari Blvd, near Azadi Sq; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-2.30pm & 3-9pm) Not desperately fast.

**Esteghlal Grand Hotel Internet Café** (Motahhari Blvd, near Azadi Sq; per hr IR15,000) Open on request, maybe.

### MONEY

After hours head to the bazaar, where you can also buy Pakistani and Afghan currencies. The Taftan terminal on the Pakistani side of the border offers the best rates for Pakistani currency.

**Bank Melli Central Branch** (Bank Melli Markazi; Azadi St) Changes US dollars and euros without much fuss.

**Bank Saderat** (Motahhari Blvd, near Azadi Sq) US dollars and euros changed only between 8am and 1.30pm.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**International telephone office** (Metri-e Kamarbandi St, off Taleqani Sq; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm) Under the Abuzar Hotel.

**Main post office** (Emdad St) Better to use the post office in Kerman (p313).

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Khaterat Zahedan Travel** (☎ 322 9113; Azadi St)

### VISA EXTENSIONS

Some travellers have reported getting help here with recently expired transit visas, but *do not* rely on this. See the boxed text, p395 for details on extending visas.

**Police Department of Alien Affairs** (Motahhari Blvd;

☎ 7am-2pm, closed Fri) Just outside the entrance to the airport, the urbane English-speaking officer of years past has moved on and this office is back to being a bureaucratic event. The middle office will process your application, and extensions should be sorted the same day, or the next. You must deposit your fee at the Bank Melli Central Branch on Azadi St.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Zahedan can be dangerous and when we visited it was definitely annoying because almost everywhere we went required a police escort (see the boxed text, p325). At any time it can be a little unsafe at night, and away from the main squares the streets are pretty lonely after dark. Car theft is a problem so if you have a vehicle find a secure place to leave it overnight. Do not venture west of Zahedan in the jagged-looking area known as the Black Mountains, unaccompanied or on foot – they're not known as the Black Mountains for their colour alone.

### Sleeping

If you're on a budget, forget Zahedan and head straight through to much-more-pleasant Bam, or Pakistan. When we stayed, foreign guests were banned from Zahedan's cheap hotels (see the boxed text, p325); the first three places wouldn't take foreigners, but this might change. Until it does, your overpriced options are all near Azadi Sq.

**Hotel Montzahirmand** (☎ 322 2313; Bazar-e Ruz; s/tw IR45,000/60,000; ☎) Right in the bazaar, this ultrabasic place is friendly but the plumbing isn't great. To find it, head north along Dr Shariati St from the corner with Imam Khomeini St; take the first left at the edge of the bazaar and it's about 80m along behind a coloured glass door.

**Abuzar Hotel** (☎ 451 2132; 40 Metri-e Kamarbandi St, off Taleqani Sq; r IR90,000; ☎) This well-managed cheapie near the Garazh area, in the west of town, has clean rooms and shared bathrooms and a decent restaurant downstairs.

