IRAN - Ultimate Budget Travel Guide

Backpacking Iran? I had wanted to travel to Iran for years, it’s a complicated land of ancient history and underground culture, a place where the girls are beautiful and the mountains bewitching. It is incredibly easy to hitchhike in Iran and the Couchsurfing community enables broke backpackers to travel Iran on a budget of just ten dollars a day... Actually, after Venezuela and Pakistan, Iran might be the best budget backpacking option in the world right now.

Salam! Backpacking across Iran is getting easier and easier. With visas on arrival now available for most countries, Iran is fast opening up to foreign travelers. I've spent a total of three months in Iran over two trips, I've hitchhiked across the whole country, explored mountains and islands, deserts and forests. Whilst on my first trip in Iran, I met a girl and we traveled together across Pakistan and India before doing a U-turn and hitchhiking back to Iran. This guide was written with the help of several Iranian friends and is the most up to date backpacking Iran travel guide around.
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Arriving into Iran

I arrived into Iran overland from Turkey, hitchhiking to the Iranian border and then catching a bus on the other side. There are long-distance bus services that will take you all the way from Tbilisi in Georgia to Tabriz in Iran and services via Armenia and Turkey as well. You can enter Iran by train or motorbike. For backpackers without the luxury of time, the best way to get into Iran is to catch a cheap flight to Tehran. There are flights with Turkish Airlines (via Istanbul), Emirates (via Dubai) and a whole load of other airlines; the cheapest I’ve found online has been with Pegasus Airlines. Most flights land in Tehran but you can also fly to other parts of the country.

Imam Khomeini International Airport: There are two airports in Tehran but Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKA) handles almost all the international flights. It's located 30 kilometres southwest of Tehran and is the largest airport in the capital. It costs about 18 dollars to catch a taxi into town although a recent initiative has been launched to offer ride-shares for 10 dollars per person. There is a subway line planned but not yet completed.
Travelling around Iran

The roads in Iran are top notch and long-distance transport is pretty comfortable. Iran has a good railway network and the trains are a better way to tackle some of the really long distances if you are short on time.

**By bus:** There are many domestic bus routes. The public buses are reliable and nice enough for backpackers. There are also VIP buses with huge padded seats and plenty of leg-room, for a long journey it might be worth the upgrade.

![By bus from Tabriz to Tehran](image)

**By train:** I caught a train from Bandar Abbas up to Yazd and it was a pretty interesting experience. For longer distances, train is far preferable to buses. Train tickets are cheap and you can ask a Farsi speaking friend to check routes and fares at Ali Baba.

![Catching an overnight train to Yazd](image)
By domestic flight: I haven't taken any flights in Iran but flight options are fairly cheap - about forty to sixty dollars from Tehran to most places within Iran. If you're backpacking Iran with just a couple of weeks to spare, domestic flights are probably the best way to get around.

By car: The traffic in Iran is fairly crazy but if you're an experienced driver, go for it. I've driven a lot in Iran; tackling the busy streets of Tehran and learning the hard way that Iran does indeed have traffic cameras. If you're driving in the cities, keep your speed reasonable even if the locals don't - they know where the cameras are and you don't. Iran is a popular stop with overlanding backpackers travelling from Europe onwards to Pakistan or Afghanistan. An Iranian friend of mine lent me their car for a couple of weeks and I drove from Tehran up to Shomal and then across the top of Iran to Tabriz and into the mountains. Road tripping in Iran is a lot of fun.

By metro: Tehran's famous subway is a great way to get around on the cheap and is especially helpful during the truly hectic rush hour. Tehran Metro is a useful app to help with Metro Navigation.

Hitchhiking in Iran

Backpacking Iran can be made an even more unique experience if you hitchhike! Hitchhiking in Iran is unbelievably easy and I hitched over 2000km whilst backpacking Iran. In the past, the thumbs up was seen as an obscene gesture in Iran however as more and more Iranians watch western movies people now understand that it's a common 'European thing' ... If you are hitching though, it's best to avoid using your thumb and instead to simply flag down cars or make a kind of 'pat the dog' motion with your outstretched arm.

Backpacking Iran - best done by thumb. Wrap up warm in the winter!
It never takes long to get a lift in Iran, many drivers are not familiar with the concept of hitchhiking but as soon as they see somebody by the side of the road they tend to stop; partly out of curiosity and partly out of the fact that everybody is just so damn nice. Backpackers in Iran are not a particularly common sight and hitchhikers in Iran are even rarer, although it is very easy to hitch, so plenty of friendly and curious Iranians will be bound to stop and pick you up.

