

TRANSINDUS

IRAN



Iran

When the British Foreign Office relaxed its travel advice in the wake of the recent thaw in relations between Iran and the US, we at TransIndus were delighted! A natural 'follow-on' from India, with which it shares many historic and cultural roots, this is a country we've long wished to offer to our clients. Iran abounds in the kind of experiences we love: fabulously exotic buildings, a wealth of evocative ancient sites spanning 4,000 years of civilization, sophisticated crafts traditions, and otherworldly landscapes, to name but a few.

Travellers recently returned from Iran also enthuse about the great warmth and fine manners of the Iranians themselves, who are evidently delighted that the rest of the world has at last woken up to the wonders of the Persian plateau. There is a country with a glittering cultural pedigree. Splendours from past eras still dominate most towns and cities, and the cuisine, textiles, ceramics, music and formal gardens draw on a cultural legacy with very deep and refined roots.

It is possible to tour the country's principal highlights in a fortnight, but with an additional week you'll be able to venture off track to experience a few less well known destinations. Feedback from our Group Tours has thus far been rapturous, and we're looking forward to discovering more about this under-appreciated destination in the coming year.





Tehran

At the foot of the Alborz mountains, Tehran is Iran's sprawling capital, and one of the most spectacularly situated cities in the world. Wherever you are, shining snow fields shimmer at the end of every street – a chimeric backdrop for a pulsating metropolis of over 12 million people! Most tours start and end here – with good reason. The city is the home of the UNESCO-listed Golestan Palace, as well as a superb crop of galleries and museums.

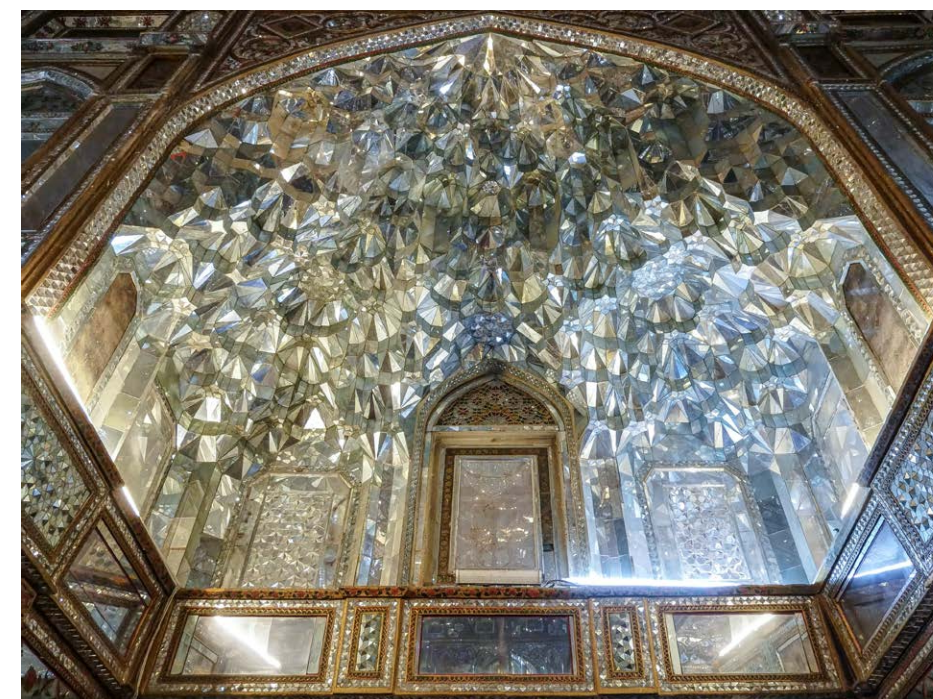
In the Treasury of National Jewels, you can marvel at some of the finery with which the Safavid and Qajar rulers used to adorn themselves. Highlights include the Darya-e Nur, the world's largest uncut diamond, the crowns worn by the last Shah and his wife, and a globe made of 51,366 precious stones.

