

Western Iran

ایران غربی



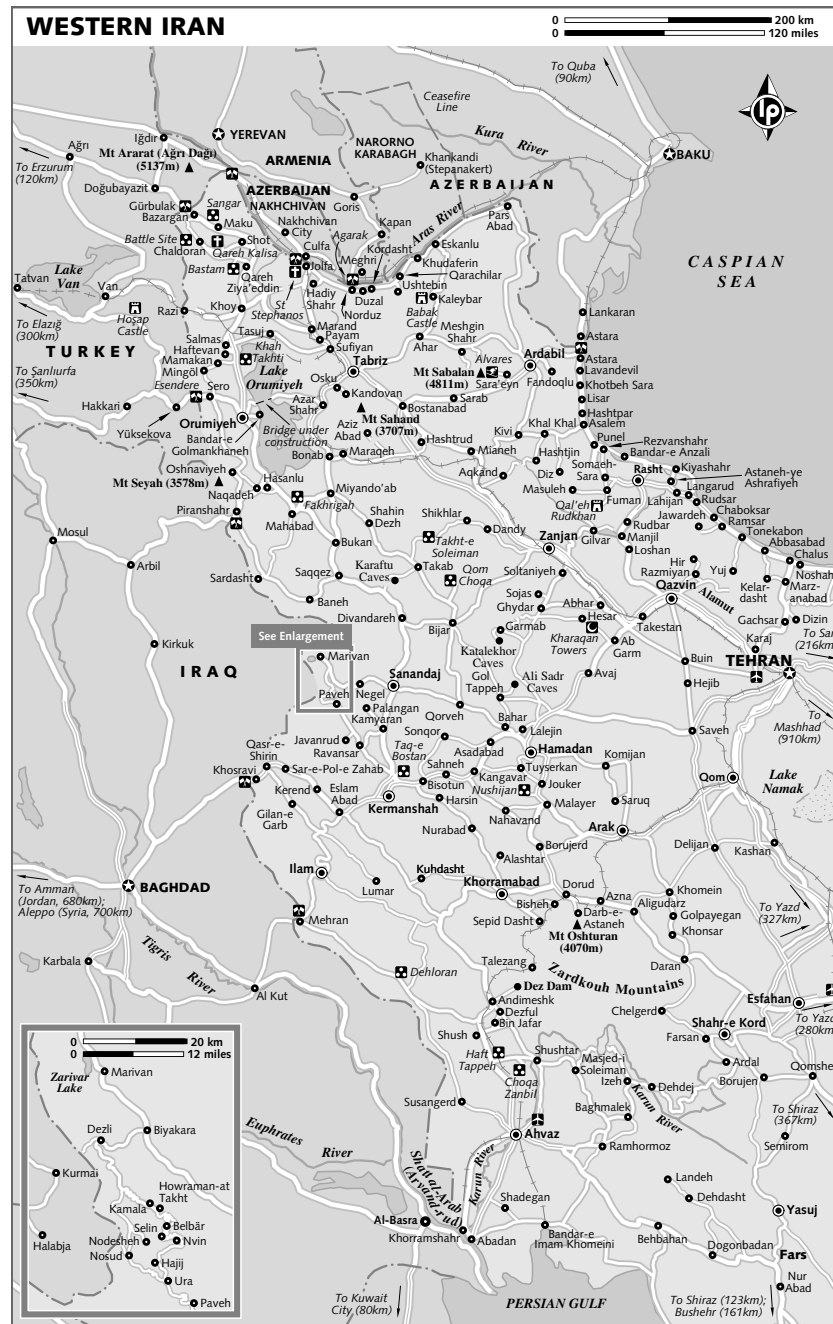
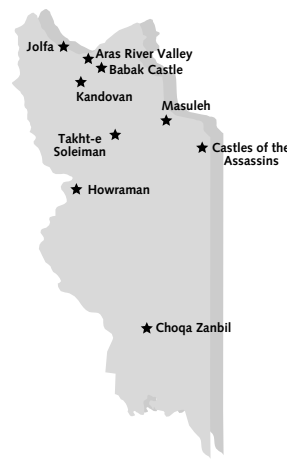
From paddy fields to blizzards to the original Garden of Eden, this region will shatter your preconceptions of Iran. Standing at the frontiers with Mesopotamia and Turkey, western Iran has witnessed many of civilisation's great empires, fortunes oscillating between trading glories and military decimation. The deeply hospitable region lacks the iconic gem-city sites of central Iran so it's often skipped by first-time Western visitors. But that makes it all the more appealing for those who relish delving a little deeper and being the 'only tourist'.

Western Iran is a linguistic and cultural patchwork: Kurds predominate in Kordestan and Kermanshah provinces; Lurs in Ilam and Lorestan; Arabs inhabit southern Khuzestan; Talesh and Gilaki are the traditional languages of Gilan (the southwest Caspian hinterland); and Azaris whose language is more Turkish than Persian, predominate in the rest of the northwest. In the most remote regions, and more generally in Kurdish towns, traditional dress is still worn.

