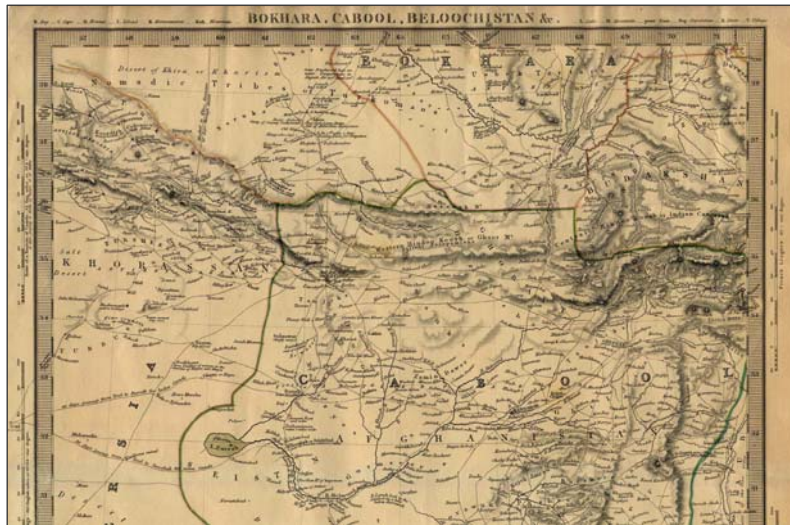




TRAVEL GUIDE TO AFGHANISTAN



Quick Facts	
Capital	Kabul
Government	Islamic republic
Currency	Afghani (AFA)
Area	<i>total:</i> 647,500 km ² <i>water:</i> 0 km ² <i>land:</i> 647,500 km ²
Population	31,889,923 (July 2007 est.)
Language	Afghan Persian (Dari) 50%, Pashto 35%, Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%, 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%, much bilingualism
Religion	Sunni Muslim 80%, Shi'a Muslim 19%, other 1%
Electricity	220V/50Hz +/-50%
Calling Code	+93
Internet TLD	.af
Time Zone	UTC+4.5



Climate

Arid to semi-arid; cold winters and hot summers.

Temperatures in the north can be below freezing for most of the winter. Snow in the higher elevations is common. Summer-time highs in lower elevations (such as Kandahar in the south) can exceed 60 C/140 deg F with daytime temperatures of 50 C/120 deg F being common. In higher areas such as Kabul, summer temperatures can be 30 C/90 deg F and winter around 0 C/30 deg F. The most pleasant weather in Kabul is during April/May and September.

Terrain

Mostly rugged mountains; plains in north and southwest. The Hindu Kush mountains that run northeast to southwest divide the northern provinces from the rest of the country, with the highest peaks in the northern.

South of Kandahar is desert.

Elevation extremes

<i>lowest</i>	<i>point:</i>	Amu	Darya	258	m
<i>highest point:</i> Nowshak 7,485 m					

Ethnic Groups

Afghanistan is a very diverse country ethnically. Tribal or local allegiances are strong, which complicates national politics immensely.

The two largest linguistic groups speak Pashto and Dari (Afghan Persian). Pashto speakers predominate in the South and East, Dari in North and central Afghanistan.

About 11% of the population has Turkic languages, Uzbek or Turkmen, as their first language. Many of them are in the North, near [Uzbekistan](#) and [Turkmenistan](#).

Baloch tribesmen, still largely nomadic, can be found anywhere between [Quetta](#) in [Pakistan](#) and [Mashad](#) in [Iran](#), including much of Western Afghanistan. They make marvelous, if often somewhat simple, rugs.

There are about 30,000 to 150,000 Hindus and Sikhs living in different cities but mostly in [Jalalabad](#), [Kabul](#), and [Kandahar](#) who belong to the Punjabi, Sindhi, Kabuli, and Kandhari ethnic groups.



Hazaras in the Central mountains look much more Asiatic than other Afghans. According to some theories, they are descended from Ghengis Khan's soldiers.

Electricity

Officially 220V 50Hz. Electricity supplies are erratic but slowly improving in major cities. Voltage can drop to below 150V in some places. The Afghans' enthusiasm for homemade generators or modifying low quality ones means that the frequency and voltage can also vary wildly.

There are three types of electrical outlets likely to be found in Afghanistan. They are the old British standard BS-546, the newer British standard BS-1363 and the European standard CEE-7/7 "Schukostecker" or "Schuko". There is no single recognized standard. Hence, you may encounter any or all of these outlet types there. Generally speaking, U.S. and Canadian travelers should pack adapters for these outlets if they plan to use North American electrical equipment in Afghanistan. You may also find cheap universal adapters in the local markets.

Getting In

By plane

Kabul International Airport: KBL) in [Kabul](#) is operating, but barely. Electricity is partial, lighting is absent in most locations, and services are minimal. Expect to (be forced to) pay bribes on your way out. There may be long delays at immigration and baggage claim. Near the existing terminal, a new modern-style terminal has been planned and some work may have been undertaken, but the scheduled completion during 2008 is questionable.

