

Afghanistan

Afghanistan at a Glance

Official Name: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Area: 650,000 sq km

Population: 23.74 million (1997)

Ethnic Mix: 38% Pashto, 25% Tajik, 19% Hazara, 6% Uzbek, 3% nomad, 2% Turkmen, 1.5% Baluch, 5.5% Others

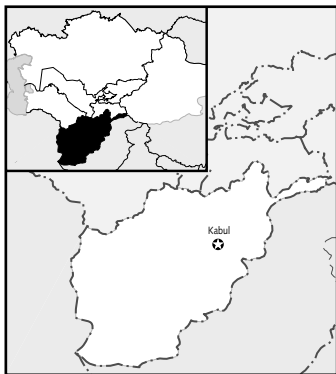
Capital: Kabul

Currency: Afghani

Country α Code: 93

Best Time to Go: don't go

Travel Warning: see the boxed text



AFGHANISTAN

At the time of writing the sound of gunfire and shelling still reverberates over parts of Afghanistan as it has done with depressing regularity since the late 1970s. Hopes are high that the latest faction to win control over the war-torn capital, the Islamist Taliban fighters, may eventually succeed in bringing peace but for the time being Afghanistan is unsafe to visit. This is tragic for the country and unfortunate for travellers, as Afghanistan is vastly appealing, with endless empty deserts, soaring barren mountains, old historic towns and, best of all, the proud, independent and immensely hospitable Afghans.

HISTORY

Afghanistan's history as a country spans little more than two centuries, but in the past it has been part, or the centre, of many great empires. As with much of the region, the rise and fall of political power has been inextricably tied to the rise and fall of religions.

It was in Afghanistan that the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism began in the 6th century BCE (before common era). Later, Buddhism spread west from India to the Bamiyan valley where it remained strong until the 10th century CE (common era). The eastward sweep of Islam reached Afghanistan in the 7th century and the entire country to this day remains Muslim.

Empires & Invaders

Afghanistan has weathered invasions by such historical superstars as the Aryans, Darius of Persia, Alexander the Great, the Kushans, Hephthalites, Sassanids, the Arab armies, Jenghiz Khan, Timur (Tamerlane), Babur (the founder of the Moguls) and even the Soviet Red Army. Between 1220 and 1223 Jenghiz Khan tore through the country destroying everything before him. Balkh, Herat, Ghazni and Bamiyan were all reduced to rubble. When the damage was finally repaired Timur swept through in the early 1380s and reduced the region to rubble again.

In contrast to Jenghiz, Timur's reign ushered in the golden Timurid era, when poetry, architecture and miniature painting reached their zenith. Timur's fourth son Shah Rukh in particular, devoted much wealth and energy to the arts; he built shrines, mosques and medressas throughout Khorasan, from Mashad, in modern-day Iran, to Balkh in modern-day Afghanistan. Herat continued to prosper under Sultan Hussain Baykara (died 1506), producing such great Central Asian poets as Jami and Alisher Navoi.

The rise of the Great Mogul empire again lifted Afghanistan to heights of power. Babur had his capital in Kabul in 1512, but as the Moguls extended their power into

Warning

! Lonely Planet strongly advises against travelling to Afghanistan, as do both the British Foreign Office and the US State Department. Although much of the country is no longer at war, the situation remains extremely volatile and there are recurrent outbreaks of fighting throughout the country. Visitors should be aware that there is no British or US mission in Afghanistan to provide consular help and there are almost certainly no other consular missions other than for Pakistan. The country is awash with arms and warlords steeped in a culture of guns, kidnappings and banditry and there are over 10 million unexploded land mines in Afghanistan. At the time of research Afghan embassies and consulates were only issuing visas to accredited journalists and aid workers. It was not possible to visit Afghanistan for the update of this edition. Occasional adventurers do make it, though many of them have come unstuck and have even been killed in the process.

India, Afghanistan's status declined as it went from being the centre of the empire to simply being a peripheral part of it. In 1774, with European strength threatening the declining Moguls on the Indian subcontinent, the kingdom of Afghanistan was founded.

The Afghan Wars

The 19th century was a period of often comic-book confrontation with the British, who were afraid of the effects of unruly neighbours on their great Indian colony. The rise of Great Game tensions (see the Facts about Central Asia chapter at the start of this book) and the internal weakness of the Afghan kingdom resulted in a series of remarkably unsuccessful and bloody, preventative wars being fought on extremely flimsy pretexts.