At the National Museum, come face to face with huge Achaemenid bas-reliefs from Persepolis, a famous statue of Darius the Great and some exquisite cast-bronze figures

from the distant Parthian era. With a little time to spare, you might also squeeze in a visit to the wonderful Reza Abbasi Museum, which holds a matchless collection of classical Persian paintings and manuscripts, and the Saadabad Palace, out in the city's leafy fringes, which reveals the opulent lifestyle enjoyed by the country's former rulers, the Shahs.

Tehran's historic bazaar district is fabulously atmospheric, especially towards the end of the afternoon, when locals throng the squares to watch the world go by, while snacking on pistachios and saffron ice cream!

After exploring the markets, unwind over a bowl of hot, fragrant dizi (traditional Iranian stew) and a puff on a qalian (water pipe) at one of the city's traditional tea houses. Or try a plate of tah-chin (crusty rice with layered chicken cooked in saffron and butter) at the famous Moslem restaurant on Panzdah-e Khordad Street.





Rey

Among our recommended day trips from Tehran is the one to Rey, 16km south of the city centre on the Metro. The site is famous for the sumptuously decorated shrine of Abdol al Azim, a beautiful complex crowned by gilded and glaze-tiled domes, to which pilgrims from across the country travel in large numbers.

Qom

The second most sacred place in Iran after Mashhad, Qom lies a few hours' drive southwest of Tehran and is revered by Shia Muslims as the site of Fatima's shrine, the Hezrat-e Ma'sumeh, whose golden dome and twin minarets tower over the city.



Abyaneh

Set against its backdrop of rugged desert mountains, with a foreground of poplar trees and fruit orchards, the red-brick village of Abyaneh forms one of the signature sights of central Iran. The spread of cuboid houses, which spill in dramatic fashion down the sides of a low hill, grew up after the Arab invasions of the 8th century when Zoroastrian refugees settled here, and retains a unique feel. Locals speak a dialect with close resemblance to ancient Persian tongues, while instead of the usual black chador, the women wear white head scarves enlivened with bright floral patterns. You'll receive a particularly warm welcome; expect invitations to take tea in a local home as you're walking around the narrow, cobbled streets.

Kashan

Kashan, roughly midway between Tehran and Isfahan, makes a delightful stop on the journey across Iran's central plateau. Long renowned as a carpet weaving centre (visits to workshops are possible), it is equally famous for its crop of grand 19th century residences (known in Farsi as 'khanehs'), built in a style perfectly adapted to the hot, arid local climate. The city is also the home of Iran's finest Persian garden, the Bagh-e Fin, which was laid out in the late 16th century, featuring char-bagh-style crossed rills fed with water supplied from the nearby mountains by an ancient qanat system of underground pipes. The garden was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2012.

Kashan's surrounding villages are the centre of one of a particularly fragrant industry: the production of rose water. In late spring, truckloads of petals are harvested to make bottles of the Islamic world's favourite perfume, attracting admirers from across the country and forming the object of several festivals. You can sample and purchase the full gamut of local rose products at shops in the lanes around the town's khaneh mansions.

Another good reason to overnight in the town is Morshedi House, an absolute gem of a heritage boutique property occupying a 250-year-old house. Its focal point is a central courtyard with small circular pond surrounded by pomegranate trees, where you can laze with a book in the sunshine – a true haven of peace and quiet.



