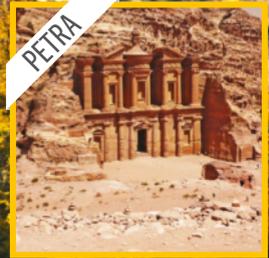


101 PLACES TO VISIT BEFORE YOU DIE



✈️
**NEUSCHWANSTEIN
CASTLE**
★ ★
Bavaria
GERMANY



**JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD'S
MOST IMPRESSIVE WONDERS**

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Neuschwanstein's mountain setting is beautiful all year round

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Book your tickets before you go, as visits are often sold out on the day. 

Best time to visit:

Mid summer to early autumn

Time zone:

UTC+1

Useful sites:

www.neuschwanstein.de/englisch/palace/index.htm
www.schloesser.bayern.de/englisch/palace/objects/neuschw.htm
en.schwangau.de/sightseeing/neuschwanstein-castle/



02 NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTLE

The passion project of King Ludwig II, Germany's fairy-tale castle will fulfil all your Disney fantasies

If you think this beautiful castle on a hill seems familiar, that's because it helped to spawn a popular culture icon. Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, Germany, is a maze of turrets, twisting stairways and stained glass, and was one of the primary inspirations for Walt Disney's castle. Unlike the Disney version, the best thing about Neuschwanstein is that it's 100 per cent real, and you're free to explore its lavish rooms and halls – just like Cinderella herself.

Neuschwanstein was built in the late 19th century as a palace for King Ludwig II of Bavaria, an unhappy man with eccentric tastes. Perched on a steep hill in the foothills of the Alps, next to a pristine mountain lake, it's easy to see why he chose this beauty spot for the location of his dream house. He spent a happy childhood in the area, as his parents built the neighbouring Hohenschwangau Castle.

Sadly, the king never got to see his castle completed, as he died during its construction. Some say it was suicide, some say murder – the

king mysteriously drowned in a lake. Shortly afterwards, Neuschwanstein was opened to the public in order to raise the money needed to complete it – a fantastic legacy for the king.

Inside the castle's white walls and ornate turrets, the stone floors and arched windows were inspired by the legendary medieval castles of lore, draped with luxurious carpets, tapestries and works of art. On your tour of the castle, you can feast your eyes on a number of spectacular rooms, each decorated in a different style – after all, this was completely the king's fantasy construction, not an austere fortress.

Your first stop will be the sumptuous Throne Room, which was inspired by the uniquely ornate Byzantine churches of Greece. Featuring a gorgeous blue domed ceiling and a mural showing Saint George slaying a dragon, there's one notable piece of furniture missing – the throne itself. It had not been made when King Ludwig died, and so the order was cancelled shortly afterwards.

At the very top of the castle is the Hall of Singers, which was intended to be a concert venue for the king to indulge his passion for music. In fact, the entire castle was an homage to Wagner. Fitted out with wood floors and ceilings, and dripping with golden paint, it is the largest room in the castle and resembles a great hall.

To get to know the king better, look into his bedroom. He only spent 11 nights in the castle during his lifetime, but this room reveals a more intimate side to the king. On its walls, you'll find the tragic tale of Tristan and Isolde – it's said that the king used operatic stories like this as an escape from his lonely reality.

Step out onto the king's balcony at the end of your visit for a breath of fresh mountain air, and plan where to visit next. You can also explore Ludwig's childhood home, Hohenschwangau Castle, cross the Marienbrücke bridge for stunning panoramic views, or alternatively take a hike around the Alpsee Lake to revel in the area's natural wonders.

For the best view of the Alhambra, go to Mirador de San Nicolás in Albaicín

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Buy your tickets online – or be prepared to queue for them overnight. ✈️

Best time to visit:

Spring and early summer

Time zone:

UTC+1

Useful sites:

tickets.alhambra-patronato.es/en/
www.alhambra.info/en/alhambra.asp
www.alhambra.org/en/



04 THE ALHAMBRA

Spain's stunning Moorish palace and its eye-catching Islamic art will transport you back in time

Known for its perfectly Instagrammable gardens, intricate geometric archways and bright-blue fountains, the Alhambra in the Andalusian city of Granada is one of Europe's finest examples of Islamic art and architecture. But the Alhambra doesn't just offer one castle – it has three.

What began life as a Roman mountain fortress would be completely transformed by the Moorish Nasrid dynasty, whose roots were in what is now Saudi Arabia. The 12th-century ruler Muhammad I of Granada saw the old Roman fortification's potential, and rebuilt it to overlook the city.

His successors continued his work and added a palace fit for a king – or a sultan. The complex design also included a marketplace, public baths, offices and workshops, essentially making it a city within a city. Decorated floor to ceiling with delicate patterns, Arabic calligraphy and white marble, the Alhambra's Nasrid Palace and its gardens were also kitted out with the latest technology, including an irrigation system for the Generalife Gardens.

