

Western Iran

ایران غربی



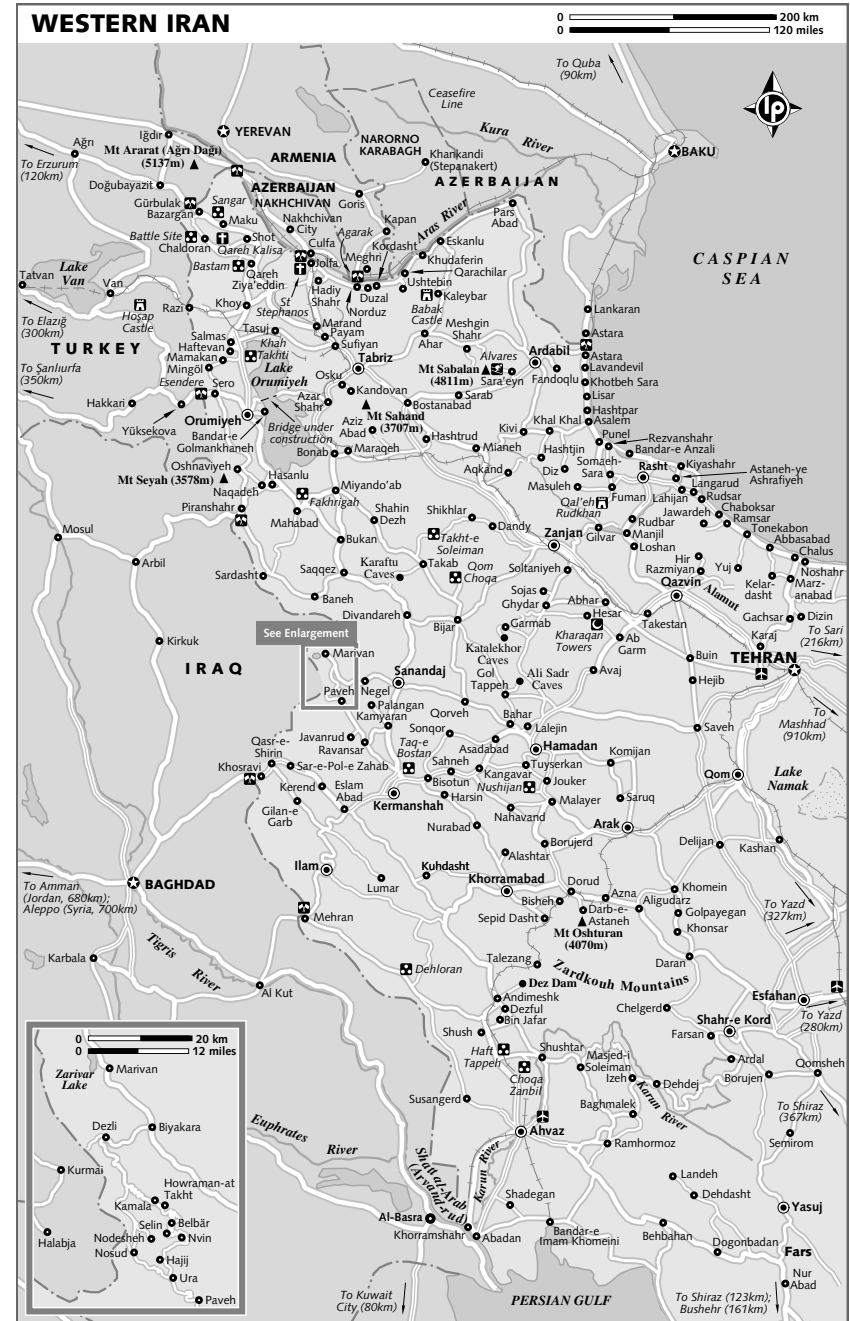
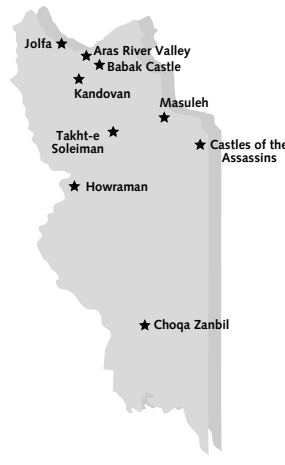
From paddy fields to blizzards to the original Garden of Eden, this region will shatter your preconceptions of Iran. Standing at the frontiers with Mesopotamia and Turkey, western Iran has witnessed many of civilisation's great empires, fortunes oscillating between trading glories and military decimation. The deeply hospitable region lacks the iconic gem-city sites of central Iran so it's often skipped by first-time Western visitors. But that makes it all the more appealing for those who relish delving a little deeper and being the 'only tourist'.

Western Iran is a linguistic and cultural patchwork: Kurds predominate in Kordestan and Kermanshah provinces; Lors in Ilam and Lorestan; Arabs inhabit southern Khuzestan; Talesh and Gilaki are the traditional languages of Gilan (the southwest Caspian hinterland); and Azaris whose language is more Turkish than Persian, predominate in the rest of the northwest. In the most remote regions, and more generally in Kurdish towns, traditional dress is still worn.

The chapter starts by the Turkish border. It loops around Lake Orumiyeh to Tabriz, continues through the Azari heartlands to Ardabil and down the Caspian coast via Rasht to Chalus. After Qazvin, Soltaniyeh and Zanjan we consider the central mountains, Kordestan and the historical cities of Kermanshah and Hamadan before descending the former 'Royal Road' towards ancient Shush, Shushtar and Choqa Zanbil.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike between flower-filled valleys and snowcapped peaks amid the ruined 12th-century **Castles of the Assassins** (p182)
- Challenge Iran's desert image in the paddy fields and forests of Gilan that lead to the delightful stepped village of **Masuleh** (p171)
- From **Jolfa** (p156) explore ancient churches, mud-walled castles and grand canyons along the biblical **Aras River Valley** (p157)
- Stagger up to **Babak Castle** (p159), the dramatic emotional heart of Azarbaijan
- Venture into **Howraman** (p194), a magical, rarely visited valley of traditional Kurdish villages
- Be awed by lonely **Choqa Zanbil's** (p215) massive, brick ziggurat which somehow managed to get 'lost' for 2500 years
- Cross sparsely populated mountainscapes from Zanjan to reach the ruins of **Takht-e Soleiman** (p187), history's foremost Zoroastrian temple complex
- Potter about between the fairy-chimney homes of **Kandovan** (p155), Iran's mini-Cappadocia



BAZARGAN

☎ 0462

Car repair yards, shops and nine cheap hotels line Bazargan's Imam St, a gun-barrel straight strip fired towards the striking silhouette of Mt Ararat. About 2km short of the immigration posts, the village ends at the outer border gate. Here the taxi/savari stand faces the basic **Hotel Jafapoor** (☎ 337 2058; Imam St; dm/tw IR20,000/40,000) whose owner is excited to show off his modest English skills and changes money. **Hotel Hamid** (☎ 337 2435; Imam St; tw IR130,000), 300m further east, is somewhat better and has bathrooms with squat toilets.

Locals pay IR10,000 to Maku but taxis ask way more from foreigners.

Ten kilometres along the Bazargan-Maku road, a muddy 2km track leads north towards Sangar past **Farhad Dameh**, a passingly interesting Urartian cave-dwelling with church-like niches and fine views of Ararat.

MAKU

☎ 0462 / pop 39,600

Boxed into a soaring rocky canyon, central Maku has a handful of minor sights and makes a sensible base for visiting the old Armenian church of Qareh Kalisa. Long a key fortress and citadel guarding the Ottoman-Persian frontier, Maku was one of many Azerbaijani khanates that gained semi-independence in the chaotic period following the death of Nadir Shah

بازرگان

in 1749. Although rejoining Iran in 1829, the khanate was only finally abolished a century later.

Orientation & Information

Shops and all hotels are within 500m of little Chahara Sq on central Imam St. **Coffee-nut Dade Pardazan** (Imam St; internet per hr IR8000; ☎ 10am-last customer) is almost opposite the Tourist Inn, 400m west. The bus terminal is 3km southeast.

Sights

The sad, crumbling remnants of Old Maku's former **citadel** lead up to the **Abu Fazl Mosque** and a series of degraded brick **fortifications** cupped beneath an impressively huge cliff overhang. Fine views justify the sweaty 25-minute hike on steps and footpaths directly north from Chahara Sq.

The celebrated but empty **Kola Ferangi** is a century-old mansion with filigree wrap-around balconies, hidden away in a ruined garden accessed through the unmarked grey gates of a clinic on Taleqani St, just north of Chahara Sq.

The attractive **Baqcheh Juq Palace Museum** (☎ 324 3719; admission IR4000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun) was originally built for the *sardar* (military governor) of Qajar Shah Muzaffar al-Din (1896-1907). Eclectically furnished rooms with colourful, quaintly tacky fruit murals are set around a wonderfully over-the-top mirror-tiled atrium. It's set in a walled orchard at the base of

appealing, tree-dappled Baqcheh Juq village whose timeless hay-topped mud houses are backed by a rugged chasm. It's 2km off the main Bazargan road, about 7km west of Chahara Sq from which yellow savaris charge IR1500.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Alvand (☎ 322 3491; Imam St; s/tw IR45,000/60,000) Just west of Chahara Sq, the Alvand is the most inviting of Maku's several cheap offerings. Rooms are well kept and management understands a little English, but the one shower has limited availability and upstairs shared toilets are out of action.

Makoo Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 322 3212; fax 322 3184; tw/ste US\$20/30, winter US\$16/24; ☎) Appealingly quiet, the Tourist Inn is a green three-storey block set well back off Imam St. Despite a little peeling paint the rooms are by far Maku's classiest option, with hot shower, squat toilet and towels. Decent if haphazard restaurant.

Getting There & Away

From the main terminal buses run to Tehran (IR65,000, three daily), Tabriz (IR12,000, four hours, six daily, last at 1.30pm), and Orumiyeh (IR12,000, 4½ hours), hourly via Khoy (IR8000) and Qareh Ziya'eddin (IR5000). Rare savaris to Bazargan (IR2500) depart from Taleqani St at Chahara Sq.

AROUND MAKU

To conveniently visit Qareh Kalisa, Chaldoran and Bastam, consider chartering a taxi from Maku then jumping out at Qareh Ziya'eddin for public transport to Khoy.

Qareh Kalisa

Splendid outside, though plain within, **Qareh Kalisa** (Black Church; admission IR3000; ☎ 24hr) is the best maintained of all Iran's medieval churches. It's alternatively known as Kalisaye Tadi (Church of St Thaddaeus) for St Thaddaeus (aka Tatavoo) who supposedly founded a church here in AD 43. Some say he came with apostle St Bartholomew, others that he was St Bartholomew. Whatever the case, Thaddaeus' preaching proved a little too successful and the jealous Armenian king reacted by killing him and massacring his 3000 converts in AD 66. In a curious twist, Armenia later became the world's first Christian nation (AD 301). Thaddaeus'

قره کلیسا

memory was revived with a chapel built here at his supposed grave in AD 371.

Mostly rebuilt after an earthquake, the smaller black-and-white-striped chapel section dates from 1319-29. The church was much restored and enlarged in 1810 when the main beige-white stone section was added. This is richly carved with saints, angels, kings and crosses, best observed from the chunky fortress-style walls that surround the church site. Ring the bell to the left of the main door if it's locked. The only Christian services are held during a brilliant three-day summer pilgrimage; dates vary and are announced shortly beforehand through the **Armenian Prelacy Office** (☎ 0411-555 3532; arctab@itm.co.ir) in Tabriz.

Qareh Kalisa is tucked behind a photographically low-rise Kurdish village, 8km off the quiet Shot-Chaldoran road. This crosses rolling arid hills that turn into bright green flower-filled meadows in spring. There's no public transport. Taxis from Maku ask IR120,000 return from Maku via Shot including waiting time.

Chaldoran

In 1514 the Ottoman forces of Selim the Grim devastatingly defeated Safavid Shah Ismail's formerly invincible Persian-Azari army at Chaldoran (Chaldiran, Chaldran). Of 27,000 Iranian soldiers a phenomenal 26,000 died, cut down by Selim's newfangled secret weapon, the cannon. The pivotal battle was followed by a scorched-earth policy that devastated agricultural settlements across much of west Azarbaijan and Kordistan, leaving the emptied land to grazing nomads for centuries to come.

Chaldoran Changi, the lonely battlefield, is commemorated by an impressive brick-domed tomb tower built in 2003. In front stands a statue of Seyid Sadraddin, the Persian army's hapless commander. It's beyond quaint Jala Ashaqi village. That's around 6km (IR10,000 by taxi) from **Siyah Cheshmeh**, a scraggy little market town, itself now officially renamed **Chaldoran**, where a predictable statue of Shah Ismail rides a rearing horse.

Savaris run infrequently between Siyah Cheshmeh and Qareh Ziya'eddin. It's better to combine Chaldoran with a taxi charter from Maku to Qareh Kalisa. Maps show a Bazargan-Chaldoran road via Kalisa Kandi, but it's slow and painfully potholed.

CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT BAZARGAN

Travelling solo, crossing here usually takes under an hour. The hill-top **immigration posts** (☎ 24hr) are 2km above Bazargan village, IR2000/1000 (plus IR1000 for bags) by shared taxi/minibus. They're just 600m from **Gürbulak** in Turkey (no facilities). The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km east in Doğubayazıt famous for its 1784 Işak Paşa palace.

Eastbound from Doğubayazıt to Gürbulak take a dolmuş (minibus; 3YTL, 25 minutes, last 5pm) from the junction of Ağrı and Sehilitik Sts, 100m east of the Karahan Petrol Ofisi station (where Ağrı dolmuşlar wait). That's about five minutes' walk from Doğubayazıt's little bus terminal and cheap hotels. Westbound buses from Doğubayazıt to Erzerum (17YTL, four hours) via Ağrı (5YTL, one hour, 20 minutes) leave at 12.30am, 3pm and 4.30pm.

Arriving in Iran during office hours you're likely to be welcomed by a charming Iranian tourist officer. The bank within the Iran-side customs building offers full rial rates for US dollars and euros. They won't change UK pounds nor Turkish lira for which you'll have to risk the scam-a-lot freelance tricksters outside or more safely ask hoteliers in Bazargan village. Beware that anywhere else in Iran except Orumiyeh, Turkish lira are effectively worthless.

Well-connected Tabriz guide-fixer **Hossein Ravaniyar** (www.iranoeverland.com; p149) is experienced at sorting out motorists' border formality problems.

Bastam & Qareh Ziya'eddin

قره ضياء الدين و بسطام

pop 24,000

Of Iran's many Urartian sites, Bastam (aka Rusai-Urutur) is probably the most impressive. That's not saying much. It's simply a steep unfenced rocky hill, but if sheer age excites you, reflect that the occasionally visible, eroded steps were probably carved into the rock around 685–645 BC. Along with slithering sheep-paths, these teeter up the edge of a precipice forming a veritable stairway to heaven. After a 30-minute scramble, the summit reveals what looks like a Bronze-Age heli-pad. There are lovely views into the valley beyond. Note that the most obvious rock-block 'walls' near the tiny settlement at the hill's base are from a 2004 reconstruction by the archaeology department.

From unexciting low-rise Qareh Ziya'eddin taxis want IR30,000 each way (15 minutes). Arrange a return ride or pay IR15,000 per hour waiting time (you'll need around 1½ hours to explore). If driving take the Chaldoran road then at the Qareh Ziya'eddin city limits turn west and continue about 6km (though the signpost says '7.5km').

Buses (IR5000) and savaris (IR12,000, 50 minutes) to Khoys are frequent from central Qareh Ziya'eddin. For Maku and Tabriz, passing transport picks up on the main Bazargan road, 3km northeast of Qareh Ziya'eddin.

KHOY

☎ 0461 / pop 179,000

Occupied since Median times, Khoys (Salt) was named for the salt mines that made it an important spur of the silk route. While not worth a lengthy detour, Khoys is more appealing than much bigger Orumiyyeh, with which it shares a long history as an important Christian centre.

Orientation & Information

At central Imam Khomeini Sq, Enqelab (east), Shari'ati (north) and Taleqani (south) Sts all intersect with commercial Imam St. This runs west to Basij Sq then continues as dreary Kuchari St to Gumsal (Kesharvaz) Sq passing several internet cafés. Unsigned but more central **Eyvan Coffeenet** (Taleqani St; internet per hr IR6000; ☎ 10am-midnight) is approximately opposite the conspicuous blue-and-white

Bank Sadarat building. Taleqani St continues south of Imam Khomeini Sq passing Valiasr Sq and the Salmas bus terminal, 2km beyond. **Bank Melli** (Enqelab St) changes money.

Sights

The huge **Motaleb Khan Mosque** (Taleqani St; admission by request) is a roofless 13th-century Ilkhanid edifice of unadorned brickwork. It claims to have the world's largest mihrab. Ask nicely and you might be shown up through passages in the super-thick walls. The entrance is hidden behind street-vendors' stalls just metres from Imam Khomeini Sq. The long **vaulted bazaar** parallels Taleqani St a short block east. It emerges into Perastori Park at the **Darvazeh Sangi**, a black-and-white stone arch with two carved lions that constitutes the last remnant of Khoys' former city wall.

The squat, stone-based cube of **St Sarkis Church** (Kalisa Sorop Serkis; Gumsal Sq) is curious if not especially beautiful, with narrow slit windows suggesting a fortified past. It supposedly dates from the 4th century, though upper brick sections were rebuilt in the 1730s. Notice carved motifs over the western door (usually locked).

The 300-year-old **Shams Tabrizi Minaret** is unique for being encrusted with protruding animal horns, though many are missing or hanging like deflated old party balloons. Named for a celebrated 13th-century dervish (see boxed text, below), it's hidden away in unpromising back alleys off 22 Bahman St, a short taxi hop northeast of Gumsal Sq.

SHAMS TABRIZI

If you find Khomeini-style Islam a little stony faced, don't be put off. Iran has produced other inspirational Muslim thinkers. One such was dervish-philosopher Shams Tabrizi whose brief relationship (1244–46) with Rumi was arguably as significant to Sufi history as Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist was to Christianity. Bravely and often with humour Shams was keen to point out that religion is not an end in itself, merely the first step in a personal journey of spiritual discovery. His *Khatesevom* is generally translated as *The Third Line*. But *The Third Path* might be more accurate, echoing the middle way of the Buddha.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Sepid (☎ 222 4234; Taleqani St; dm/tr IR20,000/60,000) Women will feel out of place in the decent-enough three- and five-bed dorms with shared clean squats. A single shared hot shower is accessed through the central kitchen.

Hotel Amir (☎ 222 3839; Valiasr St; tr IR63,000) Plants and creepers on upper stairs somewhat humanise this basic crash-pad. One shared squat toilet is designated for women. Traffic noise can be disturbing. It's halfway between the Orumiyyeh terminal and Valiasr Sq.

Khoys Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 244 0351; fax 244 0352; Enqelab St; s/tw US\$23/35) Modern yet cosy, this super-clean place has unusually well equipped rooms including minibar, excellent hot showers and even provides toilet paper. OK restaurant.

Azərbayjan (☎ 222 9800; kababs IR4000, qalyan IR5000; ☎ 8am-9pm) One of three simple *kababs* (kabab shops) on Shahid Samadzade St (parallel to Shari'ati, one block east), the Azərbaycan has a rather appealing tea-house section upstairs through unmarked rear curtains.

There are several central patisseries (Imam St) and juice bars (Shari'ati St).

Getting There & Away

Tehran–Khoys flights (IR306,000) operate on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. From 5.15am to 4.30pm Orumiyyeh-bound buses (IR7000) leave the **Salmas terminal** (Taleqani St) with Salmas savaris (IR9000, 45 minutes) departing from across the road. Use the little **Tabriz terminal** (Nasrolahi Sq), 2km northeast of centre, for Tabriz (bus/savari IR7100/30,000), Marand (savari IR15,000) and Qareh Ziya'eddin (savari IR12,000).

SALMAS

☎ 0443 / pop 75,000

Archaeologists suggest that **Gül Tappeh** (Ash Hill) once housed one of the world's first settled civilisations (7th millennium BC). Today the site is a mere muddy mound in a field 5km from Salmas accessed by a 600m-long orchard track off the lane to Keleshan village.

Known to the Medes as Zarvand, Salmas was founded as a bulwark against Babylonian incursions under Assyrian king Salmansar (Shalmanseer) III (r 859–824 BC).

Sassanid Persians staked a claim with the **Khan Takhti** royal inscription carved into a cliff 14km south of the city (facing the Sero turning on the Salmas–Orumiyyeh road).

Influenced by Armenia and Caucasian Albania, Salmas later became a major Christian centre. Although ravaged by the Turkish invasion of 1915, nearby **Haftevan** (4km south) remains a Chaldean (ie Assyrian Catholic) spiritual centre. Its archetypal 17th-century **church** is a stone cube with wobbly polygonal tower locked in a fenced garden. Ibrahim Abdinzade has the key: ask at the green-trimmed shop-house one small block further south along the main road (towards the space-ship-style silver domes of Haftevan's new mosque).

Known as Shahpur under the Pahlavis, central Salmas lost most visible remnants of its history to a massive 1930 earthquake. Today it's an unremarkable apple- and pumpkin-processing town. Mild curiosities include the 1957 **Imam Hassan Mosque** with oddly bulbous-shaped brick minarets (visible approaching the bus terminal) and a kitschy **giant teapot** in Mellat Park (en route to Haftevan).

Hotel Noor (☎ 524 5070; Imam St; tw IR120,000) has clean, acceptable rooms with shower and toilet above an old-fashioned dining room. Enter beside the pizzeria between Ferdosi and Allah Sqs. No English sign.

Long-distance services plus occasional minibuses to Khoys and Orumiyyeh use the **terminal** (Basij Mustazafin St). However, savaris to Khoys (IR9000, 45 minutes), Tabriz (IR25,000, 2½ hours) and Orumiyyeh (IR10,000, one hour) use relevant roundabouts on the new bypass road (*kamberbandi*) where passengers also jump aboard passing through-buses.

Glimpsed from the Salmas–Tabriz road, Lake Orumiyyeh appears like a distant mirage while inland arid mountains blush with minerals. Bypassed **Tasuj**, hidden amid mud-walled orchards, has an historic Jameh Mosque.

SERO

Minuscule Sero village has a terrific backdrop of mountains but is mostly handy for its border-crossing towards Van in Turkey. From the border gate, taxi to Orumiyyeh (45 minutes) should cost IR10,000/40,000 per person/car but even locals battle with bolshie drivers who want double. Walking

CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT SERO

This **border post** (🚗 8am-10.30pm, Iran time), called **Esendere** in Turkey, consists of just a few Lonely buildings on a pretty mountain road. Procedures are relatively easy for individuals but it's wise to cross early to ensure transport connections. Freelance moneychangers offer poor rates for Turkish lira (IR6300) and worse ones for US dollars (IR8000). Get better rates in Orumiyeh or (for euros-dollars) at the bank within the Iran-side customs building. The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km away in Yüksekova. **Van Erçiş** (☎ 0438-351 4193) operates a regular Yüksekova-Esendere dolmuş (minibus; YTL5, 45 minutes) till around 6pm: ignore blatantly lying denials of taxi drivers. Vangölü Turizm run Yüksekova-Van buses (YTL10, 3½ hours) approximately hourly passing the magnificent ruins of Hoşap Castle in Güzelsu village (64km before Van). In central Van, **Vangölü Turizm** (☎ 0432-216 3073; cnr Maraş & Cumhuriyet Sts) also offers a 9.30am direct bus to Orumiyeh. Turkish time is 1½ hours earlier than Iran's, half an hour in summer.

away is a risky ruse as the nearest place to get a minibus is 6km east where the scenic, if somewhat degraded road to Salmas branches north via the picturesque upper **Gonbadchay Valley, Mingöl** and **Mamakan**.

ORUMIYEH

☎ 0441 / pop 623,000

Known as Rezayeh during the Pahlavi era, Orumiyeh (Urmia, Urumiyeh) is a logical stop en route to southeastern Turkey. It's a large, deeply historic city but offers no must-see sights.

History

Bountiful orchards made Orumiyeh the historically prosperous 'Garden of Persia'. For centuries various Christian groups (Chaldeans, Armenians, Assyrians and Nestorians) lived harmoniously here alongside local Azari Muslims and a thriving Jewish community. However, in the 19th century overzealous Protestant and Catholic foreign missionary activities resulted in a harsh backlash against all non-Muslims. This was initially led by Kurdish groups fearing the possible loss of territory should a Christian-Armenian state be declared. In 1880 the Persian army stormed Orumiyeh to counterattack Kurdish nationalist leader Sheikh Ubayd Allah. Christians were massacred by both sides and orchards were devastated. In 1918 most of the Christian population fled from Orumiyeh, Salmas and Khoy, wisely fearing that invading Ottoman Turks could repeat the butchery that they had perpetrated on the Armenians of eastern Turkey. Most of those who stayed were slaughtered. Some escapee Christians returned when the Turks retreated and today six different Christian

faiths remain active. However, with a continual exodus of emigrants to the US and Scandinavia, the total non-Muslim population has dwindled to an estimated 4000 (excluding clandestine converts from Islam).

Orientation

The main commercial streets Imam Ave and Kashani St form a T at attractive Enqelab Sq. Beheshti St, unanimously known as Daneshkadeh St, continues west to Pol-e-Qoyum junction around 3km beyond the museum. Part way Ostadan St doubles back to the north through the city's most upmarket quarter.

Information

Aynet (Tarzi St; internet per hr IR6000; 🚗 9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 10am-1pm & 4.30-8pm Fri) Good internet connection here, some English spoken.

Bank Melli (Kashani St)

Jahan Moneychanger (☎ 222 2255; Atae St; 🚗 9.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Sun-Thu) Instant exchange for many currencies including Turkish lira.

Miras Ferhangi (☎ 340 7040; Daneshkadeh St; 🚗 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) West Azarbaijan's keen English-speaking tourist information office is beside the museum.

Nashrerez (Tarzi St; 🚗 8am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 8.30am-noon Fri) Small bookshop stocking excellent city maps (IR7000).

Talanet (Danesh [Kashtghar] St; per hr IR6000; 🚗 8am-11pm Sat-Thu, 10am-10pm Fri)

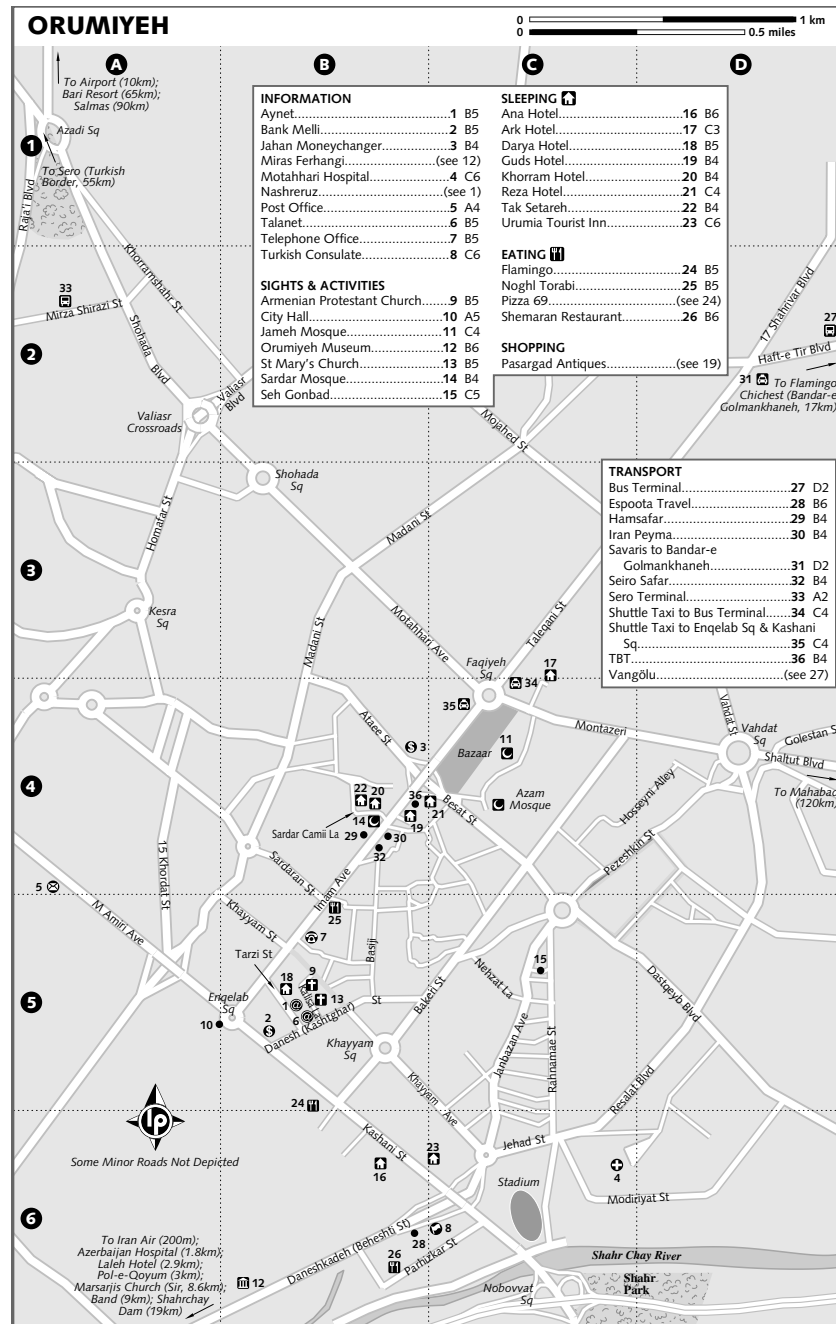
Telephone office (Imam Ave; 🚗 7am-7pm)

Turkish Consulate (☎ 222 8970; Daneshkadeh St; 🚗 9am-noon Sun-Thu) Very security-conscious.

Sights

CHURCHES

According to local Assyrian Orthodox Christians, **St Mary's** (Kalisa Neneh Mariyam; off Kalisa



Lane; ☎ 8am-4pm or on request) was founded by St Thomas on the gravesite of one of the Biblical magi, the pre-Islamic Persian priests who trotted across to Bethlehem to greet the infant Jesus, inventing Christmas presents in the process. This, they claim, makes it the world's oldest still-standing church. In fact the structure you'll see doesn't really feel that old. It still contains four antique tombstones including that of the supposed magus but his mummified body was apparently 'kidnapped' by Soviet troops during WWII and taken to Kiev.

Don't confuse old St Mary's with the new St Mary's in the same courtyard or with the Assyrian Protestant church that's visible from nearby **Khayyam Street** where Orumiyeh's youth make their nightly *passeggiata*. More atmospheric than any of these is the Assyrian Orthodox **Marsarjis Church** in the tiny hillside hamlet of **Sir** (5.6km from Pol-e-Qoyum). Despite a somewhat heavy-handed 1987 renovation, the bare stone walls of its twin cave-like chambers feel genuinely ancient. Ask for key-holder Wilson at the delightfully simple **shop-teahouse** (tea IR2000; ☎ 4-8pm Sun-Thu, 8am-8pm Fri) beside the church.

ORUMIYEH MUSEUM

Fronted by two stone rams, this small but richly endowed **museum** (☎ 224 6520; Beheshti St; admission IR3000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) displays fabulously ancient pottery and fine cuneiform inscription stones. Its most eye-catching exhibit is a replica of the priceless golden chalice found at Hasanlu (p144), beautifully embossed with charioteers.

OTHER SIGHTS

Behind the interesting **bazaar**, the large brick-domed **Jameh Mosque** (☎ by request) is partly Seljuk-era but heavily restored. The **Sardar Mosque** (Imam Ave) has a Qajar-style tri-lobed cornice, beautifully brick-vaulted interior and clock-tower minaret surmounted by what looks like a giant perfume bottle-stopper. Tucked away in a quiet mini-park, the two-storey AD 1115 **Seh Gonbad** tomb tower might have started life as a Sassanian fire temple. Police aggressively dissuade photography of the 1932 European-style **city hall** (Enqelab Sq).

Shahrchay Dam (19km from the museum) makes a popular local weekend excursion combined with *chay* (tea) at one of the riverside teahouses in **Band** (9km).

Sleeping

Guds Hotel (Mosaferkhaneh Qods; ☎ 222 2596; off Imam Ave; s/tw/tr IR60,000/90,000/120,000, with toilet tw/tr IR120,000/170,000) Clean but fairly standard mosaferkhaneh upstairs within a shopping *pasazh* (arcade).

Tak Setareh (☎ 223 1861; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw IR85,000/125,000, with TV s/tw IR100,000/150,000, with toilet tr IR175,000) Quiet, relatively well-kept *mosaferkhaneh* where you can play *nard* (a local form of backgammon) in the little lobby area.

Reza Hotel (☎ 222 6580; Besat St; s/tw/tr IR120,000/170,000/220,000; P) Large and outwardly somewhat dowdy, the Reza is nonetheless a pretty good deal and Karim, the gregarious owner, speaks great English. Neat if sometimes noisy rooms have Western loo and good hot showers with soap and towels. Recommended traveller favourite.

Ark Hotel (☎ 235 6051; off Montazeri St; s/tw US\$15/30) The vivid yellow and brown colour scheme clashes with pink towels in newly renovated rooms with bathrooms. Many cheaper *mosaferkhanehs* nearby refuse foreigners.

Khorram Hotel (☎ 222 5444; Sardar Camii Lane; s/tw IR150,000/200,000) A vaguely cosy reception area decked with plastic foliage leads to somewhat small but neatly tiled rooms with shower and toilet. Peaceful yet central.

Ana Hotel (☎ /fax 345 3314; 77 Kashani St; s/d/trw IR180,000/280,000/380,000) Rooms are fair value if somewhat less attractive than you'd expect from the rather upmarket entrance. Curiously Iranians pay 20% more than foreign tourists.

Darya Hotel (☎ 222 9562; fax 222 3451; Tarzi (Chamran) St; s/d US\$30/40) Pleasant, central and quiet, the nearly smart rooms have minibar, plastic-wooden wall-cladding and only limited wear and tear. There's birdsong and a banana palm in the welcoming foyer.

Flamingo-Chichest (☎ 436 2012; tr/apt IR300,000/450,000; P ☎) Acceptable if somewhat lacklustre accommodation in a holiday-camp-style setting, 500m back from the sand-flats of Bandar-e Golmankhaneh, 17km from town. Front-facing rooms look towards Lake Orumiyeh. Parking costs IR10,000.

Urumia Tourist Inn (Orumiyeh Grand Inn, Mehman-sara Jahangardi; ☎ 222 3080; fax 222 3202; Kashani St; s/d US\$55/80; ☎) The Tourist Inn successfully emulates a typical midrange European chain-hotel in facilities, price and anodyne could-

be-anywhere atmosphere. Comes complete with annoying Muzak in the irreproachably clean, utterly bland coffee shop.

A new five-star Laleh Hotel is currently under construction.

Eating

Flamingo (☎ 346 1177; Kashani St; meals IR40,000-75,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10pm) Justifiably considered the best city-centre restaurant, the kababs here are succulent and the salad bar is well stocked if a little pricey (IR10,000 per plateful). Décor is restrained, with solid wooden benches, lanterns and flower arrangements. Head downstairs two doors away from excellent, co-owned Pizza 69, which has a sign in English.

Shemaran Restaurant (☎ 345 9956; Parhizkar St; ☎ 8am-11pm) Predominantly for tea and qalyan (water pipe; IR10,000), this gently atmospheric sonati-style traditional restaurant is immensely popular for great lunchtime *dizi* (see boxed text, p79) and also serves limited dinners (8pm). Next door is a slightly more upmarket equivalent (Heydarbaba) and a pizzeria.

Noghl, West Azarbaijan's speciality confectionery, is made by laboriously coating nuts or fruits in layers of icing sugar using a vessel looking like a copper cement mixer. Buy it from **Noghl Torabi** (Imam Ave; ☎ 8am-10pm), which also sells fabulous carrot-and-walnut halva.

Baked potatoes (IR2000) are sold from carts around the bazaar's northeast entrance. Cake, sandwich and juice shops are dotted along Imam Ave.

Shopping

Pasargad Antiques (☎ 223 1860; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu) This shop is the most intriguing of three curio shops along Imam Ave.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Iran Air (☎ 3440520; Daneshkadeh St) flies four times daily to Tehran (IR351,000) and twice weekly to Mashhad (IR690,000). **Es-poota Travel** (☎ 345 5555; espoota@espootatravel.com; Daneshkadeh St; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) sells air and train tickets ex-Tabriz.

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

All long-distance buses leave from the **terminal** (Haft-e Tir Blvd). **TBT** (☎ 222 2844), **Seiro Safar**

(☎ 222 8399), **Hamsafar** (☎ 224 4562) and **Iran Peyma** (☎ 222 2954) have central booking offices on Imam Ave. Hamsafar and **Vangölu** (☎ 233 1333) both operate 9am services to Van, Turkey (IR120,000) taking around eight hours (expect long border waits).

Other useful domestic services :

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR100,000	19hr	11am, 3pm TBT
Ardabil	IR11,500	4hr	twice hourly, 5am-6pm
Esfahan	IR95,000	19hr	3.30pm, Iran Peyma
Kermanshah	IR30,000	11hr	6pm, 7pm TBT
	IR60,000	11hr	8pm TBT
Khoy	IR7000	2hr	hourly till 6pm Taavoni 16
Maku	IR12,000	4½hr	several Taavoni 9
Maraqeh	IR10,000	4hr	hourly till 4.30pm Taavoni 11 or 8
Sanandaj	IR25,400	10hr	7pm, Seiro Safar
Tehran (west terminal)	IR80,000	12hr	10am, 6-9pm
Tehran (Arzhanin Sq)	IR85,000	12hr	several 6-9pm Taavoni 6 or 8

Causeways almost cross Lake Orumiyeh's narrow waist. When linked by a new bridge (nearing completion), Orumiyeh-Tabriz bus travel times will radically reduce. Already Tabriz-bound savaris (IR40,000) use this short cut taking a small ferry (15 minutes, no buses) across the last unbridged section. As vehicle queues can be long, it's faster to take a savari/taxi to the *eskele* (ferry pier; IR8000/24,000, one hour), nip onto the ferry (open 7am to 10pm) as a passenger (free) and continue to Tabriz by a different savari from the far dock (IR20,000, 1½ hours). Ferry services reduce or get cancelled in windy weather.

From the **Sero terminal** (Mirza Shirazi St) minibuses run to villages of the Gonbadchay Valley, turning north 6km before the border. Taxis to Sero cost IR40,000 from outside.

Getting Around

The airport is 13km up the Salmas highway (taxi IR20,000, 20 minutes). The most useful shuttle-taxi routes run from Faqi-yeh Sq, either along Imam Ave then down Kashani St or up Taleqani St to the terminal. Savaris to Bandar-e Golmankhaneh lakeside

(IR5000, 20 minutes) leave from the corner of Valiasr and Haft-e Tir Blvds on summer weekends.

AROUND ORUMIYEH

Hasanlu

☎ 0443 / pop 400

The muddy hillock rising behind Hasanlu village was once an important Iron Age settlement that gradually developed into a fortified citadel over 4000 years. Mutilated skeletons found here suggest that the population met a barbaric end at the hands of the Urartians in the 9th century BC. Archaeologists also unearthed a famous 11th-century BC golden chalice here. But all you'll see today at the unfenced site are the wall stumps of former dwellings and storehouses (plastered for protection with straw-flecked adobe) along with a few standing stones that were probably gateways. The wide peaceful panoramas of fields and hay-topped village roofs are pleasant, but 20 minutes here is ample for most non-specialists.