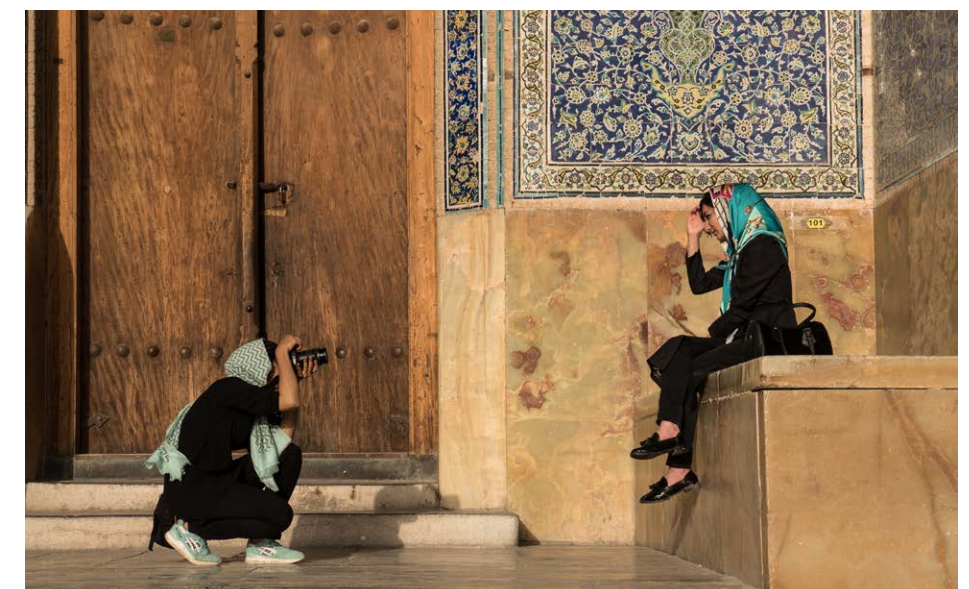


Isfahan

Former capital of the Safavid Dynasty, Isfahan became the seat of Shah Abbas the Great in 1598, and at its zenith blossomed into one of the most magnificent and cosmopolitan cities in history. Visitors from Mughal India and Europe were dazzled by the wealth of its bazaars and splendour of its buildings, erected by the finest architects and craftsmen in the Islamic world.

The great mosaic-tiled mosques and palaces flanking Naqsh-e Jahan Square in the centre of the city alone justify a visit to Iran, but the capital of Shah Abbas holds many more wonders, from the sublime Chehel Sotoun pleasure pavilion, with its UNESCO-listed 17th century murals, to the elegant arched bridges spanning the Zayande River and immaculately kept Persian gardens. There's an exceptionally beautiful covered bazaar here too, winding from the main square to the ancient Jama Masjed mosque in the north of the old city, regarded as one of the masterpieces of medieval Islamic architecture. Crowned by mud-brick domes, the market's main artery winds past a succession of shops selling fabulous ceramics, carpets, spices and jewellery.

A pleasurable city to explore on foot, with a collection of monuments unsurpassed anywhere in Asia, Isfahan epitomizes the great cultural sophistication of Iran and is, for most of our clients, the country's stand-out attraction.





Yazd

Before the Arab conquest of Persia in the mid 7th century, most of the region's inhabitants were Zoroastrians, and this city became the religion's stronghold after the spread of Islam. Among the oldest continuously inhabited urban centres in the world, it remains home to a sizeable Zoroastrian minority, and is one of Iran's great highlights due to its dramatic desert setting and well preserved old town – a maze of traditional mud brick and adobe alleys and buildings sprouting a forest of distinctive wind towers, or bagdirs.

Between visits to its exotic religious monuments, admiring sumptuous Qajar glazed tilework, you can wander for hours around the lanes of the old city exploring the silk and carpet weaving for which Yazd is renowned. Many of the hotels and guest houses retain ancient wood doors and hidden courtyards. Views over the distinctive skyline are breath-taking at sunset time. We particularly love the one from the rooftop of the Art Café, which serves delicious local coffee laced with cardamom.



