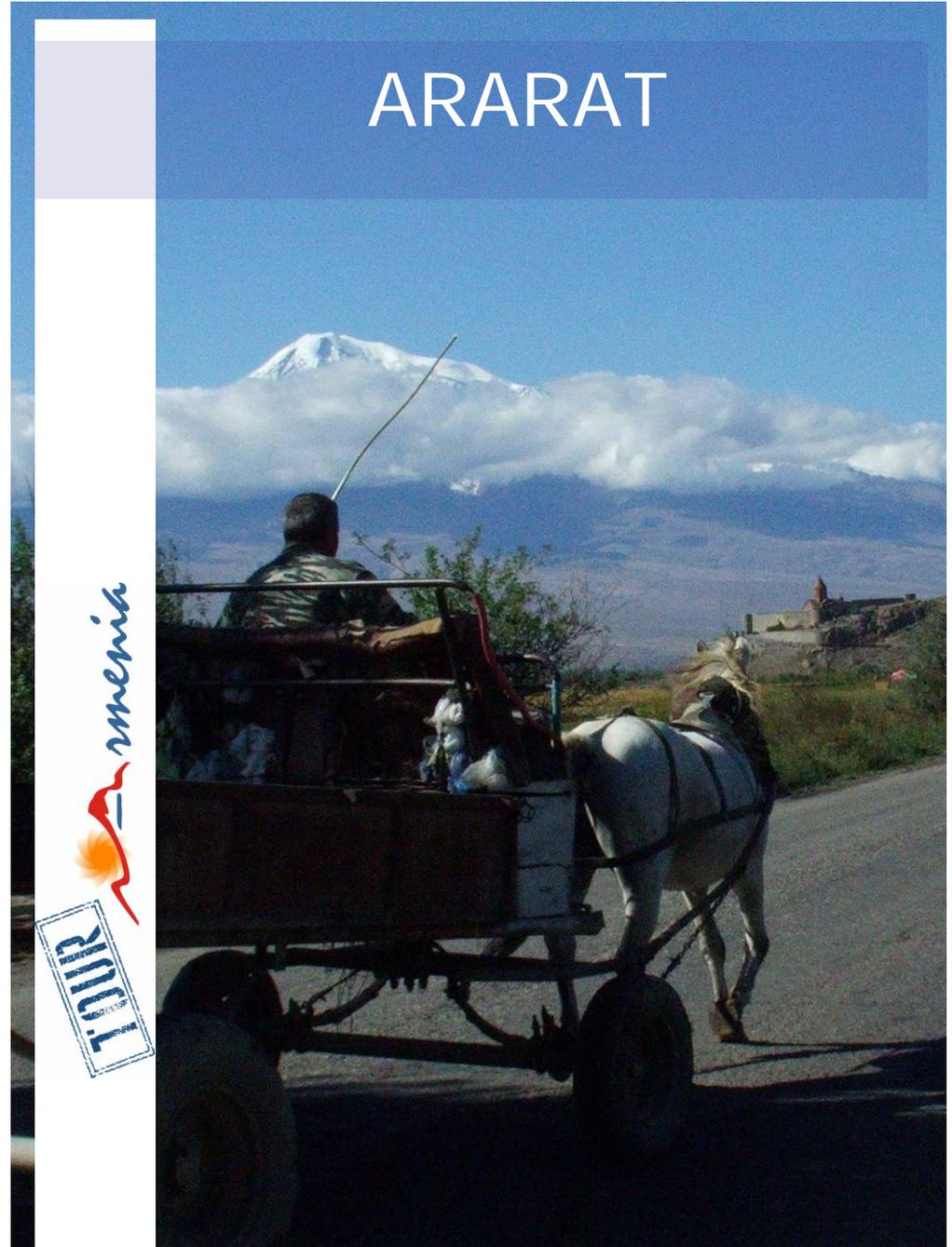


NOTES:

ARARAT



TOUR *Armenia*

ARARAT REGION MAP [▲](#)

MAP

ARARAT marz Արարատ մարզ

By [Rick Ney](#)

Maps by [Rafael Torossian](#)

Edited by [Bella Karapetian](#)

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Note about pronunciation: I transcribe words into English using local dialect, substituting "i" for "y" (Sarigugh instead of Sarygyugh). Street abbreviations: "p." stands for poghots (street), 'pts.' for poghotsner (streets), 'pta.' for poghota (avenue). GPS coordinates are in decimal degrees (DD) Latitude x Longitude. Elevation (elev.) is in meters. Population (pop.) is estimated.

INTRODUCTION

Area: 1995 sq. km

Population: 160400

Marz Capital: Artashat

Distance from Yerevan: 29 km

Marzpetaran: Tel: (010) 28 60 23

Largest City: Ararat?

Ararat marz is on everyone's list of places to go, if only on the way to Siunia or to get a little closer to Mt. Ararat, which looms over the entire valley and frames every great photo of Yerevan (try the top of Cascade in Yerevan for the most spectacular landscape shots).



Ararat has two peaks, the larger called "Massis" (5165m/16,942f) and the smaller "Sis" (3925m/12,875f). Sis is a perfectly shaped cone, like Mt. Fuji in Japan, and together with Massis forms one of the most beautiful vistas in the world. Legends ascribe the beginning of modern mankind to Mt. Ararat, the place where Noah's ark is recorded in the bible to have landed after the Great Flood.

The mountain is now in present day Turkey, but it formed the backdrop of the nation's history, and as locals bitterly observe, while they cannot touch the mountain now with a closed border, 'at least they have the best view' of one of the world's great mountains.

But Ararat marz is much more than a tripod for photos; it is a living, breathing center of civilization that still tills the soil much as its ancestors did 12,000 years ago, when the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution turned a hunting-gathering society into a farming community, allowing one of the first land cultures in the world to develop some of the earliest cities.

Highlights

- **Explore Artashat**, capital of the Artashesian and Arshakuni kingdoms for over 600 years.
- **Visit Dvin**, the
- **Watch the sun rise at Khor Virap** (or
- **Sample fish from Armash**, with excavations o
- **Visit the World Heritage Sites** o
- **Explore Argishtikhinili**, the U
- **Visit Ararat**, the Bronze A
- **Be sure to see Sardarapat Battlefield**, where
- **Visit the s**
- **Explore the Vordan Karmir Preserve**, the last
- **Bird watch at the marshlands** ar
- **Explore the Western Desert**, with
- **Visit the Hovhannes Hovhanne)**

As in the rest of the valley, in Ararat marz the discovery of flint begat the discovery of copper and tin, which begat the Bronze and the Age of Cities, two of which—Artashat and Dvin—became ancient capitals of the Armenian State.



While most make their trip to the marz just to make snapshots of Mt. Ararat and climb into the pit in Khor Virap, there is much more than a visit to the place where the founder of the Armenian Church spent 13 years waiting for a call from the king to begin his ministry.

For one, the hills around Khor Virap hold vast deposits of the remains of Artashat, the richest city in the Near East when it was built in 189 BCE, and herald for the Armenian kingdom until being moved to its nearby neighbor Dvin, which reigned over Armenian interests well into the medieval period.



The marz is also home to the largest nature Preserve in the country, Khosrov Forest, established in the 3rd century and home to rare and endangered species of animals and flora,

along with ruined hamlets and monasteries, the detritus of history's habitation.

The marz is home to the country's thriving fish industry, which provides habitat for the thousands of migratory birds that annually trek through the marz. Spring and fall are prime birding seasons, and Ararat has the most popular spots to watch.

The marz also presents a spectacular display of wild flowers each spring, with several varieties of poppies (some still being discovered) and the enigmatic Armenian Iris, one of Armenia's natural glories, fast losing its habitat to nomadic flocks and human activity.



And for anyone thinking the marz is just Khor Virap or a quick drive through the steaming Arax delta on your way south, just take a short detour to the other side of Ararat, the valley just over the eastern mountains, where alpine fields of grass and wildflowers and the spectacular settings for S. Karapet monastery and Gevorg Marzpetuni Castle.

NATURE ▲

Ararat forms the central and south end of the Ararat Valley, hemmed in by the massive Mt. Ararat to the west and the Geghama and Urts Mountain Ranges to the east.

Though the marz has an arid climate, its terrain is tremendously diverse, much due to human activity. It mountains once covered with thick forests, the valley has been long cleared, continually farmed since the Agriculture Revolution, when settlers first learned how to domesticate the wild strains of wheat and oats that proliferated the valley. The soil, built from layers of volcanic ash, is one of the richest in the Near East, and the valley is the largest that can be cultivated. The addition of irrigation in the late

Bronze Age completely transformed the region, allowing settlers to cultivate fields far into the now barren eastern mountains.

The same irrigation canals can be found throughout the marz, and modern extensions begun in the 1930's have reclaimed some of the desert areas. Irrigation was restricted in the mid-1980's as part of Gorbachev's anti-alcoholism program (Ararat and Ararat marz had become a major wine production centers) and the eastern hills of the lower valley (the Urts Mountains) have mostly returned to its desert state.

And the marz still has forests, but they are to be found deep in the recesses of the Khosrov Preserve, where thousand year old trees stand below snow-covered peaks. The rest is restricted to river beds and villages.



Even the desert areas bloom each spring thaw, in a few shorts weeks when fields of green grass cover even the most arid parts of the district and fields of wild flowers form broad ribbons of color on the mountainsides. Important endemic flowers include the endangered Iris, Tulip and Gladiolus, which prefer semi-desert and scrub.

Landscape The landscape is all due to volcanic activity, its smooth surface in the lower valley made from millions of years of water erosion. The lava deposits left behind alluvial soil that is hard to work but bountiful, and spectacular mountainscapes, from the piercing rocks of the Urts Mountains seen to the east when you are in the lower valley, to the rugged peaks and verdant valleys in the Khosrov Preserve further east.

The volcanic deposits include one of the largest deposits of stone in the country, and Ararat marz, along with Armavir, harvest most of that used in building the new Yerevan. This includes beautiful

varieties of basalt, tufa and marble, as well as agate, obsidian and precious metals (gold and silver).



Water Despite its arid climate, the marz has one of the largest aquifers in the world, which, combined with the waters of the Arax River, would provide enough water to irrigate the entire valley if it were properly diverted. Old irrigation channels still in use 2500 years after first installed evaporate much of the water, and basic neglect wastes much of the water that is used. As a result, the lower valley (where water is easily caught) is green and lush while the upper regions are still barren.

The wetlands are all along the lower valley floor and at alpine marshes in the upper valley between the Urts and Geghama Lehr. Ponds and marshlands can be found around Massis (Sis), Artashat town, Khor Virap (Artashat), Ararat, Armash and all along the Arax River.

Much of the water has been shepherded into ponds and lakes for breeding fish, which has encouraged some diversity in water flora and fauna, but is also created one of the risks facing the marz.

Irrigation Ararat is irrigated though a system of canals dating back to the Bronze Age, expanded by the Urartu Empire between 900-600 BCE. Traces of the original canals can still be found in the region and include the Dalma canal in suburban Yerevan, which begins with a 400 meter tunnel bored into the side of solid rock to allow passage of Hrazdan river waters into the historic Dalma Vineyards.

The engineering feat of this Urartian canal is the forerunner of the "Klahreezes" which were later built throughout Asia Minor, and the canal and

tunnel are the oldest functioning hydra projects of their kind.

Further expansion of the canal network beginning in the 1930's reopened vast tracks of desert land, including thousands of hectares of grapes for use in wine and cognac production. During Perestroika, most of the vineyards were destroyed by order of Gorbachev to try and stem the rampant alcoholism in the Soviet Union.

Thermal and Mineral Springs Thermal Springs in Ararat include several types of mineral waters, including calcium, sodium and natural Hydrocarbonate. Major warm springs are at Ararat and near Vedi and cold mineral and sweet water springs are located at Massis, Jerahovit and Artashat. All villages have freshwater springs.



Minerals Ararat has large concentrations of volcanic rock (tufa, pumice, perlite) as well as deposits of basalt, gypsum, andesite, limestone, marble and granite. Minerals include trace deposits of quartz, agate, obsidian, amethyst, andesine, andalusite, emerald, garnet, beryl, turquoise, carnelian, aquamarine and lapis lazuli.

Flora Ararat's flora is surprisingly diverse, though the season is restricted to a few short weeks in the lower region, longer in Khosrov Preserve. Intensively farmed, the lower valley still has pockets of endemic plants, including water loving plants in lower valley marshes, fish ponds and on the Arax River bed.



Khosrov Reserve The preserve is covered in detail in [Trip 4](#) (p. 41) but in short, the preserve, the largest in the country, is also home to a remarkable diversity of flora. It is the only Caucasian reserve with such diversity of climatic areas and plant types. The reserve supports more than 1800 kinds of plants (more than half of all species growing in Armenia), 156 of which are considered rare, endangered and disappearing. Many Red Book species (engendered) grow only here. It is the only Caucasian Reserve of mountain xerophytes, with semi-desert, Mediterranean, arid forests and steppe terrains overlap.



The **Goravan Sands Reservation** is a unique ecosystem; a desert terrain that blooms with poppies, purple Betony and Gundelia (the "crown of thorns" pollen grains of which were found in the Shroud of Turin) for a few weeks each spring. Keystone species include endemic phog and milfoil. The preserve also hosts endangered and rare keystone species of reptiles, including the toad headed lizard and the viper. Goravan Sands is located on the slopes of Mt. Urts near Goravan village.



Poppies The valley is filled with spring-blooming poppies, and among the dozen or so varieties that in Armenia, about half inhabit Ararat marz. Varieties include blood red, deep and pale orange, sand-colored and variations between. There are poppies with 'black eyes' below the stamens, those without, others with markings on the edges of the petals, and some with no markings at all. A close look at the 'simple poppy' shows how diverse this tough little plant is. Preferring dry rocky soil, the poppy is relegated to the desert scrub and rock outcroppings, with some varieties interlaced with other flowers blooming in fallow fields.

Iris Ararat is a natural habitat for the rare Iris (*Iris elegantissima*), found in the Yeraks valley and Jandam Drar, next to Tigranashen. Both habitats are shrinking and the flowers are being pillaged by locals who sell the flowers on the streets of Yerevan. At the present rate of destruction, the Iris may become extinct in its native habitat within the next decade.



Ararat Flora Flora include several varieties of orange to red Poppy, Iris (*Iris lineolata*, *I. Caucasia*), Gladilolus (*Gladilolus atroviolaceus*), milk vetch (*Astraglis distyophysus*) and yellow verbascum; best seen between mid-to-late April and May. Other flora include *Nigella oxypetala*, *Actynolema macrolema*, *Gundelia tournefortii*, *Verbascum saccatum*, *Lallemanita iberica*, *Roemeria refracta*, *Scabiosa argentea*, *Scorzonera papposa*, *Muscari neglecta*, *Stachys inflata*, *Astragalus distyophysus*, *A. kochianus*, *Achillea tenuifolia*, *Helichrysum rubicundum*, and *Silene spergulifolia*.

Wild relatives of crop plants include Cereal grains (*Triticum araraticum* Jakobz., *Secale vavilovii* Grossh, *Hordeum spontaneum* C. Koch, etc.), **Cereal-Beans** (*Lens orientalis* (Boiss.) Shmalh.), **Fruits** (*Cerasus mahaleb* (M.) Mill etc., *Punica granata* L., *Purus takhtadzianii* Fed. Etc., *Amygdalus feurliana* (Fritsch) Lipsky etc., *Prunus Spinosa* L etc., *Pistacia mutica* Fisch, et Mey, *Malus orientalis* Uglitzk), **Grapes, Berries** (*Rubus armeniacus* Focke) **Vegetable Melons** (*Allium Akaka* S.G. Gmel ex. Schult. Et Schult etc., *Dacus carota* L., *Beta macrorrhiza* Stev etc), **Technical** (*Linum barsegianii* gabr.).

Grapes Ararat—like its southern neighbor Ararat marz—is most famous for its vegetables and grapes. The valley makes up 60% of Armenia's grape production, and more than 200 kinds of grapes from six varieties are grown here - five Armenian grapes (*Mskhali*, *Garan*, *Dmak*, *Voskehät*, *Kangun*) and one Georgian grape (*Rkatsiteli*); used to produce cognac and dessert wines.

Ararat Flower routes: In Ararat, the best places to spot spring flowers are along the (M2) and it parallel state road (H8) which traces the valley from Yerevan to Yerask at the entry to

Nakhichevan. Others include the (H11) spur from Pokr Vedi to Ararat, which curves along the Arax River; the (H10) that connects the (M2) with Vedi town and then continues E through the Urts/Geghama valley with its alpine marsh and upper valley flora before rejoining the (M2) just before entering Vayots Dzor; The Yerask Valley NW of Vedi; Goravan Sands Reserve SE of Vedi; and the Khosrov Preserve (permission required), which is more easily entered from Garni in Kotaik marz, but with its park office in Vedi.

Flower Tour This tour of Ararat is part of a series of botanical tours in Armenia guided by Prof. Nora Gabrielian, the world's leading expert on Armenian flora, and co-author of the 2008 *Flowers of the Transcaucasus and Adjacent Areas* (ISBN 978-3-906166-34-6; see [Resources Online](#), p. 57). Getting her to guide is not easy (she is busy completing her 10 volume encyclopedia of Armenian flora) and all tours are custom-tailored to the flora in bloom (see flower tours under [adventure tour operators](#), p. 15) but if you can, do it. She is worth every cent.

Fauna

Fauna include the largest collections of insect species and mammals in the country, most concentrated with the Khosrov Preserve.

Birds Ararat has the most species of water-loving birds in the country. Bird habitats include marshes around Massis, Artashat, Khor Virap, Ararat and Armash; river mouths and littoral swamps, all of which are experiencing a water drop due to over use by private fish ponds.



Bird watching, migrations Ararat marz in the spring, at marshes, swamps and along river beds. Migrations begin in late March, reaching their peak in April and early May. The birds follow a predictable pattern which exacts dates are dictated by the annual thaw (give or take 1-2 weeks); small flocks of migratory water fowl (swans, ducks

and geese) peak in early April, when they are replaced by waders (sandpipers, snipes) and in late April - early May an increase in nest building in most permanent residents and breeding bird species (geese, storks, waders and corvids).

In the autumn almost as many spring travelers return via the valley on their annual trek to Southern Africa, augmented by the mild weather areas around Lake Sevan (Ararat) and Arpalich (Shirak).



Lakes, Reservoirs, Fish Ponds, Wetlands Birds

species include **LOONS** (Gaviidae): Red-throated Loon, Arctic Loon; **GREBES** (Podicipedidae): Little Grebe, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Black-necked Grebe; **CORMORANTS** (Phalacrocoracidae): Great Cormorant, Pygmy Cormorant; **PELICANS** (Pelecanidae): Great White Pelican, Dalmatian Pelican; **HERONS & BITTERNs** (Ardeidae): Great White Egret, Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Cattle Egret, Little Egret, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Little Bittern, Great Bittern; **STORKS** (Ciconiidae): White Stork; **CRANES** (Gruidae): Demoiselle Crane; **IBISES**, et al (Threskiornithidae): Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill; **FLAMINGOS** (Phoenicopteridae): Greater Flamingo (rare); **OSPREYS** (Pandionidae): Osprey; **BUZZARDS**, et al (Accipitridae): Western Marsh-Harrier; **SWANS**, **GEESE**, **DUCKS** (Anatidae): Lesser White-fronted Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Greater White-fronted Goose, Greylag Goose, Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Tundra Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Common Teal, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Garganey, Northern Shoveler, Marbled Teal, Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Ferruginous Pochard, Tufted Duck, Greater Scaup, White-winged Scoter, Common Goldeneye, Smew, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Merganser, Ruddy Shelduck, Common Shelduck, White-headed Duck; **RAILS**, **CRAKES**, et al (Rallidae): Little Crake, Baillon's

Crake, Water Rail, Spotted Crake, Common Moorhen, Purple Swampphen, Common Coot; **STILTS & AVOCETS** (Recurvirostridae): Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Eurasian Oystercatcher, White-tailed Lapwing, Northern Lapwing, Spur-winged Lapwing, Grey Plover, Sociable Lapwing, Eurasian Golden-Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover, Greater Sand Plover; **PHALAROPEs** (Phalaropodidae): Red-necked Phalarope; **SANDPIPERS**, et al (Scolopacidae): Ruddy Turnstone, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Caspian Tern, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Jack Snipe, Great Snipe, Common Snipe, Sanderling, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint; **JAEGERS** (Stercorariidae): Pomarine Jaeger, Long-tailed Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger; **GULLS & TERNS** (Laridae): Little Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Great Black-headed Gull, Common Black-headed Gull, Mew Gull, Slender-billed Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Armenian Gull Whiskered Tern, White-winged Tern, Black Tern, Caspian Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Common Tern, Little Tern; **SWALLOWS & MARTINS** (Hirundinidae): Sand Martin, Red-rumped Swallow;



KINGFISHERS (Alcedinidae): Common Kingfisher; **WIGTAILS & PIPITS** (Motacillidae): Citrine Wagtail, White Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Tawny Pipit, Red-throated Pipit, Water Pipit; **WARBLERS** (Sylviidae): Cetti's Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Eurasian River Warbler, Savi's Warbler, Moustached Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Marsh Warbler, Great Reed-Warbler, Eurasian Reed-Warbler, Paddyfield Warbler; **PARROTBILLS** (Panuridae): Bearded Reedling; **BUNTINGS** (Emberizidae): Reed Bunting, Snow Bunting.



Mountain Steppe wetlands Birds species include **CRANES** (Gruidae): Common Crane; **STORKS** (Ciconiidae): Black Stork; **CRAKES**, et al (Rallidae): Corn Crake; **BUZZARDS**, et al (Accipitridae): Common Buzzard, White-tailed Eagle.