The site is 7km from Naqadeh (IR20,000 return by taxi) to which minibuses run when full from Orumiyeh and Mahabad. Alternatively, if driving the Orumiyeh–Mahabad road via Mohammad Yar it's an 8km detour, the last 2km unsurfaced after Shonagar.

CROSSING THE IRAN–IRAQ BORDER

Much of Iraq is verging on civil war, with visitors risking kidnap or worse. However, conditions are less dire in the northernmost area of Iraqi Kurdistan, which has been virtually independent from Baghdad since the early 1990s. The Haj Omran border post near **Piranshahr**, southwest of Naqadeh, has twice been declared open (and later closed), but in principle you can currently get a visa on arrival here for Iraqi-Kurdistan (NOT valid for Baghdad or south Iraq). However, nothing can be taken for granted. Check the latest situation on Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum (www.lonelyplanet.com).

Borders at **Mehran** (accessed via Ilam) and **Khosravi** (via the oasis town of Qasr-e-Shirin) remain popular with bomb-dodging Iranian pilgrim buses heading for the great Shiite shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf. However, both have reportedly been down-graded to 'locals-only' crossings.

Mahabad

☎ 0442 / pop 168,000

Incredibly, this unassuming market city was once the capital of its own mini-country. The Mahabad Republic was a Soviet-inspired independent Kurdish state, but it survived only one year (1946), collapsing once the USSR patched things up with Tehran. In the 17th century, as Savajbulaq Mokri, Mahabad had been the regional capital. Kurdish cummerbunds and baggy trousers tell you this is somewhere different but the only 'sight' is a fine if over-restored **Jameh Mosque** in the ramshackle bazaar.

Extensively refurbished in 2006, the comfortable **Hotel Kohestan** (Koystan; ☎ 233 5738; Shahid Kandi; s/tw IR140,000/175,000) is halfway between the bazaar and bus terminal (900m). Minibuses and savaris leave frequently to Miyando'ab (30 minutes) and Orumiyeh (two hours). The road to Saqqez via Bukan has some great views and passes close to the Ali Sadr-style **Sahulan Water Caves** some 40km from Mahabad.

LAKE ORUMIYEH

Like the Dead Sea, huge Lake Orumiyeh (6000 sq km) is so super-salty that you just can't sink. A Unesco Biosphere Reserve since 1976, it's becoming increasingly shallow (maximum seasonal depth 16m) now that the Zarinard, a major feeder river, has been diverted to slake Tabriz's growing thirst. Some worry that the lake will soon be as dead as the Aral Sea. Currently the only life-form it supports directly is the very primitive, virtually transparent artimesia worm. But that's enough to attract plenty of seasonal migratory birds, notably flamingos (spring). And the worms are commercially harvested for fish-meal.

Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan and founder of Iran's Ilkhanid Mongol dynasty, had his treasury on **Kabudi Island** in the middle of the lake. His burial there in 1265 was accompanied by the wholesale sacrifice of virgins, as demanded by the custom of the day. Tourist access is limited to occasional one-off Friday excursions organised by ALP Tours in Tabriz (p149).

The lake's hard-to-access **eastern coastline** is starkly barren; the vivid blue waters contrast with jagged, sun-blasted rocks and parched mud-flat islands. The western coast is greener but orchards stop well short of the shore.

مه‌آباد

حسنلو

Of a few lakeside 'resorts', the most up-market is stylishly modern **Bari** (☎ 0433-322 2960; www.bari.ir; s/d US\$110/160; ☎ ☎ ☎), where water is deep enough for floating. Boat rides cost from IR80,000. It's 2km from Qush-chu village. More accessible **Bandar-e Gole-mankhaneh** is a 2km strip of mud flats 17km from Orumiyeh where local boy-racers burn Paykan rubber showing off to a crowd of summer weekenders. It's eerily lonely and atmospheric on a stormy winter's day.

MARAQEH

☎ 0421 / pop 173,000

While briefly capital of Ilkhanid Iran (from 1255), Maraqeh (Maragheh, Maraga) boasted the medieval world's greatest observatory. Here brilliant mathematician Nasruddin Tusi (Nasir al-Tusi) accurately calculated the diameter of the earth, centuries before the Western world even guessed it was round. On a windswept hill 3km northwest of town, a modern **observatory** (rasad-khana; ☎ closed to public) occupies the site where the original was destroyed during Tamerlane's ravages.

مراغه

Of several fine tomb towers scattered round town, most interesting is the square-plan **Gonbad-e Sorkh** topped by a squinch-pinched octagon. An upper window-hole is positioned such that sunlight shines directly onto the inner doorway at spring equinox. In nearby gardens, **Gonbad-e Arqala** (Arg-tomb; Khayyam St; admission free; ☎ ☎) 8am-2pm & 4-6pm, till 7.30pm summer) is an attractive, domed, stone building housing a fine collection of gravestones and pre-Islamic totems.

The lovely **Gonbad-e Kabul** (Dark Dome) is thought to be the tomb of Hulagu Khan's mum. It's attractively dotted with blue-tiled inlay but let down by its backdrop of school buildings and a shopping centre.

The squat **Gonbad-e Qaffariyeh** (Dezhban St) sits forlornly in a riverside garden with a tacky trio of concrete dolphins.

Mosaferkhaneh Tehran Noh (☎ 222 7368; Taleqani St; dm/tw/tr IR20,000/50,000/70,000, showers IR5000) is basic but survivable with hospital-style beds and bare light bulbs.

Great free maps are available to guests at the comfortable if outwardly very 1970s **Darya Hotel** (☎ 325 0304; www.darya-hotel.com, in Farsi; Shekari Blvd; s/d/ste US\$35/45/65), two minutes' walk west of the bus terminal.

To reach Tabriz choose from savari (IR25,000, 1¼ hours), bus (IR6000, 2½ hours, twice hourly) or train. For Takht-e Soleiman savari-hop via Bonab (IR2000, 25 minutes) or Miyando'ab (IR15,000, 1½ hours).

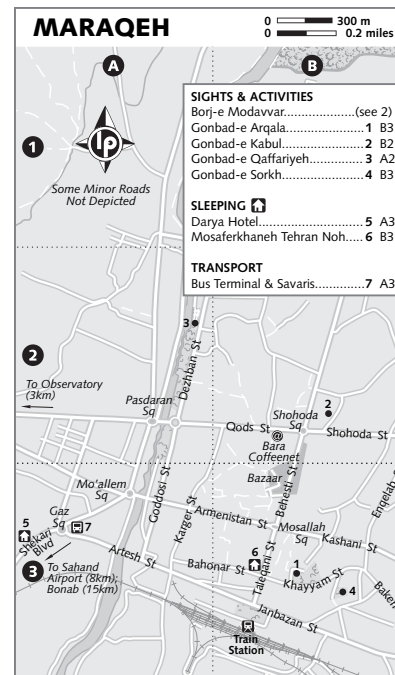
AROUND MARAQEH

Bonab

☎ 0412 / pop 72,000

Bonab is known for bicycles and atomic research (don't go snooping around its northern 'nuclear' suburbs). For tourists the main attraction is Bonab's active **Mehrabad Mosque** (Motahhari St; ☎ dawn-9pm) near the junction of Bahonar and Ghom Sts. The exterior is modest but inside are splendid wooden support columns sporting coloured, faceted capitals dated 1083. Just behind, an attractive former **hammam** (bathhouse) houses the appealing **Museum of Anthropology** (☎ 723 1033; admission free; ☎ ☎) 8am-2pm & 4-6pm, till 8pm summer) with some engaging mannequin representations of Azari life.

The surprisingly comfortable **Laleh Hotel** (☎ 726 0386; ring road; s/d/tr US\$30/35/40) has a façade like an upmarket Chinese restaurant. Rooms have leather seats, mirror-fronted desks and



Nasser Khan (☎ 553 6594, 0914 116 0149; amicodelmondo@yahoo.com) Legendary multilingual pillar of the tourist information office, Nasser often takes small groups on people-watching trips and cultural experiences. He can often get you into officially closed buildings (churches, zurkhaneh etc).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The following have English-speaking staff and offer train and plane bookings:

Afagh Gasht Travel (Map p148; ☎ 555 2250; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Sat-Thu)

Jahan Seyer Travel Agency (Map p148; ☎ 555 6004; fax 553 2331; Imam Khomeini St)

Mahnavaand Travel (Map p148; ☎ 553 9444; Tarbiat St; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-4.40pm Thu) Efficient, well-staffed, new travel and tour agency.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Passport Office (Map p147; ☎ 477 6666; Saeb St; ☎ 7.30am-1.30pm Sat-Wed, 7.30am-11.30pm Thu) Helpful for visa extensions.

Sights

BAZAAR

The magnificent, labyrinthine **covered bazaar** (Map p148) covers some 7 sq km with 24 separate caravanserais and 22 impressive *timches* (domed halls). Construction began over a millennium ago, though much of the fine brick vaulting is 15th century. Upon entering one feels like a launched pinball, bouncing around through an extraordinary colourful maze, only emerging when chance or carelessness dictates.

There are several **carpet** sections, according to knot-size and type. The spice bazaar has a few shops still selling **herbal remedies** and **natural perfumes**. A couple of **hat shops** (Bazaar Kolahdozan) sell traditional *papakhs* (Azari hats, from IR100,000) made of tight-curlled astrakhan wool. The better the quality, the younger the lamb sacrificed to the milliner's art. Other quarters specialise in gold, shoes and general household goods.

For such a huge construction, the bazaar is surprisingly easy to miss. A useful entrance is the second narrow passage east of the tourist information office. This takes you into the jewellery section.

AROUND THE BAZAAR

At the bazaar's western end an exit passage hidden by a curtain leads to Tabriz's **Jameh Mosque** (Map p148) with a magnificent brick-

vaulted interior. Beyond, an alley between two multi-stage new minarets emerges at Motahhari St opposite the heavy wooden door (no English sign) of the 1868 **Constitution House** (Mashrutiyat Museum; Map p148; ☎ 521 6454; Motahhari St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri). This charming Qajar-era courtyard house is historically significant as a headquarters during the 1906-11 constitutional revolution, but although many labels are in English the numerous photos and documents are unlikely to excite non-specialist tourists.

At the bazaar's northeast corner, the well-proportioned former Saheb Ul-Amr Mosque now houses a **Quran Museum** (Map p148; ☎ 527 2733; Madani St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Sat-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri). Its most intriguing exhibit is the scripture-covered under-shirt worn by Qajar monarchs during coronations.

BLUE (KABUD) MOSQUE مسجد کبود

Constructed in 1465, the **Blue Mosque** (Map p148; Imam Khomeini St; admission IR2000; ☎ 9am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri, earlier in winter) was among the most glorious buildings of its era. Once built, artists took a further 25 years to cover every surface with the blue majolica tiles and intricate calligraphy for which it's nicknamed. It survived one of history's worst-ever earthquakes (1727), but collapsed in a later quake (1773). Devastated Tabriz had better things to do than mend it and it lay as a pile of rubble till 1951, when reconstruction finally started. The brick superstructure is now complete, but only on the rear (main) entrance portal (which survived 1773) is there any hint of the original blue exterior. Inside is more blue with missing patterns laboriously painted onto many lower sections around the few remaining patches of original tiles.

A smaller domed chamber further from the entrance once served as a private mosque for the Qareh Koyunlu shahs. Steps lead down towards Jahan Shah's tomb chamber but access would require some minor gymnastics.

The Khaqani garden outside, honouring 12th-century Azari-Persian poet Shirvani Khaqani, is a good place to meet English-speaking students.

AZARBAYJAN MUSEUM

The **Azərbayjan Museum** (Map p148; Imam Khomeini St; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu summer, 8am-12.30pm Fri, 8am-5pm winter) is 50m

west of the Blue Mosque. Enter through a great brick portal with big wooden doors guarded by two stone rams. Ground-floor exhibits include finds from Hasanlu (p144), a superb 3000-year-old copper helmet and curious stone 'handbags' from the 3rd millennium BC. Found near Kerman these were supposedly symbols of wealth once carried by provincial treasurers. The basement features Ahad Hossein's powerful if disturbing sculptural allegories of life and war. The top floor displays a re-weave of the famous Chelsea carpet, reckoned to be one of the best ever made. The original is so-called because it was last sold on King's Rd, Chelsea, some 50 years ago, ending up in London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

ARG-E TABRIZ ارگ تبریز

This huge brick **edifice** (Map p148; off Imam Khomeini St), an unmissable landmark, is a chunky remnant of Tabriz's early-14th-century citadel (known as 'the Ark'). Criminals were once executed by being hurled from the top of the citadel walls. Far-fetched local legend tells of one woman so punished who was miraculously saved by the parachute-like effect of her chador.

Ongoing construction of a stadium-sized **Mosallah Mosque** next door is reportedly undermining the Ark's foundations and access is usually impossible.

CHURCHES

Tabriz has had a Christian community almost as long as there've been Christians. Near the bazaar, **St Mary's** (Kalisa-ye Maryam-e Moqaddas; Map p148) is a 12th-century church mentioned by Marco Polo and once the seat of the regional archbishop. Behind high gates, the curious **Anglican Church** (Map p148; Walman St) has a tower of four diminishing cylinders. The relatively central **Sarkis Church** (Kalisa-ye Sarkis-e Moqaddas; Map p148; Kalisa Alley) serves the Armenian community. It's hidden in a basketball court behind high white gates.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Central Tabriz

The 19th-century bathhouse, **Nobar Hamam** (Map p148; Imam Khomeini St), is usually locked but worth double-checking. Almost opposite, the German-designed **Municipal Hall** (Map p148; Shahr-dari Sq) is a century-old Tabriz

icon. It's only open to the public during occasional exhibitions. Follow Tabazan St down its western flank then take the second lane to the left to find the **Measurement Museum** (Sanjesh Muz; Map p148; ☎ 554 2459; admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) hidden amid very ordinary apartment blocks. The brilliantly restored 160-year-old Qajar mansion is more interesting than its display of rococo German clocks and commercial scales. Two blocks further south a trio of impressive 230-year-old mansions with two-story colonnades and decorative ponds now comprise the Architecture Faculty of the **Islamic Arts University**. Two more blocks further is the **house museum** of much-loved Tabrizi poet Ostad Shahriyar exhibiting the loveably ordinary settee and TV set that he used till his death in 1987. Shahriyar is now commemorated much more ostentatiously with the strikingly modernist **Poets' Mausoleum** (Maghbarat al-Shoara, Maqbar al-Shoara; Map p148; Seyid Hamzeh St). Its angular interlocking concrete arches are best viewed across the reflecting pool from the south. The complex also commemorates over 400 other scholars whose tombs have been lost in the city's various earthquakes. Take bus 116.

Around 350m southeast of the Poets' Monument (but with no direct road between them) is the elegant **Qajar Museum** (Amir Nezam House; Map p148; ☎ 523 6568; Farhang St, Sheshgelan; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) within the palatial 1881 Amir Nezam House, Tabriz's most impressive Qajar mansion with a split-level façade. It's oddly hidden between a school and a children's hospital.

Outer Tabriz

About 4km east of Abaresan Crossing is the wealthy if architecturally neutral **Valiasr District**. While hardly SoHo, it's the nearest Tabriz comes to an entertainment district. The city's gilded youth sip espressos around Valiasr's Karimkhan (Bozorg) Sq and make a nightly *passeggiata* along pedestrianised Shahriyar St, misleadingly nicknamed Champs Elysées. In just a few minutes here we met Iranian punks, tuft-bearded Metallica fans and even spotted a transvestite wagging his/her hips far more provocatively than any woman could dare to.

Elgoli (Shahgoli) Park, 8km southeast of the centre, is popular with summer strollers and courting couples. Its fairground surrounds

an artificial lake, in the middle of which a photogenic restaurant-pavilion occupies the reconstruction of a Qajar-era palace.

Activities

When there are sufficiently large groups, **ALP Tours & Travel Agency** (Map p147; ☎ 331 0340; fax 331 0825; Karimkhan Sq; ☞ Dec-Apr) can organise Friday skiing excursions to Mt Sahand. The cost for transport is IR50,000, lift pass (IR40,000) and ski rental (IR50,000 to IR160,000) are extra. ALP can also arrange climbing guides for Mt Sabalan (p160).

Sleeping

Summer camping is possible at designated sites, such as in Elgoli Park and near Tabriz University.

BUDGET

All rooms share communal squat toilets unless otherwise indicated.

Darya Guesthouse (Map p148; ☎ 554 0008; Mohaqgeqi St; s/tw from IR4000/6000, with bathroom IR120,000/150,000) This friendly family guesthouse has well-tended rooms in a sensibly graded variety of qualities. The tirelessly helpful owner looks uncannily like Louis de Funes and delights in retelling tales of his 1970s trips to Europe. There's a useful travellers' tip book.

Bagh Guesthouse (Map p148; ☎ 555 2762; Ferdosi St; s/d/tr IR47,000/70,000/90,000) Brighter and cleaner than most *mosafekhanehs*, rooms here are fairly small but five of the 12 have double beds, unusual at this price range.

Mahmoodi Mehmanpazir (Map p148; ☎ 554 1744; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr from IR50,000/70,000/90,000) The cheaper rooms are simple but quiet off a rear courtyard mini-garden with free communal shower. Rooms with private shower are better-painted but poorer value and suffer from road noise. Handy for the museum.

Park Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 555 1852; Imam Khomeini St; s/tw/tr IR70,000/90,000/120,000) This offers slight olde-worlde charm and there's a vine-trained rear courtyard garden. Large rooms have washbasins but somewhat tatty carpets.

Many basic *mosafekhanehs* along Ferdosi St and near Terminal Sq cater predominantly to petty traders from the ex-Soviet Caucasus. Not ideal for women travellers: **Mashhad Hotel** (Map p148; ☎ 555 8255; Ferdosi St; dm/s/tw/tr/q IR20,000/43,000/59,700/81,000/92,000; shower IR5000) Possibly the only *mosafekhaneh* allowing foreigners to use (five-bed) dormitories.

Masoud Guesthouse (Map p148; ☎ 556 6828; Mohaqgeqi St; s/tw IR40,000/56,000) Newly repainted rooms, shared squats a little whiffy. Marked 'Hello Welcom Youth Hostel'.

Hotel Delgoshay Salmas (Map p148; ☎ 554 3362; Ferdosi St; s/tw/tr from IR43,360/59,708/70,334; shower IR6000) Some rooms have washing facilities.

MIDRANGE

Morvarid Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 553 3336; Fajr Sq; s/tw IR116,130/160,341) This long-term favourite remains OK value though some of the freshly painted rooms smell a tad damp and their taste in art is a little garish. Decent bathrooms. Jebel speaks good English and doubles as driver-guide.

Qods Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 555 0898; Terminal Sq; s/tw IR130,000/200,000) Acceptable rooms with hot showers and Western loos off spanking clean but ill-lit corridors that feel soulless and slightly eerie.

Ark Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 555 1277; Ark St; s/tw with breakfast IR150,000/200,000) The are sheets on aging mattresses and there's no lift. It's named after the citadel nearby, not Noah.

Kosar Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 553 7691; fax 554 1570; info@kosarhotel.com; Imam Khomeini St; d IR160,000; ☞) Professionally upgraded historic building with well-furnished, tile-floored rooms that include satellite TV (Euronews) and fridge. Some have Western toilets and double beds. Traffic rumbles all night.

Azarbayjan Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 555 9051; fax 553 7477; Shari'ati St; s/d/tr IR170,000/242,000/302,000; ☞) A fine, central option with consistently friendly service and unpretentious but regularly renovated rooms with excellent hot showers and towels. Double-glazing reduces traffic noise.

Hotel Sina (Map p148; ☎ 556 6211; Fajr Sq; s/tw IR200,000/300,000; ☞) Calm yet central, this relatively plush midrange option has bright corridors with strip carpets over clean tiled floors. Rooms are neat and fully equipped. Enter from Felestin St. Parking is limited.

TOP END

Gostaresh Hotel (Map p147; ☎ 334 5021; fax 334 6778; Abaresan Crossing; s/tw/tr/ste US\$54/67/87/108; ☞) 'Standard' rooms are stylishly redesigned semi-suites with breast-height dividing walls between the bed and a slightly sparse sitting area. Most have kitchenette. Although several kilometres from the bazaar,

the location is handy for public transport to both Valiasr and the centre.

Hotel Elgoli (Tabriz Pars; Map p147; ☎ 380 7820; fax 380 8555; www.pars-hotels.com; Elgoli Park; s/d/ste US\$73/106/202; ☞) Three convex walls of gleaming blue glass overlook the city's favourite park, 8km from the centre. It has everything you'd expect from a top business hotel except for alcohol in the mini-bar beers. The atrium is airy and there's a revolving restaurant on top.

The new, five-star **Shahriyar Hotel** (Map p147; www.shahriyarinternationalhotel.com; Elgoli Blvd; s/d from US\$120/150) opened shortly after we had finished our research.

Eating

On winter evenings, *labu* (beets) are sold roasted or boiled from carts along Imam Khomeini St. Or try *baghla* (boiled broad beans) eaten as a snack with vinegar and *paprka* at open-air cafés around Elgoli Park.

CENTRAL AREA

There are several decent dining options around Coffeenet Deniz and nearby Shari'ati St has good juice bars. The tourist information office folks like to show you cheap local eateries nearby including part-vegetarian Arzhentin Restaurant (open for lunch only) and the delightful little Ferdosi Restaurant, a subterranean one-room vaulted cavern that's great for *dizi* (see p79) or a puff on the qalyan.

Rahnama Dairy (Map p148; Ferdosi St; snacks IR6500; ☞) 7am-9pm Sat-Thu, 7am-2pm Fri) This simple dairy-café serves unbeatable breakfasts of *must-asal* (yogurt and honey) or *khame-asal* (cream and honeycomb).

Restaurant Tatly (☎ 555 0505; Shari'ati St; pizzas IR13,000-30,000; ☞) noon-11pm) Ceilings soar to five-pointed star lamps in this renovated older building. Pizzas are typically Iranian but the *ash* (thick vegetable and noodle soup) is most hearty and excellent value (IR5000).

Honarmandan (Place of Artists; Map p148; ☎ 553 4594; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR15,000-45,000; ☞) 8am-10pm) Vaulted underground eatery with an amusing if tacky 'sculpted' centrepiece water-feature and a choice of tables or carpeted sitting platforms. Decent kababs and rich *dizi* (IR15,000).

Linette (Map p148; ☎ 555 6483; Baroun Avak St; meals IR21,000-38,000, pizzas IR13,000-27,000, coffee

IR8000-12,000; ☞) 12.30-4pm & 6.30-11pm Sat-Thu) Warm wood tones, a pseudo-Swiss wooden chimney-breast and glass-topped inset-tables create a congenial atmosphere despite the slightly cutesy Christmas theme. Try the creamy mushroom stroganoff.

Modern Tabriz Restaurant (Map p148; Imam Khomeini St; meals IR30,000-45,000; ☞) 11am-11pm) This good-value favourite serves great kababs and excellent fried trout in a large, basement dining hall that somehow finds a successful blend of olde-worlde charm, 1960s retro and idiosyncratic kitsch. Meal prices include 'service', ie salad, soft drink and delicious barley-and-barberry soup.

Kahveteria Sonati Tarbiat (Map p148; ☎ 554 8819; Tarbiat St; coffee IR5000-10,000; ☞) 9am-9pm) Cosy, gently romantic brick-vaulted café for tea and dates (IR10,000) served on porcelain featuring Qajar royalty. Women can smoke a qalyan here without incurring the stares of 40 bemused grey-beards.

VALIASR AREA

Although there's the functional **Al Mahdi tea-house** (Map p147; Amir Kabir St) and the relatively upmarket **Pars Restaurant** (Map p147; ☎ 333 0048; Homam-Tabriz St; kabab meals IR35,000-60,000; ☞) noon-4pm & 6.30-10pm) Valiasr's speciality is pizza and people-watching from coffee shops around Karimkhan Sq.

Pizza Fanoos (Map p147; ☎ 332 4700; Karimkhan Sq; pizzas IR25,000; ☞) 11am-midnight) Typically small but with attractive framed glass-art and a good view-window upstairs.

Mosbat Cafe (Map p147; ☎ 330 2977; Karimkhan Sq; espresso IR10,000; ☞) 9am-midnight) Marginally the best of Valiasr's trendy coffee shops thanks to its stylish downstairs triangular tables and wooden 'bar' seating. Upstairs is less appealing. Look for the big red-on-yellow 'Café' sign beside Haida Sandwich.

Good, similar alternatives to Mosbat include **Sharshab** (Map p147; ☎ 330 7741; espresso IR7000) just south of Karimkhan Sq and **Orki-deh** (Map p147; ☎ 331 1146; Mokhaberat St; coffee IR5000) a block east.

ABARESAN CROSSING

En route to Valiasr or Elgoli you'll usually need to change shared taxi here, but there are several fairly nice little pizza parlours of which **Abdi** (Map p147; ☎ 336 6245; 29 Bahman St; pizza IR25,000-30,000; ☞) 5-10.30pm) remains the most noteworthy, with black

décor and real flames over the doorway. Across the busy junction, **Sadaf** (Map p147; ☎ 334 5346; 29 Bahman St; meals IR22,000-45,000; ☎ noon-10pm) is an elegant family kabab restaurant serving decent *chelo morq*.

ELGOLI

Baliq (Map p147; ☎ 385 9294; Golshahr St; meals IR20,000-50,000) Fish, fish, fish. Fresh whole fish, fish kababs, fish köfte balls in the IR20,000 salad bar, fishing nets on the ceiling, little aquariums between the tables and even fish-shaped souvenir pens. Standards are excellent, the enticing décor includes log-and-rope chairs and a cave-wall trickling with water. Get off a Rahnamae-Golshahr savari (IR1000) on 35m Sina St.

Talar Bozorg Elgoli (Map p147; ☎ 380 5263; Elgoli Park; meals IR30,000) Within Elgoli's mock Qajar palace, this busy, surprisingly unpretentious family restaurant serves *Tabrizi köfte*, a local home-cooking speciality like a giant Scotch egg. Order ahead in winter.

Revolving Restaurant (Map p147; ☎ 380 7820; Hotel Elgoli, 11th fl, Elgoli Park; meals IR50,000-140,000; ☎ 7.30-11pm) A Plexiglas elevator fires you through the Hotel Elgoli's atrium like Charlie in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory for predictably great views. The basic charge of IR50,000 entitles you to raid the soup-n-salad bar. Then add main courses including steaks, sturgeon kababs and fried shrimp.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Iran Air (☎ 334 9038) has direct flights twice weekly to Istanbul (one way/return IR2,080,000/2,480,000). Kish Air and Caspian Airlines both fly weekly to Dubai (IR1,140,000). Six weekly flights weekly to Mashhad (IR638,000) use Eram Air (Sunday, Wednesday), Caspian (Monday, Thursday) and Iran Air (Tuesday, Friday). For other domestic destinations connect via Tehran (IR322,000, several daily).

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

A couple of bus companies including **Seiro Safar** (Map p148; ☎ 555 7797; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) have offices on Imam Khomeini St. Agency **Mihan Safar** (Map p148; ☎ 555 4908; Imam Khomeini St; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon Fri) pre-sells tickets for many domestic long-distance bus companies.

Main Terminal

Most long-distance buses depart from the huge, modern **main bus terminal** (Map p147; ☎ 479 6091), 3km south of centre. Between the bus lanes there's a handy **information office** (☎ 7am-8pm). Services include the following (prices are for Volvo-class except where marked *):

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR65,000	15hr	1.30pm, 4pm Kejave
Ardabil	IR11,500*	4hr	twice hourly, 5am-6pm
Esfahan	IR70,000	17hr	4-5.30pm
Kermanshah	IR65,000	12hr	6pm
Maku	IR12,900	4hr	daily
Maraqeh	IR7400	2½hr	up to four hourly
Mashhad	IR100,000	24hr	2pm, 3pm & 5pm
Qazvin	IR40,000	8hr	use Tehran bus
Rasht	IR40,000	8hr	8.30pm Gilan Tabar
Sanandaj	IR40,000	9hr	8-11am, 7pm
Shiraz	IR105,000	24hr	1.30-2pm
Tehran (west)	IR60,000	9hr	frequent till 10pm
Tehran (south)	IR60,000	9hr	Taavoni 9
Zanjan	IR18,000*	5hr	3pm Seiro Safar

Between 10pm and midnight cheaper buses to Tehran (IR50,000) leave from near the train station.

Savaris to most destinations (but not Ahar or Marand) depart from the terminal's northwest corner. Prepay at one of two ticket booths. For Orumiye savari-ferry-savari hops across Lake Orumiye (see p143) until the new bridge is finished (due 2008).

Other Terminals

Use the **Khosrowshahr terminal** (Map p148; off Fel-estin St) for Osku and thence Kandovan. Out towards the airport, the **Marand terminal** (Az-erbaijan Sq) serves Marand and Hadiyshahr (for Jolfa). Buses to Ahar (IR68000, 1½ hours) and Kaleybar (rare) use the **Ahar terminal** (Map p147; 29 Bahman St) with savaris (IR12,000 to IR14,000) waiting across the road.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Bus services to Yerevan, Armenia (IR350,000, 20 hours), Istanbul (IR300,000, 30 hours) and Baku, Azerbaijan (IR160,000, 13-17 hours) all typically leave around 10pm from outside the relevant ticket offices on Imam Khomeini Ave (Map p148).

Aram Safar (☎ 556 0597) For Baku.

Khoshrhah (☎ 556 4451)

Seiro Safar (☎ 555 7797)

However, services sometimes leave from the train station concourse, so double check.

TRAIN

Overnight trains to Tehran (13 hours) depart 5.30pm (from IR140,000) and 7.30pm (from IR52,000) running via Maraqeh (2¼ hours), Zanjan (nine hours, arriving anti-socially early) and Qazvin. The **train station** (Map p147; ☎ 444 4419; Rahohan Sq) is 5km west of central Tabriz. Shuttle taxis and city bus 111 drop off at the junction of Mellat Blvd and 22 Bahman St.

The 9am local train to Jolfa (IR5000, 3½ hours) operates Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday only.

Weekly international trains run to:

- Damascus (from IR420,000, 60 hours) 7.30am Monday; change trains in Tatvan
- Istanbul (from IR380,000, three days) 8.30am Friday
- Van, Turkey (IR124,000, nine hours) 8.30pm Wednesday, returns from Van 9.30pm Thursday

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Airport bus 136 runs from Motahhari St every 40 minutes. Taxis (with blue stripe) should cost IR15,000.

BUS & MINIBUS

City buses are relatively infrequent. Pre-buy IR250 tickets. Useful routes from the major city-bus terminal include bus 160 to the bus terminal and bus 110 to Valiasr. Several services run the length of 22 Bahman St (for the train station) including bus 111. Buses 136 (airport) and 115 (Marand terminal) leave from the west side of the bazaar. Bus 101 runs to Elgoli from near Saat Sq.

SHUTTLE TAXI

A key route runs along Imam Khomeini St from Fajr Sq to Abaresan Crossing (IR1000), but on returning diverts onto Jomhuri-e Eslami St passing the bazaar. At Abaresan Crossing, walk under the flyover to continue to Valiasr district (IR1000) or to Rahnamae (IR1000) where you'll change again for Elgoli (IR1000). For the train station start from Qonaga Sq (IR1000). To the bus terminal, shuttle taxis take Shari'ati St southbound returning via Taleqani St.

TRAM/METRO

A tram-metro system is under construction between Elgoli Park and the train station.

AROUND TABRIZ

Kandovan

☎ 0412 / pop 680

Reminiscent of Cappadocia (Turkey), remarkable **Kandovan** (Chandovan; village admission IR2500) is a photogenic settlement of troglodyte homes and storage barns carved out of curiously eroded rocks. These sit above a newer lower village like a conference of stone ice-cream cones. Scrambling along steep, narrow paths between them gives you ample idea of the place within a few minutes. However, staying overnight allows you to 'feel' the village without its crowds of local tourists.

Beyond Kandovan, smooth steep foothills mask a full view of **Mt Sahand** whose hidden volcanic summit rises to 3707m. David Rohl's book *Legend* suggests that Sahand was the Bible's 'Mountain of God'. If true that would place Kandovan slap bang in the original Garden of Eden. But today it's honey rather than apples that tempt a tasting.

OSKU

☎ 0412 / pop 24,000

En route to Kandovan you'll pass through **Osku**, famous for silk-weaving, walnuts and tight-fisted residents. In the book *In Xanadu*, William Dalrymple finally achieved his quest for an Iranian silk farm here. But while silk *kalagechi* scarves hang to dry from roof-lines above Osku's weaving workshops and are hand-stamped at the town's yellow-brick **Handicraft Cooperative** (☎ 322 0511; Farmandari St), today the raw silk is produced at **Siyah Rud** (see p157).

Osku has two old brick **mosques** and an ancient, *chinar* (giant plane tree) that divides the narrow lane leading towards Kandovan. That road weaves through walnut groves to **Ispanjan village**, where two mosques share three fine minarets. The road then continues over arid rolling hills that turn attractively grassy in spring, bypassing the silk-spinning village of **Khanemu**. Donkey traffic is as common as cars, men wear crumpled *papakh* and women appear to be wrapped in curtains.

SLEEPING & EATING

In Kandovan, several of the discordantly ordinary homes and shops at the village base

offer very basic rooms to rent (mostly May to September only). You'll usually get an unfurnished room with carpeted floor, so consider bringing a sleeping bag. All charge IR40,000 per room but standards vary. Kafe Gazakhuri Daiya is easiest to find (across the bridge from the Dairyman four-table shop-restaurant), but like most it has outside toilets and no real shower. Homestay **Jamshid** (☎ 3230016; r IR40,000) has slightly tattier rooms, but offers hot-water shower and indoor squat toilet.

Kandovan Laleh Rock Hotel (☎ 323 0191; fax 323 0190; tw/tr/ste US\$300/370/400) Like traditional Kandovan homes, the Laleh's 10 remarkable rooms have been carved out of 'fairy chimney' rock knolls. But inside they are luxurious affairs with stylish lighting, oriental-style futon-beds, underfloor heating and (in many) deep-stepped Jacuzzi as well as fully equipped bathrooms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses from central Tabriz run regularly to Osku (IR2500, 50 minutes) till around 6pm. From Osku to Kandovan (25km) taxis cost IR40,000 return plus IR15,000 per hour waiting. Minibuses are extremely rare. Direct car-tours from Tabriz (see p149) to Kandovan cost from around IR100,000 return.

Tabriz to Jolfa

SÖHRÜL CHURCH

Although smaller and less significant than Qareh Kalisa (see p137) the intriguing Söhrül Church (Söhrül Kalisa) has a unique star-hexagonal bell tower and a picturesque setting on a steep little hillock just above mud-walled Söhrül village. First built in the 6th century AD, the current brick structure is the result of a Franco-Russian rebuild in 1840, very heavily restored in 2006. Söhrül is 25km northwest of Tabriz airport. Turn off the main Tabriz-Sufiyan road beside Golzar Restaurant following the sign for Zabarlu. The last 12km is unasphalted.

PAYAM

An attractive section of the busy Marand highway 50km northwest of Tabriz passes right beside the beautiful **Abbasi Caravanserai**, slated for conversion to an inn. About 3.5km beyond is the turn-off for **Payam (Yam) ski area**.

MARAND

☎ 0491 / pop 129,000

Traditionally believed to be the burial place of Noah's mother, Marand is mostly useful as a connection point for reaching Jolfa. Transport from Tabriz and Khoy arrives at the main terminal, 1km off the southern ring road. You can continue north from there using minibuses to Hadiyshahr. But direct Jolfa savaris use Istgah Jolfa, a tiny unmarked side street, 700m north of the city centre, around 3km from the terminal. While crossing town you could visit the very historic (if heavily renovated) **Jameh Mosque** (Kashani St; ☎ 11am-5pm) and explore the curious muddy mounds and shattered spires of **Qala**, the ancient citadel.

JOLFA

☎ 0492 / pop 14,000

The original Jolfa was once a major Armenian settlement famous for its skilled artisans. So skilled, in fact, that in 1604 Shah Abbas kidnapped the entire population, whisking them off to build him a new capital at Esfahan where their descendants still live. Original Jolfa is now a busy little border town focused on Ashura Sq, a sizable roundabout directly south of the Azerbaijan immigration post. Nearby you'll find freelance moneychangers and **No Avaran Internet Club** (Vilaete-Fagih St off Ashura Sq; per hr IR6000; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu). The town has little to see in itself, but makes a good low-budget base for visiting the Church of St Stephanos (opposite), exploring the fascinating Aras River Valley or crossing into Nakhchivan or Armenia.

Sleeping & Eating

Yemekhana Hatäm (☎ 302 2828; Ashura Sq; s/tw IR30,000/50,000, tw with shower IR60,000) Survivable rooms available at the back of a popular, recently redecorated restaurant, which serves a splendid *zeshk polo ba morgh* (chicken with rice and barberries) dinner for IR20,000, including soup and drink.

Hotel Durna (☎ 302 3812; Vilaete-Fagih St; tw/tr/q IR65,900/77,900/88,000) Unsophisticated but neat, well-kept and spotlessly clean rooms share decent squat toilets and hot showers. Signed in Cyrillic, 400m east of Ashura Sq, it's a step up in quality from the similarly priced Hotel Azerbaijan almost next door.

Jolfa Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 302 4824; fax 302 4825; Eslam St; tw with/without bathroom

مرند

جولفا

US\$30/20) Jolfa's smartest option is 1km from the centre. Walk a block south from Ashura Sq then 10 minutes diagonally right at the T-junction, passing the train station en route. Some English is spoken.

Getting There & Away

Savaris gather just north of Ashura Sq for Marand (IR12,000, one hour), Hadiyshahr (Alamdard; IR1500, 15 minutes) and occasionally Tabriz (IR35,000, 2½ hours). Minibuses to Marand (IR4000, 1½ hours) run from Hadiyshahr, but not from Jolfa itself. The road to Khoy, shown on most maps, is partly mud track across almost uninhabited wilderness. It can be very hard to follow in places, but it's possible in a Paykan (IR200,000, 2¼ hours). You'll need a full-day taxi charter to do justice to the scenic Aras River road to Kaleybar.

AROUND JOLFA

West of Jolfa

Jolfa's main tourist drawcard is the very attractive Armenian **Church of St Stephanos** (Kalisa Darreh Sham; admission IR3000; ☎ dawn-dusk). The earliest surviving part of the building is 14th century. However, St Bartholomew first founded a church on the site around AD 62, a single generation after Christ. The well-preserved exterior reliefs include Armenian crosses, saints and angels. The bell tower is under reconstruction.

Tucked into a wooded glade, access is five minutes' stroll from the car park passing an ancient stone arch and 'mill' cascade. The church is 17km west of central Jolfa along the Aras valley. It's a wonderfully scenic drive especially in the golden pre-sunset light, but be careful with your camera as the river constitutes a potentially sensitive international border. On the Azerbaijani riverbank 7km west of Jolfa, a truncated **tomb stub** and **broken bridge** are all that mark the original site of ancient Jolfa (view across the Aras from near a police 'fort'). About 1km further west, as you enter a spectacular **red-rock canyon**, there's a ruined **caravanserai** (north of the road) and, 400m beyond, a cute, minuscule **Shepherd's Chapel** (south).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A taxi from Jolfa (25 minutes each way) costs around IR60,000 return with stops. A car with an English-speaking driver from Tabriz costs around IR350,000 return (p149).

