Welcome to Iran
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16 Top Experiences
Need to Know
If You Like
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Visas & Planning
Travelling in Iran
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Itineraries

Map

Welcome to Iran

Natural Environments

Cinema

Literature, Music & Architecture

Faith in Iran

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Photos, itineraries, lists and suggestions to help you put together your perfect trip

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Learn about the big picture, so you can make sense of what you see

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“All you've got to do is decide to go and the hardest part is over. So go!”
TONY WHEELER, COFOUNDER – LONELY PLANET

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YOUR COMPLETE DESTINATION GUIDE
In-depth reviews, detailed listings and insider tips

SURVIVAL GUIDE
VITAL PRACTICAL INFORMATION TO HELP YOU HAVE A SMOOTH TRIP

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THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

Andrew Burke
Virginia Maxwell, Iain Shearer

Getting there & away
International sanctions have made Iran increasingly isolated, but it is fairly simple to get into the country on a plane, by train from Turkey across numerous border crossings from neighbouring states and tours can be found at lonelyplannings.

Arriving was risky, as the visa process sees a lot of the process sees a lot of people turned away (see p 24). Passport Iran will not issue visas to Israeli passport holders, and people with an Israeli passport will be turned away at the border (you won't get on a flight to Iran with an Israeli passport). Similarly, having an Israeli stamp in any other passport will see you turned away or put on the next flight out.

Air
The vast majority of international flights come to Tehran. However, some travellers are choosing to start or end their trip in Shiraz, saving some backtracking.

Airports & Airlines
Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKIA) sees most of Iran's international air traffic. It's small, so delays are possible. Elsewhere, Shiraz, Esfahan, Bandar Abbas and Kish are (in that order) potentially useful arrival or departure points, while Abadan, Mashhad, Tashkent and other cities are

Transport

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Transport

Every listing is recommended by our authors, and their favourite places are listed first.

Look out for these icons:

- **TOP CHOICE** Our author’s top recommendation
- **Green** A green or sustainable option
- **FREE** No payment required

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**Mashhad**
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**Garmeh**
Desert oasis with memorable homestay (p174)

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Camp among 10-storey sandcastles (p230)

**Qeshm Island**
Sleepy Bandari villages, amazing geology (p214)
OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, Across Asia on the Cheap. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

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Whether you’ve got five days or are aiming, with an extension, for 50, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travellers.

Two Weeks, Tehran to Shiraz

Classic Iran

In two weeks it’s possible to see the jewels of Iran’s rich history. Start in Tehran and spend two days seeing the major sights, including the Golestan Palace, National Jewels Museum and Tehran Bazar. Take a bus to Kashan, where you can explore the bazaar, check out the Qajar-era traditional houses and chill out in the Fin Garden.

Stop for a couple of hours to check out the mosque and tomb in Natanz en route to architecturally magnificent Esfahan and spend three days exploring the blue-tiled mosques of Naqsh-e Jahan (Imam) Square, the bustling Bazar-e Bozorg, the sublime bridges across the Zayandeh River and the Armenian community at Jolfa.

Head to the desert trading city of Yazd for a couple of days wandering the maze of lanes, gaping at the Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) and climbing to the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence. For a change of pace, stop in the desert village of Fahraj for two nights before spending a day visiting ancient Pasargadae and Persepolis on the way to Shiraz. Spend two days in Shiraz, where you can see the Zand-era gardens and bazaar, and wander the old city. Fly back to Tehran.
One Month, Maku to Mirjaveh

Travellers with an adventurous bent have been following this 4420km overland route from Europe to subcontinental Asia for centuries. It's doable in less time, but you'll need a month to really appreciate Iran's diversity without feeling you're constantly on the move. The journey is serviced by regular buses and some trains.

With its soaring canyon, Maku makes a pleasant introduction before spending three days in Tabriz, which has a fine bazaar, then checking out Jolfa and the troglodyte homes at Kandovan, before heading via Zanjan for a look at the remarkable Oljeitu Mausoleum at Soltaniyeh. Continuing east, historic Qazvin is the staging point for excursions into the spectacular Alamut Valleys to walk among the ruined Castles of the Assassins. Head north via Rasht to lush Masuleh, a charming village ideal for chilling out before dashing along the Caspian Coast to reach Kelardasht in a beautiful setting, then zigzag up through the dramatic Alborz Mountains to Tehran.

Spend three days in Tehran seeing the museums, galleries and taking in the hustle and bustle, then head south for a couple of days to Kashan with its World Heritage–listed Fin Garden. Bus it to Esfahan where you’ll need three or four days to soak up the sights of the Safavid-era capital, and then head east for a village homestay in Farahzad or Garmeh in the vast Dasht-e Kavir desert. From the desert head south to the Silk Road trading city of Yazd, stopping in the spectacular Zoroastrian pilgrimage site at Chak Chak en route.