The first war took place between 1839 and 1842. Dost Mohammed, ruler of Kabul, had made approaches to the British and Russians in turn. In 1841 the British garrison in Kabul found itself under attack after Alexander 'Bokhara' Burnes was hacked to pieces by an

Afghan mob. The British attempted to retreat to India and were almost totally wiped out in the Khyber pass – out of 16,000 persons only one man survived. The British managed to re-occupy Kabul and carried out little razing and burning to show who was boss, but Dost Mohammed ended up back in power, just as he had been before the war.

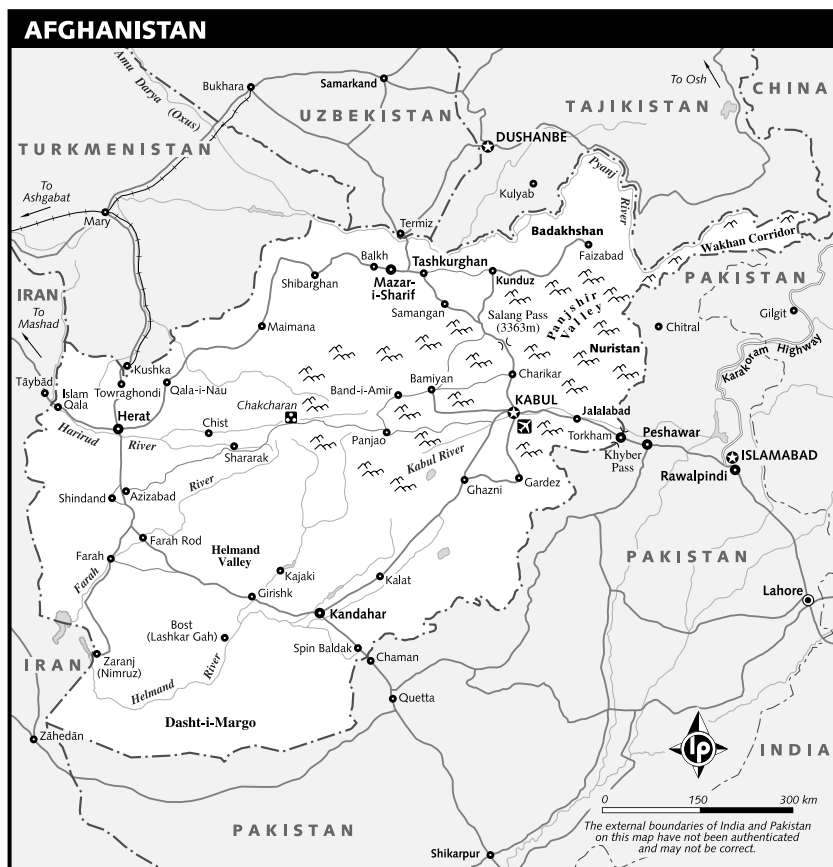
Following local wars, from 1878 to 1880, Afghanistan agreed to become more or less a protectorate of the British, happily accepted an annual payment to keep things in shape and agreed to a British resident in Kabul. No sooner had this diplomatic mission been installed in Kabul than all its members were murdered. This time the British decided to keep control over Afghanistan's external affairs, but to leave the internal matters strictly to the Afghans themselves.

Treaties between Britain and Russia in 1895 and 1907 took much of the heat out of the Great Game, when they agreed to establish a little strip of no-man's land between themselves, resulting in the strange little finger of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor, poking out of the top north-eastern corner. In 1893 the British also drew Afghanistan's eastern boundaries with the so-called Durand Line and neatly partitioned a large number of the Pathan tribes into imperial India, in what today is Pakistan. This has been a cause of Afghan-Pakistani strife for many years and is the reason the Afghans refer to the western part of Pakistan as Pashtunistan.

From WWI onwards the US replaced Britain in worrying about Russian influence. Nevertheless, the US tacitly recognised that Afghanistan was firmly in the Soviet sphere of influence and the Soviet presence was strongly felt. Afghanistan's trade tilted heavily towards the USSR and Soviet foreign aid to Afghanistan far outweighed western assistance. Only in tourism did the western powers have a major influence on the country.