CROSSING THE AZERBAIJAN (NAKHCHIVAN) BORDER AT JOLFA

Culfa, in Azerbaijan's disconnected Nakhchivan enclave, is a short walk across the Aras River from central Jolfa. Use up your rials or exchange them for Azerbaijani Manats (AZN1=US\$1.19) before leaving Iran. Note that in Azerbaijan 'one Shirvan' confusingly means AZN2.

Beware that Culfa's paranoid police assume that all foreigners are spies. Jump quickly into a taxi (AZN5, 35 minutes) or minibus (AZN1) to Nakhchivan city, which is contrastingly relaxed and cosmopolitan. From Nakhchivan city there are direct buses to Istanbul (AZN30 plus border bribes, five daily) taking around 30 hours via Igdir (AZN7).

However the enclave is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by aggressively closed Armenian borders. You'd have to fly to reach Baku (US\$100, six daily) or Ganca (US\$50, four weekly) but air tickets often sell out a week ahead.

East of Jolfa

The **Aras River** is the Bible's River Gihon. For millennia its valley formed a major thoroughfare for traders, armies and holy men. Only with the treaties of 1813 and 1828 did Russia and Persia turn it into a border line. Several mud fortifications remain from the 18th-century conflicts that led to its division. But today the tension is east-west, not north-south. Clearly visible on the Aras' north bank are ruined villages, sad signs of the still unresolved 1989-94 Armenia-Azerbaijan war. What a difference 50m makes. It's fine to drive along the south (ie Iranian) riverbank as a casual tourist (though taking photos isn't advised). Yet travelling the parallel north bank's now-severed train line would be unthinkable folly. That crosses two globally forgotten 'front lines': from Nakhchivan (Azerbaijan) to mortal enemy Armenia, on through Karabagh (Armenian-occupied Azeri territory), then back through minefields to Azerbaijan again. There's not been active fighting for over a decade, but the guard posts, bombed-out trains and barricaded tunnels add a

CROSSING THE ARMENIAN BORDER AT NORDUZ

On the Iran side, the Norduz customs yards occupy an otherwise unpopulated sweep of rural valley. Walking-distance away on the Armenian side is Agarak village. Armenian 14-day tourist visas (US\$30) or three-day transit visas (US\$20) are available at the border, but the application might take a while – annoying if you're on one of the through buses (Yerevan–Tehran via Tabriz). Hopefully, they'll wait for you. Moneychangers on the Iran side buy and sell Armenian dram (US\$1 = 307 dram) as well as dollars and rials for around 5% below bank rates. One or two taxis usually wait outside the Iranian border compound asking IR60,000 to Jolfa. From within the compound you'd pay IR20,000 more. On the Armenian side Aries Travel (☎ 374-1-220138; www.bedandbreakfast.am) coordinates pleasant homestays from 5000 dram in both Agarak and in bigger Meghri, a 15-minute, 2000-dram taxi ride away. From the Hotel Meghri near central Meghri there's a 9am minibus to Yerevan (7000 dram, nine to 11 hours) and a 7.30am bus to Kapan (1000 dram, two hours).

considerable geopolitical frisson to the Aras River Valley's great natural beauty.

Leaving Jolfa, the horizon is a gateau of red-and-white cliffs backed by snow-streaked Armenian peaks. In the middle distance is the cleft rocky beak of Nakhchivan's abrupt **Ilan Dağ** (Snake Mountain), through which Noah's Ark supposedly crashed en route to Ararat. Just beyond attractive **Marazakand**, the sinuous mud wall of **Javer Castle** rises on a rocky shoulder. Four kilometres further, the main road bypasses **Ahmadabad** village: it's worth a five-minute, 500m detour to admire its cubist array of mud-and-stone homes on a small riverside knoll. Another side road 2.5km further east leads steeply up to the popular, if somewhat overrated, **Asiyab Khurabe** spring and picnic area. The side trip is justified mainly by the valley views as you drive back down.

Siyah Rud is hardly attractive, but its farmers produce the raw silk for Khanemu's spinners and Osku's weavers (p155). Locals are happy to show you the cocoon-extraction process if you're passing through during May or June. Further east the road passes through canyons with glimpses of spiky crested ridges leading up to **Kuh-e Kamtal** (Chamtal Dagh, Tiger Mountain). Sixty kilometres from Jolfa, the canyon widens slightly at **Norduz**, the modern Irano-Armenian border terminal (see boxed text, above). Four kilometres further east, picturesque **Duzal** village rises on a hillock dominated by a distinctive **octagonal tomb tower** and Imamzadeh. Behind the next rocky bluff the road passes through the gate towers and sturdy mud-topped stone walls of the once huge **Abu Mirza** fortress (Kordasht Castle). When viewed from the east, they

frame an impressive spire of eroded rock on the Armenian side. One kilometre further east is a large, lovingly renovated **historic hammam** (Kordasht village; ☎ by request) with newly marbled floors and attractive ceiling patterns. Two kilometres further east, at the end of Kordasht village, look west for a particularly inspiring view of saw-toothed craggy ridges.

After another 25km, a side road rises steeply to the south beside a police post. This leads to **Ushtebin** (Oshtabin, Oshtobeyin) village after 5km (the last 2km un-asphalted and muddy when wet). Ushtebin has been touted by local tourist information offices as a 'new Masuleh', but virtually no visitors seem to have come, let alone any rubbish collectors. Despite the trash, the hamlet is a very picturesque huddle of stone and mud homes rising steeply in a fold of 'secret' valley famous for its white pomegranates.

The main road continues via photographically stepped village of **Qarachilar** (7km from Ushtebin junction) to **Eskanlu** (88km) where you could cut inland through nomad summer pastures to Kaleybar (opposite).

AHAR

☎ 0426 / pop 89,000

Set on high, windswept plains, Ahar is worth a 10-minute stop en route to Kaleybar to see the imposing **Sheikh Shahabdin Ahari mausoleum** (☎ 222 4310; Sheikh Shahabdin St; admission IR3000; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4pm-5.30pm). Incorporated into its front *iwan* (barrel-vaulted hall opening onto the courtyard), one of two giant exterior columns retains the original blue glaze. Inside, beyond displays of Safavid Qurans, candlesticks and *keshkul* dervish 'coconut

handbags', is an inner courtyard where the sheikh's simple black slab tomb lies behind a carved stone perimeter screen. The mausoleum lies in a park 400m south of central Ragaeei (Shahid Bajlari) St. Turn at Police Sq, northeast of which is the renovated 1906 **covered bazaar**. Around 600m east, facing the vegetable market and friendly, four-room crash-pad **Mosaferkhaneh Reza** (☎ 222 4724; Ragaeei St; s/tw IR25,000/40,000) is the savari terminal for Kaleybar (IR10,000, one hour), Meshgin Shahr (IR10,000, 1¼ hours) and Tabriz (back/front IR12,000/14,000, 1¼ hours). A block north is the small, simple but relatively comfortable **Hotel Razavi** (☎ 222 2482; Imam Khomeini St; tw IR150,000) and simple tea-house **Azizi** (Imam Khomeini St; qalyan IR1000; ☎ 7am-9pm) where craggy old grey-beards puff on some of Iran's cheapest sheeshas.

The bus terminal is 1.5km southwest of town via Basij Sq with its flag waving soldier monument.

KALEYBAR & BABAK CASTLE

کلبر و قلعه بابک

☎ 0427 / pop 17,000

Set attractively in a wide, steep-sided mountain valley, unassuming Kaleybar town makes a great starting point for random hikes and visiting nomad camps en route to the upper Aras River Valley. But by far its biggest draw is the extensive crag-top ruin of **Babak Castle** (Qal'eh Babak). Known to some as Bazz Galasi, the castle has a unique emotional resonance for Azari people as the lair of their 9th-century national hero Babak Khorramdin. Occupying a cultural position somewhere between King Arthur, Robin Hood and Yasser Arafat, Babak is celebrated for harrying the anti-Shiite Abbasid-Arab regime between 815 and 837. Beware of visiting Kaleybar during Babak's controversial 'birthday celebrations' (last week of June). While culturally fascinating, all accommodation will be packed full and authorities might suspect you of being involved in stirring up political unrest amongst the high-spirited Azari nationalists.

There are several access paths to the castle. The most popular route starts behind the seasonal Babak Hotel and takes two fairly strenuous hours with part of the route up dizzyingly steep stairways with fabulous views. Stronger vehicles can drive up an unsurfaced

track to a summer nomad camp reducing the walk to under an hour. But in winter and spring, snow and fog can render any route hazardous or completely impossible.

Sleeping & Eating

Araz Hotel (☎ 422 2290; dm/tw IR30,000/60,000; ☎) Kaleybar's cheapest option has six recently redecored rooms, mostly stuffed with four or five comfy beds sharing one shower and toilet. To find it take the second alley east of the petrol station, 300m down Mo'alleh St from the Kaleybar Grand. It looks like a private house, but hides a long banqueting hall downstairs. Staff seem curiously ill-informed and speak little Azari, let alone English.

Kaleybar Grand Hotel (☎ 422 2048; fax 422 4666; Shahr-dari Sq; s/tw/tr/stc IR50,000/100,000/150,000/300,000) Pleasant enough rooms share decent washing facilities and squat toilets, while the comparatively upmarket suites have bathrooms. There's a kitchen and communal sitting area with good views. The friendly manager speaks some English. It's on the top floor of a yellow-brick shopping centre surveying upper Mo'alleh St. Use the middle stairway. The right-hand stairs lead up one floor to the unmarked Kabir (Chabizh) Restaurant (☎ 422 4676; meals IR25,000 to IR40,000; open 12.30pm to 4pm).

Sitting on a lonely hill above Shoza-Abad hamlet, 6km from town, the basic summer-only Babak Hotel is ideally located for climbing the castle and has sweeping views from its café-restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Savaris are fairly frequent to Ahar (IR10,000, 60km, one hour). There are direct buses to Tabriz (IR12,000, three hours) at 8am and 11.30pm. Taxis want IR10,000 to IR30,000 to the castle access paths depending on which route you choose. A taxi to Jolfa along the Aras River will cost around IR350,000.

AROUND KALEYBAR

A lonely asphalt road winds 63km from Kaleybar to the tiny junction hamlet of **Eskanlu**, descending through a wonderful variety of landscapes, from bald mountain-passes to semi-desert badlands and green agricultural oases. Some 25km out of Kaleybar it passes the dramatic triple rock-topped ridge where **Avarsian Castle** once stood. This

area is particularly popular with Shahsevan nomad herders who put their tents relatively close to the road in late spring and summer. Nomad women often wear startlingly colourful flowery costumes. See the boxed text (p164) for more information.

Swing west at Eskanju and follow the Aras River (the Azerbaijan border) for 18km to reach **Khudafarin**. War-gutted since 1994, the wrecked village sits on the Azerbaijan side. Two impressive **Safavid bridges** here have been ruined much longer. Directly behind is a big, contrastingly new dam. An interesting trip continues to Jolfa (95km; p156) via Ushtebin (see p157) and Kordasht's Abu Mirza fortress (p157).

MESHGIN SHAHR

مشگین شهر

☎ 0452 / pop 57,000

Some 80km northwest of Ardabil, Meshgin Shahr is a busy market town set at the foot of Mt Sabalan's craggy north face. Climbers generally access the mountain using a 4WD as far as **Shavil** (Shabil), hiking to a shelter at around 3500m then summitting next day. ALP Tours & Travel Agency (p149) can arrange guides. If you just want mountain views, take a taxi 16km to the archaic-looking brick-box foothill village of **Mo-il** (pronounced 'meurl') for around IR50,000 return. Behind Mo-il mosque, where the road ends, very tatty hot spring pools (IR4000) are used as communal village baths. For more salubrious hot springs (IR15,000) backtrack 3km then fork west 4km to **Qeynarzheh** (Qinarjeh), a relatively modern complex in a lonely steep-cut glen. Bathing sessions alternate every 90 minutes for men (first 8.30am, last 7.30pm) and women (first 10am, last 6pm).

The foremost attraction in Meshgin Shahr itself is the cylindrical brick tomb-tower of **Sheikh Heydar Imamzadeh** (Jonubi St) tucked behind the police station (bring your passport in case of questions). The central, blue-tiled new **Amir al-Mominam Mosque** (Azadi Sq, Imam St) has golden spires like the crows' nests of a medieval galleon. Just 20 seconds' walk north from here is the town's very basic **Mosafekhaneh Baharestan** (☎ 522 8101; Ayatollah Meshkineh St; s/tw IR30,000/45,000).

Savaris to Ardabil (IR15,000, 1¼ hours) depart from **Istgah Ardabil** (☎ 522 2425; Imam St), a yard that's 300m beyond Imam Sq with its 'Allah' calligraphic centrepiece. Savaris

to Ahar (IR12,000, 1¼ hours) leave from Razmandagan Sq at the westernmost end of Imam Khomeini St, along which shuttle taxis cost IR500 per hop.

ARDABIL

اردبیل

☎ 0451 / pop 421,000

Ardabil is a logical stopping point between Tabriz and the upper Caspian coast. Ardabil's magnificent Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum is by far its greatest attraction but there's a fair scattering of other minor sights and a truly superb teahouse restaurant. When the chilly smog clears, Mt Sabalan's snow-topped peak is dramatically visible from Ardabil's Shurabil Lake. Driving to Alvares ski-slope from the nearby hot-springs resort of Sara'eyn gets you well up Sabalan's slopes for some lovely summer trekking.

Ardabil sits on a high plateau. The weather is pleasantly cool in summer, but terrifies brass monkeys in winter. Snow is probable from November.

History

A military outpost for millennia, Ardabil was declared a city around AD 470. It was capital of the Sajid dynasty Azarbayjan from AD 871 to 929, and saw independence as a khanate from 1747 to 1808. However, Ardabil is best remembered for spawning two great leaders: the Safavid patriarch and great dervish-Sufi mystic Sheikh Safi-od-Din (1253–1354), plus his later descendant Ismail Safavi. The latter expanded the clan domains so successfully that by 1502 Ismail had become Shah of all Persia. His glorious Safavid dynasty was to rule Iran for over two centuries.

Orientation

The central triangle formed by Imam Hossein, Imam Khomeini and Ali Qapu Sqs is manageable on foot. Beyond that city expands in three big concentric hoops.

Information

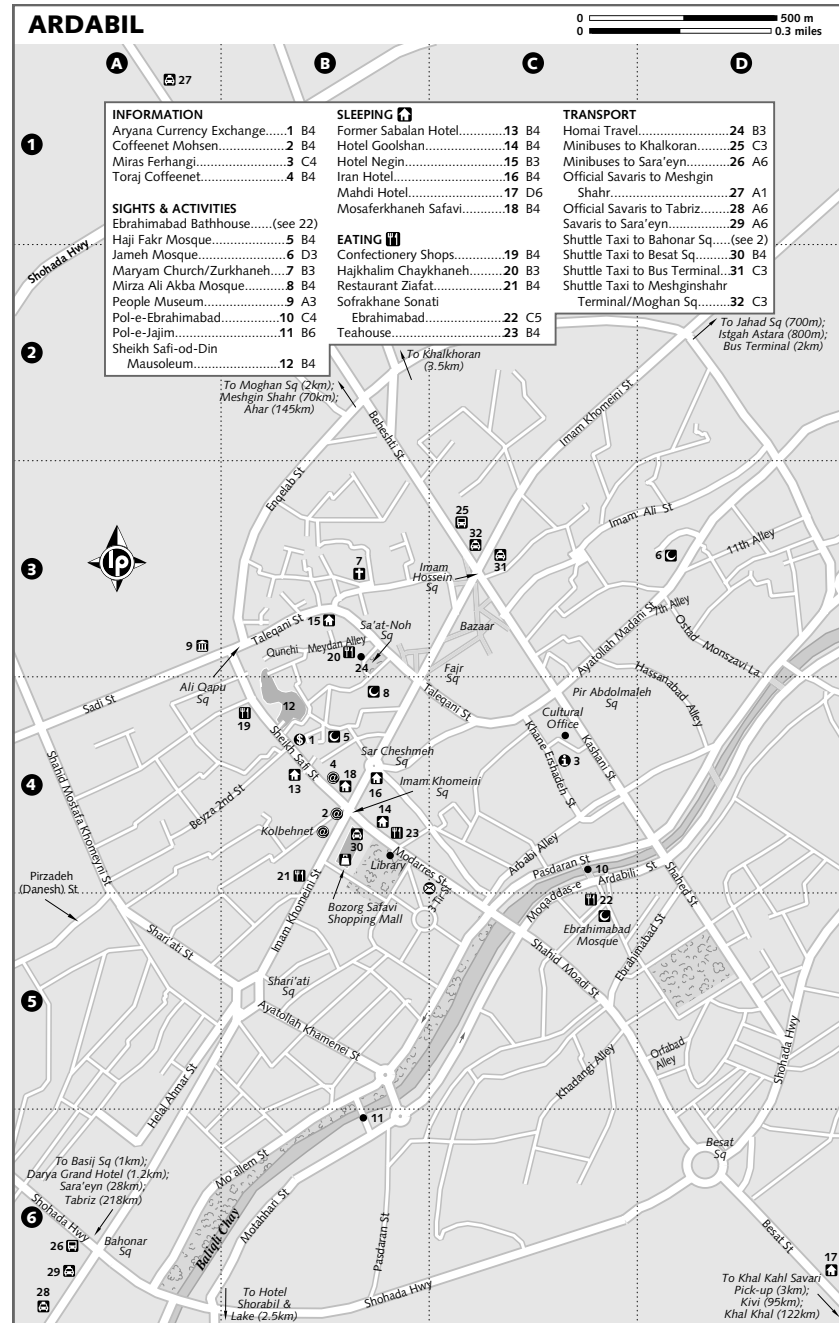
Aryana Currency Exchange (☎ 223 8747; Sheikh Safi St; ☎ 9am–2pm & 4–8pm) Changes many currencies including Azerbaijani manats.

Coffeenet Mohsen (Imam Khomeini Sq; per hr IR4000;

☎ 8am–midnight) Downstairs. The best connection of five internet places within 50m.

Miras Ferhangi (☎ 225 2708; Khane Ershadeh St;

☎ 7.30am–2pm Sat–Thu) Excellent free maps of Ardabil,



Sara'eyn and the region from a charming little brick courtyard house.

Toraj Coffeenet (Sheikh Safi St; internet per hr IR5000; ☎ 10am-midnight) Good connection.

Sights

SHEIKH SAFI-OD-DIN MAUSOLEUM

Though relatively compact, the **Safi-od-Din Mausoleum Complex** (Sheikh Safi St; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-5pm winter, 8am-noon & 3.30-7pm summer, closed Mon) is western Iran's most dazzling Safavid monument. The patriarch is buried with lesser notables in an iconic 1334 **Allah-Allah tower**, so named because the apparently geometrical motif in blue-glazed brick is actually the endlessly repeated name of God. To see the beautiful wooden sarcophagi enter through a splendid little courtyard of turquoise tiling then the **Ghandil Khaneh** (lantern house) where the intensity of gold and indigo decoration is very striking. To the left, the glorious 1612 **Chini Khaneh** (china room) is honeycombed with 'stalactite'-vaulted gilt niches originally designed to display the royal porcelain collection. Most of that was carted off to the Hermitage (St Petersburg) when Russia invaded in 1828, saving the mausoleum's staff a lot of dusting.

Much of the area around the complex is being excavated and an attractive walled garden (free entrance, access from courtyard) makes a peaceful reading refuge.

OTHER SIGHTS

Sheikh Jebra'il, Sheikh Safi-od-Din's father, is buried underneath a mildly attractive 16th-century **mausoleum** (admission by donation) at Khalkhoran, a village-suburb 3km northeast of the centre. It's an active shrine; remove your shoes before inspecting the murals and multifaceted ceiling.

Ardabil has at least five restored **Safavid bridges** across the Baliqli Chay (Fishy River). Nicknamed Yeddi Göz (Seven Eyes), the seven-span **Pol-e-Jajim** is the most famous, but the cute, three-arch **Pol-e-Ebrahimabad** is more appealing.

Stroll the back alleys to find the sweet **Haji Fakr Mosque** with its squat, Bukharan-style peppermill minaret. Nearby, the attractively brick-vaulted **Mirza Ali Akbar Mosque** (Sa'at-Noh Sq) has a blue Kufic-tiled exterior frieze and lighthouse-style minaret. The Mongol Ilkhanid **Jameh Mosque** (Shahid Madani

St) was once a truly gigantic brick edifice reputedly built on the site of a fire temple. Ravaged by centuries of earthquakes, its heftily lumpsome ruins are currently part-hidden by restorers' scaffolding. Off Taleqani St, the former **Maryam Church** has an unusual old stone pyramid as its central dome and now hosts a **zurkhaneh** (p52). The bigger **covered bazaar** is extensive and attractive, though sliced brutally in half by Imam Khomeini St. The **People Museum** (☎ 444 5885; Ali Qapu; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-8pm Thu-Tue) has rather lacklustre ethnographic displays in the partly restored Merdum She-nasi bathhouse. The **Ebrahimabad bathhouse** (Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad restaurant, opposite) is much more impressive.

Sleeping

Formerly Ardabil's traveller hub, the **Sabalan Hotel** (Sheikh Safi St) has been gutted. It might be rebuilt.

Iran Hotel (☎ 224 6644; Sar Cheshmeh Sq; s/tw/tr/q IR50,000/66,000/81,500/92,000) Mehdi's friendly welcome in partial-English can't disguise the rag-bag old rooms sharing squat toilets and grimy shower.

Mosaferkhaneh Safavi (☎ 224 0616; Sheikh Safi St; s/d/tr IR40,000/80,000/98,000) The freshest of several rock-bottom cheapies close to Imam Khomeini Sq. Some recently repainted rooms have a tap but beds are rock hard and there's no shower or English sign.

Hotel Goolshan (☎ 224 6644; Modarres St; s/tr IR80,000/100,000) Although a step up from most *mosaferkhanehs*, the Goolshan's bare, once-bright rooms are starting to look pretty tired. Shared kitchen and bathrooms.

Hotel Shorabil (☎ 551 3096; fax 551 3097; Shurabil Lakeside; s/d/tr US\$18/30/38) This relaxingly quiet, midrange place is 4km from the centre but all a-twitter with birdsong in rose gardens that lead down to an attractive recreational lake. Light-suffused rooms have good hot showers and pleasant red fabrics, though the windows could use a wash.

Mahdi Hotel (☎ 661 4011; Besat St; s/tw from IR230,000/400,000) Decent enough rooms (some with shared bathrooms) suffer road noise above a bright restaurant with striking murals. Staff are friendly but the location is rather inconvenient.

Hotel Negin (☎ 223 5671; fax 223 5674; Taleqani St; tw US\$45) Beyond a somewhat disinterested reception (no English spoken), almost-

smart corridors lead to very good rooms with full Western facilities.

Darya Grand Hotel (☎ 771 6977; Atayi St; s/d/tr/q/ste US\$35/53/66/78/105; ☎) Once considered Ardabil's best, the Darya now feels empty and forlorn. Despite some cracks in the walls it's clean enough, if lacking any real style. It's 200m east of Basij Sq.

If nothing suits in Ardabil, there's loads more accommodation in nearby Sara'eyn (p164).

Eating

Teahouse (Modarres St; ☎ 7am-3pm) An unnamed, all-male teahouse almost opposite the library does fabulous curds-and-honeycomb breakfasts (IR5000).

Hajkhalim Chaykhaneh (Qunchi Meydan Alley; tea IR500, dizi IR8000, qalyan from IR2000; ☎ 6.30am-11pm) Equally daunting for women, this place offers a very cheap, thoroughly 'real' local teahouse experience. Expect stares.

Restaurant Ziafat (☎ 224 4985; mains IR17,000-38,000; ☎ 7.30am-10.30pm) Several unexotic places for standard Iranian fare, pizzas and roast chicken are clustered along Imam Khomeini St. Of these, Ziafat is comparatively spacious with a very 1980s interior and glass-sided kitchen so you can watch chefs burning your rubbery kababs.

oSofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad (☎ 224 9588; Moadi St; mains IR25,000-60,000, tea IR3500, qalyan IR10,000) This hidden, fabulously renovated 640-year-old former *hammam* oozes atmosphere with three domed chambers each more magnificent than the last. Local speciality *pichag qeimeh* (tender lamb, diced almonds, caramelised onions and soft-boiled egg stranded with saffron) is cooked with finesse and packed with flavour, albeit in small portions. After dining retire to the central tea-chamber. Manager Sheikhlovand speaks English.

Numerous shops facing the Safi-od-Din Mausoleum sell *helva siyah* (black halva or 'pest'), a rich local speciality vaguely reminiscent of Christmas pudding. It costs around IR30,000 per kilogram but a small plateful sprinkled with coconut, grated nuts and cinnamon is plenty (IR1000). Ardabil's famous honey is sold throughout the city.

Getting There & Away

Flights to Tehran (IR315,000) leave three times daily with **Iran Air** (☎ 223 8600) and

daily with Iran Aseman. Helpful **Homai Travel** (☎ 223 3233; Sa'at-Noh Sq; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) sells air tickets and train tickets ex-Tabriz.

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

From the **main terminal** (Moqaddas-e-Ardabili St), Tehran buses (IR38,000 to IR60,000, 10 hours) leave hourly (7am to 11pm) via Astara (IR6000 to IR10,000, two hours), Rasht (IR17,000 to IR25,000, five hours) and Qazvin (IR38,000 to IR60,000, eight hours). Buses run to Tabriz (IR17,000 to IR25,000, four hours) via Sarab hourly till 3.30pm.

For Ahar make savari hops via Meshgin Shahr. Either start from **Istgah Meshgin** (☎ 333 1855; RTA Sabalan, Beheshti St), a hidden yard 200m northwest of Shohoda St, or risk casual drivers from Moghan Sq.

From different points near Bahonar Sq savaris run to Tabriz (IR50,000) and Sara'eyn (IR5000).

Savaris to Astara (back/front/whole car IR13,000/15,000/60,000, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Astara** (☎ 882 0876; Jam'e-Jam St), a small yard with a green sign 100m northeast of Jihad Sq.

Khal Khal savaris (IR12,000, 1½ hours) and rare buses depart from huge Isar Sq, 3km southeast of Besat Sq.

Getting Around

The airport is 1km off the Astara road, 11km northeast of Ardabil (IR25,000 by taxi). From Imam Khomeini Sq shuttle taxis run to Bahonar Sq (for Sara'eyn minibuses) and to Besat Sq. Khalkhoran minibuses start near Imam Hossein Sq.

AROUND ARDABIL Sara'eyn

سر عین

☎ 0452 / pop 12,000

On otherwise-lonely plains sloping gently towards mighty Mt Sabalan (4811m) sits this brash little hot-springs resort. Its mineral waters are said to cure anything from baldness to syphilis, and tacky souvenir stores overflow with Iranian miracle seekers in summer, making for great people-watching opportunities. Bathing in outdoor hot pools like **Gavmish-Goli** (admission IR6000; ☎) women 6am-1pm, men 2pm-late) is amusing in winter snow.

The modest **Alvares chair-lift** (telecabine; ☎ 222 0222; per ride IR15,000), 21km from Sara'eyn, only

operates in the ski season. But in summer Alvares still makes a great, accessible starting point for higher altitude hikes. Scenery is bracing and en route you'll probably pass Shahsevan nomads (see boxed text, right), whose flocks graze close to Sara'eyn in June, their womenfolk often dressed in pink dresses and patterned white shawls.

SLEEPING

Hotels sprout like mushrooms in Sara'eyn but many are jerry-built and decay quickly. Cheaper rooms are available above shops. Touts around the central Hydrotherapy Centre can find you a place in virtually any price range. Bargains are possible off-season.

Motel Kaveh (☎ 222 2447; Valiasr St 671; q IR100,000; (P)) Arched windows and a two-tiered terrace give the Kaveh a vaguely colonial look. Neat rooms with kitchen, shower and Western loo are excellent-value year round. It's very central in an overgrown garden (marked '096'). Owners speak German and English.

Hotel Amin (☎ 222 4290; d low/high season IR290,000/500,000) At the north edge of town, north-facing rooms have an unparalleled view towards Mt Sabalan. However, while the semi-smart tower is almost new, it's already showing signs of wear.

Laleh International (☎ 222 2750; s/d/ste with breakfast US\$80/122/256; (P) (♿)) This long-established resort hotel has neat, motel-style rooms and English-speaking staff who can arrange mountain guides for climbing the mighty Mt Sabalan.

EATING

A local speciality served from steaming cauldrons all around town is *nokhut sabzijak* (*ash-e dugh*, IR3500 per bowl). It tastes like a sort of hot tangy rice pudding with hints of rhubarb and the odd chickpea. *Fatir* (gingerbread) is also popular and honey sellers are ubiquitous.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Grindingly slow minibuses (IR2000, 40 minutes) and more frequent savaris (IR5000, 25 minutes) to Ardabil's Bahonar Sq depart from the corner of Valiasr and Imam Khomeini Sts. That's 400m west of the Hydrotherapy Centre, outside which drivers offer rides all the way to Tabriz in season. **Taxis**

(☎ 222 4888) want IR60,000 plus waiting time for a Sara'eyn–Alvares return.

Fandoqlu

Turn off the hectic, but patchily beautiful Ardabil–Astara road near Namin and follow country lanes south for 10km through fields thickly carpeted with spring flowers to reach this over-popular 'recreation zone'. If the thick mists deign to clear there should be magnificently panoramic views down towards the Caspian. No public transport.

Khal Khal

☎ 0452 / pop 41,000

A scenic alternative route from Ardabil to Rasht follows a broad valley of sparsely populated nomad territory through the almost-attractive stepped town of **Kivi** (Chivi, Giwi, Kosar) then climbs a steep-cut rocky valley to **Khal Khal**. Though rather characterless, this 4km strip-town could make a great trekking base. East of Khal Khal the road wheels through high grassy hills before tumbling down through deciduous forests to Asalem on the Caspian coast with some brilliant glimpsed views en route.

SHAHSEVAN (ELSEVAN) NOMADS

From the 17th century, various Turkic nomad tribes of Eastern Azerbaijan formed a pro-regime bulwark against foreign invaders, earning them the loose, collective name *Shahsevan* ('Shah-lovers'). However, after painful 19th-century treaties divided their traditional grazing lands between Russia and Persia, some turned to brigandry. In 1909, following the Constitutional Revolution, Shahsevan fighters sacked Ardabil – a vicious attack that eyewitnesses remembered as being far crueler than the later Soviet invasion. The Shahsevan continued their revolt until 'tamed' in 1923 by Reza Shah who bribed them with offers of considerable autonomy.

During the 20th century most Shahsevans became sedentary farmers, but some semi-nomadic groups (now officially renamed 'Elsevan') are still to be found, wintering around Parsabad then moving flocks up to summer pastures around Kaleybar and the slopes of Mt Sabalan.

فندقلو

خلخال

A lovely if tough road from Khal Khal to Aqkand zigzags across the Qizil Owzan valley where incredibly isolated, inaccessible villages cling valiantly to the distant canyon sides.

SLEEPING

Mosaferkhaneh Bastan (☎ 422 3884; dm/q IR20,000/70,000) Ultra-basic unmarked crash pad with no shower. There's no receptionist: ask for keys at the pharmacy beside Bank Tejarat opposite Coffeenet Novin, 1km west of the bus terminal.

Khal Khal Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 425 3991; s/tw/tr US\$17/20/26) Acceptable rooms with clean squat toilets have been recently redecorated, though some furniture remains ropy. Walk five minutes east of the terminal then two minutes up an unlikely mud track where the dual carriage-way ends.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The terminal is beside an amusingly purposeless pedestrian overpass. TBT buses run to Ardabil (IR6500, two hours) at 6am, 7am and 4pm and to Rasht (IR20,000) at 8am and 5.30pm. From outside, savaris run to Ardabil (back/front IR20,000/23,000, 1½ hours) and to Asalem (IR17,000, 1¼ hours) for Rasht connections. There's a handy taxi agency (☎ 425 3070) beside the terminal.

ASTARA

☎ 0182 / pop 35,000

Astara has a wide but litter-strewn beach (Sahel Darya) and could make a base to visit the forested Talesh mountain hinterlands, but most travellers head straight on to Ardabil, Rasht or Azerbaijan.

If arriving from Azerbaijan walk directly south (150m) from the border post to find Hakim Nezami St for midrange accommodation, such as **Belal Hotel** (☎ 521 5586; Mo'alleh Sq; s/d/tr IR148,000/218,000/270,000) with an English-speaking manager and relatively pleasant en suite rooms off somewhat scrappy corridors. Or walk 400m west to Shahr-dari Sq for **Mehmanpazir Aseman** (☎ 522 2300; off Shahr-dari Sq; tw with/without shower IR60,000/50,000), a bearable if typically male-dominated *mosaferkhaneh* with shared toilets. It's marked 'Asiman Mehmanxanasi' and accessed via a clothing *passaj* beside Bank Melli (no exchange). The international-standard **Espin**

آستارا

Hotel (☎ 525 2700; www.espinashotel.com; Rasht Hwy; s/d/ste US\$90/110/160; (P) (♿)), 8km south of here, sits beside an attractive mountain-backed lake where you can rent jet skis. That's 5km beyond the **terminal** (Imam Khomeini St) with buses to Tehran (IR50,000), Tabriz (IR30,000, six hours, 3pm), Rasht (IR30,000, 10am and 1pm) and Qazvin (IR50,000, 4pm). More frequent through buses plus convenient savaris to Rasht (IR40,000, 2½ hours) and Ardabil (IR15,000, 1½ hours) pick up around massive Laleh (Shohoda Qomran) Sq, 200m further south.

ASTARA TO RASHT

Between Astara and Rezvanshahr several relatively unspoilt sections of Caspian hinterland offer attractive views of rice paddies (notably at **Lavandevil**, **Khotbeh Sara** and **Sust**). There's some lovely woodland behind **Asalem** (change savaris here for Khal Khal). Most accessible of the region's castle ruins is the cute little **Dezhe Sasal Fortress** (Qal'eh Lisar; Salsal St), which crowns a petite wooded knoll at the southern end of **Lisar** town, just five minutes' walk off the main highway. Its gate arch is intact and offers sea views, though the rest of the site is fenced off.

Little **Hashtpar** is often referred to as 'Talesh', somewhat confusing as Talesh is also the name of the region and its people. Behind Hashtpar's charioteer statue in the central square is an attractive Qajar-era octagonal pavilion, but since it's used by revolutionary guards, photography is unwise.

RASHT

☎ 0131 / pop 618,000

Rapidly expanding Rasht is the capital of Gilan province and by far the largest city of the Shomal (Caspian littoral) region. Gilan has had extended periods of independence and the lispily local Gilaki dialect remains noticeably distinct from Farsi, its reversed adjective-noun order causing much amusement for other Iranians.

Although 15km inland, Rasht is a popular weekend and holiday destination for Tehranis, for whom the greatest attraction is its 'refreshing' climate (ie lots of rain). It's mildly amusing to watch local tourists driving with arms outstretched to feel the drops. But year-round downpours and steaming summer humidity don't otherwise appeal to most foreign tourists.

رشت

INTERNET ACCESS**E-Gil** (☎ 323 1306; Namju Blvd; per hr IR6000;

☎ 10am-9pm)

Ghamoos Rayane Coffeenet (☎ 2235970; Passaj Nefis, A'l'am-ol Hoda St; per hr IR4500; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu) Fast connection, friendly people but hidden away on the 4th floor (take the lift from the *pasazh* beside Bank Tejarat).**PM Coffeenet** (Taleqani St; per hr IR6000;

☎ 10am-9pm) Graffiti-cool interior with separate women's room.

Soheil (A'l'am-ol Hoda St; per hr IR5000; ☎ 10am-10pm) Enter from alley behind.**MONEY****Mehrpouya Currency Exchange** (☎ 222 7826; Sa'di Alley; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4.30-8pm Sat-Thu)**Vase Exchange** (☎ 224 0597; Moravid Close, 1st fl; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Sat-Wed, 9.30am-1.30pm Thu) Free chockeys while you change money. Good rates.**POST**

There's a central post office on Shahrdari Sq but for parcel service use the main post office (Bentolhoda St) just off Golsar Ave in Golsar.

TELEPHONE**Central telephone office** (Shahrdari Sq; ☎ 8am-8pm) Domestic calls only.**International telephone office** (Taleqani St; ☎ 8am-9pm Sat-Thu)**TOURIST INFORMATION****Gilan Miras Ferhangi** (☎ 775 4664; Ehtesab Alley off Sabz Sq; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) Historic brick building and attractive garden hosts the tourist information office.**TOURS****Hassan Mohit** (☎ 0911 136 7796; www.aryantour.com) This delightfully personable English-speaking driver-guide has a refreshingly easy-going manner. Daily rates range from US\$130/50 with/without car. Hassan can provide scrumptious family meals and homestay beds at Titi ('blossom') Cottage in the semi-rural village of Ebrahim Sara (25km east of Rasht).**VISA EXTENSIONS****Police headquarters** (☎ 218 3481; room 8, 1st fl, Shohada Sq; ☎ 8am-1.30pm Sat-Thu) To extend your visa, apply before 10am. Pay IR100,000 to the specific Bank Mellî (cnr 22 Bahman and 17 Shahrvâr Sts), return with the receipt and pay a further IR2500 to a uniformed officer. Processing takes about three hours.**Sights**The **Shahrdari** (Municipality Bldg; Shahrdari Sq) is Rasht's most identifiable landmark, its colonial style tempered by a token mini-dome topping a distinctive whitewashed tower. It looks great when floodlit at night. Palm trees admire the interplay of fountains in the square opposite. The central **horseman statue** (Shohada Sq) is Kuchuk Khan, the Jangali leader of 'Soviet Iran' (p166). A steady flow of well-wishers visit his **mausoleum** (Manzariyeh St), sheltered by a contemporary brick gazebo with intricate wooden roof.**Rasht Museum** (Taleqani St; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Tue-Sun, 9am-1pm Fri) is small, but well presented in a 1930s house. Its mannequin displays illustrate Gilaki lifestyle, amid a selection of 3000-year-old terracotta *riton* drinking horns in the shape of bulls, rams and deer. Supping from such vessels supposedly endowed the drinker with the powers and skills of the animal depicted.Cute little **Dana-ye Ali Shrine** (middle of Taleqani St) is topped with a faceted pyramid of blue tiling.Supposedly 'typical' thatched-roof **Gilani cottages** with upper wooden balustrades are shown in many brochures, but are very rare in situ. One-such has been dismantled and moved to a traffic island in Shahid Ansari Blvd (behind a drive-in burger takeaway) and is now used as a tourist information outpost. Many more are being reassembled in the excellent **Gilan Rural Heritage Museum** (☎ 323 9490; admission IR3000; ☎ 9am-dusk Thu-Fri) 18km south of Rasht (2km off the Qazvin highway). Six full homesteads complete with rice barns are already 'active' in 150 hectares of woodland. On open days, local crafts (thatching, mat-making, cloth-weaving) are displayed and there are tight-rope walking mini-shows. Houses display local tools left lying around as though the owners had just nipped out to the pub.**Sleeping**

There are many options, but occupancy is high in peak summer season (May to September) when overwhelming humidity makes air-con virtually essential.

