

# IRAN

## Tips and clues from travellers

Iran guides usually advise visitors to avoid Tehran's mountain on Fridays because of the crowds. On the contrary, I believe this is THE day to climb the mountain. The sight of all those families (granddad included) climbing the mountain is amazing. It is the only day you can see Tehran youth going crazy! They scream (really weird), they sing, they listen to 'forbidden' music, couples hold hands ... Of the course the mountain is polluted with trash, of course you'd sometimes like to get rid of those old mamas walking so slowly, but if it's not to see the ceremony, why else climb this mountain? Far better to go to the Caspian region, where the mountains are really beautiful.

*Leonor de Bailliencourt, France (Aug 00)*

In Tehran, Qeitariéh Park set in the upscale Qeitariéh neighborhood has an excellent teahouse, surrounded by trees in the middle of the park, where one finds Iranians enjoying their evenings drinking tea and smoking the naarghile. The teahouse also serves food and is open till one am. There is also a craft shop and an Internet café in the park.

*Mazen Makarem, USA (Aug 00)*

The tourist office at Orumiye has moved to 2/38 Danesh St (near the churches), tel: 227722

In Tabriz, the Blue Mosque is now open as a museum - the structural restoration virtually complete, including the dome.

*Geoff Bolton, UK (July 00)*

We thoroughly recommend spending half an hour or so in the Tekye-e Mo'aven ol-Molk, near the Soroush Hotel. This is a lavishly tiled 19th century Qajar dervish complex, the subject of the tiles being narrative scenes from the martyrdom of Ali, heroes from the Shah-Namen and figures from Persepolis or Sasanian reliefs. There is also a large footprint set into the wall that is said to belong to Emam Reza. The entrance fee is 15,000 rials.

*Dr St J. Simpson, UK (July 00)*

In Shiraz, the entrance fee for the Arg-e Karim Khan is 15,000 rials, and although the restoration still continues we think it's worth it. There is a prayer room; a hamam and you can admire the gilded wall and ceiling paintings in the room just at the opposite side of the entrance.

*Aristea Parissi & Yorgos Kechagioglou, Greece (July 00)*

At Pasdaran, to the very north of Teheran (not far from the Shahs palace), you'll find the 'Stone Garden' a very large complex of gardens and cafes. It is a wonderful place to stroll around. There are four different pavilions/cafes/restaurants representing four different nationalities - one is Azeri, the other Turkmen, the third Turkish and I think the fourth is Baluchi. The interiors, food and live music are all authentic, and it's a popular place to promenade on a Friday.

*MiRee Abrahamsen, Norway (July 00)*

I was told that the metro is operating between the airport and E.Khomeini Sq. in Teheran.

There seems to be no significant difference between bank rates and official/illegal money changers; the open market rate is even published in the newspapers. According to a German traveller, changing DM at banks is at least as good as bringing US dollars.

*Franz Kramer, Austria (Jun 00)*

There is now a new museum located in the former residence of the Zand ruler of Bushehr. It is located on Khalij-e-Fars Street. It boasts a small ethnographic and archaeological display of items found in the area and on the upper floor displays works by contemporary Bushehr artists. The museum is certainly worth a visit. Entrance is the usual 10,000 rials and opening hours are 9 am to 2 pm.

The Armenian Church in Bushehr is currently closed and locked up. There is a sign at the door that says : "Danger, do not enter, no admittance". A shopkeeper in the area suggested that the building was in disrepair so visitors could not be allowed anymore.

*Hugo Baur, Switzerland (Jun 00)*

Walking to Sharestan bridge is not so pleasant anymore; a new commercial building was constructed nearby so the bridge does not span the river anymore, just a pool of dirty water.

*Franz Kramer (Jun 00)*

When everywhere else is becoming very hot, visit Masule, which is between Tabriz and Tehran. Masule is surrounded by forest so it has a cooler summer. There are good treks but its probably not advisable going alone, especially as a solo female. Accommodation is really cheap in Masule and you can stay with families who offer a room and all meals.