Despite its relatively untroubled external relations, internally Afghanistan remained precariously unstable. Attempts to encourage Turkish-style progress in the country failed dismally between WWI and WWII. The post-war kingdom ended in 1973 when the king, a Pathan like most of those in

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power, was neatly overthrown while away in Europe. His 'progressive' successors were hardly any more progressive than he had been, but the situation under them was far better than that which was to follow.

After the bloody pro-Moscow revolution that took place in 1978, Afghanistan rapidly deteriorated into turmoil and confusion. Its pro-communist, anti-religious government was far out of step with the strongly Islamic situations that prevailed in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, and soon the ever-volatile Afghan tribes had the countryside up in arms. A second revolution brought in

a government leaning even more heavily on Soviet support and the country took another lurch towards anarchy.

The Soviet Invasion

Finally in late 1979, the Soviet regime decided that enough was enough. Another 'popular' revolution took place and a Soviet puppet government was installed in Kabul, with what looked like half the Soviet army lined up behind it. Despite an ineffectual storm of western protests it soon became clear that the Soviets were there to stay. An Islamic jihad (holy war) was called and seven muja-

heddin factions emerged. The Soviets soon found themselves mired in what later became known as 'Russia's Vietnam'. They had the advantage of short supply lines, no organised protests from home and a divided enemy but, divided or not, the Afghan mujaheddin were every bit as determined as the Viet Cong.

The war ground on through the 1980s. The Afghan clan warriors remained disorganised and badly trained but to their determination and undoubted bravery they also began to add modern weaponry; the CIA pumped up to US\$700 million a year into the conflict in one of the largest covert operations in history. Soon the Soviet regime held only the cities and soon even supplying the cities became increasingly difficult as road convoys were ambushed and aircraft brought down with surface-to-air missiles. In the late 1980s Gorbachev's new pragmatic mood of *perestroika* (restructuring) weakened the Russians' will to fight such an intractable opponent and suddenly the Russians wanted out.

The decade-long war had cost the Soviets over 15,000 men, produced a wave of nationalism in the Central Asian republics and contributed significantly to the collapse of the USSR. In Afghanistan over a million Afghans lay dead and 6.2 million people, over half the world's refugee population, had fled the country.

Civil War in the 1990s

The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 weakened the Russian-backed government of President Najibullah. In an attempt to end the civil war, Najibullah proposed a government of national unity but the mujaheddin refused to participate in any government which included him or his Watan (Homeland) Party. In April 1992 Najibullah was ousted and a week later fighting erupted between rival mujaheddin factions in Kabul. An interim president was installed and replaced two months later by Burhanuddin Rabbani, a founder of the country's Islamic political movement.

The accession of Rabbani did nothing to stop the fighting. Constant warfare between the presidential forces of Rabbani and the rival mujaheddin armies of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Rashid Dostum devas-

tated the country, doing more damage than the Soviet occupation.

The Taliban

The two bitter rivals were, however, forced into an alliance in May 1996 by the spectacular military successes of a group of Islamic fighters called the Taliban. The Taliban are a group of ethnic Pashtuns ('talib' is a Pashto word meaning 'religious student' or 'seeker of knowledge' – 'taliban' is the plural), backed by Pakistan and educated in Pakistani medressas. The Taliban took Kandahar in 1994, Ghazni, Helmand and Herat in 1995 and in September 1996 they entered Kabul unopposed – Rabbani and Hekmatyar's forces had already fled north. The former communist president Najibullah was not so foresighted, and one of the first acts of the new rulers of Kabul was to drag him from the UN compound where he had been sheltering for the last 4½ years, execute him and string up the body for all to see.

In 1997 the Taliban took Mazar-i-Sharif only to be pushed back in their first ever military setback, but by September 1998 they had taken Mazar in the north and Bamiyan in the central region of Hazarajat (with the alleged massacre of over 8000 Hazaras). At the time of writing, the Taliban controlled 90% of Afghanistan's territory and only the Tajik mujaheddin Ahmed Shah Masood provided an active opposition in the Panjshir valley.

On the international field the Taliban have enjoyed fewer successes. In 1998 the US pulverised parts of south-east Afghanistan with Tomahawk cruise missiles in an attempt to flush out Osama bin Laden, the multi-millionaire Saudi dissident suspected of the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In retaliation a UN official was murdered in Kabul and all UN staff and aid agencies temporarily pulled out of the country. That same year Iran mobilised up to 100,000 troops on its eastern borders as tension between the two countries (one Sunni, the other Shia) reached a peak after the murder of eight Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif. The Iranian Ayatollah Khamenei has described the Taliban as 'ignorant and immature'.