BUDGET**Sedaghat Guesthouse** (☎ 223 6088; Shari'ati St, upstairs; s/tw/tr IR47,000/62,500/75,000) Rooms are better than the grimy entrance stairs suggest. Singles are claustrophobically small, but worn twins are passable.**Hotel Fars** (☎ 222 5257; Sa'di Lane; tw/tr/q IR70,000/80,000/90,000) Set back from the main road, the basic Fars is quieter and marginally cleaner than the average *mehmanpazir*, but charges double if you check in before 2pm.**Caravan Hotel** (☎ 222 2612; Shahid Mehrban Lane; s/d/tr IR80,000/90,000/100,000) and **Hotel Bahar** (☎ / fax 222 1350; Imam Khomeini Blvd; tw/tr IR75,000/90,000) both occupy once-attractive but now slightly ragged buildings with high ceilings. Readers report spotting wildlife in the shared bathrooms.**Mehmanpazir Kenareh** (☎ 222 2412; Ferdosi Alley off Shari'ati St; s/tw/tr IR70,000/100,000/120,000) By far the most appealing of the central cheapies, this relatively new place has sparkling white-tiled floors, reliably changed sheets and its off-road location means it's reasonably quiet. No English sign.**MIDRANGE & TOP END****Hotel Keyvan** (☎ 222 2979; Imam Khomeini Blvd; tw with breakfast IR180,000; ☎) Choose your room carefully. Some are good value: well air-conditioned and recently redecorated, albeit with a few rough edges. Others (same price!) are very ragged fan-only boxes, albeit with toilet and hot shower.**Hotel Ordibesht** (☎ 222 9210; fax 222 2221; tw US\$30; ☎ ☎) Delightful staff and loveably dated décor behind concrete Corinthian columns make up for a slight mustiness in some of the rooms. Set well back off Shahrdari Sq, it manages to be splendidly central yet very quiet.**Hotel Pamchal** (☎ 660 3031; 15 Khordad St; d/ste IR540,000/700,000; ☎) Attractively rebuilt rooms with designer armchairs and pot plants. The orange globe-lamps are stylish if somewhat too dim. Good big bathrooms have Western toilets.**Kadus Hotel** (☎ 322 3075; cadus_hotel@yahoo.com; Azadi Blvd; s/d/tr/ste US\$60/80/90/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) A full-blown refit has cleverly used contemporary-retro touches to bring alive the Kadus' 1970s architecture. Rooms have trendy faux-antique basins, Western loos and brightly tasteful décor.**Eating**

For cheap desserts, nuts and snacks there are stalls around the bazaar. Many cheap kabab barbecues appear at night on Imam Khomeini St and Toshiba Sq.

Kumeh (☎ 322 6579; Hafez St; kababs IR10,000-22,000; ☎ 11am-2pm & 5.30-11pm) The most

interesting of a huddle of restaurants in the Park-e-Shahr area, Kumeh has Irano-Hawaiian covered dining platforms outside. Inside is more standard but sharing a post-prandial qalyan here is an ideal way to meet friendly regulars.

Saeed Coffee Shop (☎ 323 4298; Azadi Blvd; coffees IR10,000-17,000, sandwiches IR20,000-25,000; ☎ 11am-11pm) Gently stylish café serving good strong espressos. There's a billiard hall and decent pizzeria in the same block.**Kourosh** (☎ 222 8299; Gilantur Lane; meals IR30,000-50,000; ☎ 11am-4pm & 6.30-11pm) Kourosh wins no prizes for décor but offers numerous typical Gilani dishes including dill-rich *bagilah qotoq* (p170), *zeitun parvarden* (olives in walnut paste) and garlic mast. On a good day the *mirza ghasemi* (mashed eggplant, squash, garlic, tomato and egg, served with bread or rice) can be superb but the *fesenjun* (chicken with walnuts) is rather tart.**Bijan's** (☎ 424 5260, 0911-131 2588; bijan.nabi@yahoo.com; Gaz Sq, Namju Blvd; meals IR40,000-70,000; ☎ dusk-11pm Sat-Thu) Soft Mediterranean music, sepia photos and displays of olive-oil bottles create a delightful atmosphere in this very un-Iranian Italian bistro where talented chef Bijan (trained in Sheffield rather than Sorrento) turns out scrumptious pastas served with huge bowls of Parmesan.**Restaurant Tak** (☎ 323 2147; Azadi Blvd; meals IR45,000-90,000; ☎ 11.30am-4pm & 7-10.30pm) Three floors of comparatively upmarket dining with Gilani options including *torshe tareh*, a citrusy dish of local sorrel and egg.**GOLSAR DISTRICT****BFC** (Golsar Ave at 100th St; chicken dinner IR17,000; ☎ 10am-3pm & 5.30pm-midnight) An amusingly blatant Kentucky takeoff.**Babak** (Golsar Ave at 102nd St; cappuccino IR20,000; ☎ 10am-midnight) A stylish green, cream and chrome coffee-bar serving sundaes and shakes.**Boof** (Golsar Ave at 104th St; burgers IR20,000-28,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 5.30-11.30pm) This big, fast-food outlet has a grey-and-neon battleship interior and is worth visiting if only for the futuristic titanium column sinks in the toilets.**Pizza Pizza** (Gilan Blvd at 149th St; pizzas IR40,000-70,000; ☎ 6.30-midnight) Comparatively pricey but unusual in having female wait-staff and a children's play area. Order downstairs; menu in English.

Shopping

Farahmand (Imam Khomeini Blvd; ☎ 9.30am-9pm Sat-Thu) Souvenirs ranging from Gilaki wooden spoons to amusing wicker frogs are sold at Farahmand.

Cadeau (Imam Khomeini Blvd; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 6.30-9.30pm Sat-Thu) Nearby Cadeau sells plenty of canework and the odd briar pipe.

Nafis (☎ 772 7308; Bastani Shoar Sq; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4-10pm) If you're looking for more upmarket inlay boxes, this is the place.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Iran Air (☎ 772 4444; Golsar Ave; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri) flies twice weekly to Mashhad (IR497,000). **Iran Aseman** (☎ 775 9594; Rasht airport) flies to Shiraz (IR501,000, Saturday) and Bandar Abbas (IR682,000, twice weekly). Both airlines fly at least daily to Tehran (IR315,000).

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

The main bus terminal is 300m northeast of Gil Sq, itself 2km south of 'Toshiba' (Mosallah) Sq. Several bus companies have handy central booking offices. **TBT** (☎ 222 3520; Sa'di St) serves most destinations (prices are for *mahmooly*/Volvo):

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR42,000	18hr	11am, 2.30pm
Esfahan	IR60,000	12hr	6pm
Gorgan	IR22,000/ 40,000	8hr	hourly 7am-2pm & 7-10pm
Hamadan	IR19,000 (Merc)	9hr	9am, 11am, 6pm
Mashhad	IR47,000/ 80,000	16hr	2.30pm
Tabriz	IR40,000	10hr	4-8pm
Tehran	IR30,000	5hr	frequent

Savaris to Tehran leave from five different points along Imam Khomeini St. Informal Tehran and Qazvin savaris pick up at Toshiba and Gil Sqs.

Many buses to Ardabil (IR25,000 to IR40,000, five hours) via Astara start from Tehran and pick up at **Istgah Anzali** (Valiasr Sq).

Savaris to Astara (IR40,000, 2½ hours) and Asalem (change for Khal Khal) start at **Pol-e Busar** (Sa'di St).

For Bandar-e Anzali, savaris pick up on a lane off Sa'di St behind the Armenian church.

CUT THE CAVIAR – GILAN CUISINE

The Caspian Sea produces 95% of the world's caviar. But don't count on seeing any. Iran's caviar is virtually all for export. In fact, Gilan's cuisine largely ignores the sea and focuses on the local wealth of fruit, nuts, olives and vegetables. Typical dishes are packed with garlic and turmeric, rather shocking for the sensitive taste buds of central Iranian tourists. *Sirabi* is essentially fried garlic leaves with egg, *shami Rashti* are deep-fried lentil-and-meat patties, *baghlah qotoq* are dill-and-garlic-flavoured broad beans, while *anarbij* (meatballs in walnut and pomegranate sauce) is a variant of *fes-enjun*. Easier to find than any of the above is *mirza ghasemi*, a vegetarian marvel of mashed aubergine, squash, garlic and egg. Although often listed as a starter it makes a delicious meal of its own when served with rice.

Informal Lahijan savaris pick up on Shari'ati St, but the official Lahijan terminal is 500m east of Janbazan Sq hidden opposite a Saipa showroom. Durations will vary widely according to traffic conditions, but prices for minibuses/savaris are Lahijan IR2000/6000, Ramsar IR6000/25,000 and Chalus IR11,500/35,000.

For Fuman, and thence Masuleh, savaris/minibuses (IR1500/5000) depart from Yaksazi Sq (Shohaday Gomnam Sq).

Getting Around

Many shuttle-taxi routes run the length of Imam Khomeini Blvd from Shohada Sq, or along Shohada St to the Lahijan terminal. Northbound, many shuttle taxis go up Sa'di St via Shahid Ansari Sq, where some swing left up to Golsar, others continuing to Valiasr Sq (Istgah Anzali). These return southbound down Takhti St.

AROUND RASHT

Bandar-e Anzali

☎ 0181 / pop 113,000

Now Iran's foremost Caspian port city, Bandar-e Anzali's development began in the late 19th century when Enzeli village was selected as a harbour for the Russian Caspian & Mercury Mail-Steamship Company. In 1918 this 'infamous malarial hellhole of

بندر انزلی

barely 4000 souls' was the launching pad for 'Dunsterforce', Britain's secret WWI army that launched a futile attempt to prevent Baku's Azerbaijani oilfields from falling to the Turks.

Amid modern Anzali's 10km-long sprawl, just two short, ragged blocks around central Imam Khomeini Sq retain any of the once-beautiful **Russian house façades**. A block east then north of Khomeini Sq is a leafy waterside promenade lined with teahouses. From here it's possible to rent scarily fast speedboats (around IR400,000 per hour) to go bird-watching amid the reeds and waterlilies (*nenufar*) of the world's largest fresh(ish), water **lagoon**. The historic lighthouse, converted into a **clocktower**, looks good when floodlit at night.

About 900m south of Khomeini Sq, don't miss the **Martial Museum** (Kakh Moze; ☎ 421 0067; admission Iranian/foreigner IR3000/10,000; ☎ 8am-12.30pm & 3-6pm). It exhibits guns, model ships and the conjectured uniform of a Persepolis-era soldier (looking more like the costume for a hippy toga party). But the real fascination is the splendid setting, a classically styled mansion-palace with sweeping stairways that was once Reza Shah's Caspian getaway. The surrounding garden, full of armoured vehicles, backs onto the harbour area.

Bandar-e Anzali's most appealing hotel, the **Ancient Golsang** (☎ 424 5256; Imam Khomeini Sq; s/tw/tr IR80,000/150,000/200,000), is a 1912 brick building in the form of stepped triangle. Paint is chipping off the antique wooden-framed windows, but rooms are clean and have bathrooms. Staff are friendly if a little eccentric and the restaurant serves a heavenly *mirza ghasemi* (opposite).

Direct savaris (IR5000, 30 minutes) link Imam Khomeini Sq with central Rasht (Sa'di St or Shahrdari Sq). Don't bother with inconvenient minibuses.

Fuman

☎ 0132 / pop 36,000

Gilan's main attractions are wooded hinterland villages accessed via Fuman. Formerly known as Dar-al-Emareh, and once capital of Gilan, Fuman itself is a leafy junction town 25km west of Rasht, its boulevards lined with date palms, plane trees and numerous rather tacky plaster-cast statues. The mountains on its southwest horizon stay snow-topped well into April, though

فومن

it's often too hazy to see them. Fuman is the most famous place to buy *klucheh fuman*, typical Gilan cookies filled with walnut paste, available hot from the oven at several bakeries around town. Savaris to Rasht leave from a bizarrely hidden yard at the northeastern edge of town. West of the bazaar at Velayat Faghi Sq, the roads to Masuleh (Blvd Imamzadeh Mirza) and to Qal'eh Rudkhan divide; savaris to either leave from 400m up each respective road.

Masuleh

☎ 0132 / pop 1500

At least a millennium old, Masuleh is one of Iran's most beautiful villages. Rising through mist-draped forests, earth-coloured houses climb a cupped mountainside so steeply that the roof of one forms the pathway for the next. In summer, day-tripping local tourists merrily fill its appealing tea-terraces, seek out its two minuscule museums and peruse the tiny bazaar's trinket and halva shops. To avoid the coach-tour hordes, stay overnight, hike the surrounding mountains or visit in winter when cold and snow mean you'll often get the place virtually to yourself.

SLEEPING & EATING

Many villagers rent out rooms (double from IR80,000), which makes for a great way to experience a taste of rural Gilan.

Mehran Hotel (Mehran Suites; ☎ 757 2096; apt IR100,000-200,000) At the back of the village, rooms here are great value with bathrooms, kitchenettes, up to six beds and terraces with photo-perfect village views.

Mehmanpazir Navid (☎ 757 2288, 0911-239 6459; apt IR150,000-250,000) Nearer the bazaar, this place also has surprisingly sizable rooms with fold-out couches and kitchenette.

Monfared Hotel (☎ 757 2050; s/d/IR150,000/250,000) At the base of the village where savaris arrive, this older hotel has 26 timber-walled rooms with bathroom and newly tiled floors, but some peeling paint on ceilings. Mr Nabizadeh speaks some English.

On sunny days, the best places for delicious *mirza ghasemi* are the terraces at **Khaneh Mo'alleh Restaurant** (☎ 757 2122; meals IR30,000-45,000; ☎ 12.30-3.30pm & 7.30-9.30pm), behind the Monfared Hotel, and especially the Mehran Hotel's superbly situated café balcony.

ماسوله

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Fuman minibuses/savaris (IR2000/6000, 45 minutes) are regular in summer, but rare in winter. The forest scenery en route is charming and around halfway there's a brilliant traditional thatched Gilani house at the western edge of Makhlan (Makelun) village, now the backdrop for a roadside teahouse.

Qal'eh Rudkhan

قلعه رودخان

This very impressive Seljuk-era **mountain fortress** (admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5pm) covers the top of an idyllic wooded butte ringed by a curl of forested mountain. The brick rampart-ruins are relatively complete, with many photogenic towers, arches and wall sections calcified white with age or tufted with wild flowers. Access requires a steep, sweaty but gorgeous 50-minute walk starting out along a streamside full of mossy rocks then climbing pebble-studded concrete steps to the chorus of birdsong and tapping woodpeckers. The trailhead is beyond a pair of teahouses at **Qal'eh Daneh** hamlet. That's 7km (IR5000 by motorbike taxi) from Qal'eh Rudkhan village to which five-in-a-Paykan savaris from Fuman cost IR2000 per person. Even if you don't make the climb, the 25-minute drive from Fuman to Qal'eh Daneh is delightful, crossing rice paddies and skirting hills with neat green-tea haircuts. If cloud and rain make climbing impractical, a scale model of the castle in Rasht Museum (p168) shows what you missed.

Rasht to Qazvin

The Rasht-Qazvin highway is a frightening deathtrap with a few minor sights. About 33km out of Rasht the much-revered **Imamzadeh Hashem** is plonked on a wooded knoll by the roadside. Almost all public transport halts in **Rudbar** for passengers to buy nationally famous olives and pickled garlic. Olive groves and conifers grace the grassy, rocky valley walls above town, offering attractive random rambles. Climbing steeply towards breezy **Manjil**, famous for its huge wind turbines, the highway passes the **Sefidrud dam** and lake, at whose far, inaccessible western end lies the isolated ruin of **Shemiran Castle** a former Assassins' lair (see p180 for more famous Assassins' castles). Passing through **Loshan** look north to glimpse a sloping

Safavid bridge. Greenery gives way to long rocky defiles for the final stretch towards Qazvin.

Lahijan & Around

لاهیجان و اطراف

☎ 0141 / pop 61,000

Famed for its tea, Lahijan is one of Gilan's oldest towns with some tree-lined charm to its main streets.

Several minor sights are ranged around central Vahdat Sq. These include the **Jameh Mosque** (pierced by a blue-tipped brick minaret) and a charmingly run-down old men-only domed **bathroom** (shower/massage IR5000/15,000; ☎ 6am-7pm) that will eventually host a traditional teahouse. Across the square is the tile-roofed **Chahar Padeshah Mosque**. Some of its famed carved wooden doors have been removed to Tehran's National Museum of Iran, but there are attractive pseudo-medieval-styled murals on the front wall.

Alleyways around Vahdat Sq hide a few old buildings with mossy, tiled roofs, notably the intriguing **Akbariyeh Mosque** (4th West Kashef Alley).

A kilometre further east, the austere, grey **Mausoleum of Kashef-ol-Saltaneh** (☎ 224 1003; East Kashef St; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun) entombs the man who is credited with introducing tea cultivation to Iran (see boxed text, below). It houses an underwhelming museum of tea paraphernalia.

The easternmost 800m of Kashef St climbs **Sheitan Kuh** (Satan's Mountain), a tree-covered ridge fringed with tea gardens. It's crowded on Friday with local tourists enjoying fine views down over Lahijan's rectangular lake. A new **cab-car** (10 min ride return

ROOTS OF THAT CUPPA

Gilan province produces 90% of Iran's tea. The deep green, manicured tea-bushes are now so emblematic that it's hard to believe they were introduced only a century ago. In fact, tea didn't reach Persia at all until the 17th century, when it became an expensive luxury. Qajar-period attempts to grow the stuff were unsuccessful until Kashef-ol-Saltaneh, an Iranian consul in India, managed to learn the secret art. Around 1900 he slipped home to Lahijan with some 4000 tea plants and the rest is history.

IR30,000; ☎ 9am-dusk) whisks sightseers across to another neighbouring hilltop that's only slightly higher.

The blue, pyramidal roof of the distinctive wooden **Sheikh Zahed Mausoleum** (Boq'eh Sheikh Zahed; admission by donation) is Lahijan's architectural icon. The holy man buried here supposedly lived to the ripe old age of 116 (1218-1334). That's longer than the present mausoleum, which was rebuilt after a devastating 1913 fire. It's in a quiet, rural setting 2.3km east of the artificial lakeside cascade at the base of Sheitan Kuh. Take the small tea-field lane that parallels the main Ramsar road (from which the mausoleum can also be glimpsed east of the bypass).

Of several attractive villages in the appealing semi-alpine mountain hinterland, the best known is **Deilaman** (60km).

SLEEPING & EATING

Chaharfasi Mehmankhaneh (☎ 222 3222; Shohada Sq; tw/tr IR80,000/95,000; ☎) Well-kept if basic rooms with fridge and TV share separate bathrooms up steps marked 'Drawing Room'. Some rooms are windowless.

Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 223 3051; off Sepah Sq; tw US\$45; ☎) Comfortable, well-equipped rooms with a perfect central location and a restaurant that overlooks the western edge of the lake.

Several snack bars and **cababis** lie along Karimi St that links Shohada and Vahdat Sqs perpendicular to Kashef St (400m).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Savaris from Rasht (IR6000, 45 minutes) arrive at Vahdat Sq and leave (unofficially) from near Shohoda Sq. Minibuses (IR2000) and official savaris use Entezam Sq about 1.5km further west. For Ramsar and Chalus transport leaves from near Basij Sq, a junction 200m northeast of the Tourist Inn.

Astaneh-ye Ashrafiyeh

آستانه اشرفیه

Die-hard Imam Reza fans add **Astaneh**, near Lahijan, to their busy pilgrimage schedules. That's to visit the **mausoleum** (☎ dawn-midnight) of Reza's brother Seyid Jalal od-Din Ashraf, a remarkably modest shrine compared to equivalent Reza siblings' tombs in Qom, Shiraz and Nardaran (Azerbaijan). Some 22km north, 2km beyond **Kiyashahr**, a wooden walkway allows bathers and bird-

watchers access to a predictably rubbish-marred beach across a vaguely attractive reed-choked lagoon.

RAMSAR

رامسر

The tiresome Caspian coast road offers barely a glimpse of beach, but at **Ramsar** mountains and sea conjoin fairly attractively. A grand avenue of palmyra palms sweeps up from the tatty seafront to the wonderful **Ramsar Grand Hotel** (☎ 522 3592; old wing s/d/ste US\$40/57/76; ☎) Its 'old wing' lobby oozes neo-colonial charm and the manicured rear gardens are impressive. Rooms are somewhat less luxurious but fair value, especially if you opt for a more spacious suite. Avoid the new wing, a drearily ordinary 1970s concrete-box appendage (20% cheaper). Just five minutes' walk west, the **Caspian Museum** (☎ 522 5374; Motahhari St; admission IR40000; ☎) 8am-3pm winter, 8am-1pm & 4-8pm summer) is housed in the 1937 summer palace of Reza Shah. In between a (male-only) bathroom is ideal for relaxing the muscles after the trek from Alamut (p183).

Westbound savaris use Imam Khomeini Sq. Eastbound (from Basij Sq) you'll usually have to change savaris in Tonekabon (aka Shahsavari) for Chalus via Abbasabad where a forest road short-cuts to Kelardasht (p175).

CHALUS & NOSHAHR

چالوس و نوشهر

☎ 0191 / pop 83,000

Of these twin towns, Noshahr (Nowshahr) is the more attractive, with palm trees, manicured gardens and a neat little bazaar around central Azadi Sq. The main reason to come is to use the spectacular Chalus-Karaj road that starts at Mo'alleh Sq in Chalus (marked by a tall telephone mast). From this square, 17 Shahrivar St leads west across a bridge into central Chalus while Noshahr Blvd leads east passing the Malek and Kourosh Hotels (2km) and airport (4km) before reaching central Noshahr (6km) at Jame Mosque Sq. Azadi Sq is a block further.

Sleeping & Eating

Mosaferkhaneh Tavakol (☎ 222 2157; central Chalus; d IR70,000) The Tavakol has basic rooms, shared toilet, no showers and a strict 10am

THE MIGHTY CASPIAN SEA

At 370,000 sq km the Caspian (Darya-ye Khazar) is five times the size of Lake Superior. That makes it by far the world's largest lake. Or does it? Its littoral states (Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan) can't decide if the Caspian's a lake at all. Perhaps it's a 'sea'. That's more than petty semantics. In international legal terms, each nation deserves its own territorial slice of any 'sea' it borders. But with a 'lake', resources below must be shared equally among all littoral states. So the exact definition has vast economic implications given the Caspian's immensely valuable offshore oilfields. The debate continues.

The Caspian has many environmental worries (see www.caspianenvironment.org). Under-sea mud volcanoes and oil vents add to the murk of industrial effluent flowing in through its tributary rivers, notably the Volga. And at 26.5m below sea level, there's no outlet from which pollution can escape. Pollution along with climate change are probably to blame for increasingly severe algal bloom, the vast annual growths of surface water-weeds which, in summer 2005, covered an astonishing 20,000 sq km of the Caspian. Scientists are also worried by the appearance of *Mnemiopsis Leydyi* (a comb jellyfish) whose explosive 1990's reproduction in the Black Sea had threatened fish stocks there. All this along with heavy over-fishing is a particular worry for the slow-growing Caspian sturgeon, which produces 95% of the world's caviar, but is now facing possible extinction.

To Westerners brought up reading CS Lewis novels, the name 'Caspian' sounds romantic. Sadly the reality isn't very beautiful. Between 1977 and 1994 Caspian Sea levels rose an astonishing 15cm to 20cm per year. Those beaches that survived are mostly grey and ugly, but local holiday-makers don't seem to mind too much. After all, swimming in full chador isn't much fun. When Iranians tell you how wonderful the coast is, they might mean because of all the lovely rain. Rasht incorporates rain drops into the calligraphy of its welcome sign. There are even seaside restaurants named Barun (Rain). For people from the desert plateau, the Caspian coast's regular downpours must seem exotic. But few foreigners have ever shared their enthusiasm.

check-out time. It's a short stroll from Mo'alleh Sq in a lane off 17 Shahrvir St: turn beside Tejarat Bank.

Shahlizar Hotel (☎ 325 0001; fax 323 2090; Azadi Sq, Noshahr; tw IR150,000-250,000; 🏠) Comfortable, cosy rooms have cutesy straw bows decorating their doors. Manager Maziyar speaks some English and is keen to show guests the beautiful views (to mountains and port) from the fifth-floor rooftop (no lift). It's conveniently positioned right at the heart of Noshahr.

Hotel Malek (☎ 222 4107; www.hotelmalek.com; Noshahr Blvd; s/d/tr/ste IR180,000/250,000/350,000/600,000; 🏠 🍷 🍴 🚗) Stylish rooms have pleasing décor, bathrooms and good-sized double beds. Suites have playful modernist furniture. The outdoor swimming pool operates summer only. The hip restaurant (open noon to 3.30pm and 8pm to 11pm) has a fine menu (in English) ranging from steaks and fish dishes (IR41,000 to IR67,000) to chicken Kiev and *mirza ghasemi* (IR21,000).

Kourosh Hotel (☎ 222 3940; fax 222 4174; Noshahr Blvd; tw IR200,000-450,000; 🏠 🍷 🍴) Across the

road from the Malek, rooms here have pine-fresh interiors, there's a courtyard café, trendy coffee shop, fitness room, sauna and small pool.

Getting There & Around

Iran Aseman (☎ 322 5217; Karimi St, Noshahr; 🕒 7am-4pm) has twice weekly flights to both Tehran (IR195,000) and Mashhad (IR329,000).

To Tehran, buses (IR40,000) and more frequent savaris (IR60,000) leave from a small terminal on the Karaj road, 1.5km south of Mo'alleh Sq. Savaris to Kelardasht (IR10,000, one hour) leave from an adjacent yard. Eastbound minibuses/savaris to Nur (IR2200/5000) and Amol (IR6500/20,000) start a block east of Azadi Sq in Noshahr. Westbound minibuses to Ramsar, Lahijan and Rasht use an inconvenient terminal off Chalus' southwestern bypass. Shuttle taxis (IR1000) drive here from Mo'alleh Sq. Shuttle taxis from Mo'alleh Sq to Jameh Mosque Sq, Noshahr (IR1500, 15 minutes) operate until late evening.

AROUND CHALUS Namak Abrud

نمک آبرود

For extraordinary Caspian views take the long **Namak Abrud cable car** (telecabine; ☎ 0192-246 2012; admission IR50,000; 🕒 10am-3pm), up 1050m Mt Medovin. The ropeway station is 2km off the main Rasht highway, 14km west of Chalus. Dress up warmly and expect the unexpected from notoriously antisocial clouds.

Kelardasht

کلاردشت

☎ 0192 / pop 23,100

Cupped between towering, broad-shouldered peaks, Kelardasht is nicknamed the 'Paradise of Iran'. It's probably the most popular Caspian-area getaway for nature-loving Tehranis. Surrounding areas offer trout fishing, cross-country skiing, trekking, mountain climbing and plenty of cool fresh summer air. The mountain panorama approaching Kelardasht from Marzanabad is particularly impressive with several spectacular views of snow-toothed Alam Kuh soaring behind the town. At **Kaleno** an 11km part-paved road leads up to much-vaunted **Valasht Mountain Lake**.

Kelardasht's commercial centre is **Hasankeif** where most of the shops, banks and an internet café are clustered close to Hasankeif Sq. More traditional **Rudbarak** starts around 5km south of Hasankeif. It's closer to the mountains and the starting point for most hikes, though with fewer direct views. Here, amid the holiday homes, you can still find a few old **log-framed barns** and houses with slate or wood-slat roofs anchored down with rocks.

ACTIVITIES

The Alborz offers climbers a selection of 4000m peaks, including **Alam Kuh** (Mt Alam), which at 4850m is Iran's third tallest and most technical. An 800m near-vertical granite wall makes the mountain's north face a special challenge for climbers, though there are much easier alternative routes to the top. Ascents start 20km from Rudbarak. Before starting you should sign in (and pay US\$20 peak fees) at the **Mountaineering Federation** (Federation-e-Kuh Navardi; ☎ 264 2626; Tohid St, Rudbarak; 📞 call ahead), 7.4km from Hasankeif Sq. Staff here can help arrange mules and guides, can show you climbing maps and sell a great set of postcards with suggested climbing routes marked onto photos of various peaks.

For Alam Kuh it takes at least a day to trek to one of two base-camp huts. Hesarchal offers the easier summit approach. For the wall use the climbers' hut at Sarchal (3900m) and continue to a cwm called Alamchal (4150m). Climbing the wall itself is a very serious undertaking even for highly experienced mountaineers.

From Sarchal it's also possible to climb **Mt Takht-e Soleiman**, at the other end of the main knife-edge ridge, but there's a lot of bolder-jumping on the glacier and plenty of slippery scree. NB: this is the peak that Freya Stark wandered up almost by mistake in her book *Castles of the Assassins*. However, it is *not* the Takht-e Soleiman citadel near Takab (p187).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Azarbayjan (☎ 262 2678; Mahestan 3rd lane off Nasiri St, Hasankeif; tr IR200,000-450,000) Cheap by Kelardasht standards, this overgrown homestay is just 500m from Hasankeif Sq via Modarres St (fork left then right). Rooms have gas stove, fridge, bathroom and three squeezed-in beds. Those with sitting rooms cost IR100,000 extra. The communal dining terrace is good for meeting other guests.

Hotel Park Chaman (☎ 264 3159; Park Chaman, Rudbarak; small/big ste IR250,000/500,000, bungalows IR500,000) Almost 7km from Hasankeif Sq, 700m before the Mountaineering Federation, look for the obvious blue-roofed modernist restaurant across the river. While not entirely tasteful, the suites are well-equipped with bathtub, choice of toilets and balcony (no mountain views). The peaceful location is a good starting point for hikes.

Maral Hotel (☎ 262 6726; Pasdaran Blvd; ste IR400,000-800,000) Full-blown suites are comfortable though oddly the kitchenettes are much bigger than the cramped bathrooms. A big new extension should soon offer swimming pool, Jacuzzi and billiard room. It's 1.3km south of Hasankeif Sq.

Arash Restaurant (☎ 262 8312; Hasankeif Sq; meals IR25,000-55,000; 🕒 11am-3.30pm & 7.30-10pm) Bright, clean pine-ceilinged restaurant offering Iranian and Caspian favourites right on Hasankeif Sq.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Rare savaris to Abbasabad (IR10,000, one hour) take an attractive forest lane and depart from Hasankeif Sq near Melli Bank.

Savaris to Chalus (IR10,000, one hour) and Tehran (back/front IR60,000/80,000, 3½ hours) and Karaj (IR50,000/70,000, 2¾ hours) leave from a stand 400m north of the square. Buses (IR30,000, five hours) to Tehran's west terminal leave from the tiny Rahat Safar/Talayi Safar office in Zibardast, 3km east of Hasankeif departing at 8am and 2pm in either direction.

Transport within Kelardasht usually requires chartering a **taxi** (☎ 262 9191; per hr IR50,000).

Karaj–Chalus Road

Were it not for the terrifying traffic, this fabulously scenic trans-Alborz road would easily justify a visit to Chalus/Noshahr. Unlike the Haraz (Amol–Tehran) road, landscapes are beautiful almost immediately. Soaring surrounding peaks remain **snow-topped** late into the season and as you slither inexorably down through steep-cut forest valleys the engineering feat of the road's construction remains striking. However, stopping en route can be perilous and, especially in icy conditions, it's hard to focus on the scenery given the suicidal driving style of the speeding maniacs. On a few key holidays the road becomes one-way, which can mess up your plans. Massive engineering works currently deface some of the upper sections and a new expressway will eventually bypass the southern half of the road via an entirely different route. If driving, consider the contrastingly quiet side trip to Baladeh (p334).

KARAJ

☎ 0191 / pop 2,594,000

When the Shah's sister had Frank Lloyd Wright design her a spiral-roofed palace here (1966), Karaj was a peaceful escape from Tehran. Today it's a vast, sprawling commuter dormitory-town. For most travellers, the only conceivable reason to stop is to transfer between Qazvin and the beautiful Chalus mountain road without getting ensnared in the Tehran traffic. Karaj's gridlock is plenty bad enough! Chalus-bound savaris depart from Hafez Sq right at the northern fringe of town. For destinations west use the main terminal (7km away by a double-back loop of motorway) or the expressway lay-by outside where passing buses and car drivers fill up their vehicles en route for virtually anywhere in western Iran.

QAZVIN

☎ 0281 / pop 342,000

Qazvin is famed for carpets and seedless grapes. The city was once capital of all Iran and has a considerable sprinkling of minor sights, but for most Western travellers its foremost role is as a launch point for excursions to the famous Castles of the Assassins in the marvellous Alamut Valley.

History

Founded by the Sassanian king Shapur I in the 3rd century AD, Qazvin prospered under the Seljuk rulers, who erected many fine buildings. It had a second, much later burst of prominence when the second Sa'avid shah, Tahmasp I (r 1524–76), transferred the Persian capital here from Tabriz. A great patron of the arts, his ambitious architectural plan for Qazvin proved to be only a dress rehearsal for Esfahan, where his successor, Shah Abbas I, set up court in 1598.

Orientation

The city centre is Azadi Sq, widely known as Sabz Meydan. The bazaar and alleys to its southeast are the most atmospheric areas for random strolling.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

All charge IR6000 per hour.

Coffeenet Setayesh (☎ 332 0571; Ayatollah Khomeini Blvd)

Coffeenet Yahoo (Khayyam St; ☎ 9am–11pm Sat–Thu, 11am–11pm Fri)

Parsee Coffeenet (☎ 223 0119; Tous Deadend, off Khayyam St; ☎ 9am–midnight)

Shahbda Coffeenet (☎ 223 9093; Modarres Blvd; ☎ 9.30am–10pm Sat–Thu, 10am–11pm Fri)

MONEY

Sharifi Exchange (Ferdosi St; ☎ 9am–1pm & 5–8pm Sat–Thu)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information booth (☎ 335 4708; www.qazvin tourism.com; Naderi St; ☎ 8am–12.30pm & 5–7pm Sat–Thu) Facing the historic Rah Kushk Gate, this is one of Iran's most professional tourist information offices, offering great free maps and useful brochures (partly in English). It can arrange guides to get you into normally closed architectural curiosities and has masses more detailed information available, if you ask the right questions.

قزوین

Sights

CHEHEL SOTUN

چهلستون

When Qazvin took its turn as Iran's capital, this attractive, colonnaded cube was Shah Tahmasp's **royal palace**. Built in 1510, it was greatly remodelled in the Qajar era. Set in the town's little central park it looks especially photogenic at night, with its delicate balustrades floodlit and its back-lit coloured-glass windows glowing through the foliage. Inside is a new **calligraphy museum** (☎ 223 3320; admission IR2000; ☎ 9am–1pm & 5–8.30pm).

QAZVIN MUSEUM

This spacious modern **museum** (☎ 223 4935; Helel-e-Ahmar St; admission IR3000; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 4–6.30pm winter, 9am–12.30pm & 5–7.30pm summer, closed Mon) predominantly features 19th-century decorative arts but the bottom floor has some 3000-year-old bronzes and ceramics from the Alamut Valley.

MOSQUES

Built in 1115, but extensively remodelled in the early 17th century, the **Jameh Mosque** has huge *iwans* and a fine marble mihrab. The very appealing Qajar-era **Nabi (Shah) Mosque** with its Mogul-style topknots also has an impressively expansive courtyard.

AMINIHA HOSSEINIYEH

حسینییه امینیها

Tucked away in a walled rose garden is the well-preserved 1773 **Aminiha Hosseiniyeh** (Molavi St at Amin Deadend; admission IR5000; ☎ 9am–1pm & 5–8pm). It's a private mansion that doesn't look much from outside, but has a splendidly gaudy wood, glass and mirror interior and a refreshingly cool, brick vaulted basement. A great place to unwind and write up your diary in peace.

IMAMZADEH-YE HOSSEIN

امامزاده حسین

This large, well-proportioned **shrine** has a Qajar façade, a 16th-century blue dome and plenty of new mirror tiling. It commemorates a son of Imam Reza and is convivially set in a big fountain courtyard surrounded by coloured-brick alcoves. Behind is a martyrs' graveyard and an aged fighter plane on a stick.

BAZAAR & CRAFT WORKSHOPS

The fascinating covered bazaar amply repays idle wandering. At the east end of the fine Bazaar-e Vazim, **Saroye Vazir** is stacked

high with bundled old carpets. It's one of several wonderfully down-at-heel caravan-serais between which you'll still find the odd door-maker and metal workshop. A **cushion maker** reveals his craft in an alley off Molavi St and there's a **traditional shoemaker** near Shohada Sq.

CISTERNS

Qazvin has some of Iran's best-preserved domed cisterns where water was stored underground and cooled by wind towers. Sadly getting in is rarely possible so don't make a special trip, but if you're passing the most impressive from outside are the **Sardar cisterns** and the **Haji Kazem Cistern** with its well-preserved wind tower.

GATES

Tehran Gate (Darvazeh-e-Qadim-e-Tehran) and **Rah Kushk Gate** (Darbe Kousht; Naderi St) are two dinky little Qajar decorative remnants of Qazvin's once-vast city walls. The much more massive **Ali Qapu** (Helel-e-Ahmar St) was originally a 16th-century gateway to the royal precinct, a kind of forbidden inner city. Today it's a police post so don't take photographs.

OTHER SIGHTS

Tourist maps mark dozens of other historic buildings, but few are at all visually exciting. Even the colourfully domed 14th-century **Amineh Khatun shrine** with fine blue conical spire and Kufic script seems forlornly lost in the warren of banal modern backstreets.

The cute, 20th-century **Kantur Church** (Borj-e-Naghous) has a blue-brick belfry dome and sits in a tiny Russian graveyard.

Safa Hammam (Molavi St at Taqavi Alley; bath IR5000; ☎ 7am–7pm Sat–Thu, 7am–2pm Fri) is the best known of Qazvin's traditional subterranean bath-houses to remain active. The domed central rest area is attractive. Men only.

Activities

Qazvin is a good place to prepare for Alamut-area hikes. **Nakhajir Camping Shop** (☎ 222 4551; Ferdosi St; ☎ 8am–1pm & 4–9pm Sat–Thu) sells great-value camping gear including head torches (IR30,000 to IR50,000), sprung hiking sticks (IR70,000) and 1:300,000 Farsi maps of the Alborz (IR15,000).

Mehdi Babayi (☎ 0912-682 3228) is an experienced trekking and climbing guide who pays

QAZVIN

0 600 m
0 0.4 miles

1 **A** **B** **C** **D**

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attention to key safety details, even though his organisation can seem somewhat hazardous. He's a surreal Iranian Shane Warne lookalike with a comically dextrous 200-word English vocabulary; a character you'll remember long after any trek.

Sleeping

Mehmanpazir Buali (☎ 222 3329; Buali St; s/d/tr IR80,000/90,000/120,000) Repapered rooms (some windowless) have TVs and top-sheets and though the whole place has a slightly musty smell.

Khaksar Hotel (☎ 222 4239; Khaleqi Alley; s/d/tr IR80,000/100,000/120,000) Neat, spacious recently redecorated rooms with shared bathrooms. Better than most other Qazvin *mosafirkhanehs*.

MehmanpazirMerkezi (☎ 222 6279; Imam Khomeini St; d/tr IR100,000/150,000) Fairly sweet little rooms with top-sheets, rug, fan and central air-conditioning share very clean showers and squat toilets. Road noise can be disturbing.

