

Afghanistan

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has been a country united against invaders but divided against itself. Its allure, spread by Great Game romantics and travel literature alike, has only been heightened by its inaccessibility over the last 30 years.

The most recent cycle of violence started with the Soviet invasion of 1979, a bloody 'David and Goliath' conflict, with the underdogs eventually besting the superpower. But the war's dividend wasn't peace, but a ruinous civil war – a morass that came back to haunt the West in the shape of the medieval Taliban and the smoking rubble of 9/11. The subsequent ouster of the Taliban promised another new start, but Afghanistan's rebirth as an infant democracy has been troubled at best. Despite early promise, stability has proved difficult to find, with patchy reconstruction and the south of the country in particular bleeding from a deep-rooted insurgency.

Yet before all this bloodshed, Afghanistan had formed part of the original overland hippy trail, beguiling its visitors with great mountain ranges, a rich mix of cultures – and the Afghan people themselves, who greeted all with an easy charm and ready hospitality.

A battered, but beautiful and proud country, Afghanistan's road to recovery lies as strewn with pitfalls as ever, and the resilience of its people remains under strain.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 650,000 sq km
- **Capital** Kabul
- **Country code** ☎ 93
- **Famous for** civil war, the Taliban, carpets
- **Languages** Dari (Afghan Persian), Pashto
- **Money** afghani (Afg); US\$1=45.52Afg, €1=57.26Afg
- **Population** 28.4 million (2009 estimate)



HOW MUCH?

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.80
- **100km shared taxi ride** US\$2
- **Internet connection per hour** US\$1
- **Afghan pakol (hat)** US\$2
- **Homestay** US\$25
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.40
- **1L petrol** US\$1

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Kabul** (p476) Afghanistan's hectic capital, permanently buzzing on the cusp of change.
- **Bamiyan** (p481) Home to the giant Buddha niches, and the nearby sapphire waters of the Band-e Amir lakes.
- **Herat** (p483) The Silk Road heart of the country, with an astounding Friday Mosque and Citadel.
- **Mazar-e Sharif** (p486) The blue domes of the Shrine of Hazrat Ali make this Afghanistan's most important pilgrimage site.
- **Wakhan Corridor** (p488) The remote plateaus of the High Pamirs are perfect for trekking with yaks.

ITINERARIES

- **One week** Arriving in Kabul (p476), take a couple of days to explore the city, be-

fore heading out to the Bamiyan Valley (p481) and the lakes of Band-e Amir (p483).

- **Two weeks** Add a few days to the above itinerary, and then fly to Herat (p483) to explore the riches of its old city before either crossing into Turkmenistan or Iran, or returning to Kabul.
- **One month** Slow the pace down and then head into the north, checking out Mazar-e Sharif (p486) and Balkh (p487), before making a trek into the Wakhan Corridor (p488) and exiting the country to Tajikistan.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

There's fine weather in spring (March to May), but rain and snowmelt can make many roads difficult to traverse. Summer (June to August) can be blisteringly hot, although Kabul and Bamiyan enjoy pleasantly cool nights. Autumn (September to November) is warm and dry, with plenty of delicious Afghan fruit. From the end of November winter arrives, and snow is common across much of the country making travel difficult.

HISTORY

Afghanistan's history as a country spans little more than two centuries, but in the past it has been part, or the centre, of many great empires. As with much of the region, the rise and fall of political power has been inextricably tied to the rise and fall of religions.

SAFE TRAVEL IN AFGHANISTAN?

The British Foreign & Commonwealth Office and US State Department both currently advise against travel to Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate and there's every reason to believe that things will remain unpredictable for some time to come. Due to the continuing instability affecting Afghanistan, we were unable to do on-the-ground research for this edition, and relied on friends and contacts residing in the country.

If you must travel to Afghanistan, it's imperative that you get the most up-to-date safety advice available. Check on security before setting out – the political situation can change quickly and without warning. A list of good news sources can be found on p492.

Bloody attacks inside Kabul (including the targeting of hotels) have become a favoured Taliban tactic, and the road to the Pakistan border at Torkham is not considered safe for travel. All points south of the capital remain firmly out of bounds, and the only secure way of reaching Herat is by air. Bamiyan remains an oasis of calm, as does Mazar-e Sharif, but the north is increasingly unstable, including Kunduz and parts of Badakhshan. Only the Wakhan Corridor, isolated by its remoteness, can be considered truly calm, but is best accessed via Tajikistan.

Always remember that Afghanistan is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, and land mines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) claim dozens of victims a month. It's common to see murals on buildings identifying different types of land mine and UXO.