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Talibanned

The Taliban are a group of ethnic Pashtuns, backed by Pakistan and educated in the medresas of Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi. Their aim is simple – to create the world's purest Islamic state – but their unprecedentedly severe interpretation of Islamic sharia law (which includes forbidding women to work, closing girls' schools and making beards compulsory for men) has caused great unease in the traditionally relaxed cities of Kabul and Herat.

The list of unnecessary evils banned by the Taliban's 'Department to Propagate Virtue and Eliminate Vice' runs to music, television, magazines, photography, kite flying, pigeon flying, paper bags, long hair and drums. Cassette and video tape flutters like bunting from many Taliban checkpoints. With other forms of entertainment banned, Kabul's sports stadium packs a crowd every Friday afternoon, when thieves have limbs surgically amputated (under anaesthetic), female adulterers are stoned and murderers beheaded. Others open to arrest or beating include men whose beard is less than fist-length (the punishment is imprisonment until the facial hair grows to the requisite length), anyone absent from daily prayers and taxi drivers who take unaccompanied female fares.

In March 1999, for the first time, the Taliban and the leaders of the Anti-Taliban Northern Alliance brokered an agreement in Ashgabat in Turkmenistan to share power. The agreement quickly collapsed and further talks in Tashkent failed to achieve a concrete solution (the implementation of Islamic law for one proving a sticking point), but for a nation weary of war the agreement marks the most positive development for a decade.

Reports from within indicate that if the Taliban can enforce peace and unity throughout the land and rebuild at least some of the country's shattered infrastructure then imposed Islamic law may be an acceptable price to pay. However, for the traveller, one of the most interesting countries in Asia looks likely to remain off limits for some time to come.

GEOGRAPHY

Afghanistan is a totally landlocked country slightly larger than France, with an extremely rugged topography. It borders Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan and is strategically important to all.

The mighty Hindu Kush (Killer of Hindus) range, the western extremity of the Himalaya, runs across the country from east to west. The average elevation of this mountainous interior is a lofty 2700m and the highest peaks reach 7500m in the north-east. From here rise

the major rivers of Afghanistan. The Kabul river flows east into the Indus while most others such as the Helmand, Farah and Harirud disappear into the desert sands.

To the north of the Hindu Kush lie the low-lying plains of Afghan Turkistan and the border marked by the Amu-Darya (Oxus). To the south stretches the dry, dusty Dasht-i-Margo, or Desert of Death.

Afghanistan is very seismically active. Two major quakes in 1998 and then again in February 1999 killed hundreds of people, the latter leaving over 30,000 homeless.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

According to Afghanistan's 1987 constitution the Loya Jirga, a traditional gathering of clan leaders, elects an executive president for a seven-year term. The president then appoints a Council of Ministers which must be approved by the bicameral National Assembly.

The country is presently without elected leaders. The UN and most western governments continue to recognise the government of ex-President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Northern Anti-Taliban Alliance, despite the fact that they now control less than 10% of the country. Power is in the hands of the Taliban who are led by Maulana Mohammed Omar, a one-eyed former mujaheddin cleric. Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recognise the Taliban diplomatically.

On taking the capital the Taliban announced that Afghanistan would be ruled by an interim six-member inner *shura* (council) led by Omar's deputy, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani (no relation to the fleeing president). The country has since been renamed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

ECONOMY

A country primarily of agricultural and nomadic shepherds, Afghanistan traded chiefly with the former republics of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The only natural resource exploited was natural gas, most of which was piped into the former USSR.

Constant war for 20 years has destroyed all industry. Today's biggest earner is smuggling, either of goods (imported duty free from Dubai and then 'exported' to Pakistan) or drugs (Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of hashish and opium). Traditional exports include karakul pelts from Turkistan, dried fruit and nuts, handwoven carpets and gemstones from Badakhshan. Indeed in the 1980s lapis and heroin financed many of the mujaheddin groups. Drug money is often still laundered through the gemstone market.

Foreign aid remains vital to Afghanistan's economy. It is hoped that transit fees from Central Asian oil and gas pipelines could become a major earner, as – once again – could tourism. See the boxed text 'Pipe Dreams' in the Facts about Central Asia chapter.

