

# Bamiyan & Central Afghanistan

## بامیان و افغانستان مرکزی



The massed peaks of the Hindu Kush form a huge tangled knot in the centre of the country, aptly known as the Koh-e Baba – the Grandfather of Mountains. It's also the Hazarajat, the home of the country's minority Hazara population. Today it's a remote and marginal area, but was once the crucible for some of Afghanistan's greatest cultural achievements.

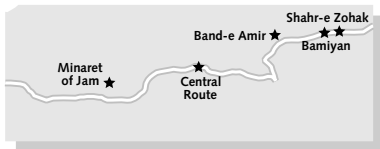
Buddhism flourished in the green Bamiyan valley 1500 years ago; a centre of art and pilgrimage that reached its apogee in the creation of the giant statues of Buddha, which overlooked the town until their cruel destruction by the Taliban in 2001. Even deeper into the mountains, the fabulous Minaret of Jam still stands as a testament to the glories of later Muslim dynasties.

But the scenery is the real star of central Afghanistan – an unending procession of rocky mountaintops, deep gorges and verdant river valleys. The bright light and crisp mountain air makes the landscape sing, not least the incredible blue lakes of Band-e Amir.

The roads can be as bad as the views are spectacular, and visitors should prepare for bumpy travel and some chilly nights at high altitude. You'll need to time your trip for the warmer months: many communities become cut off once the snows of winter arrive, with roads impassable until after the spring melt.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Stand in awe beneath the giant empty Buddha niches of **Bamiyan** (p114)
- Dip your toes in the sapphire-blue lakes of the **Band-e Amir** (p122)
- Climb the ancient ruined citadel of **Shahr-e Zohak** (p119), guardian of the Bamiyan valley
- Bump along the remote and spectacular back-roads of Afghanistan's **central route** (p124)
- Scale the lost **Minaret of Jam** (p126), hidden in the folds of the Hindu Kush



**RISK ASSESSMENT**

Bamiyan has consistently remained one of the calmest provinces in Afghanistan, with no major security incidents. Travellers are advised to avoid the southern route to Bamiyan from Kabul via the Hajigak Pass and Maidan Shahr in Wardak Province due to poor security, where there have been repeated abduction threats made against internationals.

The central route is reasonably secure but very remote. There have been regular reports of robberies against private vehicles in the Chist-e Sharif and Obey areas.

**CLIMATE**

Dominated by the crags of the Koh-e Baba and Hindu Kush, central Afghanistan has a dry mountainous climate. In summer, days are warm (up to 28°C) while high altitudes mean that nights can be cold even in the middle of August. Warm clothes are essential. Temperatures drop considerably from November, skirting around freezing point. The region sees heavy snow from this point onwards, which can persist until March or even April, cutting off swathes of the region (although Bamiyan remains connected to Kabul year-round).

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Central Afghanistan's isolation is felt in its poor transport links to the rest of the country. Two punishing roads lead slowly from Bamiyan to Kabul, via either the northern Shibar Pass, or the Hajigak Pass to the south. Roads are similarly poor leaving the Hazarajat across the central route to Herat – a trip of several days in the summer, frequently impassable during the winter snows and merely treacherous during the spring melt. There are no commercial flights to Kabul, although both the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) and Pactec operate services between Bamiyan and Chaghcheran and the capital.

**BAMMIAN**

باميان

Bamiyan sits at the heart of the Hazarajat in a wide valley braided with mountain rivers and is one of the poorest yet most beautiful parts of Afghanistan. Once a major centre

for Buddhist pilgrimage, modern Bamiyan is now more closely associated with the destruction visited on Afghanistan's culture by war. The two giant statues of Buddha that once dominated the valley now lie in rubble, victims of the Taliban's iconoclastic rage. Despite this, the Bamiyan valley still holds a powerful draw over the imagination. It was made a World Heritage site in 2003 for its cultural landscape and is a must-see for any visitor to Afghanistan.

While isolated today, it wasn't always so. Bamiyan was once an important way station on the Silk Road. Trade and pilgrims flocked to its temples and in return Bamiyan exported its art – a synthesis of Greek, Persian and Indian art that had a major influence on Buddhist iconography as far afield as China. Centuries later, Bamiyan became the focus of Afghanistan's nascent tourist industry, as visitors came to rediscover its past glories and gaze in awe at the monumental Buddha statues carved from its cliffs.

War brought an end to that. Initially isolated from the fighting, Bamiyan suffered terribly under the ideological fervour of the Taliban, whose anti-Shiite doctrines drove ethnic massacres as well as the smashing of idols.

Since the Taliban's defeat, Bamiyan has returned to the peace of earlier years and is currently home to a New Zealand-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). It has consistently been one of Afghanistan's real oases of calm, although locals grumble about the slow pace of reconstruction.

For many, Bamiyan can best be experienced at sunset from the hills overlooking the valley. The niches of the Buddhas evoke a particular power at this hour and as the light of the day changes so does the colour of the cliffs, from honey to pink, ochre to magenta.

**HISTORY**

Bamiyan's place in Afghan history begins with the emergence of the Kushan empire in the 1st century AD. As a halfway point between Balkh and the Kushan capital at Kapisa (near modern Bagram, see p109), it grew rich from the trade along the Silk Road between Rome and the Han Chinese.

The nomadic Kushans quickly took to Buddhism and were instrumental in fusing