But after the re-Christianisation of Spain in 1492, the new Catholic kings and queens built their own palace on the site, to overshadow the one built by the nation's former Muslim rulers. The Palace of Carlos V's classic Renaissance styling contrasts starkly with the Nasrid buildings, but somehow it works.

The old city of Granada and the Alhambra absolutely must be seen by anyone travelling in southern Spain, but to make the most of your trip you'll need to plan carefully. Be sure to buy your tickets in advance, as they only sell a few hundred tickets on the door each day – and people will queue up overnight to grab them. Your ticket specifies an entry time for the Nasrid palaces, but you are free to wander around the rest of the complex at your leisure.

Once you've made your way past the entrance gates, you'll find yourself in the Generalife Gardens, inspired by the paradise gardens of Persia. You'll discover a huge variety of colourful flowers, flowing water features and shady spots under fruit trees, and you could spend hours

here – but you'll have to tear yourself away to visit the palaces themselves.

To see how the Christian kings tried to outshine their Arab predecessors, visit the Palace of Carlos V – though it's worth noting you can only explore the inner courtyard. This is a perfect circle, reminiscent of Spain's famous bullrings.

When your time comes, cross over the threshold into the Nasrid palaces, which include the famous Court of the Lions. Look out for gorgeous Arabesque patterns in the doorways all around the palace – the delight is in the detail. Stained glass gives the palace a burst of colour when it catches the light, and if you look out, you'll see yet more colourful gardens below.

For a taste of the Alhambra's original purpose, clamber along the battlements of the Alcazaba, an Arab fort built over Roman ruins. When you reach the top, survey the Sierra Nevada mountains, the Alhambra complex and the city of Granada from your vantage point – you'll soon understand why this place has been prized by generals, kings and sultans for centuries.

07

METEORA

Make your own pilgrimage to Greece's spellbinding monasteries of Meteora

Greece is well known for its plethora of monasteries, churches and other religious sites, often built in inaccessible places such as mountaintops and rocky islets out to sea. But none of these test their visitors' devotion more than the monasteries of Meteora, a city in the sky, where six working monasteries cling to the edge of rock pillars for dear life.

Religious folk, including monks, nuns and even hermits have inhabited this remote part of Greece since the days of early Christianity, but the threat of invasion forced them to retreat up the mountain. Eventually, their buildings were constructed on teetering rock pillars, or at the edges of sheer cliffs, in order to ensure maximum inaccessibility.

At its height of popularity, 24 religious sites operated in the Meteora mountains, but today only six remain. All six are open to the public, at the bargain price of just three Euros each. Inside, you can enjoy ancient frescoes that still shimmer in the light, painstakingly painted chapels, well-kept gardens, and even some ingenious technology to help make the monks' lives on the rocks a little easier.

The monasteries are in a beautiful setting, surrounded by dramatic mountains, a vast plateau, and woodlands filled with nature. It's a popular spot for hiking, and many take the tree-lined path from the valley floor up to the monasteries, finding it a rewarding experience.

But, if you don't fancy clambering uphill in the searing Greek sunshine, there is a road that takes you to the entrance of all the open monasteries. Once you get there, be prepared to ascend (and descend) hundreds of steps, cross bridges over steep drops, or go through dark and narrow caves to get into the sanctuary of the complex.

Each monastery has different opening hours, and some are closed on certain days, so before you go it's essential to check this information and plan your route accordingly.

Most visitors start with Great Meteoron, the largest and most famous monastery. As well as the standard chapel, garden, museum and courtyard, you can step inside the monastery kitchen, where monks prepared their food and wine. A little deeper into the complex you'll find something far creepier – an ossuary, filled with skulls and bones of monks who once lived and died in Great Meteoron.

A little way downhill is Varlaam Monastery, with its beautiful architecture and stunning viewpoints, including a shaded pavilion that looks over the edge of the mountain.

Then, if you're a film buff, it's certainly worth the difficult trek to Agia Triada, which was used



If you go to Meteora, you're guaranteed a great view, whichever monastery you're exploring

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Men and women must cover everything, except their heads and forearms.

Best time to visit:

Late spring to early autumn

Time zone:

UTC+2

Useful sites:

www.visitmeteora.travel/
www.meteora-greece.com/
www.discovergreece.com/en/mainland/thessaly-sporades/meteora



as the villain's headquarters in the Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*.

Next, you can visit the two convents, Rousanou and Agios Stefanos – the latter of which has been recently restored to its former glory. End your day at the bottom of the valley with Nikolaos Anapafsas, one of the hardest to reach but from its courtyard you can see the eerie remains of

abandoned monasteries precariously perched on surrounding rocks.

At the end of your long day, you'll want to sit down, and there's no better way to relax than watching the sun go down over the monasteries. Along the road, there are a number of viewpoints you can catch this spectacular sundown – though be careful not to fall off the edge.