*Yvonne, Hong Kong (May 00)*

The Decorative Arts Museum of Iran in Esfahan was a delightful place full of beautifully decorated handicraft, a refreshing pearl of an old town house with an inner garden, and everything is excellently displayed.

*Ole Thage, Denmark (May 2000)*

Visa credit cards no longer work in Iran. MasterCard still works and is accepted but don't be fooled by hotels or shops with the Visa logo in the window. According to several shop owners, the card does not work anywhere in the country.

In Tehran, the National Museum and the Museum of Islamic Art now try to sell their tickets together as a package. If you try to enter the latter first, you are pointed back to the National Museum when they sell you tickets to both for a total of 30,000 rials (15,000 each). If you only want one, say so.

In Yazd, the Towers of Silence remains worth a visit but they're not so silent anymore - young Iranian men with motorcycles like to challenge each other to see whether their bikes can make it up the steep hill. There's also a guy who'll take your photo on a camel for a couple of thousand rials.

*Jacques Poitras, Canada (May 00)*

If visiting Iran, try to catch at least one day of the Ashura festival in mid-April. The sight of hundred of men (and they are all men and boys) dressed in black flagellating themselves in unison and sheep being slaughtered in the streets is something you won't see almost anywhere else in the world. The downside is that all shops and businesses are closed for the duration.

Contrary to some reports, photography is permitted inside the Imam Khomeini shrine south of Tehran. The guards' objections seem to be to cameras with noisy actions such as auto-rewind rather than photography per se. Ask your taxi driver to translate your request.

*Andrew Hubback, UK (May 00)*

We tried to visit the Kelisa Darre Sham near Jolfa. First we tried to get permission in Jolfa itself, but, although we were helped by a taxi driver, didn't manage to get it. In Tabriz we met a tourist guide who helped us.

The Permission has to be obtained from the tourist office in Tabriz at a cost of 30.000 rials. A travel agency has to be a guarantee for you. As it turned out, we were denied permission by the tourist office without reason.

*Patrick de Groot and Erik Visscher (March 2000)*

After almost 10 years of waiting, the Tehran underground subway is finally open. The first person to take a ride on it was President Mohammed Khatami, whose reformers recently came out on top in recent parliamentary elections. This hopefully will make the streets of Tehran less polluted and crowded with traffic.

*Ron Broadfoot, Canada (Feb 2000)*

I was asked to complete a currency declaration form upon entering Iran through Tehran airport, though I wasn't asked to produce it when leaving the country.

These days, the difference between changing money at a bank compared to at an exchange office or on the street is not that great.

In Shiraz, the new Bank Melli office just east of the Kowsar Hotel does not change money; they will send you to the Bank Melli central branch and the exchange office is actually in a small building behind the large main building.

*Constantine Mandykias, Australia (February 2000)*

As we were cycling through Chalus we had a bad experience with the police. While cycling my 'wife' didn't wear the long coat which usually didn't present a problem because most people understand that it is impossible to cycle in a chador. But in Chalus she left her bike for a moment to look for a bakery and forgot to put on her coat. She didn't get far. The first policeman that saw her took her to the police station where she was questioned in Farsi and they wouldn't let her go to show them her coat and bicycle. Eventually a policeman found me and I was able to show them that we had a long coat and were on bicycles. The moral of the story is that when you are not in a big city and not in a tour group, always dress very conservatively.

*Geisje van den Berg & Tony Verschoor, The Netherlands (Jan 2000)*

Having obtained student cards in Bangkok, we found them very useful as they were accepted everywhere in Iran except Persepolis. You might need to be persistent however, as they are almost never accepted graciously. There also seems to be no system set up for student tickets. They always just gave us one standard ticket for two people.

We found overcharging foreigners to be a problem in Iran. We found it good policy to always ask the price of food and drinks in advance, especially in Tabriz where everyone seems willing to charge you more. Taxis in Esfahan were a problem, as the LP guide warns.