The chapter starts by the Turkish border. It loops around Lake Orumiyeh to Tabriz, continues through the Azari heartlands to Ardabil and down the Caspian coast via Rasht to Chalus. After Qazvin, Soltaniyeh and Zanjan we consider the central mountains, Kordestan and the historical cities of Kermanshah and Hamadan before descending the former 'Royal Road' towards ancient Shush, Shushtar and Choqa Zanbil.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike between flower-filled valleys and snowcapped peaks amid the ruined 12th-century **Castles of the Assassins** (p182)
- Challenge Iran's desert image in the paddy fields and forests of Gilan that lead to the delightful stepped village of **Masuleh** (p171)
- From **Jolfa** (p156) explore ancient churches, mud-walled castles and grand canyons along the biblical **Aras River Valley** (p157)
- Stagger up to **Babak Castle** (p159), the dramatic emotional heart of Azarbaijan
- Venture into **Howraman** (p194), a magical, rarely visited valley of traditional Kurdish villages
- Be awed by lonely **Choqa Zanbil's** (p215) massive, brick ziggurat which somehow managed to get 'lost' for 2500 years
- Cross sparsely populated mountainscapes from Zanjan to reach the ruins of **Takht-e Soleiman** (p187), history's foremost Zoroastrian temple complex
- Potter about between the fairy-chimney homes of **Kandovan** (p155), Iran's mini-Cappadocia



WESTERN IRAN

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BAZARGAN

☎ 0462

Car repair yards, shops and nine cheap hotels line Bazargan's Imam St, a gun-barrel straight strip fired towards the striking silhouette of Mt Ararat. About 2km short of the immigration posts, the village ends at the outer border gate. Here the taxi/savari stand faces the basic **Hotel Jafapoor** (☎ 337 2058; Imam St; dm/tw IR20,000/40,000) whose owner is excited to show off his modest English skills and changes money. **Hotel Hamid** (☎ 337 2435; Imam St; tw IR130,000), 300m further east, is somewhat better and has bathrooms with squat toilets.

Locals pay IR10,000 to Maku but taxis ask way more from foreigners.

Ten kilometres along the Bazargan-Maku road, a muddy 2km track leads north towards Sangar past **Farhad Dameh**, a passingly interesting Urartian cave-dwelling with church-like niches and fine views of Ararat.

MAKU

☎ 0462 / pop 39,600

Boxed into a soaring rocky canyon, central Maku has a handful of minor sights and makes a sensible base for visiting the old Armenian church of Qareh Kalisa. Long a key fortress and citadel guarding the Ottoman-Persian frontier, Maku was one of many Azerbaijani khanates that gained semi-independence in the chaotic period following the death of Nadir Shah

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in 1749. Although rejoining Iran in 1829, the khanate was only finally abolished a century later.

Orientation & Information

Shops and all hotels are within 500m of little Chahara Sq on central Imam St. **Coffee-nut Dade Pardazan** (Imam St; internet per hr IR8000; ☎ 10am-last customer) is almost opposite the Tourist Inn, 400m west. The bus terminal is 3km southeast.

Sights

The sad, crumbling remnants of Old Maku's former **citadel** lead up to the **Abu Fazl Mosque** and a series of degraded brick **fortifications** cupped beneath an impressively huge cliff overhang. Fine views justify the sweaty 25-minute hike on steps and footpaths directly north from Chahara Sq.

The celebrated but empty **Kola Ferangi** is a century-old mansion with filigree wrap-around balconies, hidden away in a ruined garden accessed through the unmarked grey gates of a clinic on Taleqani St, just north of Chahara Sq.

The attractive **Baqcheh Juq Palace Museum** (☎ 324 3719; admission IR4000; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun) was originally built for the *sardar* (military governor) of Qajar Shah Muzaffar al-Din (1896-1907). Eclectically furnished rooms with colourful, quaintly tacky fruit murals are set around a wonderfully over-the-top mirror-tiled atrium. It's set in a walled orchard at the base of

appealing, tree-dappled Baqcheh Juq village whose timeless hay-topped mud houses are backed by a rugged chasm. It's 2km off the main Bazargan road, about 7km west of Chahara Sq from which yellow savaris charge IR1500.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Alvand (☎ 322 3491; Imam St; s/tw IR45,000/60,000) Just west of Chahara Sq, the Alvand is the most inviting of Maku's several cheap offerings. Rooms are well kept and management understands a little English, but the one shower has limited availability and upstairs shared toilets are out of action.

Makoo Tourist Inn (Mehmansara Jahangardi; ☎ 322 3212; fax 322 3184; tw/ste US\$20/30, winter US\$16/24; ☎) Appealingly quiet, the Tourist Inn is a green three-storey block set well back off Imam St. Despite a little peeling paint the rooms are by far Maku's classiest option, with hot shower, squat toilet and towels. Decent if haphazard restaurant.