About five percent of these guys will expect money but, if you explain your situation before you get in, it’s easy to avoid confusion. I learnt a few basic hitchhiking phrases in Farsi, below, and found that as long as I could explain ‘no money’ everything was usually fine – a few drivers did simply drive off when they realised I was hitchhiking without any money and wasn’t going to pay but this was never a problem; another lift was just a few minutes away!

**Phrases you need when hitchhiking in Iran**

**Without money – majanee**  
Do you go to ...? – *shoma be ... mirid?*  
Can you do me a favour please? – *Mishe ye lotfi be man bokonid?*  
Can you please give me a ride to ...? *Momkene man ro be ... beresonid lotfan?*  
I don’t want to pay – *Man nemikham pul bedam*

*Always carry a pen when hitchhiking in Iran*
Entry requirements for Iran

As of 2016, many visa restriction for Iran have been lifted and it is now possible for most backpackers to get a visa on arrival at the airport. There are mixed reports on getting visas on arrival at Iranian land borders; I chose to get my visa issued in advance in the Iranian embassy in Istanbul. To do this I need an authorisation code; more on how I sorted that in a moment.

My Iranian visa in which I look about fourteen years old...

Officially British, Canadian and American tourists cannot get a visa on arrival and can only travel the country with a guide. You can get a visa ahead of time as long as you have an authorisation code from a tour company. Officially, companies are not supposed to offer authorisation code’s unless you book a tour however, there are ways around that. You could book a cheap, one day tour, in order to get your authorisation code. You could then apply for your visa and cancel the tour...

Upon actually entering the country, it is unlikely that immigration personnel will ask you where your tour is; you could well be meeting them once out of the airport. Come up with a decent story, have a couple of back-up phone numbers and keep a straight face; I’ve heard of several people who have made it around the country this way on a British or American passport.

Visas are valid for thirty days and can be extended for two weeks a total of two times; it is relatively easy to backpack Iran for two months. If you want to sort your visa ahead of time, you will need an authorisation code.
1stQuest provide the cheapest, fastest, authorisation codes out of any company in Iran and these are the guys I used to sort my authorisation code on my first trip to Iran.

Outside the visa extension office in Esfahan.

**Getting an Iranian visa in advance**

If you are crossing Iran overland or are travelling on a British, American or Canadian passport, you will need to get your Iranian visa in advance at an embassy. It's fairly straightforward to sort out your Iranian visa before you arrive, you will need an authorisation code ([get it here](#)). I got my first Iranian visa at the embassy in Istanbul; it was a simple enough procedure - I turned up with a couple of passport photos and the authorisation code, more information below, and filled in some forms. I got my passport back the same day.

**Getting an Iranian visa on arrival**

It's recommended to bring records of your trip details: this often includes the name of at least one hotel which you could feasibly be staying at. It is useful to have the telephone number and name of somebody within the country. The airport immigration may make a few phone calls to validate your local contact or they may let you sail through; reports are mixed. To get an Iranian visa on arrival, follow these steps...
1) **Iran Health Insurance Cover**; either bring a printed copy of your health insurance or get one at the airport for around €15. The Passport and Visa Department will need it.

2) **Submit the Form.** The details will look something like this [Visa Application Form](#), including the contact details for your address and telephone number in Iran (hotel booking, friend/ family, or travel agency). You will need a hotel booking.

3) **Receive Visa Approval** and visa payment details.

4) **Pay the Visa Charge** at the next counter, it’s around €75 for Europeans or €50 if you have an MFA Code. Be careful with currencies other than Euros or USD otherwise it may cause delay.

5) **Receive the Visa Stamp (Full Page).**

6) **Pass through Immigration Control (Entry Stamp).** Patiently answer any questions about why you are visiting Iran.

Copies of your passport and a few passport sized photos are worth having to hand. The whole process can take between 1-4 hours depending on the airport and terminal passenger flux.

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**Backpacking Iran fashion tips**

You might be surprised but fashion in Iran is a big part of daily life. Many young women colour their hair blue, purple, pink and gold. Headscarves are often *only just* in place and golden sandals showing off painted toenails are commonplace.

