

Iran, Practicalities.

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Not a country to share its gems on a whim, difficulties with visas, a harsh climate and a sparcity of information on birding localities all conspire to leave Iran as a challenging, albeit rewarding, destination. To ease the travels of future birders, hopefully the notes below will go someway to smoothing the trip.

Visa.

Difficulties obtaining a visa are a major obstacle to visiting Iran. The process is relatively straightforward, but depending on your nationality and the current state of international relations, your visa may or may not be approved. My first attempts to obtain a visa were rejected - it was third-time lucky for me.

Applying at an embassy is the quickest way to a rejection! Far better is to use a Tehran-based tourist agency to help you - you submit your details to them and state which embassy you want to collect your visa from, they make the application to the relevant ministry and, if the application is successful, a code number is issued. You then take this code and your passport to the relevant embassy and within a few days, your visa will be issued. I can warmly recommend the Touran Zamin agency, friendly and efficient, completely trustworthy.

2012 Update: the closure of the Iranian embassy in London has not resulted in any reduction in the likelihood of a visa being granted. For UK residents, however, it does mean a visit to an Iranian embassy in a neighbouring country is now required once approval has been granted. Postal applications are not permitted due to the need to give fingerprints.

Climate.

Summer is perhaps not the best time to visit Iran! On my trip, at the very end of summer, temperatures were extremely high, reaching 40-45 C at locations along the Persian Gulf with a hyper humidity that was truly punishing. Inland, in a broad belt from Esfahan across to the central deserts, conditions were more manageable - very low levels of humidity and temperatures of 'just' 36-38 C. In the high Albroz mountains, the weather was very nice - sunny and 25 C (albeit chilly at night).

In winter, the weather on the Persian Gulf is excellent, temperatures sitting in the 20-25 C range, but lands to the north are then frequently very cold and snow occurs across large parts of the country. Temperatures of minus 10 C are common, some roads can be closed.

Consequently, all things considered, probably an early spring trip (April) would be optimal, not only benefitting from the best weather, but also catching spring migration.

Birding Localities.

As so few birders have ever visited Iran, the staples of usual pre-trip planning, i.e. the trip reports from those who

have been before you, are almost non-existent.

In days of scouring the internet and reading literature, slowly nuggets of information appeared, hints of avian richness at sites far and wide, but very few reports detailed concrete localities, almost none gave directions or maps and several included reference to site names I could not locate on maps. Regardless, an itinerary evolved, study of satellite images (google) then pinpointing likely areas that would warrant a visit and from this I drew up maps on how to get to them (usually meaning where the best habitat looked to be, which way and how many kilometres to walk, which dry river beds to follow, etc).

Considerable thanks here must go to Jerzy Dyczkowski for his 1999 trip report and account of finding Pleske's Ground Jay (the only direct reference I found for this endemic) and to Seyed Babak Musavi for his notes and valuable suggestions regarding Hormozgan Province. Finally, though not designed with the birder in mind, the Lonely Planet Guide to Iran proved invaluable, not only with practical information on transport and travel throughout the country, but for giving the best map I could find to the Alamut Valley and inspiring my trek over the high Albroz mountains via the Salambar Pass.

Hopefully this report, will go some way to addressing the lack of birding information to Iran and encourage fellow birders to visit this exciting country.

Transport & Accommodation.

Roads in Iran are generally very good to excellent, and getting better by the day - most major highways are being upgraded to two lanes. Though I hitch-hiked almost continuously (extremely easy, rarely a car would go by without stopping), virtually all localities mentioned in this report are also accessible by public transport. Intercity buses are comfortable, modern and frequent, smaller localities served by 'savaris', shared taxis that leave when full (this rarely being more than ten minutes or so). It is worth remembering that Iran is a huge country and distances are vast - road journey of 10-12 hours are commonplace, longer not unusual. Most of the bus companies also operate night services - to avoid losing too much time, it is worth either using these overnight services or utilising the extensive internal flight network, itself fairly inexpensive.

Self-drive car rental is nigh on impossible in Iran (largely due to sanctions meaning no credit cards), but it is very easy (and not very expensive) to either rent taxis as and when is needed or organise a car with driver for the whole trip. Touran Zamin can help with this, as can they in booking internal flights (again due to no credit cards, internal flights can not be booked online).

Hotels are available almost everywhere at a variety of standards - generally even at the budget end of the range, hotels have air-conditioning and usually a fridge. Lonely Planet provides full details of accommodation throughout the country.

Costs.

For the western traveller, Iran is basically a reasonably-priced destination. Though inflation was running at 25% per year, it still remains very affordable, budget hotels usually costing in the region of 12-20 euros for a double room and buses around 6-10 euros for journeys of around 400 km. Taking a private taxi from Shush to the Dez River, a journey of over 60 km, cost about 6 euros, for this he would also wait three or four hours and take me back again. Again Lonely Planet is useful here, but late 2010 prices are already about 70% higher than those quoted in Lonely Planet.

2012 Update: with the Iranian rial falling in value, Iran is becoming an ever cheaper country for the tourist. Real prices were about a third lower on my 2011/2012 winter trip as compared to the 2010 summer visit.