Scrub species birds include **WAXWINGS** (Bombycillidae): Bohemian Waxwing, **SHRIKES** (Laniidae): Red-backed Shrike; **ACCENTORS** (Prunellidae): Duncock; **THRUSHES**, **CHATs**, et al (Turdidae): Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, Common Stonechat; **WARBLERS** (Sylviidae): Lesser Whitethroat; **BUNTINGS** (Emberizidae): Black-headed Bunting, Snow Bunting; **FINCHES** (Fringillidae): Eurasian Linnet; **SPARROWS** (Ploceidae): Eurasian Tree Sparrow; **SHRIKES** (Laniidae): Isabelline Shrike.



Woodlands, Thickets, Farmland, Orchard Birds include **BUZZARDS**, et al (Accipitridae): Levant Sparrow hawk, Eurasian Sparrow hawk, Northern Goshawk; **PHEASANTS**, **QUAIL**, et al (Phasianidae): Black Francolin, Pheasant; **SANDPIPERS**, et al (Scolopacidae): Eurasian Woodcock; **PIGEONS & DOVES** (Columbidae): Common Wood-Pigeon, European Turtle-Dove; **CUCKOOS** (Cuculidae): Common Cuckoo; **OWLS** (Strigidae): Eurasian Scops-Owl, Tawny Owl; **SWALLOWS & MARTINS** (Hirundinidae): Barn

Swallow; **LARKS** (Alaudidae): Wood Lark; **WIGTAILS & PIPITS** (Motacillidae): Red-throated Pipit; **WARBLERS** (Sylviidae): Firecrest, Common Goldcrest, Icterine Warbler, Willow Warbler, Eurasian Chiffchaff, Greenish Warbler, Greater Whitethroat; **WRENS** (Troglodytidae): Winter Wren; **THRUSHES**, **CHATs**, et al (Turdidae): Dark-throated Thrush, Fieldfare, Redwing, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Blackbird; **TITS** (Paridae): Crested Tit; **BUNTINGS** (Emberizidae): Corn Bunting, Pine Bunting; **FINCHES** (Fringillidae): Red-fronted Serin, Twit, Eurasian Siskin, Chaffinch, Brambling, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, Eurasian Bullfinch, Hawfinch; **SPARROWS** (Ploceidae): Eurasian Tree Sparrow; **STARLINGS** (Sturnidae): Rose-colored Starling, Common Starling; **CROWS**, et al (Corvidae): Black-billed Magpie, Eurasian Jay, Rook.

For a complete list of all birds by species and habitat see [TourArmenia Birding pages](http://www.tourarmenia.com/nature/birding_pages) (www.tacentral.com/nature/birding.asp)

Khosrov Reserve Fauna include 1000 species of beetles (the largest collection in the country), a number of species of mollusks and fish (trout - *Salmo fario*, roach - *Rutilus rutilus*), 30 species of reptiles (*Pseudopus apodus*, *Erix jauculus*, *Coluber ravergieri*, *Vipera lebetina*, *Eumeces schneideri*, *Mauremys caspica* etc.) and 130 species of birds (European short-toed eagle - *Circaetus gallicus*, partridge - *Alectoris chukar*, bearded eagle - *Gyps fulvus*, Gypeatus barbatus, pigeon - *Columba livia* etc.). About 50 species of mammals are included (weasel - *Mustela nivalis*, marten - *Martes foina*, wild cat - *Felis silvestris*, wild boar - *Sus scrofa*, fox - *Vulpes vulpes*, hare - *Lepus europaeus*, lynx - *Lynx*, wolf - *Canis lupus*, panther - *Panthera pardus tullianus* etc.).

Among the mammals is the rare and endangered predecessors to the domesticated sheep and goats; the wild goat (Bezoar goat, *Capra aegagrus*), locally known as the Armenian bearded goat, and the Armenian mufflon or Transcaucasian wild sheep. The Transcaucasian brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) also occurs here, though in dwindling numbers. Hunting for the bear was prohibited in Armenia in 1967, though illegal hunts are a prevalent problem, abetted by the Ministry of Nature Protection charged to protect the species.

OTHER FAUNA

River, Marsh Fauna include endemic river fish such as Sturgeon (*Accipenser*), Cat-fish (*Silurus glanis*), Chanar Barbel (*Barbus capito*); Galician Crayfish (*Astacus leptodactylus*).

Amphibians include Marsh Frog (*Rana ridibunda*), Caspian Tortoise (*Clemmys caspica*), and Minor Asian Newt (*Tritulus vittatus*).

Reptiles and Amphibians are everywhere. The herpetofauna includes grass-snakes (*Natrix natrix*, *N. tessellata*), lizards (*Darevskia unisexualis*, *D. nairensis*). Lizards include the endangered Persian toad headed sun watcher, a rare Mediterranean species that can be found in Ararat marz at the Goravan Sands Preserve near Vedi and in the Khosrov Reserve.

Mammals include the hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Indian Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), Caucasian Squirrel (*Sciurus anomalus*), Asia Minor Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus xanthoprimum*), Edible dormouse (*Glis glis*), Small Five-toed Jerboa (*Allactaga elater*), Southern White-breasted Hedgehog (*Erinaceus concolor*), Armenian Shrew (*Crocidura armenica*), Radde's Shrew (*Sorex raddei*), Natterer's bat (*Myotis nattereri*), Blasius's Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus blasii*), Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus euryale*), Greater Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*), Lesser horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*), Mehely's Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus mehelyi*).



Other Fauna that are endangered include the Wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), Pallas's Cat (*Felis manul*), Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Steppe Polecat (*Mustela eversmannii*), Marbled Polecat (*Vormela peregusna*), Beech Marten (*Martes foina*), Eurasian Badger (*Meles meles*).

Other Endangered species include the Mufflon (*Ovis orientalis orientalis-Gruppe*), Caucasian Bearded (Bezoar) Goat (*capra aegagrus F. rxl.*), the Caucasian Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*) and the Persian leopard (*Panthera pardus saxicolor*).

RISKS/ ECO CHALLENGES

Water Ararat marz, like the entire valley, is under threat from a variety of problems, not least of which is the increasing draw of water from the underground aquifer. The aquifer is huge; one of the largest in the world and the largest in the Near East, but its pressure is a stable flow, which can be easily interrupted by excessive draws in any given point. This is the main problem facing the valley, as fish farms draw tremendous amounts of underground water for fish production, dumping the remainder.

This water is not recycled for use in the fisheries, standard practice worldwide, nor does it make its way to farm fields where it might be used in irrigation. Instead, local fief owners simply dump the excess onto the ground where it is left to evaporate in the arid climate, one of the greatest wastes of this precious resource.

The pumping of water also lowers the aquifer flow; enough that farms and villagers are often left dry during the critical irrigation months of the summer. The scramble for water that is arguably plentiful enough to reclaim the entire valley for agriculture is not limited to a few hundred meters on either side of the (M2) highway, causing desertification and erosion of top soil on the rest of the valley.

The irrigation canals that are in place are tremendously wasteful in themselves, but the local economy is no where near developed enough to invest in drip or other irrigation techniques that can limit water use. Government assistance is not even a question; corruption is so rife local farmers are too consumed tending fields to pay bribes to consider alternatives.

A more disturbing problem is the pollution of ground water around Yerevan, from decades of faulty and decaying sewerage control, and the dumping of toxic chemical into rivers and streams by the Nairit chemical plant and others. The closure of the plant in the 1990s blessedly stalled the dumping process, but it is not fixed; annual attempt to restart the plant threaten to renew toxic dumping. Officials deny any problem, which is a problem in itself.

Pollution The most easily seen problem in the marz is the belching smokestacks of the cement factory at Ararat city. Along with the cement factory by upwind of Tsaghkadzor Ski Resort, the Ararat factory is responsible for 2/3rds of the air pollution in Yerevan and the Valley. Smokestacks are not filtered, which would reduce the pollution particulates by up to 90%.

Owners (oligarchs with connections in the government) refuse to install filters that will cut their profits. A stream of EU, American and other agencies to study the problem have produced reams of paper reports no one reads, but no real solution to the problem. As the Yerevan construction boom continues, on still days (especially in the height of summer), the upper valley resembles Bombay or Beijing, the air pollution is so bad. Those who can, escape the stifling air by traveling for higher climbs.



Poaching & Hunts The greatest risk facing Ararat marz animal species is the rampant poaching and hunting activities promoted by the very agency charged with their protection. Armenian oligarchs and international hunting agencies openly promote the bagging of the endangered Mufflon, Bezoar Ibex (bearded goat) and even the almost extinct Caucasian Brown Bear, despite their being listed in the red Book of endangered species, therefore any hunting of them illegal under international law.

Local green organizations say one of the reasons the Khosrov Reserve is off limits to most visitors is not to preserve the habitat but rather to hide the activities of illegal hunters.

Stop the slaughter

*The disgrace about the hunts in Armenia that are about to make several species extinct on Armenian soil is that local oligarchs and government officials regularly flout hunting bans, some reported to have even resorted to hunting endangered species from helicopters with automatic weapons. Mistaking the slaughter of endangered species with proving manhood, these hunters prove the axiom about men with short p****s.*

No matter who gives what kind a certificate, these are illegal hunts, according to Armenia's own legislation and the placing of these critically endangered species on the Red Book of endangered species list. However, hunting

continues in the Khosrov Reserve, assisted by the very government official charged to protect the species: the Ministry of Nature Protection and the staff of the Khosrov Reserve itself, who derive additional income from bribes and private fees to helping to outfit hunting trips into the Reserve.

in enlightening look into the open advertising of the hunting of endangered species in Armenia can be found at <http://www.huntineurope.com/public/usa/BEZOAR+IBEX+AND+ARMENIAN+SHEEP+HUNTING+IN+ARMENIA.asp?IDProdotti=349>

Look at the trophy fees for endangered Bezoar goat, Armenian Mufflon and the critically endangered bear.

Contact these companies to express your protest against their promoting the extinction of species in Armenia and participation in illegal hunting activities:

www.huntineurope.com/usa/
www.internationalsafari.com

To contact the Minster of Nature Protection
www.mnpiac.am/

DO: ▲

Khor Virap/Artashat If you go nowhere else in Ararat, go to the Khor Virap/Artashat complex, the site for one of Armenia's most famous antique capitals (ca. 189 BCE-428) and location of the pit where the founding father of the Armenian Apostolic church languished for 13 years. The pit is preserved, surrounded by a 4th-9th century monastery, which is itself where the ancient capital's prison keep once stood. The surrounded hills and marshlands are a part of the city of Artashat ("Joy of Artashes"), designed by Hannibal for the founder of the Artashesian dynasty. The hills seem barren, but don't be fooled: a walk up any will soon show the evidences of a 2200 year old culture; pottery shards, foundation stones and even a bone or two that surface after each hard rain.

Dvin Second to Artashat, and better preserved, are the citadel and cathedral quarter for Dvin, which took Artashat's mantle in 428 and used it for a thousands years before succumbing to Timurid and Turkish invaders. Once the richest and most populous city in the Near East, Dvin maintained its importance as a trading and craft center while other capitals rose and fell, among them Bagaran and Ani, which are only 50 km away.



Khosrov Reserve You need permission to enter (see [Adventure Tour Operators](#), p. 15 or Garni section in Kotaik chapter), but it is worth the effort to hike through one of Armenia's last pristine wilderness areas, and a habitat for over 1000 rare species of plants and animals. The reserve is also home to the extremely rare and endangered Persian leopard, Caucasian brown bear and the Armenian bearded goat (Bezoar or wild goat). You will have scant chance to meet any of these creatures, but you will have the opportunity to hike (or jeep) by the ruins of some magnificent medieval settlements, fortresses and monasteries; Havuts Tar convent, Aghjots vank, Kakavaberd (Geghi castle), among others. Figure 2-3 days for a great hiking-camping trip in one of the Caucasus' most unique wilderness areas.

Urts-Shaghap Valley Tracing the Ararat valley but in the middle of the marz is the Urts Mountain Range, which divided the marz into two uneven parts. The Urts River flows through the valley, which has several folds that turnoff into Khosrov Reserve while the main route heads S to Vayots Dzor.

Paruir Sevak Museum This may seem a bit obscure for most tourists, but the museum is small and the subject was one of the most explosive figures in late 20th century Armenia. Sevak's writing was revolutionary for his time, his animal attraction palpable among the female socialist species. His work rife with Sturm und Drang, to many Sevak was the James Dean of his time, a lost soul that captured the frustrations and yearnings of his generation, and a master wordsmith who is widely believed to be one of the greatest Armenian writers of all time. His death (officially listed as a car accident) is almost universally believed to have been engineered by the KGB.

Excavations Visit Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze / Iron Age and Hellenistic excavations by Norabats, Jrahovit, Urtsadzor, Gevorg Marzpetuni Castle, Aigevan, Tigranashen and Urtsalanj.



Natural Ararat

Natural treks include birding at fish ponds and river deltas around Massis, Artashat city, Khor Virap/Artashat complex and Armash; guided trekking through the Khosrov Reserve; spring flower watching on the northeastern slopes of the Ararat valley, Mt. Eraks valley and the Shaghap River valley between Vedi and Zangekatun; exploring the Goravan Sands desert preserve.

Camping can be had near most villages, though the Ararat Valley is the least wild and least comfortable in summertime. Better camping is found in the Mt. Eraks valley W of Vedi, Vedi and Khosrov River valleys NE of Vedi, and the Shaghap River valley SE of Vedi (Urtsadzor, Shaghap, Lanjanist, Lusashogh, Lanjar and at S. Karapet vank). Camping in Khosrov is possible for guided treks (see [Adventure Tour Operators](#), p. 15).

WHEN? ▲

The best time to visit Ararat is Spring, when snow melts and spring rains stir the earth to an eruption of color within a matter of days. The wild flowers that the marz is so famous for achieve peak bloom in April and May, the beguiling endemic Iris blooming for a couple of weeks sometime between April 15-May 15. Other wild flowers (poppies, straw flowers) cover the landscape into early June, and have some of the most magnificent displays.

Spring is also the best time to birdwatch; migratory birds flock to the valley beginning in March, with species peaks occurring in successive waves between April and early June. Two-thirds of Europe's bird species either inhabit or migrate

through Armenia, and the Ararat Valley is a veritable super highway for those winging their way to summer homes.

Sometime in May the weather suddenly changes, mild days turning to sticky, hazy days in the lower valley, though it is still relatively pleasant in the upper Urts-Shaghap Valley. Khosrov has a wonderful spring; its mountains covered with blooming *nush* (wild almond) trees looking like candy tufts on the emerald green slopes. Almost half the flora species of Armenia inhabit the reserve, and most bloom between late April and June.



Summer heat is somewhat cushioned by the amazing variety of vegetables and fruits grown in the marz. For at least 6000 years the Ararat Valley has been the food basket for the country, and age-old techniques of organic farming still reign. Most prized by locals are the juicy tomatoes, crisp cucumbers and juicy apricots, peaches, plums, cherries and especially melons featured on every bountiful table. People schedule their summer trips to coincide with peak harvests, and stopping by the road to buy some mouth-watering peaches, apricots or plums (the kind that dribble down your chin as you revel in the bursts of sun-ripened flavor—this is better than sex!).

Many like to travel in the autumn, when the intense summer heat breaks and long warm days give over to cool nights. The weather is more predictable, and the harvests of grapes come in, but the land is also spent for the year, its fields fallow and the mountain slopes burnt a raw brown from the long summer days. The days are mild, but the incredible variety of flora and migratory flocks are long gone.



Winters are cold and days can be dreary; the valley experiences long stretches of foggy, gray days. Mt. Ararat is often obscured by cloud cover and snow storms. Given this, there are short periods when the fog and clouds lift and a dazzling winter sun appears. The air is crystalline and the view is spectacular, with deep blue skies and jaw-dropping views of Ararat, showing every vein in the snow-covered crest. There is no set time for these days, alas, but they more often occur in the later part of winter, and after rain storms in early spring.

HOW LONG?

Ararat is easily reached by car from Yerevan, and all trips can be done in half-day to one-day excursions. Start with sunrise at Khor Virap (spectacular), and explore it and the surrounding slopes of Artashat plus Dvin in a morning. Trekking through Khosrov Reserve is a 1-3 day trip, though from Garni you can hike up to the 9th c Havuts Tar convent in about 45 minutes, and with a jeep you can visit the most popular spots (Aghjots Vank, Mets Gilanlar, Kakavaberd) in an easy day trip. Another day trip starts with Dvin and Khor Virap, then heads off on the (H10) to Vedi, Urtsadzor and Zangekatun, visiting Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, S. Hovhannes tower at Lusashogh, S. Karapet monastery and the Hellenistic grave site at Urtsalanj before rejoining the (M2) at Zangekatun, with the Paruir Sevak museum. From Yerevan you can visit all the NW sites within a half day.

Plan 1-2 days for just the highlights (Khor Virap, Dvin, S. Karapet) and another 1-3 days for a guided visit to the Khosrov Reserve.



Hitting the Highlights Dvin, Khor Virap (half-day); add Vedi, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, S. Karapet Monastery, and Zangekatun (1 day). Northwest: Norabats, Ghukasavan, Sis, Jrahovit, Dimitrov, Berkanush, Baghramian, Dalar, Mrgavan, Artashat city (half-day). North: Lanjazat, Azat Reservoir, Garni-Geghard (half day). Khosrov Reserve (1-3 days).

HISTORY ▲

While Armavir marz boasts the oldest settlements uncovered in the Ararat valley, there is little doubt among archeologists that Ararat marz is just old, but its remains have basically been plowed under by the 10,000 years or so of farming in the district. The beginning of domesticated wheat in Armenia, and possibly the Near East, the marz is also one of the places where the domestication of sheep, goats and cattle took place, initiating the Agricultural revolution that began the Neolithic period.

Quickly following this revolution was the Age of Cities, several of which developed into major urban areas and capitals of Bronze, Iron, Hellenistic and medieval kingdoms, the two most famous being the 2nd c BCE city of Artashat, “Carthage of the East”, and Dvin, the most important trade point on the Silk Road for over five centuries.

Following a prolonged period of degradation in the 16th-18th cc, modern Ararat began with Russian claiming the region in the early 19th century, when the rail line, farming, trade and industry began a 200 year rise that is in many ways continuing, with short periods of contraction.

PREHISTORIC AGE ▲

Part of the same valley as Armavir, Ararat was legendarily founded by Haik (Hayk), the eponymous “father” of the Armenians. His

grandson Aramais is said to have settled the valley, giving it (and the nearby mountains) his name. In fact, both Armavir and Ararat marz trace their names to this man, simply using different pronunciations of the same word for each name. Some explain the legend of Aramais as the origin myth of the Indo-European people, since his children and grandchildren scattered throughout the known world from this point. In doing so, these tie the origin myth to the biblical story of the flood and Noy (Noah), whose children and grandchildren founded the tribes of the world. One of these was Noah's great grandson Torgarmah, Haik's father and so the founder of the Armenian race.

Also in legend, one of Aramais' progeny was Sosanver, the founder of the proto-Armenian religion, which believed one could divine the future through the rustling of trees in a sacred plane grove. This may be a variation of sacred groves in ancient Greece, or their origins.

Prehistoric (Chalcolithic/Neolithic levels) sites in Ararat include lower level excavations at Dvin, Norabats, Jrahovit, Artashat, Gevorg Marzpetuni Castle, Aigevan, Ararat, S. Karapet and Urtsalanj.



BRONZE & IRON AGE ▲

The Bronze Age placed Ararat marz as an agricultural district in the Metsamor kingdom, which had its capital in Armavir marz. The kingdom reached its peak in the Bronze Age, when it uncovered the secret to forging bronze, and it is still the earliest known instance of creating the metal.

The rise of metallurgy in the valley and its agricultural development saw the rapid growth of cities, with fortified citadels and signs of great warfare to capture the secret of forging copper—

then bronze and iron—which were the “atomic secrets” of their day. The secrets were so closely held that it was not until the late Iron Age in Armenia that Egypt first learned the secret.

The culture not only developed metal to a high art, it was a fulcrum of world trade, artifacts uncovered in the marz coming from Egypt, Babylon and Assyria, the Orient and the Scythian tribes to the north.



The rise of the Metsamor Culture marks the first wave of Indo-European migration, beginning with Indo-Iranian migrations in the 5th m BCE, followed by waves of Indo-European speakers into Anatolia, Central Asia and the Balkans in succeeding millennia.

Around 2000 BCE, a second wave of Indo-European migration began, this time coming full circle back to the Armenian plateau. Thousands of years of development created distinct dialects and physical attributes, which further influenced the “mother tribes” in Armenia, among them the tribes inhabiting the Ararat settlements at Norabats, Artashat, Dvin and Jrahovit. This second wave (by the Nairi) resulted in the destruction of the Metsamor tribe and began a period of development of the L'chashen Culture, sometimes called the Kura-Arax Culture.

The development of the culture reached its peak in the Sevan region, at L'chashen, and it is believed that the Ararat Valley was either subservient to this culture, or in decline, a sort of Dark Ages that is not well understood.

Bronze and Iron Age sites in Ararat include Dvin, Artashat, Norabats, Jrahovit, Ararat and Urtsalanj.

URARTIAN EMPIRE ▲

The name “Ararat” for the valley was first mentioned in the manuscripts of the Urartian king Argishti I, who first crossed the Arax River in 786 BCE. In 782 BCE cuneiform he celebrates his earlier victory, saying he occupied the country of Vaza. It was here that he established his military and political centers in the valley; the citadel of Erebuni and the military center of Arghishtihinili in present day Armavir.

Argishti's son Sardur I, expanded the empire as far as the far shores of Lake Sevan, and to the edges of modern Georgia. In Ararat, the Urartians erected a number of fortresses and outposts to guard the kingdom from Northern (Scythian) and eastern tribes.

Digging massive irrigation channels through the marz, Argishti, Sardur and Rusa I turned what had become a desert during the first dark ages into an oasis, a feat attested by numerous boundary stones carved on cliff rocks during their reigns.

Some trace the actual founding of Hellenistic Artashat City to the Urartian period, saying the 2nd c BCE city was in fact built on top of an Urartian stronghold that had been ruined during 6th c BCE Scythian (“skutes”) and Cimmerian raids. Urartu fell around 590 BCE, the country immediately reorganized as the Armen or Armenian kingdom.