The best views of the Acropolis can be found in rooftop bars and restaurants in the Thissio, Monastiraki or Plaka neighbourhoods

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Buy the combination ticket so you can see other ancient sites, too.

Best time to visit:
Spring and summer (to avoid potential rain)

Time zone:
UTC+1

Useful sites:

www.visitgreece.gr/en/culture/archaeological_sites/the_acropolis
www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en
www.lonelyplanet.com/greece/athens/attractions/acropolis/a/poi-sig/1153952/359421



19 ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS

Greece's modern city of Athens still beats around its ancient heart, as all roads lead to the Acropolis

It was the place where Athenians came to worship their city's goddess, Athena. It was also a thriving hub for trade, the military and even democracy. The Acropolis of Athens is so much more than the breathtaking Parthenon, but it's a good place to start. Built in the 5th century BCE, the Parthenon temple once contained a gigantic statue of Athena herself, where worshippers would come to lay gifts and sacrifices at her feet. The temple has decayed significantly since then, and it has been hit by a few Ottoman and Venetian cannonballs, but what remains is as stunning now as it was back then.

To get to this world-famous landmark, take the metro to Akropoli station. Inside the station, there are replicas of the Parthenon Marbles, and even some archaeological finds to admire. Get out and walk towards the southern entrance to the Acropolis, as opposed to the main entrance, as the queues are considerably shorter there. It's also the best place to start – on your way up to the top of the hill, you'll pass by extensive

remains of ancient Athens, where people really lived. On the way, there's the Theatre of Dionysus, a stoa, and the awesome Odeon of Herodes Atticus, which is still in use as an arts venue.

When you have ascended the steps and passed under the imposing propylaea, you'll be greeted with a view of the iconic Parthenon – the moment you've been waiting for. But before you head straight over there, it's worth having a peek at the Athena Nike temple, which is remarkably well preserved for its age. Explore the edges of the great Parthenon and marvel at the ancient genius who built it, and listen to the wind rushing through the pillars.

Take a moment to turn away from the ancient stuff, and look into the modern-day city. The Acropolis is one of the highest points for miles around, so you should be able to see as far as the port of Piraeus, nearly ten kilometres (six miles) away. You can also spot the Greek Parliament, the Temple of Olympian Zeus and more ancient monuments close by. Notice how all the city's

main streets lead towards you – despite being 2,500 years old, this monument is still at the centre of Athenian life.

Before you descend the hill to return to the modern, be sure to admire the Erechtheion, which features intricate and impressive pillars of Greek women. One of these was taken by Lord Elgin to decorate his home in Scotland, and it can now be seen in the British Museum.

To make the most of your Acropolis experience, the new Acropolis Museum, which was opened in 2009, is a must. Built to house every single artefact found on the hill and surrounding area, you'll find many archaeological wonders, such as colourful statues and pottery. Modern technology helps you to imagine what the Acropolis was once like in its heyday. However, the museum remains at the centre of a controversy concerning the return of the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles from Britain to Greece, with the Greek government hoping this modern venue will be a suitable home for their lost treasures.

23 TBILISI

This medieval city in the heart of the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia is ready for the future

Tbilisi, a city whose fiery spirit was once repressed by its Soviet occupiers, is blooming. Along the Kura (Mtkvari) River, fancy hotels, lively nightclubs and world-class restaurants attract locals and tourists alike. Get a feel for Georgia's unique culture and beautiful language as you walk its streets, and listen to the Georgian music coming out of each bar.

This culture-rich city is now even easier to get to, with cheap inbound flights recently introduced from a number of European countries. Georgia is a fascinating country, a wild place that until a few decades ago, the world knew little about – and Tbilisi is the perfect place to start your tour.

The old town is a colourful and charming neighbourhood, small enough to explore by foot, but large enough to get serendipitously lost in. Its 19th-century wooden mansions – many featuring elaborate balconies for their owners to people-watch from – are all painted in an array of colours. They might look a little on the 'distressed' side, but trust us, it's part of their charm.

In fact, it almost looks like something out of a Disney film – and nowhere is this more apparent than at the Clock Tower. This leaning, higgledy-piggledy tower and its adjacent puppet theatre were built in 2010 by Rezo Gabriadze. Every hour, an angel comes out of the clock to ring the bell, and twice a day you can catch a show in the puppet theatre – we promise it's better than Punch and Judy.

Head out of the Old Town to Rike Park and then look up to the sky. Directly above you, you'll find the imposing Narikala fortress, which has protected the city and the Kura (Mtkvari) River valley since the 4th century. Inside its battlements, you can look around a newly restored Eastern Orthodox Church, complete with lavish dome paintings. If you're feeling a touch adventurous, you can walk to the top – but it's much more fun to take the cable car from Rike Park, which was installed in 2012.

