



# Northeastern Iran

## شمال شرقی ایران

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### Why Go?

The Northeast's primary attraction is Mashhad's extraordinarily grand Haram-e Razavi complex – the shrine of Imam Reza – which attracts pilgrims in their millions. The main highway to Mashhad from Tehran parallels the classic silk route via a series of former caravanserai villages and towns edging round the vast desert emptiness of the Dasht-e Kavir. An alternative route crosses the Alborz Mountains, descends to the highly developed Caspian coast then passes through Turkmensahra (an area that's culturally Turkmen), skirting the ancient Hyrcanian oak forests of the Golestan (Paradise) National Park, mountain home to a small population of leopards.

There's much to discover here – and you'll need to come this way if travelling overland to Turkmenistan – but foreign tourists remain extremely rare throughout the region. Cities like Semnan, Shahrud, Gorgan and Mashhad are vibrant and increasingly modern, but don't expect to find many English speakers or even any Latin script on most signs.

### When to Go

April to May is beautiful, with steppe and mountains mantled in technicolour flowers. Come on spring or autumn weekends (Thursday to Friday) to see horse-racing at Gonbad-e Kavus. In December temperatures can occasionally dip to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but more likely hover around  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Winter snows block some minor roads (eg Kordkuy-Radkan) but can make spotting elusive leopard tracks in the Golestan National Park a bit easier.

Avoid Mashhad around No Ruz (Iranian New Year) in late March and during religious holidays – innumerable pilgrim crowds turn the city into pandemonium. July and August are blisteringly hot and the Caspian region's infamous humidity peaks.

## History

Historically, the northeast developed as Khorasan ('Where the [Iranian] Sun Rises') and Tabarestan/Mazandaran (the south-eastern Caspian littoral). Millennia of culture reached a zenith here around 1000 years ago, producing many of the era's great scientists and poet-philosophers. But the 13th- and 14th-century ravages of the Mongols and Tamerlane were so complete that Tabarestan's settled civilisation was virtually wiped out in many places; even now the sites of several once-prosperous cities are mere undulations in the steppe. A few marvellous, lonely towers, most astonishingly at Radkan and Gonbad-e Kavus, are the last witnesses of former glories.

The 16th-century Safavid regime's move towards formal state Shiite Islam was a major factor in the growth of Mashhad from a shrine-village to the region's foremost city.

## Sari

ساری

📍 011 / POPULATION 299,000

The sprawling capital of Mazandaran is an infuriating, traffic-snarled place not really worth a big detour. However, it's a key connecting point if you're trying to reach Badab-e Surt by public transport, and the place you're likely to arrive if you've travelled the impressive Trans-Alborz Railway, which switchbacks down steep valley sides from the central plateau to the low-lying Caspian coast.

The best places to stay are **Hotel Badeleh** (📍 011-3388 4497; [www.hotelbadeleh.ir](http://www.hotelbadeleh.ir); Sari-Gorgan Hwy Km10; tw/ste IR2,834,000/3,924,000; 📞 ☎️) and **Hotel Asram** (📍 011-3325 5090; [asramco@gmail.com](mailto:asramco@gmail.com); Valiasr Hwy; s/tw/tr/ste foreigners €40/55/80/100, Iranians IR997,000/1,635,000/2,087,000/2,152,000; 📞 ☎️) which has a good restaurant-teahouse on its top floor.

## Getting There & Away

**Sari Airport** (📍 011-3372 2133; <http://sari.airport.ir>; off Sari-Gorgan hwy, Km11) is 14km east of the city. By train, arriving in Sari from Tehran or Garmsar is the one way of travelling the **Trans-Alborz Railway** ([www.rai.ir](http://www.rai.ir)) in daylight (IR140,000, five hours, departs Garmsar 10.40am).

Most long-distance buses use the big **Dolat Terminal** (Valiasr Hwy). However, for Bardab-e Surt, the 8am Orost minibus leaves from the **Mazandaran-Semnan Savari Stand** (Terminal Rahband; 📍 011-3323 1661; Keshavarz Blvd), a

small, easily missed garage, around 800m from the train station, on the west side of Keshavarz Blvd. Savaris and twice-daily buses to Damghan (IR250,000, four hours) also start there, making a rest stop at Telma Dareh (95km).

Savaris for Gorgan (front/back seat IR150,000/140,000) and Gonbad-e Kavuz (IR250,000/235,000) start on the Gorgan Hwy, 2km east of Golha Sq/Hotel Asram.

## Gorgan

گرگان

📍 017 / POPULATION 343,000 / ELEVATION 135M

This appealing, rapidly expanding city has a lively vibe and a colourful character, thanks to an ethnically mixed population and an attractive location where the green Alborz Mountains stoop to meet the northeastern steppe.

Gorgan was the birthplace of 'eunuching' Aga Mohammad, who founded the expansionist Qajar dynasty (1779-1925). Its architectural heritage is relatively limited but Gorgan makes a fine base for visiting the Turkmen steppes and Golestan's forested mountains.

## Sights

### Gorgan Tower

TOWER

(Borj-e Basij; Basij Sq; IR50,000; ☀️ 8am-midnight) The three-legged giant folly of a tower that sits on Basij Sq like a child's fantasy spacecraft is actually a jerkily revolving restaurant-coffeehouse that spins once in 45 minutes (if you persuade the barista to set it moving). Upstairs there's also a ring of open-air seating. Grab a coffee (IR80,000) to take advantage of the free customer wi-fi.

It's a fun novelty if you're driving by but getting here is a pain without a car: you'll need to find the **pedestrian access tunnel** (Basij Sq) from the road that runs parallel to the Sari Hwy, a block north of Basij Sq.

### Taqavi House

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p250; Imamzadeh Nur Alley; ☀️ 8am-2pm) **FREE** This magnificent complex of historic buildings houses the Golestan Miras (p251) cultural-tourist office. Ask to peep inside the 'eight-wife' harem building – it's not your average bureaucrat's photocopier cupboard.

## Sleeping

In the evenings till fairly late at night you'll see what appear to be hitchhikers on the south side of Mofateh Sq, and possibly other major thoroughfares. Their boards actually read سویت ('suite' in Farsi) and they're