Hotel Iran (☎ 222 8877; Peyghambarieh St; s/tw IR120,000/160,000) This popular traveller favourite manages to be simultaneously quiet yet eminently central. The pleasant, decently furnished rooms are great value with good bathrooms and central air-conditioning – if they turn it on! Owner Karim Noruzi speaks good English, but compare options before signing up to his Alamut trips.

Alborz Hotel (☎ /fax 222 6631; hotel_alborz_q@yahoo.com; Taleqani Blvd; s/tw US\$25/40; ☎ ☎) This appealing midrange option has small but fully equipped modern rooms with golden bedcovers, towels and BBC World TV. Staff are very helpful and the lobby coffee shop makes a pleasantly low-key meeting point.

MarmarHotel (☎ 255 5771; www.marmarhotel.com, in Farsi; Ayatollah Khomeini Blvd; s/d IR400,000/540,000) The Marmar is a festival of nouveau-riche kitsch, overloaded with mouldings and chandeliers. Little armour-clad knights guard the soapstone marble stairs. Comfortable rooms are graciously less lurid, but with some wear to the furniture. Bring earplugs for the road rumble.

Eating

Qazvin's local speciality is *qimeh nasar* (also spelt *gheymeh nasser*), a tangy lamb stew made with diced pistachios.

Nobahar (☎ 222 2451; Bazar Dimaj; mains IR13,000-30,000; ☎ ☎ 10am-4pm Sat-Thu) This is a fairly large, comparatively low-stress bazaar eatery that

serves stews (including *qimeh nasar*), which you can choose by pointing at the relevant kitchen cauldron.

Pizza Yekta (☎ 222 2407; Ferdosi St; pizzas IR16,000-35,000; ☎ ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-11pm Sat-Thu, 6-11pm Fri) Designer off-line windows add a little architectural smile to this popular air-conditioned fast-food place. There is a bit more seating upstairs.

Hezardasan (☎ 335 0100; Hafezi Alley, off Khayyam St; meals IR20,000-40,000; ☎ ☎ 11.30am-3.30pm & 7-11pm) At the upmarket northern end of Khayyam St, Hezardasan makes a valiant attempt at giving its cellar room that *sofrakhane sonati* feel, but the overall effect is a little too neat to be memorable. Its delicious *qimeh nasar* comes mounded into barberry rice.

Eghbali (☎ 223 3347; Taleqani St; mains IR20,000-83,000; ☎ ☎ 11am-4pm & 7-10pm) Prices are high and despite the odd fake stone frieze there isn't much atmosphere. Nonetheless it's popular with travellers for its English menu and reliable food.

The convivially crowded Yas, in a dead-end alley opposite Hotel Alborz, is cheaper. There are several similar restaurants on Ayatollah Khomeini Blvd east of Valiasr Sq.

Chaykhaneh Aqaqia (off Imam St; tea IR1000; ☎ ☎ 8am-10pm Sat-Thu) This wonderfully unpretentious, cheap and down-market all-male teahouse has chess and *nard* to play. Easily missed, the entrance is on the left off a covered access-way to the workaday Sadd Sultani caravanserai.

Getting There & Away

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

Handy bus services from the main terminal include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Esfahan	IR65,000	6hr	1pm Talayi, Taavoni 6
Hamadan	IR12,000	3½hr	7am Seiro Safar
	IR25,000	3½hr	2pm Seiro Safar
Kermanshah	IR40,000	7hr	7.45am, 2.30pm
Mashhad	IR80,000	18hr	2pm, 2.30pm
			Talayi
Rasht	IR12,000	3hr	7.45am, 2.45pm
			Alborz 7.30am, 3pm TBT
Tehran	IR6500-12,000	2½hr	frequent

Official Tehran and Karaj savaris leave from outside (IR30,000). Unofficial ones pick up at Valiasr Sq.

Cranky buses run to Hir (via Razmiyan) around 11am and to Mo'alleem Kalayeh (IR10,000, 2½ hours) around 1.30pm (not Friday). However, for these Alamut Valley destinations savaris are vastly better. Mo'alleem Kalayeh savaris (IR25,000, 1½ hours) depart from gigantic Qaribqosh Sq, 2km east of Valiasr Sq. Razmiyan savaris (per person/car IR18,000/70,000, 1¼ hours) depart very occasionally from **Istgah Razmiyan** (Helalabad Sq off Sa'di St): to get there take a shuttle taxi up Naderi St to Sardaran Sq, walk a block west along Beheshti St then 300m southwest down Shahid Fayazbakhsh St.

Some buses en route to Zanjan, Tabriz and Hamadan stop momentarily at the busy Dorah-e Hamadan junction. Minibuses to Takestan congregate nearby.

For Rasht, savaris depart from **Darvazeh Rasht** (Enqelab Sq) where some through buses also pick up/drop off.

TRAIN

The best-timed trains to Tehran (IR5900, two hours) depart at 8.30am and 10.35am. For Zanjan (2½ hours) handy trains leave at 8am and 5.40pm. There are useful sleeper trains to Tabriz at 9.10pm (IR39,350, 11 hours) and to Mashhad at 8.45pm, but tickets can be in short supply. **Arash Safar Travel** (☎ 222 2260; Helel-e-Ahmar St; 🕒 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Sat-Thu) can book for you and sells air tickets ex-Tehran.

Getting Around

City buses run both ways along the main drag (Imam Khomeini St/Taleqani Blvd), but cars and shuttle taxis can only use it east-bound, returning from Valiasr Sq to central Azadi Sq (Sabz Meydan) via Shahr-dari or Buali Sts. From the centre to the bus terminal change at Valiasr Sq. From the terminal to Azadi Sq loop round via the bazaar.

ALAMUT VALLEY

الموت

Few places in Iran offer a more tempting invitation to hike, explore and reflect than the fabled Alamut and Shahrud Valleys. Beneath soaring Alborz peaks, the landscapes are inspirational and delightfully varied, with scenic suggestions of Patagonia, Switzerland, central Australia and Syria all

spiced by a uniquely fascinating medieval history. Nestled almost invisibly on widely spread rocky knolls and pinnacles lie the shattered remnants of over 50 ruined fortresses. Shrouded in fabulous myths, they were the heavily fortified lairs of the medieval world's most feared religious cult and are collectively known as the **Castles of the Assassins** (see boxed text, p182). The most interesting are at Gazor Khan (Alamut Castle, p182) and Razmiyan (Lamiasar Castle, below). Beware that Alamut Castle is NOT in Alamut town (aka Mo'alleem Kalayeh, p182).

Using a mix of savaris and taxis it's possible to visit both Razmiyan (65km) and Gazor Khan (110km) in a long day trip from Qazvin. But it's much more fun to take your time, sleeping a night or three at Gazor Khan to do some trekking. If you can manage enough Farsi to charter a taxi there's no real reason to take a guide, though a knowledgeable historian could help bring to life the castles' bare stones.

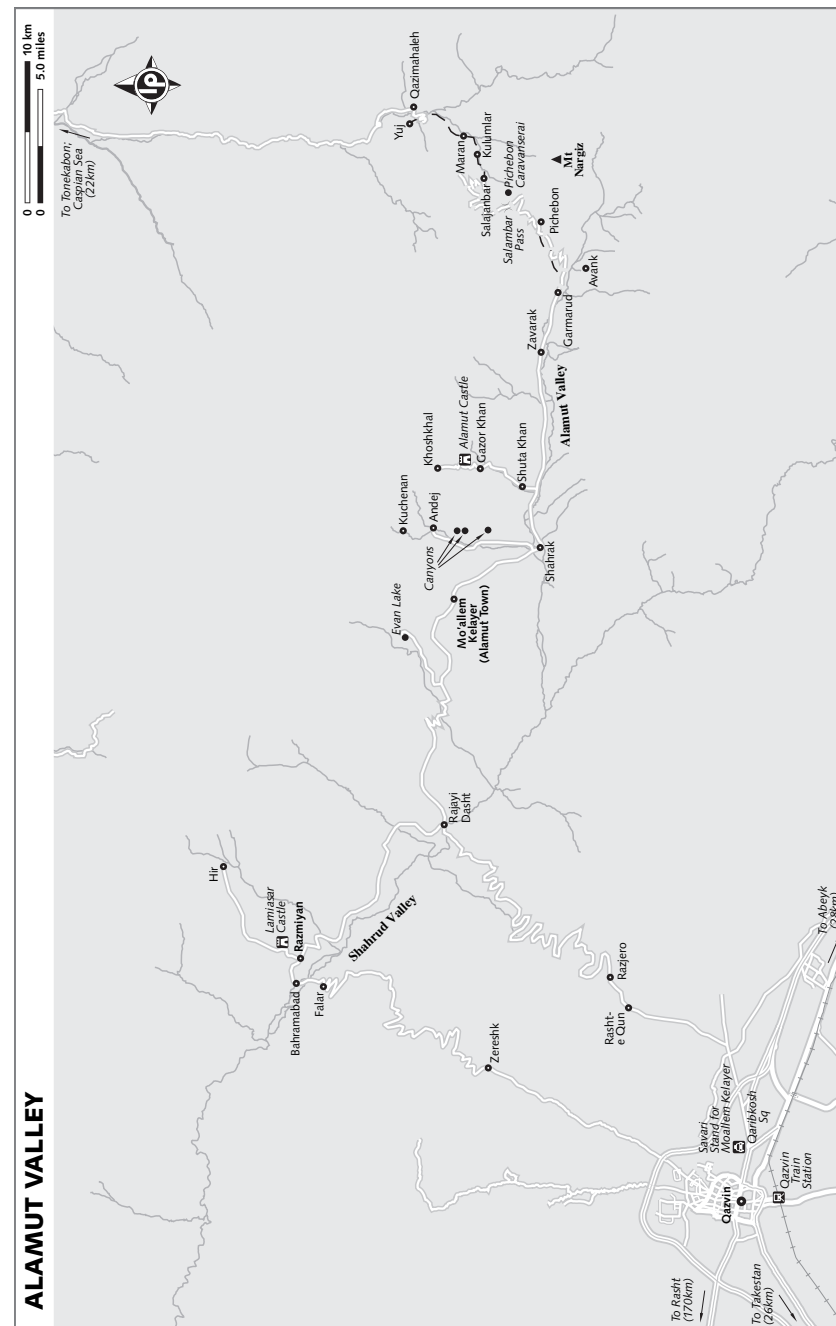
A guide (or at least a bag-carrying mule and mule-driver) is wise, however, if you're planning a multi-day, cross-Alborz trek into the Caspian hinterland (p183).

Razmiyan & Lamiasar Castle

☎ 0272 / pop 1800 رازميان و کاخ لامياسار

The winding descent into Razmiyan from Qazvin passes some timeless mud hamlets and gives wonderful views over the Shahrud Valley's rice terraces. Central Razmiyan itself is a strangely soulless place but a handily central **taxi agency** (☎ 322 2828) makes it easy to arrange onward transport if you've arrived by savari. A taxi costs IR20,000 up to the Lamiasar Castle access path (2.5km towards Hir). From there it's an obvious 20-minute stroll to the top edge of the castle where a remnant hint of round bastion and some other wall chunks remain. The castle site sweeps down from here to outer-wall remnants that drop vertically into the valley below. Allow at least an hour to seek out the various degraded fortifications, enjoy the birdsong and meet the lizards. Bring a hat and sunscreen as there's minimal shade.

There's no formal accommodation in Razmiyan. A taxi to Mo'alleem Kalayeh costs IR80,000, or IR100,000 if you tack on an 8km detour to **Evan Lake** en route. With its powerful



CASTLES OF THE ASSASSINS

In the 12th century, a network of incredibly well fortified Alborz mountain castles sheltered the followers of Hasan-e Sabbah (1070–1124), spiritual leader of Islam's heretical Ismaili sect. In popular myth, Sabbah led a bizarre, much-feared mercenary organisation whose members were dispatched to murder or kidnap leading political and religious figures of the day. They believed that their actions would transport them to paradise. Supposedly Sabbah cunningly cultivated such beliefs by showing them beautiful secret gardens filled with enticing young maidens while unwittingly stoned on hashish. This gave them their popular name 'Hashish-iyun', root of the modern English term 'assassin'. Or so the story goes. Peter Willey's book, *Eagle's Nest*, gives an altogether more sympathetic version portraying Hasan Sabbah as a champion of the free-thinking, pro-science Islamic tradition and suggesting that the hashish tales were fabricated exaggerations designed to denigrate Ismaili Islam.

Whatever the truth, most of the impregnable Ismaili castles were captured by Hulagu Khan in 1256 using diplomatic trickery, having earlier forced the surrender of the Ismailis' spiritual leader (Sabbah's successor). Only two fortresses, Girdkuh and Lamiasar, decided to put up a fight. Thanks to their sophisticated water cisterns and vast food reserves they could hold out for years, 17 years in the case of Girdkuh! Before moving on, the Mongols systematically destroyed the castles' fortifications to avoid future difficulties. That means today it's history and brilliant scenery more than the scanty rubble that draws the few travellers that make it here.

The crushing of Alamut was effectively the end of the Ismailis for generations though believers resurfaced centuries later and now Ismaili Islam is the predominant faith in parts of Tajikistan and northern Pakistan (though not at all in Iran). The castles were forgotten and only returned to public consciousness with the publication of Dame Freya Stark's 1930s travel diary *Valleys of the Assassins*. A copy of that recently reprinted volume makes a great companion for the trip.

mountain backdrop, the tiny lake would be stunningly beautiful if it weren't for nearby power lines and muddy car-washing spots.

Mo'alleh Kalayeh

معلم کلايه

☎ 0282 / pop 4700

Sometimes called Alamut town, Mo'alleh Kalayeh is the Alamut Valley's one-street district centre. It's a useful transport staging post for the region but not a sight in itself. If you get stuck here, **Haddodi Restaurant** (☎ 321 6362; tw/6-bed IR80,000/140,000) rents two very simple rooms. It's on the main street 50m east of the eagle statue. The town centre, where rare buses and savaris loiter, is 600m further east. Savaris to Qazvin (IR25,000) are an hour quicker than the dreadfully slow bus (IR15,000, daily except Friday) that departs once feeder buses from outlying villages have arrived. For Gazor Khan taxi charters cost IR40,000, or IR80,000 including a side trip to Andej en route. Or take the returning school bus around 11.45am.

ANDEJ

انديج

The 8km road-spur to Andej passes beside three truly awesome red-rock side-canyons,

somewhat reminiscent of the Olgas (central Australia). The turning is just northwest of **Shahrak**, which has a prominent (but not Assassin-related) castle ruin.

Gazor Khan & Alamut Castle

گازرخان و قلعه الموت

☎ 0282

The region's greatest attraction is the fabled ruin of **Alamut Castle** (admission IR4000; ☎ dawn-dusk), Hasan-e Sabbah's famous fortress site. The site is a dramatic crag rising abruptly above the pleasant, unpretentious little cherry-growing village of Gazor Khan. The access path starts about 700m beyond the village square and requires a steep, sweaty 25-minute climb via an obvious stairway. On top, archaeological workings are shielded by somewhat unsightly corrugated metal sheeting. But the phenomenal views from the ramparts are unmissable.

Several tempting mountain hikes start in Gazor Khan or Khoshkchal village, a steep, 15-minute 4WD ride beyond. Route suggestions are extensively described in a helpful travellers' tip book at the charming **Hotel Koosaran** (☎ 377 3377; dm IR30,000). That's effectively just the guest room in Ali Samie's

family home. It can sleep up to five, curled up on cotton mattresses on the floor. Simple but tasty meals are available (IR15,000) if you ask ahead and the flat roof facing Gazor Khan's village square makes a great people-watching perch.

Managed by a Grimm's fairy-tale crone, the **Golestan Inn** (☎ 377 3312; room/suite IR120,000/150,000) offers rather tatty accommodation amid trees on the slight rise that directly overlooks the stairway to Alamut Rock. The 'rooms' share a decent kitchen and a grotty squat toilet. The 'suites' are a pair of semi-detached concrete houselets with run-down balcony seats amid overgrown foliage. Kabab meals cost IR30,000 (by pre-arrangement).

Hotel Farhangian (☎ 377 3446; tr IR160,000) is a converted former school whose ex-classrooms now form reasonably well equipped though not luxurious 'suites' with kitchen and bathroom. Beware that the place gets locked up when the receptionist (a small boy) goes home for his meals! Bring your own food. There's no English sign, but it's tucked behind the Alamut Research Centre, up a short driveway that heads south from, castle trailhead. Don't rush to believe locals who tell you it's closed.

Savaris usually run to Qazvin at around 7am (IR30,000, 2½ hours). At the same time there's a bus to Mo'alleh Kalayeh (school days, IR3000, 45 minutes). Both leave from the village square outside Hotel Koosaran.

Tramking Towards the Caspian: Garmarud to Yuj

Crossing the Alborz on foot from the Alamut Valley to the Caspian hinterland is geographically compelling, scenically stunning and culturally fascinating. You'll be one of just a handful of foreigners since Freya Stark (1930s) to make such a trip, but hurry: road builders are slowly extending tracks further and further into the isolated mountain villages and a whole way of life revolving around donkey transport will soon be a thing of the past.

The route described here isn't especially arduous, though a guide and/or mule-driver is recommended to avoid difficulties at a few awkward spots, especially if you attempt the walk before June, when you'll be tramping through treacherous snows on the highest sections. It's most pleasant to allow three days, though two days or even less is

quite possible if you're in some inexplicable hurry. (In midsummer you could shorten the walk by arranging a 4WD to take you as far as **Salajanbar**.)

The hike starts in pretty, canyon-framed **Garmarud** village, 18km east of the Gazor Khan turning, where the Alamut Valley road's asphalt ends. Whether you walk or drive, the route goes via picturesque **Pichebon hamlet** and across the 3200m **Salambar Pass** beside the small, partly renovated (but deserted) **Pichebon Caravanserai**. Fabulous views. On foot from Garmarud it took us 5½ hours to that caravanserai (with a guide, short-cutting through flower-filled meadows and beneath a waterfall). From the caravanserai it's another three hours to Salajanbar, descending very slowly through pretty thorn shrubs and fields of yellow iris. If you follow the jeep track instead of the walking path, take the right-hand fork an hour beyond the pass.

Wonderfully picturesque **Maran** is the last village en route with no semblance of a road. Walking there from Salajambar takes three hours and requires fording a stream twice. While not that hard, it's potentially dangerous when the water's high: slip and you'll be washed over a waterfall to certain doom.

Another three hours' downhill hike from Maran brings you to an un-asphalted road below pretty **Yuj** village set in flower-filled meadows.

SLEEPING

In Garmarud a hotel is under construction: if completed that will make the village a great base for shorter hikes. Mr Sardeghi's tiny **Grocery Shop** (☎ 379 4008, 0912-682 8991) sells biscuits and might help you arrange *qotr* (mules) to carry your bags.

At Pichebon, grassy meadows are great for camping – ask permission in the village.

In Maran village, **Nematullah Mansukia** (☎ 0192-282140) can provide a simple home-stay with great home-cooked meals (around IR40,000 per person). By pre-arrangement he can also organise mules from Yuj (around IR120,000) or even Garmarud (around IR300,000). The village has a tiny, super-rustic *hammad*.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach Garmarud, a *dar baste* (closed door) savari costs IR100,000 from Qazvin or

IR50,000 from Mo'alleh Kelayeh. From the end of the hike in Yuj, a savari to Tonekabon supposedly departs at 8am (IR25,000, two hours). Otherwise get someone to phone the savari driver **Shabani** (☎ 0911-394836) from Yuj's village telephone. Hopefully he'll arrive to pick you up within a few hours. Yuj has an informal baker but no shops so keep some snacks in reserve for the wait.

SOLTANIYEH

☎ 0242 / pop 8700

Little Soltaniyeh ('Town of the Sultans') was purpose-built by the Ilkhanid Mongols as their Persian capital from 1302. But less than a century later in 1384 it was largely destroyed by Tamerlane. Fortunately three fine monuments survived. By far the most dramatic of these is the magnificent **Oljeitu Mausoleum** (Gonbad-e Soltaniyeh; www.soltanieh.ir, in Farsi; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-5pm), now a Unesco World Heritage site. Almost 25m in diameter and 48m high it's the world's tallest brick dome. Inside, renovators' scaffolding can't hide the enormity of the enclosed space. A ground-floor exhibition illustrates the ongoing restoration process. Spiral stairs within the hugely thick walls lead up two floors to a terrace with panoramic views and fine stucco-work vaulting.

The building is named for its sponsor, Mongol sultan Oljeitu Khodabandeh. Oljeitu changed religions as often as a film star changes wives. During his Shiite phase, egged on by a favourite concubine, he had planned for the mausoleum to re-house the remains of Imam Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. That would have made it Shiite Islam's holiest pilgrimage site outside Mecca (instead of Najaf, Iraq). However, Oljeitu couldn't persuade the Najaf ulema to give him Ali's relics and eventually he was buried here himself in 1317.

The mausoleum approach crosses partly rebuilt stubs of Soltaniyeh's **citadel wall** and some **archaeological excavations** (admission free) of the Mongol-era townscape.

Some 500m southwest of the main complex, the 1330 **Khanegah Dervish Monastery** (Hamadan highway; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) has restored cells around a courtyard leading to the **Boq'eh Chelabi-oglu Mausoleum** behind the mihrab of a shattered-sided former mosque.

From the Oljeitu Mausoleum's upper terrace, it's easy to spot the lonely blue-

domed **Mullah Hasan Kashi tomb** (admission free) in semi-desert, 1.5km south towards the mountain skyline. It was built by Safavid Shah Tahmasp to honour Hasan Kashi, a 14th-century mystic whose recasting of Islam's historical sagas as Persian-language poetic epics unwittingly had a vast influence over Shia Islam's future direction.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Soltaniyeh is 5km south of the old Zanjan-Qazvin road, but *not* accessible from the parallel motorway. By public transport it's easiest to visit as a day trip from Zanjan. Direct savaris (IR5000, 30 minutes) and very irregular minibuses (IR1500, 50 minutes) from Zanjan's Honarestan Sq drop you an obvious 10-minute walk north of the mausoleum.

AROUND SOLTANIYEH

The extensive **Katalekhor Caves** (☎ 0242-482 2188; admission IR15,000; ☎ 8am-7.30pm, last entry 6pm, closed after heavy rain) are 130km southwest of Soltaniyeh via the quiet if slightly monotonous Soltaniyeh-Hamadan road. The visit involves around 1¼ hours underground walking up and back in small guided groups. The experience isn't unduly claustrophobic and it culminates in several vistas of fine stalactite formations that are much more impressive than those at better-known Ali Sadr (p206). There's no public transport. We paid IR100,000 return by taxi from **Ghydar** (aka Qeydar or Khodabandeh) whose quaint **Ghydar Nabi madrasah** (off Imam Khomeini St) sits where a prominent cockscorn of rocky outcrop descends to the town's original heart. Savaris run semi-regularly from Ghydar to Soltaniyeh and Zanjan. En route consider making a 15-minute detour to the celebrated but tumble-down little **Sojas Jameh Mosque** (Dr Chamran St). Its ornate interior stuccowork is just visible through all the restorer's scaffolding. It's amid collapsing mud houses at the western end of Sojas town.

By car it's feasible to visit Soltaniyeh and all the above in a long day trip from Zanjan or while driving between Zanjan and Hamadan.

ZANJAN

☎ 0241 / pop 367,000

Hidden in tiny alleys behind its modern façade, Zanjan retains some attractive mosques, a fantastic bazaar, a plethora of

knife-grinders and some delightful teahouse restaurants. The city is a logical base for visiting the impressive Soltaniyeh mausoleum and a good staging point to reach Takht-e Soleiman via the scenic Dandy road.

Zanjan city's moment of infamy came in 1851 with a bloody siege ordered by Persian prime minister Amir Kabir. The resulting massacre was part of the relatively successful campaign to crush the nascent Baha'i religion. Baha'i-ism had only broken away from Islam three years before, but was spreading much too rapidly for Tehran's liking.

Orientation & Information

The main commercial centre is Enqelab Sq. **Export Development Bank** (Ferdosi St; ☎ 9am-noon) changes money. **Rayanet** (Sa'di St; per hr IR5000; ☎ 8am-midnight) has excellent internet connection and (over) friendly staff. Farsi-only city maps are sometimes sold from bookshops opposite the **telephone office** (Sa'di St; ☎ 7am-10.30pm) and are available free from room 25, **Miras Ferhangi** (☎ 323 9007; miras_zanjan@hotmail.com; ☎ 8am-2pm).

Sights

Built in 1926 but looking considerably older, the unique, unmarked **Rakhatshor-Khaneh** (Rakhatshorkhaneh Alley; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is a dome-and-column subterranean hall whose water channels were originally constructed as a public laundry-place. It's dotted with wax washerwomen to remind you how life was before Electrolux and Zanussi. There's also a calm garden courtyard.

The long, narrow, mostly brick-vaulted **bazaar** is inspiring and surrounding alleys hide half-a-dozen historic mosques. Entered between copper shops off Enqelab St at the bazaar's ungentrified eastern end is the delightfully decrepit yet still-active **Dokhtar Caravanserai**. Grandly tiled, the dome and minarets of the **Rasul-Ullah (Sai-ini) Mosque** peep above central Enqelab Sq. Madrasah cells line the inner courtyard of the sizable 1826 **Jameh Mosque**, accessed through a spired portal on Imam St. **Seyid Ibrahim (Imamzadeh) Mosque** is similarly extensive. The dinky **Khanum (Women's) Mosque** has a commonly photographed pair of squat pepper-pot minarets but its 1940s architecture is of little artistic merit.

The 1851 Baha'i massacres were perpetrated in lanes behind where you now see philosopher **Soravardi's bust** (Sa'di St) on a library wall. **Pol-e-Sardar**, an attractive Safavid bridge, is visible west of the Bijar road.

Sleeping

Hotel Sa'di (☎ 322 2528; Imam St; s/tw/tr IR40,000/55,000/70,000) This sensibly priced *mosafer-khaneh* is relatively well kept but the windowless singles are truly minuscule.

Hotel Hafez (☎ 322 2740; Enqelab Sq; s/tw/tr IR80,000/150,000/220,000) Peeling paint, window bars and the odd cockroach might make prison inmates feel at home here. Still, it's perfectly central and rooms do have basic shower and squat toilet attached.

Park Hotel (☎ 332 2228; fax 332 6798; Imam St; s/tw IR192,000/288,000; ☎) Upgrades are ongoing at this reliable midrange option near Azadi Sq. The manager speaks some English.

Sepid Hotel (☎ 322 6882; Imam St; s/tw IR250,000/320,000; ☎) An inviting foyer leads to wood-effect walled corridors and pleasant-enough rooms with glittery floral bedspreads and curtains. Metal gauze lamps cast curious patterns at night, but the somewhat ragged bathrooms are a let down.

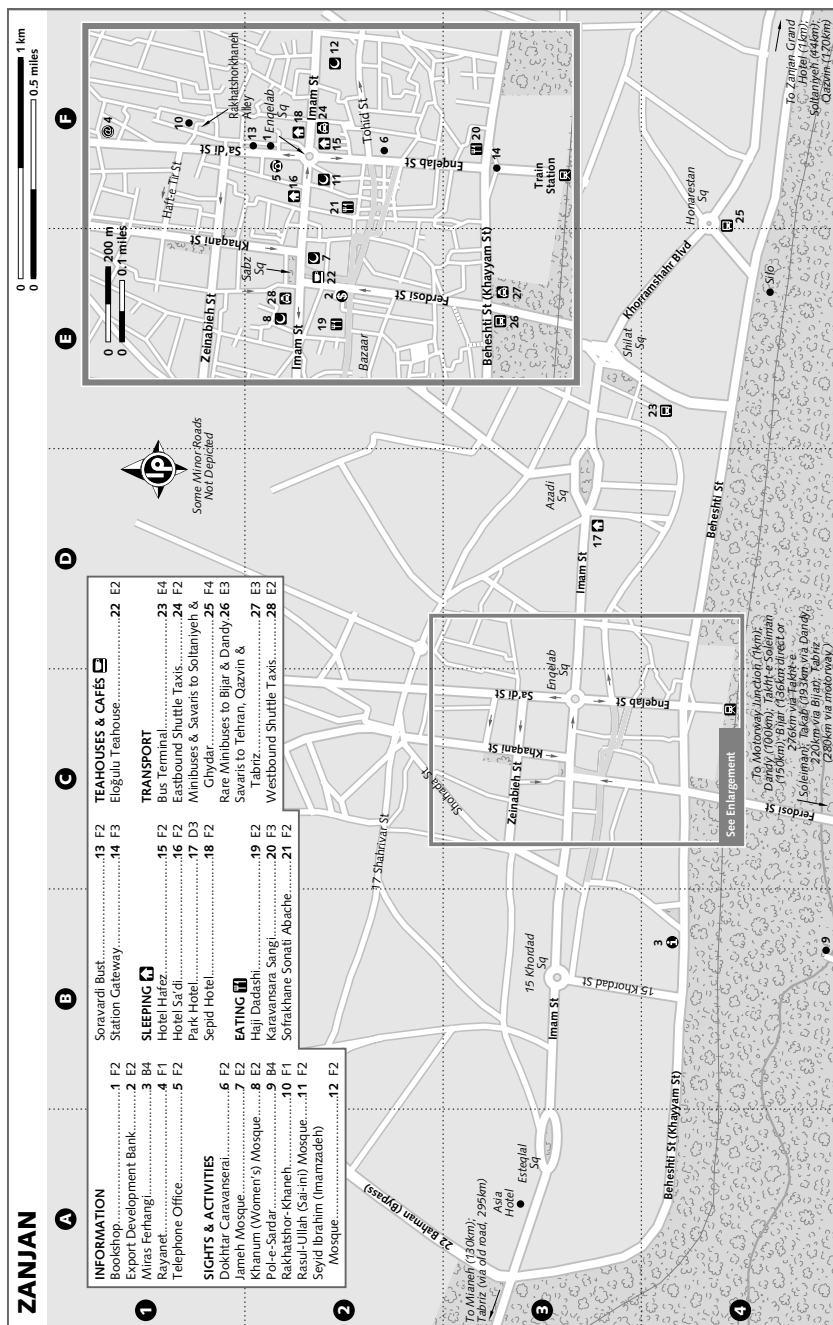
Zanjan Grand Hotel (Hotel Bozorg Zanjan; ☎ 728 8190; Basij Sq; s/tw/stc US\$92/104/139; ☎ ☎ ☎) By far Zanjan's top option, the stylishly sparse, international-standard rooms are spacious, with impeccable bathrooms, a slight niggle being the ill-conceived light-switching system. Staff try hard to please. However, the noisy location is inconvenient if you're not driving.

Eating

In addition to the traditionally styled places listed below there are numerous standard *kababis* along Imam St.

Sofrakhane Sonati Abache (Bostani Bashkah; ☎ 323 7250; Bashkah Alley; dizi IR15,000, qalyan IR12,000; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Good for bread-and-honey breakfasts, this former *zurkhaneh* chamber is an octagonal domed cellar eccentrically decorated with old samovars, portraits and peacock feathers. Tea (IR3500) comes with dates and a swizzle-stick of crystal sugar. At night it's popular with (male) university students. Look for the black door with brass knobs and knockers.

Haji Dadash (☎ 322 2020; bazaar; meals IR15,000-30,000; ☎ 10am-11pm) This family-oriented



and magnificent setting here are attractions enough.

Takht-e Soleiman's name (Throne of Solomon) is not based on real historical links to Old Testament King Solomon. It was in fact a cunning 7th-century invention by the temple's Persian guardians in the face of the Arab invasion. Realising Islam's reverence for biblical prophets they entirely fabricated a tale of Solomon's one-time residence to avert the site's certain destruction. The ruse worked, the complex survived and the name stuck.

In the 13th century, Takht-e Soleiman became a summer retreat for the Mongol Ilkhanid khans. The remnants of their hunting palace is now covered with a discordant modern roof forming a store-room (often locked) for amphora, unlabelled column fragments, photos and a couple of ceramic sections of those ancient gas pipes.

A guide is often available at the site gate and can help you make sense of all the piles of stone if you share enough language. Alternatively, navigate yourself using a glossy bilingual Farsi/English map/brochure (IR3000), which are sold at the ticket booth but not displayed. Ask.

Takht-e Soleiman is 2km from **Nosratabad**. Archaeologists believe that beneath that mud-and-haystack village is the site of Shiz, once a Nestorian-Christian centre of Graeco-Persian learning (not just a 'Land of Oz' fiction). Nosratabad has a minuscule kabab window, but the nearest accommodation is 42km away in Takab.

ZENDAN-E SOLEIMAN

This dramatic 97m conical peak dominates the valley landscape for miles around. Though it's now bare of all construction,

the cone was once enclosed by fortified walls and topped by a religious sanctuary that archaeologists suggest dated back to 900 BC. Zendan-e Soleiman means Solomon's Prison, though anyone jailed within the central crater wouldn't have lasted long given the noxious sulphurous fumes. Peering gingerly into its dizzying void can be suffocating enough. Assuming you're reasonably fit, climbing to the crater's edge should take under 15 minutes. The path is muddy but obvious, zig-zagging up from the Takab road about 4km south of the main Takht-e Soleiman ruins.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Unless you charter a ride from Zanjan or Dandy, the approach is from Takab. From a small taxi stand on the western edge of Takab town taxis ask IR50,000 return including enough time to quickly run around the site and to dash up Zendan-e Soleiman. Add IR15,000 per hour if you hang around. Savaris and minibuses only run to Nosratabad once or twice a day and leave you 2km short of Takht-e Soleiman. Traffic is often very thin making hitchhiking awkward.

Takab

تکاب

☎ 0482 / pop 50,000

This hilly market town is of interest only as the closest access point for Takht-e Soleiman. Bank Saderat at the crossroads of Imam and Enqelab Sts approximately marks its commercial centre. About 100m southeast of that junction opposite Bank Melli, the extremely basic, showerless **Mehmunpazir Takht-e Jamshid** (☎ 522 2119; Imam St; tw IR60,000) is signed 'Pensiun'. Rooms have recently been

repainted but conditions remain far from inviting. The owner knows the odd word of English. A kilometre uphill from the Bank Saderat crossroads, passing close to **Coffeenet Yahoo** (☎ 523 2288; Pasdaran St; per hr IR7000; ☎ 10am-8pm) en route, is the comparatively upmarket **Rangi Hotel** (☎ 522 3179; fax 522 4650; Upper Enqelab St; s/tw/tr/q with breakfast US\$25/32/40/45). Since a major re-fit and expansion in 2007, the top-floor rooms are now the most comfortable. The restaurant has improved of late and manager Ayub speaks good English.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and minibuses use a new terminal in the northeast corner of town. Bijar and Shahin Dezh minibuses depart roughly hourly until 1pm. The 5am bus to Zanjan (IR12,000) drives via Bijar.

Savaris to Bijar (IR15,000, one hour) leave from outside **Taavoni 16** (☎ 522 2136; Imam St) just across the bridge from Mehmunpazir Takht-e Jamshid.

The taxi stand for Takht-e Soleiman is near Galem Sq, 600m further west along Imam St.

For Miyando'ab (and thence Maraqeh or Orumiyeh) start by taking a savari from the western edge of town to Shahin Dezh (IR15,000, 1¼ hours), cross that town by taxi (IR2000, 3km) then continue by savari (IR10,000) or minibus (IR3000).

Around Takab

KARAFTU CAVES

غار کرفتو

These intriguing four-storey **cliff-caves** (admission IR4000) are normally visited from Divandareh (67km to the south), but should soon be accessible via an improved road from Takab. An antique inscription within says in Greek: 'Hercules lives here: no evil may enter'.

Takab to Bijar

The 84km road to Bijar offers some scenic vistas across the high plateaus and towards a variety of dry mountain-tops. It passes two notable villages of mud houses: **Sadbil** (17km from Takab) and **Qizil Belakh** (25km). Some 35km from Takab, an unasphalted side road leads about 10km to **Qom Choqa** (Ghamchoghay). This dramatic nose of cliff overlooks the Shahan River and was the site of a fortress thought to date back to the 8th century, though it is now virtually invisible.

BIJAR

☎ 0872 / pop 51,000

Cradled between arid hills topped in rocky crags, Bijar is a fairly diffuse junction town, but is more scenic and has better transport connections than Takab. Tohid St is the main north-south axis. The town centre is where Tohid St meets Taleqani St and almost-parallel Imam St one block further north. A block west of Tohid St is handily central **Click Coffeenet** (Taleqani St; s/tw IR20,000/23,000; ☎ 8am-10pm).

Mosaferkhaneh Moqadam (☎ 422 3260; Shahid Ardalan St; s/tw 40,000/50,000, shower IR5000) has simple, unexciting rooms with big ceiling fans, wooden-board beds, maybe-clean sheets and shared squat toilets. It's an Escheresque maze of stairways reached through a subterranean restaurant on a quiet tree-lined street between Bank Melli and the small brick-vaulted bazaar. That's one block north and west of the Imam/Tohid St junction.

The much smarter **Iran Bam Hotel** (☎ 423 3160; Sanandaj Hwy; tw 300,000) is a modern three-storey circular building of blue glass with a decent restaurant and café. Rooms are fully equipped and have fancy sash curtains but the thick pile carpets are already looking soiled. It's about 3km west of town, 800m beyond the roundabout at which Imam and Taleqani Sts converge.

Near the Taleqani St petrol station (1km west of the Coffeenet) is the kitschily atmospheric teahouse **Sofrakhane Ferdin** (Taleqani St; qalyan IR6000; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Getting There & Away

The main terminal, 4km northeast of town handles all minibuses (last at 3pm) and buses plus savaris to Zanjan (IR25,000), which depart regularly till dusk. Minibuses to Hamadan (IR15,000) depart at 7.30am and 8am only.

Savaris for Takab (IR15,000, one hour) and Sanandaj (IR22,500, 1¼ hours) depart until dusk from outside the Iran Bam Hotel. A taxi from the terminal costs IR5000 *dar baste*.

SANANDAJ

☎ 0871 / pop 358,000

Even by Iran's super-hospitable standards, Sanandaj is a remarkably friendly city. It's the capital of Kordestan province, a good

THRONE OF SOLEIMAN – MAKE A DAY OF IT

A great way to visit Takht-e Soleiman (see p187) is by chartering a taxi for a day from Zanjan (around IR350,000, full day with stops) travelling on afterwards via Takab to be dropped off in Bijar. The route passes some fabulously timeless villages, particularly once you've passed the un-exotic mining town of Dandy. **Shikhar**, 20km from Dandy is dramatically backed by the pyramidal peak of **Tozcludagh** (Dusty Mountain). **Qaravolkhana**, 20km further (10km before Takht-e Soleiman), has particularly picturesque mud-block homes rising between spindly trees and a lurid, metallic-green igloo-shaped mini-shrine at its southern end. Bucolic meadowland behind offers great hikes and the possible ascent of **Mt Belqeis**, topped by fragmentary ruins of a Sassanid line-of-sight fortress.

If you take the daily Zanjan-Dandy minibus (around 9am), use Dandy's **taxi stand** (☎ 0242 352 2566) to charter a ride for the last 50km to Takht-e Soleiman.

base for visits to Palangan and a great place to learn more about Kurdish history and culture. You'll see plenty of men wearing traditional cummerbunds and baggy Kurdish trousers. Yet it's a modern, noticeably prosperous city with a large, fashionable population of students ever anxious to try out their English. In Sanandaj's Sorani-Kurdish *ju-an* means beautiful and *deso hoshbe* means thank you.