The cable car is just one example of Tbilisi's extensive efforts to modernise and keep pace with other cities in Europe. In another corner of Rike Park, you can find the uber-modern Peace Bridge across the Kura (Mtkvari). Built by the joint efforts of Georgian, French and Italian firms, the bridge symbolises the new Georgia.

But let's not forget that old-fashioned Georgia has its own merits, including the hot sulphur baths – perfect for soaking in at the end of the day. With a constant water temperature of 38 to 40 degrees Celsius (100.4 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit), it's pretty balmy in there – and also a little bit smelly. Don't let that put you off, though. The locals claim the warm, mineral-

packed waters will cure a range of ills, from skin conditions to stress to insomnia.

Tbilisi's unique fusion of the old and the new works in perfect harmony with the relaxed

Georgian lifestyle. But don't just take our word for it, go and experience it for yourself – this mountainous little country may just surprise and enchant you.

Dusk view of Narikala fortress, the Kura (Mtkvari) River and the old town in Tbilisi



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Taxis can try to charge extortionate rates, but public transport is efficient, safe and cheap.

Best time to visit:

May (so you can enjoy the annual Flower Festival)

Time zone:

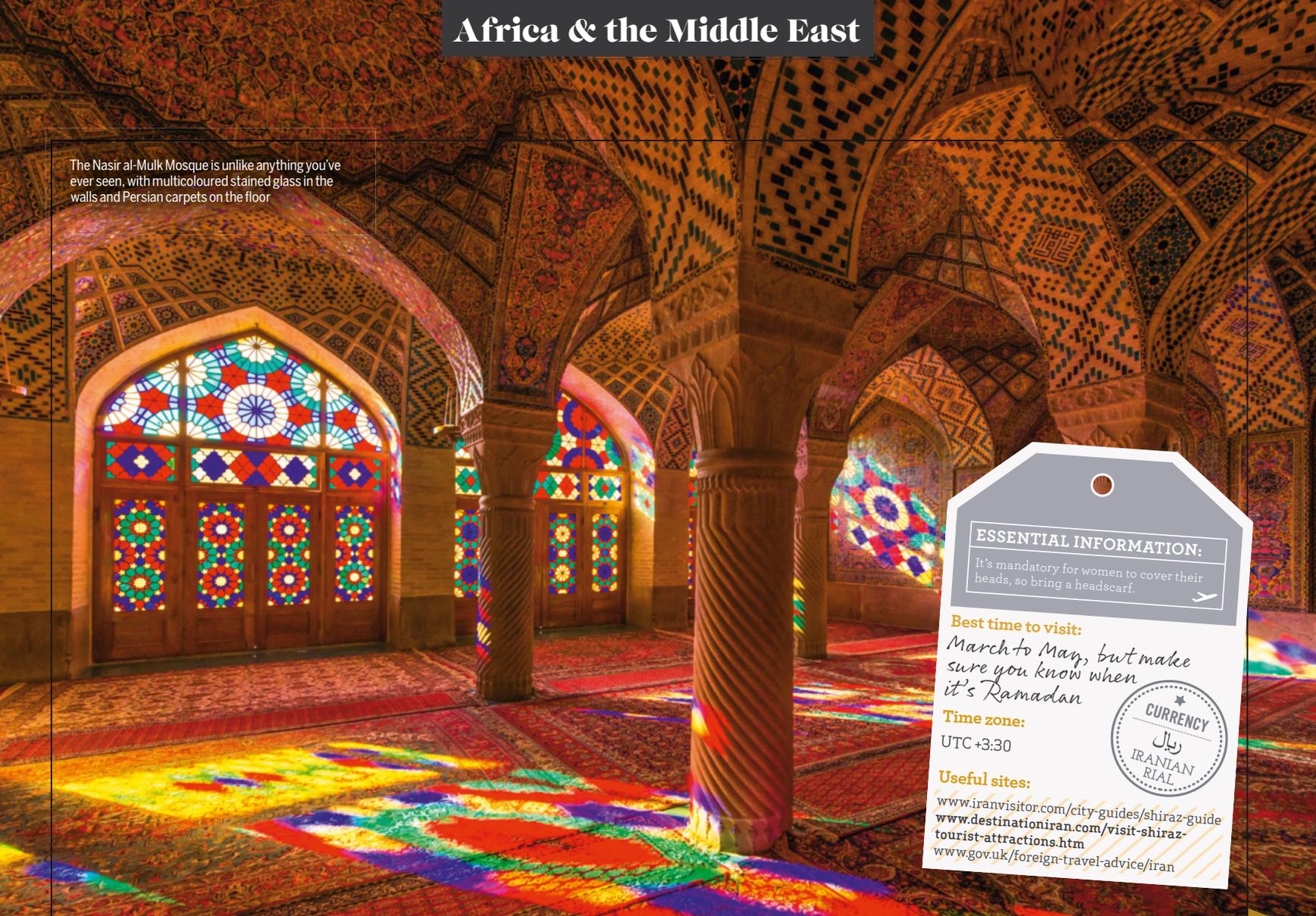
UTC+4

Useful sites:

www.visitgeorgia.ge/about-georgia/tbilisi/
www.georgia.travel/
www.lonelyplanet.com/georgia/tbilisi



The Nasir al-Mulk Mosque is unlike anything you've ever seen, with multicoloured stained glass in the walls and Persian carpets on the floor



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It's mandatory for women to cover their heads, so bring a headscarf.