Naein

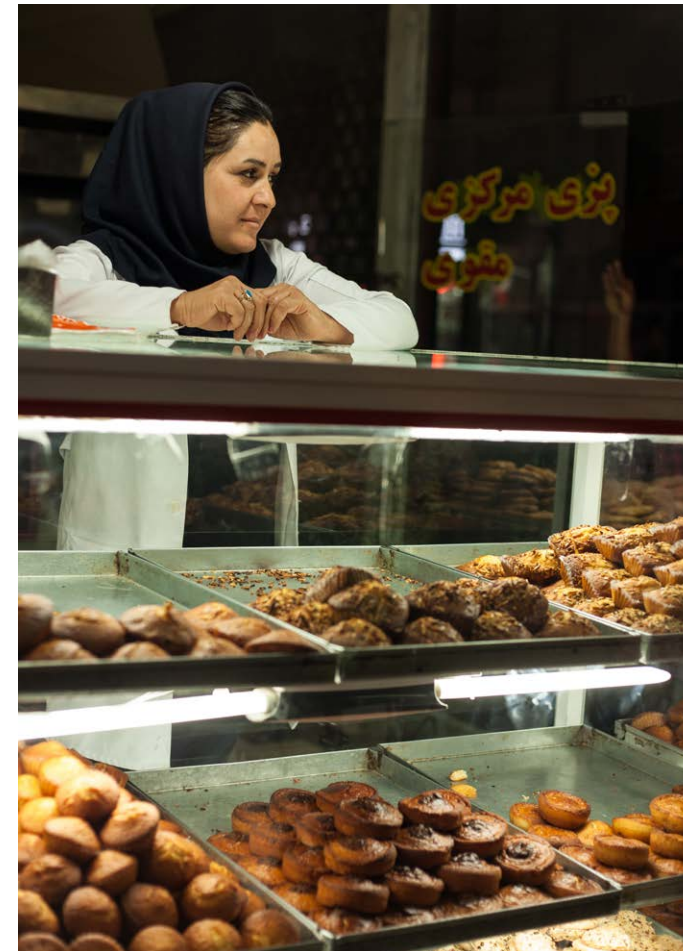
At the start of the old Safavid pilgrimage route across the desert to Mashhad, this crumbling mud-walled town ranks among the most picturesque in Iran. Its most distinctive building is an ancient mosque with an unusual octagonal minaret, one of the first to be erected in Persia after the Arab invasion, and which retains some exquisite decorative brickwork. Another highlight is the adjacent Safavid house built in 1560, whose owner opens it to the public as an 'ethnographic museum' where you can admire original plasterwork friezes recounting traditional tales from the Koran. The town also retains an evocative Parthian fort and the remains of a 3,000-year-old qanat water distribution system by means of which snow-melt was channelled from the distant mountains.

A tract of massive, yellow dunes outside Naein provide a target for enjoyable day trips or cycle rides.



Meybod

A major desert city with a population of over 75,000, Meybod offers a compelling stopover on the journey to or from Yazd. Its standout monument is the enigmatic Narenj Castle – a pile of eroded adobe ramparts and bastions lording it in spectacular fashion over the surrounding courtyard houses and dusty lanes. Next to it stands one of our favourite restaurants in the country, where you can dine on succulent saffron kebabs marinated in walnut and pomegranate juice. The dining hall occupies a wing of an old, beautifully restored caravanserai. Other sections hold stalls selling colourful local weaving products and carpets. Shopaholics may also wish to explore the local pottery district. Meybod has been famous for many centuries as a ceramics centre and the outskirts are scattered with traditional workshops where you can pick up traditional pots and tiles at bargain prices.



Shiraz

Famed over the centuries for its nightingales, poetry and wine, Shiraz has traditionally been regarded Iran's cultural capital. Two of Persia's greatest Sufi poets are both entombed here, while the affable, famously laid-back locals are proud of their refined parks and gardens, dating from the Zand era of the late 18th century.