History

Originally known as Senna (as it still is to local Kurds), the city was of major importance in the Middle Ages but withered to nothing in the chaotic post-Chaldoran era. A *dej* (fortress) was built here in the early 18th century and Senna-dej slowly developed into Sanandaj. From here the powerful Ardalans emirs came to rule the last autonomous principality of Iranian Kurdistan up until 1867. Under the Ardalans the town developed many fine 19th-century buildings, though most have since been lost to rapacious 20th-century development.

Orientation & Information

Busily commercial Ferdosi St links the twin centres Enqelab and Azadi Sqs. From the latter, Abidar St slopes up into the folds of a rocky ridge that was the city's historic defence and is today the pleasant **Abidar mountain park**. The delightfully helpful, multilingual **Cultural Heritage Organisation**

of Kordestan (☎ 225 5440; www.kurdistanmiras.ir; Habibi Lane; ☎ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu) offers beautiful brochures and basic, up-to-date maps. Its office is an inner section of the lovely mansion that houses the Regional Museum. A little one-window **stationery shop** (Imam St) sells city maps that are very accurate for back alleys but dangerously outdated for main streets (many being newly constructed). To change money use **Bank Melli** (Taleqani St), but not the big branch on Azadi Sq. Internet is available in the plush Tejeri Kordestan shopping mall on Pasdaran St and at **Ashyanneh Coffeenet** (☎ 323 6187; Seyid Qotb St; per hr IR7000; ☎ 8am-11pm). The website www.sanandaj.com has city photos to send as e-postcards.

Sights

The well-renovated Lotfolla Sheikh-al-Islam Mansion houses a **Regional Museum** (Habibi Lane; admission IR20,000; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm) whose multicoloured windows (*orosi*) were designed for practicality as well as beauty; supposedly they disorientate mosquitoes. Exhibits include some extraordinarily old pottery and metalwork treasures but sadly the acoustically engineered fountain-cellar is generally kept locked.

Another attractively restored Qajar building, the **Asef Mansion** (Asif Diwan; Imam St; admission IR4000; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Tue-Sun), is now a museum of Kurdish life. Mannequins are dressed in various distinctive tribal cos-

tures that are still commonly worn in valleys around Kordestan. One room features Sanandaj's speciality wood-inlay crafts. A side courtyard just within the mansion's entrance leads through to a vaulted **gallery** (admission free) that has sporadic art exhibitions.

Several other historic buildings are only partially repaired. The trefoil-topped **Moshir Divan** is a particularly iconic mansion still in dire need of renovation. It's hidden in a walled garden off Shohada St: ring the speaker phone and hope.

The formerly grand **Khosroabad Mansion** (Khosroabad St; admission free; ☎ 10am-dusk) has an impressive central courtyard with reflecting pools and was once the palace of Ardalans emir Amonulla Khan but is now in

a fairly parlous state. It's two blocks up a quiet boulevard of plane trees from Sahar Kaveh St.

In 1813, Amonulla Khan sponsored the fine **Jameh Mosque** (Darolesan Mosque; Imam St), with tiled twin minarets and 32 interior domes. He was so pleased with the result that he reputedly had the architect blinded to prevent its repetition for any other patron. The punishment would have been more appropriate for whoever built the ugly new mosque directly behind.

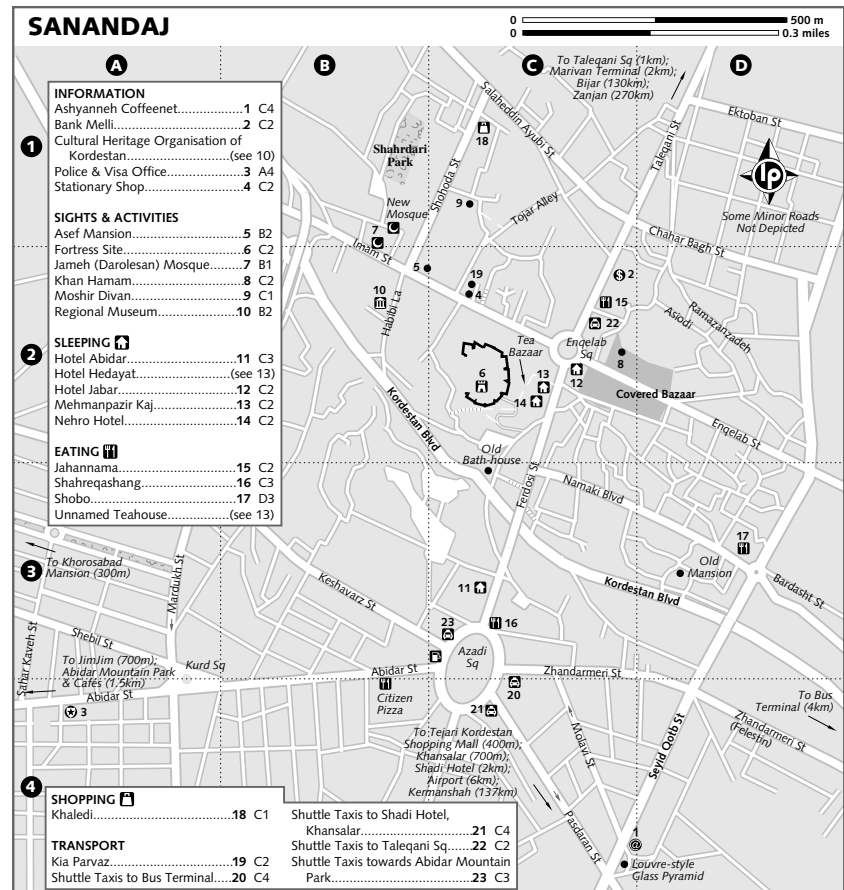
The **fortress site** (Imam St) is firmly closed for military use, though a tea bazaar huddles at its eastern edge. The **covered bazaar** is cruelly bisected by Enqelab St but within is the unusual 1805 **Khan Hamam** (admission IR2000;

THE KURDS

Just as many Westerners have the misguided impression that Iran is somehow 'dangerous', so Iranians are similarly misinformed about Kurdish areas of their own country. In fact Kurdish hospitality often trumps even that of mainstream Persians.

Kurds comprise nearly 10% of Iran's population. But there are several different Kurdish sub-groups speaking languages that are almost mutually unintelligible. Kurds around Howrman and Paveh are the most traditional and speak poetic Hurami. Those in Sanandaj usually speak Sorani. Both groups are typically Sunni. However, some Kurds around Kermanshah are Shiite. Kermanji, the language of most Kurds in Turkey, isn't widely spoken, though Kermanji satellite TV stations, some openly glorifying PKK leader Abdulla Öcalan, are starting to change this. Curiously there are pockets of native Kermanji speakers around Kalat in northeastern Iran. They were originally sent there by the Safavids to defend Iran's 17th-century borders, and never left.

There are variations between tribes, but a common element in traditional dress for most Iranian Kurdish men is the slightly tasselled headscarf (*mezare*) and the distinctive *kawa pantol* suit with heavily pleated baggy trousers. These are typically belted by a wide cummerbund (*biben*) which, when dancing, men pull off and whirl above their heads. Women wear colourful long dresses over baggy trousers and rarely resort to chador. At celebrations the real finery comes out, notably caps covered in gold coins over cascading stitched tulle scarves.



☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun). The interior has considerably restored grey-and-white floral and bird motifs, attractive tiling and remarkably lifelike 'bathers' enjoying the historic bathroom. The easily missed door has a brass 'fist' knocker: walk one mini-block into the bazaar beside Mehmanpazir Jahan, then one block right and it's on your left.

Sleeping

Mehmanpazir Kaj (☎ 323 1162; Ferdosi St; s/tw from IR60,000/80,000) The Kaj is unusually presentable for a cheap guesthouse with corridors that have renovated old wall-mouldings. The simple rooms have nicely tiled bathrooms with squeaky clean squat toilets and gushingly powerful showers. Unsigned in English, it's four doors along from the bridge that crosses Kordestan Blvd.

Nehro Hotel (☎ 225 5170; Ferdosi St; tw/tr IR70,000/90,000) This great-value place has clean, well-kept rooms above a small shopping centre. All have shower and squat.

Hotel Abidar (☎ 324 1645; Ferdosi St; s/tw with bathroom IR110,000/170,000). Rather ill-maintained, though standards vary somewhat between rooms. It's one of few cheaper places to accept single women travellers.

Shadi Hotel (☎ 662 5112; Pasdaran St extension; tw/tr US\$35/55; 📶) By far the best accommodation in Sanandaj, this very professional hotel deserves at least three of its four self-awarded stars. A choice of restaurants lead off a spacious lobby that wraps around a big copper fireplace. Staff speak English. The hotel's main drawback is its out-of-town position beyond Mellat Park but shuttle taxis from Azadi Sq pass outside (very fast!).

Other options if the above are full:

Hotel Jabar (☎ 323 6584; Enqelab Sq; tw with/without bathroom IR118,000/82,500, tr IR100,000) Very central.

Hotel Hedayat (☎ 226 7117; Ferdosi St; s/tw IR91,100/127,600, without bathroom IR80,200/106,350)

Eating

Typical *kababis* and fruit-juice squeezers are scattered along Ferdosi St, especially around Enqelab and Azadi Sqs where **Shahreqashang** (☎ 322 7706; ☎ 7.30-2.30am) serves ice creams and snacks till very late. An unnamed, unexotic teahouse beside the Hotel Hedayat is good for fried egg breakfasts or *dizi*.

JimJim (☎ 356 4213; Abidar St; coffee IR6000-9000, Pizzas from IR18,000; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4pm-midnight) Gold tables, swirly wrought-iron seats and very friendly staff make this little café a pleasant place for refreshment if walking between Abidar Park and the Khosroabad Building. In Abidar Park itself and beyond Kuhnavaar Sq there several places for ice cream, kababs and snacks.

Khansalar (☎ 662 351; Pasdaran St; meals IR20,000-45,000; ☎ 11.30am-3pm & 5.30-10pm) Sanandaj's most interesting restaurant has waiters in Kurdish costume, plays Kurdish music and has some Kurdish menu options including *dokhwa* (tinglingly tart barley soup) and various types of *köfte* (meatballs). There's *kashka bademjun* (mashed eggplant with yoghurt) for vegetarians (IR10,000). Take a shuttle taxi from Azadi Sq, alighting opposite the university just before EN Bank.

Jahannama (☎ 226 4212; Taleqani St; meals IR25,000-50,000; ☎ 8am-4pm & 7-10pm) Descend a glittery stairway into a weird stylistic mish-mash of OTT opulence, middle-class kitsch and genuine local artefacts including antique qalyans and samovars. Food is excellent and sensibly priced. Try the delicately flavoured *khoresht sabzi* (vegetable, meat and bean stew), succulent *juje pofaki* (marinated chicken morsels) or curious *tahchin agusht* (meat, raisins and barberries arranged like a gâteau between layers of saffron rice).

Shobo (☎ 324 1179; Shahid Namaki St; meals IR30,000-50,000; ☎ noon-10pm) The service is off-hand and our *chelo mahi* (fried fish on rice) was rather underwhelming, but the downstairs section has a fairly pleasant atmosphere with bed-seats and a central fountain pool. The menu has vague English translations.

Shopping

Several workshops around the Asef Mansion create and sell Sanandaj's famous woodcrafts, notably inlaid *nard* sets.

Khaledi (☎ 225 5680; Shohoda St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-8pm) This shop sells traditional musical instruments including beautiful *setars* (long-necked local lutes).

Getting There & Away

Travel agency **Kia Parvaz** (☎ 222 7770; alley off Imam St) sells tickets for Iran Aseman's daily Sanandaj-Tehran flight on a Fokker 100.

Savaris to Kamyaran (IR16,000, one hour), Kermanshah (IR35,000, two hours), Qorveh

(IR20,000) and Hamadan (IR35,000) wait in neat, well-organised queues in the main terminal area, 4km east of centre. Mini-buses leave from behind and long-distance buses from a half-hidden section to the left. Several bus companies have handy central ticket offices around Enqelab Sq.

Destination Fare Duration Departures

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR60,000	13hr	6pm Seiro Safar, Taavoni 7
Esfahan	IR36,000	9hr	8pm Taavoni 5
Orumiyeh	IR35,000	9hr	9am Taavoni 5, 7.45pm Taavoni 15
Rasht	IR34,000	7hr	6pm Taavoni 15
Tabriz	IR32,700	9hr	8pm Taavoni 5
Tehran	IR29,600-60,000	6hr	various

To Bijar, Saqqez and Marivan, savaris and rare minibuses leave from the far northern edge of town, but inbound often drop passengers 1km further south at Taleqani (Sohrevardi) Sq at the northern end of Taleqani St.

Getting Around

Fast-filling shuttle taxis (IR1000 per standard hop) from Enqelab Sq run east to the main terminal and north along Taleqani Sq to the Marivan terminal. From Azadi Sq they run down Pasdaran St to the Shadi Hotel and up Abidar St. For Abidar mountain park things are complicated by the one-way system: some cars up Keshavarz St divert and continue up Abidar St past JimJim leaving you to walk the last 15 minutes or so. A taxi *dar baste* to the upper hairpin sections of Abidar Park costs around IR10,000.

AROUND SANANDAJ

Palangan

pop 850

Brilliant Palangan is one of Iran's most picturesque villages. Its earth-coloured stone houses climb steeply up both sides of a rocky chasm while traditionally dressed villagers shoe horses in the narrow pathways or simply stand gazing from their flat rooftops. Wobbly old bridges cross the gushing river at either end of town. Unlike Howraman this is not an 'undiscovered' gem. Local tourists come in considerable numbers at weekends to picnic in the local

orchards. However, as many come dressed up in Kurdish Friday-best costumes this adds further photogenic colour to the scene. Access is relatively easy. Start in dreary Kamyaran, halfway between Hamadan and Sanandaj. Savaris for Palangan start from Salahaddin St (2km southeast of Kamyaran's main terminal), but you'll probably need to pay *dar baste* (IR60,000 return plus waiting time). The asphalted road (45km) passes some other interesting mud-and-stone Kurdish villages en route. Vehicles arrive at a car park outside Palangan's big, rather ugly fish farm. Don't be dismayed. The old village is hidden around the corner, a 15-minute stroll along a covered watercourse.

Marivan

☎ 0875 / pop 123,000

The main tourist draw of this bustling Kurdish market town is **Zarivar Lake**, 3km to the west. Backed by low, rolling mountains and fronted by marshlands the lake is invaded by pleasure boats during summer weekends, but is idyllically peaceful at other times. Marivan has several very decent hotels of which the finest is the new six-storey **Hotel Zarivar** (☎ 34 0777; s/d ste IR230,000/350,000/600,000). Fully equipped international-style rooms with fresh pine décor overlook the lake's marshy eastern end (albeit from the wrong side of the road), and there's an excellent top-floor-view restaurant. The **ITIC Tourist Inn** (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 322 1626; tr IR315,000) has 10 contrastingly dowdy old bungalows but all have bathrooms and the location is an ideal perch overlooking the lake, high above the boating jetty.

The Marivan-Sanandaj road has some very attractive stretches and passes through the mid-sized stepped village of **Negel**. This is incongruously dominated by a modernist mosque that houses the priceless **Negel Quran**. It's reputedly one of only four Qurans to survive from the time of the third caliph, Osman (ie barely a generation after Mohammad PBUH). Although it's been stolen three times, each time it has been recovered and has only a single page missing.

Sanandaj-bound transport uses Marivan's terminal, 2km east of the centre with occasional minibuses (IR8000, 2¼ hours)

and regular savaris (IR30,000, 1½ hours). Shared 4WDs into Howraman are sometimes available from Jomhuri St, but there's a better chance of finding a shared ride from **Biyakara**, a roadside junction market 17km towards Sanandaj.

HOWRAMAN

هورامان

Caught at the intersection of powerful empires, the Kurds had their homes destroyed so regularly in medieval history that, by the 18th century, a sizable part of society had foregone villages altogether and resorted to nomadism and brigandry. An important exception, thanks to its impenetrable mountain-hemmed position, was the Howraman (Orumanat) valley. This remains one of Iran's least known and most spectacular areas. In colder months you'll still see Howraman men wearing *kolobal*, brown-felt jackets with distinctive shoulder 'horns'. There is plenty of age-old stone terracing and the villages are stacked Masuleh-style, one house's roof forming the next one's yard. The Hurami Kurdish language is quite distinct from Sorani Kurdish, which replaced it in Sanandaj, though Hurami was once the dialect of choice for regional Kurdish poets. Knowing even a few words will flabbergast and delight locals you meet. *Fere-washa* and *zarif* mean beautiful, *wazh-maze* means delicious, *deset wazhbu* (literally 'hand good') means thank you to which one replies *sarat wazhbu* ('head good' ie you're welcome).

From **Biyakara**, 17km east of Marivan, an asphalted road leads up through a narrow canyon, transits the extensive village of **Dezli**, and climbs a high pass where it divides. Two roads from here lead to Paveh, both breathtakingly beautiful. What appears to be the smaller branch wiggles along the Iraqi borderline at **Dalani** (don't take photos there), bypasses **Nodesheh** and continues via **Nosud**. This is now asphalted so much easier than the alternative, but classic, route via picturesque **Kamala** (basic kabab shops) and austere **Howraman-at-Takht** (Oruman-Takht) where the asphalt ends. Howraman-at-Takht is a particularly impressive and steep array of rock-and-mud bungalows viewed most photogenically from the diminutive **Pir Shaliar shrine**, 600m beyond. Although there's now a green-

domed Muslim prayer-room here, that shrine's real interest lies in the animistic rocks and trees, behind, which are draped with votive rag-strips Buddhist-style. A Mithraic midwinter festival is reportedly still held here on the Friday nearest to 4 February. Some suggest that this is a cultural relic from pre-Zoroastrian 'angel' worship, albeit with an Islamic overlay.

The slippery mud road from Howraman-at-Takht onwards to Paveh (72km, 4½ hours) is 90% hairpins: marvellously scenic but spine-jarringly exhausting, and impossible if wet or snowy (ie most of the winter). The most appealing villages en-route are **Belbär**, cupped in a deep mountain hollow, and **Selin** where brightly attired women sit at the roadside crocheting classic Howraman slippers (*giveh*). The best views are around **Hawasawa** (visible but inaccessible from the 'road') with grandeur reminiscent of the Karakoram Highway. Asphalt returns at Ura, 21km from Paveh.

Sleeping

There's no formal accommodation en route, but if you are invited to stay you might find hospitality so overwhelming that a polite quick 'escape' is hard to arrange.

Getting There & Away

Snow allowing, Howraman-at-Takht makes a relatively easy taxi day-trip from Marivan (or even Sanandaj). There are also shared 4WDs between Biya Kaya and Howraman-at-Takht (IR20,000, 1½ hours, 50km), but you can't be sure of finding a ride back again the same day. A great idea is to engage a taxi or 4WD at Biya Kaya or Marivan and continue all the way to Paveh. *Dar baste* expect to pay IR250,000 via Nosud, or IR500,000 via Belbär. Sharing a ride, prices will vary enormously according to vehicle, driver and what other co-passengers you can find for intermediate points.

PAVEH

پاوه

☎ 0832 / pop 13,700

The rapidly developing Hurami-speaking town of Paveh (sometimes pronounced 'Pawa') makes an accessible introduction and gateway to Howraman. It's a phenomenally hospitable place with a fine setting, high up a fold of mountainside valley. Views

of Paveh's most characteristic stepped area are best from the Ferris wheel in Kazemi Park. At the back of the park you'll find the **Ateshgah Suites** (☎/fax 722 1732, 0918 888 3059; r IR150,000), where six concrete box-rooms with bathroom and unfinished kitchenette are carpeted and have blankets but no beds. It's named Ateshgah for what was once Sassanian Persia's second-greatest Zoroastrian temple complex (after Takht-e Soleimian) on a pronounced rocky knob on the mountain-top opposite. The site is very distantly visible from rooms 1 and 2 across a deep valley. Locals claim somewhat optimistically that they can walk there and back in a long day.

There's cheaper accommodation, in little dormitories at the **Ostad Khanim Mo'alle** (Female-teachers' Hostel; ☎ 722 5574; dm IR15,000) if they allow you to stay. It's supposedly for women only, but the caretaker (who speaks no English) might accept foreign men if they're suitably polite. Access is down steps marked with a restaurant sign featuring a chicken (beside the Pirayshfoad barber shop). By far the nicest dining option in Paveh is **Kapr** (☎ 722 1112; Shohoda Sq; meals IR12,000-30,000; ☎ 8am-10pm) at the top of the town's little blue-glass shopping centre.

Getting There & Away

From the main terminal 3km east of central Paveh, Kermanshah minibuses (IR5500) and savaris (IR20,000, 1½ hours) fill slowly. It might prove quicker to go in hops via Javanrud (IR3000, 45 minutes) or Ravansar (IR3500, one hour). En route you'll pass the slippery-floored **Ghuri Gahleh Cave** (Goori Gala Qar; admission IR4000; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), which claims to be Asia's longest, but what you see is very disappointing and somewhat claustrophobic.

For Marivan and Howraman shared Toyota (pronounced 'tweeter') pick-ups gather outside a trio of orange container huts, 1km west of Shohoda Sq. Departure times are highly unpredictable, typically before dawn to Howraman-at-Takht (IR70,000, five hours) if at all. To allow plenty of photo stops consider renting a taxi *dar baste* to Marivan from the delightful folks at **Kurd Taxi Agency** (☎ 722 777; Blvd Janbazan) either via Nosud (IR250,000) or in perfect dry weather via Howraman-at-Takht (IR500,000, very rough road).

KERMANSHAH

کرمانشاه

☎ 0831 / pop 765,000

By far the largest and busiest city in central west Iran, Kermanshah developed in the 4th century AD astride the Royal Road to Baghdad. Its strategic position has brought both prosperity and attack. Most recently it suffered missile damage during the Iran-Iraq War. Briefly renamed Bakhtaran in the 1980s, the city is a melting pot of Kurds, Lori and other Iranians. Though not a major tourist draw, its backdrop of glowing red-rock mountains is impressive and, if you're passing through, don't miss Taq-e Bostan.

Orientation

Kermanshah is bewilderingly vast. The main street changes names (Kashani-Modarres-Beheshti-Sheikh Shiroodi) as it stretches over 10km from the busy commercial centre (the southern third) to the foot of the magnificent rocky Parom Mountain massif. Here the Taq-e Bostan carvings, ringed by parks and outdoor restaurants, form the city's foremost attraction. Cheap accommodation is found south of the mammoth Azadi Sq, which has a mini Dome-of-the-Rock in its midst. Another key junction is 15 Khordad Sq, nicknamed Meydan Labab, actually a daunting high-speed flyover rather than a square.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Emperator (Modarres St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Upstairs. Fairly good connection.

Hasabgarnet (☎ 723 1309; Shari'ati St; per hr IR6000;

☎ 10am-9pm)

MONEY

Sepehr Exchange Co (Bank Sepah Bldg, Kashani Sq)

Changes money, unlike the big Bank Melli on Azadi Sq.

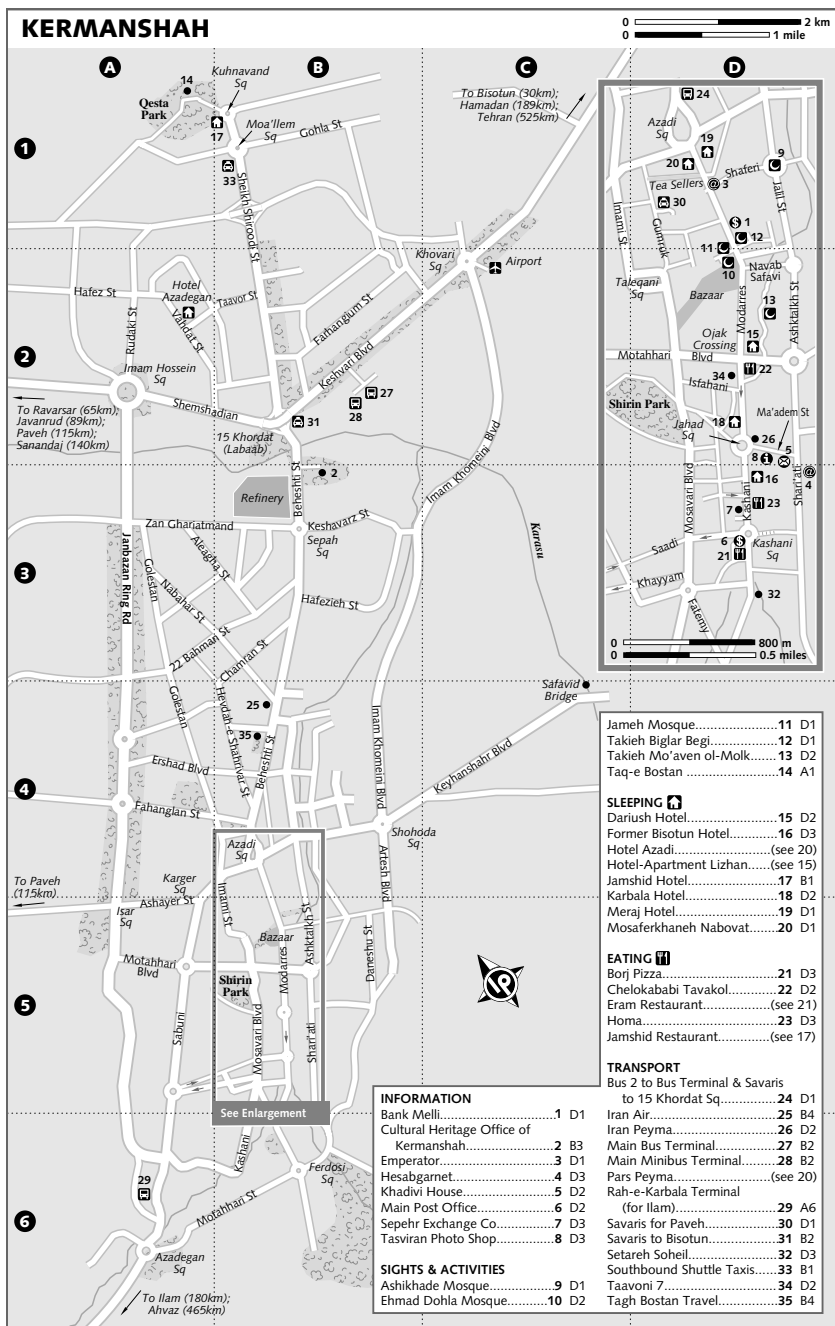
TOURIST INFORMATION

Cultural Heritage Office of Kermanshah

(☎ 836 7403; off Beheshti St; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sun-Wed, 7.30am-1pm Thu) Lavish free brochures and decent if undetailed map.

Khadivi House (☎ 721 2696; Ma'adem St; ☎ 8am-3pm Sat-Thu) The Cultural Heritage Office operates a more convenient tourist information outlet at a beautifully restored Qajar mansion and garden used as occasional exhibition place.

Shapur Ataee (☎ 0918 856 6220; shapurataee@yahoo.com; per day plus tips IR200,000) Extremely learned



and interesting tour-guide with good English and decent spoken French.

Tasviran Photo Shop (☎ 722 8560; Kashani St; ☎ 8am-9pm) Develops film and prints digital pictures. English spoken, no slides.

Sights

TAQ-E BOSTAN

تاق بستان

At the city's northern edge, Kermanshah's star attraction is **Taq-e Bostan** (admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-9pm), a towering cliff inscribed with some extraordinary **Sassanian bas-reliefs**. They are set in and around a pair of **carved alcoves**. The biggest and newest alcove features elephant-backed hunting scenes on the side walls and highlights the coronation of Khosrow II (AD 590-628) beneath which the king rides off in full armour and chain mail looking like the Black Prince (albeit half a millennium before European knights had 'invented' such armour). The second niche shows kings Shapur II and Shapur III twiddling their sword handles and enjoying a relaxed chat apparently oblivious to the footballs that have landed on their heads. To the right of the niches is the finest and oldest tableau showing Shah Ardashir II (r AD 379-383) trampling on the defeated Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (who he'd beaten in AD 363 when Shapur II's commander). He receives a crown of blessing from Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda, or perhaps from Shapur II - experts disagree. Meanwhile Mithras sneaks up behind pretending to be Luke Skywalker with a light sabre.

Surrounding open-air restaurants remain popular late into the evening. Even after the reliefs-complex closes, sympathetic lighting means that a golden glow emanates warmly from the alcoves, making the reliefs attractively half-visible through trees across a boating pond.

HOSSEINIEHS

Distinctively Shiite, Hosseiniehs are shrines where plays are acted out during the Islamic month of Moharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at Karbala (AD 680). The finest in Kermanshah is the 1913 **Takieh Mo'aven ol-Molk** (Hadad Abil St; admission IR4000; ☎ 10am-noon & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu). Enter down stairs, through a courtyard and domed central chamber decorated with grizzly scenes from the great Karbala

battle. The shrine remains very much active, pilgrims kissing the doors and looking genuinely moved by the 'footprint of Ali' on the wall of the second courtyard. This is set amid tiles depicting a wacky gamut of images from Quranic scenes, to pre-Islamic gods including Shahnameh kings, European villages and local notables in 19th-century costumes. A lovely building to the right is now an ethnographic museum displaying regional costumes and tools.

The lesser known **Takieh Biglar Begi** (☎ 827 6597; admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm Sat-Thu) now houses a fairly cursory calligraphy museum, but is worth visiting for its dazzling mirrored central dome-room. To find it take the lane opposite the fine **Jameh Mosque** (Modarres St), which has a beautiful Yazd-styled twin minaret. Then take the first alley left.

OTHER SIGHTS

The extensive, much restored **covered bazaar** slopes up from Modarres St. It's well worth exploring with a couple of dilapidated old caravansera courtyard at the western end. Within the bazaar, **Ehmad Dohla Mosque** (Jewellery Bazaar), entered through an attractive tiled portal, has a Qajar-era clock tower.

The once interesting area of older houses around the blue-domed, 20th-century **Ashikhade Mosque** (Jalil St) has now been largely bulldozed, but some curiosities remain if you poke about in the back alleys.

Sleeping BUDGET

A gaggle of cheapies lie handily close to Azadi Sq, many marked only in Farsi and almost all above shop fronts via stairways that are sometimes hard to spot.

Mosaferkhaneh Nabovat (☎ 823 1018; Modarres St; s/tw/tr IR60,000/105,000/140,000, without shower IR50,000/80,000/140,000) The friendly Nabovat has sensibly priced, no-frills rooms whose sheets are clean if cigarette-burnt and whose showers are powerful and stay hot for a reasonable while.

Hotel Azadi (☎ 823 3076; Modarres St; s/tw with private bathroom IR174,000/200,000, with shared bathroom IR108,000/123,000) Somewhat worn furniture in newly painted rooms, some with a tap, others with aging bathrooms. The hearty teacher-manager looks like an Iranian Richard Branson and enterprisingly tends to add around 35% to the bill for foreigners.

Meraj Hotel (☎ 823 3288; Modarres St; s/tw IR150,000/250,000) *Mosajferkhaneh*-style rooms albeit with small shower booths and squat toilets. Access up stairs guarded by a stuffed goat.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Karbala Hotel (☎ 727 3665; fax 727 5999; Parking Shahrdari; s/d with breakfast US\$25/37; ♿) There are some attractive mouldings in the foyer, but the recently redecorated rooms at Karbala remain fairly characterless with war-torn bathrooms.

Dariush Hotel (☎ 722 7001; Motahhari Blvd; s/d IR300,000/350,000; ♿) Partial redecoration has failed to rid the Dariush of its 1970's atmosphere, typified by the Blue Peter DIY look of the corridor ceilings. Room décor now uses a pleasant coffee-and-cream colour scheme, but bathrooms (with Western toilet) are distinctly aging.

Bisotun Hotel (Kashani St) Kermanshah's most delightful old hotel is sadly closed for now while the owner (wanting to demolish it) battles with the government (trying to protect the lovely building).

Jamshid Hotel (☎ 429 9666; fax 429 6002; Kuhnavand Sq, Taq-e Bostan; d/tw/tr/ste US\$58/87/112/136) Easily the best of Kermanshah's top-end hotels the new Jamshid Hotel has an eccentric white-stone 'castle' façade, but interior décor and service are elegantly international and restrained. Rooms have all the usual extras down to minibar, kettle and logo-ed slippers.

Hotel-Apartment Lizhan (☎ 721 0102; fax 727 6666; Motahhari Blvd; apt IR600,000; ♿) Self-contained apartments with full kitchens sleep up to six in two bedrooms, which might have a 1970's Cindy Doll feel but are 110% clean, comfy and new. The perfumed entranceway features Leonardo's 'Last Supper'; well, not the original obviously.

Eating

Around Azadi Sq and on Motahhari Blvd near Ojak Crossing there are snack stalls and confectioners selling Kermanshah's archetypal Nan Berenji cookies (literally 'bread-rice'; a round semi-sweet confection that's usually yellow and flavoured with saffron). There's a great concentration of kabab cafés and open-air teahouses near the Taq-e Bostan carvings and several restaurants around Kashani Sq.

Chelokababi Tavakol (☎ 722 7184; Modarres St; meals IR18,000-25,000; ☎ 11.30am-3pm & 5.30-9pm) This would be the backpacker meeting place, if there were any backpackers. Excellent value Iranian food is served in an atmospheric once-grand old bathhouse that's slightly gone-to-seed. Charming owner Ali Rahban looks somewhat like Dudley Moore, speaks good English and can rustle up eggplant delights for vegetarians. Head downstairs through white-framed doors with coloured glass panels.

Borj Pizza (☎ 728 9741; Shahid Ashrafi St; medium pizzas IR21,000-26,000; ☎ 10am-2.30pm & 5-10pm) Though not quite as swish as nearby Zagros Pizza, its unusually good Borj Special Pizza (IR26,000) has enough flavour that you don't need to reach immediately for the ketchup. Rare indeed in Iran.

Eram Restaurant (☎ 727 8506; Bahmany Bldg, Shahid Ashrafi St; meals IR22,000-50,000; ☎ 9am-3pm & 6-10.30pm) Beneath the same fake 1920's-style tower building as Borj Pizza, Eram's staff are as eccentric as its wavy brickwork interior, which culminates in green-bronze framed copies of the Bisotun reliefs. It serves mainly kababs, but does *fesenjun* at lunchtime.

Homa (☎ 723 4246; Kashani/Dabir Azam Sts; meals IR30,000-55,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-11pm) Combining the atmosphere of a teahouse with the calm elegance of an upmarket restaurant, Homa has embroidered tablecloths and blue-brick dining niches ranged around a gently trickling fountain. Though not a patch on homemade equivalents, the semi-sweet *fesenjun* (IR30,000) is ideally complemented by their acidic *dugh* (churned sour milk or yogurt mixed with water).

Jamshid Restaurant (☎ 424 4185; basement, Jamshid Hotel; meals IR45,000-85,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 8-9.30pm, longer in summer) Surveyed by a gigantic bronze eagle and huge samovar, this unusual dining room is cut in two by an artificial 'stream'. Try the local speciality *khoresht khalol* (lamb stewed with almonds) rather than the three-skewer *dandeh kabab* (IR65,000), which is famous more for its excessive size than for its flavour.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Flights to Tehran (IR315,000) leave thrice daily on **Iran Air** (☎ 824 8610; Beheshti St; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu, 7.30am-1pm Fri), plus four times weekly on Iran Aseman. Tickets

are sold by **Tagh Bostan Travel** (☎ 824 6222; Vila St; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat-Thu, 10am-1pm Fri), **Setareh Soheil** (☎ 727 1115; fax 727 1116; Kashani St; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Sat-Thu) and other travel agencies.

BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

The huge main bus and minibus terminals are side by side about 8km northeast of Azadi Sq. Use savaris or bus 2 from Azadi Sq. Several offices sell advance tickets including **Iran Peyma** (Javad Sq), **Taavoni 7** (Modarres St) and very handy **Pars Peyma** (Modarres St) beside the Hotel Nobovat, which offers tickets to almost anywhere. Useful options:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR60,000	9hr	8am, 9pm via Andimeshk
Esfahan	IR60,000	9hr	5pm Pars Peyma
Orumiyyeh	IR70,000	12hr	5pm Iran Peyma
Tabriz	IR45,000-75,000	8hr	6am, 6pm-10pm
Tehran (west)	IR29,000-IR60,000	9hr-9hr	Taavoni 13, TBT frequent

For Khorramabad, Taavoni 7 has an 8.30am bus via Eslamabad (IR35,000, 4½ hours), but it's generally much quicker in hops. Start with a minibus to Harsin (IR3800, 45 minutes), a sizeable town in an agricultural valley surrounded by moorland bluffs reminiscent of a drought-stricken Scotland. Cross town by shuttle taxi (IR2000, 3.5km) and continue by savari to Nurabad (per person/car IR10,000/50,000, 40 minutes) from which there are minibuses/savaris (IR4500/15,000, 1½ hours) to Khorramabad.

For Hamadan there are direct minibuses (IR10,000, 2½ hours) and savaris (IR40,000).

For Sanandaj, savaris cost IR35,000 (two hours), but strangely it can prove cheaper to break the savari journey in Kamyaran (IR12,000, one hour), which works well for visiting Palangan.

Transport to Ilam and Qasr-e-Shirin (for the Iraq borders) uses the quite separate **Rah-e-Karbala terminal** (Sabuni St) in the southwest corner of Kermanshah.

Savaris to Paveh (back/front IR20,000/25,000) depart from Gumruk St close to Azadi Sq.

Savaris to Bisotun (IR5000, 25 minutes) start from the southeast slip-road of the intimidating 15 Khordat (Labab) overpass.

TRAIN

A new railway is planned linking Tehran to Baghdad (Iraq) via Kermanshah and Qasr-e-Shirin, but construction will probably take years.

Getting Around

Bisotun-bound shuttle taxis from 15 Khordat Sq pass the airport gates. Shuttle taxis from Azadi Sq head in all directions, most usefully to the terminals and to Mo'alleh Sq for Taq-e Bostan. On Modarres St, city buses usefully drive the 'wrong way' (northbound), but northbound shuttle taxis have to wind around the one-way system until 8.30pm.

AROUND KERMANSHAH

Bisotun

☎ 0832

Awesome dry cliffs line the north flank of the busy, partly industrialised Kermanshah-Hamadan road, looking especially majestic when approaching Bisotun from Sahneh. At Bisotun these cliffs are inscribed with a series of world-famous **bas-relief carvings** dating from 521 BC. They were awarded Unesco recognition in 2006. The key feature is a well-preserved Darius receiving chained supplicants while a *faro-har* (winged Zoroastrian 'angel' denoting purity) hovers overhead. Though hard to make out from ground level, the scene is surrounded by cuneiform inscriptions expounding upon Darius' greatness in three 'lost' languages (Elamite, Akkadian and Old Persian). In 1835, eccentric British army officer Henry Rawlinson bemused locals by dangling for months over the abyss to make papier-mâché casts of these texts. It's hard to know how his superiors gave him the time off to attempt so life-threatening an eccentricity, nor why Rawlinson didn't just toodle up to Ganjnameh (p205) and copy those inscriptions instead. Nonetheless, his transcriptions later allowed the deciphering of the cuneiform scripts, a thrilling breakthrough that renders Bisotun as significant to Persia-ophiles as the Rosetta Stone is to Egyptologists.