Best time to visit:

March to May, but make sure you know when it's Ramadan

Time zone:

UTC +3:30

Useful sites:

www.iranvisitor.com/city-guides/shiraz-guide
www.destinationiran.com/visit-shiraz-tourist-attractions.htm
www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iran



31 SHIRAZ

You may know it as a red wine, but Iran's city of Shiraz is richer than any glass under the sun

Iran might not feature high up on your travel bucket list, but it really should. This beautiful country has gained an unfair reputation since the outbreak of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – a dangerous and lawless place, where women are oppressed, and everything that was once worthwhile reduced to dust. But this couldn't be further from the truth. While the Iranian government is notoriously theocratic, Iran has been a stable place in recent years, and is now mostly safe for tourists to visit.

Iran has some of the oldest historical landmarks in the world, and the city of Shiraz is right at the heart of it all. Even if you think you're accustomed to the stunning beauty of Islamic art and architecture, wait until you come to Shiraz; it will still wow you. If you look for it, you'll find beauty around every corner.

Perhaps the most iconic image from Shiraz is the rainbow glass found in the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque. Standing by its glorious stained windows, with the light shining through, is just like being inside a jewellery box. Built in the

late 19th century by the decadent Qajar ruling dynasty, the decoration certainly befits its creators' lavish tastes.

Stroll down the road a little bit to get a glimpse of another gleaming treasure – the Shah Chéragh, a tomb of two important figures in Shia Islam. It's said the two brothers took refuge in the city during a persecution of Shias, and this funerary monument to them was built in the 12th century. Inside the blue dome, an emerald chamber filled with tiny mirrors glitters when it catches the light – and we promise it's one of the most jaw-dropping sights to be found in the entire Islamic world.

Shiraz is also the nearest major city to the ancient Persian site of Persepolis, built by Darius I and Xerxes the Great. Definitely one of the most impressive sights of the ancient empire, Persepolis gives you a taste of the might of the ancient Persian Empire, which once spanned from Greece to Pakistan.

In addition to its historic and religious sites, Shiraz was an artistic city, known for its poets

and landscape artists. The Tomb of Hafez was built to commemorate one of Persia's most famous poets, and inside the garden and its wonderfully adorned pavilions, locals congregate to chat and watch the sun go down over their stunning city.

If you're looking for your own Garden of Eden, Shiraz may be the closest you ever get to it. Known as Iran's garden city, the streets wind their way around bountiful green spaces and parks. Built by the fabulously wealthy shahs and merchants, many of these slices of paradise surround the former summer houses of the rich and famous.

The Qavam House is a great example of this. In its luxurious and cool interior, you'll see rooms intricately tiled from floor to ceiling, decorative glass all around, and many comfortable chairs that are perfect for taking a break from the heat. Step outside into its Eram Garden, and dip your feet into the perfectly symmetrical fountains bubbling with turquoise water – it's hard to believe you're in Iran, isn't it?

If you do your research, you might be lucky enough to watch a huge Sikh celebration

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Remove your shoes and wash your feet in the pools as you enter the temple.

Best time to visit:

April, for Vaisakhi, the holiest Sikh festival

Time zone:

UTC+5:30

Useful sites:

www.goldentempleamritsar.org
www.indianholiday.com/best-of-india/monuments/golden-temple.html
sacredsites.com/asia/india/golden_temple_amritsar.html



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GOLDEN TEMPLE

Sikhism's holiest shrine, in India, welcomes visitors from all walks of life into its gilded archways

The glimmering Golden Temple in the Indian city of Amritsar stands on a platform, just above a pool of holy water, which reflects its fantastic image when still and calm. Millions of Sikhs have been visiting this site for centuries, as it is their holiest Gurdwara – a place for pilgrimage and religious reflection. But the famous Golden Temple itself is only one small part of a massive complex known as the Sri Harmandir Sahib – and it's well worth exploring in its entirety.

Sri Harmandir Sahib has seen wars, the establishment of empires and even the Partition of India. The temple has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times – a testament to how important the place is for Sikhs. It took its current form in the 19th century, when the Maharaja Ranjit Singh rebuilt the temple after founding the Sikh Empire. In 1830, he covered the central shrine in gold foil, giving it its iconic look.

