

## Iran

### *Location*

The Islamic Republic of Iran is located in the Middle East, between Iraq and Pakistan. The country is slightly larger than Alaska, covering 1,648 million sq km, of which only 12,000 sq km is water, mostly in the form of lakes. The World Factbook gives the coordinates for the geographic center of Iran as 32 00 N, 53 00 E, but this point is out in the middle of nowhere, about 140 km SE of Esfahan. According to the map of the Middle East, Iran lies between 44°E and 63°E longitude and from 25°N to 40°N latitude. Iran is bordered to the west by Turkey and Iraq, to the east by Afghanistan and Pakistan. The northern border is shared with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and the Caspian Sea. The southern border consists of the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Iran also claims to have rights to a significant portion (20%) of the Caspian Sea, which contains huge reserves of oil and natural gas. Other countries bordering the Caspian dispute the Iranian method of dividing the mineral and territorial rights, and propose to give Iran rights to only about 12% of the sea floor and surface of the Caspian. Iran also controls about a dozen islands in the Persian Gulf.

### *Geography*

Iran has three distinct geographical areas: mountain ranges, interior basins, and lowland plains. The principal mountain ranges include the Zagros Mountains in the west and south, and the Alborz Mountains in the north. Many peaks in the Zagros exceed 3,000 meters above sea level, and in the south-central region of the country, there are at least five peaks of over 4,000 meters. As the Zagros Mountains continue into southeastern Iran, the average elevation of the peaks declines dramatically to under 1,500 meters. Most of these mountains are at elevations higher than 2,440 meters. Around the Caspian Sea is another chain of mountains, the narrow but high Alborz Mountains. Volcanic Mount Damavand (5,600 meters), located in the center of the Alborz, is the country's highest peak and is the highest mountain on the Eurasian landmass west of the Hindu Kush.

Most of the rest of the country consists of a plateau that contains several closed basins and two salt deserts in the east, the Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut. Except for some scattered oases, these deserts are uninhabited. The average elevation of this plateau is about 900 meters, but several of the mountains that tower over the plateau exceed 3,000 meters. Much of the plateau has interior drainage and is characterized by many intermittent streams, intermittent salt lakes, and wet salt flats.

Iran has two main expanses of lowland plains: the Khuzestan plain along the Persian Gulf in the southwest and the Caspian Sea coastal plain in the north. A smaller lowland plain is located along the Gulf of Oman in the south. The Khuzestan plain is a roughly triangular-shaped region averaging about 160 kilometers in width. It extends for about 120 kilometers inland, just a few meters above sea level, and then meets abruptly with the foothills of the Zagros. Much of the Khuzestan plain is covered with marshes. The Caspian plain is both longer and narrower. It extends for about 640 kilometers along the Caspian shore, but its widest point is less than 50 kilometers, while at some places less than 2 kilometers separate the shore from the Alborz foothills.

Several minor rivers and streams drain into the Persian Gulf, while a number of small rivers that originate in the northwestern Zagros or Alborz drain into the Caspian Sea. On the Central Plateau, numerous small rivers, most of which have dry beds for the greater part of the year, form from snow melting in the mountains during the spring and flow through permanent channels, draining eventually into salt lakes that also tend to dry up during the summer months. There are no major rivers in the country. Of the small rivers and streams, the only one

that is navigable is the Karun, which shallow- draft boats can negotiate from the Persian Gulf delta port city of Abadan inland to Ahvaz, a distance of about 180 kilometers. There is a permanent salt lake, Lake Urmiyeh (called Lake Rezaiyeh under Mohammad Reza Shah), in the northwest, whose brine content is too high to support fish or most other forms of aquatic life. There are also several connected salt lakes along the Iran-Afghanistan border in the province of Baluchestan va Sistan.

