



Northeastern Iran

شمال شرقی ایران

Includes »

Tehran to Gorgan	237
Gorgan	237
Semnan	242
Damghan	244
Gonbad-e Kavus	245
Around Gonbad-e Kavus	246
Bajgir	247
Mashhad	248
Around Mashhad	259
Mashhad to Sarakhs	261
Sarakhs	261
Kalat (Kalat Naderi)	262
The Road to Afghanistan	262

Why Go?

Sandwiched between the vast desert emptiness of the Dasht-e Kavir and the steppes of Central Asia, northeastern Iran has a spine of mountains that become more lushly forested as you head west. East of Minudasht the wilderness has been declared the Golestan (Paradise) National Park. Above the overdeveloped Caspian coast rise more forests and the grand Alborz Mountains.

Mashhad's extraordinarily grand Haram-e Razavi complex surrounding the tomb of Imam Reza is Iran's holiest site and draws millions of pilgrims each year. Mashhad is also the logical staging point for visiting Afghanistan or Turkmenistan.

Best Places to Eat

- » Hezardestan Traditional Teahouse (p255)
- » Sofrakhane Sonati Darvish (p240)
- » Hafez Restaurant (p255)
- » Jahan Hotel Restaurant (p255)

Best Places to Stay

- » Vali's Non-smoking Homestay (p255)
- » Tourist Inn (p240)
- » Hotel Pars (p255)
- » Iran Hotel (p255)

When to Go

Spring (March to May) is the most beautiful season and visitors catch the steppe and mountains mantled in glorious technicolour flowers. But beware, Mashhad is engulfed by No Ruz (Iranian New Year) holidaymaking hordes (late March) and pilgrims for religious festivals such as Ramadan, and ends up transformed into Dante's hell.

April to June means you'll miss the worst human scrums, still get to enjoy masses of late-blooming flowers in the mountains and dodge the worst of the summer humidity, for which the Caspian coastline is infamous.

History

Historically, the area developed as Khorasan (Where the [Iranian] Sun Rises) and Tabarestan/Mazandaran (the southeastern Caspian littoral). Millennia of culture reached a zenith here around 1000 years ago, producing many of the era's great scientists and poet-philosophers. But the 13th- and 14th-century ravages of the Mongols and Tamerlane were so complete that Tabarestan's settled civilisation was virtually wiped out. Even now the sites of several once-prosperous cities are mere undulations in the steppe. A few marvellous, lonely towers, most astonishingly at Radkan and Gonbad-e Kavus, are the last witnesses of former glories.

The 16th-century Safavid regime's move towards formal state Shiism was a major factor in the growth of Mashhad from a shrine-village to the region's foremost city.

Tehran to Gorgan

The road to **Manzadaran** from Tehran winds over stunning Alborz mountain terrain and is well worth the journey in itself, but has some treacherous switchbacks.

The gateway to the northern province is the sprawling city of **Sari**, famous for a cluster of three 15th-century tomb towers: the Imamzadeh-ye Yahya, the Imamzadeh-ye Abbas and the Borj-e Soltan Zein-ol Abedin. Keep an eye out for the Khaneh Kholbadi, a restored 18th-century mansion with fabulous coloured windows that scatter light across a glamorous interior.

Sari's finest hotel is the **Hotel Badeleh** (☎/fax 0151-422 2548; Gorgan Hwy, Angilasam; tw/ste US\$92/130; ☎☎). Also good is **Hotel Asram** (☎0151-325 5090; fax 325 5092; Valiasr Hwy; s/tw/tr/ste US\$50/55/65/80; ☎☎☎).

Sari has three flights a week to Mashhad (US\$48). A better option is to explore the wonderful landscape of the Alborz by taking the train from Tehran (four departures daily). Trains also continue to Gorgan.

Gorgan

☎0171 / POP 253,000 / ELEV 135M

This appealing city has a colourful, ethnically mixed population and an attractive location where the green Alborz Mountains stoop to meet the northeastern steppe. Gorgan was the birthplace of 'eunuch-king' Aga Mohammad who founded the expansionist

Qajar dynasty (1779–1925). Its architectural heritage is relatively limited but Gorgan makes a fine base for visiting the Turkmen steppes and Golestan's forested mountains. From the bazaar around Shahrdari (Vahdat) Sq, vibrant Valiasr St leads several kilometres southeast towards Nahar Khoran, an appealingly semirural scattering of woodland restaurants and hotels.

👁 Sights & Activities

Masjed-e Jameh (Jameh Mosque) MOSQUE (off Aftab 27th Lane; ☉dawn to dusk) Built around a quadrangle in the **bazaar**, the attractive 15th-century mosque has blue-tiled portals, sections of traditionally tiled roof and a distinctive Mazandarani-style capped minaret.

Imamzadeh-ye Nur TOWER (Aftab 15th Alley; ☉ 8am–dusk) This 15th-century brick tomb tower may be of specialist interest, but actually finding it is a great excuse to poke around Gorgan's most interesting old alleys.

Taqavi House HISTORIC BUILDING (Taqavi Lane; admission free; ☉8am–6pm) This magnificent building houses the Golestan Miras cultural-tourist office. Ask to peep inside the 'eight-wife' harem building which is not your average bureaucrat's photocopy cupboard.

Gorgan Museum MUSEUM (Shohoda St; admission US\$3; ☉8am–6pm) It has limited, dusty ethnological exhibits, and displays sparse finds from local archaeological sites such as Jorjan (Gonbad-e Kavus) and Turang Tappeh (a large tumulus 22km northeast of Gorgan).

Imamzadeh Abdollah IMAMZADEH (Shohoda Sq) This is a still-expanding complex that contains dazzling mirror work. Its large blue dome looks especially photogenic viewed through trees from near the bus terminal against a distant backdrop of seasonally snow-topped ridges.

Nahar Khoran WALKING Forest paths offer an easy clean-air escape from Gorgan, albeit crowded with weekenders and adorned with litter. The road continues several kilometres through **Ziyarat**. This once-picturesque village has suffered an extensive building boom but idyllic views remain through a green cleft valley up to high ridges behind.

گرجان