You will see many elegant and approachable ladies when backpacking Iran

*Photo Credit: ajammc.com*
What should you wear when backpacking Iran?
Legally, all women in Iran must cover their hair with a headscarf. Avoid showing off flesh and stick to long sleeved tops or a coat. Jeans are perfectly acceptable. Avoid clothes which show off your butt or boobs unless you're on the hunt for an Iranian husband, you won't have to hunt long.

Men in Iran should also keep skin covered although t-shirts are OK... just don't wear shorts. If you have tattoos, keep them covered as tattoos are not permitted in Islamic culture and you may get some funny looks if you have them on show.

Accommodation in Iran
There are very few hostels throughout the country, the only one I know of is the Seven Hostel in Tehran. In general, your options are limited to cheap guesthouses, more expensive hotels, camping or couchsurfing. There are some hotels and guesthouses specifically set up for backpackers mentioned in The Lonely Planet; these tend to be much more expensive than they should be... because, you know, they are in the Lonely Planet.

If you are a couple you will often be asked what your relationship is when checking into guesthouses or hotels. I recommend simply saying you are married. I travelled Iran with my Persian girlfriend and we encountered so many problems that we got a temporary marriage in Iran to get the damn certificate so we could get around this issue. We probably only encountered this problem because she had an Iranian, rather than a foreign, passport.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Hostel Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tehran</td>
<td>Iran Hostel</td>
<td>Great location right near the metro and bus station. Clean facilities &amp; very helpful staff!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashan</td>
<td>Hostel Green House</td>
<td>Awesome hostel for those wanting to experience the traditional Iranian way of living. Conveniently located in the Kashan city center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazd</td>
<td>Badgir Hostel</td>
<td>Very chilled hostel with all the basic necessities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiraz</td>
<td>Grandma Guesthouse</td>
<td>Great hostel with a family feel. Friendly staff, decent facilities &amp; a pretty garden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Book Your Iran Hostel Here!**

**Money in Iran: Not as simple as it should be...**

Before you go to Iran, be sure to stock up on cash. No debit or credit cards will work in the country and traveller's cheques are usually not accepted. I recommend bringing either US dollars or Euros and changing your money into Rial at exchange offices; be careful with swapping money on the street as you sometimes get screwed with fake or low-value notes. Ferdosi Square in Tehran has the exchange shops with the best rates.

![Iranian currency notes](image_url)

You will have millions of Rial when backpacking Iran.
The currency in Iran, the Rial, has a few too many zeros - 500,000 Rials is just 15 USD - and the local people have come up with a somewhat ingenious, somewhat confusing, often frustrating way to get around this.

Most prices are quoted in Toman; with one Toman being equal to ten Rial. This gets rid of one of the pesky zeros. To work out how much you actually owe, add a zero to the quoted price and you are back into the realm of Rial.

In theory, this leaves foreign backpackers very open to getting scammed by unscrupulous Iranians but this didn't happen to me once in Iran. Iranians are, in general, very honest and hospitable people. Taxi drivers can prove the exception to this rule...

**Where to go in Iran**

There are so many incredible places to go to in Iran and even after backpacking Iran for three months I feel like I've barely scraped the surface of this incredible country. Below are a few of my favourite places to check out when backpacking Iran. For detailed information on destinations, I recommend picking up a copy of the *Iran Lonely Planet* guide.

**Tabriz:** If you're crossing Iran overland from Europe, Tabriz is likely to be your first stop. With a fascinating labyrinthian bazaar and more carpets than people, Tabriz is freezing in the winter and often boiling in the summer. The Blue Mosque is an impressive first start to Iran and Tabriz is well worth stopping in for a night. It’s seven hours by bus from Tabriz to Tehran.
Bazaar of Tabriz, One of Iran’s UNESCO World Heritage Sites and the first stop for many backpackers entering Iran from Turkey.

**Kandovan:** Often referred to as Iran's Cappadocia, Kandovan is famed for its troglodyte (cave people) dwellings and fairy chimneys. There are a few houses offering a basic place to sleep and a super posh hotel carved into the rocks complete with in-room jacuzzis. It might be possible to wild-camp or find an abandoned cave dwelling to crash in; I'll be checking out Kandovan in the next month. More information coming soon.

