



Understand Iran

IRAN TODAY266

International sanctions, inflation, crackdowns on dissent and high unemployment are challenges facing Iran.

HISTORY269

Time has witnessed great empires, mighty invaders, shahs (strong, weak and eccentric) and the birth of an Islamic Republic.

PEOPLE286

Rather than chanting fundamentalists, Iranians are warm, charming and welcoming.

DAILY LIFE.....289

'A book of verses underneath the bough, A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou.' (But without the wine.)

IRANIAN CUISINE296

Iran's diverse and distinct cuisine has evolved over three millennia, influenced by the arid environment and invading forces.

FAITH IN IRAN 301

An understanding of the Shiite Muslim religion and its most revered imams is vital to understand Iranians.

ARCHITECTURE304

Persian architecture has strongly influenced building throughout the Islamic world, and even in India.

CARPETS, ART & CRAFTS308

The Persian carpet is more than just a floor covering to an Iranian; it's an integral aspect of religion and culture.

LITERATURE, MUSIC & CINEMA 313

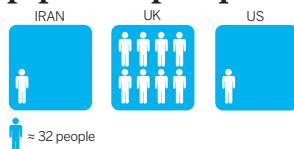
Since the 1st millennium AD Iran has produced outstanding poets; in more recent times, literature and cinema.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS 318

Iran is a land of snow-capped mountains, cliffside villages and vast, sweeping deserts dotted with oases.



population per sq km



Iran Today

Feeling the Pressure

Iran is a country under intense pressure. With the Arab Spring felling regimes across the region, the isolation of international sanctions, dangerous levels of inflation, high unemployment and the ever-present threat of a targeted military strike, you could be forgiven for thinking something has to give.

In 2009, 18 months before Tunisia kicked off the Arab uprisings, it seemed to many that change would come through the ballot box. When that didn't happen millions took to the streets in support of the opposition Green Movement, protesting what they claimed was a rigged election and calling for the president to step aside. But a violent crackdown ended the demonstrations, its leaders were put under house arrest and thousands of regime opponents have since been jailed or disappeared.

The Green Movement was the sort of spontaneous uprising that Iranians had been predicting for 10 years. That it failed, followed by the ruthless efficiency shown in rounding up opponents, has left many people feeling hopeless and paranoid. Some Iranians we spoke with would remove the battery in their already-switched-off phone before discussing politics. At a social level, crackdowns by the Ershad (morality police) and Basij (hardline militia) on dress and hairstyles have increased, and even the millions of long-tolerated satellite dishes are being (selectively) targeted.

So What Now?

Iran is more or less split between those who support the existing system – often rural people and the urban poor – as against those wanting change. The latter have largely given up on the electoral system and gone back to waiting for 'something to happen'. There are three main pos-

- » » Population: 78 million
- » » Area: 1,648,195 sq km
- » » GDP: US\$480.3 billion
- » » GDP growth: 2.5%
- » » Budget surplus: US\$35 billion
- » » Inflation: 22.5%
- » » Unemployment: 15.3%
- » » Population living below the poverty line: 18%

Dos & Don'ts

- » Never use the thumbs up sign, which is the equivalent of the middle finger 'up yours'.
- » Men should not offer to shake a woman's hand unless she offers first.
- » Take off your shoes when entering a home or a mosque.
- » When invited to dinner take a tin of the local sweets (eg *gaz* in Esfahan).

Top Books

- » **Journey of the Magi** (Paul William Roberts) Thought-provoking journey 'in search of the birth of Jesus'.
- » **Neither East Nor West** (Christiane Bird) American woman's account of her travels in Iran.