Urartian sites in Ararat include the lower layers of Artashat, Dvin, and at forts near Norabats, Jrahovit, Aigevan, Ararat and Urtsalanj.

HELLENISM AND ARTASHESIAN PERIOD ▲

Hellenism arrived in Armenia with the fall of the Persian Empire in the 4th c BCE. As Alexander's armies conquered Persia on his march towards the end of the known world in India, he left behind each victory Greek administrators charged with Hellenizing the eastern barbarians, including Armenia. Exhausted by 400 years of constant warfare, subject states to the Achaemenids eagerly

embraced the new world order, the Armenians embracing the Greek ways more than others. Some say this was due to the recognition Greek gods that bore more than a little similarity to their

Armenian counterparts, which was their Indo-European origin.



The Orontids (Yervandunis) rose immediately following the collapse of Urartu, but came to prominence in 321 BCE, when Alexander's Seleucid descendants reorganized their kingdom and recognized the upstart

Armenian lords. They reigned from their Ararat valley Seat for about 150 years.

Artashat Ararat marz coming out party is generally traced to 189 BCE, when Artashes I (Artaxias I), the founder of the Artashesian dynasty (189 BCE- 1), moved the capital from the Orontid stronghold at Yervandashat to a complex of hills overlooking the Ararat plain. Artashat (Artaxata)—in legend designed by his Carthaginian sidekick Hannibal, the bad-boy thorn in the side of the Roman league—was named after the new king and roughly translates to "Joy" or "Pleasure of Artashes". Planned along Greco-Roman lines, Artashat rivaled the 7 hills of Rome with its own twelve hills, Strabo and Plutarch calling it as the "Armenian Carthage".

Artashat was a large center of Hellenistic culture in Armenia, the first theatre in Armenia was built in the city. Succeeding kings ruled over a country that still controlled the trade routes between Asia and the West, which was named the Silk Way in the 2nd c. BCE, and which gave Armavir unimagined wealth. Perhaps because of this, Armenia found itself at the fulcrum of a fight



between the new super powers, Rome and Parthia, for control of Asia.

The Artashesian kings attempted to placate each side, or to play one off the other to preserve Armenian autonomy, but they were not always successful; in 163 the Romans devastated the region, assuming renewed domination over Armenia. The rise of Tigran the Great in the 1st c BCE, moved the capital temporarily to his capital at Tigranakert, which was destroyed by the Romans who forced him to submit to Roman suzerainty. The capital returned to Artashat.

Artashat remained the principal political and cultural center of Armenia for 700 years until the capital was moved to nearby Dvin.

Hellenistic sites in Ararat include excavations of Artashes' "Joy" of Artashat, sublevels of excavations at Norabats, Jrahovit, and Dvin, and the main hill of Urtsalanj.

ARTASHESIANS & EARLY CHRISTIANITY ▲

The Arshakunis The Artashesians were succeeded by the Arshakunis in the year 1 or 2, and they ruled mainly from Artashat and their family Seat in Vagharshapat. Under the Arshakunis the valley was made up of the provinces of Vostan, Urts and Arax.

"Vostan" means royal residence, and the province took up the central valleys of the Arax Azat Rivers including the Khosrov Forest. It was the oldest province, and the seat of the Arshakuni kings. Urts province included the left bank of the Vedi and the area around modern Urtsadzor, while Arax ("Arats") province took up the lower watershed of the Arax River, including modern Nakhichevan.

Arshakuni kings included King T'rdat III, who instigated the conversion of the country to Christianity, and Khosrov II (r. 330-339), who established the forest that bears his name. That 4th c royal hunting ground became the incubator for the current Khosrov Reserve, the largest nature reserve in the country.

The Conversion The conversion itself is covered in detail in the Armavir marz chapter (Echmiadzin), but it sprang in part from Artashat and the pit where Grigor Lusavorich languished for 13 years before being summoned before a mad king begging to be cured.

The pit is now the focal point of a major pilgrimage monastery on the Ararat plain, where the 2nd c BCE castle prison was located. Built at the eastern

end of the old city and the tallest hill of the twelve that made up the ancient capital, the pit marks the spot where Grigor was thrown after refusing to venerate the idol of Anahit during celebrations of the young King T'rdat's victorious reclamation of his kingdom.



Under torture Grigor admitted to the king he was the son of the man who killed the king's father, and only his Parthian kinship to the king saved him from immediate death. Instead, he was thrown into a pit of snakes and scorpions and left to die, where the charity of a kind-hearted woman saved him from starvation. Sometime between 301 and 314 (historians are in disagreement on the exact date, though the traditional year is 301), the king went mad, medieval depictions of him as a board symbolizing his mental anguish.

His madness was precipitated by his ruthless suppression of his Christian population, and particularly for having the Roman maiden Hripsimeh, her nurse and 39 other maidens from Rome killed for refusing his advancements. T'rdat's sister, Khosrovadukht (secretly Christian), had a dream where she was told that only Grigor could cure her brother and save the kingdom, which was threatened by the Sassanid Persian empire.

Discovering that Grigor was still alive, the mad king summoned him, and the place they met is in legend the same where Grigor was born (while his family was on the run from Armenian troops sent to avenge the murder of T'rdat's father Khosrov at the hands of Grigor's father), and from where the infant T'rdat was taken by friends to Rome. That site is where Zvartnots Cathedral was built.

The conversion meant the destruction of hundreds of Armenia's pagan temples, with the exception of only two: Garni was saved by the efforts of Khosrovadukht, and still stands, and the other was at Artashat, on the current border with Turkey. This latter was just discovered in 2007 and excavations show it to have been far grander than

that at Garni. It was toppled in the mid 4th century not by Grigor, but by a foreign power.

The pit did not become a relic of the Christian faith until after Grigor had left the court and became a hermit, living unattended in a cave. His wasted body found sometime around 335, and pieces of it quickly became relics (his head is reputedly in Italy, his right arm in Echmiadzin, he left in Kilikia). In 339 Persian forces led by the Sassanid King Shapur sacked and burned Artashat, though it was quickly rebuilt and maintained its political and economic importance until 428 when the capital was moved to Dvin.

A popular pilgrimage site in the 5th c, the pit was converted into a major site in the 5th-6th cc, when the 4th century shrine over the pit was rebuilt into a basilica church. The prison was replaced by a large church in the 7th century, and monastery walls erected and enlarged in the next several centuries.

When the Arax River shifted west in the 3rd c, Artashat's natural water defenses were replaced by fetid mosquito-infested swamps, and the decision was made to move the capital to Dvin—though politics are thought to have played the lion share of the decision by King Khosrov III (330-338) to move the seat of power to Dvin in 335: It was a time of great turmoil, with Sassanid kings breathing down the backs of the Armenians, and the king—never secure under Armenian's feudal system that places most of the power in the hands of powerful nakharar families—weakens by internal discord and the failure of the Romans in Constantinople to lend support. The move lessened the city's importance in royal circles, but it remained as commercial city of some import until the fall of the Armenian Kingdom in 428.

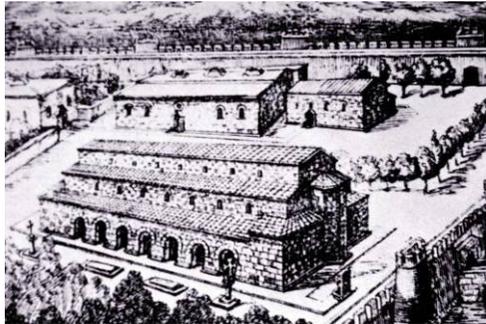
Much of Artashat disappeared during the construction of the Dvin, its stones taken to build the new capital. Something of a town persisted into the medieval period, finally succumbing to 14th-15th cc Mongol and Timurid invasions, and the forced migration under the Safavids in 1603.

Artashesian-Early Christian sites are at Artashat and Khor Virap and underlying foundations for churches at S. Karapet monastery, Urtsadzor, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Lusashogh and Urtsalanj.

DVIN ERA / EARLY MEDIEVAL ▲

The Dvin period is perhaps the crowning glory of Ararat's history, its small excavation a pale reflection of the magnificent city that adorned the valley. Founded long before its glory days in the

Bronze Age, the settlement was a fortress during the Urartu period and became a regional town of some importance during the Yervanduni Era (6th - 2nd cc BCE).



Artist rendition of medieval Dvin

By 335 it had become so important that the Arshakuni king Khosrov II (330-339) moved his seat of power there following the death of King T'rdat III, establishing the royal hunting grounds nearby that became the Khosrov Reserve.

The Arshakunis lasted a little more than 100 years after this move, increasingly caught up in the perpetual fight between Persia and Rome over the region. An ill-fated attempt to throw off the chains of control cost the kingdom its autonomy and the Arshakunis their last king in 428, when the Sassanids took control of the eastern provinces, making Dvin the capital of their Armenian marzpanate (the origin of the current word "marz" for Armenia's 10 districts).



Dvin porcelain

This began Dvin's golden age. For almost 1000 years Dvin was the center of the political and wealth aspirations of Armenians, Arabs,

Byzantines, Seljuks, Persians, Ottomans and Georgian kings; each of which ruled over a part of its history. Securely placed at a crossroads on the Silk Road, Dvin became a major trading and artisan center, its famous faience and porcelain were coveted by Caliphs in Arabia and the kings of Europe.

When the Catholicos moved the Holy See to Dvin in the 470's the city became both political and spiritual center for Armenia.

For details about Dvin, see the [Dvin section](#) of this chapter (p. 23)

The region became extremely wealthy in the next 200 years, Dvin ransacked during the Arab conquests of the mid 7th century, but quickly reviving as the Caliphate installed their governor for the Armenian district in the capital. Tolerant of their cousins ("people of the book"), marauding Arabs turned out to be quite a boon for Ararat and Dvin: both tripled in size during the Arab period, Dvin becoming one of the largest cities in the world, believed to have topped out at 150,000 people by the end of Arab rule in the late 9th c.

Bagratuni rule (9th-11th cc) secured the region's links with Asia and Byzantine, helped by a "Pax Byzantium" in Europe and North Africa. The political seat moved to Ani, but Dvin continued as a major artisan and trade route, if anything its wares even more popular in far-flung markets. Some of Dvin's most beautiful faience and porcelain come from the Bagratuni period, followed by the short revival under the Zakarians and Georgian kings.

11th c Seljuks devastated the area, installing their Emirs in Dvin, which continued as an important trading and artisan center. On the fall of the Emirs, the Zakarians and Proshians installed governors in the area, which began a period of fighting between Armenian, Seljuk and Shaddadid tribes, the latter invited by a terrified population to defend their city, then overstaying their welcome by a few decades.

Dvin Era/medieval sites include the excavated city and museum of Dvin, the monastery of S. Karapet in the Selav/Urtsadzor valley, and churches, monasteries and medieval sites at Khor Virap, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Urtsadzor, Mankunk, Shaghap, Lanjanist, Lusashogh, Urtsalanj, and the Khosrov Reserve sites of Havuts Tar, Kakavaberd, Aghjots Vank, Baiberd, Gilanlar and Vanstan.

DARK AGES ▲

Armenia's Dark Ages are generally traced to the first invasions of the Mongols, though in reality Mongol rule was a mixed bag of tolerance, growth and brutal suppression. Some regions thrived under Mongol rule, especially in the south, which nakharars made compact with the Mongol khans. The Bagratuni lands, however, did not fare as well, their leaders fighting the Mongol hordes, and losing. Dvin was surrounded, attacked and destroyed by Mongols, and it never completely recovered. Most of the population migrated south to Siunik or west to Kilikia, the rest eking out a living until the city was completely obliterated by Timurid raids in the early 15th century.

During the next three centuries, the population of the Arax valley became predominantly Muslim, as Turkish and Persian conquerors pushed out Armenian villagers in favor of nomad Tatars and Kurds. Cultivated land was abandoned in favor of pasturage, which began a process of desertification the valley has not yet recovered from. The population was forced to migrate to Persia in the early 1500s and 1600s, which emptied the region of native Armenians. During the late medieval period, the region was known as the Vedi-Basar mahal.

IMPERIAL RUSSIAN / SOVIET PERIODS ▲

During the second Russian-Persian war, Ararat valley was taken by Russian troops under Ivan Paskevich, Yerevan capitulating on 1 October 1827. It was formally ceded by the Persians in 1828. The repopulation of the region by Armenians began at this time, though the marz' villages remained largely in Tatar and Kurdish hands until the next century.

The Russian Imperial era saw rapid development in the local economy, spurred on by the construction of the Tbilisi-Yerevan-Baku rail line that coursed through the Arax Valley. Still the region remained poverty stricken, its towns never reaching the status of their former medieval glory.



The Russian era is perhaps more noted in region for the first European climbs of the great Mt. Ararat, the first in 1829 by the German alpinist Dr. Freidrich Parrot. This was followed in 1834 by M. K. Spasky-Antomanov, who climbed Ararat to prove that the stars could be seen at noon and used ice from the summit to baptize his son. The most famous was in 1847, a third climb by Professor Frederick Barod, accompanied by a 38 year old Khachatur Abovian, founder of modern Armenian literature.

The valley faced fierce fighting during 1918-1921 Turkish attempts to cut southern Armenia from its heartland and create a land bridge with Baku. The attempts failed as the Red Army captured Baku and the valley, though in the final division of the region (confirmed by an anti-Armenian Stalin who was currying favor with Ataturk), historically Armenian Nakhichevan was separated from Ararat region and given to Azerbaijan. In 1930, Ararat marz was officially formed with its capital at Vedi.

As with the rest of the country, Ararat was industrialized during the Soviet period, though the main economic output was agriculture. The reclamation of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land occurred in this period, rebuilding irrigation channels that had lain disused for 600 years. Farm collectives succeeding in taking back 70% of the arable land before the Soviet Union collapsed. Industries included cement, stone quarries, gold production and textile mills. The town of Massis became a major rail transit center for the Caucasus.

The region's villages were in the main inhabited by Kurds and Tatars until the mid 20th century, when post-war population boon began a resettlement. This was completed in the population exchange of 1989-1991, during the Karabakh conflict.

ARARAT NOW ▲

Suffering through a massive downturn in the 1990s, the marz is witnessing something of a comeback, though its exports are nowhere near as robust as in Soviet times, and industry is restricted to mineral extraction. The main industry is a huge cement factory by Ararat, which produces half the cement in the country (the other half is produced outside the ski resort of Tsaghkadzor), and is responsible for most of the air pollution (of course it is unfiltered).

The small farming communities are rather prosperous, though locals will never let on just how much they actually make.

Despite the limited advances in the last few years, most of the income still comes from relatives living abroad, who send remittances to their families. The outflow of inhabitants continues to outpace those returning, despite official figures.



PEOPLE ▲

Ararat has a mixture of cultures; primarily Armenian, Greek and Assyrian immigrants from 1828, with Yezidi shepherds on the mountain slopes of the Gephama Lehr.

Assyrians The marz' main minority is its Assyrians, descended from one of the greatest cultures of the ancient world, which empire stretched between the Hindu Kush and the Mediterranean Sea. One of the oldest cultures on earth, Assyrians brought civilization to the world, script and literature, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the first (the Hanging Gardens of Babylon), and the first constitution – the Code of Hammurabi on the face of a rock-cliff – which is still studied in law schools. What remains in Armenia are roughly 2700 people out of a total

population of 4 million. Assyrians can be found in Dmitri and Verin Dvin villages.

Contact:

“*ATUR*” ASSYRIAN ASSOCIATION, 11 Pushkin p, Yerevan, tel: 565151.

“*ASHUR*” ASSYRIAN YOUTH CENTER, 105, Terian p (Polytechnic University), Bldg. 4, room 4102, Yerevan, tel. 598515

IN AND OUT ▲

By Rail

A daily *elektrichka* (*electric intercity*) plies the rails between Yerevan Central Station and Yeraskh, stopping at Massis, Artashat, Ararat, Yeraskh and points between. The train is a cheap way to get there if you don't mind the slow pace. It takes about 2 hr to Yeraskh. Trains leave early morning from Yerevan, beginning their return trip in the evening. 300-1500 AMD depending on your destination.

By Air

Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport is NW of Ararat, in Armavir marz. See Yerevan In and Out for details.

By Road

(Distances from point to point) The main road through Armavir is the **Yerevan-Meghri highway (M2)**, which links Yerevan with Artashat (24 km), and Ararat (22 km) before reaching Yeraskh (11 km) where from it takes a sharp left turn to climb the Urtsadzor Mountains to Urtsadzor (30 km, H10 intersection) and the Tukh Manuk Pass (1795m, 9 km) where it enters Vayots Dzor and leads to Areni (17 km), Yeghegnadzor (14 km) and Jermuk (49 km).

At Massis the **Yerevan ring road (M15)** skirts the SE and E side of the capital city on its way to Kotaik marz and Abovian (38 km).

There is a **state road (H8)** parallel to the (M2), which passes through villages between Yerevan and Ararat, where it joins the (M2). It has roughly the same distances between points as the (M2).

The **(H10) highway** begins at a point about halfway between Artashat and Ararat at Vosketap and leads to Vedi (7 km), Urtsadzor (8 km), Shoghap (9 km) and Lusashogh (12 km) before rejoining with the (M2) at Urtsalanj (13 km), about 4 km before Zangekatun.

A spur road that links villages along the Turkish border is **the (H11)**, which begins at Pokr Cedi and then proceeds to Lusarat (2 km), Yeghegnavan (3 km) and Noyakert (3 km) before rejoining the (M2) (4 km).

In the northwest, **the (H12)** leads from the (M2) at Aintap just outside Yerevan to Massis (6 km), then SW to Ranchpar (12 km) before entering Armavir marz (3 km) and tracing the Turkish border to the (M3) (12 km).

Also on the north is **the (H13)** which departs from Massis and heads NW to Armavir (16 km) and then to Voskehat and Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin, 3 km).

In the NE, a patchwork of roads wind towards the **Azat Reservoir and the Garni gorge**, the most popular road being from Massis/M2 east to Marmarashen (1 km), J'rashen (4 km), Ditak (500 m) and Arevshat (3 km) where it joins a N road to Lanjazat (4 km) and the dam for the reservoir.

Other NE roads are the **Verin Dvin-Khosrov** and the **Norashen-Narek** roads that lead to the Khosrov Reserve. Both deteriorate into paths as they approach the reserve, requiring Jeep or other 4x4 vehicles to use.

The **Vedi-Urtsadzor road** leaves the N end of Vedi and travels E to Urtsadzor (8 km), where a NE roads leads towards a N turn (8 km) that in about 1.4 km leads to a L valley and the Grigor Marzpetuni Castle. Continue E on the main road you reach the Vedi gate to the Reserve (3.5 km).

Public Transport

Public transport includes intercity buses and minivans (Marshrutni Taxis) that travel from village to village and village to city; and taxis / hired cars with drivers. Most villages and all towns have some kind of taxi service.

Buses (Aftobus) connect the region with Yerevan (Central Train Station/Sassuntsi Davit Metro) via Artashat City (200 AMD), Ararat city (350 AMD), Vedi (350 AMD), Yeraskhavan (350 AMD), Norashen (300 AMD), and Arevshat (330 AMD).

Intercity/Inter-village buses (those diesel belching, dirty orange bombs that ply the roads and crowd cars off their lanes) depart bus stops in Massis, Artashat, Vedi and Ararat and link to each other and points between. Villages are normally linked via marshrutni taxis (minivans).

Minivans (Marshrutni Taxis) connect the region with Yerevan (behind Kino Rossiya bus stop) via

Massis (150 AMD), Artashat city (200 AMD), Vedi (400 AMD) and Ararat city (400 AMD), along with Khor Virap (350 AMD),

From Yerevan (Central Train Station/Sassuntsi Davit Metro), minivans ply the roads to Artashat (250 AMD) and Urtsadzor (400 AMD).

Inter-village minivans connect Massis, Artashat city, Vedi and Ararat city with each other and villages in between and around each central point. Minivans run mornings and evenings, ask around for times, departure spots and fees.

Taxis/Cars with drivers can be hired in Massis, Artashat city, Vedi and Ararat city and at many villages. Most welcome excursions (half and full-day trips), even on short notice. Figure 100-150 AMD per kilometer plus something extra for stops; or negotiate a day rate of around \$20-40, for up to four passengers. If you stop for food, feed the driver as well.



OVERNIGHT/EAT ▲

Lodging Ararat has a few overnights, most of them restaurant-hotels/motels congregated on the (M2) between Yerevan and Massis and at Artashat. Others are in Vedi and Ararat city.

Hotels/Motels

Massis has a few restaurants-hotels around the town and on the short drive to Yerevan; 5000 AMD for five hours or 10,000-30,000 AMD per night.

The (M2) has a couple of by-the-hour spots near Artashat city, and there is another inside town; 5000 AMD per five hours or 10,000-30,000 AMD overnight. Artashat city also has a soviet hotel (2500-5000 AMD).

Vedi has a filthy Soviet hotel (they should pay you to stay there) and a couple of restaurants with private bedrooms (5000 AMD for five hours or 10,000 overnight).

Ararat city has a Soviet hotel in town (2500-7500 AMD for rustic digs) and a hotel-restaurant on the other side of the Square (10,000-25,000 AMD).

B&B-Home stays, which can be rustic but full of local hospitality, can be found at villages and towns throughout the marz. 3000-4000 AMD for basic room and breakfast is fair (toilet may be out back). Venues include Massis, Artashat city, Vedi, and Ararat city (mostly apartments), and home stays at the villages of Norashen & Hnaberd (Dvin excavation), Lanjazat (Azat Reservoir/Garni Gorge), Khor Virap, Urtsadzor (Khosrov Reserve and Vedi valley), Armash (birding spot), Shaghap (Selav valley), Lusashogh (S. Karapet monastery), Urtsalanj and Zangekatun (Paruir Sevak museum, Vayots Dzor).