**Zanjan:** Home to Iran's best pizza place (Liro Pizza) and with the fascinating Salt Men museum nearby (think shrunken mummies and unintelligible signs in Farsi), Zanjan is a good place to break up the trip between Tabriz and Tehran if you have plenty of time.
Alamut Castle: Once upon a time there was a secretive sect of unstoppable assassins living within the mountains. They were known as the Hashshashin because of the rumour that they were pretty much permanently blazed and that hashish was used during their training rituals. The assassins built a fortress and reigned down terror across Persia as they descended to attack prominent figures in public. One day, they botched a job... failing to kill Genghis Khan. Genghis, being Genghis, lead his Mongol horde into the mountains and killed every last one of the stoner assassins who may or may not have been fairly slow to react. Alamut Castle, the assassin’s’ HQ, is largely a ruin but it commands stunning views over the valley below and is a great place to camp. You will need to hire a car to explore the Alamut valley in one day. It's a two hour drive from Tehran to Qazvin where you can start your Alamut adventure. Read more about Alamut Castle over at Lost with Purpose's trip report.
**Tehran:** The capital of Iran and one of the best places for backpackers to party, Tehran is unlike anywhere else in Iran. A popular hub for the young and beautiful, this is a place of risky fashion statements, underground culture and fascinating history. The Golestan Palace is one of the most striking buildings in the world and should not be missed. If you can get hold of a car; driving in Tehran is a great experience. The Roof of Tehran is a unique place to kick back with a (non alcoholic) beer in the evening and meet local Tehranis. There is one hostel I know of in Tehran - **Seven Hostel** - but it is also very easy to find a local host who will show you around. Outside of Tehran, there are multiple ski slopes, Dizin is the best known, which offer some of the best value skiing in the world.

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**Shomal:** Meaning simply 'North', Shomal is where most young Tehranis go for a weekend away. Shomal is blessed with a cool climate, lush forests and patches of unspoilt coastline along the Caspian Sea; it's a good place to camp. I spent a few days hanging out in Sar Velat village, reachable from Ramsar. Shomal offers the best value accommodation in all of Iran and you can pick up super plush villas with soaring balcony views for as little as 50 - 100k a night.

Whilst staying in Sar Velat, I ate in a small local restaurant - Khale Marzie Restaurant - which had some of the most incredible food I have ever tried. There are no shops in the village and this is the only restaurant, bring supplies. At the top of the village, there is virgin forest and pristine meadows where you can chill out and soak in the views. It normally takes about four to five hours to reach Shomal from Tehran.
Soaking in the views from Shomal...

Sanandaj: No backpacking adventure across Iran would be complete without a couple of days exploring the rolling hills, quaint villages and unbeatable hospitality of Iranian Kurdistan. Sanandaj is the capital of the region and, despite the heavier army presence, is one of the most friendly cities in Iran. Palangan is one of the most stunning hill-villages in all of The Middle East and it's well worth hiking and camping around the area; The Kurds are fantastic people and will make sure you are well looked after. It's an eight hour bus journey to Tehran from Sanandaj.

Spices in the market of Sanandaj
**Esfahan**: Filled with gorgeous Islamic architecture, tree-lined boulevards, Persian parks and some of the world’s most stunning bridges; Esfahan is a popular stop on the trail and most travelers backpacking Iran spend a couple of days here. The bridges are lit up at night and walking along the river is a chilled out experience. The Masjid-e Jameh is a truly stunning work of art where you can explore 800 years of Islamic history before taking to the fun-filled bazaar nearby and hunting for trinkets.

![Si-o-seh Pol (The bridge of thirty-three spans) of Esfahan](image1)

**Yazd**: The desert city of Yazd springs out of the ground in defiance of its surroundings and wows tourists with its winding lanes, blue-tiled domes and soaring minarets. Most backpackers in Yazd congregate at The Silk Road Hotel but there are much cheaper options around. Couchsurfing in Yazd is not especially easy. Yazd is one of the best places in Iran to organise desert adventures and nomad homestays; I’ve heard good things from backpackers who have visited Garmeh.

*Book Your Yazd Hostel Here!*
**Shiraz:** The heartland of Persian culture for more than 2000 years, Shiraz is famed for its scholars, poets, nightingales and wine. Home to the impressive Arg-e Karim Khan fortress, this is a city that is best explored on foot. Shiraz is, actually, the reason I came to Iran in the first place. The masjid-e Nasir-al-Molk Mosque is one of the most stunning buildings in the world and, as a kid, I had a faded photograph torn from a National Geographic upon my wall. The mosque is filled with glittering stained glass windows and when the sun hits at the right angle the entire building is filled with multicoloured rainbows that dance across the floor and walls.