We found the entrance fee to the National Iran Museum had gone from 15,000 rials to a crazy 30,000 rials. But ISIC cards get you a 50% discount. This fee now also gets you into the Islamic Arts Museum next door but don't expect anyone to tell you this for paying 10 times the Iranian price - we discovered it quite by accident. And just in case you think your money is going to improve or maintain the collection, think again. The layout is identical today to the museum site map in our 1972 Persia Archaeology Guide by Sylvia Matheson.

A lot of sights have upped their prices. We managed to visit the Masjed-e Vakil at around lunch time. It is one of the loveliest mosques in Iran in our opinion. Go, it's free too!

In Bushehr look out in the Old Town for door knockers in the shape of human hands, stained glass windows and one massive house around a courtyard with a lone tree; it's the most awesome building in the old town. The Bandari architecture is very like the Swahili towns of East Africa.

We went to visit the Armenian church to find it had collapsed when a water main burst, undermining its foundations. It is now almost totally ruined.

*Cameron, Lindsay & Sean Wayman, Australia (Feb 2000)*

The dual pricing is very common for foreigners; hotels, taxis, museums - it gets very boring after a while. Museum entries cost 20,000 Rials for foreigners/2,000 for Iranians.

I took Thomas Cook travellers cheques in US dollars with me, instead of American Express. I went to the Bank Melli central branch, on Ferdosi St, Teheran to change US\$80. They wanted to charge me US\$13 for this operation, saying it was a fixed commission. It was impossible to get a cash advance with my international Visa card in this bank and I had the same problem at the Bank Melli central branch in Shiraz and Esfahan - they would only accept Master Card.

The only good place to change my Thomas Cook travellers cheques was the Money Exchange in Esfahan where the manager gave 8080 Rials for US\$1, which is the official rate at the bank at the moment for cash.

*Pascal Grailllot, France (Dec 99)*

I was a bit reluctant of travelling to Iran because of the clothes' constraints. However, it is really not that bad. I wore a scarf to cover my hair and neck (take a cotton one, it's lighter) and the Islamic clothes (large cotton or linen pants and a long sleeves cotton shirt to the knees) and it did not bother me except when eating in a restaurant. The colour of the clothes does not really matter although dark and solid colours will help you blend into the local crowd. I am glad I went as it made me realise the western perception of Iran is not quite correct. I felt safer in Teheran by myself at night than in any major European city. Iranian people are friendly and willing to communicate with foreigners. If your time in Iran is limited, do not go south to Bandar Abbas and to the Hormouz Strait: it is not really worth it unless you visit the village of Minab (women wearing a red mask to cover their face).

Take some time to travel through the two deserts. The Dasht-e Lut in the south-east is quite interesting with the typical villages and the beautiful coloured landscapes. The Dasht-e Kevir, south of Teheran, is a sand desert with a salt lake in the middle. Visit the Bam citadel at sunset (the colours are great to take pictures).

*Catherine Willemart, Belgium (Nov 99)*

Rasht itself has nothing to offer, however there is a small Armenian church about 200 m north from Shohada. The entrance is on the corner and if you ring the bell for a long time, somebody will open up and explain the story of the Armenian community there. There is also a small museum and an Armenian school in the area. A Protestant church is opposite the Rasht Museum.

*Rawel Mroczkowski (Oct 99)*

Whatever you wear as a woman, you will be spotted by everyone, especially by Iranian women. My girlfriend bought a chador in Turkey and regretted it. This kind of chador is not worn in Iran.

*Klaas Koers & Wilma Scholte, The Netherlands (Oct 99)*

Arriving at Mehrabad airport in Tehran was sort of a disappointment, because everything went so smoothly. I was expecting difficulties but the officer checking my visa smiled and wished me a happy holiday. It was a funny feeling to get out and take my first lungful of the Tehran air - it smells like scorched motor oil, clutch and rubber.

In Shiraz, young Iranians love to go strolling along the Chamram highway. There is a path next to the highway with artificial waterfalls, statues and restaurants. It is a place where boys search for girls and the path is crowded with youngsters on rollerblades, biking or just strolling.