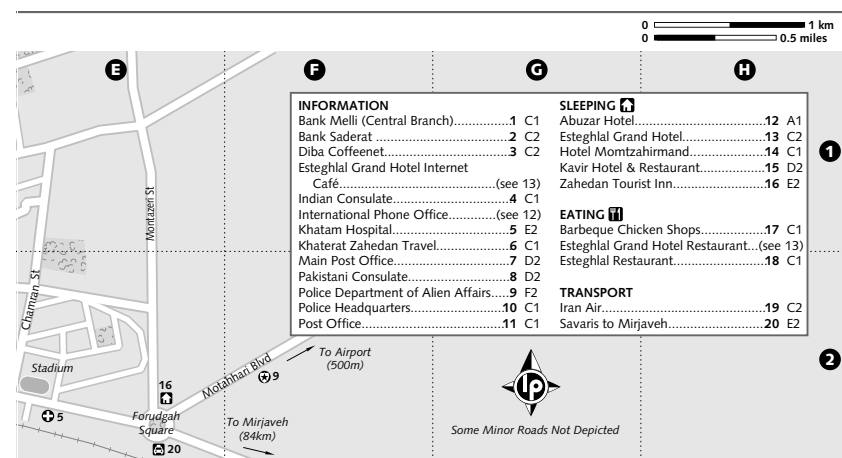
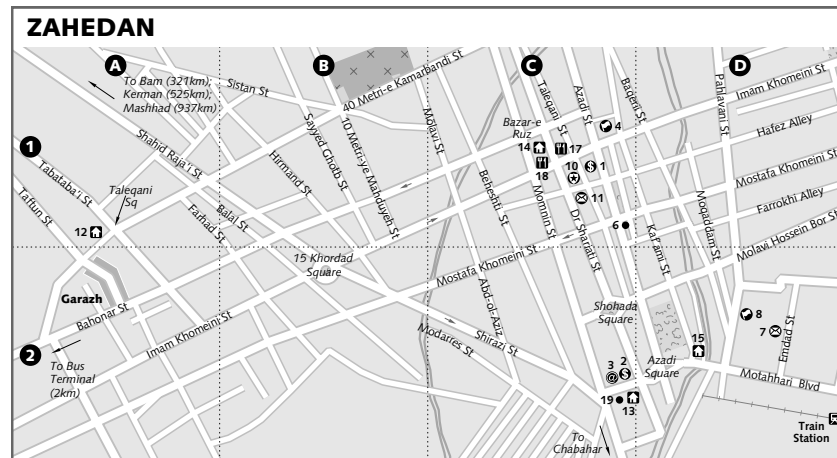
**Kavir Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 326 0137; Motahhari Blvd; s/d IR170,000/250,000; ☎) Worn almost to the point of being worn out, and none too clean, avoid the Kavir unless you're an overlander looking for lock-up parking.

**Zahedan Tourist Inn** (Hotel Jahangardi; ☎ 322 4898; Montazeri St, off Forudgah Sq; r US\$47; ☎) Away from town but handy if you're en route to or from Pakistan, rooms here are a good size and clean.

**Esteghlal Grand Hotel** (☎ 323 8068; www.hoteles.teghlal.ir; Azadi Sq; s/d/ste IR693,000/988,000/1,386,000 with breakfast; ☎) The best place in town by a desert mile, the big Esteghlal has nice-enough three-star rooms with satellite TV, fridge and spotless bathroom.

### Eating

There are several good barbecue chicken places around the corner of Dr Shariati and Imam Khomeini streets, and a few *kababis*.



### FROM 'THIEVES' TO 'ASCETICS'... & BACK

Not so long ago Zahedan (meaning 'Ascetics') went under the far-less-inviting name of Dozda (Thieves). The locals offer several explanations for the original name. The more obvious of the two is that the village of Dozda first developed as a place where bandits came to rest. The more romantic version has it that rain soaked straight through the soil, thereby the ground 'stole' the water. Passing through one day, Reza Shah was astonished that, despite its name, the town appeared no more full of thieves than its neighbours. At once he had the name changed to Zahedan in a nod of recognition to the more conspicuous collection of straggly bearded, ascetic-looking men living there.

However, Zahedan's bad reputation seemed fully justified in the days following the Bam earthquake (see p323). No sooner did truckloads of aid arrive than much of it disappeared on *pik-ups* (utilities with canvas covers) going east. Rightly or wrongly, the Baluchis of Zahedan were blamed for stealing as many as 90,000 Iranian Red Crescent tents earmarked for the needy of Bam. And these figures came straight from the government in Tehran.

Other than that, all the hotels have restaurants, with prices reflecting room rates.

**Esteghlal Restaurant** (☎ 322 2250; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR15,000) Less than no frills, but a decent range of cheap staples in the centre of town. Don't confuse it with...

**Esteghlal Grand Hotel** (☎ 323 8088; Azadi Sq; meals IR60,000) The indoor/outdoor restaurant out back serves unsurprising but tasty fare in a relaxing setting. The best in town.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Given Zahedan's isolation, flying makes a good alternative to long hours of overland travel. It's also a good idea for northward journeys to Mashhad.