The mosque opens at 8 am and I recommend arriving before that; it is the only place in Iran I visited that was crowded with tour groups... Despite the crowds, it should not be missed. The Pardis Hotel, near the Karandish Bus Station on Safar Street has bargain private rooms at 40k - about 12 dollars - if you don't mind slumming it and are sick of camping.

![Nasir ol Molk Mosque, Shiraz - one of my favourite places in Iran](image)

**Persepolis:** The ancient capital of the Persian Empire, Persepolis is simply awesome. This is my second favourite place in Iran and it's a great place to explore for a few hours. The city was sacked by Alexander the Great and burnt to a crisp but many of its huge stone statues and buildings carved into the rock still stand. The ancient city was totally lost beneath the sands for over a thousand years and only rediscovered in the 1930s. The best part of the city is the hills housing the tombs of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III, it's a poignant place to pause and soak in the sheer scale of the city stretching away from you. It's easy to hitch a ride from Shiraz and
takes under an hour to get to Persepolis; try to arrive before ten or eleven as it gets very hot.

Takht-e-Jamshid (Persepolis), Fars - a highlight of any Iran backpacking adventure

Ghalat: A small village a stone’s throw from Shiraz, Ghalat is said to be home to many fine flowers and herbs that grow wildly within the hills. This may be the perfect place to watch the sun go down with a cheeky smoke.

Backpacking Iran - the real Iran is outside the cities...

Hormuz Island: This stunning volcanic island is my favourite place in all of Iran. There is nowhere quite like this anywhere else on earth and if you’re backpacking Iran in search of incredible landscapes this is where you should go... Check out my Hormuz travel guide for more info. Iran is a BIG country and there are lots more epic
places to check out, try to get away from the traditional tourist trail of Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd, there's a lot more to see...

The most incredible landscape in the world...

**Six must try experiences when backpacking Iran**

**Smoke some shisha:** Whilst in Iran be sure to track down a sofreh khune, a traditional shisha bar where Iranians hang out, play backgammon and smoke Ghelyoon (shisha).

**Crash a house party:** underground parties are very common in Iran and there's usually dozens happening in Tehran at the weekend. Drinks and other party enhancers are widely available and the atmosphere is chilled and casual with men and women chatting and sometime canoodling together.

**Hitch a ride:** Hitchhiking is not common in Iran but it's an amazing experience, very easy and a great way to see the country.

**Haggle for trinkets:** Haggling is very common in Iran and you should be able to negotiate a discount of at least 10%.

**Camp amongst nature:** There are so many truly gorgeous places to camp in Iran and, assuming it's not freezing, this is a fantastic way to escape the bustle of the cities and explore the best of Iran's stunning nature. I recommend going on a multi-day trek and taking a tent.

**Try the food:** Iran is famous for its kebabs and stews; street food here is some of the best in the world and Iranians take bread baking to the next level...
Sofreh Khune, A place for Iranians to hang out, drink chai and smoke some shisha.

**Persian hospitality**

Before I travelled to Iran, I really wasn’t sure what to expect. This is a country which has been depicted unfavourably in the international media and I half expected to be bundled into the back of a van by a bunch of bearded men; when I look back on that I realise just how totally ridiculous it was to even think about that. Iran is one of the safest countries to backpack around and there are many things I discovered about Iran during my travels in this amazing country.

Persian hospitality opened my eyes to just how damn fun Iran is to travel around. Thanks to a couple of networking groups on Facebook I was able to connect with plenty of local Iranians and arrange to hang out with people all over the country...

*With my Kurdish friends in Sanandaj, Kurdistan*
It was whilst hitchhiking that I first came across Tarof; a complex and confusing offshoot of Persian hospitality...

**Tarof in Iran**
Tarof is an Iranians custom which you need to be aware of; basically, somebody will offer something for free even though it is not actually for free – when the offer is made, it is supposedly understood by both parties.

Backpackers and even other Iranians can find this a bit frustrating as sometimes somebody will make a huge show of offering something for free only to expect payment at the end. The tradition comes from a warm and fuzzy place though; Iranians don’t like the idea of asking for money as the Persian culture dictates that you should be extremely hospitable to guests, especially us lucky backpacking vagabonds.

When hitchhiking in Iran, it helps if you check the ride is not Tarof – simply say ‘Tarof Nist’ – it’s not Tarof. Assuming they answer no you can assume that the offer is indeed genuine.