*Eirik Softeland, Hungary (Oct 99)*

Price of rial in 'Open Market' is now about 1US\$ = 9.000 IR. This is nearly double the price in the guide and is the best key to recalculate prices as they appear in the guide. If you travel from Turkey, buying rials in Istanbul is not a bad idea. We bought them at money changers in Laleli at about 5% less than in Tehran 'Open Market'.

Nowadays it seems almost impossible to get a train ticket if you don't book it a month in advance.  
*Marti Griera and Montse Sors (September 99)*

After having paid a visit to Alexander's prison in Yazd, it's worthwhile to take the alley that leads from the north east corner of the square in northern direction and alongside the Cultural Heritage Office. After some 300 metres you will reach a walled compound on the right hand side, with one of the biggest windchimes in town. You can't miss it since the windchimes look fairly new due to restoration. Entrance is on the north side and requires another 10000 IR. Inside the compound is a former nobleman's house under restoration. On the south side of the inner courtyard are the branch offices of the Counsel for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage. The third office from the left is decorated with mirror inlays and beautiful wall paintings showing various women dressed in what would be considered as very indecent in nowadays Iran. The paintings are of a rather good quality and, from the look of them, date from late 18th to early 19th century. If you ask nicely, the official currently occupying the office will allow you in to have a look around.

Entry fees all over the country have risen to 15000 and 20000 IR respectively. These are imposed by the Government so it's useless to try to bargain. Entry fees are imposed even when the bigger part of the attraction is (still) under full scale restoration, due to which all doors are closed and there is actually nothing to see, as you'll find out once inside. Iranians more than once showed embarrassment about the prices and entry fees imposed on foreigners.

*Rene Holtel, The Netherlands (Aug 99)*

The Museum of Decorative Art was one of the highlights of Esfahan and really worth a visit. The building was renovated and opened in 1996. Do not miss the glass windows and the mirror works of the building. All the exhibits are in Farsi only, but you get a guide who leads you around and speaks some English. In one room I was shown how they make the thin gold threads that are used on traditional clothes and in another I saw some making of traditional pottery. The exhibitions include wonderful miniatures, lacquer work, painting, old khorans, calligraphy, ceramic, brass work, wood carving and traditional costumes. It is closed on Friday but on the other days it is open from 8 am to 1 pm.

*Ernst Lessan, Austria (June 99)*

There are now many public places where you can check your e-mail. In Isfahan and Shiraz if you go to the rug sellers in the Bazaar, some of the more prominent ones have set up shop. Apparently there are little Delta signs (triangles) in the windows indicating that there are computers available. But, even better, there are now Internet Cafes operating in Tehran.

Opportunities for nightly entertainment in Iran exist. Traditional restaurants have singers at night and the pseudo-cabaret style entertainment goes on well into the night.

The best time to go to Iran is during the 10 Days of Dawn from February 1st through 11th, when the country celebrates the anniversary of the revolution. Tehran is replete with music concerts (amazing traditional music as well as international music from mostly other third world countries) plays and films. Even international films in original languages or with English subtitles. Also, the city is very much in a festive mode and so, it's quite fun to behold.

*Laleh Khalili, USA (May 99)*

You cannot use a Visa card in Iran - it seems that only MasterCard is accepted.

*Jasper Lloyd, UK (May 99)*

The Iran Air office is now at the corner of Faghihji Street and Zand Boulevard, Shiraz.

*Arian Zweegers (May 99)*

We landed at Tabriz airport and saw a very interesting picture of a village with the houses dug into the rocks. We asked around and found out that the village is called Kandovan. We hired a taxi to get there (35.000 Rials/half day, about 50 km from Tabriz) and it was one of the highlights of our travels to Iran. The village itself lies at a high altitude on the slope of a big mountain. The houses were dug into the rocks which looked like pyramids, in a very strange landscape. To walk to the houses you have to climb the narrow steps between them. At the lower part, there is a small river. From the other side, on a hill, you have great views of the mountain and the rocky village.