**Iran Air** (☎ 322 0813/4; Motahhari Blvd), near Azadi Sq, flies from Zahedan to Chababhar (IR284,000, six times weekly), Esfahan (IR512,000, Friday only), Kerman (IR258,000, Friday only), Mashhad (IR436,000, four times weekly) and Tehran (IR599,000, once or twice daily).

Mahan Air flies regularly to Tehran, though you might need to board a Tupolev, which on Fridays goes to Dubai for Zahedan's only international flight. Tickets are available from travel agencies.

#### BUS & SAVARI

Buses head north all the way to Mashhad, usually travelling overnight so you miss the desert scenery. More manageable are day trips to Zabol (opposite) and Kuh-e Khajeh (p331) by savari. Note that all buses from Zahedan face lengthy stops at checkpoints (p407).

The sprawling terminal in the west of Zahedan is, like so many others in Iran, chaotic in an organised fashion. Buses leave several times a day for the following destinations; longer trips usually leave in the afternoon or evening, for a morning arrival. These days most buses are Volvo or similar (prices here are for Volvos), though if you're prepared to ask around – and wait – a Mercedes will eventually run to most destinations.

Destination	Fare	Duration
Bam	IR20,000	4-6hr
Bandar Abbas	IR50,000	15-18hr
Esfahan	IR90,000	15-19hr
Kerman	IR45,000	6-8hr
Mashhad	IR85,000	13-16hr
Shiraz	IR90,000	15-18hr
Tehran	IR120,000	19-23hr
Yazd	IR65,000	14hr
Zabol	IR12,000	3-4hr

#### To/From Pakistan

There are frequent buses (IR6000, 1½ hours) and minibuses (IR7500, 1½ to two hours) from Zahedan to Mirjaveh (96km). Most buses leave from the bus terminal. The easiest way, however, is to get a savari (IR20,000, one hour) from Forudgah Sq in the far east of town. Drivers will ask for as much as US\$20 for the trip, but bargain your hardest.

The Iran-Pakistan border is 15km east of Mirjaveh village, so clarify whether your vehicle is going to the village or border. See also Crossing the Pakistan Border at Mirjaveh/Taftan, p330.

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Drivers travelling between Turkey and India often describe the trip between Zahedan and Quetta, across the vast Baluchestan desert, as the worst leg of their journey. The road from Quetta to the Iranian border is barren and lonely, with few facilities and a risk of bandits; consider driving in convoy once on the Pakistani side.

The clearly signposted road between Zahedan and Kerman is good, but short on facilities. Take plenty of water and make sure your vehicle is in good order or risk a potentially long and unpleasant wait for repairs. Petrol is available in Mirjaveh (20L maximum), Zahedan and Fahraj (between Zahedan and Bam).

#### TRAIN

The new train line linking Bam and Zahedan should open by 2009. Check Raja Trains ([www.rajatrains.com](http://www.rajatrains.com)) for updates.

#### To/From Pakistan

The long, remote, dusty, sometimes cold and often uncomfortable train trip between Zahedan and Quetta, in Pakistan, is guaranteed to be a story you'll tell until you die. If you're someone who enjoys meeting people, isn't fussed by hardship (carriages are simple with wooden seats and no sleepers) and has plenty of time, you'll probably enjoy it. If not, take the bus.

Iran and Pakistan have plans to increase cross-border trains between Zahedan and Quetta when the line to Bam is finished (see To the Orient By Train, p404), until then the train is supposed to leave on the 3rd and 17th of every month by the Western calendar at 8.30am, *insh'Allah* (if God wills it). It usually does, but do call the not-exactly-overworked stationmaster in Zahedan's attractive **train station** (☎ 322 4142) to double-check; mornings are best. The trip is scheduled to take 30 hours, but as reader Michael von Kuelmer reported, two days is more likely:

'The speed is 20 to 30km/h, great for viewing and taking pictures. We needed c 47 hours for the whole trip, including about five hours at the border. You can use that time for shopping in Taftan (we bought blankets). Armed guards accompany you on the

Pakistani side. The whole staff of the train (more staff than passengers) was very friendly, handshaking with the driver included! The train stops in villages on the way, which gives you the opportunity to meet unbelievably nice people there. It's a ride you won't forget but with warm clothes and enough food and drink it's a pleasant journey as well! And don't be put off if the train is leaving late; ours left with half-a-day delay. It's holiday – you are not in a hurry!'

