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 Azarbayjan
- 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 Zanjjan 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