



# Tehran تهران

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## Best Places to Eat

- » Azari Traditional Teahouse (p59)
- » Khoshbin Restaurant (p58)
- » Monsoon (p59)
- » Cingari (p59)
- » Akbar Mashti Bastani (p60)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Firouzeh Hotel (p55)
- » Espinas Hotel (p57)
- » Ferdossi Grand Hotel (p55)
- » Media Hotel Apartment (p57)
- » Roudaki Hotel (p56)

## Why Go?

With its relatively short history, ugly mask of concrete, sometimes choking smog and manic streets flowing hot with machines, many travellers and no small number of Tehranis will tell you there's no reason to hang around in the capital. But to take their advice is to miss out. For while Esfahan or Persepolis has a convincing case for being the soul of Iran, Tehran is indisputably its big, ugly, chaotic and dynamic beating heart.

Packed onto the lower slopes of the Alborz Mountains, this is Iran's most secular and liberal city and it attracts students from across the country. Expect relatively bold fashion statements, a range of ethnic and international restaurants, chic cafes and plenty of art galleries. And while Tehran lacks history, it makes up for it with impressive museums. But to get inside the real Tehran you need to get beyond the museums and into the cafes and teahouses and onto the walking trails. That's where you'll connect with Tehranis.

## When to Go

The best time to visit Tehran is during the two-week No Ruz (Iranian New Year) holiday from March 21. Given more than 60% of Tehranis come from somewhere else and head for home for the holiday, the usual traffic chaos is replaced by relative calm.

During April and May and September to early November the weather is relatively mild. Summer is hot and can be very humid, and while winter isn't as cold as some places, air pollution tends to be at its worst during December and January.

## History

Apart from 11th-century AD records suggesting the village produced high-quality pomegranates, little was written about Tehran until the 13th century. In his book *Moj'jamol Boldan*, writer Yaqoot Hamavi described Tehran as a village of Rey, then the major urban centre in the region, where 'rebellious inhabitants' lived in underground dwellings.

In 1220 the Mongols sacked Rey as they swept across Persia (see p275), executing thousands in the process. Most who escaped wound up in Tehran and the future capital's first population explosion turned the village into a prosperous trading centre.

In the mid-16th century Tehran's natural setting, many trees, clear rivers and good hunting brought it to the attention of the early Safavid king, Tahmasp I. Under his patronage, gardens were laid out, brick houses and caravanserais built and the town fortified by a wall with 114 towers. As Tehran continued to grow under later Safavid kings, European visitors wrote of the town's many enchanting vineyards and gardens.

Threatened by the encroaching Qajars, regent Karim Khan Zand moved his army from Shiraz to Tehran in 1758. At the same time he refortified the city and began constructing a royal residence. Perhaps he had intended to move his capital here, but when Qajar chieftain Mohammed Hasan Khan was killed and his young son Agha Mohammed Khan taken hostage, Karim Khan decided the threat was over and abandoned the unfinished palace to return to Shiraz.

But things didn't work out quite as Karim Khan would have liked. By 1795 he was long dead and his one-time prisoner, Agha Mohammed Khan, was shah. The new shah declared this dusty town of 15,000 his capital.

As the centre of Qajar Persia, Tehran steadily expanded. By 1900 it had grown to 250,000 people, and in the 20th century it became one of the most populous cities on earth. Iran's capital has fomented and hosted two revolutions, two coups d'état and much intrigue. As the setting for the CIA's first coup in 1953 (p46), it had a profound impact on post-WWII world politics. And as pronouncements from Tehran have been the driving force behind the growth of radical Islam since 1979, that influence has not waned.

Today it is fascinating to walk in the footsteps of that modern history: you can see the

White Palace at Sa'd Abad (p49), where the last shah hosted the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt as they plotted the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh; walk past the former US embassy now called the US Den of Espionage (p47); gaze up at Azadi Tower (p54), where hundreds of thousands of people gathered to mark the 1979 revolution and, more recently, to protest against the regime the revolution delivered; or visit the haunting Behesht-e Zahra cemetery (p71), where the faces of soldiers who died in the Iran-Iraq War stare out from endless fields of glass boxes.

## Sights

Tehran is vast and many neighbourhoods are never visited by other Tehranis, let alone foreign travellers. Most sights and hotels are found either side of Valiasr Ave, the 17km-long street that runs from Tehran train station in the south to Tajrish in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains.

As you move around, the huge social and economic gaps between northern and southern Tehran are plain to see. The south is older, poorer, more congested and generally less appealing. However, as it was the centre of the city until the mid-20th century, the area south of Jomhuri-ye Eslami Ave is home to many of Tehran's best museums, including the National Museum of Iran and the glittering National Jewels Museum, as well as the Golestan Palace complex and Tehran Bazar. A little north of here is the area loosely referred to as central Tehran, on the edge of which is Park-e Laleh – home to the Carpet Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Most locals think of anywhere north of Valiasr Sq as northern Tehran. Much of this area was semirural until about 1970, but frenetic expansion has spread apartment buildings further into the Alborz foothills, engulfing the last shah's opulent Sa'd-Abad and Niyavaran palaces in the process.

Most streets have signs in English but getting lost is still easy. It's worth remembering the Alborz Mountains are known locally as the North Star of Tehran because they are, yes, in the north. And as the whole city slopes down from these mountains, if you're walking uphill that usually means you're going north.

For more detailed maps of Tehran and elsewhere in Iran, head to government map-makers Gita Shenasi (p63).