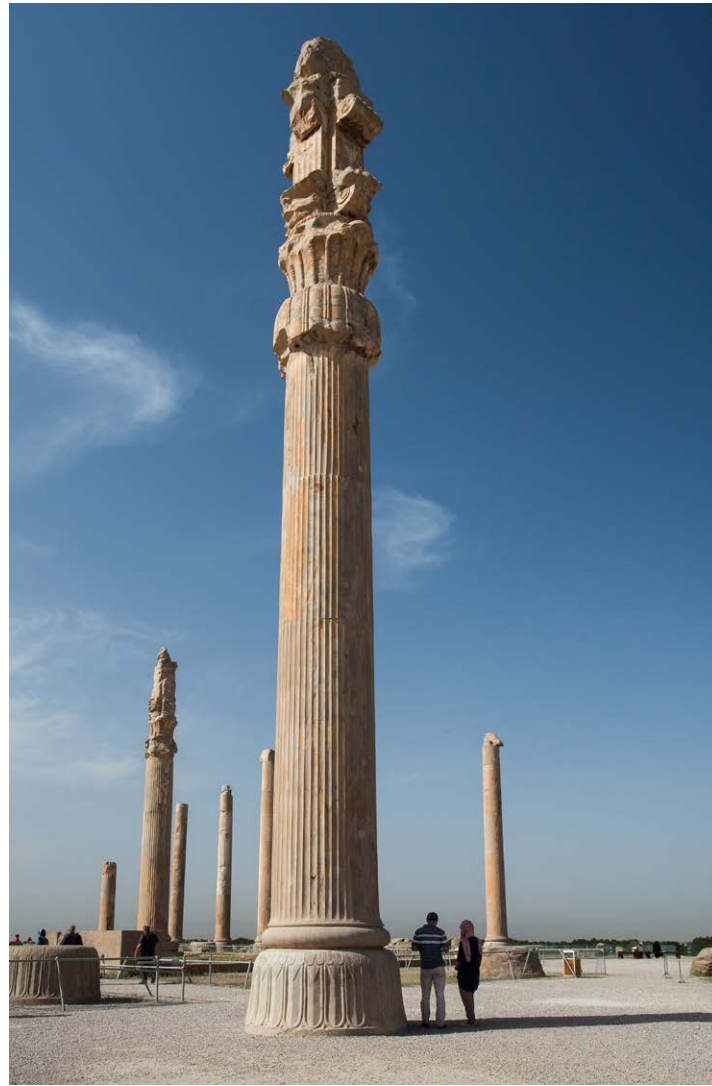
The vineyards have all gone and what nightingales survive are drowned out by traffic noise these days, but Shiraz warrants more than a cursory glance out of a bus window en route to nearby Persepolis. After the tombs of the two great poets, the city's most iconic sight is the mosque of Nasir al-Molk, whose arched and vaulted reception rooms are bathed in light from multi-coloured stained-glass windows – one of the gems of 19th century Qajar architecture. The adjacent square, leading to a particularly wonderful covered bazaar retaining its original domed roofs, is a delightful place to linger over coffee.

Another unmissable sight is the Naranjestan-e Ghavam, an exquisite 19th century pavilion set amid some of the country's loveliest formal gardens. Its basement holds a small but excellent museum, and a shop selling high-quality miniature paintings on camel bone.

Above all, Shiraz is a city for wandering. Tucked away in the backstreets of its medieval core are innumerable shrines, tombs, and mosques awaiting discovery, as well as a bumper crop of traditional tea houses and restaurants.

Travellers with a keen interest in archaeology may wish to follow in the steps of the British art historian, Robert Byron, whose 1930 travelogue, 'The Road To Oxiana', describes an eventful hunt in the hills around Shiraz for ruins dating from the Sassanian period (3rd century AD). The most spectacular of them, Dokhtar Castle, looks exactly as it did in Byron's day, perched on the edge of a deep, stratified ravine in the desert.





Persepolis

Persepolis, also known as 'Parseh', was the seat of the Achaemenid empire, whose power peaked under Darius I and his son, Xerxes I, but was ultimately brought to violent halt when Alexander the Great sacked the city in 330BC. Today, its ruins – an assemblage of colossal pillared palaces, throne halls, reliefs, gateways, platforms and tombs fashioned from pale-grey marble – form one of the world's greatest archaeological treasures and an eloquent witness to the might of ancient Persia's rulers, whose writ once extended from the Balkans to the Indus and south as far as the Nile.

Given the monumental scale of the site, it is amazing to think the great capital lay completely forgotten until the 1930s when excavation work revealed its full extent. An hour's drive out of Shiraz, Persepolis is today a world-renowned visitor attraction. Marvelling at the monumental stonework, it's still possible to gain a vivid sense of the world of Darius, Xerxes and Alexander.



Naqsh-e Rostam

Visits to Persepolis are nearly always combined with a detour to this extraordinary necropolis, where a collection of colossal reliefs dating from the Achaemenid, Sassanid and Elamite periods are carved into a cliff face – one of the most awe-inspiring sights of ancient Asia. Burial site of the Persian kings, including Xerxes and Darius II, the tombs were spared destruction by Alexander and have survived the corrosive effects of two-millennia of weather to a remarkable extent. A low hill opposite them provides a marvellous bird's-eye view of the site.