Plan to spend three days exploring the narrow lanes and desert architecture of Yazd before heading to Shiraz via Pasargadae and Persepolis. Spend two days in Shiraz taking in the bazaar, gardens and poet’s shrines, and another on a day trip to Bishapur or Firuz Abad. Continue to Kerman, stopping for a night with nomads in Bavanat (during spring or autumn) or in a cave at Meymand. Using Kerman as a base, plan for three days exploring Mahan, Rayen and the desert stars in the Kaluts. Stop in Bam to see what remains of the Arg and just rest a while in this ancient oasis town. Then blast through Zahedan to the Pakistan border at Mirjaveh before your visa expires.
This intriguing meander west is ideal for those who’ve seen the main desert city sites or are confident in navigating through areas often unaccustomed to foreigners. The route over mountains and valleys boasts eight of Iran’s 13 World Heritage Sites (denoted here with an *), but should be just as memorable for the people you’ll meet on the journey. The remotest sections will require charter taxis, but rides cost only about US$10 per hour. Note that in winter, mountain roads can be cut by snow.

Starting in Tehran, head west to Qazvin and spend the afternoon exploring the historic city, before driving into the Alamut Valley to hike among the fabled Castles of the Assassins. From Qazvin go over the Alborz Mountains to Rasht, and on through paddy fields and forests to the stepped village of Masuleh. Spend a day exploring the village and surrounding hills, or hiking up to Qal-eh Rudkhan. Hire a taxi and, forsaking the dull coast, spend a memorable day climbing through nomad country to Ardabil via Khal Khal. In Ardabil visit the magnificent Sheikh Safi-od-Din Mausoleum* before settling in bustling Tabriz for a few days. Explore the brilliant covered bazaar* and the contrasting Valiasr District, do your laundry, and allow a day for an excursion to the quaint troglodyte village of Kandovan, and maybe another for Jolfa and the ancient Church of St Stephanos*.

Refreshed, head southeast and use Zanjan as a base to see the magnificent Mongol-era Oljeitu Mausoleum* at Soltaniyeh. From Zanjan, take the starkly beautiful mountain road to lonely Takht-e Soleiman*, once the world’s greatest Zoroastrian fire-temple complex. Sleep in Bijar and continue to hospitable Sanandaj, capital of Iranian Kordistan. Spend a day exploring the city and another for a trip to Palangan or, for adventurers, a taxi ride through the endless hair-pins of the Howraman Valley. Either way, finish the day in Kermanshah and spend the following day visiting the Achaemenid-era stone carvings of Taq-e Bostan and Bisotun*.

Hop south for a quick stop in the charming Lurish capital of Khorramabad, with its picturesque hilltop fortress, before continuing to Shushtar, with its mesmerising, Roman-built hydraulic irrigation complex*. Base yourself here for visits to the ruins of ancient Shush and Choqa Zanbil*, a magnificent 3000-year-old Elamite ziggurat.
10 Days, Tehran to Mashhad

**Mashhad Pilgrimage**

Take the train or bus from Tehran to Gorgan, nestled attractively in the Alborz mountains. Gorgan makes a great base for visiting the Turkmen steppe and the remote Mil-e Radkan tower. If you're impressed by this tower, you'll want to visit the incredible 1000-year-old tomb-tower of Mil-e Gonbad, in Gonbad-e Kavus, before visiting the forested mountains of Golestan National Park, perhaps staying at The Turkmen Ecolodge.

Next up, travel to Iran's holiest city of Mashhad, where you can revel in the ecstasy of pilgrims in the stunning and massive Haram-e Razavi complex and visit the beautifully proportioned Boq'eh-ye Khajeh Rabi mausoleum. Mashhad is a great base for exploring the hinterlands by foot, bicycle or horseback. Nearby Kang is a photogenic stepped village of stacked mud-brick homes. The mausoleum of 11th-century poet, Ferdosi is found in Tus, while Omar Khayyam has his tomb in Neishabur. The impressive mountain cliffs of Kalat Naderi lie to the north, or you can take tea with the Afghans at Torbat-e Jam.

Mashhad is a gateway to Central Asia; otherwise fly back to Tehran or continue south by bus or train into the desert.

10-12 Days, Esfahan to Kerman

**Desert Detour**

If you've ever dreamt of the oasis towns of the 1001 Nights or are drawn to hospitable homestays, this trip is for you. It's doable by taking infrequent buses, but the odd taxi dar baste can reduce waiting time. Avoid the summer heat by travelling between October and April.

Start in Esfahan and take a bus to Toudeshk for a night and a morning in the shifting sands of the Varzaneh Desert, before continuing to see the traditional houses of Na'in. From Na'in take the bus east to Khur, where you get a taxi to Farahzad and/or Garmeh for desert homestays that redefine hospitality; plan for three days all up.

Continue to Yazd via Chak Chak, and check into an atmospheric traditional hotel in the old town. Spend two days exploring the old city, the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence and a qanat, the underground water veins that keep these desert cities alive and if you're fit perhaps a trek into the desert. Heading south stop in Fahraj or the restored Caravanserai Zein-o-din for one night, before moving on to Kerman, from where you can take a tour to the remarkable 'sand castles' of the Kaluts.