POPULATION & PEOPLE

The population of Afghanistan is about 23 million although exact figures are hard to come by due to nomadic wanderings and large numbers of internally displaced peoples. Afghanistan is split sharply along ethnic lines and these ethnic and cultural differences continue to profoundly shape Afghan politics. Approximately 40% of the population is Pashto. There have been allegations of ethnic cleansing against the Taliban troops in northern Afghanistan.

SOCIETY & CONDUCT

Afghanistan's geographical position – for centuries crisscrossed by armies, empires

and trade routes – combined with its varied geological terrain have given rise to the great diversity of languages and traditions that form Afghanistan's cultural heritage. The turmoil produced by the civil war and the enormous number of displaced peoples have put great pressure on Afghan cultural life.

The seclusion and veiling of women has not been enforced since 1959, but the Taliban's accession to power has brought great changes to women's lives. Afghan women can be flogged or otherwise punished for being on the street without the company of a male relative or for not wearing the shuttlecock-shaped *burqa*. Women can only attend single sex hospitals (of which there are few) and may not seek employment or education.

Aid workers tell of women dying after being refused treatment because the only available doctors were male, and of women having their thumbs cut off for wearing nail varnish. The Taliban have stated that girls' schools will be set up but only when the country can afford them – little consolation to Afghan women, whose literacy rates remain as low as 15%. The ban on seeking employment has had a particularly painful affect on Kabul's estimated 50,000 war widows. If the extreme orthodox Islamic regime persists great care will be needed to exercise respect for prevailing customs.

RELIGION

Afghanistan is an intensely Muslim country. Although the Blue Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif is one of the most important Shia Muslim shrines, the country is 85% Sunni. The Hazaras of central Afghanistan form the bulk of the Shias and as such have strong links to Iran. The country has historically been a great centre of Sufism.

LANGUAGE

Afghanistan has two main languages. One is Dari, a Persian dialect very similar to the Farsi spoken in Iran and Tajik spoken in Tajikistan. The second language is Pashto, which is also spoken in the Pathan (Pash-tun) regions of Pakistan. Persian is the language of the Taliban and thus most officials, and is the one to generally use.

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INTERNET RESOURCES

Afghanistan Online

www.afghan-web.com

(news searches, books, culture and cookery)

Afghanistan Today

<http://frankenstein.worldweb.net/afghan/>

(music, history, culture, restaurants, publications, news and aid organisations)

Taliban Online

www.ummah.net/dharb

(the Taliban and their Islamic aims)

BOOKS

Afghanistan – Essential Field Guides by Edward Girardet and Walter Jonathan (ed). Excellent introduction to Afghanistan, aimed at journalists and aid workers. The only practical source of information for travelling in the region.

An Historical Guide to Afghanistan by Nancy Hatch Dupree. This was written in 1977, so is well out of date but still offers interesting historical details for armchair travellers.

Road to Oxiana by Robert Byron. Still, more than 60 years after it was written, the best travel book on Persia and Afghanistan. Few characters in the travel literature genre are as memorable as the show-stealing Afghan consul to Iran.

A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush by Eric Newby. One of the modern classics of travel writing, the book describes the (mis)adventures of two Englishmen who trekked through the Hindu Kush to Nuristan, north of Kabul, in the 1950s. One of the best endings of any travel book.

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

The following organisations can give advice on security as well as private flights and guesthouses for aid workers and journalists:

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghanistan (ACBAR)

(☎ 091-44392, fax 840471,

✉ acbaar@radio.psh.brain.net.pk)

3 Rehman Baba Rd, University Town, Peshawar

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UN-OCHA)

(☎ 051-211451, fax 211450,

✉ unocha@undpafg.org.pk)

House 292, St 55, F-10/4, Islamabad

KABUL

The capital of Afghanistan was never a terribly attractive or interesting city and that has certainly not been improved by the last twenty years of conflict. The Soviets left the

city reasonably intact in 1989, but since then Kabul has been virtually destroyed by bombardments and street battles, with an estimated loss of some 30,000 lives.

The **Kabul Museum**, which used to have one of the finest collections of antiquities in Asia, has had nearly three-quarters of its finest collections looted. It was once possible to walk the five-hour length of the crumbling walls of the old citadel, **Bala Hissar**, but they are now off limits and extremely dangerous due to unexploded bombs and local landmines. The pleasant **Gardens of Babur** were once a cool retreat near the city walls.