Pasargadae

Pasargadae was the Achaemenid capital before the foundation of Persepolis, and is famous today as the site of the marble tomb of Cyrus the Great (558–530BC), which sits on a high, stepped plinth on a river plain near the hilltop fortress of Toll e-Takht. Overlooked by most visitors, the monument has retained the lonely serenity enjoyed by Ernst Herzfeld, Aurel Stein and the other archaeologists who first explored the region in the early 20th century. Nearby, the dishevelled ruins of a palace and temple are virtually all that remains of a once splendid city, which lay deserted after the Achaemenid departure.





Kerman

In the southeast of the country on the edge of the great Dasht-e Lut Desert, Kerman was historically an important crossroads dominating trade routes to Afghanistan and India. It retains a particularly fine mud-brick old town, at whose heart stands the Ganj Ali Khan complex, a collection of well preserved 17th century bazaars, caravanserais and splendid tiled mosques.

For a taste of old Persia, we recommend a stop at the Vakil Tea House, in the heart of the market area. Settle at one of the low tables to enjoy some traditional Baluchi food, accompanied by live music that would have been instantly recognizable to travellers in the Safavid era and is the perfect complement to the elegant, vaulted-arch ceilings.



Mahan

Iran is filled with awe-inspiring mosques, and by the time you get to Mahan chances are you will have seen quite a few of them. The shrine of the revered Sufi mystic-poet Ne'mutallah Vali Kermani, however, has a more tranquil and spiritual atmosphere than most, which owes a great deal to the character of the saint himself, a charismatic dervish who lived in the late 14th century. Blending glorious Timurid mosaic tilework and elegant Safavid arches, the complex has the power to inspire even the most travel-weary visitor. As, indeed, does Mahan's other great attraction, the famous Qajaar Garden on the town's outskirts, whose centrepiece is a beautiful Islamic

pavilion where you can pause to enjoy tea and a water pipe in the most exotic of surroundings. Fountains dance amid ascending tiers of green water, flanked by rose gardens and stands of cypress that contrast vividly with the surrounding desert – a true wonder. The official name of the walled compound is the 'Shazdeh' or 'Prince's Garden'. It was intended as a pleasure resort for royalty and high-ranking officials travelling between Kerman and Bam, and must have provided a welcome respite from the heat of the summer. Today, its beds of roses, marigolds and other fragrant blooms attract admirers from all over the world.



Rayen

This walled, mud-brick citadel outside Kerman is similar to the ancient citadel of Bam, which was destroyed by an earthquake in December 2003 (and is currently being rebuilt by the Iranian government). Well preserved, and in a truly spectacular setting, with the rippled slopes of Haraz mountain looming to the south, the site offers a flavour of what life must have been like in this region during medieval times. Photographers will be in their element, particularly during the spring when traces of snow streak the nearby ridges. Inside the building, stalls set up by local crafts people include one devoted to traditional knives.



Exploring Iran

The image of Iran portrayed in the foreign media has for decades been rather forbidding. Within minutes of leaving the airport, however, you'll realize that the grim, grey-bearded Ayatollahs whose giant images define the country in the popular imagination abroad have little to do with reality on the ground. Ordinary Iranians are exceptionally welcoming and hospitable. With sixty percent of the population under the age of 30, this is a young, vibrant country with its eyes set firmly on the future. In the cities, you'll come across cafés filled with hip, smart-phone carrying 20-somethings as fascinated by fashion and the arts as their counterparts in the West – even if the girls do have to wear headscarves in public. Out in rural areas, attitudes are generally more conservative but the locals no less warm. A surprising number of people speak a little English and are eager to practise it. In short, encounters with Iranians will be frequent and likely to prove among the most enjoyable aspects of your trip.

One of the things that most surprises British visitors to Iran is the number of other foreign nationals travelling around the country. It soon becomes clear that the wonders of Isfahan and Persepolis exert a far more widespread appeal in France and Germany than in the UK. This can mean overwhelming numbers at the main sights in peak season, which is why we devise our itineraries very carefully to avoid the busiest periods and times of day. In some cases, to reach a monument before the large tour groups an earlier start than usual may be required.

When to go

Spring (March–early June) and autumn (September–late November) are the best times to visit Iran. As a rule of thumb, we try to avoid travel during Ramadan and Muharram (your TransIndus consultant will know when the dates of these festivals fall).