You pay in rial to Taftan (IR12,000), and in rupees from Taftan to Quetta. Alternatively, you could get yourself across the border and get on the train in Taftan.

### Getting Around

A private taxi between the airport and town will cost about IR15,000, if you bargain hard.

You'll be lucky to get a private taxi for less than about IR5000, and from the bazaar to the terminal expect to pay IR7000. Shuttle taxis are available along the main roads for about IR1500 a trip. Around town taxis cost about IR20,000 an hour.

### ZABOL

☎ 0542 / pop 128,000

North of Zahedan, Zabol is a dusty frontier town that's sufficiently close to the Afghanistan border – and far enough away from Tehran – that it's full of smugglers, illicit goods, big-bearded Afghans and the ever-present suggestion of drugs, especially opium. As you wander through the bazaar it becomes clear this is no ordinary town. There are all manner of smuggled goods for sale and there's a good chance you'll see pungent opium smoke wafting out from behind curtained-off sections of stall.

The town has been inhabited for millennia and is known in Iran as the birthplace of Rostam, the mythical hero of Ferdosi's epic poem the *Shahnameh*. There's little of great historical interest left, though a newly opened **museum** (Ferdosi St; ☎ Sat-Thu) has a small display of archaeological finds. It's housed in the old British consulate, built in 1899, east of the bazaar and opposite the Amin Hotel. Hours are flexible (ie it opens when they feel like it).

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Combined with a trip to Kuh-e Khajeh (opposite), and perhaps a brief stop at **Shahr-e Sokhta** (the Burnt City, 56km south of Zabol), Zabol makes a good day trip from Zahedan. How much company you'll have depends on the security situation at the time (see the boxed text, p325). Whatever the situation, they don't see many foreigners out here, so you'll probably stand out. Keep your best weapon – a smile – at the ready.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Amin** (☎ 222 2823; Ferdosi St; s/tw IR85,000/125,000; (P)) The family-run Amir, near the bazaar, is a good budget sleeping option. English isn't spoken (and there's no English sign) but staff is happy to help and you can use the kitchen. It's about 400m east of Imam Khomeini St, on the northern side of the street – look for the green front and a small yellow sign.

**Hotel Aram** (☎ 229 5400; Rostam Sq; r IR310,000; (P)) For more luxury, this hotel outside the terminal has squat bathrooms, TV and fridge to go with its pink interior and unmissable octagonal green-glass façade.

For food, there's the usual range of utilitarian *kababis*, pizza, barbeque chicken and sandwich joints.

### Getting There & Away

Mahan Air flies between Zabol and Tehran on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Arriving from Zahedan by bus (IR10,000, three to five hours) you'll stop at the new bus terminal, off Rostam Sq (look for the giant statue of Rostam on his trusty steed Rakhsh). Buses leave here for Mashhad (IR60,000, 12 to 15 hours) and all manner of other places, including Tehran. From Zahedan, you're far better off taking a savari (IR25,000, two hours, 216km) if you want to be back in a day.

Savaris leave from Zahedan for Zabol every half-hour or so from 50m west of the Abuzar Hotel (p327), and in our experience the drivers tend to take a disturbingly fatalistic approach to driving. You must bring your passport; if you don't bring your passport the driver won't take you. And there's a good chance you'll have a police escort the whole way.

### CROSSING THE PAKISTAN BORDER AT MIRJAVEH/TAFTAN

Crossing the border between Iran and Pakistan at Taftan is a relatively painless process – the painful part is the trip to Quetta. Getting to the border from Zahedan or Mirjaveh is simple, but be aware that Pakistan is 90 minutes ahead of Iran (or maybe just 30 minutes if Iran reinstates daylight-saving in summer), meaning the border closes at 4.30pm (Iranian time) in winter, sometimes earlier (1½ hours before sundown). The border usually opens around sunrise Iranian time (about 7am).

