



# Central Iran

# ایران مرکزی

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## Best Places to Eat

- Abbasi Teahouse & Traditional Restaurant (p172)
- Bastani Traditional Restaurant (p171)
- Shahrzad (p172)
- Ghavam (p205)
- Talar Yazd (p190)

## Best Places to Sleep

- Abbasi Hotel (p171)
- Barandaz Lodge (p181)
- Saraye Ameriha Boutique Hotel (p155)
- Niayesh Boutique Hotel (p202)
- Fahadan Museum Hotel (p189)

## Why Go?

Central Iran, encompassing the magnificent cities of Esfahan, Yazd and Shiraz, is the cultural *tour-de-force* of Iran. Wedged between the Zagros Mountains to the west and the Dasht-e Kavir to the east, it offers the quintessential Persian experience and it's no coincidence that it attracts the most visitors. But in an age that celebrates getting off the beaten track, this is one destination where this is a redundant quest: for centuries people have crossed this land, following in the footsteps of ancient empire builders, their journeys commemorated in the artistic wonders at Persepolis.

You can continue that journey today, tracing the silk route along desert byways, through city bazaars and across mountain passes – in much the same manner as the region's famous nomads. Many of the caravanserais and *khans* that dot these routes have been restored and overnighting in one of these hospitable lodgings serves as an appointment with history.

## When to Go

Visit in the spring when Persian gardens are in bud, mountain orchards are full of flowers and the rose fields around Kashan are at their fragrant best.

Although there is some difference in climate from region to region, generally travelling in the extreme heat of summer when temperatures can reach 50°C or more is not much fun between June to September.

January and February can be equally challenging, not just in the Zagros Mountains, but across the whole region as locals hunker down against the freezing cold of midwinter.

## Qom

قم

📍 025 / POPULATION 1,250,000 / ELEVATION 933M  
Iran's second-holiest city after Mashhad, Qom (Ghom) is home to both the magnificent Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine and the headline clerics who have ruled the country since 1979. Shiite scholars and students come from across the world to study in its *madrasehs* (schools) and browse in its famous religious bookshops, pilgrims pay homage at the shrine and locals are conspicuously pious. Travellers need to be mindful of the city's religious nature when visiting and dress conservatively. Discreet behaviour is particularly appreciated around the Hazrat-e Masumeh shrine.

Qom is one of Iran's fastest-growing cities (the population has doubled since the revolution) and the outskirts are being transformed by a sprawl of apartment blocks. While the new infrastructure is rather unattractive, the population growth has at least brought new life to the old centre. Qom can be visited in an easy day trip from Tehran or en route to Kashan.

### 👁 Sights

★ **Hazrat-e Masumeh** SHRINE  
(حضرت معصومه; Map p150; Astane Sq; 🕒 24hr)  
The physical and spiritual centre of Qom, this magnificent shrine is the burial place of Imam Reza's sister Fatemeh, who died here in the 9th century. Reza was the eighth of the 12 imams who descended from Prophet Mohammed; as the only one of the 12 to be buried in Iran (in Mashhad), his sister's burial site has a special resonance as a place of pilgrimage. Non-Muslims are allowed into the courtyards but not the shrine itself.

Much of what can be seen today was built under Shah Abbas I and the other Safavid kings in the 16th century. Anxious to establish their Shiite credentials and prove they could match the sect's shrines at Karbala and Najaf (in modern-day Iraq), they lavished the site with courtyards of brilliant tile work. For visitors, however, it is the great golden cupola that distinguishes Hazrat-e Masumeh; this was an embellishment added by the Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah in the early 19th century. Not to be outdone by their predecessors, successive rulers have lavished various embellishments on the shrine complex over the years with the latest addition – the construction of a grand plaza next to Astane Sq – being contributed by today's Ayatollahs of Qom.

Visits by non-Muslims should officially be in groups accompanied by a guide approved by the shrine stewards (who are incidentally a mine of information about the features of the complex); in practice, however, an element of discretion is exercised in permitting entry to individual travellers. Women must wear a chador, available free of charge at entrance No 1. Discreet photography by mobile phone was permitted during our visit but large cameras were discouraged.

### Old Bazaar

BAZAAR

(Map p150; 🕒 9am-8pm Sat-Thu) This lovely old bazaar in the heart of Qom, a short stroll from Astane Sq, is worth a visit as one of the most authentic covered markets in Iran. With a small *khan* in the middle, and the usual labyrinth of alleyways, it is distinguished from other such trading places by representing 'business as usual' for the local citizens of Qom, with little if no concession to modernity or visitors. A great place to sense the continuity of trade over centuries.

### Astane Square

SQUARE

(Map p150) The city's main square is paved with marble and pedestrianised, offering a grand vista of the Hazrat-e Masumeh. The square takes on a carnivalesque quality in the evening when robed clerics hurry by while pilgrims and scholars congregate to enjoy the open space, stroll the length of the square between the shrine and the glorious blue-domed **Imam Hassan Mosque** (Map p150), and browse among the Islamic bookshops. Catering to more worldly appetites, the souvenir shops flanking the square sell delicious local sweets.

A favourite confection of Qom is *sohun*, a sinfully sweet brittle made with pistachio, almond, saffron and cardamom. Buying a tin of these from one of the shops (IR100,000) and a glass of tea from the square's tea stand is part of the local experience.

Astane Sq spills into a neighbouring pedestrianised plaza in front of the Imam Hassan Mosque. A huge multistorey underground car park under this plaza is handy for those driving to Qom.

### 🛏 Sleeping & Eating

During religious festivals and on Fridays Qom is packed – be sure to book ahead if you plan to stop over. The best place to stay is **Qom International Hotel** (Map p150; 📞 025-1771 9208; www.qomhotel.com; Helal Ahmar St; s/d/tr IR1,890,000/3,060,000/3,920,000; 🏠🚗),