Since that time, it has been at the heart of conflict between Sikhs and other religious groups,

and as recently as the 1980s it was heavily damaged by the Indian Army (sent in by Indira Gandhi). But now, the Gurdwara is once again a place of peace and quiet within the lively city of Amritsar. Following one of Sikhism's major doctrines, the temple welcomes people from all faiths, ethnicities and classes.

Within its walls, you need to make sure that you cover your head and dress respectfully. The temple offers items for you to cover up with, but if you want to take something home with you, the market stalls outside its gates sell head coverings and shawls for a relatively low price.

Orange is a religiously significant colour here, so that is one of the most common colours you will see people wearing.

When you pass through the entrance gate, you'll be greeted right away with the magnificent site of the Golden Temple. Before you head in that direction, though, a walk around the pool is a good idea – you can see some of the other buildings that make up the complex, such as the

Akal Takht, where the central authority of modern Sikhism resides.

In the pool, you'll see men, women and children washing, as Sikhs believe this water has restorative powers. By the steps going down into the water, you might see devotees meditating. Then, as you make your way towards the Golden Temple itself, there will be a long line of people queuing to get in. The sanctum contains the original Sikh scripture, which is on display so people can worship by it. The temple is small and crowded inside, but absolutely stunning, with its ceiling covered in gold foil and precious stones.

At the end of your visit, stop by the community kitchen. In most Sikh temples, they serve a humble vegetarian meal free of charge, to any and all who cross the threshold. The Harmandir Sahib is no different, and serves thousands of people every day. It's nothing fancy – the principle is that everyone eats as equals – but it is tasty, and a good way to immerse yourself in Sikh traditions.

The Registan – meaning ‘sandy place’ – is the centre of Samarkand’s historic district

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
Be sure to research the Uzbek visa process thoroughly – it can be complicated. ✈️

Best time to visit:
Spring or autumn, to avoid the heat

Time zone:
UTC+5

Useful sites:
www.visituzbekistan.travel/sightseeing/samarkand/
www.lonelyplanet.com/uzbekistan/central-uzbekistan/samarkand
www.responsibletravel.com/holidays/uzbekistan/travel-guide

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UZBEKISTAN
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SAMARKAND

Timur’s regal city is a stunning turquoise gem, deep in the deserts of Uzbekistan

Samarkand’s historic buildings are as beautiful as the Indian fabrics and Chinese silks that once flurried through there, on their long journey across the Silk Road. This city in Uzbekistan and in the middle of the barren steppes and deserts of Central Asia, was built on the back of Silk Road trading wealth – but it took the vision of one terrible emperor to turn it into the cultural jewel it is today.

Timur (the real-life inspiration for Marlowe’s Tamburlaine) was a ruthless warlord from the Middle Ages, who had absolutely no problem slaughtering anyone unlucky enough to be in his way. But he was also a man with lofty aspirations, and dreamed of turning the city of Samarkand into a new centre for Islamic learning and culture. By forcing great intellectuals and craftspeople to live in the city, he succeeded – travellers who came to Timur’s Samarkand marvelled at how it exceeded anything they had ever seen before.

Now you can, too. Uzbekistan was once a place shrouded in mystery, so far behind the Iron Curtain that it was almost impenetrable. But

since the dissolution of the USSR and the death of its harsh former president, Islam Karimov, the country is now able to slowly reveal its treasures to the world.

And what treasures they are. The centrepiece of Samarkand is the mighty Registan – meaning ‘Sandy Place’ – a public square surrounded by three stunning madrassas (Islamic schools/universities). Beneath the blue domes, golden ceilings and perfect patterned tiles, great men from all across the vast Timurid Empire came to study the *Quran*, as well as mathematics, literature, poetry and art. Explore them for yourself and come back when night falls, so you can see all their colours enhanced by an incredible light show.

But the terrifying Timur is never too far away. The Gur-e-Amir (Tomb of the King) is his final resting place, and it’s said he placed a curse upon all those who dared to enter it. In the 1700s, a Persian warlord broke the slab of green jade that marked Timur’s crypt when he tried to steal it. After that, he seemingly had an awful run of

bad luck, with his son becoming gravely ill. The warlord returned the stone to Samarkand and apparently his son recovered. The stone still bears the cracks from this attempted robbery, but don’t worry – you shouldn’t be affected by the curse yourself, if you simply wish to stand in awe of this brutal emperor and his surprisingly beautiful tomb.

As well as the historic sights, any visitor to Samarkand should seek out an experience with Uzbekistan’s unique culture. Look around a carpet factory and see highly skilled women at work, creating magnificent items with just their hands. Or sample some local food in one of Samarkand’s many Uzbek restaurants – but be warned, it’s not exactly suitable for vegetarians.