Travellers get preferential treatment on both sides so the whole process rarely takes longer than an hour. American travellers might have to undergo a brief but polite interview about their itinerary. People with vehicles have reported similarly smooth crossings.

To change money you will probably have to deal with one of the sharks who circle around both sides of the border. If you don't know the exchange rates you *will* be ripped off, so check them before you arrive or ask someone crossing in the other direction.

Taftan has been described, not unfairly, as hell on earth, especially in summer. On the upside, it's no worse than Zahedan and you don't need a police escort everywhere you go. Buses for Quetta (350 rupees, 617km) leave in the morning (usually before 10am) and afternoon (between about 3pm and 6pm), or whenever they fill to bursting point. If all goes according to plan the bus takes from 11 to 16 hours, so the later evening buses are best if you don't want to arrive in Quetta in the middle of the night. Readers suggest the buses waiting around the square in Taftan are better than those parked at the border itself. A Toyota taxi makes the same trip in 12 to 15 hours for 4000 rupees, or 1000 rupees a seat. From Quetta, most buses depart between 2pm and 6pm.

Coming into Iran, once the paperwork is finished a free shuttle bus will drop you at the edge of the border compound, from where you wait for a *pik-up*/minibus/savari to fill and leave for Mirjaveh or Zahedan. You'll be asked for about IR40,000 per seat in a savari to Zahedan.

If you get stuck at the border, staying in Taftan is preferable to Mirjaveh. Taftan's Tourist Hotel charges about 600 rupees a night, and another hotel costs 150 rupees.

### KUH-E KHAJEH

The flat-topped mountain that is **Kuh-e Khajeh** rises out of a wide, flat expanse of Sistan that is desolate in winter but swathed in green in spring and summer. It's then that water from the Hirmand River feeds into the lake bed to become the attractive Lake Hamun, though when we last visited only a fraction of the lake had filled. Locals blame water-intensive opium production operations upriver in Afghanistan for 'stealing' their water, and by consequence the 200 or so migratory bird species once found here.

The main attraction is the remains of an ancient town, the crumbling mud-brick dwellings stepping steeply up to the top of the mountain. The town was originally built during the Parthian era, but what remains is thought to date from Sassanid times. Wandering through the arches and squares you'll almost certainly be alone, unless it's a Friday when Zabolis like to picnic nearby. If you have a vehicle, a rough road runs up to the top of the mountain, where there are several more ancient buildings, panoramic views and a radar station; don't take any photos.

On Fridays, the minibus from Zabol runs all the way to Kuh-e Khajeh. At other times it will probably stop in Kuh-e Khajeh village and you'll have to walk the last 4km along a flat, straight road that turns into a causeway at the edge of town. You're unlikely to be

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troubled by traffic. The minibus runs every 45 minutes or so, takes about 40 minutes and leaves from Mir Hosseini St, just south of the junction with Kargar Blvd – opposite and a bit south of where the savaris from Zahedan stop. If you don't fancy Zabol, ask the savari from Zahedan to drop you at the turn-off to Kuh-e Khajeh – it's on the left about 6km south of Zabol, just before a bridge.

### MIRJAVEH

☎ 0543

Anyone travelling between Iran and Pakistan by land will pass through Mirjaveh. Locals assure us there is little that interests them in Mirjaveh, so there won't be anything to interest travellers. And they're right. There is a hotel if you're desperate, though barely anyone actually stays here. The ITTO-run **Mirjaveh Tourist Inn** (Hotel Ali; ☎ 322 2486; s/tw IR50,000/90,000; (P) (P)) was described by one reader as looking 'like a ghost hotel', it was so quiet. But it is cheap, and you will be desperate, so the room will be welcome. Overlanders can park up in the gated yard for IR40,000.

From Mirjaveh, there is always something about to go to the border or to Zahedan (bus/minibus IR6000/7500, 1½ to two hours, 96km), from where buses go to almost every major city in Iran.

### میرجاوه

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