

Around Kabul

اطراف کابل



Many short-term visitors to Afghanistan tend to arrive in Kabul and then leave as soon as they can, attracted by the better-known attractions of Bamiyan and Herat. That's a shame, because there's still plenty to see within a couple of hours' drive of the capital.

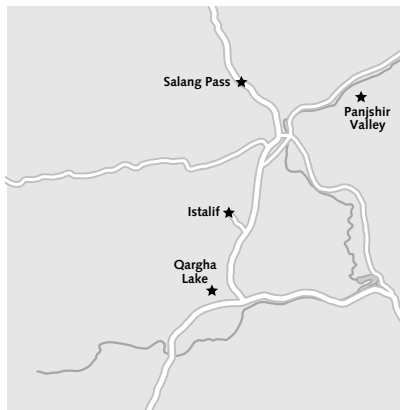
North of Kabul is the wide expanse of the Shomali Plain, a richly fertile region renowned for its fruit, and framed by the Koh Daman mountains of the Hindu Kush. Once a much-contested battlefield, the Shomali Plain is home to the ancient village of Istalif, at the foothills of the peaks, a popular recreation spot for centuries and home to Afghanistan's most recognisable pottery.

The highway continues across the plain until it starts to rise towards the mountains, offering the traveller a choice of destinations. Straight ahead and up takes you along a series of dizzying switchbacks to the Salang Pass, the gateway to northern Afghanistan. A second road tempts you towards a narrow gorge with a rushing river that opens out into the spectacular Panjshir Valley. This is one of the country's most beautiful spots, and the last resting place of one of its national heroes.

Closer to Kabul you can find activities both Afghan and Western in taste. Kabulis take their families to the green surrounds of Paghman for weekend picnics, while at Qargha Lake you might find yourself unexpectedly shouting 'Fore!' at Kabul Golf Club – surely Afghanistan's most peculiar sporting venue.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Shop for traditional pottery in the historic village of **Istalif** (opposite), overlooking the Shomali Plain
- Watch out for unexpected bunkers at the **Kabul Golf Club** (p109) at Qargha Lake
- Visit the tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud in the sublime **Panjshir Valley** (p110)
- Cross the **Salang Pass** (p112), the mountain gateway to northern Afghanistan



For sake of this chapter, we've only considered destinations that make easy day trips north of Kabul. Other potential excursions from the capital include Jalalabad (p182) and Ghazni (p196). Both are subject to particular security issues – check the relevant sections for more details.

ISTALIF

استالف

The mountain village of Istalif has enchanted travellers for centuries. Babur waxed lyrical about the wine parties held in its gardens, while British officers enjoyed its shady slopes during their first occupation of Kabul. Today it is a popular spot for weekend daytrips for Kabulis and expats alike, coming for the tremendous scenery

and the famous blue pottery made in the village.

Istalif clings to the slopes of the Koh Daman mountains north of Kabul, giving splendid views across the Shomali Plain. This fertile region has traditionally been the breadbasket of Kabul, or perhaps its fruit bowl, for the villages are renowned for their grapes, cherries, figs and mulberries. The Shomali Plain suffered grievously in the recent years of war. Its wide spaces are ideal for armoured warfare, and dead tanks still litter the landscape. The Taliban took particular trouble to subdue the plain and its mainly Tajik population. In 1999 a scorched earth campaign displaced around 140,000 residents, destroying houses and