Camping can be had throughout the marz (except along the Turkish border), near villages and in wilderness areas. The best camping is inside the Khosrov Reserve or on the Vedi and Selav Valleys near the reserve. The Selav valley flows from Urtsadzor SE to the Urtsalanj, following the Urtsadzor Mountain Range. There are few villages and plenty of open space between.

Camping on the Ararat Valley is possible near villages and near birding spots (Armash and Sis especially), but note there is not much tree cover, except in cultivate orchards—ask first.

Other good camping can be had at Azat reservoir, which includes the bonus of swimming and boating (locals have boats and are willing to escort you for a small fee), and the hot springs and mud baths on the SE shore.

Another good valley (though without tree cover) is on the Mt. Yerakh valley, which has a small mineral pool and in May, crops of wild Iris on the steep hills.

One of the most spectacular spots to camp is just off the (M2) as it climbs the mountain passes to Vayots Dzor. Hills are very steep but you can find spots off the highway (and its noise) at several spots. Among the most beautiful (with friendly folks) are at Tigranashen (the valley is incredible, with great spelunking in its caves) and Zangekatun.

Before setting up camp, be sure you are not trespassing on private property, especially if you

are close to a village or farm. Ask and you will almost certainly be given permission—and probably food, drink and an evening of stories into the bargain.

Details for lodging are listed in individual [Day Trips](#) (p. 16).



Eating out

Eating out in Ararat is available at roadside stands, restaurant-hotels and cafes in Massis, Artashat city, Vedi and Ararat city and on the (M2) highway between Yerevan-Massis-Artashat-Ararat-Yeraskh.

There is also great eating to be found at roadside fruit and fish stands in the S end of the (M2), with luscious home grown tomatoes, melons and peaches vying for your appetite with “Mets Dzuk” (“Big Fish”) shops that let you choose your squirming main course right out of a fish tank. Most sell to those wanting to grill on their own, but some will do the whole thing with trimmings for you (around 5000 AMD per person for a fish dinner).

Other dining spots include cafes or restaurants near Khor Virap, Armash and between Massis and Yerevan city limits.

Massis, Artashat city, Vedi and Ararat city have shukas, mterks and kiosks selling food, drink and candy. Most villages have kiosks and mterks.

Water Reliable bottled water is available at mterks and restaurants throughout the marz. Freshwater springs are also in every village and town, usually in the center. They are considered safe by locals, and we have never had a problem with one, but you need to use your own judgment and don't drink out of a cup that's not yours and has been used before.

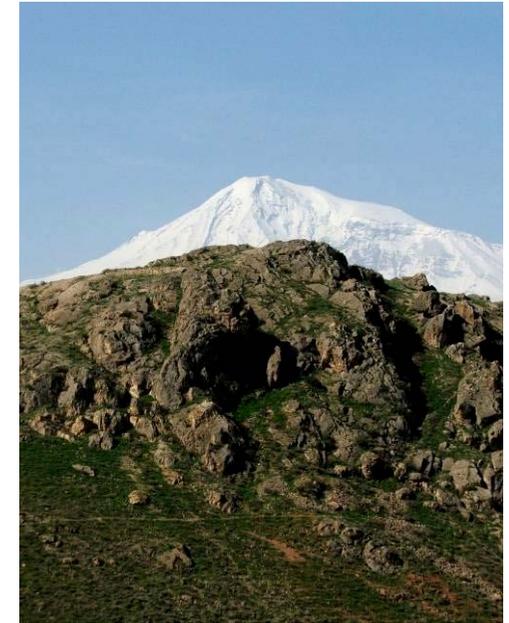
DESTINATIONS ▾

Armavir's main destination is Khor Virap/Artashat; among the most visited spots in Armenia. The pit at Khor Virap is believed by the faithful to be where Grigor Lusavorich languished for 13 years for refusing to worship a Pagan deity. The pit is inside the 2nd c BCE – 335 capital of Armenia, its hills strewn with pottery shards and pieces of Hellenistic artifacts. Next is the excavation and museum of Dvin, capital of the country for about 1000 years (335-mid 14th c). Others include the Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, the Khosrov Preserve and the S. Karapet Monastery, all on the Vedi/Selav River valleys between Vedi and Vayots Dzor.



Picturesque locales include the view of Mt. Ararat from Khor Virap (take photos from the monastery platform, and then hike up to the top of the next hill for incredible views of the mountain and the monastery)—come at dawn for a magnificent sunrise. Others are the Armash fishponds in the evening sun; the Azat Reservoir; Garni Gorge; the entire Selav Valley (Vedi to Zangekatun); the valley around S. Karapet Monastery with its Yezidi summer camps and alpine terrain; The stretch of the (M2) around Tigranashen and Zangekatun, the Tukhmanuk Pass; the Mt. Yerakh (“Iris”) Valley and Goravan Sands Preserve.

Some of the most spectacular scenery is in the Khosrov Reserve, especially the entrance from Vedi, the Grigor Marzpetuni Castle valley, and the Azat River Valley. Especially noteworthy are the --caves, Aghjots Vank, Kakavaberd, Mets Gilanlar and Baiberd, Havuts Tar and the forests on the Azat, Khosrov and Vedi Rivers.



Prehistoric sites include lower level excavations at Dvin, Norabats, Jrahovit, Artashat, Gevorg Marzpetuni Castle, Aigevan, Ararat, S. Karapet and Urtsalanj.

Bronze and Iron Age sites in Ararat include Dvin, Artashat, Norabats, Jrahovit, Ararat and Urtsalanj.

Urtanian sites in Ararat include the lower layers of Artashat, Dvin, and at forts near Norabats, Jrahovit, Aigevan, Ararat and Urtsalanj.

Hellenistic sites in Ararat include excavations of Artashes' “joy” of Artashat, sublevels of excavations at Norabats, Jrahovit, and Dvin, and the main hill of Urtsalanj.

Artashesian-Early Christian sites are at Artashat and Khor Virap and underlying foundations for churches at S. Karapet monastery, Urtsadzor, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Lusashogh and Urtsalanj.

Dvin Era/medieval sites include the excavated city and museum of Dvin, the monastery of S. Karapet in the Selav/Urtsadzor valley, and churches, monasteries and medieval sites at Khor Virap, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Urtsadzor, Mankunk, Shaghap, Lanjanist, Lusashogh, Urtsalanj, and the Khosrov Reserve sites of Havuts

Tar, Kakavaberd, Aghjots Vank, Baiberd, Gilanlar and Vanstan.

19th/Early 20th c sites include churches at Dimitrov, Berkanush, Baghranian, Dalar, Mrgavan, and Khor Virap village.

Ethnic villages include Dimitrov, where one of the last populations of Armenian Assyrians live and several Yezidi villages near Khosrov Reserve.

NATURE TOURING ▲

Natural areas are few and far between on the Arax River plain (this is an agricultural area with intensive farming), but Sis and Armash have large fish ponds that are popular with migratory water fowl. Otherwise the area is known for its tasty produce. The more wild areas are on the other side of the Urts Mountains, NW and SE of Vedi, especially along the Selav River, which has large open spaces between its few villages.

The most famous nature area is the Khosrov Reserve, the largest reserve in the country. The reserve is home to about half of Armenia's flora and much of its fauna species, many of which are endangered. Permission is required to enter, easily had through an adventure tour operator (see Yerevan travel agents listing or one of the [adventure tour operators](#) on p. 15 of this chapter). 1-3 day hiking and camping trips can be arranged, well worth it for nature fans. There is more about the Khosrov Reserve in [Trip 5](#) (p. 51).

Hiking and trekking Ararat has great hiking trails in the Khosrov Reserve and along the upper Vedi River and the Selav River. Others are the Mt. Yerakh ("Iris") valley from Vedi to the Artashat canal and Azat Reservoir (20 km); the Azat reservoir shoreline (5-10 km); Garni Gorge from Azat Reservoir to Garni (14 km); the Goghiti River from Garni to Geghard (8 km); and 1-3 day hikes inside the Khosrov Reserve, visiting Havuts Tar and Aghjots Vank monasteries, and the medieval ruins at Baiberd, Mets Gilanlar, Kakavaberd and the Azat Caves, among many choices.

Suggested hikes and treks are detailed in [Natural Armenia](#) (p. 9)

Mountain treks Most of Ararat's mountains are in the east of the marz: The main ranges are the Geghama, which divides Ararat from Gegharkunik marz (lake Sevan) and the Urtsadzor, which divide the upper marz from the Arax River plain. The tallest is Mt. Geghasar (3443m) in the far NE end of the marz, part of the Geghama Lehr Mountain Range. Just south of Geghasar are Mts. Ughtasar (3170.7m) and Tsaghkavet (3076m), while N and

NW are Mts. Vishapkar (3157.7m) and Yeragaget (2589.6m). Just E of Azat Reservoir is Mt. Yeranos (1823.7m). Others in the Khosrov Reserve are Mts. Manukunk (2932.1m) and Khosrovakar (1988.3m). Central marz mountains include Mts. Yerakh (1418.5m), Alsar (1853.9m), Andasar (2292.8m) and Kotutssar (2061.5m) which looks over the Grigor Marzpetuni Castle. Mountains in the south of the marz include Mts. Urts (2445.9m) and Dahnak (2534.9m), Mt. Gndasar (2946.7m) on the Vayots Dzor border, and Mts. Dashburun (1210m) and Khunut (2065.8m) on the Nakhichevan border.

Flower Watching Some flowers begin to bloom as early as late March in protected areas like river canyons and marshlands, but the main blooming season waits until April and May, with peak blooms in the east between mid-April to mid-May. Best places to look are all along the (M2) highway between Artashat city and Yeraskh, with most of the poppies and wild flower fields coming to bloom close to Armash. Other places are the Goravan Sands preserve in May, the Yerakh ("Iris") valley in May, the mountain pass by Tigranashen, and the rail line near Yeraskh. Alpine flowers bloom from April to June in the Selav River valley, especially between Shaghap and Lusashogh. For a list of flowers [see Flora](#) (on page 5)

Birding Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migrating birds, especially water fowls, which will congregate at the marshlands and ponds around Sis and Armash. Other marshes are around Khor Virap/Artashat, Lusarat, Yeghegnavan and Noyakert, near the Turkish border. Azat Reservoir in the N of the marz is another good birding spot, combining wetland, mountain steppe and alpine terrains. The Khosrov Reserve is also good, especially for Mountain cliff, woodland and semi-desert species. See [Birds](#) (on page 6) and [Resources](#) (on page 57).

Adventure Tour Operators ▲

Haik Melkonian, tel. 091-71-73-82, email: ajdahag@yahoo.com, organizes hiking/climbing/camping trips in Armenia with his team of professionals. The group specializes in Mt. Aragats and the Geghama Lehr, especially Mt. Ajdahak, with its unique eco-system, Crater Lake and petroglyph-covered stones. They also service nature trips throughout the republic. Melkonian is also a professional photographer, whose photos grace the pages of Erivan magazine.

Avarayr Adventure Tours, (tel. 010 56 36 81, 52 40 42, Fax: 010 56 36 81), 1 Pavstos Biuzand p., Yerevan, E-mail: avarayr@arminco.com, URL:

www.avarayr.am/ has been arranging cultural and adventure tours to Armenia for more than 12 years, one of the first to provide fully equipped hiking, climbing and adventure tours. Tours include expert guides, cooks and support staff for all tours. Tours run the gamut from hiking and climbing in the wilderness to cultural visits for the more comfort-minded. Their best seem to be tours that combine both aspects. A good, solid company.

One of the most experience mountain climbers in Armenia is **Andrey Chesnokov**, (tel. 010 57 67 57), 10 Vardanants St., Apt. #49, Yerevan, Armenia 375010, email: ruzan@aua.am, who has climbed most of the mountains in Armenia and is a recommend, reliable guide.

Armenia Green Cross Ecological NGO ("AGCE"), 14-10 Batumi, Vanadzor (tel. 0-322-24066, fax. 58449, mob. 093-32-32-84) is a local NGO that provides eco-tours as part of its mission to preserve and enlarge ecologically vital areas of the country. Eco-tours are expert-led hiking, climbing and camping tours, including hiking and climbing equipment, tents, sleeping-bags, emergency and first aid facilities and the services of their professional rescue group (EU certification).

The Armenian Mountain rescue teams "Spitak" (tel: 010 35 00 06), 50 Halabian p., Yerevan, email: spitak@yerphi.am, moon.yerphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm, stationed in both Yerevan and Stepanavan, can organize hiking, rock climbing and mountain expeditions. Guides are experienced rescuers-rock climbers, and they can also arrange horse riding along picturesque routes, by a horse cave and "Ancient Armenian horse games."

The Eco-Tour Center (tel. 010 27 87 28 / 27 40 12), 2 H Hakobian St. apt. 22, 375033 Yerevan, Armenia, email: zhanna@netsys.am, www.ecotourismarmenia.com, arranges nature tours, climbs and camping, as well as birding, flower watching and other nature tours. Contact Zhanna.

Hike & Go, (tel. France (+33 6) 88 34 04 11, local cell: 091 20 41 38), email: info@hikeandgo.com an adventure travel group operating out of Armenia and France (English spoken) is an interesting group that features tours of Armenia combining traditional touring with hiking into Armenia's wilderness and off-the-beaten-path monuments, some of which can only be reached by hiking. [See web site \(www.hikeandgo.com/\)](http://www.hikeandgo.com/)

AdvenTour Travel (tel. 010 53 96 09, cell.: 091 42 67 45), Email: adventour@netsys.am, URL: www.armeniaexplorer.com, 39 Pushkin p., Yerevan, Armenia, 375002, arranges adventure, birding, botanical and historic tours.

Oxalis Tours, (tel. UK (+44 20) 78 70 80 37, USA (+1 201) 984 1420; Fax: (+44 20) 76 81 31 31) 68 Landseer Road, London N19 4JP UK, URL: www.oxalis-adventures.com/armenia/index.php provides trekking, climbing and botanical tours to Armenia, specializing in combining off-the-beaten paths with primary sites. They hire expert guides from in and out of the country and provide full tour services. Worth looking into, well organized.

Flower Tours

Professor Nora Gabriellian is the preeminent expert on Armenian and Transcaucasian flora, having personally discovered several new species of endemic flowers in Armenia, the latest in 2006. She is the author of the upcoming Field Guide to Armenian Flowers, the culmination of 50+ years work in the field. This seventy-something still out-hikes the fittest members of her tours and combines expert data with humor, enthusiasm and great good will. She is not easy to book (she continues to do her research and is not for the casual tourist), but if you can arrange for her to take you on a 1 to 8 day flower tour, you will be amazed at the flora that abounds this country. She doesn't have a travel agency but contact her through her daughter Mariam (also widely respected for her botanic work) who can check her schedule and make arrangements. (m_agababian@hotmail.com).

Archeological Tours ▲

MassTour (tel./fax. 010 27 78 32), 8 Komitas, Yerevan, e-mail: info@masstours.com, URL: www.masstours.com, specializes in archeological tours and participation in archeological digs supervised by working archeologists. Projects include the Urartian fortress of Erebuni (Arin Berd), forerunner of present day Yerevan, the Bronze Age temple-city of Agarak, Bronze-Iron Age tomb field of Aghavnatun, Paleolithic caves in the Kasakh River Canyon near the village of Apnagiugh, guided visits to the petroglyphs in the Geghama mountain range. They also run tour packages with expert guides. Excavation packages begin from \$750/week for full service land-expeditions.

See [Resources](#) (p. 57) for more Archeological options.

EXPLORING THE REGION ▲



Each trip will take probably a half day at most for most tourists and it can be easily paired with any of the other trips in Ararat for a full day excursion. We have made the “mad-run” by including sites from all 5 day trips in one day, beginning at dawn and ending at dusk. You can do it, but your eyes will be blurry: Best to divide into two days to more leisurely see something from each trip, or pick the most popular from each.

A “Greatest Hits” day trip would begin at dawn in Khor Virap/Artashat, go to Dvin, then proceed down the Arax river to Yeraskh, looping up to Tigranashen and Urtsalanj and traveling the Urts valley to S. Karapet, Urtsadzor, Gevorg Marzpetuni Castle and Vedi, then back to the (M2) and Yerevan. Any visit to Khosrov Preserve is a 1-3 days trip and requires permission and an expert guide.

Sites in UPPER CASE are considered sites definitely worth a stop, while those in (*lower case italics*) have value in visiting, but it will probably take up more than a day to see if you include them all in one trip. Bear in mind that no matter how “close” a site seems to be on the map, it might be reached only via a rocky path or pot-hole filled road, and could take 30-45 minutes to get reach.

-  camping possible
-  overnight
-  food and drink
-  thermal, mineral spring

TRIP 1: NORTHWEST ARARAT ▲

(Yerevan) - (Norabats) - (Ghukasan) - **MASIS** - (Sis) - (Marmarashen) - (Jrahovit) - (Arevshat) - **LANJAZAT (AZAT RESERVOIR/GARNI/KHOSROV RESERVE)**

Trip 1 explores the NW section of the marz around Massis, an area of rich alluvial farmland, marshes and fish ponds on the Arax River plain. The region is made up of carefully cultivated farm fields (most still tilled by hand), a spider web of irrigation canals and channels, and the occasional low hill, which brows hold the remains of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements.

An extension of the rich fields to the NW in Armavir, Ararat marz belonged to the same ancient cultures that shaped the history of the Near East: the Indo-European, Metsamor and Araxes-Kura cultures that sprang forth the Iranian, Indian and Anatolian cultures which evolved into their Bronze Age counterparts. The “spectacular” finds are in Armavir, but that is probably more because they were the focus of well-funded excavations during the late Soviet period, not because there is little to find here. Strike any hill in this region and you will find something older than Moses. As new excavations begin, Ararat is expected to produce findings even more incredible than those already uncovered at Metsamor and Adablur to the north.



Stay: Hotels, restaurant-hotels and motels on the (M2) between Massis and Yerevan, Yerevan itself, guest houses/apts. in Massis; village homes (rustic) throughout the region; camping around the fishponds at Sis and near villages (no forest cover).

Eat: Restaurants & cafes on the (M2) and Massis; restaurant-hotels on the (M2) and Massis; mterks and kiosks in Massis and villages.

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, Massis and Sis.

➡ From Yerevan's Sassuntsi David train station, continue south to the rail underpass turn that leads to the Arax valley—instead, continue straight for about 900 m to Erebuni Airport, turning right at the roundabout and continuing for another 1.8 km to the next major intersection, turning L and into the Nerkin Charbakh neighborhood with the Karmir Blur rail station about 650 m SW. Continue SW on the same road for about 3.2 km to the L (SE) Massis highway—do not turn here, but continue another 50 m to the Norabats village turnoff (L) and a final 1 km to a R (NW) turn that leads to

the school in central (**Norabats**, DD 40.10741 x 44.43418, elev. 863m)   

SIDE TRIP: Norabats – Նորաբաղ (formerly Yengija, pop. 990) is set on fertile plains just SW of Yerevan. Were it not for Massis region's reputation as a mosquito-infested swamp, the village would already have been overrun by oligarch dachas. As it is, the village lives blissfully on as a farming community that is in fact relatively mosquito free (myths die hard).

On the road in from Yerevan you passed a low brow that is the site of a **Paleolithic/early Bronze Age settlement**. The excavation is covered over, but locals say artifacts “pop up” during the spring thaw and after heavy rainfall.

To the S of the village there are the important **Neolithic ruins of “Yengija” or “Massis Blur”**, with Soviet dating to 6000-4000 BCE, newer timelines suggesting it might be 7000 or 8000 BCE in origin; among the first settlements in the region. Like its sister excavation to the north, the excavation has scant remains.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

➡ From the school in Norabats, take the NW exit road to the Yerevan road, turn L (W) and for about 1 km to northern Darakert and the R (N) road and another 2 km to central (**Ghukasavan**, DD 40.12530 x 44.41522, elev. 852m)   

SIDE TRIP: Ghukasavan – Ղուկասավան (till 1949 Kalali, pop. 900) official population of 2125 is belied by the actual size; 4 streets of houses with large greenhouses in their backyards. As with almost all the villages we have visited, what is official and real are two different things. Despite its prosperity from raising produce and flowers for market in Yerevan, half the population makes much more in Russia or the west, sending remittances to their families back home.

The village is named for a founder of the Armenian Communist movement, **Ghukas Ghukasian** (1899 –1920). Ghukasian became Marxist while a student, joining the Bolsheviks in 1917. In 1919 he became a representative of young Bolshevik Armenians at organizing conventions in Tiflis, and was sent to Kars in February 1920 to prepare for the May uprising.

It was there he was Killed in battle with the authorities on 14 May.

Mainly in his honor, a (derelict) Comsolom Museum was founded in the village in 1970. Closed but ask around and someone can stir up a key.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Ghukasavan backtrack to the Massis highway north of Norabats, turn R (SE) and continue for about 5.5 km to the L (E) turnoff to **MASIS** (DD 40.06592 x 44.43626, elev. 834m)   

MASIS

(DD 40.06592 x 44.43626, elev. 834m)

 **MASSIS - ՄԱՍԻՍ (Մասիս)** ▲ (formerly the Kurdish villages of Zangibasara, Marimanlu and Ulukhanlu, pop. 10,000) has survived better than many towns by its proximity to Yerevan, residents able to take minibuses and buses to the big city to work. Still, it lost 40-50% of the population when its textile mills and light industrial factories closed in the 1990s. Once the largest rail center in the south Caucasus, the town's rusting warehouses await peace and the opening of the borders.

Other than long blocks of dilapidated apartment buildings (the town “boasts” over 70 five-story buildings), a town square, shuka and a couple of cafes, there is almost nothing to see or do in town. Massis is the closest town to Mt. Ararat, which can be seen from any spot in town, and at night one can see the lights of Kurdish villages and Turkish army depots on the mountain ridges.