To reach the carvings jump out of a savari from Kermanshah where the road entering Bisotun's swings 90° right (east). Then walk through a large car park following the mighty cliffs west. You'll pass a

بیستون

club-wielding little **Hercules statue** from 148 BC (albeit with recently replaced head) sitting on a rocky ledge. A little further is a very eroded **Parthian relief of Mithrades II**, partly overwritten by a 17th-century Arabic inscription by Sheikh Alikhan. The main reliefs face east, high above this, requiring a good zoom lens and early-morning sunlight for decent photos.

Some 200m beyond the main site is the huge, smooth **Farhad Tarash** rock face, popular with climbers who consider it among Iran's greatest challenges. In fact it was artificially smoothed in the 7th century AD for an inscription that Khosrow II never got around to scribbling. Walk 10 minutes' further west, crossing some lumpy archaeological diggings, to find a well-restored but unused 1685 caravanserai.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The savari stop for Kermanshah and for Sahneh (and thence Kangavar and Hamadan) is a 10-minute walk east through Bisotun town, just beyond Bank Keshvari.

HAMADAN

☎ 0811 / pop 528,000

Known in classical times as Ecbatana, Hamadan was once one of the ancient world's greatest cities. Pitifully little of antiquity remains, but significant parts of the city centre are given over to excavations and there is a scattering of historical curiosities. Sitting on a high plain, Hamadan is graciously cool in August, but snow-prone and freezing cold from December to March. In the summer the air is often hazy, but on a rare, clear spring day there are impressive glimpses of snow-capped Mt Alvand (3580m) preening itself above the ragged neo-colonial cupolas of Imam Khomeini Sq. A popular summer retreat, Hamadan's main draw card for Iranian visitors is its proximity to the Ali Sadr Caves (p206), but these are vastly over-rated.

History

According to ancient Greek historians, Median king Deiokes fortified a palace here in 728 BC, and over succeeding decades the Median capital of Ecbatana grew into an opulent city. Its massive walls were said to have had seven layers, the inner

two coated in gold and silver, the outer one as long as that of classical Athens. By 550 BC it had fallen to the Achaemenid Persians, and King Cyrus was using it for his summer court.

The Medes retook the city in 521 BC but were kicked out again within six months by Darius who was so pleased with himself that he recorded his achievements in stone beside the Royal Road at Bisotun (p199).

After centuries of wealth and pre-eminence under Parthian and Sassanian dynasties alike, Ecbatana/Hamadan faded somewhat after the Arab conquest in the mid-7th century AD, but it became the regional capital under the Seljuks for some 60 years in the late 12th century. Known as Hegmataneh (Meeting Place of Sufis) in Old Persian, Hamadan suffered the usual devastations by Mongols (1220) and Tamerlane (1386), but only hit a major decline in the 18th century following a Turkish invasion. It began to recover in the mid-19th century and was totally redesigned to a modern city plan in 1929 by German engineer Karl Frisch.

Orientation

Frisch's master plan is a cartwheel design with six avenues radiating from the circular hub of Imam Khomeini Sq, widely referred to simply as 'meydan'. The wheel distorts to the northeast around the lumpy hill of Tappeh-ye Mosallah and the excavation site of Hegmataneh Hill. Distances between blocks are deceptively long if you're walking.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Coffeenet Arshia (Imamzadeh Sq; per hr IR7000;

☑ 8am-10pm) Slower connection.

Coffeenet Rozhan (Takhti St; per hr IR8000;

☑ 9am-2pm & 4-9pm) Handy for the Arian Hotel.

Sib Coffeenet (Khaje Rashid Blvd; per hr IR8000;

☑ 9am-10pm) Good connection and decorated with lots of smiley-faces, hearts and ceiling netting. Three other coffeenets are within a block.

POST

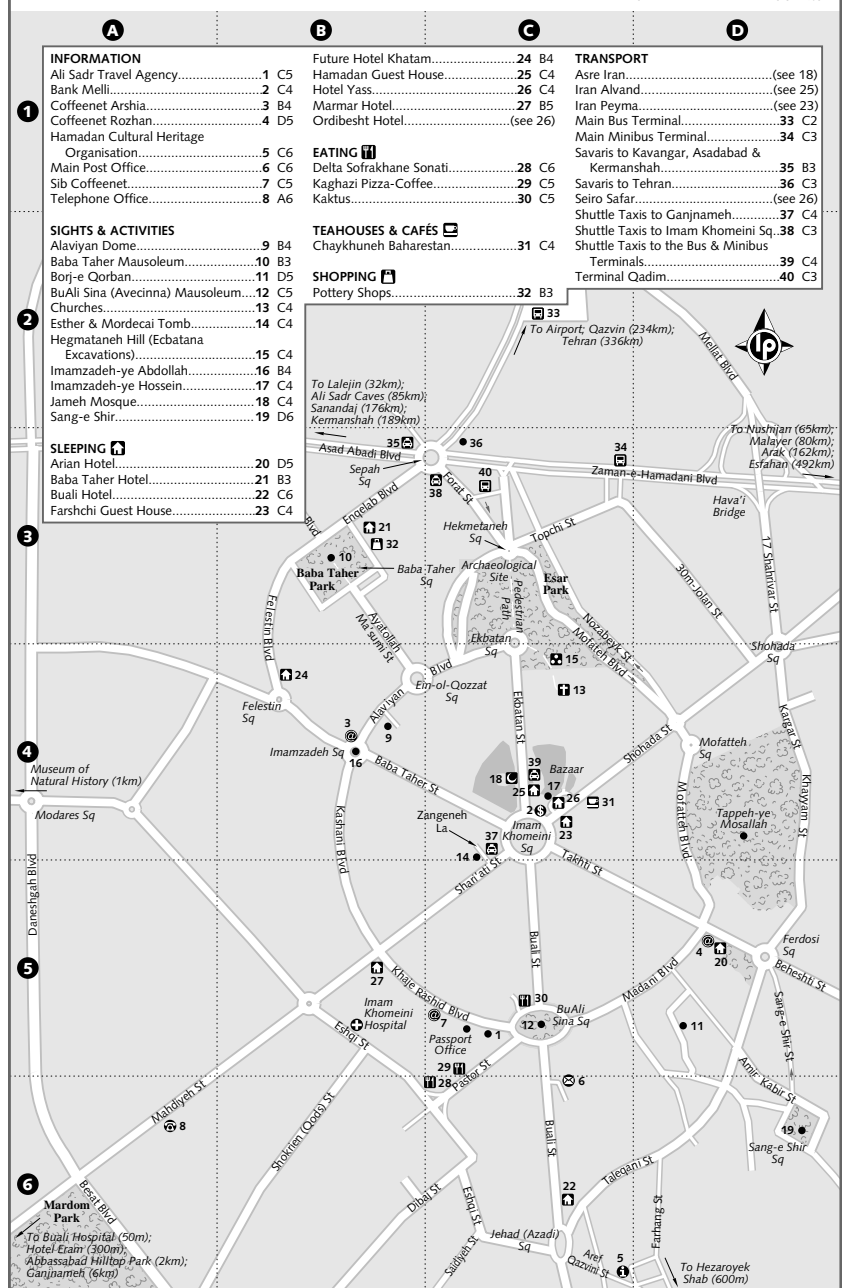
Main Post Office (off Buali St)

Sub Post Office (Khaje Rashid Blvd)

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (Mahdiyeh St) Take a shuttle taxi down Shari'ati St.

HAMADAN



TOURIST INFORMATION

Ali Sadr Travel Agency (☎ 828 2011; Khaje Rashid Blvd; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7.30pm Sat-Thu, 10am-noon Fri) Although a commercial agency, the English-speaking staff are super-friendly and happy to answer general questions.

Hamadan Cultural Heritage Organisation (Sazemane Jahangardi; ☎ 827 4771; www.hamedanmiras.ir, in Farsi; Gagh-e Nazari, Aref Qazvini St; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat-Thu, 8am-11am Fri) Staff speak minimal English but merrily load up visitors with beautiful books and pamphlets as though it were Christmas. It's worth coming just to visit their delightful Qajar mansion and gardens.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Passport Office (Edeareh Goznameh; ☎ 826 2025; 1st fl, Khaje Rashid Blvd; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Sat-Thu) The austere concrete building looks forbidding behind high green railings and guarded by armed soldiers. But friendly staff assured us that applications for visa extensions are now granted routinely.

Sights**ESTHER & MORDECAI TOMB**

بقعه استر و مردخای

This vaguely Tolkeinesque, 14th-century **tomb tower** (Aramgah-e Ester va Mordekhai; ☎ 252 2285; 12 Zangeneh Lane; admission by donation, typically IR10,000 & a pen; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm Sun-Thu, 8am-noon Fri) was once Iran's most important Jewish pilgrimage site. These days visitors are few and far between and some of the Hebrew inscriptions have been repainted

so often by those who evidently couldn't understand them, that they have become stylised beyond readability.

Traditionally this is considered to be the burial site of Esther (for whom a book in the Bible's Old Testament is named) and her cousin/guardian Mordecai (who possibly wrote it). Jewish orphan Esther had married Xerxes I (Biblical King Ahasuerus) who'd ditched his first wife, Vashti, for being too much of an early feminist. Esther's better-honed feminine wiles are later said to have saved the Jews from a massacre planned by Xerxes' commander (and Mordecai's enemy) Haman. With names eerily reminiscent of Babylonian gods, Esther (Ishtar?) and Mordecai (Morduk?) might be purely allegorical. Some suggest that the tower actually commemorated Jewish queen, Shushan-Dokht, who persuaded her husband, Yazdgerd I (r AD 399-420) to sanction a renewed Jewish colony at Hamadan.

The tower is mostly hidden behind a high grey metal barrier – ring the door bell (no English sign) and hopefully Rabbi Rajad will scurry out to greet you, opening the 400kg stone-slab door to the tower and telling you (in French or Farsi) to don a scull-cap (provided) before crawling into the inner tomb area. He's an avid collector of foreign pens, which thus make an ideal tip.

BUALI SINA

Had you studied advanced medicine in 17th-century Europe, your 'text book' would have been the great medical encyclopaedia, *Canon Medicinae*. Incredibly, this had been written 600 years earlier. Its author, remembered in the West as Avicenna, was in fact the great Iranian philosopher, physicist and poet Abu Ali Ibn Sina (AD 980-1037), 'BuAli' Sina for short. If you're a fan of aromatherapy you can thank BuAli for the development of steam distillation with which essential oils are extracted. His ideas on momentum and inertia were centuries ahead of Newton's. And (following al-Kindi and al-Farabi), his blending of Aristotle's ideas with Persian philosophy helped inspire a golden age of Islamic scholarship. However, this philosophy, rapidly led to a polarisation of views about the man whose ego was reputedly as great as his intellect.

Born in what is today Uzbekistan, BuAli studied medicine in Bukhara where his sharp mind and photographic memory had him running rings around his teachers. Political intrigues in Bukhara meant BuAli fled westwards to Jorjan (Gonbad-e Kavus, p342) only to arrive as Qabus, his illustrious prospective sponsor, dropped dead. Initially Buali proved luckier in Hamadan, where he successfully treated the ailments of the ruling emir and was promoted to vizier. However, when his patron died, Avicenna was thrown into prison for corresponding with Abu Jafar, a rival ruler based in Esfahan. Perhaps the suspicions were true. Four months later the Esfahani stormed Hamadan releasing BuAli who thereupon worked with Abu Jafar for the rest of his life, coincidentally dying while on a return trip to Hamadan some 14 years later.

OTHER MAUSOLEA & TOMB TOWERS

Hamadan's icon is the **BuAli Sina (Avicenna) Mausoleum** (Aramgah-e Buali Sina; ☎ 826 1008; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-4pm winter) a 1954 tower that looks something like a vast, unfinished concrete missile. It is loosely modelled on Qabus's 1000-year-old tower in Gonbad-e Kavus (p342), which Buali probably saw inaugurated. Paying the entry fee (entry from west) allows you to see the single-room **museum** of Avicenna memorabilia, his tombstone, a small library and a display on medicinal herbs. But the tower itself is better observed from a distance.

Of a similar era but architecturally less successful is the heavily buttressed **Baba Taher Mausoleum** (Aramgah-e Baba Taher; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-5.30pm). It looks like a failed prototype for Thunderbird 3. There's little reason to go inside unless you enjoy Persian calligraphy, inscribed here on some gently opalescent stone wall-slabs.

The **Alaviyan Dome** (Gonbad-e Alaviyan; Shahdad Lane; admission IR3000; ☎ 8am-7pm) is now a misnomer, as the 12th-century green dome, immortalised in a Khaqani reference, has long since been removed. The dome-less brick tower remains famous for the whirling floral stucco added in the Ilkhanid era. This ornamentation enraptured Robert Byron in *Road to Oxiana*, but frankly it's ugly. In the crypt (narrow steps down from the interior at the back) is the plain-blue tiled Alaviyan family tomb covered with votive Islamic embroidery.

A useful landmark is the golden dome of the unfinished **Imamzadeh-ye Abdollah** (Imamzadeh Sq). More appealing is the 1883 **Imamzadeh-ye Hossein**, tucked behind the Hotel Yass in a little courtyard with an ancient mulberry tree. The 13th-century **Borj-e Qorban** is a classic 12-sided, pointy-roofed tower tomb, but it looks sadly out of place in its dowdy housing-estate setting.

HEGMATANEH HILL

تپه هگمتانه

In the mud beneath this scraggy low hill lies Hamadan's ancient Median and Achaemenid **city site** (☎ 822 4005; admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun, 8am-noon Mon). Small sections of the total area have been fitfully excavated by several teams over the last century, most extensively in the 1990s. The most interesting of several shed-covered 'trenches' allows you to walk above the

excavations of earthen walls using plank walkways on wobbly scaffolding. The walls' gold and silver coatings are long gone of course and it's hard to envisage the lumpy remnants as having once constituted one of the world's great cities. A nicely presented museum tries to fill the mental gap, showing some of the archaeological finds including large amphorae, Seljuk fountains, Achaemenid pillar-bases and Parthian coffins.

A few decades ago when the government relocated inhabitants from the hill and demolished their homes in the name of archaeology, they spared a pair of 19th-century **churches**, which remain at the southern edge of the site.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

A vaulted passage of the bazaar leads into the courtyard of the large Qajar-era **Jameh Mosque** (admission free). The off-line south *iwān* leads into a hall (currently under restoration) over which there's an impressively large brick dome. The new north *iwān* is lavished with patterned blue tilework that continues on four of the mosque's six minarets. Some areas are restricted to men only.

Sang-e Shir is a walrus-sized lump of rock eroded beyond recognition by the rubbing of hands over 2300 years. Supposedly once a lion, you'd never look twice at were it not the only surviving 'monument' from the ancient city of Ecbatana whose gates it once guarded. Some claim it was carved at the behest of Alexander the Great.

Sleeping BUDGET

These three cheap *mosaferkhanehs* are conveniently located close to central Imam Khomeini Sq.

Farshchi Guest House (Mosaferkhaneh-ye Farsi; ☎ 252 4895; Shohada St; tw/tr/q/5-bed IR60,000/80,000/100,000/130,000, showers IR5000) By *mosaferkhaneh* standards the Farshchi is a cosy, friendly place with something of a family atmosphere, plastic flowers and samovars giving vague touches of humanity to the area of shared squat toilets and washbasins. Most rooms are four-bedded.

Hamadan Guest House (☎ 252 7577; Ekbatan St; bed IR60,000; (P)) This large, confusing and male-dominated place has four- and six-bed

dorms for which locals pay around IR20,000 per person. Foreigners pay IR60,000 per person, but will usually get the whole room between them. It's a fairly long walk to the shared toilets whose doors don't lock. There's no English sign: take the green-framed stairway beyond the first alley-yard as you walk down Ekbatan St from the *meydan*. Ask for help as there's no reception desk.

Ordibesht Hotel (☎ 252 2056; Shohada St; s/tw/tr/q IR100,000/150,000/180,000/200,000) Bright and unusually airy, this no-nonsense *mosaf-erkhaneh* is compulsively cleaned and Ali speaks some English. There are separate toilet facilities for men and women and 'free showers for foreigners'. Most rooms are quads (IR150,000 for single occupancy).

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Except for the Arian, Hamadan's better accommodation is lacklustre and charges 'foreigner rates' in US\$ that are around 70% higher than local rial prices. However, discounts of 30% are not uncommon if you ask. The new Hotel Khatam at Felestin Sq should be complete by the time this book goes to print.

Hotel Yass (☎ 252 3464; fax 251 2680; Shohada St; s/tw US\$20/25) With an excellent location and some early 20th-century features, the Yass could be a pleasant choice given some TLC. But for now the rooms are dreary with institutional beds, aging showers and feeble-flush Western toilets. The building is marked in Latin letters but no English is spoken. Reception is on the 3rd floor.

Marmar Hotel (☎ 827 1840; Shari'ati St; tw IR300,000) In Japanese, mar-mar would translate as 'so-so'. Very apt. A creaky glass elevator takes you to rooms where crimson curtains and bedspreads are lit by bright unshaded lamps. The bathrooms could be cleaner and there's no shower curtain. No English (spoken or signage) except to state the misleading foreigner rack-rate of US\$50: that's baldly ignored should you ask in Farsi.

Arian Hotel (☎ 826 1266; www.arianhotel.com; Takhti St; s/tw/tr US\$40/50/60) At this inviting midrange hotel, each floor has a different, gently appealing style of décor with modernist lamps on the 3rd floor and a more opulent period look on the 4th. Check out the 2nd floor to see what they consider 'British style'. The lobby has a couple of

gratuitous Persepolis-aping columns. Some English is spoken.

Hotel Eram (☎ 825 2001; Eram Blvd; d US\$75; P ☎) Behind a swishly upgraded lobby, rooms are less impressively renovated with aging bed-boxes and half-length baths. It's at the south-west edge of town. Some English spoken.

Buali Hotel (☎ 825 0856; Buali St; tw/ste US\$87/138; ☎ ☎) The standard rooms have fridge, BBC World TV and floral pseudo-silk fabrics, but the bathrooms are rather outdated. Suites are a considerable step up.

Baba Taher Hotel (☎ 422 6517; fax 422 5098; Baba Taher Sq; s/tw/ste US\$103/134/161; P ☎) The mirror-tiled lobby and restaurant offer a dazzlingly garish festival of Las Vegas kitsch while corridors test out the full palate of pastel colours. The reasonably well-appointed rooms are thankfully somewhat more subdued, but barely justify the discounted price (from US\$70) let alone rack-rates. English spoken.

Eating

Apart from Hezaroyek Shab, none of the following have menus in English. For that you'll have to resort to hotel restaurants of which the BuAli's (meals IR40,000 to IR70,000) is about the best.

Chaykhuneh Baharestan (☎ 254 2777; Shohada St; dizi IR7000; ☎ 6am-7pm) This atmospheric, if decidedly down-market 100% male teahouse is charmingly adorned with metalwork, sepia photos and Quranic murals. It's ideal for a greasy fried-egg breakfast, cheap *abgusht* (aka *dizi*) lunch or a puff on the qalyan, and is populated by photogenically haggard old white-beards. To find it, head upstairs through a partly illustrated doorway opposite a small branch of Bank Maskan.

Kaghazi Pizza-Coffee (☎ 825 3870; Pastor St; coffee IR5000-12,000, snack meals IR16,000-24,000) Pine furniture and a few African masks bring some character to this gently stylish two-room café whose pizzas are refreshingly crispy and thin-crust.

Delta Sofrakhane Sonati (☎ 826 1813; basement, Esfaji St; qalyan IR10,000, meals IR20,000-50,000; ☎ 6am-7pm) This delightful neo-traditional retreat lies beneath the unremarkable Delta restaurant using separate stairs from outside. Tea (IR5000) comes in ceramic Lalejin pots, women can smoke qalyan on carpeted bed-seats without undue attention and the chicken 'biriyani' comes on a flaming

plate. Don't miss the scrumptious *kashka bademjan* (IR12,000), eggplant paste with yoghurt, mint and roasted red peppers.

Hezaroyek Shab (1001 Nights; ☎ 824 5217; Farhang St; local mains IR15,000-35,000, European dishes IR35,000-50,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7.30-11pm) This cosy if slightly garish restaurant is quite a trek from the centre (IR5000 *dar baste* taxi) but there's a wide Irano-European menu and owner Pari Bakhtiyari speaks fluent English. Call ahead.

Kaktus (Buali Sq; meals IR30,000-70,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 7-10.30pm) Down easy-to-miss stairs, Kaktus remains one of Hamadan's most popular middle-class kabab restaurants. It's tastefully lit if not imaginatively decorated.

Shopping

Hamadan region is famous for its leatherwork, wooden inlay, ceramics and carpets. Try contacting the **Union of Carpet Co-operatives** (☎ 252 8622) if you can't find what you want in the rather tatty carpet bazaar. Several **pottery shops** (Baba Taher Sq) sell colourful, locally famous pottery from Lalejin, 32km away.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Kish Air flies to Tehran (IR195,000, twice weekly). Tickets are sold by Ali Sadr Travel Agency (p202).

BUS

All long-distance bus services start from the new **Tehran terminal** (Enqelab Blvd), but most companies have city centre **ticket offices** (☎ 7am-noon & 3-7pm) near Imam Khomeini Sq. **Seiro Safar** (☎ 252 2860) and **Iran Peyma** (☎ 252 1213; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-7pm) are either side of the Ordibesht Hotel. **Asre Iran** (☎ 252 5376) and **Iran Alvand** (☎ 252 5763) face each other across Ekbatan St.

Useful bus departures:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departures
Ahvaz	IR70,000	11hr	6-7pm Seiro Safar, Asre Iran
Esfahan	IR38,500	8hr	8am, 10.30am, 9pm, 10pm Alvand
Mashhad	IR120,000	21hr	9.30am Asre Iran
Qazvin	IR14,000	3½hr	2.30pm Seiro Safar
Orumiyeh	IR34,900	9hr	1.30pm Iran Peyma
Rasht	IR21,500	6hr	9.15 Iran Peyma
Tehran	IR40,000	6hr	7-10.30am, 2-4pm and 11.30pm
Zanjan	IR18,000	4hr	Taavoni 5, 3.30pm

Tehran buses take either the expressway via Takestan or the more direct road via Saveh, but few go via Qazvin. Expect delays after fresh snow.

MINIBUS & SAVARI

There are two minibus terminals. Use the **Main Minibus Terminal** (Zaman-e Hamadani Blvd) for Kermanshah, Sanandaj (maybe changing in Qorveh), Bijar (at 11am and noon via Qorveh) and Ali Sadr (several daily). Use **Terminal Qadim** (Ekbatan St) for hourly minibuses to Tuyserkan, more frequent services to Malayer (and thence Nahavand or Borujerd and on to Khorramabad), and to Asadabad (for Kangavar). Savaris to Malayer wait outside.

Savaris to Kermanshah (IR40,000), Kangavar (IR15,000), Sanandaj (IR35,000) and Tehran (IR120,000) leave from relevant points near Sepah Sq. The Tehran savaris are well-organised with a sign-up **booth** (☎ 423 8669).

Getting Around

Shuttle taxis run along the spokes of Hamadan's cartographic wheel for IR500 (one block), IR1000 (longer hop) or IR5000 (*dar baste*). Shuttle taxis to the bus and minibus terminals leave from Ekbatan St.

AROUND HAMADAN Ganjnameh

گنج نامه

Literally translated as 'Treasure Book', Ganjnameh is so named because for years its **cuneiform rock carvings** were thought to be cryptic clues to help find caches of mythical Median treasure. Belatedly translated, the texts turn out instead to be a rather immodest thank you to the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda from the Achaemenid monarch Xerxes (486-466 BC) for making him such a very, very good king. To emphasise the point the message is repeated in three languages (Old Persian, Elamite and neo-Babylonian) on rock faces some 2m high. A second panel similarly commemorates his dad, Darius.

The site is in a rural mountain valley at Hamadan's westernmost extremity, some 8km from the centre. From the parking area the carvings are a very obvious two-minute stroll passing a row of tatty teahouses, souvenir stalls and snack bars. Just beyond is a 9m-high waterfall that becomes a popular

ice-climbing spot when frozen in winter. At weekends the site can get crowded and messy with rubbish but several long-distance paths lead directly up the peaceful fore-slopes of Mt Alvand making for relatively convenient yet bracing hikes.

A narrow lane continues 4km to the Tarik Dare **ski slopes** (☔ Thu & Fri winter) and in summer a road winds on very attractively right across Mt Alvand's lower slopes to Oshotoran near Tuyskeran (opposite).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Shared taxis (IR2000) take approximately 20 minutes departing from Shari'ati St near the Esther & Mordecai Tomb. They're fairly frequent at weekends, but midweek you'll probably have to charter (from IR10,000 each way). Finding a ride back can take a while.

Ali Sadr Caves

غار علیصدر

☎ 0812

For most Iranians these highly commercialised **caves** (Qar Ali Sadr; ☎ 553 3440; locals/foreigners IR5000/150,000; ☔ 8am-4pm winter, 8am-9pm summer) constitute quite simply western Iran's greatest tourist attraction. You might not agree. Indeed if you have visited vastly more impressive equivalents in France or Lebanon, you are best to be prepared for a major disappointment.

The caves rise to a maximum internal height of 40m, with a river (up to 14m deep) flowing through the middle. Visits through the caves take about two hours with no 'escape' possible once you've begun. You start and end with a 20-minute trip on the underground river in roped-together paddle-boats. The boat route is colourfully lit, though the big central cavern has many more steps than geological superlatives. In summer the caves feel cool, so bring a sweater. In winter it's refreshingly warm compared with the snow-bound exterior.

Close to the cave entrance **Ali Sadr Hotel** (Mehmansara; ☎ /fax 553 3312; tent/tw/bungalow IR50,000/250,000/200,000; P ☎) has a decent restaurant and reasonable rooms with bathrooms. Out of season prices are negotiable and the location would make it a delightfully peaceful getaway and possible trekking base. **Stalls** around the cave entrance sell drinks and there's even a **teahouse** within the cave.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Hamadan, minibuses run to Ali Sadr village several times daily (IR7000, 1½ hours). Taxis want around IR200,000 return with waiting time: consider stopping briefly en route to admire the remarkable mud walls of fortified farm village **Mihamar Ohlea** at the roadside. Tours by Hamadan's Ali Sadr Travel Agency in Hamadan (p202) cost IR4500 per person including return transport and snacks but not entrance fees.

Malayer

ملایر

☎ 0851 / pop 181,000

Taking public transport between Hamadan and Borujerd or Nahavand you'll probably have to change in Malayer (pronounced ma-loy-ya). If so, look out for the ancient beehive-domed **Yakhchad-e Mirfattah** (usually locked). This was the medieval equivalent of a deep freezer: ice put inside in winter would stay frozen well into summer. It's amid trees and suburban fields, visible from Tusi Blvd (the ring road), less than 1km southwest of Taavon Sq from which savaris leave to Borujerd and Nahavand. Savaris for Hamadan leave from Revolution Sq (Meydan Enqelab) 2km northeast, IR1000 by shared taxi.

Around Malayer

NUSHIJAN (TAPPEH NUSH-E JAN) نوشیجان
Sitting on an abrupt pimple of hill amid flat, comparatively fertile plains this unique **Median Citadel** (☎ 225 1225; admission IR4000; ☔ 8am-5pm) originally hosted the fortified grain

ANAHITA

Zoroastrianism had always venerated the four elements but it was fundamentally a monotheistic faith worshipping Ahura Mazda. So when Achaemenian King Artaxerxes II (404-359 BC) starting wall-papery Kangavar's temple in solid gold to honour Anahita (آناهیتا) as an anthropomorphic 'water goddess', he seems to have been acting under the heavy cultural influence of his Greek wife. Not that that stopped Persia warring with Greece: the temple's incredible wealth was eventually seized and plundered by Alexander the Great's Greek forces around 331 BC.

THE LORS OF LORESTAN

Call them Lurish, Lori or Lor, these proud people (around 2% of Iran's population) are best known to Westerners for the magnificent bronze-crafts of their hazily documented Kassite forebears. Around 1800 BC, these polytheistic horse-breeding warriors were pushing forward the boundaries of metallurgical technology, casting exquisite bronzes whose fine decoration belies their often mundane purposes. The Lurish golden age was destroyed by centuries of medieval wars that wiped out virtually all settled agriculture. Lorestan lapsed into lawless nomadic 'backwardness' such that the Lors, like many Kurds, remained predominantly semi-independent nomads until well into the 20th century. In 1931 the valiant Freya Stark considered Lorestan to be the 'wastes of civilisation' as she risked brigands, bandits and police ire seeking ancient gravesites from which to procure Lurish bronzes. Today admiring such bronzes is much easier thanks to Khorramabad's Falak-ol-Aflak (p209) or Tehran's National Museum of Iran (p104) and Reza Abasi Museum (p114).

The Lori language is a dialect based on Old Persian with additions from Arabic and modern Farsi. A handy greeting is *damaqeqaqi* (are you well?); 'delicious' is *tomdara*.

stores and temples of a 7th-century BC settlement. It's relatively small and shaded by steel-girders with ugly shed-roofing, but nonetheless makes a worthwhile 3km diversion from the Malayer-Hamadan road. Before climbing the hill, stop at the sparse exhibition centre where friendly staff use models and pictures to make sense of the mud-daub walls, arches and tunnels that you'll see up top. Then drive on 600m to a second car park part-way up the hillock from which climbing to the site entrance takes just three minutes. However, you'll need a certain level of athleticism to reach the rear *apadana* (audience hall) behind which are the (rather plain) remnants of what archaeologists have dubbed Iran's earliest fire temple.

Tuyskeran (Towiserkan)

تویسرکان

☎ 0852 / pop 39,000

This ancient city has a covered bazaar and a 17th-century **madraseh** (totally rebuilt in 1991); but the main tourist attraction is **Gonbad-e-Hayaquq-Nabi**. Try saying that with your mouth full of Tuyskeran's famous walnuts. It's an eight-sided brick tower with clamshell-grooved conical roof sitting in a garden on the west edge of town, 500m off Shahid Ashraf Esfahani Blvd. The tower is considered to be the tomb of Jewish prophet Habakkuk, whose book within the Bible's Old Testament is mostly a vitriolic rant against the Chaldeans. Possibly a guardian of the temple of Solomon, Habakkuk was probably amongst the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon. Maybe he

'retired' to the Hamadan area after Darius released them in 538 BC.

In the hills above town (passing close to a golden domed mosque en route), is **Mir Razi Mausoleum** (☎ 4228420; admission free) a 1975 memorial to Safavid sufi poet Mir Razi-ed-Din-e-Artisani (died 1627). The architecture is along the lumpy lines of Hamadan's Baber Taher tower but the site is peaceful and attractive.

Becoming one of the first foreigners ever to stay at the unsuspecting **Mosafekhaneh Tadayon** (☎ 422 0006; Bahonar St; s IR41,500, d & tr IR80,000, tw with/without bathroom IR70,000/60,000) is a great way to immerse yourself in rural Iranian life. Rooms aren't fancy but they're better value than anything in Hamadan and just getting in is quite an adventure. The sign (in Farsi) leads into a shopping passage halfway between the bazaar and Farshid Sq. There's no reception: just ask someone to find the elderly gentleman who runs the place.

Minibuses (IR6500) and savaris (IR20,000) to Hamadan loop right around via Joukar, departing from a point some 3km east of the bazaar in Tuyskeran's Sarabi suburb. For the very scenic mountain road via Oshotoran and Ganjnameh (p205) you will need to charter a taxi (during summer-only).

If you're heading for Kermanshah, a direct bus service departs at 8am from Basij Sq. Alternatively you could change in Kangavar (45km) to which minibuses (IR2700) and savaris (IR7000) depart from further up Ashrafi Blvd.

Around Tuyserkan OSHTORAN

اشتران

On a grassy knoll above the low-rise, mountain-backed village of **Oshtoran** are the extensive ruins of **Qal'eh Hamza Khan**. This mud-walled fortress is comparatively intact with all four corner-towers well-preserved and much of the interior looking as though it had been lived in till relatively recently. The 20km road from Tuyserkan passes through walnut groves then crosses a low pass with great views across broad valleys to an array of mountains. These look superb when snowcapped, but too much snow can block the road's continuation across Mt Alvand's foothills from Shahrestan to Ganjnameh (p205).

FARASVAJ

فرسوج

A 5km side trip off the Tuyserkan–Kangavar road, **Farasvaj** has a modest **Safavid bridge** and an impressively restored (but currently unused) 17th-century **caravanserai** at the top of Chamran St. Returning to the main road there are excellent views towards the rugged bulk of **Mt Khan Gormaz** (2863m) whose slopes form a nature reserve protecting ibex and wild goats.

Kangavar

کنگوار

☎ 0837 / pop 58,000

A chaos of rocky lumps, dressed-stones and ancient column-bases tumble down a grassy hillside in the middle of Kangavar town. That's virtually all that remains of Kangavar's famous 2300-year-old **Anahita Temple** (admission IR4000; ☎ 8am–sunset). While not really warranting a long detour, it's conveniently on the Kermanshah–Hamadan road so worth stopping en route. Marvel at the workmanship that created such perfect stone columns, a massive 4ft in diameter. And at the force of all the earthquakes that toppled them. An impressive section of 5m-tall stone wall topped with stubby columns is easily viewed for free as you walk up Raja'i St from Araji St (the main Hamadan road). Raja'i St culminates in a quietly attractive bazaar area where there's a basic **mosaferkhaneh**.

The savari terminal for Hamadan is 2km east of the ruins. It might prove quicker to change cars halfway in Asadabad (easy as there's a single departure point for Hamadan and Kangavar there). For Kermanshah, flag down a passing bus or use the Nahavand ter-

minal at the western end of town and make savari hops via Sahneh and/or Bisotun.

Nahavand

نهادند

☎ 0852 / pop 67,000

Nahavand was founded by Alexander the Great's general Seleucus Nicator well over 2000 years ago. It was also the site of a pivotal battle in AD 642 that effectively sealed Arab-Muslim victory over Sassanid Persia. However, the town has little to show for all that history. Apart from a couple of column fragments plonked in the Nikanjam Passaj shopping centre (Abuzar Sq), there's no sign of the 193 BC Seleucid temple that once graced a local hill. And the historic Jameh Mosque took a direct bomb hit during the Iran–Iraq War.

Minor attractions if you're passing through include the mural-filled 1852 **Hamam-e Haji Agha Torab** (former bathhouse), and the central, eye-catching if architecturally unremarkable **Nabi-e Sardab Mosque**. Its gilt-tipped, octagonal, blue minaret is visible as you shuttle between the Borujerd terminal (south) and the main northern bus terminal (for Kangavar, and for Hamadan via Malayer).

KHORRAMABAD

خرم آباد

☎ 0661 / pop 339,000

Little visited by foreigners, Khorramabad is nonetheless scenically appealing and a possible base from which to discover Lorestan province, the glorious Zagros Mountains and the Lori (Lurish) people.

Khorramabad lies in a long, wide gorge sandwiched by dry, impressive crags in which have been found at least five Palaeolithic cave-dwelling sites. Historians disagree whether Khorramabad was the site of Shapurkhist or of Samha. Both are ancient 'lost' cities that had advanced irrigation and milling systems over 1500 years ago, judging from archaeological clues like the Gerdab-e-Sangi cistern.

In the Middle Ages a fortified central citadel was built here by the Atabegs, the powerful clan who ruled Lorestan from the 12th century until subjugated by Shah Abbas around AD 1600. The citadel later became the residence of Persian governors who developed it into a classical fortress that soared so impressively that it became known as Falak-ol-Aflak (Heaven of Heavens). In the 1830s, the governors moved into a mansion

at the castle's base (now a military academy) and the fortress became a prison. It's now an interesting museum.

Orientation

Around the fortress, narrow central streets are attractively lined with *chinar* (plane) trees, but driving is awkward thanks to an infuriating one-way system. Bypassing the melee, busy Shari'ati St (the main Ahvaz–Hamadan highway) hosts the bus offices and several hotels.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

AryaNet (Motahhari St; per hr IR7000; ☎ 9am–9pm) The best of several grudgingly slow coffeenets around Motahhari/Enqelab Sts.

Shaba-key Sabz Coffeenet (Imam Khomeini St; per hr IR6000; ☎ 8am–8pm) Reasonable connection, easy to miss up two floors near Shohoda Sq.

MONEY

Export Development Bank of Iran (Bank Tose-shadarat; Alavi St; ☎ 9.30am–3.30pm Sat–Wed, 9.30am–12.30pm Thu) Changes money relatively painlessly (10 minutes) for a flat US\$1 commission. Take an Alavi taxi from beside Bank Melli (no exchange).

POLICE REGISTRATION

Police Station No 5 (☎ 218 2864; Valiasr Ave) For registration (necessary to stay in cheap guesthouses in Khorramabad) ask for 'Amaken', present passport or passport/visa copy and fill a form stating where you'll stay. The office is around 800m from Kyo Sq, entered from an alley beside Ghavamin Finance.

POST

Post office In a yard off the castle access lane.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Hassan Niknam (☎ 0916-361 1135; niknamhassan@yahoo.com) Dignified and well-informed, Hassan co-manages the Karon Hotel, speaks great English and acts as guide and tourist helper. He can put mountaineers in touch with members of the local climbing federation. **Lorestan Cultural Heritage Organisation** (☎ 221 6718; www.lorestanmiras.ir; Lorestan University, Falak-ol-Aflak Lane; ☎ 7am–2pm Sat–Thu) Nobody in the office speaks English, but their beautiful maps and brochures are given away free by better hotels.

Sights

FALAK-OL-AFLAK قلعه فلک الافلاک This unmissable eight-towered **castle** (☎ 220 4090; www.lorestanmiras.org, in Farsi; admission IR4000;

KHORRAMABAD STREET NAMES

Official Name	Commonly Used Name
Imam Hossein Sq	Meydan Shaqayeq
22 Bahman Sq	Kyo Sq
Basij Sq	Shimsherabad Sq
Daneshju St	Shimsherabad St
Imam Khomeini St	Alavi St

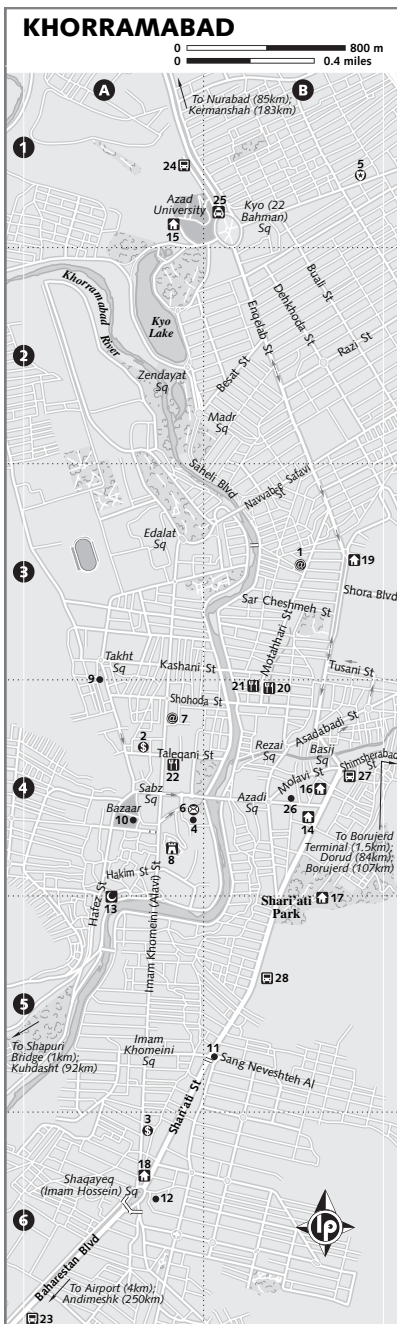
☎ 8am–6pm, 8am–8pm summer) dominates the city centre from a rocky promontory. It looks especially dramatic when floodlit at night and offers extensive city views from the crenellated battlements. The entrance weaves up past sellers of tacky Lurish tourist trinkets into a courtyard where you can dress up in Bakhtiyari tribal garb for a posed photo. Above the inviting **teahouse** (see p211) a grating covers the dizzyingly deep castle **well** (43m), but there are other 'falling danger' spots where a 'disciplinary' watches out for your safety as well as your behaviour.