AROUND KABUL

Nuristan (Land of Light), north-east of Kabul, is mountainous, remote, little visited and of great ethnological interest – and memorably described in Eric Newby's hilarious *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*.

The **Red City** (Shahr-i-Zohak), the remains of an ancient citadel which guarded Bamiyan, is about 17km before Bamiyan itself and 180km north-west of Kabul. This was once the centre of the Ghori kings.

Within Bamiyan are the great **buddhas**. The smaller of the two buddhas stands a towering 35m high. This buddha is thought to have been carved out in the 2nd or 3rd century CE (common era), but it is badly disfigured. The better and larger buddha, which stands 53m high, is estimated to be two or three centuries younger and is in a later, more sophisticated style. The buddhas were carved roughly out of their niches, then built up with mud and straw, covering them in a type of

The Hidden Costs of War

There are over 10 million unexploded land mines in Afghanistan. Some 400,000 Afghans have already been killed and 4000 a year continue to die violently. Some 80% of the casualties are civilian. Worse still, mines will continue to take lives indiscriminately for decades to come. In September 1998, 45 people were killed when a public bus hit an anti-tank landmine.

The Golden Crescent

For years Afghanistan has been the world's largest exporter of hashish and it recently overtook Myanmar to become the world's leading supplier of opium. It is estimated that 200,000 farmers cultivate 2200 tons of opium a year. Although the Taliban has condemned drug production (it controls 95% of opium land) and promised to cut down on production in return for international recognition, it is uncertain whether it has enough support in the countryside to do this.

Opium poppies, which are harvested in June and July, are often shipped for production to mobile labs in Pakistan's tribal areas, where Pakistani law doesn't apply. They are then packed back over the mountain passes into Afghanistan and beyond. The so-called 'Golden Crescent' now supplies Europe with 80% of its heroin, 65% of which is smuggled through Central Asia.

Tajik officials say that 200,000 tons of drugs are stockpiled at the border, about a ton of which crosses over each day. Known locally as *khanka*, raw opium costs US\$30 per kg in Afghanistan's Helmand valley. The same kg costs US\$800 in Osh and then US\$6000 in Moscow. In 1995, Kyrgyzstan alone exported more narcotics than either Myanmar (Burma) or Thailand.

Most of the business is controlled by narco-clans, although the army, police and border guards all have fingers in the opium bowl. Drugs have even turned up on Russian military aircraft. It is feared that Tajikistan in particular could degenerate into a major 'narcocracy' like Colombia. And it's big business. Central Asia's drugs industry is valued at an annual turnover of US\$1 billion to US\$14 billion. In 1999 alone the UN gave US\$6 million to fight the drugs war and US\$30 million worth of opium was seized in a single haul near the Pyanj river. Police estimate that they catch about 5% of all shipments.

Not all of the drugs are exported; addiction in Central Asia is mushrooming. The average age of addicts in Bishkek is 17 years. In Kazakhstan, 85% of those HIV positive are drug addicts.

In post-Soviet Central Asia, camel caravans of exotic silks and spices have been replaced, it seems, by Ladas packed with opium. The Silk Road has become an opium highway.

Production centres and shipment routes in Afghanistan are well protected by armed warlords and trafficking carries the death sentence in many countries in the region.

cement. Cords draped down the body were covered to form the folds of the figures' robes.

Shar-i-Gholgola is the main ruined city in the valley – the name means 'city of sighs'; climbing to the top of the cliff on the other side of the valley to look across at the bud-dhas used to be a popular activity.

The incredible lakes of **Band-i-Amir** (Dam of the King), clear blue water dammed by sulphurous deposits and surrounded by towering pink cliffs, are 75km beyond Bamiyan.

SOUTH & WEST OF KABUL

The modern town of Ghazni is just a pale shadow of its former glory. The city is only 150km south-west of Kabul but poor roads mean the trip still takes most of the day. Ghazni today is known mainly for its fine bazar. The restored **tomb of Abdul Razzak**

and the museum within are of interest. There are also some very fine minarets, the excavations of the **Palace of Masud** and, most surprisingly, a recently discovered **Buddhist stupa** which has survived from long before the Arab invasion of the 7th century CE.