PRACTICALITIES ▲

Area Code: 236
 Long Distance: 0236 + local number
 From abroad: + (374) 236+ local number
 Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel (Beeline), 093/094 VivaCell (MTS)
 International callers: Armentel/Beeline + (374) 91 + number, VivaCell-MTS + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0236) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 236 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Train

Elektrichka trains connect Massis with Yerevan, originating at the Central Station in Yerevan, arriving at the main station in Massis. The Elektrichka leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the afternoon. Tickets at 250-500 AMD makes this one of the cheapest ways out of Yerevan.

By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minivans (marshrutni taxis) connect Massis with Yerevan, Artashat, Vedi, Ararat, and villages in the marz. Intercity buses stop at Massis on their way to Vayots Dzor and Siunik (ask around town for exact time). The bus station is by the train station.

Buses Buses to Massis from Yerevan depart from the Bus Stop behind Kino Rossiya at Agathangelos (150 AMD) and arrive at the Massis bus stop. Buses from Massis include those to Artashat (150 AMD) and Ararat (250 AMD). The small orange buses include villages in the region and cost around 100-150 AMD each trip. Most leave the villages in the morning and return in the evening.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop at the train station. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Massis Minivans connect to Yerevan (150 AMD, Kino Rossiya bus station), Artashat (150 AMD), Ararat (250 AMD), Vedi (250 AMD), and Echmiadzin (250 AMD).

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it is cheaper.

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Massis at 100-150 AMD per kilometer with a 600 AMD minimum charge. Taxis should charge 1500-2250 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone (1500-2250 AMD). Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we used Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

By Car (note: distances are from point to point) Massis is off the (M2) highway at the intersection of the (H12) & (H13). The (M2) leads N to Yerevan (15 km), and SE to Artashat (14 km), then to Ararat (17 km), Yeraskh (18 km) before turning NE to the Urts Valley (H10, 9 km) and the Tukhmanuk Pass at Vayots Dzor (9 km). The

(H12) in Massis connects to the (M2) at Yerevan (6 km), and S/SW to the Armavir border (15 km), and the (M3) junction (13 km), which leads S to the Turkish border (6 km) and N to Vagharshapat/Echmiadzin (14 km). The (H13) in Massis heads northwest to Vagharshapat/Echmiadzin (12 km). From Massis it is 12 km to central Yerevan, 14 km to Echmiadzin, 14 km to Artashat, 31 km to Ararat, 49 km to Yeraskh, 93 km to Yeghegnadzor, 154 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 109 km to Vaik, 142 km to Jermuk, 177 km to Sissian, 206 km to Goris, 269 km to Goris, 295 km to Kadjaran and 335 km to Meghri.

AROUND

On foot is easy; the entire length of the town is only 2 km. Hiking the back roads around the town is also easy, though there is little tree shade on hot days.

Taxis Massis has plenty of taxis. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English). The general rate is 600 AMD anywhere in town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101
Police – 102, 67112
Ambulance service – 103
Rescue Hot Line - 118
Gas emergency service – 104
Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs

Massis is covered by both Armentel/Beeline and VivaCell-MTS (7/6 Arno Babajanian p.) mobile services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office*, [See HayPost site for list \(http://www.haypost.am/\)](http://www.haypost.am/). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegraphs.

Internet

ARMINCO has a local representative in Massis at 8 Araratian p. (Varsik Khachatryan, David Martirosyan), tel. 41711, e-mail: triline@arminco.com. They offer prepaid card service.

There is an Internet café in the town, and Internet Activity Center in the schools.

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks;
ACBA, 3 Central Square

ARDSHININVESTBANK, New District 3

Shopping

There are a few shops in town, though most go to Yerevan. Shops include mterks, souvenirs and clothing stores. Most are around the central square and its side streets. The Shuka and Yarmaka are in the center.

Film, etc.

Film can be bought at film developers and mterks. Batteries are suspect, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town.

Hospital, Polyclinic

There is a clinic in town. For a medical emergency, contact your lodging venue or go to Yerevan.

MASSIS CLINIC, tel. 42011

OVERNIGHT

Restaurant/Hotel-Motel

There are many RESTAURANT/HOTELS on the (M2) highway between Massis and Yerevan. Used mostly for hourly visits by couples (5000-10,000 AMD for 4-5 hours) they provide cheaper (and better-priced) lodging than in Yerevan. They are clean and have food service--delivered to your room or in a separate dining area. The decor is "different"-- titillating by their standards and can be as entertaining as the sounds next door. Seriously, this is a good option for budget tourists. 10,000-30,000 AMD for overnight DBL/STE.

Hotels can be found in each city of the marz. 10,000-30,000 AMD for overnight DBL/STE.

Boarding/Apartment

This is a possibility, though done informally, there are no organized rentals as yet. Ask around when you arrive. Apartments are mostly in the north side of the tracks, houses on the south side. 3000 AMD pp for B&B in clean space is fair. Be sure there is water and power.

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovats Grills, Srjarans and cafes, and restaurants/motels on the (M2). Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.



CONTINUE TRIP 1

➡ From Massis, take the S road towards Ranchpar for about 3.5 km and just across the Hrazdan River to R (NW) road that leads in about 3.3 km to the N entrance into central (Sis, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 

SIDE TRIP: Sis – Ufju (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) existed as a Turkish (Azeri) hamlet for most of its existence, and was emptied during the 1989-1991 population exchange with Azerbaijan. Residents now are largely made up of refugees from Baku. Other than its farming and the nearby ponds, the village is also renowned for its stunning views of Mt. Ararat.

Sis is next to a huge set of **Fish Ponds**, once part of a thriving Soviet industry that exported Armenia's prized Ishkhan and Sig fish to markets across the USSR. The industry was broken up in the 1990s, though it remains controlled by a few "fish moguls" in the overall economy. Some of the huge ponds are no longer used, their fertile soils used by local farmers for other crops.

Sis is one of Ararat's prime **Birding Sites**, with migratory water fowl stopping at the fish ponds each April-May and October-November on their way two and from their summer homes. For a list of birding fowl that might be sighted in the area, see [Birds](#) (on page 6).

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Sis backtrack to central Massis and take the east road out of town to the (M2), crossing over the highway into (Marmarashen, DD 40.05659 x 44.47031, elev. 841m) 

SIDE TRIP: Marmarashen – Սարսարաշեն (formerly Aghhamzalu, pop. 900), replaced its Armenian inhabitants for Turks in the 15th century, swapping back again in the mid 20th century as its Muslim citizens immigrated to Azerbaijan. The village is locally famous for a nearby marble quarry, which produces exotic varieties of stone for wealthy home owners in Yerevan.

The village has the new **S. Gevorg Church**, its medieval design making it look a lot older than its 2002 date. The domed cruciform church is made from honey-colored stone and has two khachkars (cross-stones) erected in memory to

victims of both the Genocide in 1915 and the earthquake on the 7th of December in 1988.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

- ➔ From Marmarashen take the S road (H8) for about 1.5 km to central (**Jrahovit**, DD 40.04486 x 44.47050, elev. 830m) 🏠 🏕️ 🌿

SIDE TRIP: Jrahovit – Ջրահովիտ (before Jabachalu, pop. 650) is one of a string of villages on the (H8) highway, its denizens deriving their incomes from the fertile plains.



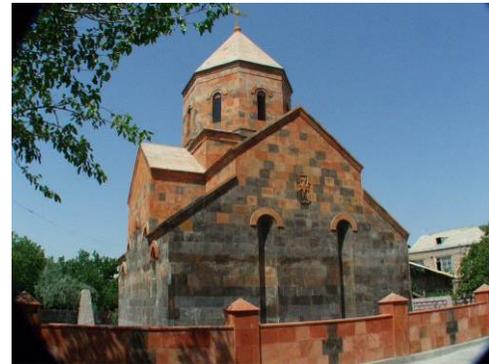
To the S/SE of the village there is a **Neolithic/Copper-Iron Age tell**. One of the most important excavations of the Bronze Age kingdoms in Armenia, Jrahovit's tell consisted of several deep strata of occupations, with stone structures built on top of the previous level of settlement. Artifacts included early Bronze Age pottery, a large collection of bones and sacrificial remains, and other utensils. Further excavations may show early Neolithic occupation, which would make the settlement one of the oldest in the region (ca. 7000-8000 BCE).

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

- ➔ From Jrahovit head S on the (H8) for about 2.5 km and past Arevabuir to a L (NE) street in Mrgavet that jogs R to another L (NE) road that in about 3.2 km turns sharply right into Ditak, and continues for another 2.8 km to central (**Arevshat**, DD 40.04401 x 44.54395, elev. 937m) 🏠 🏕️ 🌿

SIDE TRIP: Arevshat – Արևշատ (once Mets Armalu, then until 1945 Nerkin Aghbash, pop. 1000) is situated above low cliffs overlooking the right bank of the Azat River. Its name consists of two Armenian words: arev "sun" (in this context meaning "life") and shat "much" hence "long life" or "lasting". The sun was also the first Armenian god, so it can also be interpreted to mean "long life god" or "forever sacred". **BUT**, spend a day here in the August sun, and you will probably translate it as the locals do: "too much sun".

The village boasts a new **Astvatsatsin church**, a handsome domed cruciform building using black and red tufa stone.



Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

- ➔ From Arevshat take the NE road that leads in about –km 2.5 km to the SW entry to **LANJAZAT (AZAT RESERVOIR / GARNI GORGE)** (DD 40.05721 x 44.56759, elev. 961m) 🏠 🏕️ 🌿

🗨️ **LANJAZAT– ԼԱՆՋԱԶԱՏ (Լանջազատ)** 🏔️ (till 1940 Janatlu, then Zovashen, pop. 750) is set at the base of the dam for the Azat Reservoir, fed by the waters of the Azat and Goghthi Rivers, with hot springs on its southern shores.



The village is absolutely typical for Soviet Armenia, but the lake is worth a day trip on its own, located as it is at the mouth of the Garni Gorge, a wilderness area the leads past the 1st century Greco-Roman temple and Geghard monastery as it hems in the Khosrov Reserve. The river is the border between Kotaiik and Ararat marz.

The Young Man and the Sea

It was a long summer day. The clear blue waters of the lake lap softly against the rocks, stippled by jumping Tzknor, Sazan, Koghak, Carp and the rare Karmera Khait thrusting into the afternoon light. On the far side of the lake there was a large mound encrusted with mineral salts and traces of a natural spring while further up the scrub hill sat a caravan tent and a flock of sheep. And perched above the middle of the lake was a small house on piers. After a few echoing calls across the lake, one of the men on the far side waved and slowly made his way to the lake's edge. Soon a motorboat appeared with two men inside.

The men were Robert and Armen. Armen's taut body, sinewy arms and grizzled face made him look much older than his 25 years. Deep set eyes and a sun weathered face shone as he smiled and welcomed us on board for a tour of the lake, 'his home'. A few minutes later the boat landed on the other side, and we settled into a carved stone pool of water fed by mineral springs. The water was cold and rich, a natural salve for weary legs that just hiked 6 kilometers from Garni. Armen smiled and then called to a circling hawk, perfectly imitating a mating call. The hawk swerved in its flight and began to descend, swerving away just as it spotted the human source of the cry, furiously flapping its wings and shrieking in anger.

The peace and natural beauty of this area is hard to imagine when it is so close to Yerevan. Calling the city 'a place for machines', Armen seemed to thrive on the solitude of the lake. 'People are people,' he shrugged as he looked off to a jumping fish about to be entangled in one of the nets he set in the lake. "On the lake, everything is understood. I know my place." Robert nodded in assent. Neither spoke except when asked, then only after a deep silence, carefully considering the question.

Armen used to swim in the lake when he was a boy, and as soon as he completed his time in Karabakh, he and Robert decided they didn't want to go back to the city, they remembered the pristine world on the shores of the lake and decided to make it a home. Tending sheep on the far side of the lake, they also fish for a living, living in the tent or in the house set in the center of the lake.

Neither man had much to say about their time in Karabakh, it was "our duty and it was necessary," as Armen put it, and they would do it again if they had to. But a weariness in their faces showed as they spoke about their time as soldiers, a weariness of age too soon. I told him about the story "The Old Man and the Sea", and he quickly dubbed himself a "Young Man of the Sea," saying he had always loved the lake, diving and swimming in it when as a boy, that he and Robert got through the long winters in Karabakh by reminiscing about the lazy afternoons swimming and fishing by the lake, promising each other they would set up a fishing business at their boyhood lake. He proudly gestured at their private kingdom as he said, "we got our dream."

Neither man shunned companionship, they seemed to thrive on it and they welcomed visitors, repeatedly asking us to return with more guests--they had fish ready to fry, could build a campfire on the lake shore, and there is plenty of room on the pier for people to sleep. The offer was good for anyone who found their way to their little sea kingdom, "just call across the waters when you reach the reservoir's edge. We'll hear you." True hosts, they almost grew angry when we offered to help them out with the fuel for their motorboat.

But as we boarded the boat to return to the nature preserve and the temple of Garni, the sun set on the crystalline waters that formed diamonds of light on the canyons walls and underneath the pier, the sound of a gull hung in the air, and I thought that if this life was not perfect, it was the most nearly perfect these men could have made at that time; in the solitude of nature, in an island on piers in the center of a beautiful lake, by a campfire on a mountainside with each his own thoughts and the star studded night for companionship, free from the restraints of the other side, the side we call civilization.

⚡ AZAT RESERVOIR - ԱԶԱՏԻ Զրամբար (Ազատի ջրմբ.)

Azat Reservoir is a welcome respite after a day's hike, but beware its waters—fed by the ice cold springs bursting from the Azat River Canyon, even on the hottest day a dip in the lake will suck the breath out of most swimmers (the locals preferring to call it 'bracing'. I think 'nut-nesting' is more accurate). Shallower waters are warmer, but the deep are to be taken seriously.

Fishermen on the lake will take you to the other side, where a hot water **mineral spring** feeds a stone pool on a mound encrusted with mineral salts. Mud from the lake is considered medicinal, locals alternating from the mineral bath to the river to mud baths.

The reservoir became operational on May 31, 1977, supplying vital irrigation water for the Arax Valley. The reservoir is located at 1650m altitude,

and has a water volume of 70 billion cubic meters, held in by a 77 meter earthen and concrete sleeve dam. Like the rest of Armenia the reservoir lays in a seismically active zone, and in true Hollywood disaster flick verbiage, the UN Disaster Reduction Program has described that if the dam were to burst, 33 settlements, including Lanjazat village, would be washed away by 40 meter tall wave with a velocity of 67 kilometers/hour. The water would reach Lanjazat in a time of one minute. Whew!

➡ A road departing from the NE of the village winds its way in switchbacks over the northern shores of the lake and enters **Garni Gorge**.  

⚡ GARNI GORGE - ԳԱՐՆԻԻ ԶՈՐ (Գառնիի ձոր)

Garni Gorge is one of Armenia's natural wonders and a favorite of locals for lazy summer days. The waters gushing from the basalt and granite cliff walls are ice cold, crystal clear and feed a unique ecosystem (as well as quenching much of Yerevan's thirst).



The gorge has a unique ecosystem with small forests, and sections of semi-desert, mountain steppe and xerophytes (dry condition) terrains. It also home to a number of rare and endangered animal species, including the exceedingly rare Persian leopard, which has been known to come down to the river to drink at night once or twice. Other fauna in the preserve include Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Wild cat (*Felis silvestris, ornata* group), Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), Stone marten (*Martes foina*), Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) Indian porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), European hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*)

Among the 67 types of **birds** registered in the Armenian Red Book are sixteen in the preserve, including Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures, Lammergeier, Golden and Lesser Spotted Eagles and Northern Goshawk.



Among other fauna, the gorge is host to a number of amphibians and reptiles, among them the **giurza**, a rare but extremely poisonous snake. The Garni Canyon is close enough to inhabited areas there is less chance of coming across one, but you can detect it by its sand colored to dark gray coloring and hexagonal shaped markings. If you do happen to spot any snake, simply stop. Snakes avoid contact with humans and take any chance to avoid confrontation.

Taking the north shore road into the gorge, you first reach a **dense forest**, in the midst of which are the **remains of a once thriving village**, now abandoned. Its citizens were forcibly removed to the canyon rim by revolutionists, and for a while residents hid in caves and rock outcroppings on Mt. Yeranos (1823.7 m), which plunges to the river edge on the other side, its slopes covered with rose-red, cream and violet slabs of marlaceous limestone. What are left of the settlement are a few white-washed walls standing alone in the thick underbrush and a chimney that juts defiantly into the trees.

The **forest** seems to be the most remote place on earth, with only the sounds of birds and a startled fox keeping company. Here the canyon grows wilder and more beautiful, with occasional meadows and fields of sweet hay and goldenrod covering patches of open land. In May the river swells and covers some of the natural path, but the terrain is easily navigated. About 3 km before Garni there is an **electric station and picnic area**.

From the picnic area to Garni, the gorge alternates between narrow gaps and wide open spaces. **The confluence** of the Azat River and the icy cold waters of the Goghthi River is another favorite picnic area, filled with summer trekkers and swimmers who dam up the rivers with small stones to create shallow pools. Above this spot is one of the most beautiful sights in Armenia: About 600 meters away and 300 feet above is the **temple of Garni**. In the morning it is yellow gold. In the evening it drips red with the setting sun.



Next is **Symphony canyon**, named for its spectacular rock formations, a series of perfectly cut diamond shaped granite, basalt, slag and andesite. The waters pouring from the rock crevices are naturally purified, and their springs have been siphoned off for delivery to Yerevan (and new bottled water that is ironically being sold in the same market the water comes free from people's taps).

Inside the canyon are the remains of a **16th c bridge**, its finely engineered arches at one time leading to a narrow road that surmounted the Geghama mountain range, ending at Lake Sevan.

Mountain Treks If you continue upriver past the bridge to the Khosrov Reserve (on foot only), you will reach in about 6 km Geghard Monastery (also in Trip 1 of the Kotaik marz chapter) and in another 17 km of mountain trekking, Mt. Vishapasar and in another 8-12 km the top of the Geghama Mountain Range and the pictogram fields between Mts. Nalsar and Azhdahak

For more details about Garni Gorge, see Kotaik chapter, Trip 1.

Camping is possible in the river gorge and along the lake shore (ask if people are nearby), and at the Hangestian Goti; **Overnight** in Garni (rustic,

3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** along river bed and across the lake.

➡ Taking the north shore path to Garni's far east side, continue about 1.5 km and past the Fish Restaurant to the bridge over the river and then heads back on the other side for another 800 m climb to the Garni Entrance to Khosrov Reserve (DD 40.1135 x 44.7427, elev. 1315m). 🏠 🌿

🌿 **KHOSROV RESERVE - ԽՈՍՐՈՎԻ ԱՆՏԱՌ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ԱՐԳԵԼՈՑ** ▲

Directly across from Garni temple are the Khosrov Mountains and the western entry to the **Khosrov Forest Reserve**. The reserve is one of Armenia's largest protected areas and its most unique, hosting dozens of rare or endangered species of insects, birds and mammals, including the Caucasian Bearded Goat and the extremely rare Persian Leopard.



Note: permission is required to enter the Khosrov Reserve. Locals in Garni or [Adventure Tour Operator](#) (p. 15) can arrange this and organize half-day to 3 day road, hiking and camping treks into the gorge.

The Reserve is covered in Trip 5 of this chapter, but sites that can be reached from the Garni gate include [Havuts Tar](#) (p. 52), [Baiberd](#) (p. 54), [Mets Gilanlar](#) (p. 55), [Azat Caves](#) (p. 56) and [Kakavaberd](#) (p. 56).

For more information see [Khosrov Reserve, Trip 5](#) (p.51).

➡ *Backtrack to the (M2) at Jrahovit or Yerevan.*
END OF TRIP 1



TRIP 2: ARTASHAT, DVIN ▲

(Yerevan/Lanjanist) – (Dimitrov) – (Baghramian) – (Berkanush) – (Dalar) – (Mrgavan) – **ARTASHAT CITY - DVIN** – (Verin Dvin) – (Khosrov Reserve: Narek entrance)



Trip 2 explores the north central valley, a swath of rich land from the Arax River to the northeast hills of the Khosrov Reserve. This area has historically been the home for Armenia's kings; the Artashesian and Arshakuni dynasties that gave the country its greatest glories and its Christian character. Known as Vostan (royal place), this central valley heartland bred centuries of power that bent the arc of history throughout the ancient world, from the introduction of Hellenism to the creation of the Armenian Empire that rivaled Rome to the fulcrum of ancient politics that became synonymous with the country's name.

And its capitals were here; at ancient Artashat a little south to Dvin to the royal forests of the Khosrov Reserve. It is hard to imagine as you drive through the irrigated fields and through dusty dilapidated villages, but what now exists is a poor reflection of the heartland that for close to 1200 years controlled the destinies of empires, religions and the forces of history.

Don't be fooled by the desert lands and sometimes desperate poverty; scratch the surface of any hill, no matter how low, and you will soon find the artifacts of a great culture, one of the richest and most refined in the ancient world.

The trip includes modern Artashat, capital of the marz, and the ruins of the ancient capital of Dvin, which reined over the fortunes of the Armenian kingdom for almost 1000 years. The center of commerce, politics and religion in the medieval kingdom, at over 150,000 people, Dvin (also

known as Dabil by Arabs and Duin by others) was the largest city on the Silk Road between the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, and the center for ceramics, metal and trade for the entire Near East.

Flower watching is quite good in the area (especially the uninhabited slopes above Verin Dvin), from April-May. Birding is good in the lowlands and bogs around village irrigation channels, and mountain steppes, from April through mid June.



Stay: Hotels, restaurant-hotels and motels on the (M2) outside Artashat; a soviet style hotel and restaurant-hotel inside Artashat; informal guest houses/apts. in Artashat; village homes (rustic); Camping at Khosrov Reserve and near villages (no forest cover).

Eat: Restaurants & cafes on the (M2); in Artashat; mterks and kiosks in Artashat and villages.

Springs: freshwater cold springs in all villages and Artashat; mineral and freshwater springs in the Khosrov Reserve.

➔ If you are starting from the end of Trip 1 (Lanjazat), backtrack to Mragavet (H8) and head SE for about 2 km to central Dimitrov.

