



# Western Iran

## ایران غربی

### Includes »

Tabriz .....	84
Kaleybar & Babak Castle .....	95
Ardabil .....	96
Qazvin .....	108
Alamut Valley .....	112
Soltaniyeh .....	115
Sanandaj .....	119
Howrman .....	123
Bisotun .....	128
Hamadan .....	128
Shush .....	136
Choqa Zanbil .....	137
Shushtar .....	138

### Best Places to Eat

- » Bijan's (p103)
- » Sofrakhane Sonati Ebrahimabad (p98)
- » Haji Dadash (p117)
- » Khansalar (p122)

### Best Places to Stay

- » Darya Guesthouse (p89)
- » Hotel Malek (p107)
- » Kadus Hotel (p102)
- » Mehran Hotel (p106)

### Why Go?

From paddy fields to blizzards to the original Garden of Eden, this region will shatter your preconceptions of Iran. Standing at the frontiers with Mesopotamia and Turkey, western Iran has witnessed many of civilisation's great empires, with fortunes oscillating between trading glories and military decimation. The deeply hospitable region lacks the iconic gem-city sites of central Iran so it's often skipped by first-time Western visitors. But that makes it all the more appealing for those who relish delving a little deeper.

Western Iran is a linguistic and cultural patchwork: Kurds predominate in Kordistan and Kermanshah provinces; Lors in Ilam and Lorestan; Arabs inhabit southern Khuzestan; Talesh and Gilaki are the traditional languages of Gilan (the southwest Caspian hinterland); and Azaris whose language is more Turkish than Persian, predominate in the rest of the northwest. In remote regions, and in Kurdish towns, traditional dress is still worn.

### When to Go

The craggy peaks of the Zagros from Hamadan northwards see snow arrive early and leave late (about November to March), while the sweltering lowlands around Shush begin to boil in June.

To make the most of western Iran, try visiting for the spring flower blooms in April/May, or the autumn harvest of juicy grapes and delicious mulberries in September/early October.

## Bazargan

📍0462 / POP 10,000 / ELEV 1417M

Car repair yards, shops and nine cheap hotels line Bazargan's Imam St, a gun-barrel straight strip fired towards the striking silhouette of Mt Ararat.

About 2km south of the immigration posts, the village ends at the outer border gate. Here the taxi/savari stand faces the basic **Hotel Jafapoor** (📞337 2058; Imam St; dm/tw US\$4/6) whose owner is excited to show off his modest English skills and changes money. **Hotel Hamid** (📞337 2435; Imam St; tw US\$15), 300m further east, is somewhat better and has bathrooms with squat toilets.

Locals pay US\$2 to head on to Maku but taxis ask way more from foreigners.

## بازرگان

For internet, try **Coffeenet Dade Pardan** (Imam St; per hr US\$1; ☎10am-last customer), almost opposite the Makoo Tourist Inn, 400m west of the main square.

## 👁 Sights

The sad, crumbling remnants of Old Maku's former **citadel** lead up to the **Abu Fazl Mosque** and a series of degraded brick **fortifications** cupped beneath an impressively huge cliff overhang. Fine views justify the sweaty 25-minute hike on steps and footpaths directly north from Chahara Sq.

The celebrated but empty **Kola Ferangi** is a century-old mansion with filigree wrap-around balconies, hidden away in a ruined garden accessed through the unmarked grey gates of a clinic on Taleqani St, just north of Chahara Sq.

## Maku

📍0462 / POP 39,600 / ELEV 1293M

Boxed into a soaring rocky canyon, central Maku has a handful of minor sights and makes a sensible base for visiting the old Armenian church of Qareh Kalisa (p78). Long a key fortress guarding the Ottoman-Persian frontier, Maku was one of many Azerbaijani khanates that gained semi-independence in the chaotic period following the death of Nader Shah in 1749. Although rejoining Iran in 1829, the khanate was only finally abolished a century later. Shops and all hotels are within 500m of little Chahara Sq on central Imam St. The bus terminal is 3km southeast.

## ماکو

## Baqcheh Juq Palace Museum MUSEUM

(📞324 3719; admission US\$1; ☎9am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun) This attractive mansion was originally built for the *sardar* (military governor) of Qajar Shah Muzaffar al-Din (r 1896-1907). Eclectically furnished rooms with colourful, quaintly tacky fruit murals are set around a wonderfully over-the-top mirror-tiled atrium. It's set in a walled orchard at the base of appealing, tree-dappled Baqcheh Juq village whose timeless hay-topped mud houses are backed by a rugged chasm. It's 2km off the main Bazargan road, about 7km west of Chahara Sq from which yellow savaris charge US\$1 one way.

## CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT BAZARGAN

Travelling solo, crossing here usually takes under an hour. The hill-top **immigration posts** (☎24hr) are 2km above Bazargan village, US\$1 (plus US\$1 for bags) by shared taxi/minibus. The posts are just 600m from **Gürbulak** in Turkey (no facilities). The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km east in Doğubayazıt, famous for its 1784 İşak Paşa palace.

Eastbound from Doğubayazıt to Gürbulak take a dolmuş (minibus; 3YTL, 25 minutes, last service 5pm) from the junction of Ağrı and Sehitlik Sts, 100m east of the Karahan Petrol Ofisi station (where Ağrı dolmuşlar wait). That's about five minutes' walk from Doğubayazıt's little bus terminal and cheap hotels. Westbound buses go from Doğubayazıt.

Arriving in Iran during office hours you're likely to be welcomed by a charming Iranian tourist officer. The bank within the Iran-side customs building offers full rial rates for US dollars and euros. They won't change UK pounds nor Turkish lira for which you'll have to risk the scam-a-lot guys outside or, more safely, ask hoteliers in Bazargan village. Beware that anywhere else in Iran, except Orumiyeh, Turkish lira are effectively worthless.

Well-connected Tabriz guide-fixer **Hossein Ravaniyar** (www.iranoverland.com; p89) is experienced at sorting out motorists' border formality problems.