### *Climate*

Iran generally has a combination of arid and semiarid climates. Temperature extremes vary greatly from summer to winter. Summer (June through August) is intensely hot, except in the high mountains. Temperatures occasionally reach a daily high of 46°C (115°F) and an extreme evening low of 11°C (51°F) in Tehran. In the low coastal area surrounding Bandar Abbas, the extreme high and low are 44°C (111°F) and 24°C (75°F), respectively. Winter (December through February) temperatures occasionally reach a daily high of 21°C (70°F) and an extreme evening low of -13°C (9°F) in Tehran. In Bandar Abbas, the extreme high and low are 32°C (90°F) and 2°C (36°F), respectively. Only the Caspian coastal zone and some high mountain regions receive appreciable annual precipitation. Snow remains on the highest summits most of the year. Winter is normally the rainy season for the country overall. The Caspian coast, the most humid area of Iran, receives the greatest annual precipitation, varying from 800 to 2,000 mm (32 to 80 in), with the majority falling between late summer and mid winter. Dust and sand storms frequently occur in desert regions, severely reducing visibility.

## *History*

The History of Iran is a colorful but bloody one. Waves of successive invasions reduced the population drastically and persistent internal feuding between local rulers didn't help, either. The period prior to 651 AD covers the foundation of the Persian Empire under Cyrus to the conquest of Iran by the Arabs. A few of the ruling groups from this period include the [Achamaenids, Seleucids, Sassanids and others](#). Apart from the Zoroastrian fire-temple, or Atashgah, just outside Isfahan, there are no monuments from this period.

Between 1050 and 1220, Iran was ruled successively by the [Seljuks](#). Many of the most important monuments in Iran date from this time, including most of the finest minarets and the great dome of the Friday Mosque, which was erected by Nizam al-Mulk. In 1220, Persia was invaded by the Mongols. From this time until 1335, the region was ruled by the Il Khans, or "lords of the World". These were the grandchildren of Genghis Khan who had put an end to the Seljuk rule.

The [Muzaffarids](#) were the next dynasty to hold power in Persia, from 1335 to 1393. It was during this period that Hafez, Iran's greatest poet, flourished in Shiraz. The party was terminated by Tamerlane who raged through the area and blinded every remaining prince of the household rendering them unfit for leadership. Timurlane was at first inclined to spare Isfahan, but following the murder of his garrison by the Isfahanis he returned and slaughtered 70,000 of them. Relatives of Tamerlane, called Timurids, held power until 1453. The Aq-Qiunlu and Qara-Qiunlu clans, who were distinguished by their banners bearing respectively black and white sheep, had been at constant warfare with one another during the Timurid

period. The predominantly Sunni Aq-Qiunlu supported Timurlane while the Qara-Qiunlu provided an effective resistance, eventually taking Isfahan in 1453.

The defeat of the Qara-Qiunlu leader, Alvand, by his distant cousin Shah Ismail, marked the start of the Safavid period of rule in 1501. Shah Ismail's grandson, Shah Abbas I, made Isfahan his capital created the city as it is today. This period has left a tremendous heritage of architectural splendor in the city. The dynasty was terminated ingloriously following a protracted siege of Isfahan by Afghani tribesmen in 1725. The afghan rule was not well tolerated by the Persians, who refer to the period as the Afghani interregnum, and claim that this was an unremarkable period historically.

The Afghanis were defeated in 1729 by Nader Khouli, a general in the army of the last of the Safavid rulers. Eventually, in 1736, he took the reins of power himself and for a brief period restored the fortunes of the country. A period of political chaos followed his assassination in 1747, until Karim Khan took over the government of the country and made his capital in Shiraz in 1753. Following Karim Khan's death in 1779, a further period of anarchy ensued which was eventually terminated by the accession of Agha Muhammad Qajar in 1794 beginning the Qajar dynasty that was to last until 1925.

