

Squiz the World goes to... Iran

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're heading to a country that has been called Persia, that once had lions roaming its plains, that gave the world some of its most famous poetry... and that right now is at the centre of rising tensions between powerful nations.

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Iran.

JUST THE FACTS

"Iran sits in Western Asia, right at a crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of Europe. It borders countries like Iraq, Türkiye and Afghanistan, and it has coastlines along both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. That location has made it strategically important for thousands of years.

The country is big. Iran covers about 1.65 million square kilometres, making it the seventeenth-largest country in the world and the second largest in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia.

It also sits beside one of the most important waterways on Earth: the Strait of Hormuz. This narrow passage connects the Persian Gulf to the open ocean, and about one-fifth of the world's oil supply travels through it by ship."

"Iran has a population of close to 90 million people, and it is a relatively young country. Nearly sixty percent of Iranians are under the age of 39.

Most people speak Persian, also known as Farsi. It's an Indo-European language, which means it is actually more closely related to languages like English than to Arabic, even though it uses a similar script.

The capital city is Tehran. It has been the capital since 1795, though the region itself has been inhabited for more than six thousand years. Today Tehran is a vast, busy city backed by the snowy peaks of the Alborz Mountains."

"Iran's landscape is dramatic, with deserts, high mountain ranges and fertile valleys. That variety of habitats means Iran has some fascinating wildlife too. One of the most famous animals found there today is the Asiatic cheetah, a critically endangered big cat that now survives almost entirely in Iran's deserts.

In the mountains you might find the Persian leopard, one of the largest leopard subspecies in the world, along with wild goats, gazelles and even striped hyenas.

And remember those lions we mentioned earlier? Long ago, a type of lion known as the Asiatic or Persian lion roamed parts of Iran. They disappeared in the early 20th century after years of hunting and habitat loss, and the last confirmed lions in Iran were seen in the mid-1900s."

"Iran is officially known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has an elected President and Parliament, but above them sits a religious authority called the Supreme Leader. Until recent events, that role was held by Ali Khamenei, who had been Supreme Leader since 1989.

This system, where religious leadership holds ultimate political authority, is known as a theocracy. Iran today is also predominantly Shia Muslim, a branch of Islam followed by most of the population.

With tensions in the region escalating between Iran, Israel and the United States, understanding how this system works helps explain why what happens in Tehran can ripple far beyond its borders."

To understand how we got here, we need to do some...

TIME TRAVEL

"Long before it was called Iran, this land was known as Persia.

Around 2,500 years ago the Achaemenid Empire (uh-KEE-muh-nid) rose under Cyrus the Great, creating one of the largest empires the world had ever seen. Its capital at Persepolis was filled with grand stone carvings, towering columns and relief sculptures showing people from many different cultures bringing gifts to the Persian king.

Persia was later conquered by Alexander the Great, ruled by Parthians and Sasanians (suh-SAY-nee-unz), and eventually became part of the Islamic world in the seventh century.

In the 1500s, the Safavid (SAF-uh-vid) dynasty made Shia Islam the official religion of Persia. That decision still shapes Iran's religious identity today."

"In the twentieth century, Iran modernised under Reza Shah Pahlavi and later his son. But in 1979, after protests and unrest, the monarchy was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran became an Islamic Republic, blending elected government with powerful religious oversight.

Since then, Iran has had a complicated relationship with the West, particularly the United States, and has been involved in regional conflicts."

Today's tensions are not sudden. They sit on top of layers of history, belief and politics that stretch back decades, even centuries.

After all that history, let's see what life is like for kids growing up there today, because it's...

TIME FOR SCHOOL

"In Iran, the school year usually begins in late September and runs through to June, following the Solar Hijri calendar.

The school week runs from Sunday to Thursday, because Friday is the main weekend day.

School days often begin around 7:30 in the morning and finish in the early afternoon. Boys and girls usually attend separate schools after the early years, and students wear school uniforms. Girls wear a long coat-like garment called a manteau along with a headscarf in public schools. That reflects Iran's national dress laws, which say women and girls must cover their hair and dress modestly in public places."

"Education levels in Iran are high. Literacy among young people aged 15 to 24 is around ninety-nine percent, meaning almost every young person can read and write.

Many students go on to university, and Iran produces large numbers of science and engineering graduates. Students preparing for university must sit a highly competitive entrance exam known as the Konkur (Kon-Koor), which plays a big role in shaping their futures.

Subjects at school include maths, science, Persian literature, religious studies, and Arabic. The strict government banned the teaching of English in public primary schools in 2018. It is still taught in high schools but the government encourages the teaching of other languages such as Russian or Chinese instead."

Despite internet restrictions and filtered platforms, Iranian young people are highly tech-savvy and connected to the wider world, often finding creative ways to explore global culture online. And culture, in Iran, is a very big deal.

LET'S GET CULTURAL

"Iran has produced some of the world's most celebrated poetry. Writers like Hafez, Saadi and Rumi are quoted in everyday conversation, and many families keep books of their poetry at home.

Persian carpets are another famous cultural symbol. Each carpet can take months or even years to weave and often contains intricate patterns and symbols passed down through generations... think, the magic carpet in Aladdin"

"At the same time, modern youth culture is lively and expressive. Music scenes, art collectives and online communities show that young Iranians, like young people everywhere, are exploring identity, creativity and change.

While culture operates within religious guidelines set by the state, artists often use metaphor and symbolism to explore big ideas."

"Through invasions, revolutions and political shifts, one thing has remained remarkably steady: Persian identity.

The language endured Greek conquest. Poetry survived Mongol invasion. Art adapted to religious change.

The people of Iran have lived through turbulence before."

And that, my friends, brings us to...

DINNER TIME

"Iranian food is full of fragrance and colour, and one ingredient shines brighter than most: saffron.

Sometimes called red gold, saffron threads are grown widely in Iran and are a source of national pride.

A typical dinner might include rice steamed until fluffy and then topped with saffron-infused grains that glow golden. There could be kebabs grilled over charcoal, slow-cooked stews called khoresh, fresh herbs, yoghurt dips and flatbread."

"One prized element of a rice dish is tahdig (tah-DEEG), the crispy golden crust that forms at the bottom of the pot. It is so loved that family members sometimes compete for the crunchiest piece.

Food in Iran is about more than eating. It is about hospitality. Guests are welcomed warmly, and meals are shared slowly, often accompanied by tea and conversation."

"Festivals like Nowruz (NO-rooz), the Persian New Year celebrated at the spring equinox when the days start to get longer, bring special dishes and traditions that connect modern families to ancient customs.

And that deep connection between past and present runs throughout Iranian life."

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

Before it was called Iran, what name was commonly used for the country for hundreds of years? Persia

True or false: In Iran, the school week runs from Monday to Friday. False. It's Sunday to Thursday.

And what is the name of the golden spice that is a symbol of Iranian cuisine? Saffron

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Iran.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.