Kandahar is in the far south of Afghanistan, midway between Kabul and Herat. It is the second largest city in Afghanistan and lies at an important crossroads where the main road from Kabul branches north-west to Herat and south-east to Quetta in Pakistan. Kandahar lies in the Pashto heartland and has gained modern significance as the power base of the Taliban militia. Kandahar's great treasure, a **cloak** which once belonged to the Prophet, is safely locked away from infidel eyes in the mosque of the Sacred Cloak, known locally as Da Kherqa Sharif Ziarat.

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A few kilometres from the centre of Kandahar towards Herat are the '**Forty Steps**' (Chihil Zina). They lead up to a niche carved in the rock by Babur, founder of the Mogul empire, guarded by two stone lions.

KANDAHAR TO HERAT

Ruins and drugs are the features of this route across western Afghanistan. The Helmand valley was once the centre of a sophisticated *karez* (underground irrigation system; see the boxed text 'Karez' in the Around Turpan section of the Xinjiang chapter). Today the region has gained infamy as Afghanistan's largest drug-producing area (see the boxed text). **Bost (Lashkar Gah)**, 150km west of Kandahar, today is a jumble of ruins and remains – shattered remnants of a once mighty city. The superb arch, **Qalai Bost**, was the high point of a visit to this old centre.

HERAT

Herat was a small, provincial, relatively green, laze-about place which everyone seemed to like. It was an easy-going oasis after a lot of hassle and dry desert. In the fifteenth century Herat was the Timurid centre of art, poetry, miniature painting and music, blending Persian, Central Asian and Afghan cultures to create one of Central Asia's cultural highlights. Today the city sits particularly uneasily under puritan Taliban rule.

The **Friday Mosque**, or Masjid-i-Jami, is Herat's number one attraction and one of the finest Islamic buildings in the world, certainly the finest in Afghanistan. It has some exquisite Timurid tilework to complement its graceful architecture. Herat's ancient citadel, or *qala*, built in 1305, is today used as a base by the Taliban so you can't get in for a look around, although you could once walk right round its outer wall. The **covered bazar** in Char souq is a complex of all sorts of shops and artisans' workshops.

A short walk from the centre of Herat on the road that runs north are a number of interesting sights. First there is a small **park** with a beehive-shaped tomb then, farther on, four immense, broken **minarets**. They are all that remains of an old medressa, which was

built in 1417 by the Queen Gaur Shad (who also built the fabulous Masjid-i-Azim Gohar Shah mosque at Mashad in modern-day Iran). As the wife of Timurid ruler Shah Rukh, Gaur Shad was Timur's daughter-in-law and a remarkable woman in her own right, who kept the empire intact for many years. Her mausoleum still stands near the medressa, a carbon copy of the Gur Emir in Samarkand.

The shrine complex of **Gazar Gah**, dating from 1425, is about 5km east of Herat. The tomb of Abdullah Ansar, a famous Sufi mystic and poet who died in Herat in 1088, is the main attraction. The Afghan King Dost Mohammed and the famous Persian poet Jami are also buried here.

The 65m high **Minaret of Jam**, 313km from Herat and around 550km from Kabul is the second highest in the world and one of the oldest at over 800 years old.

AFGHAN TURKESTAN

North of the Hindu Kush is a quite different Afghanistan – if the south is related to the Iranian plateau, the north is akin to the Central Asian steppes and indeed, prior to the modern obsession about borders, the Afghan nomads were quite at home on both the Russian and Afghan sides of the border. Until the Salang pass tunnel was completed in the mid-1960s this was also a totally isolated part of the country. To get there before that time you either had to climb up and over the highest part of the Hindu Kush, north of Kabul, or cross the lower western extremity near Herat and make a long desert crossing.

Archaeologists have found remains of Greek cities from the days of Alexander the Great near Mazar-i-Sharif but there is nothing much for the visitor to view. In Mazar-i-Sharif itself is the **Blue Mosque**, supposedly the Tomb of Ali, the adopted son of the Prophet, and the holiest spot in Afghanistan.

Although **Balkh** was, until Jenghiz Khan, a flourishing city of beautiful buildings, today all that is left are a few time-worn buildings and the crumbling remains of the city walls.

The 15th century **Green Mosque** (Mosque of Abu Nasr Parsi), Masjid-i-Nau Gumbad and the rubble of the pre-Mongol city walls are pretty much all there is to see.