*Sotiris Chaimantas (Apr 99)*

In Tehran, KLM no longer require reconfirmation before return flights. It has two offices, one is now apparently situated opposite to Park-e Meillat, the other on the second floor of the international terminal of Mehrrabad. The new telephone number is 2044 757. The office is shared with Allitalia.

Apparently the metro is up and running.

In Shiraz, the Iran Air office has moved - same street, now directly on the corner and ground floor.

In Esfahan, the Armenian cathedral now demands money - 10000 rial for foreigners and the museum is hilarious. Have you seen the inscribed rice? But the price is worth paying.

Lots of new murals are to be seen in Chehel Sotun - the restorations are well under way now. Prices for flights have gone up - unsurprisingly so. Domestic flights have gone up by about 30% which does not really matter so much with western money as the exchange rate is better now. Apparently the best money to bring in is the newest US\$100 bills. All other bills and currencies are less valued. Deutschmark is better though than pounds Sterling and others. 100DM note is again the best.  
*Anon (May 99)*

During April, the law regarding taking carpets out of the country was changed. One carpet (up to 6 sq metres) is allowed per person, plus as many kilims as you want. Some travellers were thoroughly searched before leaving Tehran airport going home.  
*Tony Blair (May 99)*

I'd recommend avoiding the north end of Hafez Street in Shiraz, near Quran Square; it's quite poor and some street urchins on a motor-cycle hailed me with stones as I was walking along.

The Zand, east of Shohada Square was under construction; traffic was not closed off but it was impossible to cross the Zand by foot there as far down as the bazaar-e Vakil, entailing significant detours.

Bogh'e-ye Shah-e Cheragh; possibly because this is the first shrine I went in, I thought that the mirror tilework inside was amazing. It turned out that I didn't see anything comparable or as spectacular in other shrines for the whole of the rest of my trip to Iran.

In Kerman, The Kerman Contemporary Arts Museum is definitely worth seeing. The art by Sanatee (with captions in English) are mainly tilework pictures. In another gallery there is a display of photographs of contemporary Iran (but not labelled in English). Some appear to depict scenes from the Iran-Iraq war and its effect on the civilian population.

In Yazd - Lariha House is shown in the brochure published by the Organisation of Culture and Islamic Relations. A taxi driver offered to take me there, claiming that it was very beautiful. I didn't have time but later I couldn't find it on any map. It may be worth checking out. It appears to have a big wind-tower and some reflecting pools.

Also in the Organisation of Culture and Islamic Relations brochure is a picture of "Shesh Bagdir" (6 Wind Towers). Some Spanish tourist I met tried to tell me about it but we couldn't find a way to communicate the directions so I didn't see it. It is almost certainly within the Old City, though.

In Tehran, the best murals to be seen are on the wall along Taleghani Street at the US embassy.

*Richard G.A. Bone, UK (Apr 99)*

## **Moving around Iran**

Although Iran's transport system isn't as developed as those in western countries, it's considerably better than most other countries in the region. All public transport is frequent, reliable, relatively safe and very cheap. But it's worth considering getting airborne for the following reasons: your visa probably won't last long enough for you to use public transport to remote cities; fares are very cheap; the country is vast, and the scenery is often boring; and flights (particularly on Iran Air) are reliable, frequent and cheap.

If you can't get somewhere in Iran by bus (or minibus), chances are that *no one* wants to go there. There are lots of different bus companies offering competitive and mostly comfortable services. Transport can be a problem for about 10 days before and after No Ruz, the chaotic Iranian New Year which starts on or about 21 March. Road travel can be interrupted by roadblocks at any time of year, most frequently on either side of a main city, but occasionally dotted through remote areas for no particular reason. Foreigners are rarely hassled at roadblocks - the worst that will happen is that you'll have to show your passport and endure a delay.

Driving your own vehicle is a gutsy call. The distances are long, the traffic is appalling and it's hard to find secure parking. To all appearances, there are no road rules. The upside of driving is that the road surfaces are generally excellent and petrol is ridiculously cheap. Shared taxis are a better option between major towns. A seat costs about three times as much as a deluxe bus, but can be worth it if you crave a little extra comfort or want to hurry through a dull stretch of countryside.