The national carrier, **Ariana Afghan Airlines**, is flying with a small fleet of about 14 Airbuses and Boeings (plus Antonovs). Ariana is banned from European air space for safety reasons. They have daily flights from [Dubai](#), and periodic flights from [Islamabad](#), [Delhi](#), [Istanbul](#), [Baku](#) and [Tehran](#). Ariana is particularly bad at keeping to schedules; flights can be cancelled or delayed without notice.

A far better option is the independent operator **Kam Air**, which has twice daily flights from Dubai, twice weekly flights from [Delhi](#) and weekly flight from [Almaty](#), [Istanbul](#) and [Mashad](#). Some of the flights on the Dubai to Kabul route stop in [Herat](#) if you'd prefer to enter the country there. **Pamir Airways** is a new private airline that offers daily flights between Kabul and Dubai (\$330 inbound, \$210 outbound), some stopping in Herat.

Air Arabia flies 4 times per week from [Sharjah](#) - however they have currently suspended operations. **Pakistan International Airlines (PIA)** flies 4 times per week from Islamabad and 1 time per week from Peshawar to Kabul. Another route in may be



via through [Tehran](#) or [Mashad](#) in [Iran](#). **Iran Air** has periodic flights from [Tehran](#) to Kabul. **Air India** operates two flights a week from Delhi to Kabul.

Flights to other cities such as [Mazar-e Sharif](#) may be available if you can hook up with the charter company **PACTEC** however seating is very limited.

By car

From [Peshawar, Pakistan](#) via the [Khyber Pass](#) to [Jalalabad](#) and then proceeding to [Kabul](#). From [Quetta, Pakistan](#) to [Kandahar](#). From [Mashad, Iran](#) to [Herat](#). From [Uzbekistan](#) to [Mazar-e Sharif](#) and from [Tajikistan](#) to [Konduz](#). Traveling any of these routes should not be considered safe, especially Quetta to Kandahar.

By bus

Buses run regularly between [Jalalabad](#) and [Peshawar, Pakistan](#). Also, between [Herat](#) and [Mashad, Iran](#). Afghani buses are thoroughly checked by Iranian border police for possible drugs, so expect delays.

Getting Around in Afghanistan

By plane

Planes fly between Kabul and the major cities ([Kandahar](#), [Herat](#) and [Mazar-e Sharif](#)) at varying frequency.

By car

There is a growing network of public transportation between the country's cities. Buses ply some routes and Toyota vehicles have a near monopoly on minivan (HiAce) and taxi (Corolla) transportation.

Jeeps and Land Cruisers are available for hire along with drivers who speak some English. There are tour operators in [Kabul](#) that can provide a car and guide. Petrol stations are scarce in the countryside, and fuel is expensive.

Paved roads are the exception, not the rule, and even those roads can be in poor repair. Once outside the major cities expect dirt roads (which turn to mud during rain or snow melt). The highway between Kabul and [Bagram](#) is dominated by military convoys and "jingle trucks".

Stay out of the way of military convoys! They travel fast and are heavily armed. Driving too close or approaching quickly from behind is an excellent way to be mistaken for a car bomber, and they WILL open fire if they feel threatened.



A new highway links [Kabul](#) to [Kandahar](#). The highway is in good condition but should not be considered safe due to frequent attacks by anti-government forces such as the Taliban and the poor standard of driving. The trip takes a minimum of 5 hours.

Language

[Dari](#), which is very similar to [Persian](#), is spoken by about half the population, [Pashto](#) by 35%, Turkic languages (primarily [Uzbek](#) and [Turkmen](#)) by 11%. There are also 30 minor languages such as Balochi. Dari is the historical lingua franca, but in the South and East Pashto is more common. Most people speak more than one language. You'll find a few people in Kabul who speak a little English but otherwise it isn't widely understood.

Drinking

Being an Islamic country, alcohol consumption is illegal. It is however tolerated, for non-Afghans, in western restaurants in [Kabul](#).

Accommodation

Hotels and guesthouses are available in all major cities, and while some may not meet international standards they are usually friendly and reliable.

Staying safe

Afghanistan is a volatile country and downright dangerous in the southern and eastern areas -- **non-essential travel is highly discouraged**. The Taliban has now declared abduction of foreigners to be one of its primary goals. In July 2007, twenty-three Koreans were kidnapped from a public bus in Ghazni province, south of Kabul. Two of them were murdered while the rest were set free several weeks later after controversial negotiations with the Korean government.

While the northern part of the country is generally considered to be a lot safer than the south and east, occasional incidents can still occur anywhere and a seemingly safe place can become the opposite in an instant. Several German media reporters were killed in the northern parts of Afghanistan, most likely by criminals or anti-westerners.

Landmines and other UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) remain a problem across the country, so plan to stick to well-worn paths, avoid red and white painted rocks, and do not touch or move any suspicious-looking item. According to the Afghan Red Crescent Society, approximately 600-700 people are injured or killed every year in accidents due



to landmines and UXO. This is greatly reduced from over 1,600 in 2002. While traveling in Afghanistan you are likely to see mine clearance organizations at work.