The main buildings around the rear courtyard form a very well-presented **ethnographic museum** showing vignettes of Lurish life accompanied by folk music appropriate to each theme. A video-room shows off regional attractions (English version available) and an exhibition culminates with a hoard of Lorestan bronze daggers and axe-heads recently discovered at Sang Tarashan, around 40km away.

OTHER SIGHTS

If you have time to kill there are several minor curiosities, many very historic but none nastily photogenic. Khorramabad's unremarkable bazaar sells a lot of colourful scarves and hosts the modern **Imamzadeh Zaid-ibn-e-Ali** with tiled north façade. The low-key **Tavasuli Mosque** (Shakaster St) was also photogenic till they built a big mobile telephone tower behind it. **Gerdab-e-Sangi** (Takht Sq) is a 1600-year-old Sassanian stone reservoir, 18m in diameter, said to be the world's oldest. Spring water wells up within and once provided the proto-city's water supply. Behind is a steep rocky slope indented with caves said to have been home to early humans around 40,000 years ago.

In a stone-edged circle beside thundering Shari'ati St is an **inscribed stone** (Sang Neveshteh



Alley) from around AD 1150, apparently setting out details of local grazing rights.

The 20m-high pale brick tower called **Minar-e Ajon** (Ajon Minaret; Shaqayeq Sq) might look like a chimney but it was actually a 900-year-old signalling point for caravans. Ruins of the ancient **Shapuri bridge** (Pol-e-Eshkeseh) are stranded in a field off the Khudasht road. Five of the 28 original arches remain intact.

Sleeping

Mehmanpazir Iran (☎ 221 9529; Shari'ati St; s/tw/tr IR70,000/75,000/90,000, no shower) The friendly Iran is the most inviting and best maintained of several cheapies near Basij Sq. But there's a snag. Before you can check in you'll need to register with police across town (p209). Some rooms have new beds, others mattresses on the floor. Light sleepers might be disturbed by road noise and lack of door-curtains.

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Venon Hotel (☎ 323 4076; Enqelab St; s/tw/tr/q IR150,000/360,000/480,000/580,000) Above an expansive restaurant, sparklingly clean, new rooms have tiled floors, displays of plastic flowers and curtained-off shower booths. Toilets are shared. It's bearable value for single travellers but otherwise overpriced.

Hotel Karon (☎ 220 5408; Shari'ati St; s/tw/tr with breakfast US\$20/30/37; P) A major makeover has given the Karon a swish new foyer, lift and cosmetically improved rooms. The wood-effect vinyl floors could use more frequent washing and water supply remains dodgy, but staff are obliging and Hassan speaks excellent English.

Shaqayeq Hotel (☎ 420 3390; Shaqayeq Sq; s/tw US\$20/30) Seriously tatty last resort.

Shahrdari Inn (☎ 220 2227; Shari'ati Park; s/tw US\$45/60; P) Clad in multicoloured marble behind the trees of the park, attractive rooms in cream and pastel-blue have bay windows with sitting areas. A few have castle views (eg room 127). Bathrooms are passable if less polished. Some staff speak English.

ITTIC Tourist Inn (☎ 322 5672; Jamejam St; bungalow IR310,000; P) Semi-detached bungalow units with crazy-paving walls are peacefully perched above the popular Kyo boating lake. They are fully renovated with good bathrooms, wooden floors and velvet-ten bedspreads.

Eating

Cheap but unexciting *kababis* bracket Mehmanpazir Iran with nicer versions along Motahhari St. Fancier restaurants are often serenaded by caged birds rather than CDs. A Lorestan speciality is *chelo-gusht*: most of a boiled sheep lurking in a mound of rice.

Moka (☎ 221 9760; Motahhari St; coffee IR5000-12,000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4pm-midnight) Enjoy real espressos (IR10,000) and amusingly creative sundaes in what looks like a sauna-room tucked behind a party supply shop. It's nicer than it sounds!

Shem Shad Nemune (☎ 220 5235; mains IR21,000-35,000; ☎ 8am-3pm & 6-10pm) Almost next door to Yalda, the fried trout (IR26,000) is good but mind those bones.

Yalda (☎ 220 5128; Taleqani St; meals IR27,000-50,000; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-10pm) Moulded ceilings, pastel-toned wall paintings and a gently upmarket feel make this a congenial place to taste *chelo-*

gusht (IR40,000). Opt for *baqelipulau* (herb pilaf) when selecting the type of rice. *Mast* (yogurt) sets off the flavours perfectly.

Pizza Park (☎ 220 5888; off Motahhari St; pizzas IR21,000-26,000; ☎ 9am-11pm) Across a small triangle of park from Moka this is Khorramabad's nicest central pizzeria.

Castle Teahouse (Falak-ol-Aflak; tea IR2500-5000; ☎ 8am-6pm, 8am-8pm summer) This vaulted stone chamber has the obligatory carpeted bed-seats and serves lovely cinnamon tea in china pots. However, it's a little touristy and the only food, a delicately flavoured *ash* (IR5000), comes disappointingly in disposable plastic bowls.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Taban Air tickets to Tehran (IR250,000, daily) are sold by helpful **Soleyman Travel** (☎ 220 0600; Muhajadine-e Islam St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Sat-Thu). The airport is 5km south of Imam Hossein Sq.

BUS

Long-distance buses leave from the relevant company offices found along Shari'ati St. Most have morning and evening services to Esfahan (IR40,000, eight hours) and Tehran (IR45,500, eight hours via Qom). Taavoni 15 has services to Orumiyeh (normal/Volvo IR52,000/90,000, 17 hours) at 3.30pm and to Sanandaj (IR25,000) at 1.30pm.

Taavoni 1, 7 and 15 have night buses to Ahvaz (IR40,000, six hours) via Andimeshk. However, to see the beautiful canyon-lands south of Pol-e Dokhtar you'd be better off travelling by day to Andimeshk by minibus (IR12,000, 4½ hours) or savari (IR35,000, 3½ hours) from the small **Andimeshk terminal** (Baharestan Blvd), 800m south of Imam Hossein (Shaqayeq) Sq.

For Kermanshah, Taavoni 17 (Peke-saba) has a direct bus at 2pm (IR25,000, 3½ hours), but if the timing is inconvenient it's easy enough and often faster to do the trips in hops via Nurabad and Harsin (see p199). Savaris to Nurabad (IR12,000, 85km) and Alashtar (IR8000) leave from Kyo Sq, minibuses starting from 200m further up a feeder road.

Incoming minibuses from Borujerd (IR6000, two hours) and Dorud (IR5000, 1¾ hours) might drop you at Basij Sq, but departing they use a terminal 1.5km further

northeast up Shimsherabad (Daneshju) St. Scarily fast savaris take barely half the time.

Getting Around

Handy shuttle-taxi routes (IR1000) run along Shari'ati St (Shimsherabad-Shaqaye) and between Basij and 22 Bahman Sqs (Shimsherabad-Kyo) with two diversions northbound due to the one-way system. More centrally, a northbound route runs up Imam Khomeini St to Sabz Sq then up Kashani St to Takht Sq, returning by wiggling through traffic jams around the back of the bazaar.

AROUND KHORRAMABAD

Dorud & Lake Gahar

☎ 0665 / pop 103,000

Dominated by a huge, satanic cement factory, **Dorud** is useful as a launching point for hiking to beautiful, mountain-ringed **Lake Gahar**, famed for its succulent *qizil arla* fish. The trailhead is **Haft Cheshmeh**, a lonely refuge hut, car park and drinking-water spring 23km from Dorud. In midsummer guides and ponies are usually available here. The trek skirts 4070m **Mt Oshuran** taking around four hours out, less back. Bring your own food and tent. Even if you don't hike, great views justify the car journey as far as **Darbe-Astaneh**, a mud-house village 18km from Dorud.

Friendly but easy-to-miss, the basic **Mosaf-erkhaneh-e Baharestan** (☎ 422-2919; Shari'ati St; s IR60,000) is upstairs opposite Dorud's cinema.

The porticoed **Mehmansara Shahr-dari** (☎ 422 0020; Beheshti Blvd; tw/tr IR170,000/250,000, summer IR200,000/300,000) has spacious, very comfortable rooms and a decent restaurant featuring great photos of local beauty spots. It's in a park off Dorud's main through-street 1.5km west of the train station, 2.5km east of the bus terminal where minibuses and scorchingly fast savaris run to Khorramabad and Borujerd. Esfahan-bound buses pick up passengers around midnight from taavoni offices on Beheshti Blvd. Incoming trains are met at the station by savaris for both Khorramabad and Borujerd.

THE DORUD-ANDIMESHK RAILWAY

This super-scenic railway trundles through beautiful, remote and virtually

roadless valleys skirting Lorestan's pointy peaks and passing through dozens of tunnels. Most trains run in the evenings but there's a day service departing Andimeshk at 5.30am, returning from Dorud at 2pm. It's timetable to take 5½ hours but often takes nearer seven. Often overcrowded to the point of sheer mayhem, the journey is a cultural experience but also a test of endurance.

Bisheh Waterfalls

The tiny village of **Bisheh** (Bishehpuran) hides one of Iran's prettiest **waterfalls**. It cascades in 30m chutes off a tree-topped gully then trickles in rivulets into the river below. In summer many local tourists make the scenic day trip from Dorud (train only) or Khorramabad (new road, no public transport). By autumn only their litter remains and you'll have the village to yourself, the entire population of children following you Pied Piper-style. The best waterfall views are from across the river using a new footbridge at the northern edge of the village. From Dorud the day train takes about half an hour to Bisheh with fabulous glimpses of ziggurat-shaped **Mt Parvis** en route. You'll have an ample 4½ hours in Bisheh before the 7pm Tehran-bound train arrives to take you back to Dorud.

Sepid Dasht

The railway does a switchback at **Sepid Dasht**, the biggest village en route. Sepid Dasht itself isn't architecturally attractive but its mountain backdrop is spectacularly spiky. Rare savaris bump their way to Khorramabad on a scenic road that passes close to the **Gerit Falls**.

Talezang

Of anywhere along the line, isolated **Talezang** is the most tempting hop-off point for trekking into the mountain wilderness. This place is six stops south of Bisheh, three hours north of Andimeshk. One hiking challenge is to make for **Shevi Waterfall**, which emerges directly as a spring from a cliff then falls around 100m in a wide sweep. The Shevi Waterfall is reportedly around five hours walk from Talezang with some climbing involved. Bring food and tent.

Borujerd

☎ 0622 / pop 257,000

In transit between Khorramabad and Hamadan you might need to cross this large, mountain-backed town. Sadly a March 2006 earthquake seriously damaged Borujerd's three remaining historic monuments, strung out over a kilometre off central Jafari St. The Seljuk blue-domed **Jameh Mosque** and fine Qajar-era **Soltani (Imam) Mosque** (Safa St) remain closed as sections are dangerously close to collapse. The celebrated **Imamzadeh Jafar** (Imamzadeh Lane) has reopened but its unusual, conical spire remains scaffolded.

On a pronounced hill 2½km northwest of centre, the upscale **Zagros Hotel** (☎ 350 4901; tw/stc US\$95/115) is a local tourist attraction in itself with park-like grounds, a 'geyser' lake and a (currently broken) mini-cable car. The hotel has an impressive three-storey modern atrium, decent restaurant and appealing if pricey pseudo-traditional teahouse section. Rooms have Scandinavian-style pine interiors and vast picture windows, but carpets are starting to look slightly scuffed. For the best mountain views take rooms 202 to 207. Creaky glass elevators.

Savaris leave regularly for Dorud (IR10,000, 45 minutes) and Khorramabad from Dora Sq, around 5km southeast of the centre with most minibuses using the main terminal 600m nearer town. Savaris to Nahavand and Malayer start around 1km northwest of the Zagros Hotel. For Hamadan change in Malayer.

Alashtar Valley

Before Tamerlane's 14th-century ravages, Alashtar had been a major city. However, by the time Freya Stark came tomb-raiding here in the 1930s, all that remained was a nervous garrison of Persians huddled insecurely within a mud-walled fortress, in fear of the 'wild' Lurish tribes beyond. The town briefly made world news in 2005 when an unmanned drone spy-plane (presumed to be American) crashed nearby.

Alashtar's mountain-rimmed setting has a certain grandeur at the end of a long, agricultural valley from Nurabad. The road south passes through a canyon 10km before Khorramabad nicknamed the 'Velvet Mountains' for its eye-catching mossy

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bluffs. Several grassy areas here make popular picnic sites.

ANDIMESHK

☎ 0642 / pop 174,000

Flat, uninteresting Andimeshk has useful transport connections to Shush, Dezful and Shushtar. You'll need to sleep here if taking the scenic day-train to Dorud. **Hotel Rostan** (☎ 424 1818; Imam St; s/tw/tr IR140,000/170,000/200,000) is handily central between Sa'at and Beheshti Sqs. Rooms have good bathrooms but the curiously patchy décor gives the impression that ambitious redecoration works stopped in mid-flow. Don't assume that the air-conditioners actually cool.

Just east of Azadegan Sq, the relatively up-market **Hotel Bozorg Andimeshk** (Andimeshk Grand; Southern Bypass; ☎ 422 2100; fax 422 9295; s/d US\$64/91; ☎ ☎) is out of the centre but handy for the zoo-funfair and bus terminal. Rooms with balconies and decently equipped bathrooms just about justify local prices (single/double IR316,900/479,600), but seem vastly overpriced at foreigner rates.

Many snack bars and small restaurants surround Beheshti Sq offering samosas, falafels, burgers, kababs and some particularly outstanding *dizi*.

Getting There & Away BUS, MINIBUS & SAVARI

Almost any service from Ahvaz can also be booked ex-Andimeshk at the new **main bus terminal** (Azadegan Sq), 1.5km south of Beheshti Sq on the southern ring road. Iran Peyma runs to Esfahan at 7.45am (IR42,000), 10am (IR32,800) and 8pm (IR70,000, Volvo). They also have overnight Volvos to Tabriz (IR100,000, 2.30pm) and Shiraz (IR75,000, 4pm).

Savaris to Dezful (IR2000, 15 minutes) leave frequently from Sa'at Sq. Savaris for Ahvaz depart from Beheshti Sq. Minibuses for Shush (IR2250, 45 minutes) use a hidden yard off a lane directly west of Beheshti Sq.

For Khorramabad, minibuses (IR12,000, 4½ hours) and more frequent savaris (IR35,000, 3¼ hours) depart from Enqelab St around 2km north of the centre. They travel via **Pol-e-Dokhtar** (Virgin Bridge) a town that's named for a 3rd–10th century brick bridge of which only a single chunky

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brick arch remains, straddling the main road in a canyon further north.

TRAIN

The **train station** (Taleqani St) is handily central, one short block west of Sa'at Sq (two blocks north then one west from Beheshti Sq). Arrive way before the 5.30am departure if you want a seat on the brilliantly scenic but appallingly overcrowded day train to Dorud via Bisheh (see p212). A 9pm train originating in Andimeshk runs overnight to Tehran (14 hours).

SHUSH

☎ 0642 / pop 44,000

Shush (Susa) was once among the greatest cities of ancient Persia. Now it's a pleasantly small, relatively new town with a vast archaeological site, splendid castle, enigmatic Tomb of Daniel and bustling market. Across the square from Hotel Nazr is **Paradise Coffeenet** (☎ 522 0780; Haft-e Tir Sq; per hr IR8000; ☎ 10am-midnight).

History

An important Elamite city from about the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, Susa was burnt around 640 BC by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, but regained prominence in 521 BC when Darius I set it up as the Achaemenids' fortified winter capital. At that time it was probably similar in grandeur to Persepolis.

The palace survived the city's fall to Alexander the Great in 331 BC, and indeed Alexander married one of Darius III's daughters here. Still prosperous in the Seleucid and Parthian eras, Susa re-emerged as a Sassanian capital. During Shapur II's reign (AD 310–379) it regained renown as a Jewish pilgrimage site and became a centre of Nestorian Christian study. Evacuated in the face of Mongol raids Shush disappeared into the sands of time, only re-emerging after 1852 when the British archaeologist WK Loftus became the first to survey the site. His work was continued by the French Archaeological Service from 1891 more or less continuously until the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Sights

ANCIENT CITY

Entered from YaZahra Sq on Khomeini Blvd, the **archaeological site** (admission IR4000; ☎ 8am-

7pm, closes after heavy rain) occupies the whole southern flank of modern Shush. To the right as you enter, the landscape is entirely dominated by the **Chateau de Morgan**. On the site of an Elamite acropolis, this crenellated masterpiece looks like an Omani desert fortress but was in fact built by the French Archaeological Service between 1897 and 1912 to defend researchers from raids by local Arab and Lurish tribesmen. Notice a cuneiform-inscribed brick incorporated into the castle's west doorway.

Turning left at the top of the site's main entry ramp, you can walk through the site of the 521 BC **Palace of Darius**. That is now just a muddy rise on which a 30cm-high labyrinth of brick-and-wattle wall fragments marks the former room layout. At the northern rim are the massive stone bases of what was once an **apadana**, of six by six 22m-high columns topped with animal figures. A couple of double-horse capitals are partly preserved on the paved terrace.

To the east, beyond the partly paved **Royal Gate**, the **Royal City** is a misleading name for barren, lonely undulations stretching to the far horizon. It's more sensible to loop back towards the castle amid muddy gullies, pottery shards and thorn thickets alive with darting desert foxes. At the western side of the castle there's an earthen watchtower above ancient caves and niches.

SHUSH MUSEUM

Some tourists visit this bright new **museum** (Susa Park, Khomeini St; admission IR3000; ☎ 7.30am-1pm & 3.30-7pm, Tue-Sun) quite by mistake, thinking that they've actually entered the archaeological site (whose access track is right beside it). The museum's five rooms display seriously ancient stone- and pottery-work from regional archaeological sites. Highlights include a giant bullhead capital from Shush's **apadana**, a lion-hugging Hercules statue from Masjid-i Soleiman (p218) and some spooky clay masks from Haft Tappeh (opposite).

TOMB OF DANIEL

As in a typical imamzadeh, Muslim pilgrims crowd the glittery interior of the **Tomb of Daniel** (Aramgah-e Danyal), kissing the zarih grate around a green-draped grave slab. Here, however, this behaviour

is particularly intriguing given that Daniel has at best tangential relevance to Islam. In fact, he's a semi-mythical Jewish figure who supposedly served as a faithful **satarap** (administrator) to Darius I (522–486 BC). Dubiously recorded in the Bible as having 'tender love with the prince of the eunuchs' (Daniel 1, 9) he is best remembered for unenviable ordeals in lions' dens. These exploits were already over 300 years old when recorded in the Old Testament (Daniel 6, 16-23).

Whatever the real provenance of the Daniel relics, they brought Shush an extremely lucrative flow of Jewish pilgrims from right across the Middle East. Great wealth accrued to the townsfolk living nearby, but those living across the river were missing out on the bonanza and wanted a share of the pilgrims' shekels. A compromise was arranged whereby Daniel's bones would spend alternate years on either riverbank, bringing prosperity to both communities. In the 12th century, travellers reported that an even more fanciful arrangement had left the holy remains dangling in a crystal coffin suspended from a metal bridge across the middle of the river.

What happened to them during the Mongol destruction is not recorded, but the present structure with its distinctive, pinecone faceted spire, so typical of Khuzestan tombs, was only built in 1871.

The tomb complex is easy to find in the bazaar area, two blocks from the museum. It remains open late into the evening.

Sleeping & Eating

Apadana Hotel (☎/fax 521 3131; s/tw US\$22/33; ☎ ☎) Comfortable and central above a good restaurant, the Apadana's rooms are fully equipped, though the wallpaper is starting to look a little tatty and water pressure can be rather low in the upper rooms. Staff are friendly and some speak English.

Hotel Nazr (☎ 522 9611; Haft-e Tir Sq; tw/q IR200,000/250,000; ☎) Rooms have good bathrooms and are newer than the Apadana's, but the place lacks any atmosphere and is about 1km further from the historical sites. From the minibus yards walk 300m up Shar'ati St. Prices are hazily defined so it's worth bargaining.

Plenty of snack bars and **kababis** are scattered near the museum and Haft-e Tir Sq.

Getting There & Away

Long-distance buses en route to Ahvaz can often be persuaded to drop passengers off on the main highway, 2km east of town. Shuttle taxis head from this point into the centre, but not necessarily at 2am when many southbound buses go by. Heading out of Shush, you'll usually need to go first to Andimeshk or Ahvaz.

Minibuses to Ahvaz depart frequently from Khomeini Blvd, 800m northeast of the archaeological site. For Andimeshk (IR2250, 38km) and Dezful they use small, separate yards across the road. The Apadana Hotel can arrange sensibly priced agency taxis for Choqa Zanbil (IR90,000 return) and Shushtar.

CHOQA ZANBIL & HAFT TAPPEH

Haft Tappeh هفت تپه
Muddy Elamite-era mounds pimple this otherwise-flat oasis area. Several are thought to have been small ziggurats dating from around 1400 BC. None are mind-blowingly exciting, but recent archaeological work has rendered them a little more interesting. Beside the site, a Unesco-sponsored **museum** (admission IR2000; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu) is beautifully set amid bougainvillea and soaring palms. It displays archaeological finds including a curious black sarcophagus. Photo-rich explanations detail the excavation, restoration and partial reconstruction of Choqa Zanbil (25km away).

The Haft Tappeh site is 3km off the Ahvaz-Andimeshk highway. Beyond the museum, after crossing the train tracks there's a 1km unpaved short cut south to the Choqa Zanbil road.

Choqa Zanbil

چغاز نبیل
One of Iran's Unesco World Heritage sites, Choqa Zanbil's magnificent brick **ziggurat** (admission IR5000; ☎ 7am-6pm, guarded 24hr) is the best surviving example of Elamite architecture anywhere. Even if you're not a fan of ancient ruins, the great bulk and splendid semi-desert isolation of Choqa Zanbil can't fail to impress. Although close access is prevented after 6pm, the ziggurat arguably looks most appealing after dusk when the golden floodlighting emphasises

THE ROMAN CONNECTION

Some of Shushtar's then state-of-the-art irrigation systems were built using Roman technology and labour: legionnaires defeated at the AD 259 battle of Edessa (today's Şanlıurfa in Turkey). Their leader, vanquished Valerian, became the only Roman Emperor ever to be captured alive. Sassanian king Shahpur I was so proud of his victory that he recorded the event with boastful carved reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam (p283) and Bishapur (p286). Stories vary as to Valerian's fate, but Shushtaris insist that he was imprisoned in Qal'eh Salosel (opposite). In some versions he was systematically insulted then brutally killed by being forced-fed a 'soup' of molten gold.

the structure's form better than the hazy desert daylight.

HISTORY

The ancient inhabitants of proto-Iran attached great religious importance to mountains. Where they had no mountains, they made their own. This was the origin of distinctive pyramidal, tiered temples known as ziggurats. Choqa Zanbil's ziggurat was the *raison d'être* of the town of Dur Untash, founded by King Untash Gal in the mid-13th century BC. Dur Untash bloomed especially in the early 12th century BC when it had a large number of temples and priests. The town was eventually sacked by Ashurbanipal around 640 BC and, incredibly, remained 'lost' for more than 2500 years. It was accidentally rediscovered during a 1935 aerial survey by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the forerunner of BP.

THE ZIGGURAT

The ziggurat was dedicated to Inshushinak, the chief god of the Elamite pantheon and patron of Shush. In those days the area was fertile and forested, and the ziggurat was built on a slightly raised base to guard against flooding. It has a square plan with sides measuring 105m. The original five storeys were erected vertically from the foundation level as a series of concentric towers, not one on top of another as was the custom in neighbouring Mesopotamia. At the summit (now lost) was a temple accessi-

ble only to the highest elite of Elamite society. Even now the taboo remains and you're not allowed to climb the remnant stairways that rise on each of the four sides.

The structure is made of red bricks so well-preserved that an observer could believe they're brand new. However, if you look very closely, a brick-wide strip at around eye-level is intricately inscribed in **cuneiform**, the world's spiky first alphabet that looks like a spilt box of tin-tacks. The inscriptions are not easy to make out unless you cross the rope cordon. Permission to do so is the only apparent advantage of tipping the 'guide'. He speaks not a word of English, but gesticulates with gruesome clarity as to the purpose of the **sacrifice stones** (halfway along the northwest side). Easy to spot is an ancient **sun dial** (facing the southwest central stairway) and, beside it, a strangely moving **footprint** of an Elamite child, accidentally preserved for three millennia.

AROUND THE ZIGGURAT

The ziggurat was surrounded by a paved courtyard protected by a wall. At the foot of the northeastern steps would once have been the **Gate of Untash Gal**, two rows of seven columns where supplicants would seek the pleasure of the king. Around the wall was originally a complex of **tomb chambers**, tunnels and **qanat** channels. Once the site's climate became drier, qanats brought water an incredible 45km from ancient rivers. Vestiges are still visible. Outside were the living quarters of the town and 11 temples dedicated to various Elamite gods and goddesses. Little of this remains.

Walk a couple of minutes east of the main asphalt access road towards an isolated lamppost to find some more, excavated **Elamite royal tombs**. There's little to see here, either, though steep ancient steps lead down into (unlabelled) **tomb number five**. Descending is unwise as the pit stinks of toiletry misdemeanours... especially bad when the temperature hits 45°C. Nonetheless, it's still worth strolling up the slight rise nearby to look back at the ziggurat from a particularly photogenic angle.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport. An ideal way to visit both sites is as side trips on a taxi-

charter from Shush to Shushtar (IR130,000). Visit Haft Tappeh first, as its museum is a good primer for Choqa Zanbil. In reverse you'd find Haft Tappeh's lumpy ziggurats somewhat of an anticlimax. Add IR15,000 per hour waiting time.

SHUSHTAR

☎ 0612 / pop 66,000

The deeply historic city of Shushtar lies strategically where the last contoured red ridges of the expiring Zagros Mountains fade into the endless flat watermelon fields of southern Khuzestan. Beneath the initially unexciting surface of today's low-rise cityscape, there's lots to discover including a complex of artificial ancient 'watermills' and no less than 14 imamzadehs. The town centre is 17 Shahrivar Sq marked by Bank Melli (no exchange). The very fast-connection **Persian Coffeenet** (17 Shahrivar Sq; per hr IR10,000; ☎ 8am-11pm) is across the square on the second floor of a building that looks like a pair of mini glass Empire State Buildings.

In an alley behind the Shandran Bridge, the delightful little **Mostofi House** (admission free; ☎ 8am-2pm) hosts a small **tourist information office** (☎ 622 0850; www.shustarchtb.ir) where you can get useful brochures and maps. While here peruse a small museum in their *shabestun* (a below-ground sitting room typical of traditional Khuzestani houses) and enjoy river views from their palm-tree courtyard.

Sights

WATERMILLS

Shushtar's *raison d'être* for millennia was controlling the irrigation of the Khuzestan plains, and the town's most famous attraction is a set of ancient **'watermills'** (Abshari Sika; Shari'ati St; admission IR5000; ☎ 8am-10pm). Actually, these aren't buildings at all but a powerful arc of cascading water chutes that are strangely mesmerising, especially when floodlit at night. They're especially impressive considering that the water is fed through ancient man-made feeder tunnels. One mill has been reconstructed so you can observe an old paddle-wheel device turning a millstone. Entrance is down steps beside an attractive blue-façaded building now home to souvenir and pickle shops. You can see the watermills site almost as well by simply peering over

شوشتر

the parapet of the Shari'ati St bridge (one block south of 17 Shahrivar Sq), or even better by climbing the hill behind: follow signs to the attractively renovated **Marashi House** (☎ 622 3484; Abdullah Banu St; admission free; ☎ 8am-9pm, variable).

POLE SHANDRAVAN

About 400m west of the bus terminal are substantial ruined sections of this partly Sassanid **bridge** cum weir, also known as Band-i Qaisar or Valerian's Bridge. Along with the **Band-e-Mizan** weir, this raised the river level by 2m, providing the waters necessary for irrigation and mills. Considered a wonder of the world by 7th-century invading Arabs, the workers and architects were Roman captives (see boxed text, opposite). The bridge originally had 45 arches and remained intact, albeit with many a renovation, until around a century ago. According to some Khuzestani historians, it was then deliberately dynamited by British agents. The idea was to break Shushtar's trade connections, thus encouraging locals to seek alternative work at the new (British-owned) oilfields of Masjid-i Soleiman. Less conspiratorial theories blame rebellions and floods for the bridge's deterioration.

Today the Pol-e Shandran ruins parallel to a newer Dezful Rd bridge. A park is being built to landscape the scene.

QAL'EH SALOSEL

The historic heart of Shushtar was **Salosel Castle**, a prominent cliff-hill overlooking the river. This is where Shapur I is said to have imprisoned Roman Emperor Valerian. It's also here that Persians held out for two years against the invading Arab-Muslim armies until secret tunnels were revealed to the attackers by a traitor. For centuries Khuzestan was governed from a palace ('Kushk') on this site and an impressive three-storey pyramidal building stood here until the 1920s. Sadly, above-ground, only a mound of rubble remains. However, the castle's impressive Sassanian-era subterranean rooms and water channels have been rediscovered. As yet they are only open on special occasions like No Ruz but at such times they are very imaginatively lit.

The site is one long block north of Shahrivar Sq then three minutes' walk to the east.

پل شاندروان

THE BAKHTIYARI

The nomadic Bakhtiari's traditional goat-herding migration (around 350km each way between seasonal pastures) inspired feisty writers like Gertrude Bell (in 1902) and Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury buddy Vita Sackville-West (in 1927) to follow their foot-steps. It is also the subject of two inspiring documentary movies including Oscar-nominated *People of the Wind* (1976). Today some migrations continue. Although the predominant use of trucks rather than bare-footed toil to transport the flocks makes for a rather less glamorous image, meeting hospitable Bakhtiyaris in their make-shift tent-camps is still a highlight of travel in northern Khuzestan.

See also Iran's Nomads, p285.

OTHER SIGHTS

Visible from the minibuses as you arrive from Ahvaz, **Imamzadeh Abdullah** has a white pinecone of a central tower reminiscent of Daniel's tomb in Shush. A gory local tale records a woman beheading her own son to swap his head for the skull of a long-dead holy man, which is now enshrined here as a sacred relic. Colourfully decked with strings of lights, the building resembles a cruise liner against the evening horizon. At its foot is the small but impressive 11-arched ancient **Lashgar Bridge**.

A short walk south of the bus terminal, the partly 9th-century **Jameh Mosque** (Masjid Jameh Lane) has a truncated, gently leaning minaret and sits in a quiet tree-filled quadrangle of fruit-sellers.

Just beyond the Hotel Jahangardi is a great viewpoint beside the octagonal **Kola Ferangi tower**, which looks like (and probably was) a stone lighthouse, though local lore relates that Shapur's slave driver would watch over the Roman prisoners from here surveying progress on the **Band-e-Mizan** (Sassanid weir) that divided the river to provide water for the watermills. Across the water you'll see the blue-domed **Seyid Mohammad Golabi Shrine** behind which rises an *ivan* of the vast new **Sheikh Alome Shushtari Shrine**. Currently in yellow brick, it entombs the 20th-century philosopher Mohammad Taq Shushtari and should eventually be covered in fabulous blue

tiling, Esfahan style. About 1km further such tiling already graces the brilliant and considerably older **Saheb-al Zaman shrine** at which awed devotees have supposedly made sightings of the Mahdi (last imam), hence the 'empty seat' shrine box.

Sleeping & Eating

Mehmanpazir Shushtar (☎ 622 3288; Sharafat St; s/d/tr IR100,000/120,000/150,000) Recently rebuilt with reasonably neat tiled floors, this upstairs place charges what it feels you'll pay, apparently irrespective of whether you get a room with an OK bathroom or have to share the communal squat toilet. Mattresses and sheets are clean and new.

Hotel Jahangardi (☎ 622 1690, fax 622 1692; Sarafat St; s/tw/tr IR225,000/278,000/331,000; (P) ♻️) Right beside the river you can gaze across to the mausolea from this wonderful location that's peaceful until nocturnal tourists decide to crank up their party music. The clean, reasonably comfortable rooms have bathrooms.

Restaurant Abshar (☎ 622 4805; Shahrivar Sq; meals IR25,000; ☎ 7.30am-3pm & 5-10pm). There's a good selection of eateries around Shahrivar Sq of which this deceptively cavernous eatery makes a friendly choice and supplements kababs and *ghormeh sabzi* (meat and vegetables with rice) with scrumptious spit-roast chicken (IR50,000 half-bird).

Several shops sell Shushtar's famous pickles and preserved fruits. Local *koluche* (soft-centred biscuits with a hint of caraway) taste best when stuffed with dates.

Getting There & Away

Shushtar's single, handily central bus terminal is a block north and west from Shahrivar Sq, between Almas and Sheikh Sts. Very regular buses run to Ahvaz (IR5000, 1½ hours) and Dezful (IR2000, one hour), where you can transfer for Shush or Andimeshk. There's no public transport to Shush (90km), but a good asphalt road exists passing within 5km of Choqa Zanbil and emerging near Haft Tappeh.

AROUND SHUSHTAR Masjid-i Soleiman

☎ 0481 / pop 108,000

At 4am on 26 May 1908, British oil-prospectors finally hit a 'gusher' at Masjid-i

مسجد سليمان

Soleiman, nicknamed MiS ('em-ai-ess'). It was the first commercially viable Iranian oil strike and came just in the nick of time for the exploration company, forerunners of BP, who were on the verge of financial collapse. The result was ultimately to transform Iran's history and provide Britain's navy with a crucial edge in looming WWI: having switched their ships to petrol-power, finding a plentiful fuel source had become essential. The whole thrilling history is brilliantly retold in Daniel Yergin's book, *The Prize*. The original first oil well, **Naftom Yek**, is 200m up an alley just east of MiS's central post office, visible through locked railings along with an antiquated steam-engine.

On a hill overlooking town (IR10,000 by taxi), **Sar Masjid** is the stone terrace on which some believe a 6th-century BC fire temple once stood. Others claim this was the birthplace of Cyrus. It seems to have later housed a Seleucid sanctuary: several statues found here and on nearby hills suggest a Hercules cult. Masjid-i Soleiman's apparently ultra-Muslim name (Solomon's Mosque) was probably conceived as a 'cover' to protect the site at the time of the Muslim-Arab invasions as happened at Takht-e Soleiman (p187).

Bardnashandar (Bardneshandeh) is a similarly enigmatic stairway and stone platform close to the Andika road. There's a single, spindly 3.5m-high 'column' but the main attraction is the 40-minute drive from MiS passing through Bakhtiari spring pastures-lands where the nomads' traditional black **tent-camps** are easy to spot in April/May. If invited in, a handy greeting is *che-khoni?* (reply *khubam*). Thank you is *beoumi*.

DEZFUL

☎ 0641 / pop 208,000

Sometimes pronounced *dez-bil*, Dezful makes an interesting brief stop between Shushtar and Andimeshk. Its 12-span **Pol-e Qadim** is supposedly 'the world's oldest bridge still in use'. That's rather misleading. While the bridge's stone foundation pillars date back to the reign of Sassanian king Shapur I (AD 241-272), today's arches are a mix of Safavid brick and modern ferro-concrete. A series of 'grinds' (rather indistinct ancient 'mill' remnants) stretch along the river towards a newer bridge above

which the historic **Tiznoo House** (☎ 223 1033; ☎ 7am-2pm) hosts a tourist information centre. Behind this stretches Dezful's extensive 'old' **bazaar**. It's very lively, but after sustaining 900 bomb-hits during the Iran-Iraq War, doesn't really look 'old' any more. Set on a more distant cliff-top, **Pir-e-Ruband** is an attractive 1609 mausoleum with a lopsided Khuzestani pinecone tower.

Kornasiyun Hamam (admission IR2000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-8pm) houses a museum of local life in an old bathhouse near the somewhat overpriced riverside **Ronash Hotel** (☎ 223 7907; Saheli St; d/ste IR250,000/1,500,000; ♻️).

With three weekly Iran Aseman flights to Tehran (IR255,000), the airport is virtually all that stops Dezful merging with Andimeshk to the northwest. Andimeshk-bound savaris leave from the east end of the new bridge. Minibuses from Shushtar drop off at Moghavemat Yakoub Lays Sq, 600m northwest of the **long-distance bus terminal** (Payam Noor Blvd) at the southeast edge of town.

AHVAZ

☎ 0611 / pop 1,005,000

Abu Nuwas ('Father of Curls') is perhaps the only Muslim poet celebrated for writing homoerotic drinking songs. He was born in AD 756 in Ahvaz, but got out as soon as he could. You'll probably want to do the same. But hopefully not (as Abu was) sold as a sex slave to a Yemeni drug dealer.

Using the well-served airport is the only likely reason you'd choose to transit this vast, featureless, industrial city where summer temperatures regularly top 50°C. Acceptable central accommodation options include the quiet if basic **Mehmanpazir Parknow** (☎ 222 2534; Imam Khomeini St, pedestrianised section; s/d IR84,000/113,500) and the assiduously cleaned **Iran Hotel** (☎ 221 7200; fax 221 7206; Shari'ati St; s/tw IR200,000/300,000; ♻️). Before a flight, congenial modern rooms at the professionally run **Oxim Hotel** (☎ 447 4720; 7200; MiS Highway; s/tw/d US\$64/91/91; (P) ♻️) are a sensible choice, being just 2km from the airport.

Getting There & Away

Helpful English-speaking **Tayareh Travel Agency** (☎ 222 9849; fax 222 6108; tayareh_travelagency@yaho.com; Azadegan St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-9pm Sat-Thu) sells air tickets including to Tehran (IR332,000, frequent), Esfahan (IR315,000, daily), Shiraz

(IR315,000, twice weekly), Kuwait (one way/return IR660,000/1,094,000, weekly) and Dubai (one way/return IR762,000/1,277,500, four weekly).

You can get to Shush (IR6000, two hours) and virtually anywhere else in Iran from the big main **bus terminal** (Andimeshk Rd) 5km west of centre up Enqelab St. Andimeshk savaris/minibuses (IR25,000/7500) depart from a hidden yard 200m further north. Dezful buses (IR15,000, 1¼ hours) use a different yard 100m to the southeast of the main terminal across Enqelab St.

Buses for Shushtar (IR5000, 1½ hours) use **Istgah Shushtar** (Pasdaran Blvd) way across town, 4km northeast of centre (halfway to the airport). Call ☎ 447 2020 for a taxi.

AROUND AHVAZ

From Khorramshahr, 125km south, **Valfarje-8 Shipping** (☎ 336 7116) sails to Kuwait at least weekly. Dusty **Shalamcheh**, west of Khorramshahr, is the official crossing point for Basra in Iraq for those with suicidal self-confidence. Wreckage still litters surrounding tracts of land devastated in the Iran–Iraq War.