International Flights

By far the most convenient route to Iran from the UK is BA's direct flight to Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA). Services depart almost daily, fares are competitive and, best of all, journey time only 5hrs 40min. Alternatively, you can fly with Turkish Airlines via Istanbul or Qatar Airlines through Doha, which will take around 10 or 11hrs.

Travel within Iran

Iran is huge – almost 7 times larger than the UK to be exact – and overland journeys between destinations are often long by British standards. That said, we use only luxury, air-conditioned vehicles with experienced drivers, and there's plenty of exotic scenery to enjoy out of the window as you travel. For some legs of your tour it may also make sense to take the occasional domestic flight.

Dress and etiquette

- Things are changing fast in Iran, but it remains outwardly a conservative Islamic country in which women are expected to dress modestly in public, wearing a headscarf, long sleeves and long, loose fitting trousers or ankle-length skirts, and a long coat in winter. Watch how other women dress and you'll soon get the idea. In some religious places, women must also wear a light, cotton chador to enter mosques – there will always be a stall renting them for visitors. Men should note that in public, shorts are never acceptable.
- In general, when chatting to Iranians avoid quizzing them about politics, and steer the subject on to less contentious ground in the unlikely event they do the same to you.
- Beware taarof, the Iranian code of civility which can cause confusion for the uninitiated, particularly when shopping. Often a vendor will tell you an item is free when it isn't. As the buyer, you're merely required to keep insisting. It may take two or three goes, but eventually your payment will be accepted.

- Unlike in some countries, where you may be asked to send copies via email or WhatsApp, Iranians tend to be reticent about sharing personal contact information with strangers. Iranians, particularly young people, love to be photographed, and spend a lot of time taking pictures of themselves and their friends and family to post on Instagram! This makes it a particularly enjoyable country if you like taking snaps of local people. Expect a barrage of friendly questions and requests to have your photograph taken in return!

Suggested Itinerary

This fortnight-long tour packs all the country's benchmark sights into a varied itinerary starting and ending in the capital, Tehran. Given the distances involved, it's not surprising the trip involves a few extended journeys. But rest assured, these are conducted in great comfort and are punctuated by regular breaks at sights that will linger in the memory as long as the great mosques and archaeological complexes for which Iran is internationally famous.

Iran Discovery | 13 Days

Experience the very best Iran has to offer - from the glories of Safavid Isfahan to Achaemenid Persepolis - on this carefully honed tour across the central plateau.

Taking advantage of BA's direct flight to Tehran from London Heathrow, you'll begin your trip in the capital, where the standout sight is the Golestan Palace of the Qajar Shahs, famed for its sumptuous decor (and delightful traditional tea shop!). Day two features the only domestic flight of the itinerary, taking you to Shiraz in the south, which we'll use as a base for exploring Persepolis and satellite monuments. A winding journey over the outliers of the barren Zagros Mountains takes you on to Yazd, home of Iran's most exotic skyline and, at the end of the first week, to Isfahan, whose splendid mosques and palaces are unrivalled in the Islamic world.



UK — Tehran (1 night) — Shiraz (3 nights) — Naqsh-e Rostam — Pasargadae — Persepolis — Yazd (2 nights) — Meybod — Naein — Isfahan (3 nights) — Abyaneh — Kashan (2 nights) — Qom — Tehran (1 night) — UK

How to book

We hope you enjoyed reading about Iran. If you have more questions our specialist travel consultants will be happy to hear from you on: 0208 566 3739 or enquiries@transindus.com

Having discussed your options with one of our travel consultants and chosen a trip that meets your aspirations, the next step is confirm your booking by paying a deposit. This is normally 20% of the total tour cost and can be paid in person at our offices in Ealing, London, over the telephone or via bank transfer. We will ask you to complete and sign a Booking Form. Your balance payment is only due 8 weeks prior to departure. We suggest you familiarise yourself with our booking terms and conditions, a copy of which you'll be sent along with the booking form.



TRANSINDUS

Your journey. Our expertise.



The organisation of travel and accommodation is supported by excellent local guides to make each day a wonderful experience for even seasoned travellers.

Ejner Kmudsem



Our holiday was excellent and the hotels were fantastic. Will definitely use Transindus again and recommend to friends.

Rosemary Lambkin



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