![Hitchhiking to Iranian Kurdistan](image)

**Couchsurfing in Iran**
Couchsurfing is technically illegal in Iran. You do not, however, need to use the (blocked) website to be able to find a place to crash; many Iranians will simply invite you into their home and the chance for this goes up dramatically if you are a backpacker hitchhiking across Iran… I had numerous drivers attempt to whisk me off for a week of adventuring in the desert, mountains or jungles. Iranians tend to get very excited when they meet a backpacker – it’s one of the many reasons Iranians are awesome people and this is one of the best countries in the world to backpack on a budget.
How much does backpacking Iran cost?

Backpacking Iran can be super cheap; I spent about twenty bucks a day on average not counting the occasional splurge on something to smoke.

If you are staying in basic guesthouses, catching long-distances buses and trains (rather than flights) and eating in simple restaurants you can expect to spend around fifty dollars a day.

Average room cost: **$18 - $35**
Average meal cost: **$3 - $6**
Long distance VIP bus cost: **$12 - $16**
Entrance to a site cost: **$6 for foreigners**
Budget tips for broke backpackers

To backpack Iran on the cheap I recommend sticking to the three basic rules of budget adventuring....

**Hitchhike:** In Iran, it is so so easy to thumb a ride that it really would be a crime not to give it a go... Hitchhiking is an ace way to keep your transport costs down.

**Camp:** With plenty of gorgeous natural places to camp, Iran is an excellent place to take a tent. When you're in dire need of a shower and some company, jump on Couchsurfing.

**Eat local:** Local Iranian food is cheap, tasty and everywhere - these guys are the king of kebabs!

**Pack the backpacker bible:** Nine years of travel tips, tricks and hacks plus intel on the best backpacking routes and practical advice to help you discover sustainable long term travel. [Check it out here.](#)
Learning Farsi in Iran

Farsi is one of the most beautiful languages in the world... This is a language that was crafted by poets and warriors, kings and mystics; a language that stretches back thousands of years into the past and is native to only Iran but also Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and parts of Russia; basically places that were, at times, very much under the control of the Persian Empire.

Farsi is a fairly tricky language to pick up but even learning a few words will go a huge way when chatting to Iranians who will be thrilled that you are making an effort. Whilst backpacking Iran, I used a uTalk Go, a super magical language learning app, to get to grips with the language and learn a few phrases.

My favourite phrases for backpacking Iran

Hello - Salaam
How are you? - Chetori?
Very good - Kheili Khub
Beautiful - Khoshkel
Where can I camp? - Koja mitunam chador bezanam?
Please - Lotfan
Cheers - Salamati
Trash (can be used as a light insult amongst mates) - Kesafat
What? - Chi?
where? - Koja?
Do you have a lighter? - Fandak darid?
Can you give me a discount? - Mishe Takhfif bedid?
Where is the drinking water? - Aab ashmidani kojas?
Can you give me a ride to XXX - Mishe mano ta XXX beresoonid?
What is your name? - Esme Shoma chie?
I am from XXX - Man az XXX Hastam
How much does this cost? - Een cheghad Mishe?

These are just a few of the phrases I learned. I strongly recommend downloading uTalk Go - the language learning app which I use for getting to grips with the local lingo all over the world, the basic membership is free and they cover over 170 countries and counting!
Learning Farsi on uTalkGo over a cup of chai

Internet in Iran

Backpacking Iran is not without its challenges; for starters, you might have to live without Facebook for a bit... Shock, horror!

Unfortunately, it’s not just Facebook that is blocked; Couchsurfing, The BBC, Twitter, Youtube, Pornhub... a lot of your favourite sites have been blocked by the government for indecency reasons.

The all too familiar ‘this site is blocked’ message I got to know well whilst backpacking Iran.

Luckily, it’s very easy to get around this. Almost all Iranians have VPNs installed on their phones and you can download a VPN from the app store or purchase one in the country.
VPNs work by bouncing your location all around the world so that it appears that you are in, for example, Amsterdam rather than in Tehran. This means that the Iranian government cannot track or block you. Because surveillance levels are that bit higher in Iran, it makes sense to have your VPN switched on whenever you are on any public wifi, regardless of what you are doing.

I’ve tried a whole number of VPNs whilst backpacking Iran; at the time of writing, Hide Me works the best.

**Dating in Iran**

Whether you are a man or a woman, you are likely to get plenty of sultry stares whilst backpacking in Iran. I had one girl stop me on the street so she could give me her phone number. Iranians like 'rare' things and right now, in Iran, backpackers are still pretty damn scarce!

