

# Understand Iran

## **IRAN TODAY ..... 274**

The struggle between liberal and conservative forces continues.

## **HISTORY ..... 276**

A tale of great empires, mighty invaders and the power of Islam.

## **PEOPLE ..... 293**

Many ethnic groups, but one unifying Iranian identity.

## **DAILY LIFE ..... 295**

How Iranians live and play, and the role of women in society.

## **IRANIAN CUISINE ..... 302**

Dig into a diverse and distinctive cuisine.

## **FAITH IN IRAN ..... 306**

An insight into Shiite Islam is key to comprehending Iranian life.

## **ARCHITECTURE ..... 310**

Beautiful Persian architecture has had a global influence.

## **CARPETS, ARTS & CRAFTS ..... 315**

Persian carpet, arts and crafts are an integral aspect of Iran's culture.

## **LITERATURE, MUSIC & CINEMA ..... 320**

Discover Iran's outstanding writers, artists and film-makers.

## **NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS ..... 326**

Iran's mountains and deserts are home to rare species.

# Iran Today

Modern Iran seems to be forever sitting at a crossroads between Islam and the West, between reformists and conservatives, between rogue state and responsible international citizen. Whichever of these Irans is in ascendance, the country remains one of the Middle East's most important regional powers. And just as relations between Iran and 'the Great Satan' (USA) appeared to be thawing, along came Donald Trump.

## Best on Film

**Taste of Cherry** (1997) Abbas Kiarostami tackles the taboo subject of suicide.

**The Apple** (1998) Samira Makhmalbaf's stunning debut about two adolescent girls imprisoned by their father.

**A Separation** (2012) Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning movie about a marriage falling apart.

**Taxi** (2015) Brilliant 'docu-fiction' as Jafar Panahi gives a voice to ordinary Iranians in a Tehran taxi.

**The Salesman** (2016) Farhadi's second Oscar scoop looks at the effect of an assault on a marriage.

## Best in Print

**Shah of Shahs** (Ryszard Kapuściński; 1982) Lyrical study of the Shah's hold over Iran and demise.

**Mirrors of the Unseen** (Jason Elliot; 2006) Perceptive and entertaining travelogue-history of Iran.

**Iranian Rappers and Persian Porn: A Hitchhiker's Adventures in the New Iran** (Jamie Maslin; 2013) Rollicking ride through Iran counterculture.

**City of Lies** (Ramita Navai; 2014) Gripping account of contemporary Iran told through a cast of Tehran characters.

## Regional Meddling

Few countries hold as much power in the Middle East right now as Iran. Having taken up the mantle of defender of Shiites and their interests across the region, and having spent decades channelling funds into the coffers of friendly governments and movements, Iran now has a powerful voice in what happens in some of the world's most important conflicts. Iranian-backed Hezbollah is widely credited with propping up the Syrian government, fighting alongside government troops to turn back the march of Islamic State and other groups who would overthrow the Assad regime. In Lebanon and Iraq, both countries with Shiite majorities like Iran, Iran has advisors on the ground and provides financial support to ensure that its view of politics prevails. In this role, Iran provides a counterpoint to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as regional powers; Iran has also been vocal in its defence of Shiite communities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Perhaps more than at any time in recent history, Iran is one of the region's most important kingmakers and policy decisions made in Tehran will play a role in determining the future of the region. Which is, of course, just the way the Iranian government likes it.

## Iran & the United States

Iran's relationship with the West, particularly the United States, has long defined the image the country has of itself and which it projects onto the world stage. The flashpoints have ranged from the CIA-backed coup in 1953 to the seizing of US embassy personnel in Tehran in 1979. Since the Islamic Revolution, the relationship has had far more lows than highs and remains one of profound mutual suspicion. Things began to thaw under President Khatami and many years of tough negotiations, sanctions and brinkmanship finally culminated