Trains are fairly efficient, reasonably fast and certainly cheap, but they're often not as convenient as buses. The most exciting trips are between Tehran and Tabriz (for the scenery and excellent service) and between Tehran and Gorgan (for the number of tunnels and the scenery). The great Trans-Iranian Railway, built in the 1930s to connect the Caspian Sea at Bandar-é Torkaman with the Persian Gulf at Bandar-é Emam Khomeini is one of the great engineering achievements of the 20th century.

## **Comments from travellers:**

The first line number 2 was opened in February, 2000. You can go from Emam Khomeini square to Teheran station in the west of the town. They are working on more stations in the direction to the east. When it is finished there

should be 17 stations running the 19 km. Line 1 running from north to the south is in construction (27 stations and 34 km). Prices : 300 Toman within the city. Line 2 has 8 stations.

*Ernst Lessan (Jul 00)*

From Iran, buses to Turkey go via Georgia (Turkey has closed it's border with Armenia), so a Georgian transit visa or "gift" at the border may be required. It's unclear whether an Armenian visa will be accepted for transit through Georgia.

If you're crossing into Armenia from Iran try to take the Tehran-Yerevan bus or find out what days the infrequent Megri-Yerevan bus runs; otherwise you'll probably have to pay around US\$85 for a taxi (per car) for the spectacular 400 km trip to Yerevan like I did. Expect your baggage to be checked by both the Iranian and Armenian custom officials.

The border crossing with Armenia at Noordoos is open to foreigners. There are a number of ways to get to Noordoos. The easiest way is to take a taxi from Tabriz for the 200 km trip which costs about US\$15. Otherwise, you can bus it to Jolfa then take a mini-bus or taxi from there. The last 30 minutes of the drive runs next to the Aras river which is at the border that separates Iran from Azerbaijan. You can clearly see villages and watch towers on Azerbaijani side of the border. Very few westerners cross this border; Iranian and Armenian custom officials are likely to check your baggage.

*Constantine Mandylas, Australia (Feb 2000)*

It was possible to cross the border between Iran and Armenia, though because of our car, it took us 23 hours to have all the paper work done. This is without taking into account the 4 hours spent on the Armenian side refusing to bribe them (though we couldn't avoid giving cigarettes to the Russian soldiers still checking what is going out of the country); 19 hours were necessary on the more polite and hospitable Iranian side.

At the border, we had to pay \$47 for using Iranian roads and oil. The following day, at the administration border in Jolfa, 65 km away from the actual border, we had to pay \$80 for car insurance even though we had our own. They said we could have avoided it with a Carnet de passage - which we couldn't get having bought the car in Georgia. It is likely to be much quicker on the Iranian side travelling by bus or cycling.

We found that oil is still ridiculously cheap and that driving is not as petrifying as we would have expected.

*Arnaud Moreillon & Ben Pillonel (Jan 2000)*

Bandar-e Anzali - the information we got in Anzali was that passenger services from the port no longer run to Baku in Azerbaijan. They referred us to the Astara land border, which is apparently closed to foreigners.

As of December 1999 air fares are a massive 125% higher in rial terms. Yet, despite inflation, Iran is still a crazily cheap place to fly or do just about everything else.

*Cameron, Lindsay & Sean Wayman, Australia (Feb 2000)*

The buses for the Caspian provinces do not leave from the Eastern terminal, but from the Western. Actually, at the Eastern terminal I have only seen minibuses. The terminal LP refers to as Sayro Safar is called Arzhantin and is served by different companies, not only Sayro Safar.

*Pawel Mroczkowski, Poland (Oct 99)*

We took the train from Tabriz to Tehran. Easy going. However, our bicycle went with a different train and arrived 8 hours later. They charged more for the bicycle than our first-class sleepers. Taking the bicycle with a bus is easy, but we had to pay 10.000 Rials per bicycle extra.