One of the best things about Samarkand right now is that it remains relatively undiscovered by tourists, but in order to marvel at this hidden gem all by yourself, you’ll have to act quickly – a new high-speed rail network is making it much easier for foreign visitors to travel to it. So what are you waiting for?

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Apply for your Pakistani visa up to two months in advance.

Best time to visit:

*October to December
(weather will be ideal
for sightseeing)*

Time zone:

UTC+5

Useful sites:

[www.pakistantoursguide.com/
badshahi-mosque.html](http://www.pakistantoursguide.com/badshahi-mosque.html)
[https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/
1277/](https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1277/)
[https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/
pakistan](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan)



If you're looking for a Mughal masterpiece that's untapped by throngs of tourists, look no further

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BADSHAHI MOSQUE

On the edge of Lahore's thriving Walled City, you'll find the last great Mughal construction project

Lahore has long been considered the cultural capital of Punjab, the home of Mughal emperors, Sikh rulers and, later on, British colonisers. Now Pakistan's second city and historic hub, Lahore retains much of its grandeur, and the Badshahi (Emperor's) Mosque presides over it all. One of the world's biggest mosques, it's built from red sandstone and features four minarets that tower over the old city, three white marble onion domes, plus a vast square marking the entrance. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb built the place in the 1670s, in order to commemorate his military victories over a Hindu king further south. His project was strongly influenced by the Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi, built by his predecessor Shah Jahan – the man behind the world famous Taj Mahal.

After various invasions of Lahore, the mosque was used as an army garrison – first by the Sikhs, then by the British – yet it still fell into disrepair. But the mosque has been fully restored in the past 100 years, and it's become one of Pakistan's most prominent symbols.

While it's often overshadowed by its more tourist-friendly neighbour, India, there are plenty of reasons to visit Pakistan. Recently voted the best 'unspoilt' place for backpackers to visit by a number of prolific travel outlets, tourists are beginning to recognise the latent potential in this South Asian nation. Lahore is a fantastic starting point for your trip, as it is one of the safest areas in the region, and many of its residents welcome foreign tourists with open arms.

When you cross the Badshahi Mosque's threshold, you'll pass through a grand entrance gate, heavily influenced by Persian architecture. Walking through the courtyard (which can apparently hold up to 100,000 faithful), you'll notice it is bustling with Pakistani locals and domestic tourists. You might even find that some of the more curious local children ask to take selfies with you!

Proceed to the portico, where you can admire intricately decorated white marble – it's said to be some of the finest in the world. It's carved with endlessly climbing flowers, many of which

are painted vividly in pink, green, red and orange. Take a note of the gilded chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, too. Everything is perfectly symmetrical – a hallmark of Mughal design.

The prayer hall can allegedly accommodate tens of thousands of worshippers, but is normally only accessible to male worshippers. It's particularly busy on Friday lunchtimes, as that's the time for jummah (Friday prayers).

If you can't get enough Mughal architecture, you're in luck. In the Hazuri Bagh garden – a place where the emperor would watch his army parade around – is an ornate pavilion, bright blue fountains, and plenty of green, grassy spaces. You'll also find the tomb of poet Allama Iqbal, one of Pakistan's most definitive writers.

For the best view of the mosque, get a rooftop table in Lahore's famous 'food street' and enjoy a hearty Pakistani meal while watching the sun go down over the domes and minarets. The mosque, along with the neighbouring Lahore Fort, is beautifully lit up at night, and makes for a truly stunning evening vista.

100 Tahiti

One of the largest islands in French Polynesia, it's hardly surprising that this is home to the nation's capital of Pape'ete. With a permanent population of more than 150,000 people, Tahiti is buzzing with life and culture. Its economy is not purely based on tourism, so you will see ordinary Tahitians living and working, and can really immerse yourself in authentic local life. Check out the colourful market in Pape'ete, and grab yourself some fresh produce.

The island is rich in history, and prominent characters from its past include Captain Cook, the mutineers from the ship *Bounty*, and Queen Pomare IV, who ruled over the island for 50 years. You can pour over artefacts relating to Tahitian history at the island's museum, which is dedicated to preserving Polynesian culture.

Or, you can continue to enjoy the stunning beaches and landscapes – Tahiti is famous for its unique black-sand beaches. The possibilities are endless.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
There's no public transport, so hire a car or bike.

Best time to visit:
November or April (to get good weather without the crowds)

Time zone:
Various

Useful sites:
tahititourisme.uk/en-gb
www.boraboraislandguide.com
www.tahiti.com

CURRENCY:
FRENCH PACIFIC FRANC

FRENCH POLY

Thousands of miles away from the nearest land, French Polynesia is the perfect Pacific retreat

Picture paradise – you know what it looks like. Quiet, white-sand beaches with coconut palms lazily draping over the sands, their leaves pointing towards crystal-clear, turquoise waters. It might be a cliché, but you know you'd go there in a heartbeat.