Getting There & Away

From the main terminal buses run to Tehran (IR65,000, three daily), Tabriz (IR12,000, four hours, six daily, last at 1.30pm), and Orumiyeh (IR12,000, 4½ hours), hourly via Khoy (IR8000) and Qareh Ziya'eddin (IR5000). Rare savaris to Bazargan (IR2500) depart from Taleqani St at Chahara Sq.

AROUND MAKU

To conveniently visit Qareh Kalisa, Chaldoran and Bastam, consider chartering a taxi from Maku then jumping out at Qareh Ziya'eddin for public transport to Khoy.

Qareh Kalisa

Splendid outside, though plain within, **Qareh Kalisa** (Black Church; admission IR3000; ☎ 24hr) is the best maintained of all Iran's medieval churches. It's alternatively known as Kalisaye Tadi (Church of St Thaddaeus) for St Thaddaeus (aka Tatavoo) who supposedly founded a church here in AD 43. Some say he came with apostle St Bartholomew, others that he was St Bartholomew. Whatever the case, Thaddaeus' preaching proved a little too successful and the jealous Armenian king reacted by killing him and massacring his 3000 converts in AD 66. In a curious twist, Armenia later became the world's first Christian nation (AD 301). Thaddaeus'

قره کلیسا

memory was revived with a chapel built here at his supposed grave in AD 371.

Mostly rebuilt after an earthquake, the smaller black-and-white-striped chapel section dates from 1319-29. The church was much restored and enlarged in 1810 when the main beige-white stone section was added. This is richly carved with saints, angels, kings and crosses, best observed from the chunky fortress-style walls that surround the church site. Ring the bell to the left of the main door if it's locked. The only Christian services are held during a brilliant three-day summer pilgrimage; dates vary and are announced shortly beforehand through the **Armenian Prelacy Office** (☎ 0411-555 3532; arctab@itm.co.ir) in Tabriz.

Qareh Kalisa is tucked behind a photographically low-rise Kurdish village, 8km off the quiet Shot-Chaldoran road. This crosses rolling arid hills that turn into bright green flower-filled meadows in spring. There's no public transport. Taxis from Maku ask IR120,000 return from Maku via Shot including waiting time.

Chaldoran

In 1514 the Ottoman forces of Selim the Grim devastatingly defeated Safavid Shah Ismail's formerly invincible Persian-Azari army at Chaldoran (Chaldiran, Chaldran). Of 27,000 Iranian soldiers a phenomenal 26,000 died, cut down by Selim's newfangled secret weapon, the cannon. The pivotal battle was followed by a scorched-earth policy that devastated agricultural settlements across much of west Azarbaijan and Kordistan, leaving the emptied land to grazing nomads for centuries to come.

Chaldoran Changi, the lonely battlefield, is commemorated by an impressive brick-domed tomb tower built in 2003. In front stands a statue of Seyid Sadraddin, the Persian army's hapless commander. It's beyond quaint Jala Ashaqi village. That's around 6km (IR10,000 by taxi) from **Siyah Cheshmeh**, a scrappy little market town, itself now officially renamed **Chaldoran**, where a predictable statue of Shah Ismail rides a rearing horse.

Savaris run infrequently between Siyah Cheshmeh and Qareh Ziya'eddin. It's better to combine Chaldoran with a taxi charter from Maku to Qareh Kalisa. Maps show a Bazargan-Chaldoran road via Kalisa Kandi, but it's slow and painfully potholed.

CROSSING THE TURKISH BORDER AT BAZARGAN

Travelling solo, crossing here usually takes under an hour. The hill-top **immigration posts** (☎ 24hr) are 2km above Bazargan village, IR2000/1000 (plus IR1000 for bags) by shared taxi/minibus. They're just 600m from **Gürbulak** in Turkey (no facilities). The nearest Turkish-side accommodation is 40km east in Doğubayazıt famous for its 1784 Işak Paşa palace.

Eastbound from Doğubayazıt to Gürbulak take a dolmuş (minibus; 3YTL, 25 minutes, last 5pm) from the junction of Ağrı and Sehilitik Sts, 100m east of the Karahan Petrol Ofisi station (where Ağrı dolmuşlar wait). That's about five minutes' walk from Doğubayazıt's little bus terminal and cheap hotels. Westbound buses from Doğubayazıt to Erzerum (17YTL, four hours) via Ağrı (5YTL, one hour, 20 minutes) leave at 12.30am, 3pm and 4.30pm.

Arriving in Iran during office hours you're likely to be welcomed by a charming Iranian tourist officer. The bank within the Iran-side customs building offers full rial rates for US dollars and euros. They won't change UK pounds nor Turkish lira for which you'll have to risk the scam-a-lot freelance tricksters outside or more safely ask hoteliers in Bazargan village. Beware that anywhere else in Iran except Orumiyeh, Turkish lira are effectively worthless.

Well-connected Tabriz guide-fixer **Hossein Ravaniyar** (www.iranoeverland.com; p149) is experienced at sorting out motorists' border formality problems.