In 1925, Reza Pahlavi was proclaimed Shahanshah, or King of Kings. He moved the capital to Tehran, and in 1935, the name of the country was changed to Iran (meaning Land of the Aryans). The Shahanshah was forced to exile in 1979 and replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## *Important Dates*

The Iranian calendar has two types of important dates: fixed and moveable. Some of the important fixed public holidays are:

11 February	Revolution Day
20 March	Day of Nationalization of the Oil Industry
21-25 March	<a href="#">Noruz</a>
1 April	Islamic Republic Day
2 April	Sizdah-bedar (National day to end Noruz, people spend a day in the country)

The moveable holidays, with dates, are presented in the following table:

<b>Holiday</b>	<b>Days</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
<a href="#">Islamic New Year</a>	1	15 Mar	5 Mar	22 Feb
<a href="#">Ashoora</a>	2	24 Mar	14 Mar	2 Mar
<a href="#">Prophet's Birthday</a>	1	25 May	14 May	2 May
Start of <a href="#">Ramadan</a> (not a holiday)	--	6 Nov	27 Oct	15 Oct
<a href="#">Eid Al Fitr</a>	4+	6 Dec	26 Nov	14 Nov
<a href="#">Eid Al Adha</a>	4+	23 Feb	12 Feb	2 Feb

## *Population*

The population of Iran in July 2001 was a little over 66 million people. Iran's rapidly expanding population (partly due to Kurdish refugees from Iraq, and Afghan refugees) has increased countrywide demand for basic services, such as water and sewage disposal.

Reportedly, about 4 million refugees reside in Iran. Urban centers cannot keep pace with the demand as migration from rural areas continues to increase. About three-fourths of Iran's population lives on one-fourth of the land, primarily in the Caspian coastal region. Tehran has a population of 10 million. The average population growth is 0.72%, with 2.02 children born per woman. Iranians have an average life expectancy of about 69.95 years.

## *Currency*

The official currency of Iran is the Iranian Rial (RI), although it is often referred to as toman (a unit of ten Rials); so travelers should be careful when converting money not to get the two mixed up. The Iranian Rial comes in coin denominations of RI 250, 100, 50, 20, 10, and 5. Banknotes are in denominations of RI 100, 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, and 10,000. The exchange rate on 21 August 2002 was \$1 = 1,741.25 RI

## *Education*

One of the first measures adopted by the government after the Revolution in 1979 was the desecularization of the public school system. This was a three-pronged program that involved purging courses and textbooks believed to slander Islam and substituting courses on religion; purging teachers to ensure that only those who understood the true meaning of Islam

(i.e., were not secular) remained in the schools; and regulating the behavior and dress of students.

Although the government reintroduced the study of religion into the public school curriculum from primary grades through college, it did not act to alter the basic organization of the education system. Thus, as late as the school year 1986-1987, schools had not changed significantly from the pattern prior to the Revolution. Students studied in primary schools for five years, beginning the first grade at about age seven. Then they spent three years, designated the guidance cycle, in a middle school. In this cycle, the future training of students was determined by their aptitude as demonstrated on examinations. Students were then directed into one of three kinds of four-year high schools: the academic cycle, preparing for college; the science and mathematics cycle, preparing for university programs in engineering and medicine; and the vocational technical cycle.

The Ministry of Education announced that nearly 11.5 million students were registered for elementary and secondary schools during the academic year 1986-1987. Statistics on the percentage of young people aged seven through nineteen enrolled in school have not been available since the Revolution. It is generally estimated that the percentages have remained similar to those before the Revolution: school attendance of about 78 percent of elementary-age children and less than 50 percent of secondary-age youth.

An educational problem in Iran since the early twentieth century has been the general perception among the upper and middle classes that foreign education is superior to Iranian. Thus, there have been large numbers of Iranians studying abroad. As long as the foreign-



educated students returned to Iran, they were able to apply their skills for the overall benefit of the country; however, under both the monarchy and the Republic, thousands of Iranians have elected not to return to their homeland, creating a veritable "brain drain." Since the Revolution, the government has tried to discourage Iranians from going abroad to study, although it has not prevented the practice.

### *Language*

Iran has a heterogeneous population speaking a variety of Indo-Iranian, Semitic, and Turkic languages. The largest language group consists of the speakers of Indo-Iranian languages, who in 1986 comprised about 70 percent of the population. The speakers of Indo-Iranian languages are not, however, a homogeneous group. They include speakers of Persian, the official language of the country, and its various dialects; speakers of Kirmanji, the term for related dialects spoken by the Kurds who live in western Iran and adjacent areas of Iraq and Turkey; and a few other languages spoken by minority ethnic groups. Approximately 28 percent of the population speaks various dialects of Turkish. Speakers of Semitic languages include Arabs and Assyrians.

