

Mazar-e Sharif & Northeastern Afghanistan



مزار شریف و شمال شرق افغانستان

Travel north of the Hindu Kush and you'll find a quite different Afghanistan. The Central Asian steppe starts here, a wide grassy plain that stretches all the way to Russia. For much of its history, the Afghan city-states of the north looked across the Amu Darya towards Bukhara and Samarkand for their interests instead of to Kabul. Indeed, until the Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush was completed in the mid-1960s this was a totally isolated part of the country, accessible only by traversing the highest part of the mountains north of Kabul, or making a long desert crossing via Herat.

Travellers should head first for Mazar-e Sharif, home to the shimmering blue domes of the Shrine of Hazrat Ali. Nearby lies the far more ancient town of Balkh, where Zoroastrianism was born and Alexander the Great took his wife. His footprints can also be detected near the town of Kunduz at the ruins of Ai Khanoum, the easternmost Greek city in the world.

Continuing further east, the big mountains start to rise from the plains again in the province of Badakhshan. One of the remotest corners of the country, roads here become lost in the tangle of peaks where the Hindu Kush meet the Pamirs. The best way to get around is by foot, or with the yaks of the nomadic Kyrgyz who live in the thin tongue of land of the Wakhan Corridor, an area bursting with potential as a future trekking destination.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Join the pilgrims at the blue **Shrine of Hazrat Ali** (p152) in Mazar-e Sharif
- Head to **Balkh** (p155) to find the ruins of an ancient citadel and Afghanistan's oldest mosque
- Discover the unusual Buddhist temple and caves of **Takht-e Rostam** (p158) in Samangan
- Look for the remains of ancient Greeks at **Ai Khanoum** (p162) on the Tajikistan border
- Trek with yaks in the high altitude splendour of the **Wakhan Corridor** (p167)



CLIMATE

The northern plains see extremes of temperature. Baking summers (up to 43°C) and freezing winters (occasionally down to -10°C) lead Mazar-e Sharif's citizens to joke about their *paka o posteen* ('fan or furcoat') climate. Spring and autumn are thankfully more temperate. Faizabad has a more moderate climate, although winter snows make travel in Badakhshan problematic between October/November and March/April. The high altitude Wakhan Corridor has warm days and near freezing nights even at the height of summer in July, while early snow effectively cuts the region off from the rest of Afghanistan from late September.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular flights with Ariana and Kam Air link Mazar-e Sharif to Kabul. Kam Air also operates a twice-weekly flight to Herat. Ariana runs an erratic schedule for Kabul services to Kunduz and Faizabad.

The Salang Tunnel connects the northern and southern halves of the country. The main highway from Kabul to Mazar-e Sharif

and on as far as Andkhoi is excellent, as is the road from the Pul-e Khumri junction to Kunduz and Taloqan. A 4WD is recommended for travel to Faizabad, and is essential further into Badakhshan. There are two border crossings between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, at Shir Khan Bandar (near Kunduz) and Ishkashim (in Badakhshan). The border with Uzbekistan at Termez is open, and with sufficient paperwork it's just about possible to trek from Badakhshan into Pakistan over the Dilisang Pass.

MAZAR-E SHARIF

مزار شریف

☎ 050 / pop 800,000

Mazar-e Sharif is north Afghanistan's sprawling urban centre, a relatively modern city standing on the wide steppes near the border with Uzbekistan. Compared to some of the neighbouring towns it's a relative youngster, and was long overshadowed by the power and prestige of its neighbour

NORTHEASTERN AFGHANISTAN