*Klaas Koers & Wilma Scholte, The Netherlands (Oct 99)*

Esfahan to Istanbul - There's a bus to Turkey now but it runs only twice a week. Its cheaper to go to Tehran and take a bus from there - I went by an aircon bus Tehran-Istanbul for 80.000RI - you must bargain. Contrary to what you sometimes hear there are no buses running between Shiraz and Turkey.

*Petr Hruska, Czech Republic (Sept 99)*

Coming overland from Pakistan into Iran by car (diesel engine), an unpleasant surprise happened to us. After the usual immigration and customs arrangement, we drove to the last gate. They told us we had to go back to Boundary Terminal management. We again showed our passport and carnet and were handed over a paper in Persian. The person in charge told us we had to go to the bank and pay US\$174. It took a long time before we found out we had to pay this amount because oil prices are so low in Iran. A kind of fuel tax. If you have a tourist visa you don't have to pay, only if you have a transit visa, but the embassy in New Delhi/Islamabad and the consulate in Quetta only issue transit visas.

The border officials said that the Iranian government want to have the fuel price on the same level as that of the neighbouring countries, making it so expensive to come into Iran for only seven days (US\$50 transit visa plus US\$174 fuel tax).

*Johanna de Bresler, The Netherlands (Apr 99)*

You can arrive in Iran by boat across the Gulf. There is a very good catamaran ferry operating between Dubai and Banar Lenge & Dubai and Bandar Abbas. The sailing dates are : Friday - no sailing; Saturday Dubai-Bandar Abbas; Sunday Bandar Abbas-Dubai; Monday Dubai-Bandar Lenge and Thursday Bandar Lenge-Dubai. The costs are - return first class ticket - 375 Dirhams; second class - 355 Dirhams; third class 295 Dirhams. The ferry is run by Valfarje 8 and the agent in Dubai is Sharaf Travel (tel) 552121 (ext 208).

There is no ferry from Oman to Iran. It took a lot of phoning around to get this information so although not many travel to Iran this way, this information could save someone a lot of time.

I went to Lenge and although it is a very uninteresting place in itself, it is an easy place to start in Iran. Lenge also has an airport and I was able to fly on the day after arrival to Shiraz for less than US\$10.

*Jon Lynn, UK (Feb 99)*

## **Highlights and Attractions (tips from travellers)**

A highlight of our trip to Shiraz was the Passion Play at the Masjed e Nasir ol Molk. This takes place over the five days at the end of the 40 days mourning for the death of Ali. We were lucky enough to be told about this by two local guys. We arrived around sunset and the courtyard of the mosque was full of people. At about 9 pm the play started, basically consisting of two groups in the costumes of the rival armies re-enacting the battle of Karbala. The whole thing was very well done and nobody seemed to mind two foreigners being there.

*Martin Nixon & Alison Ball, Sri Lanka (Aug 00)*

A new modern road is now open from Ize in the western mountains, to about 60km west of Esfahan. It is a glorious road. The mountains were incredibly high and snow covered with gorgeous valleys and lakes. It was very remote and the only other people we saw the whole day were a man on a bike and a few nomads. The only problem with the route was that it crossed so many mountain ranges, but it is certainly worth making the effort. You would never believe that such scenery existed in a desert country.

*Joyce, USA (July 00)*

Although I got to know only the women that could speak English and who were interested in westerners, and so I might conclude they were from the more liberal end of Iranian society, I found them "just like us" in so many ways. Inside their homes, they were critical of their 'uniform', and fascinated (appalled perhaps) that I was not wearing make-up. As we talked with the Spice Girls on MTV though the illegal satellite dish, the girl-talk ranged through the amusing to the hysterical. You try explaining the concept of a one-night stand with sign language.

I was spontaneously invited to a wedding and the mum of the groom dragged me off to fix my hair and put some make up on. Their fashion on such occasions is, perhaps, glitzy by our standards but Iranian women are glamorous with a capital G. Still, the effect of a black street chador over the bride's ornate headpiece and her frothy gown would have been sobering if I had been drinking.

