

Jalalabad & Eastern Afghanistan

جلال آباد و شرق افغانستان



Think of the great clichés of the Afghan character and you'll be transported to Afghanistan's rugged east. Tales of honour, hospitality and revenge abound here, as hardy fighters defend the lonely mountain passes that lead to the Indian subcontinent. For Afghan, read Pashtun: the dominant ethnic group in the east whose tribal links spill across the border deep into Pakistan.

Jalalabad is the region's most important city. Founded by the Mughals as a winter retreat, it sits in an area with links back to when Afghanistan was a Buddhist country and a place of monasteries, pilgrims and prayer wheels. Sweltering in summer, you can quench your thirst with a mango juice before heading for the cooler climes of the Kabul Plateau, via the jaw-dropping Tangi Gharu Gorge.

A stone's throw from Jalalabad is the Khyber Pass, the age-old gateway to the Indian subcontinent. Getting your passport stamped here as you slip between Afghanistan and Pakistan is to experience one of Asia's most evocative border crossings. If you've been in Afghanistan a while, you might find the sudden Pakistani insistence on providing you with an armed guard for your onward journey a little bemusing.

Sadly much of the east remains out of bounds to travellers. The failures of post-conflict reconstruction have allowed an Islamist insurgency to smoulder among the peaks and valleys that dominate this part of the country. The beautiful woods and slopes of Nuristan – long a travellers' grail – remain as distant a goal as ever and the current climate means that carefully checking security issues remains paramount before any trip to the region.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy the orange blossom of the many gardens in **Jalalabad** (p182)
- Cross the iconic **Khyber Pass** (p185), the gateway to Peshawar in Pakistan
- Take in the shade of the Mughal gardens at **Nimla** (p184)





CLIMATE

The plains of the east are hot and dry in the summer, although Jalalabad catches a lot of humidity which can make it a sticky place from mid-June to early September, with temperatures pushing over 30°C. Winters are cool and fall below freezing in the mountains, with snow on the high peaks, including the wooded slopes of Nuristan.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A recently repaved highway runs from Kabul through eastern Afghanistan to Jalalabad and the Pakistan border at Torkham. There are plentiful transport connections along this corridor. Crossing the border into Pakistan is pretty straightforward – an early enough start can see you have breakfast in Kabul and dinner in Peshawar.

JALALABAD جلال آباد

Jalalabad, Afghanistan's largest eastern city and the capital of Nangahar province, lies roughly equidistant between Kabul and the

Pakistan border at Torkham. It sits in the lee of the Safed Koh Mountains in a fertile plain watered by the Kabul river. Compared to the capital it's something of a green oasis, warm in winter but hot and sticky in summer.

The winter climate meant that Jalalabad was a popular retreat for Afghan rulers since it was founded by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1570. The region's historical importance predates Islam however. Between the 2nd and 7th centuries AD, the Gandharan culture of the Kushans flourished in the Jalalabad valley and it was a place of pilgrimage rivalling Bamiyan. Nearby, Hadda was a hugely important complex of monasteries and caves used as monk's retreats can be seen on the far side of the river when leaving Jalalabad for Kabul. Islam arrived when Mahmood of Ghazni tore through to India in the 11th century, and much of the area's subsequent history was tied precisely to controlling the route to the subcontinent through the Khyber Pass.

Jalalabad was a British garrison during the First Anglo-Afghan War and received the one survivor of the disastrous retreat

from Kabul in 1842 (see boxed text, p32). Just over 150 years later, the mujaheddin launched an equally disastrous attack on Jalalabad, their first attempt to capture a major city from the government after the Soviet withdrawal. Over 10,000 people died. From 1992 Jalalabad was ruled by a council of mujaheddin called the Nangahar Shura, but the predominantly Pashtun population meant that the city surrendered to the Taliban in 1996 without a fight.

Several of the *shura* leaders returned to power at the close of 2001 and have been heavily implicated in the opium trade for which Nangahar is renowned. Despite this, a provincial ban in 2005 met with popular support and a 96% drop in cultivation. A failure to follow up with alternative livelihood programmes meant that the poppies were back in bloom the following year.

Many people zip through Jalalabad when passing between Kabul and Peshawar. If you've come from Pakistan the city seems like a continuation of the large Pashtun towns of North West Frontier Province, down to the street food and the make of autorickshaws. The heat and humidity can make Jalalabad exhausting in summer and malaria is a serious risk. It's also essential to take note of the political forecast, as the city sits in the heart of the Pashtun areas.

ORIENTATION

Jalalabad runs east-west along the south bank of the Kabul river, and is roughly laid out in a grid. The main junction to orientate yourself by is Chowk-e Mukharabat. The main road leads west from here past the Spinghar Hotel towards Kabul. The main commercial area runs south of the junction to Chowk-e Bazari and Chowk-e Talashi, from where the main road heads east to the airport and the Pakistan border. AIMS (www.aims.org.af) produces an excellent downloadable map of Jalalabad.

INFORMATION

Moneychangers, internet cafés and PCOs can all be found clustered between Chowk-e Mukharabat and Chowk-e Talashi.

ANSO East (☎ 070 606601)

Jalalabad Public Hospital (Sarakh-e Kabul) Next to Spinghar Hotel, with plenty of pharmacies in the immediate area.

Kabul Bank (near Chowk-e Talashi)

Police (☎ 079 9048 154)

SIGHTS

A rule follows that wherever an Afghan ruler settles, he lays out a ceremonial garden. As a favoured winter residence, Jalalabad has several, in varying degrees of maintenance. Akbar's original gardens have long been lost to urban development. The remainder lie between Chowk-e Mukharabat and the Spinghar Hotel.

The **Seraj-ul Emorat Gardens** (Bagh-e Seraj-ul Emorat) are named for the palace of King Habibullah ('Building of Light'), built in the confines of the garden in 1910. The palace was reduced to a shell during the 1929 tribal uprising but the gardens remain a pleasant place for a walk. There are plenty of orange trees for which Jalalabad was once famed and the park still hosts the Mushaira Festival in mid-April, celebrating the blossoming of the orange trees with poetry, storytelling, music and picnics.

Habibullah loved Jalalabad and, ever the moderniser, built the country's first golf course here. When he was assassinated here in 1919, the course was turned into the grounds for his **mausoleum**. Built in the same weird neoclassical style of the time, it also houses the tombs of King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya, *doyenne* of Afghan feminism. The gardens are opposite Seraj-ul Emorat.

Between Seraj-ul Emorat and the Kabul river is the peaceful **Kawkab Garden** (Bagh-e Kawkab), planted with roses. A new garden, **Bagh-e Abdul Haq**, is also being laid out here to commemorate the mujaheddin leader Abdul Haq who was killed by the Taliban in 2001. It sits by the Pul-Behsud bridge which leads north to Kunar province. Sunset views of the river here are lovely.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Eastern Afghanistan remains unstable. Security is generally good along the Kabul-Jalalabad-Torkham highway, although extreme caution should be taken around the traditionally problematic Sarobi area and the approaches into Kabul. Take appropriate security precautions in and around Jalalabad city.

We advise against travel off the main highway, due to the large numbers of armed anti-government groups in the region.