You need to use your VPN to access tinder and it was using Tinder in Iran that I met a blue-haired beauty who I hitchhiked across the whole country with. If Tinder isn’t your thing; it's easy to meet hot Iranian chicks simply by heading to local cafes or shisha bars.

A Persian princess I met whilst backpacking Iran.

Many young Iranians take to the street and play a cat and mouse game where entire groups shout at each other, and exchange pre-written notes and numbers, from their cars as they zoom along the motorway.
The big problem with dating in Iran is finding a place to be intimate, this is even harder if you are a foreign-Iranian duo. It is pretty much impossible for a foreign-Iranian duo to check into a hotel without a marriage certificate, however if you can find an understanding mullah, it’s possible to get a temporary Iranian marriage; a sigheh. These can last for a minute to a lifetime and typically cost about thirty dollars to get sorted. Note that this is not easy to sort and takes perseverance.

Many young Iranians are not especially religious or conservative and are curious about foreign backpackers in Iran. Most Iranians lack the sexual experience of Europeans and it is important that you always treat women with respect whilst in Iran.

If you go on a date with an Iranian, remember; you are an ambassador for your country - i.e. don’t be a dick. I was lucky enough to fall in love in Iran; it’s fair to say that backpacking in Iran changed my life.

**Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll in Iran**

Backpacking Iran is full of surprises... Everything is possible in Iran and there is a lively *underground scene of house parties* and even full-on raves. Getting invited to one of these is fairly easy if you fall in with the right crowd; I attended a truly mental house party whilst in Tehran and other, more civilised, event down in Shiraz. Alcohol is illegal in Iran although Shiraz is famed for its wine and it's possible to find imported booze and homemade stuff throughout the country.

Drugs are also, of course, illegal but rumour has it that Iran boasts some of the finest herbs in The Middle East (available at approximately thirty dollars for ten grams).
Security in Iran

Backpacking Iran is a totally safe experience. Almost all of the negative media hype surrounding Iran is a decade out of date and was not particularly accurate in the first place. Iran is a very peaceful country and one of the most stable nations in The Middle East; just don’t get caught breaking the rules.

If you do, bribes are an option; play it carefully. Iran really is a super safe place to travel and plenty of women travel solo in Iran without any issues.

Best time to travel to Iran

Iran is famed for being a country with four very different seasons all being present at once!

The best time to visit Iran depends on what you want to do. Skiing is best in the winter and this is also a good time to visit the deserts and Hormuz; during the summer the desert can reach temperatures of seventy degrees!

The best time to backpack around Iran is, in my opinion, between March to May and September to December.
Border crossings in Iran

Backpacking Iran leaves many opportunities for overlanding to other countries.

Iran shares borders with Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. When you’re finished backpacking Iran and ready to move on to a new adventure (I recommend Pakistan!!) check out Caravanistan for plenty of info on visas and crossing reports. If you want to arrange your visa in advance, get the authorisation code from 1stQuest.

A brief history of a world power

Iran, or Persia, had been an important global player for millennia and is home to one of the oldest civilisations in the world. The First Persian Empire stretched from one corner of the known world to the other and 40% of the world’s total population lived and died under the reign of The Persians during 480 BC. Once a superpower of immense proportions, Iran has been invaded many times and suffered during the medieval ages as it was ravaged by the unstoppable Mongol hordes. Despite this, Persian culture refused to be diluted and Iran maintained a strong national psyche. Iran sided with Germany during World War II and was promptly invaded by British, American and Russian forces.

After the war, Iran struggled with multiple local uprisings incited by Soviet forces who wanted cheap access to the country’s massive oil fields. A military coup orchestrated by the CIA in 1953 catapulted the young and enigmatic Shah Mohammed Reza to power.
The new Shah began rapid modernisation of Iran and entered into a contract with an international consortium of businesses to sell Iranian oil and split profits 50:50. Crucially, the consortium would not allow Iranians to be on the board or to audit the cash flow and Iran was taken for a ride as its oil fields were sucked dry with only a fraction of the profits making it back to the government for economic improvements. As the Shah pushed through land reforms and pro-Western policies, the Islamic right wing became alienated and restless and found leadership under Ayatollah Khomeini who was swiftly banished after defaming the Shah during a speech.