I was stopped in the street in Kerman by a uniformed man - "here we go" I thought, but he very politely asked me if I had the time to "discuss with him the situation for women in Iran". Although I wasn't entirely frank, I got the impression he was genuinely interested in my views and had I been more critical it would have become nothing more than an informed debate. If anything, he seemed disappointed at my reticence to criticise.

I was "hassled" twice - a brilliantly low "hit-rate" by the standards of surrounding countries. And so it is through the whole of Iran. Solo women travellers are honoured guests to be protected and welcomed. The Persians are truly generous folk. I don't know if I saw more generosity because I was a woman all alone, but it never failed to strike me as extraordinary. If I asked for help with a taxi, it would be paid for. If I went to buy something small to eat at a stall, it would be given to me. If I asked for direction, I would be taken to where I was going. If I were at a tourist site, somebody would come and open some door or room where others were not allowed. I would not hesitate to tell any woman to travel there alone. It is easier than any other country I have been to : safe, clean, interesting and the men are strictly hands off.

*Cheryl Rivers, Australia (Feb 2000)*

One place which isn't mentioned in the LP guide to Iran is Kandovan, a village about one hour away from Tabriz. It reminded us a lot of Goreme in Turkey. It's basically a village of houses carved straight from cone-shaped sandstone formations. Unlike Goreme, there are no hotels, cars, restaurants or tourists. Donkeys and the occasional minibus from Shohada Square in Tabriz are the main means of transportation. There was deep snow when we visited in late December. It's a beautiful and very unique looking town. We hired a taxi from Tabriz with an hour's waiting time for 35,000 rials.

*Cameron, Lindsay & Sean Wayman, Australia (Feb 2000)*

Yazd is a wonderful place. For 10000 rials you can climb up the Amir Chakhmagh Complex "tower" and enjoy magnificent views of the town. The last bit up the minaret is only suitable for people who don't mind squeezing their way up through the darkness. The views are only beaten by what you can see from the roof of the Friday mosque

(the caretaker now expects 5000 Rials for the favour of opening the door) at sunset. It was one of the highlights of our trip to Iran.

*Sebastian Hoffmann (Oct 99)*

## **Be careful !!**

After negotiating a price to Maku from Bazargan, the driver wanted to take my companion and I to Tabriz for a silly price. He insisted that there were no buses to Tabriz, but we insisted he take us to the bus station as agreed. He refused and kept driving and then slowed down and reached around making an attempt to touch us grabbing at our legs. I gave him some slaps with my LP guide and he stopped. He then threw his head back and arms heavenward making tutting noises and muttering 'hejab'. To me, it seemed to imply that although dressed modestly we were loose western women. Had we been lone travellers a disconcerting experience could easily have become frightening.

*Annabel Holley, UK (Aug 00)*

We wanted to see the US Den of Espionage (once the American embassy) and the Azadi Monument in Teheran. From our hotel we took a taxi and stopped in front of the American embassy. The wall surrounding the embassy is full of anti-US slogans. Three of us took photo's of the wall and the embassy. Within a minute a police car arrived and some five minutes later there were about twelve policemen talking to our taxi drivers. We were brought (escorted) to a police station and had our camera's and passports taken by the police.

After more than three hours we were told we could go but not before removing the film from our camera, making a copy of our passport and writing down our address.

There was no sign saying it was forbidden to take photo's and the hotel didn't warn us. Maybe the police were a bit nervous because earlier in the week there was a terrorist attack in Teheran.

*Eric Wuestenenk, The Netherlands (Jun 00)*

I had an encounter with the bogus police. Several hotels now warn guests about them and they are becoming widely known among the Iranian population. As a result, it's easier to get out of trouble. When the guy approached me, I aggressively argued back with him - "where's your uniform?" and so on, while shaking my head and saying no a lot. He backed off pretty quickly and my guess is that it was obvious to him that I knew what he was up to.

*Jacques Poitras, Canada ((May 00)*