Insects and Snakes are also something to be careful of, as the mountainous country has many vicious tiny creatures such as scorpions, spiders, snakes, etc.

If, after considering the risks, you still choose to travel in Afghanistan, hiring an armed escort or traveling with an experienced guide are ways to decrease the risks. You should also check with your embassy, and be clear on what they can and cannot do for you in an emergency.

Healthcare

Afghanistan has its fair share of health issues, and it would be wise to consult a travel doctor ahead of your trip about vaccinations and health risks. Respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis and food-related illness are common, and [malaria](#) is a risk in many parts of the country.

Afghanistan is one of the dustiest countries in the world, and you should be prepared to be covered in it and breathing it for most of your stay, even in the major cities. Pollution from diesel engines can also make life unpleasant.

Flies are notoriously heinous here, likely due to poor sanitation. Winter brings some relief, but they come back full-strength when spring arrives.

Food should be approached with a discerning eye, hygiene standards can often be lacking. Hot, freshly cooked food is generally safer. Bottled water is also advised, unless you have your own purification system.

Bring any prescription medicine you may need from your home country, don't count on being able to find it locally. You may also consider carrying pain relievers and anti-diarrheas, as they'll be hard to find outside of major cities.

As is most parts of Asia, squat toilets are the norm, and toilet paper optional and sometimes scarce. Western-style toilets are seen occasionally in newer buildings and some private homes.

Etiquette

- Women in all parts of Afghanistan wear the **burqa** or **chadori**. On the other hand, many women in Kabul and Herat these days don't wear the burqa but rather put on



- The Middle Eastern style hijab, which is similar to Iranian fashion. Western women are highly encouraged to wear a head scarf (especially outside Kabul).
- Showing the bottom of the foot is considered rude.
- The farther south you go the more conservative the people are.

Dos:

- 1 Greet with the Arabic: Assalaam alaikum (Peace be upon you)
- 2 Respond to greetings with: Waalaikum assalaam (and peace also upon you)
- 3 Address others by title when possible. "Mullah" religious leader (giver of knowledge) or "Khan" (Sir). "Haji" is for only those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.
- 4 Remove footwear for prayers
- 5 Point with your whole hand rather than one finger
- 6 Use a handshake and a pat on the back when greeting male friends.
- 7 Women: embrace female friends and kiss three times on alternating cheeks.
- 8 Belch - In many areas, its an expression of appreciation for a good meal!

Do Not:

- 1 Drink alcohol or eat pork in front of Afghans
- 2 Give the "Thumbs up" or "Ok" hand gestures
- 3 Eat or drink in front of an Afghan during Ramadan
- 4 Play loud music when they are praying
- 5 Wink
- 6 Blow your nose in public
- 7 Eat with your left hand
- 8 Sit with the soles of your feet toward someone else
- 9 Ask a man of his wife/daughter/sister
- 10 Ask an Afghan their ethnic origin

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

- A In Afghanistan, there is a very different sense of time. How long it takes to accomplish a task is not as important as long as it does get accomplished. Afghans sometimes arrive "late" by others standards. When conducting business, it is essential that you meet in person and have much patience in your negotiations.
- B Regarding gifts, you should reciprocate any gifts that you receive. Much appreciated would be gifts from your hometown.
- C It would be risky to accept food or water from the locals.



- D It can also be dangerous to accept cigarettes from locals. Don't risk it.
- E Get ready to drink huge quantities of tea, usually green tea (chai sabs), in every place you will visit ...They offer it without sugar and together with sweets or candies.
- F Be very sensitive to what your host tells you, but here are a few basics. (mostly for women)
- G Never look a man in the eyes, and never attempt to touch a man you are not married to.
- H Always have your head and shoulders covered, and wear long-sleeved dresses and loose pants

COMMUNICATION

Fixed line service is available in major cities (digital in [Kabul](#)) and mobile phones in most cities. SIM cards are available and international calls to Europe/US typically cost less than \$0.5/minute. Outside of major cities your options are limited to a satellite phone.

Mobile Phones

- **Roshan** [\[14\]](#) +93 (0) 79 997 1333. The most reliable service with the widest coverage. SMS is possible to most countries. SIM cards cost \$5, local calls are 5Af/minute (10 cents/min).
- **Afghan Wireless** [\[15\]](#) Owned by the government is questionably reliable and serves fewer destinations than Roshan. SMS is available to most countries. SIM cards cost \$1.00, local calls are 4.99Af/minute billing in seconds.
- **Areeba/MTN** [\[16\]](#) +93 (0) 77 222 2777. The cheapest cell service, offers the least coverage. SIM cards cost \$3, local calls are 5.5Af/minute.
- **Etisalat** [\[17\]](#) +93 (0) 78 688 8888. A large network provider from the UAE, is the latest GSM network in Afghanistan.

Satellite Phones

- **Thuraya** [\[18\]](#) is the most reliable.