In 1973, the Shah returned the oil fields to national control and raised export prices to further fund the country’s development. The West, who had enjoyed dirt cheap Iranian oil until this point, responded by fanning the flames of discontent amongst the Islamic right wing in the hopes that a change in government would lead to cheaper oil. It was largely because of foreign powers meddling behind the scenes that Iran changed so abruptly.
In an attempt to avoid a civil war the Shah left Iran in January 1979. Just a couple of weeks later, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and received a heroes welcome. Iranian army forces, surrounded on all sides by rebel revolutionary forces, declared neutrality and Khomeini took control as the 'Supreme Leader of Iran'. Many political activists fled during the Iranian revolution as revolutionary forces took a hardline approach on nationalistic groups in a bid to unite the country. Khomeini’s policies changed Iran drastically, something I cannot write about here.

The USA and her allies, keen to get its hands on some dirt-cheap oil again, encouraged an Iraqi invasion led by American ally Saddam Hussein. The eight year Iran-Iraq war raged as Khomeini continued to enforce anti-western policies and the country changed beyond recognition. Khomeini died in 1989 and control passed to Khamenei, a powerful figure with an almost identical name and beard. Recently, the situation in Iran has been rapidly changing.

Many trade embargoes have now been lifted and Iranians are hopeful that economic prosperity and a softening of attitudes is on the horizon. Iran has the potential to be a world power yet again and the country is opening up to the world. Inspired by a glorious past, many Iranians are now excited to see what the future holds for Iran and there are exciting political developments upon the horizon as politics slowly begins to move away from being totally intertwined with religion.

Right now it is an exciting time to go backpacking around Iran; the sense of hope and excitement in the air is intoxicating and Iran is finally emerging, blinking into the light, as a global player yet again.
Useful apps to download before backpacking Iran

Be warned, it’s often hard to download new apps without a VPN when backpacking Iran so I suggest downloading the following before you travel to Iran.

**uTalk Go** - The backpacker’s secret weapon when it comes to learning languages, I cannot recommend uTalk enough; whilst backpacking in countries like Pakistan, India, Nepal and Iran it has proven worth its weight in gold...

**Telegram** - Iranian’s favourite instant messaging app, similar to Whatsapp.

**Maps.me** - My favourite offline maps app.

**Fast Dic** - Dictionary for quickly translating specific words whilst backpacking Iran.

**VPN** - I always have a VPN ready to go on both my phone and laptop, I personally use Hide Me which is one of the fastest and most reliable options out there. This particular VPN allows for up to five connections which is handy for keeping all your devices connected without having to purchase multiple VPN packages.

**Tehran Metro** - The best way to find info on Tehran’s metro system.

**Snapp** - Iranian Uber!
Books to read on Iran

Backpacking Iran can be a much more enlightening experience if you know a little bit about the country’s history and customs, I strongly recommend throwing a couple of the below books into your backpack before travelling in Iran.

The Backpacker Bible - Learn how to ditch your desk and travel the world on just $10 a day whilst building a life of long-term travel with an online income. Shameless bit of self promo here but this book is basically my dissertation on backpacking, nine years of tips and tricks and your purchase helps keep the site going. If you've found the content on this site useful, the book is the next level up and you will learn a ton - if you don't, I'll give you your money back. Check it out here.

A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind - An in-depth look at how the country was formed, encompassing historical, cultural, social and religious factors.

Lonely Planet Iran (Travel Guide) - I rarely travel with a guide book, I was however impressed with the Lonely Planet for Iran; it’s well worth picking up a copy before you go backpacking across Iran.

Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know - An overview of regional history and involvement with the west from past to present and into the future.

The Silk Roads: A New History of the World - Certainly one of the most popular recent publications on the region, a stark look at history from the other side of the coin.

Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalisation

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (Graphic Novel) - Insights into daily Iranian life, culture and family through the experiences of Marjane, a young girl living in Tehran.

City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death and the Search for Truth in Tehran

Iran: A Very Short Introduction

Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic

If you're hitchhiking, I strongly recommend picking up a road map of Iran.
Insurance in Iran

Whenever you hit the road and go travelling, you need insurance. I have been backpacking for nine years and have had to claim a total of three times; if I didn't have backpacker insurance I would have been utterly screwed on all three occasions. I recommend World Nomads Travel Insurance - they hands down have the best support and if you do need to claim they will help you get it sorted quickly.

Even if you don't get insurance with World Nomads, Please do get some sort of insurance from somewhere, there are lots of decent options online.

And so there you have it amigos, everything you need to know to hit the road and go backpacking in Iran...

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