Or if you are starting from Yerevan's south border, head S on the (M2) for about 12.6 km from to the exit for (Dimitrov, DD 40.00695 x 44.48945, elev. 842m) 

SIDE TRIP: Dimitrov – Ղիփրոլ (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) is one of a handful of villages inhabited by Assyrians, a tiny minority in Armenia (and not much larger in the rest of the Near East). Once on the greatest empires on earth, the Assyrian Empire thrived during two periods; the 3rd-2nd millennia BCE and then in the late Iron Age, coexisting and warring with the Urartian forebears of the Armenian people.

There is some scholarship that the Assyrians and proto-Armenians are related, and certainly the Urartians and later Yervandunis found much in common with the Assyrian empire, using their cuneiform and customs, as well as sharing concepts for design and religious worship. Assyria collapsed in the 605 BCE, exhausted by 200 years of warfare with Urartu and encroaching rivals in Media and the Levant.

Afterwards, Assyrians (called "Asori" or plural "Arosiner" in Armenian), became a semi-

nomadic population, traveling from place to place as they sought a permanent home in inhospitable lands.

Converting to Christianity in the 1st century, they formed the base of the Syrian Christian church, which had great influence on the development of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Not only did they shape the original liturgy, when Grigor Lusavorich came to Armenia, he brought with him the Assyrian patriarch Hakob of Mtsbin (the first person in history who attempted to climb Mount Ararat), who assisted him in converting the country. Until the invention of the Armenian script, Assyrian (Aramaic) was the language of the Armenian church, read by Assyrian priests. Yet during the Arab period, the Syrian church almost died, fracturing into 7 sects.

Allied with Armenian tribes evicted from Anatolia by Arab, Seljuk and Turks invaders, Assyrians and Armenians dwelt in the area around Lake Urmia (Persia) for centuries. Those in Armenia today come from Assyrians in Urmia as well as others who resettled in Nakhichevan, peacefully co-existing with their Armenian neighbors, the two sharing the same Christian precepts (the Armenian Church liturgy derives in large from its Syrian counterpart).

Facing reprisals for supporting the Russians during the Persian-Russian war (1826-1828), Assyrians from Urmia escaped to eastern Armenia, given land grants by the Russian general Yermolov for services to the Tsar.

A second wave entered the country in the early 20th century, when those living side-by-side with Armenians under Ottoman rule in western Armenia (especially Hakkari district) followed their Armenian neighbors into eastern Armenia.

Their fate was a direct result of western power interference: A British mandate calling for the creation of an Assyrian state during World War I encouraged the Assyrian population to resist Arab and Persian domination, which, when the British pulled its support for an Assyrian State, ended in the death of 750,000 Assyrians (2/3 of the population) by Turkish, Arab, Persian, and Kurdish populations (the latter then suffering the same fate when they became victims in the genocide of 1937-1939). Ironically, the Armenian government has yet to recognize the Assyrian genocide, though none question it in the country.

Assyrians make up Armenia's third largest minority, at around 3500, about half their population in 1990. Officially protected and called almost blood-brothers to Armenians, in reality they face some discrimination by their hosts, including hazing in the army. This is ironic, since their kinship and shared history of faith and persecution is so close there is often intermarriage between the two groups, nearly always siding with Armenians in ties of strife and rebellion.

In part due to their uneven status, but mostly because of the country's deteriorated rural economy, most have migrated to Russia (Khazan), where there are larger Assyrian populations and a better chance at obtaining living wages. Worldwide there are some 4 million Assyrians.

Dimitrov looks like a typical Armenian village, its difference being the Assyrian culture center (small museum) and its annual Assyrian Culture Fair held each fall. The local church is close in form to Armenian style, though the services are Nestorian, which is in union with the Roman Catholic Church (and ironically not recognized by the Armenian Church, which has been accused of persecuting the Assyrian faithful). Village schools teach Aramaic, the language of Assyrians today, and that used by Artashes I to mark the boundaries of his kingdom in the 2nd c BCE.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Dimitrov head S on the (H8) for about 4 km and through the villages of Massis, Burastan, and Azatavan to (Baghramian, DD 39.97845 x 44.51483, elev. 835m) 

SIDE TRIP: Baghramian – Բաղրամյան formerly Bashnalu, pop. 700), like its neighboring villages, makes its living from farming the fertile Arax plain. The small village has a 19th century church that has been recently remodeled.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From central Baghramian continue S on the (H8) for about 800 m to the S entry to

(**Berkanush**, DD 39.97328 x 44.51876, elev. 828m)   

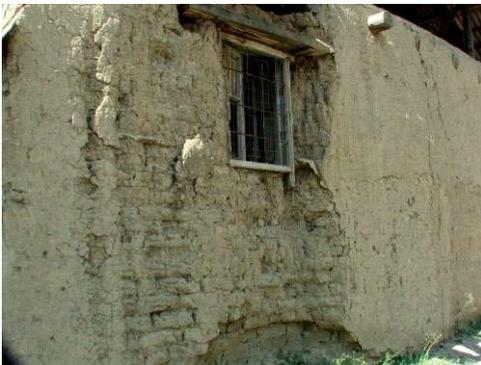
SIDE TRIP: Berkanush – Բերկանուշ (formerly Oghurbekli, pop. 800) also has a 19th century church that has been recently renovated.

The village, like Baghranian and Mrgavan, was once inhabited by Turks (Azeris) who left following World War II. They were also inhabited by Assyrians, who faced the Stalin's wrath following the war, many exiled to Siberia.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Berkanush, cross over the highway (NE) to (**Dalar**, DD 39.97565 x 44.52357, elev. 843m)   

SIDE TRIP: Dalar – Դալար (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) has a 1904 church. The village also has a nice spring sculpture, called “The Three Girls”.



Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From in front of the church in Dalar, head SE on the (H8) for about 500m to a L (NE) street and follow it for another 500 meters to a R (E) street for about 150 meters to a L (N) that ends at the church in (**Mrgavan**, DD 39.97312 x 44.53566, elev. 836m)   

SIDE TRIP: Mrgavan – Մրգավան (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) village boasts a

newly renovated 1903 S. Hakob church in its center.



The church has dedicated staff, including one of the nicest candle sellers we have met; she spent time telling us the history of the church, showing us around the small sanctuary while blessing us with every other word. No more remarkable than any other 19th/20th century church in the marz, this church still goes down as one of the nicest visits we have had to a church in Armenia. Since you pass it to get to Artashat and Dvin, you might as well make a stop yourself.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Mrgavan church, backtrack to the (H8) and continue SE for about 1.5 km to central **ARTASHAT** (DD 39.95540 x 44.54804, elev. 831m)   

ARTASHAT CITY ▲
(39.95540 x 44.54804, elev. 831m)

✠ **ARTASHAT CITY - ԱՐՏԱՇԱՏ Կ, (Արտաշատ Կ.)** ▲ (till 1945 Ghamarlu, pop. 10,000) is the modern incarnation of the ancient capital that lies about 10 km to the southeast. A village from ancient times, the modern city was founded in 1828-1829 by Armenians and Assyrians escaping persecution in Persia following the Persian-Russian War which resulted in Persia ceding control over Eastern Armenia to Imperial Russia.

The modern city has little to recommend it as a tourist stop, save its few eateries, a Soviet Hotel

(cheap but challenging) and a restaurant hotel near the city park. Artashat is convenient for exploring the marz, within 30 minutes drive of both Ararat and Vedi, and a good start and stop point for half-day explorations of the rest of the marz.

The town gets by on its position as the marz capital and through remittances from abroad. There are a few factories more or less working, but the local economy seems pretty depressed. The most prosperous concerns are the wineries and cognac factories (“Artashat Winery”, “Great Valley”) and a porcelain factory that makes tiles.



SITES

The **central square** is faced by the marzapet, town hall and the Soviet hotel.

Monuments

Near the Town Hall is a small **King Artashes I statue**, built for the founder of the old capital to the south.



Church

S. Hovhannes church was in the process of construction when we visited, and locals say it will be ready for 2008.

Culture

Arno Kharazian Theatre, located in the center, was once a breeding ground for Armenia's up and coming performers. They struggle to get by now, putting on the occasional production, but their fame remains in the past.

Charles Aznavour Art Center is where art, dance and cultural programs take place. If a folk dance performance is on, make appointment of seeing it and supporting the local culture.

There is also a **music school**.

Artashat University (tel. 23828) serves the local population and is where you can meet the city's youth and find out what they think of to do for fun. May be a good place to scope an overnight in a family home.

Park

The **City Park** was dedicated in 2004, and is probably the most popular local hangout, especially on summer evenings. The park includes a band shell, rose gardens and fountains, some working. It is located just beyond the restaurant hotel.

Other

The town has a **stadium**, popular with sportsmen who regularly compete (and often win) in countrywide competitions. Visitors are welcome to the field (weekend pick up games) and in the **gym**.

[MAP]

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 235
Long Distance: 0235 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 235+ local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel (Beeline), 093/094 VivaCell (MTS)
International callers: Armentel/Beeline + (374) 91 + number, VivaCell-MTS + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0235) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 235 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Train

Elektrichka trains connect Artashat (central station) with Yerevan (David Sassuntsi metro).

The Trains leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the afternoon. Tickets at 250-500 AMD makes this the cheapest way to Artashat.

By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minivans (marshrutni taxis) connect Artashat with Yerevan, Massis, Vedi, Ararat, and villages in the region. Intercity buses stop at Artashat on their way to Vayots Dzor and Siunik (ask around). The bus station is by the train station.

Buses Buses to Artashat from Yerevan (200 AMD) depart from the Bus Stop behind the central train station (M: Sassuntsi Davit) and arrive at the Artashat bus stop/train station. Buses from Artashat include those to Massis (100 AMD) and Ararat (100 AMD). Small orange buses connect to villages in the region and cost around 100-150 AMD each trip. Most leave villages in the morning and return in the evening.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop at the train station. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Minivans connect Artashat to Yerevan (Central train Station, 200 AMD, Kino Rossiya bus station, 250 AMD), Massis (100 AMD), Ararat (100 AMD) and Vedi (100 AMD).

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it is cheaper.

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Artashat at 100-150 AMD per kilometer with a 600 AMD minimum charge. Taxis should charge 2900-4450 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone for same price. Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we used Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

By Car (note: distances are from point to point) Artashat is on the parallel (M2) and (H8) highways. The (M2) leads N to Massis (14 km) and Yerevan (29 km), and SE to the (H10) connection (6 km) which leads to Vedi (6 km). From the (H10) the (M2) continues SE to Ararat (11 km) and Yeraskh (18 km) before turning NE to the Urts Valley (H10, 9 km) and the Tukhmanuk Pass at Vayots Dzor (9 km). From Artashat it is 29 km to central Yerevan, 11 km to Ararat, 34 km to Yeraskh, 79 km to Yeghegnadzor, 140 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 95 km to Vaik, 128 km to Jermuk, 163 km to Sissian, 192 km to Goris, 255

km to Goris, 281 km to Kadjaran and 321 km to Meghri.

AROUND

On foot is fairly easy; from top to bottom the city is 1 km long and about 3 wide, though the central district is barely 500m square.

Taxis Ararat has plenty of taxis. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English). The general rate is 500 AMD anywhere in town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101
Police – 102, 26881
Ambulance service – 103
Rescue Hot Line - 118
Gas emergency service – 104
Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs

Artashat is covered by both Armentel/Beeline (23/97 Augustos 23rd p.) and VivaCell-MTS (136a August 23rd p.) mobile services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office* (23/97 Augustos p.), [See HayPost site for list \(http://www.haypost.am/\)](http://www.haypost.am/). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegraphs.

Internet

ARMINCO has a local representative (Sokrat Hakhvertian), 19 Marx p., apt. 1, tel. 25756, email: artashat@arminco.com. They offer prepaid card service.

There is an **INTERNET CAFÉ** in the town and an Internet Center at *School #6*, 20 Marx Street, tel. 25707, 25708, email: vepraksia@hotmail.com.

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks:

ARDSHININVESTBANK, 15 Marx p.
ARMECONOMBANK, Atarbekian p.
CONVERSE BANK, 1 Kharatsian p.
UNIBANK, 1 Kharatsian p.

Shopping

There are a few shops in town. Shops include mterks, souvenirs and clothing stores. Most are around the central square and its side streets. The Shuka and Yarmaka are in the center.

Film, etc.

Film can be bought at film developers and mterks. Batteries are suspect, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town.

Hospital, Polyclinic

There is a hospital and clinic in town. For a medical emergency, contact your lodging venue or go to Yerevan.

ARTASHAT HOSPITAL, tel. 25537

Dentist

There is one dental clinic in town.

ARTSTOM STOMATOLOGICAL CLINIC, 11 Marx p, tel. 24767, e-mail: artstom@mail.ru



OVERNIGHT

Hotels/Motels

The Soviet relic **ARTASHAT HOTEL**, Central Square, still houses refugees along with tourist rooms. Run down, no service to speak of, but cheap with DBLs at 5000 AMD.

A **RESTAURANT/HOTEL** is in town. Used for weddings, celebrations and tête-à-têtes, the hotel welcomes tourists to basic, clean rooms in multi-story building with DBL/TRP at 10,000/25,000 AMD

Boarding/Apartment

This is a distinct possibility, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. Apartments are mostly in the north side of the tracks, houses on the south side. 4000-5000 AMD for B&B in clean space is fair. Be sure there is water and power.

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovats Grills, Srjarans and cafes, and restaurants/motels on the (H8). Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.

\$ = 1500 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks
\$\$ = 1500-2500 AMD
\$\$\$ = 2500 AMD or more

PARTEZ, center, is a small café off the main street. \$-\$\$

Café and Grill stands are also in town, serving grill, kebab and sandwiches. \$-\$\$



CONTINUE TRIP 2

➡ From Central Artashat, head back towards Mrgavan on the (H8) to the NE road on between Mrgavan and Dalar; turn R (NE) and continue for about 4.1 km to the outskirts of Verin Artashat, where a left street heads N for about 850 meters to another L that exits the village and takes you to a large hill and fenced area just before Hnaberd. You can alternately enter the village and make your way to the large roundabout, taking the NW spur that leads to the same place, the complex of **DVIN** (DD 40.00390 x 44.57773, elev. 937m) 🏰 🏠 🌊

🏰 **DVIN - ԴՎԻՆ** 🏰 (“hill” in middle Persian, classical name was Duin, or Dwin/Duin in ancient Armenian primary sources. Arabs referred to the city as Dabil; Greek: Δουσιος, Τισιον) is shockingly neglected for being one of the country's most important historic cities; for almost 1000 years Dvin was the capital of the aspirations of Armenians, Arabs, Byzantines, Seljuks, Persians, Ottomans and Georgian kings; each of which ruled over a part of its history.

They fought over its commerce and lusted after its treasures; it was invaded by legions and captured the imaginations of kings, emperors, shahs and Emirs.

Its fate was recorded by Arab, Greek and European historians and in its heyday it was one of the largest cities in the Near East, eclipsing the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and nearly so Cairo and Constantinople.

One of the most important cities in medieval times, little of its grandness will be found in the dusty hill and poorly kept excavations that lie on the edge of the Geghama Lehr. This is not to say you should skip Dvin; absolutely not! You simply need a little imagination to life what was one of the greatest cities on earth.

There is a small, worn museum with knowledgeable and friendly guides that somehow eke out a living at the site and are fanatic about protecting its remains. There are good artifacts from Dvin's Bronze Age, and enough fragments and broken columns to allow you to conjure a pretty good idea of how sophisticated the city once was.

Combine this with a visit to the Dvin Gallery at the State History Museum in Yerevan and you will be able to appreciate the size of this ancient city that reached upwards of 150,000 inhabitants, most of them craftsmen and artisans that enriched the Near East with their art.

During its entire history, the city was repeatedly destroyed (twice by earthquake) and rebuilt, creating a strata of history 7-8 meters thick; each layer of which was rich with examples of the way the people lived. Perhaps more than any other, the excavation at Dvin revealed a detailed picture of life at each step of its 1000 year history, from the lowly dweller and craftsmen to the caravans that enriched the city with trade and the loftiest pretensions of the ruling class and clergy.

BACKGROUND

Human remains from the Stone Age have been uncovered in the area and substantial settlements at the site date back to the early Bronze Age, commensurate with other Metsamor-Kura cultures on the Ararat valley (Metsamor, Mokhra Blur, Ada Blur, etc.). The early settlements thrived on trade, and metallurgy, given the large number of stone, copper and bronze objects found indigenous to the area and the outside world.

A rather remarkable prehistoric find are the large number of fertility figures displayed at the site, some believed to date back to the pre-bronze era. Dvin has a large collection of phallic stones excavated at the site, which in ancient times was located in a delta of mountain streams, so it is not unusual for a cult of fertility to have arisen there, though the more modest tourists might be a little shocked at the resulting phallic stones.

In the 3rd millennium BCE, a cyclopic stone fortress was erected at the site, which had grown into a significant regional center of trade and production. Even at the earliest, Dvin was already an important stop on an expanding network of trade routes that linked Anatolia and the Mediterranean coast with Central Asia. Like Metsamor, the site had a walled citadel (acropolis), where the palace and temples were located, surrounded by a necropolis of residential homes and services buildings. Ceramics and metal works

had reached a sophisticated level of development; black and red earthen ware with cosmic and water imagery is found here several hundred years before they became widespread in Anatolia and in the Mediterranean world.

By the Iron Age, the walled compound had been enlarged, especially by the Urartians, who used the fortress as a key defense in the Ararat valley, itself an Iron Age "super highway" for trade and invasions by neighboring tribes.

At the same time that Artashat was built, a Hellenistic settlement also appeared at Dvin, suggesting that, if it was not yet the capital, it at least had the pretensions and the means to imitate the great city to the south. Its purpose was still defensive, though, the fortress used to protect entry to the capital.



Dvin's emergence into the history books begins in 335, when after the Arax river shifted leaving the old capital at Artashat defenseless, the Arshakuni king Khosrov II (r. 330-338) moved the capital 20 km N to Dvin. This may well have been due also to the king's fondness for the hunt; his forebear Khosrov I so avid a hunter he ordered the planting of entire forests in the mountains just to the east, the royal hunting ground becoming the precursor to today's Khosrov Nature Preserve. Khosrov II enlarged the forests, establishing the Khosrov Forest, which stands to this day as the state-protected Khosrov Reserve.

The city became the seat of power for the Arshakuni dynasty and a major trade, crafts and cultural center for the country until its fall 1000 years later.

What the king called his new city is unknown; the word "Dvin" is a middle Persian word for "Hill", a name given to the city later in the 5th c. The city

prospered under Arshakuni rule, later reaching legendary fame as the wealthiest and most populous city east of Constantinople.

Khosrov's reign was short and that of his dynasty not much longer, as they succumbed to Roman/Sassanid pressure in the late 4th c, the two super powers dividing the kingdom between them. An ill-fated attempt to rebel cost the kingdom its autonomy and the Arshakunis their last king in 428, when the Sassanids took control of the eastern provinces, making Dvin the capital of their Armenian marzpanate (the origin of the current word "marz" for Armenia's 10 districts).

The city's fortunes grew again in the marzpanate period, its place on the Silk route by now secure, its artisans among the most sought after in the ancient world. Its fortunes rose yet again in the 470s when the Holy See at Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin) moved to Dvin, setting up a dual seat of power; the church in the lower plaza of the city, where the katolikos' palace and the great cathedral of S. Grigor were built; and that on the acropolis, from where the Sassanid marzpan (governors nominated by the Persian king) ruled.

The Marzpan had supreme power, but he could not interfere with the age-long privileges of the Armenian nakharars. The country enjoyed a great deal of autonomy; key positions were held by Armenian nakharars, as were the taxes and much of the administration.

There is little recorded about the city's involvement in the religious turmoil of the 5th century (when the Sassanid King Yazdgerd attempted to force the country to convert to Mazdaism) save its rallying point for battle by the besieged Catholics and the battle of Avarair (451), which decimated Armenia's princely houses, but none of it seems not to affected the city's trade or position, though the great cathedral was converted into a storehouse by the Sassanids.

The Sassanids, besieged by their own troubles, later made compact with the Armenians, whose princely houses revived enough to rise again against their overlords in 572, this time with Byzantine help, capturing the capital and killing the Persian Marzpan Suren. The cathedral burned and the uprising was quickly suppressed. Persians and Byzantines both fought over the country for the next 60 years, the Byzantines taking Dvin in 591 and 624.

According to Sebeos and the katolikos John V the Historian, Dvin was captured in 640 during the reign of Constans II and Catholicos Yezra, when

Arabs swept through the region, returning in later years to consolidate their control over the kingdom. On January 6th, 642, they stormed Dvin, slaughtering 12,000 of its inhabitants and carrying 35,000 into slavery.



The city struggled to hold out, hoping for Byzantine reinforcements, but eventually the city commander, Smbat, admitting he could no longer hold out against the "Ishmaelite horde", submitted to the Caliph Omar, consenting to pay him tribute. Smbat was soon replaced by the Muslim Othman (654).

The Arabs called the city Dabil and it became the capital of "Armenia" - the North administrative unit of Arab Caliphate, the seat for the Ostikan, or appointed Caliphate governor. Despite a series of Byzantine moves and Arab countermoves to recapture the country and the capital, it remained in Arab hands for the next 300 years.



Ever resourceful as craftsmen and traders, locals made the best of their situation, many learning Arabic, some converting, most taking advantage of

the new international trade routes the Arab Caliphate fostered to increase the wealth of the city immeasurably.

The Arab period is marked by long periods of peace and development, pock-mocked by internal political strife and short periods of turmoil, resulting in the city being seized and looted by rival Arab, Kurdish, Turkic and Armenian lords.

Despite these periods of turmoil, the city reached its height under Arab rule, swelling to 150,000 residents, its limits extending over all the surrounding villages. Farmers plowing their lands still uncover pottery, glass objects, glazed ceramics, metal ware and coins that were minted in the city at least until 930.

