



Persian Gulf

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Why Go?

Few geographical descriptors are as evocative – and as controversial – as the Persian Gulf. Rich in oil, gas and mystique, this body of water and surrounding land is the heart of Arab consciousness and pride. No wonder, then, that Iran and her neighbours to the south have long argued over its name. The Gulf countries may call it the Arabian Gulf, but for all Iranians – including the proudly traditional Iranian Arabs (or Bandari) who live along its northern coastline – it could never be called anything but the *Khalij-e Fars* (Persian Gulf).

In the past, foreign interlopers headed here to establish trading posts. These days, there aren't many reasons for non-Iranians to visit. Those interested in eco- and cultural tourism will love Qeshm Island (we certainly do), but the resort island of Kish is overhyped and underwhelming, and the rest of the region offers little to the traveller other than long, hot journeys.

When to Go

The gulf is hotter than Hades between April and November, with temperatures averaging 35°C and occasionally climbing as high as 50°C. Not surprisingly, life adjusts accordingly – most businesses start early and then shut up shop from about noon to 5pm.

During No Ruz (Iranian New Year; 21 March to 3 April) the entire coast is inundated by swarms of domestic tourists – avoid travelling here at this time. Try to visit during winter, when the temperature averages between 18°C and 25°C, humidity is relatively low and crowds nonexistent.

Kish Island

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'Oh, but have you been to Kish? You absolutely must go.' Travelling in Iran you're likely to hear this more than once. And when you ask what is so special about Kish, you're told: 'But Kish is wonderful; everything works there. The beaches are clean, the buildings are modern and there's duty-free shopping. It's just like Dubai!'

جزیره کیش

And yes, all of this is true...to a degree. Since the 1970s, when the last shah tried to transform this desert island into a playground for the rich and famous, Kish has become the Iranian equivalent of Hawaii, the Costa del Sol or the Queensland Gold Coast – a beach resort where visitors can swim, shop and sample a laid-back and relatively liberated local lifestyle. Here, women let their headscarves slip back a bit, wear sandals, water ski (albeit in hejab-style



Persian Gulf Highlights

- 1 Spend a day cycling around **Kish Island** (p208)
- 2 Explore the biodiverse waters of the **Harra Sea Forest** (p215)
- 3 Marvel at the sculptural Chahkooh Canyon in Qeshm's extraordinary **Geopark** (p215)
- 4 Eat and sleep with the locals in a **homestay** (p216)
- 5 Watch endangered Hawksbill Turtles lay eggs on the beach at **Shibderaz village** (p216)
- 6 Take an early-morning speedboat to the former Portuguese outpost of **Hormoz Island** (p218)