### *Religion*

The overwhelming majority of Iranians--at least 90% of the population--are Muslims who adhere to Shia Islam. In contrast, the majority of Muslims all over the world follow Sunni Islam. Of the several Shia sects, the Twelve [Imam](#) or Twelver (*ithna- ashari*), is dominant in Iran; most Shias in Bahrain, Iraq, and Lebanon also follow this sect. All the Shia sects originated

among early Muslim dissenters in the first three centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in A.D. 632.

The principal belief of Twelvers, but not of other Shias, is that the spiritual and temporal leadership of the Muslim community passed from Muhammad to Ali and then sequentially to eleven of Ali's direct male descendants, a tenet rejected by Sunnis. Over the centuries, various other theological differences have developed between Twelver Shias and Sunnis.

### *Agriculture*

After nearly achieving agricultural self-sufficiency in the 1960s, Iran reached the point in 1979 where 65 percent of its food had to be imported. Declining productivity was blamed on the use of modern fertilizers, which had inadvertently scorched the thin Iranian soil. Unresolved land reform issues, a lack of economic incentives to raise surplus crops, and low profit ratios combined to drive increasingly large segments of the farm population into urban areas.

The 1979 Revolution sought self-sufficiency in foodstuffs as part of its overall goal of decreased economic dependence on the West. Higher government subsidies for grain and other staples and expanded short-term credit and tax exemptions for farmers complying with government quotas were intended by the new regime to promote self-sufficiency. However, by early 1987, Iran was actually more dependent on agricultural imports than in the 1970s.

## *Trade*

Iranian trade centers on oil. Iran is OPEC's second largest oil producer, with approximately 9% of world oil reserves, and the world's second largest reserve of natural gas. Oil exports account for around 80% of foreign exchange earnings, so the economy is extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in the oil price. Because of this, the government, aided by organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has made the development of non-oil exports a priority. Traditionally such exports are carpets, pistachio nuts, and dried fruit. However, the country has the advantage of a broad domestic industrial base, an educated and motivated workforce, and geographical location, which gives it access to about 300 million people in Caspian markets, Persian Gulf states and countries further east. The government is encouraging import substitution through joint manufacturing ventures with foreign companies to update Iran's technological base and the management skills of the private sector.

Iran also possesses enormous mineral resources, including coal, copper, iron, zinc and gold, much of which has yet to be developed. This has spawned a number of processing industries, particularly steel. Iran is already the third largest producer of copper in the world.

## *Food*

Iranian cuisine is delicious. With its emphasis on the freshest ingredients, especially vegetables and fruit, and its relatively low levels of red meat and fat, it is also remarkably healthy. The Persian diet relies heavily on rice, bread, herbs, fruits and excellent quality meat

comprising of lamb or chicken. Iranian bread is baked either in cavernous day furnaces or in the flames of a pit-oven.

Tea (or chay – rhymes with pie) can be easily termed as the national drink of Iran. Tea is generally served in small glasses and never with milk. A chunk of crudely broken sugar is held between the front teeth and the brew is sipped through this. Coffee is not available easily and is expensive. Several delicious fruit juices are readily available and are freshly squeezed while you watch. Another popular drink is yogurt in carbonated water.

### *Landmarks*

Iran has a long history of almost 7,000 years since the Aryans immigrated to the Iran Heights. There are many landmarks left from this early period, mostly in Persepolis and Naghshe-rostam near present Shiraz. Iran offers the visitor an unforgettable journey through thousands years of history: the mighty dynasty of the great Achaemenian Kings, from Cyrus I to Darius III, whose empire came to an end at the hand of Alexander the Great and whose ceremonial capital at Persepolis remains one of the world's archeological wonders; the splendid monuments of Persia which reached their zenith under the Shah Abbas the Great in the 17th century

Rob Gilmore