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ACCOMMODATION

Most levels of accommodation are available in Afghanistan, from top-end hotels and en suite yurts to complete fleapits, and everything in between. Kabul naturally has the widest choice of available options, while outside the cities you may not be presented with any meaningful choice at all.

In the book we have defined budget as up to 2000Afg (US\$40), midrange up to 4000Afg (US\$80), and top end as anything over 4000Afg. These prices are for doubles, but in many places you'll just be quoted a flat rate for the room irrespective of occupancy. Rooms come without bathrooms unless noted in the text; breakfast is rarely included.

Even though some budget and midrange hotel rooms listed in the text are described as 'clean', this is a relative term and they're unlikely to be absolutely spotless. It's a good idea to bring a sleeping sheet as the quality of bed linen can sometimes leave a bit to be desired. A *pattu* (the woollen blanket carried by many Afghan men) makes an excellent alternative.

Other useful items to pack are a padlock and a torch or candles. Power cuts are frequent, and in some places there just may not be any electricity at all. Earplugs can also be a good idea, particularly if you end up sleeping at a *chaikhana*.

Some of the cheaper accommodation places in Afghanistan will not take foreign guests, and while we have attempted to account for this in the text, local conditions can change according to the security environment and the whims of local police. This is something we particularly noted in Kabul, where since our last visit many of the cheap hotels popular with independent travellers had closed their doors to foreigners. At the opposite end of spectrum, many midrange and all top end hotels and guesthouses employ security guards outside their premises.

If travelling in winter, you'll find many places are heated by a *bukhari*, a simple heater run off paraffin, gas or petrol. While undoubtedly warming, these devices can be extremely dangerous. Stories of exploding *bukharis* or people dying of asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide poisoning are a staple of the local press during the colder months. Never sleep in a room with a lit *bukhari*. If you're in Afghanistan long term, investing in a carbon monoxide and smoke detector is recommended.

Finally, Afghan hospitality is famous, and people you meet on the road may invite you to your home. Remember that most ordinary Afghans have very limited resources and may just be offering hospitality they may ill be able to afford for the sake of honour. If the offer is genuine (and you're satisfied as to the safety aspects of the situation), consider carefully as to whether you can accept without burdening your poten-

tial host. A gift for your hosts, such as fruit or sweets, is appropriate.

Camping

We advise against rough camping in Afghanistan, where a tent will quickly draw the attention of locals. In October 2006 two German journalists were murdered when they were camping in Baghlan province, increasing the chances that should the police spot a tent they'll move you on and insist you stay at a hotel or chaikhana. An exception is the peaceable Wakhan Corridor, where you're likely to be trekking with local guides. Camping here is sometimes the only option.

Chaikhanas

The simplest form of accommodation available in Afghanistan is the chaikhana (teahouse). In small towns and places off the beaten track (the central route for instance), they're likely to be the only type of accommodation on offer. In addition, when long trips by public transport demand an overnight stop, it's at a chaikhana where the driver will pull up.

At its most basic form, sleeping arrangements in a chaikhana are no more than the large communal room where meals are taken, either on the floor or on a *takht* (raised platforms). Bed and board are as one – if you eat your evening meal at the chaikhana then you've also paid to stay, so a night should weigh in at under 100Afg. You simply grab a corner, unroll your sleeping bag or blanket and you're away. There's no peace or privacy (and as a foreigner, you're instantly a figure of interest), and no security for your belongings either. Bathroom facilities tend towards the extremely basic, often just a drum of water fixed with a tap. Outside the towns and cities, enquiries as to where the toilet is may find you directed to either a pit latrine or just being waved towards the street outside.

Female travellers won't be allowed to sleep in a communal room with men, but most chaikhanas have at least one or two private rooms, for which you'll pay a small supplement. They're a much better bet for privacy and security, but don't always have a lock. These rooms often come with some bedding, which you may or may not want to examine too closely.

A torch or candles are essential in a chaikhana. In the remote areas a car battery is commonly used to power the lights and blaring TV, as it's cheaper to run than a generator.

Guesthouses

Private guesthouses were very much a feature of the accommodation scene in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Taliban regime, when there was a huge influx of foreigners and a shortage of hotel capacity. Although less popular now than they once were, they can still make a good choice, and are a preferred option for those staying in the country for longer time periods. Prices are normally negotiable for extended stays.

Guesthouses in Afghanistan are essentially private houses that have been converted into B&Bs, and typically have just a handful of rooms and one bathroom shared by all guests. They are often contained in a small compound behind a high wall that offers privacy and security; the best will have a nicely tended garden. Rates normally include breakfast, with other meals offered for extra. Amenities vary widely, but usually include satellite TV and, increasingly, internet access. A private generator should provide a reliable electricity supply. The guesthouse will be run by a *chowkidar* (caretaker), who usually lives on-site. If you're staying long term, you'll find a good *chowkidar* to be worth his weight in gold.

Hammams

If you're staying in cheap accommodation, the local hammam (bathhouse) may be the best way of getting clean. They're busy sociable places, and in the country often the only source of hot water. Prices are usually around 15Afg or 25Afg if there's a private room, and about 100Afg to be washed and massaged by the staff (tips are always appreciated). Bring toiletries and flip-flops (thongs) and keep your underwear on – Afghans of both sexes will be surprised to discover you don't shave your intimate areas.

Locals will generally be happy to direct travellers to the nearest hammam. In the cities there are separate hammams for men and women; in the country access for women is often restricted to a particular