Arab chroniclers record that Dvin exported a wide range of goods, collectively called "Armenian" goods which were prized throughout the Empire and included fine textiles dyed with cochineal.

The city was wracked by an earthquake in 863, rebuilt, and then almost completely destroyed by a second, more severe tremor in 893, which buried alive 70,000 inhabitants. It was again rebuilt, and remained the seat of the katolikos for a short time, but it went into a slow decline, hastened by a late 9th c wave of fanaticism in the Caliphate, which Emirs had converted to the Shiite sect and were bent on converting or eliminating their Christian subjects. By the beginning of the 10th c, the Arabs were provoking mass resistance in the country (some of which were brutally suppressed, wiping out several of the ancient princely families) while facing internal decay. Into this power vacuum, a new breed of leader emerged, led by the Bagratuni House, members of which had been governors of Dvin, and which finally asserted independence in the 10th c. They succeeded in retaking much of present Eastern Armenia by the end of the 9th c, including Dvin, led by the new Prince of Princes Smbat I Bagratuni the Confessor (890-914).

The war against the Arabs, and Dvin, are both linked to the martyrdom of Smbat I in 914. After successes in liberating the kingdom and obtaining autonomy for his rule, Smbat enraged the local ostikan Yussuf by reaching a separate agreement on tribute with the new Caliph that cut Yussuf's take. Invading Smbat's lands in Siunik, Yussuf laid siege to their seat of power at Yerenjak (present Iran), capturing and killing the king's heir and nephew, then dragging Smbat in chains to the fortress's walls, where he was tortured in front of his wife and family.



Yussuf had Smbat beheaded and his body hung on a cross outside of Dvin, where it was seen to have worked a number of miracles. This helped to rally the country during the reign of Smbat's son Ashot II the Iron to repel Yussuf's troops and consolidate the kingdom.

Arab counter attacks resulted in decades of fighting before the Bagratuni Kingdom effectively took hold, and by then the capital had been moved to Ani, in Gugark province.

Dvin, still commercially and culturally important (and still the seat of the church) hired defenders of their town, one group of Kurdish fighters which came by invitation in 951. The Shaddadids, hired as a temporary army, ended up staying more than a century, establishing one of Armenia's more colorful dynasts of Moslem rulers. According to Armenian historians, Dvin was the birthplace of the Kurdish general Najm ad-Din Ayyub, who fathered the great Seljuk fighter Saladin, nemesis of the Crusaders, and Jerusalem's conqueror.

After more than 300 years of lusting after the Armenian kingdom, the Byzantines finally succeeded in capturing the country and Dvin from the Bagratunis in 1045, enjoying their prize for barely 19 years before losing it all to waves of Seljuk attacks in 1064.

The Kurdish Shaddadids were appointed governors of the city by the Seljuks and ruled off and on with a series of Muslim lords until 1173 when the Orbelian King of Georgia George III captured the city for a short time. Led by the Armenian atabeg (general) Ivaneh Zakarian, the city was again in Georgian hands under Queen Tamara in 1201-1203.

The Zakarian period saw a burst of cultural revival in the country, and Dvin's fortunes rose for one

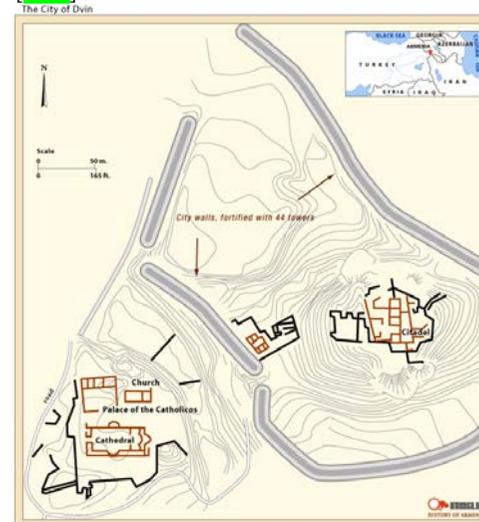
last, glittering time as caravan trade swelled the city's coffers and elaborate churches and palaces were erected. As suddenly as it began, it came crashing down in 1236, when the city was completely destroyed by invading Mongols. The city never recovered.

The city lay in ruins, its stone taken by villagers for building material, the enormous wealth carried off by Mongols and Timurids, or buried under the ashes of the burnt city. Archeological digs began at the end of the 19th c, and stopped with the coming of the revolution. Systematic excavation resumed in 1937, quickly yielding some of the more sensation finds housed at the History Museum in Yerevan. Technically ongoing, the digs have by and large stopped completely for lack of funds, and the site lies neglected. Villagers have plundered the church walls looking for hidden gold, and others dig trenches at night hoping to find artifacts worth selling. Dvin is in need of a new king, or at least a sponsor to help keep it from going to complete ruin.

THE COMPLEX

The complex includes the small museum, a Citadel with palace and villa remains, the "town square" with cathedral, church and Catholicos' palace remains, and the necropolis, which spreads out over the surrounding villages and regularly churns up pottery shards and other small artifacts each spring plowing.

MAP



Enter the site via the metal gate and head towards the lower level museum, a single-story building with long cement porch. The yard in front (replete with washing on the line and dogs sniffing at your heels) is decorated with fragments from the major periods of Dvin's occupation; early and middle age khachkar and other carvings, and a rather impressive line of Bronze Age phalluses standing against the museum wall.



Museum & Artifacts The museum is housed in part of the old excavation center, a dilapidated metal roofed structure with sagging doors and windows. Part of the building was used as a storage shed for unearthed artifacts, and still stores stone blocks and hundreds of as yet undocumented pieces, mostly pottery shards (If you're hoping to see the good stuff, too bad, it is already in the storage vaults in Yerevan or in someone's private collection). The staff can be coaxed into showing the stored material.

The museum itself is in a large hall off the front porch, and includes a small but well-thought selection of stones, carvings and gorgeous glazed ceramic ware done in a Persian style, using Armenian motifs. There are also maps and reconstructed drawings of what portions of the city looked like in its heyday. The lion's share of artifacts are displayed in the History Museum in Yerevan, and if you haven't yet, make plans to visit the gallery to better appreciate the enormous skill and beauty of the craftsmanship that was routinely exported throughout the Middle East and was described and lusted after in Baghdad and Cairo.

Still, the small collection here gives a taste of what Dvin was known for, including examples of its substantial trade connections, if the large number of Sassanid, Byzantine, Arabic, Seljuk, & Georgian coins found at the site are anything to go by. The

coins (gold, silver and copper) include those minted at Dvin during the Caliphate period, which were widely spread throughout the Transcaucasus and Middle East, some of which found their way to the Baltic and Scandinavian peninsulas.

Unfortunately lost save a few fibers, Armenian and Arabic historians praised Dvin's silk products, carpets, pillows, lace work and embroidery. What has survived, and is perhaps the best testament we have to the exceptional craftsmanship practiced in Dvin, were the high quality ceramics, including a glazing process imported from China that was perfected in Dvin. Glaziers made ceramic ware for all types of use, from simple saltcellars to wine goblets and large pitchers. The glazed ware here and esp. in Yerevan is among the largest and best displays of medieval ceramic ware in the world. Especially noteworthy are faience earthenware decorated with women's and lions' heads, pattern relief and glazed dark or light blue. Multi-colored glazed cups were also decorated with animal and human figures.



Other items on display here and in Yerevan include decorated items in gold, silver and bronze, weapons and tools, and other household items (decorated jugs with girdles stamped with human figures, plants and animals).



At Dvin excavators found several archaic style heads carved from red tufa stone, one of which is at the museum here. The heads, probably severed from life-sized statues, once adorned wall niches or lining walls (their backs are rough cut). One archeologist compared their design with coined images of Artashesian Kings and concluded they were depictions of kings from the 3rd-2nd c BCE. As such, they are among the only examples of statuary from the antique period, and, just as importantly, the only surviving secular figures from the Hellenistic period.

Dvin traded with many different countries, and objects include those from Byzantium (mosaic glass), Egypt, Syria and Persia (faience).

City Plan

Excavations uncovered the outline of a city that closely resembled other fortified cities in Medieval Armenia; the citadel was set aside from the necropolis, on top of a hill with double walls and round towers, the whole encircled by a deep moat. The citadel had four main gates, each named for the road it served: Ani, Tbilisi, Nakhichevan, and the far provinces.

[\[MAP\]](#)



Detail of citadel showing multiple layers of habitation.

Dvin covers a territory of about 400 ha. Including parts of the nearby villages of Hnaberd, Verin Artashat and Norashen. At its center (behind and above the museum) is the citadel, an acropolis from its earliest times, where fortresses stood for millennia before Khosrov built his new capital. He placed his new fortress and palace in the middle of the citadel, and surrounded it with immense walls with more than 40 round towers to guard the site. As a secondary defense, he had a moat dug outside the walls, itself 30-50 m deep. The necropolis was connected to this impregnable site by bridges which could be cut in times of war.

A tertiary defensive line was erected around the necropolis, itself made of strong pise-walls (baked clay bricks).

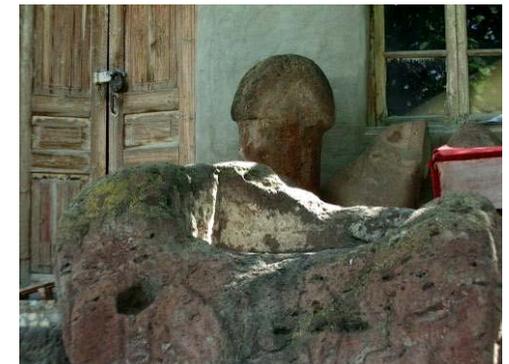
The **citadel** is on the hill behind the museum, up a steep track and through the weeds. The hill was terraced with a thick warren of civil buildings; dwellings, workshops and administrative buildings all in support of the main residence. Mostly built of baked clay brick and cobblestone, the larger buildings were built from limestone and multicolor tufa, like the palace.

Once on top, the outline of the castle and royal premises become apparent, if you follow the line of the stone foundations. Sadly, there is very little left of the grandeur that Arab historians marveled at, instead there is a small block building with the remains of a staircase and fireplace that out guide attributed to 4th-5th c Sassanid Mazdaism fire rituals. For the more hardy, hike one km south to view the remains of a large 5th c market building, near the road to Artashat. This was still well within the city limits, giving some idea of the size of the old city.



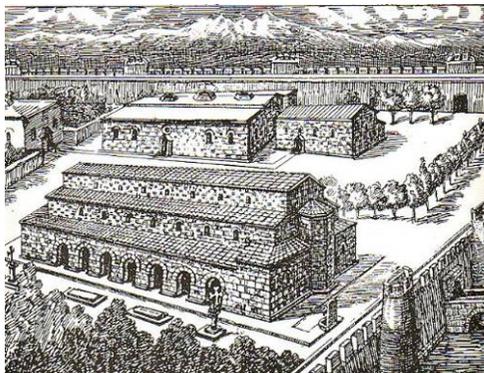
A focus of the citadel are the remains of the 4th c Arshakuni palace, a two story structure with the reception hall and residence quarters on the upper floor, the kitchen, storage rooms and servants quarters underneath. Also on the ground floor were Roman baths, as at Garni, with separate chambers for men and women. Much of the surviving wall structure was done in an early form of cement (wattle and daub), faced with multi-color tufa, in successive layers from the 4th to the 7th cc.

The upper rooms were richly decorated with carvings, gyps cornices, frescoes and architectural detailing, and, as found at the site, at least one example of glazed stone carving that might have been used in the wall décor. The main hall, assumed to be the reception or banqueting hall (or both), was huge, its roof supported by eight large columns. Along with the King Khosrov II hunting lodge in the Azat valley, the Dvin palace remains the best example of 4th-5th c civil buildings in the country.



Enlarged and enriched several times by successive rulers, the palace yielded rich finds allowing excavators to piece together how the rich and powerful lived in the early medieval period. When not dispensing justice or feuding with his nakharars, the king spent much of his time hunting in his private preserve, and banqueting with royal guests and his retinue. Feasts could last for days, and the menu revolved around large portions of meat; game included stag, boar, rabbit and the famous Armenian mufflon, rounded off with wild pheasant, quail, water fowl and exotic game birds migrating through the country. Bread was an important part of local diet, as it remains today, as was seasonal fruit, nuts, and berries, all washed down with a kind of ale brewed from grain and wine. Feasts could start early in the day, breaking for the hunt or chase, then resume with eating and entertainment until late at night, the king and his guests staggering to bed to sleep off the night's revelry, only to rise the next day and start all over again. Obviously this was not an everyday affair, but it occurred enough to leave behind vast quantities of food scraps that excavators found in the palace area.

All of this was supported by the rest of the city (the mere mortals) who, not unlike the working poor of today, made the things the king sold to support his lifestyle, and that of his nakharars. Freeman were few and far between, and as beautiful a legacy as they left behind, the artisans and master craftsmen of Dvin were by and large indentured servants, or at least so economically strapped by taxation and payments to their betters, they effectively were so. It was not a world I would want to be a peasant in.



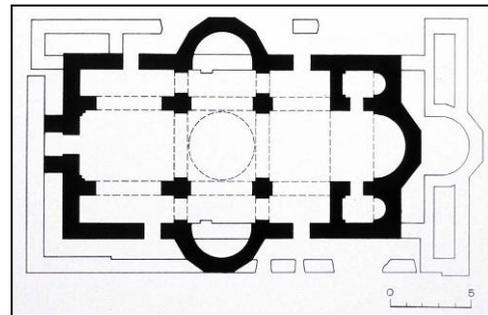
Artist Rendition, Cathedral Square

CATHEDRAL SQUARE

The square is formed around the main cathedral, S. Grigor, a smaller S. Yizbuzit, and the Catholicos palace.

S. Grigor Cathedral was a massive structure, when first built in the 3rd c as a Pagan temple it was the largest building in Armenia (30.41 x 58.17 m). The temple was built over earlier worship temples; the oldest believed to have been built in the Copper or Early Bronze Age. The 3rd century structure was a triple nave basilica with seven pairs of columns supporting the clay tile roof. This was common among Greek style buildings of its type, and the precursor to the Hall type church that predominated Armenia architectural to the 5th c. After the adoption of Christianity, the temple was converted in the 4th c into a church by adding a protruding semicircular apse on the east end. About 150 years later an arched gallery was added on the south side, allowing for overflow and church attendance by those under penitence and deemed too sinful to enter the church proper.

Destroyed along with much of the city during the Arab invasion of 642, a new church was built on top of the ashes of the old shortly thereafter; a central domed cruciform type with protruding semicircular apses. The new building, more in keeping with the Armenian styles predominant in the country, was different in couple of respects: it maintained its triple nave effect by placing only two annexes in the corners, flanking the altar.



Another difference was the way the dome was built; rather than placing the dome over a square made from the exterior walls that was typical of the time, the dome at Dvin was instead placed on top of four massive pillars in the center of the building, themselves stabilized by 12 large arches that distributed its weight to the walls. Though incorporated in other 5th c churches, the particularly arrangement of the arches and the way it opened the interior space was an engineering feat for the 7th c, imitated with later

churches. The focus of the interior became the space itself, rather than the structure of support, and the open dome made a lofty, airy space to worship in. Sadly, despite their best efforts, engineers were still unable to make the drum complexly stable, and later earthquakes caused the dome to collapse over time.



There is some thought that this was deliberate; rather than make a structure that was impervious to tremors (still a quixotic quest), some say that engineers deliberately made parts of medieval cathedrals so that they would absorb earthquake shocks and minimize damage to the whole structure. Early medieval "shock absorbers", the domes, and especially roofs over later bell towers served as kind of corks that would pop off during an earthquake. According to this theory, it was cheaper to replace a dome than to rebuild entire church walls. Excellent examples of this theory are the tent roofs over the corners of Yot Verk Church in Giumri; they literally popped off during the 1988 earthquake, absorbing the earthquake's shocks and saving the building. Just opposite, the 19th c Astvatsatsin church, which did not use this technique, was mostly destroyed.

Back to Dvin. Its various evolutions were widely imitated throughout the kingdom, including the 5th c triple nave hall, which builders used as the model for the 6th c basilica at Odzun (Uzunlar), and the 7th c cathedrals for the --- at Talin and the Mamikonians at Aruch, both of which usurped Dvin's position as largest church in Armenia.

Dvin's cathedral was unsurprisingly rich in its decor, with a mosaic floor made from multi-hued stone glass and column capitals carved with intricate nest hatching designs. Inscriptions covered the walls and framing was in elaborate geometric designs with animal and fruit imagery. Chandeliers boasted multi-colored glass lamp

shades. The altar apse was also decorated with mosaic stone (7th c), depicting the Mother of God, the oldest mosaic of this type found.

Outside, the church roof boasted at first a handsome clay tile roof with elaborate butt-end tiles running above the cornice. Like the rest of the church, only fragments survived the 893 earthquake, which destroyed most the town (burying alive up to half the population). The cathedral never fully recovered from the 9th c disaster, thought he katolikos continued to live at the site for a few years until moving to Aghtamar and Ani (late 9th -10 c).



S. Yizbuzit church, a little north and east of the cathedral, is also traced to the 4th c, built over a pagan shrine. If the main cathedral may have been devoted to the worship of Mythra, the small shrine is thought to have been dedicated to Anahit or Astghikh, both popular deities of the late pagan era.

By its style, this small basilica is of a type widely known between the 4th-7th cc, though the date of its most famous version is sometime between 553-557, based on a reference by the historian Yovhannes Catholicos to its commission by the Catholicos Nerses II (548-557) and the death of St. Yizbuzit ("Redeemed by God") in 553.

Nothing remains of the Pagan structure, save a few foundation stones and its platform. There is not much left of the 6th c structure either, save its outline and a few column stones. Enough apparently survived to allow excavators to place its type and allot its fortune to the subcategory "small 5th-6th cc basilica" with the following features: Rectangular plan with thick walls, a square inset apse and a barrel vault roof resting on transverse arches (at right angles) supported by wall pilasters which can still be seen on the North and south

walls. Placing the apse inside the rectangular walls created a simpler design, favored at the time of very early churches and those in the 6th c (protruding apses were an invention of the 4th c that further converted Pagan buildings, but which went in and out of favor until its loss in later buildings). Of what remains, experts divine the church may not have had a western door (doors were on the north and south walls). There may have been an arched window on the west-east walls, but later excavations did not confirm this idea, nor were evidence so pilasters or columns found.

A northern chamber adjoins the basilica, which had thick walls and what is conjectured to have been a long stone roof, its slabs jutting out past the walls to create a portico of sorts. The chamber was not as high as the basilica, and its use is unknown, though use as a Martyrion, shrine or early pagan site is not ruled out.

The 7th c **Catholicos palace** lies close to the main cathedral and St. Yitzbuzit to form the cathedral square. The palace was a monumental structure, and elaborately decorated; even its ruins are impressive, with a large central hall (11.4 x 26.7 m) using two rows of columns to hold up the (tiled) roof, and a series of smaller rooms adjoining the main hall. The hall was built along the lines of other vernacular houses, with a series of roof apertures made from wooden trusses arranged in squares stacked on each other at angles, the smallest square at the top where the aperture was. In this, the hall is a precursor to much later 10th-13th cc gavits (narthexes) at churches throughout the country.



Remains include the bases and one capital of the columns that supported the roof, the capital carved into volutes and palm fronds with great flourish.

The column abacus (slab) is decorated using a geometric pattern.

The palace design and layout dictated vernacular tastes for several hundred years, influencing the design of the Grigor Mamikonian palace at Aruch (ca. 680 c) and Catholicos Nerses III's palace at Zvartnots (mid 7th c).

TOWN SQUARE: SECULAR BUILDINGS

Nearby a secular town square of sorts lay, surrounded by buildings including two palaces from the early middle age of Armenia.

A **ca. 570 Palace** lay to the SW of the cathedral, and had a central hall with three pairs of columns. Adjoining this main hall were a number of rooms of different types: service, sleeping and worship. In the 560's the palace was used by a Persian official, who converted a room in the W wing for fire worship. This was presumably the Marzpan Suren who was killed in the 572 revolt, which also destroyed the building.

A bit to the W are the remains of what is thought to be a **caravanserai**; a large structure with 36 columns bases.

Other artifacts (Note most of these are found at the State History Museum in Yerevan—see Yerevan chapter) Like Roman and Greek cities it emulated, Dvin had a number of **memorials** in central squares or lining the main avenues. Once such memorial is a column that was found in the cathedral square, its capital on display at the State History Museum in Yerevan. These kinds of memorials were common into the 7th c, when they began to be replaced by khachkars.

Another fragment is a bas relief on a large **lintel stone**, showing a grape harvest. The stone carving (5th-6th cc) includes a depiction of a cross form that seems to be part of the grape harvest, a highly symbolic statement of Christianity (the blood of Christ was believed to exist in the transfigured chalice of wine during service). Other figures are two women pickers bearing baskets of grapes on their backs. The figures, interwoven with vines and grape leaves, seem to be realistically depicted in this early form of perspective.

Another carving is that of a **peacock**, carved in white limestone, dated to the 6th c, about the same time another stone with the same figure was made for the cathedral at Ptghni in Kotaik marz.

A couple of examples **gypsum décor** found at the site are in the small site museum, but the best are

in Yerevan. Gypsum became popular in Dvin after the 893 earthquake; a cheaper, if less permanent, way of adding a little splash to the city's buildings. Gypsum is a form of plaster of Paris, poured into cut molds. Much cheaper and quicker than hiring a stone carver, it also permits more elaborate decoration on wall niches, doorways, window framings and as frontal pieces. Its drawbacks were far outweighed by the cheaper cost and the ability to replace crumbling fragments quickly and in many cases, in far richer designs than before. As proof of the technique, excavators point to a lintel piece that was cast from a template used in other castings, each one having the same identical flaw as the original mold.

Dvin's gypsum fragments include animals in motion, sirens (winged lions with crowned human heads), pomegranate and grape imagery, and elaborate quatrefoil and stalactite designs. In many ways, the gypsum designs at Dvin foreshadowed the "Armenian Rococo" period of the 13th c, when church décor, miniatures and architectural ensembles reached their zenith of design and excess.