To reach magical places like this, many holidaymakers head for Hawaii, the Caribbean, or even the islands of South East Asia. Unsurprisingly, not many people think of France – but their overseas territory of French Polynesia is one of the most stunning places on Earth. Home to six archipelagos, including the islands of Bora Bora, Tahiti and the relatively unspoilt Marquesas Islands, you'll find beauty everywhere you look. Island-hopping throughout French Polynesia is something every traveller should try out on an adventure across the Pacific.

Originally colonised by great Polynesian explorers, it's thought that these islands were some of the last places on the planet to be

settled by humans. When Polynesian settlers came to the area, they built highly advanced and interconnected societies on the islands. These survived for more than a thousand years, and when Spanish, French, Portuguese and British sailors came through the area, they took note of what they found. But that didn't stop Europeans from trying to enforce Christianity on the population, and as a result conflict between the Europeans and native Polynesians broke out.

French missionaries were particularly prevalent in the area, and in one skirmish in 1838, the French government sent a warship to protect its citizens. This was the start of a long and protracted war between the two peoples, with France ultimately winning out and officially taking over the area in 1889.

Although French Polynesia's faraway nature is certainly a large part of its charm, it does mean that it will take you a fair amount of time (and money) to get there. From Europe, the most

common routes go via Los Angeles, and will take more than 24 hours in travel time. You'll fly into Pape'ete, on Tahiti, as it is the only international airport in the country. Make sure you do your research to see if you can find cheaper deals flying via anywhere else, such as New Zealand.

With a wealth of islands to explore, you'll want to plan your trip carefully, so you can make the most of all the area has to offer. The most easily accessible islands from outside are the Society Islands, and they're also the ones that cater best to travellers, as the major destinations of Tahiti and Bora Bora form part of this group.

But even beyond those two treasures, the Society Islands are a real jewel. Most of the islands here have small airports, making island-hopping quick and simple, but you can look into doing it the old fashioned way and take ferry boats between them. From Tahiti, Mo'orea is the easiest island to reach by boat, with journeys taking between half an hour to an hour. You'll

French Polynesia has hundreds of islands and atolls, many of which feature awesome scenery and incredible snorkelling

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Bora Bora

It's been in countless movies, and graced many a computer screensaver, so we're sure you've seen it before. Bora Bora is the iconic mountain island, surrounded by a gorgeous lagoon and bordered by a fantastic reef.

Known for its luxury hotels, Bora Bora is definitely one of the most expensive islands to visit, but it's perfect for honeymooners looking to splash out on the trip of a lifetime. There's a plethora of accommodation options, but the most iconic are the over-water bungalows, which start from around £500/\$650 per night if you're looking at one of the major international chains.

As well as being romantic, Bora Bora is an extremely fun place to be, so get out there and enjoy some snorkelling and scuba diving in the lagoon. Alternatively, pump up your adrenaline by trying out something a little more exhilarating, such as water sports, or hiring a speedboat – which you can drive around all by yourself.

used as a nuclear testing ground for French atomic weapons. Although their use has been banned since the end of the Cold War, the residents complain about the impact fallout is still having. But if you're drawn to adventure, the Gambier's main island of Mangareva might appeal – you can fly there from Tahiti, but other international visitors would be a rare sight indeed on the island.

Known around the world for their beautiful beaches and friendly locals, French Polynesia rightly earns its spot on your (probably very long) list of places to go. And if you give it a chance, we're sure it will win your heart, too.

NESTIA

still find those trademark Tahitian bungalows sitting above shallow, blue lagoons there, but head inland a little to explore the striking green mountains that poke up against the skyline.

If being surrounded by nature is your idea of heaven, go to the little island of Huahine. As well as abundant fruit plants, such as watermelon, breadfruit, coconut, banana and even vanilla, you'll find beautiful white tiaré flowers growing wild and free. The wildlife here is also second to none – if you want a chance to see a rainbow of fish and corals, put your snorkel mask on and dive into the lagoon.

The Marquesas Islands also have a wide variety of things to see and do, but you'll have to be quite intrepid to go there. 3,000 miles away from

the nearest land mass – Mexico – it's quite the unspoilt paradise. These volcanic islands feature some of the most spectacular scenery in the entire world, including the Vaipo waterfall on Nuku Hiva, with a sheer 350-metre (1,148-foot) drop – making it one of the tallest waterfalls in the world. It's also home to one of the richest cultures in the entire area, so if you're keen to learn more about this ancient civilisation, be sure to chat to one of the locals. Ask them about traditional Polynesian dances – it's so much more than hula skirts and lei garlands.

The other island groups are far less accessible, and their tourism potential hasn't been seriously delved into yet. The Gambier Islands, despite their appearance of perfect peace, were once

Island hopping is something every traveller should try out