Overnight in either village (*rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair*); **Camping** is possible around the village, ask first; **Springs** in villages.



CONTINUE TRIP 2

➡ From Dvin complex, make your way back to the Verin Artashat roundabout from which a NE road that leads in about 500 m to a L (N) road that takes in you about 2 km to the R (NE) road that leads in about 1.5 km and through Nerkin Dvin village to (**Verin Dvin**, DD 40.0232 x 44.5914, elev. 951m) 🏠 🍷 🍷

SIDE TRIP: Verin Dvin – Վերին Դվին (pop. 2000) was established in the 19th century by émigré Assyrians escaping the genocide. The village has the largest population of Assyrians (Dmitrov has the next largest) in Armenia. The villagers descend from Assyrian émigrés who came in 1828, with the signing of the Treaty of Turkmanchai that declared an end to the war between Russia and Persia. A population swap ensued, between Armenia and Persia, the Assyrians entering eastern Armenia for the first time in history during the exchange.

For **background** on the Assyrians in Armenia, see [Dmitrov](#) in this same trip (p. 21) for an introduction to the Assyrian population.

The current population is what remains of a 1990s emigration to Russia and Ukraine by skilled workers seeking better wages and a better rate of exchange (the Armenian dram is artificially inflated to increase profits in the exchange market). The village is basically self-sufficient; locals till the fields from dawn to dusk, raising produce that is rarely sold at market, it being considered better to remain in local hands.

There are two **dance ensembles** in Verin Dvin; the 'Nineveh' group for adults and 'Arbela' for the school pupils. Performances are normally in winter and summer, spring and autumn reserved for farm work.

There are two congregations in Verin Dvin: **Shara**, the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East (based on the Nestorian Rite though now in union with the Catholic Church), while the **Church of Marez**, which follows the Orthodox faith. As Assyrians are proud to point out, while Armenia may be the first country to adopt Christianity as a state religion, the Assyrians were the first to adopt Christianity in any form, in the 1st century, when almost 260 years before Armenia's 301 conversion, King Abkar of Assyria converted to Christianity.

The Impetuous Days

The Assyrian culture is one of the oldest in the world, its traditions as old—perhaps older than—that of the proto-Armenians who became its most significant rival and the cause of its collapse in 605 BCE. Much of what Armenians consider their origin myths have parallels to—and some say sprang from—Assyria, which was one of the most significant influences of Armenia's cultural development.

Among the traditions the two shared in prehistoric times was the calendar, both placing the new year in the Spring, the ancient Armenians designating it at the time the star Sirius rose through the rays of the rising sun on the Spring solstice.

Assyrians began observing the New Year on April 1st, a tradition that has continued for the last 2,675 years. The date coincides with the annual spring flooding of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, which ancient Assyrians believed prompted an annual battle between the supreme god Marduk and Tiamat, god of the sea. As Marduk defeated Tiamat, the floods subsided and the rivers—and earthly balance—were restored.

The victory hailed the new year and the most important Assyrian holiday, "The Impetuous Days", began, according to custom and following one of the most important laws in the Code of Hammurabi, the world's first constitution (ca. 1760 BCE).

Celebrations lasted 15 days, during which courts were in recess and slaves and children could not be punished, the rich gave alms to the poor and the king abdicated his power, making all citizens equal. Celebrations included ritual song, dance and rites in honor of Marduk, the supreme, all knowing god.

When the Assyrians adopted Christianity this pagan holiday, along with many others, was preserved and is still practiced.

In accordance with Nestorian tradition only a cross is placed in the Church of Shara, while icons adorn the Church of Marez (Orthodox).

The Nestorian church is the unique 19th c **Holy Tovmas** basilica, one of the only working Assyrian Churches in Armenia. The original was built from clay bricks with plastered walls. The renovation of the church somehow explains the complex relations between the "brother" nations of Armenians and Assyrians. No money was allocated for the renovation of the church for the 1700th anniversary of the conversion of

King T'rdat to Christianity (which officially marks the beginning of the Armenian conversion) in the year 2001. The churches do not have relations; despite their congregations share the same histories, Christianity and persecution.

A specialist in Eastern rite churches from Switzerland visited Verin Dvin to visit the community head, an actor who she had seen perform in Europe. Seeing the church ruins, she decided to donate the money she had originally intended for the Armenian celebrations, to the Assyrian community. That allowed for the renovated church you see now. The church is a triple nave basilica with a bell-tower entry covered with a pyramidal roof.

The village has a **Culture House**, which is where you will find the **Mayor's Office, Post Office, Clinic** and the **Library**.

Locals welcome visitors and a chance to talk about their heritage and unique **customs** (see side box). Assyrian is the lingua franca, startling most visitors who expect to hear Armenian. Assyrians speak Armenian and Russian fluently, but the community has made sure that Assyrian (Aramaic) is taught in the local schools, along with Assyrian history and customs.

[Trekking MAP]

Trekking Verin Dvin is a good starting point for hiking into the **Khosrov Reserve** via the rough road that heads NE from the village (see next entry). The N/NW road leads in about – km to the Azat Reservoir and Garni Gorge.

Overnight in village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** is possible near the village (ask) and on the way to the Khosrov Reserve (tree color scarce); **Springs** in village.

➔ From Verin Dvin, take the NE dirt road out of the village for a rough 60-90 minute drive through 14 km of travel to Mt. Yeranos and the ruins of Yeranos village, then in another 10.5 km of rougher roading, (**Baiberd/Khosrov Reserve**, DD 40.0892 x 44.7818, elev. 1396m)

SIDE TRIP: Baiberd / Khosrov Reserve – Բայբերդ / Խոսրովի արգելիչ (pop. 4) is technically 1 km SE of the original boundaries for the Khosrov Reserve, though the only way in is through the Reserve from Garni, or the rough road you just used. The 4 locals who live here

are reserve staff. Others are Armenian and Yezidi shepherds who take their flocks to high altitude pastures, and villagers visiting the reserve to hunt for herbs, mushrooms, wild asparagus and once cultivated fruit trees that now grow wild. These include apricot, peach, apple and thousands of almond trees.

The area has a number of ruins, most Yezidi and Assyrian in origin, which were evacuated on Stalin's order following the great patriotic War (World War II). The Assyrians were suspected of supporting independence and so persecuted along with other minorities in the Soviet Union. On the way to Baiberd you pass Mt. Yeranos (1823.7m) and the ruins of Yeranos village (1719.9m), once inhabited by Assyrians who were deported in 1946. Another deserted Assyrian village on the way to Baiberd, perched over the Goghthi and Azat Rivers, is Blurashen ("Hill place").

For details about Baiberd, see [Trip 5: Khosrov Reserve](#), p. 51.

➔ END OF TRIP 2



TRIP 3: KHOR VIRAP, ARARAT ▲
 (Artashat) - (Taperakan) - (Ginevet) - **KHOR VIRAP/ARTASHAT** - **ARARAT CITY** - (Surenavan) - (Armash) - (Yeraskh)



Trip 3 explores the marz' most popular sites, the ancient city of Artashat and Khor Virap. Site of the deep pit where Grigor Lusavorich languished for 13 years before being brought to the court to cure a king said to have gone mad from the act of his persecution of the country's Christians, Khor Virap is revered second only to Echmiadzin and a pilgrimage site for millions worldwide.

At important feast days, the 4th century church and its surrounding medieval monastery are crowded by locals seeking favor with God while a carnival atmosphere takes over the area outside the vank walls: matagh (sacrifice) stalls hawk live doves, chickens and sheep next to food sellers and tables laden with toys, flowers, souvenirs and religious paraphernalia, while musicians and tight-rope walkers angle for coins.

My favorite time to visit is at dawn, when the face of Mt. Ararat is revealed bit by bit like by the rising sun like a sheet of gauze undulating down the mountains steep hills. There are no tourists jostling for position and it seems the whole mountain is mine to embrace.

Ararat Wine Country The rest of the trip takes you into Ararat's Wine Country, an industry still in its infancy with vineyards still converting age-old vineyards back to their original viticulture use established some 3000 years ago. Some say 6000 years ago while others trace it to genesis, when Noah is said to have planted a grape vine in thanks for being delivered from the flood.

Viticulture is old in the Arax valley; endemic grape species are still found in the valley and its foothills, and most of the world's wine sorts are found only in Armenia, among them Areni, Ararati (Chaschabash), Mschali, Vosevat (Chardgie) and others.

Urartian cuneiform mentions the valley's established viticulture and potent wine, and wine cellars found at Karmir Blur are more than 2700 years old. The 5th c BCE Greek historian Xenophon wrote about Armenia's wine in "Anabasis" ("The March Up Country"), mentioning it was storied in huge vats in the ground and served in large jars, imbibers using straws to drink the wine with. This may have been a form of mead (he mentions the wine was covered with a film of wheat), but historians generally believe it was among the earliest wine in recorded history, and may well describe an early form of brandy, which many believe originated in Armenia. It was certainly potent stuff; Xenophon includes descriptions of its hallucinatory effects on those who drank.

By the Hellenistic Era, Armenia was already famous for its wine, which was exported to Egypt, Greece and an emerging Rome, which took the country's exports to a new height by the 1st century. Medieval exports included far flung empires on the Silk Road, with caravans laden with jars of red wine in their cargo.

Armenian cognac was world famous by the Soviet Era, and a famous legend arose about its most famous fan, Winston Churchill, who is said to have pestered Stalin each time they met to discuss the state of the war, when his next shipment of Ararat brandy would be sent.

Vineyards stretch from Artashat to Armash on the valley floor, and eastwards to Vedi and the top of the Urts Valley in Trip 4. Some vineyards and wineries welcome visitors, providing informal tours and tastings. Others are not as welcoming, but it is worth stopping by to see—the detour is not much and the chance to see wine and cognac making is worth a stop.

This is a short trip; it can be done in 2-3 hours, 4 at most if you take a wine tour, so pair it with Trip 3 or 4 for an easy, pleasant day trip.



Stay: Restaurant-hotels and motel in Ararat and on the (M2); guest houses/apts. In Ararat; village homes (rustic) throughout the marz; Camping by Khor Virap (ask priest first), Armash fish ponds and near villages (no forest cover, orchards).

Eat: A couple of cafes on the (M2), in Ararat and at Armash (fresh fish); mterks and kiosks in Ararat and villages.

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, and Ararat.

➔ From Artashat city square, head to the (H8), turn L (SE) and continue for about 5-6 km and past Shahumian to central (**Taperakan**, DD 39.92404 x 44.59706, elev. 830m) 🏠 🍷 🌄

SIDE TRIP: Taperakan – Տափերական (once



Kirov, pop. 1800), named for the 2nd century BC bridge that spanned the Arax River and led traders into the ancient capital of Artashat, the modern village is no where near its ancient namesake, but is known for its **VAN-777 LLC Winery** (tel. 091-424219, 091-421307), located in the village center, and for its specialty wine, "Tushpa", a semi-dry red varietal produced from the native Haghtanak grape that goes back 3000 years in the valley. The wine comes in several vintages and levels of dryness, and goes well with desserts and as a casual drink (mix with cabernet for a delightful rose).

The factory does not do organized tours, but you can stop by and someone will show you around, and you can buy from the office.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Springs** in the area.

➔ From Taperakan, continue SE on the (H8) for about 1 km to a L (NE) turn that ends in about 2 km at (**Ginevet**, DD 39.93184 x 44.62433, elev. 867m)

SIDE TRIP: Ginevet – Գինեվետ (before Vedu Gini Gortsarani Banavan or "Vedi Wine Factory", pop. 100) is the home of Vedi Alcol, a large distillery and winery that produces a variety of wines (most famously the semi-sweet Vernashen) and a new line of cognacs. No organized tours but someone in the office can be coaxed into providing a tour of sorts that might include an informal tasting.

➔ Backtrack to the (H8), turn L (SE) and continue for about 800 m to a R (S) road that in about 750 m meets the (M2); cross over the (M2) to enter Pokr Vedi/Khor Virap and continue for about 2.7 km and past the village to a fork in the road (look for a large statue of a Fedaiyi on a low hill in front). Take the R fork for about 1.5 km to the car park for **ARTASHAT- KHOR VIRAP** (DD 39.87926 x 44.57763, elev. 830m) 🏠 🍷 🌄

✳ **ARTASHAT / KHOR VIRAP - ԱՐՏԱՇԱՏ - ԽՈՐ ՎԻՐԱՊ** ▲ sits on a series of hills overlooking the Arax River with one of the most famous (and photographed) views of Mt. Ararat. It is also, after Echmiadzin and the temple of Garni, the most visited site in the country.

For good reason, too; the site is located next to the Turkish border, seeming within arm's reach of the massive mountain that looms over the valley. Dawn at the monastery of Khor Virap or on top of Artashat is a breath-taking experience not to be missed, as stars and (if you are lucky) the moon evaporate over the deep purple crest of Ararat and shadows creep behind you to reveal the mountain's outline bit by bit with each moment. Your tour schedule may have you visiting the site in mid afternoon, but if you can manage it, take a taxi just before dawn to watch the sun rise. One of Armenia's stunning splendors.

Khor Virap/Artashat is famous for two other reasons, each worth a visit by itself. It is here that Artashes I, the founding monarch of the Artashesian Dynasty in Armenia established his capital in 180 BCE; and it was here that the founder of Armenia's Christian Church, Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator) began his improbable ministry to convert the kingdom to Christianity by being imprisoned in a pit in the city's dungeon. Both were responsible for the identification and some say survival of the Armenian people; Artashes for establishing a 600 year line of kings that preserved the nation's territory, and Grigor Lusavorich for creating a religious identity that ensured its cultural survival.

[MAP]

BACKGROUND

Artashat

The city of Artashat ("Artaxiasata") was built on twelve hills for the founder of the Artashesian Dynasty, Artashes I, between 189 and 180 BCE on top of settlements and fortresses that dated back

to the Bronze Age. The city, called "the Joy of Artashes", lay at the confluence of the Metsamor and Arax Rivers, the delta of which nurtured a lush background to a city of broad streets and Roman statuary, one of the most famous capitals in the ancient world, its beauty the stuff of legend and fact as recorded by the Romans Strabo and Plutarch.

The city's history begins with the founding of the Parthian Empire 70 years earlier, during the twilight of the Seleucid Empire. A linchpin of Alexander the Great's quest to conquer the known world, the Seleucid Empire controlled vast tracks of territory, including Eastern Europe, Asia Minor and the Armenian provinces. In 249 BCE, a prince of the Parthian House named Artashes-Arshak I established the starting point of the powerful Parthian Empire (the Parthian Artashesian House) by wresting control of Persia from the Seleucid King Antiochus II Theos.



Encouraged by the exiled Carthaginian general Hannibal, and making an alliance with the disgruntled Aeolian League, Antiochus' son Antiochus III invaded Greece in 197 BCE. There he was defeated by the Romans at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BCE, then forced to abandon all European territories and cede all of Asia Minor north of the Taurus Mountains to Pergamum to Rome, which took the lands as war booty.

At this time the ruler of Armenia was the paranoid Yervand IV (the last), who moved his capital from ancient Armavir to Yervanduni, installing elaborate traps and secret passageways in his castle to prevent usurpers to the crown from gaining entry. His paranoia warranted, for when Antiochus III began his campaign against Rome, he recruited a young and ambitious Armenian Parthian, Artashes (Artaxias in Latin), to lead his troops against Yervand, who was an ally of the Parthians.

Artashes, who had sworn allegiance to the Seleucid Antiochus III, and reigned as co-governor of Armenia with Zariadres-Zareh, then switched allegiance and declared independence, both seeking support from Rome. The Romans appointed them both kings, and divided their lands. According to Strabo the new kingdom included the Caspian area around Faitakaran and Vaspurakan (Van), Siunik, Taik, Khorsineh (Ardahan), Gagarin (Gugark), Karenitis (Erzerum), Derzineh (Terjan) and Tamoritit (Timorik)—much of historic Armenia in Eastern Anatolia.

Thus begins the reign of Artashes I (189/188-160/159 BCE), the founder of the Artashesian dynasty (189 BCE-2).

Somehow, the Roman outcast Hannibal—having led the Seleucid King Antiochus to Roman defeat—befriended the friend-of-Rome Artashes and enters the Armenian scene, according to legend choosing the site for and planning a new city to replace the old capital of Ararat, which defenses became useless when the Arax River changed its course (the ruins of ancient Ararat can still be seen on a promontory near Sardarabad). He is reported to have spent his waning years in the capital, avoiding Rome while waxing philosophic in the king's palace.

"It is related that Hannibal, the Carthaginian, after the defeat of Antiochus by the Romans, coming to Artaxias, king of Armenia, pointed out to him many other matters to his advantage, and observing the great natural capacities and the pleasantness of the site, then lying unoccupied and neglected, drew a model of a city for it, and bringing Artaxias thither, showed it to him and encouraged him to build. At which the king being pleased, and desiring him to oversee the work, erected a large and stately city, which was called after his own name, and made metropolis of Armenia." (Plutarch's Life of Lucullus)

The Medieval Historian Movses Khorenatsi attributes the city's founding exclusively to the desire of the new king:

"Artashat went to the spot where the waters of the Arax and Metsamor intermingle, and being pleased with the hill, he there constructed a city, calling it Artashat, after his own name. The Arax River aided him with (floating) the timber of forests; he therefore carried out the construction easily and quickly, and erected therein a temple."

Built on top of large mounds of marble (much of which was quarried to build the city's lavish palaces and villas), both Plutarch and Strabo described the city as large and beautiful, "Armenia's Carthage". Artashes had the idols of the gods that had been kept in Bagaran brought to Artashat, two of which were the idol of Anahit (Artemis) which he installed in a temple inside the citadel and another to Tir-Apollo (Mher), which was placed in a second temple which location was lost until very recently. Both temples were beautifully carved and clad with copper plate.

In fact, the first excavation of the site is recorded to this time, and attributed to Hannibal, who led the young king on a 'discovery tour' of the site, marveling at the extensive Urartian defenses and foundations—built by a lineage of kings already 350 years buried and unknown to the new dynasty.

Along with the idols, Artashes emptied Bagaran and Yervandashat of its population, forcing them to the new city to help build and populate the capital. There were two bridges to the city; the most famous called the "taperakan" or Artashat bridge.

Artashat became known as the "Ostann Hayots" (court or seal of the Armenians) and with the exception of a short period when the capital moved to Tigranakert during the reign of Tigran II the Great (95-55 BCE), Artashat continued to charm Armenia's royal houses for several hundred years. As opposed to the old Yervanduni capital at Ararat, Artashat was a focal point of Hellenistic culture, a place of graceful boulevards, marble statues, and roman style villas.



The city was also known as the font of Greek theatre in the kingdom, where the second permanent public theatre was built, during the reign of Artavazd II, son of Tigran II the Great.

During his reign, Artavazd became known as an accomplished playwright and author, penning Greek tragedies, orations, and historical commentaries which were treasured in Greek literature and survived until the second century. Artavazd arranged for a troupe of Greek actors to live in his new capital, where they performed the tragedies of Euripides and the comedies of Menander, as well as Greek plays penned by the king himself. An archeological dig near Ararat unearthed three large stone tablets containing a long rhythmic Greek poem entitled "The War Loving Goddess", believed to be a portion of a tragedy written by Artavazd II.

After Tigran II's defeat by Lucius Lucullus in 68 BC at the Battle of Artashat, and the city remained a hotly contested military target for the next two centuries. This is no better illustrated than by Plutarch, who recorded an event from Artavazd's reign in 53 BCE. The king had ordered the players to present Euripides' "The Bacchae," at a time the Parthians and Armenians were fighting the Romans. In the play the women of Thebes are driven into frenzy by the god Dionysus, thinking themselves huntresses, the humans their prey. Mistaking her son for a mountain lion, the queen of Thebes rips his head off his body and shows to her horror-stricken husband. During the 53 BCE performance, the head of the defeated Roman general Crassus was used instead, tossed on stage at the climactic moment of the play, announcing the Parthian-Armenian victory in a most dramatic way.

The city continued well into the Roman protectorate era (1-54), the historian Tacitus referring to the city in his Annals (Book II):

Tiberius accordingly discussed these matters and the affairs of Armenia, which I have already related, before the Senate. "The commotions in the East," he said, "could be quieted only by the wisdom, of Germanicus; own life was on the decline, and Drusus had not yet reached his maturity." Thereupon, by a decree of the Senate, the provinces beyond sea were entrusted to Germanicus, with greater powers wherever he went than were given to those who obtained their provinces by lot or by the emperor's appointment . . ."

". . . Of all this Germanicus was aware, but his most pressing anxiety was to be first in reaching Armenia."

"This had been of old an unsettled country from the character of its people and from its geographical position, bordering, as it does, to a

great extent on our provinces and stretching far away to Media. It lies between two most mighty empires, and is very often at strife with them, hating Rome and jealous of Parthia. It had at this time no king, Vonones having been expelled, but the nation's likings inclined towards Zeno, son of Polemon, king of Pontus, who from his earliest infancy had imitated Armenian manners and customs, loving the chase, the banquet, and all the popular pastimes of barbarians, and who had thus bound to himself chiefs and people alike. Germanicus accordingly, in the city of Artaxata, with the approval of the nobility, in the presence of a vast multitude, placed the royal diadem on his head. All paid him homage and saluted him as King Artaxias, which name they gave him from the city."

(For complete text see The Internet Classics, Tacitus Annals www.classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.html).

Artashat was occupied by Syrian legions under the Roman general Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo in AD 58 as part of the short-lived first conquest of Armenia, and destroyed in AD 163 when Statius Priscus conquered Armenia anew.

Rebuilt, Artashat remained the principal political and cultural center of the kingdom until the 4th c, when—like its forebear Ararat—the Arax River shifted 20 km away, leaving fetid swamps where rivers once provided natural defenses. King Khosrov III (330-338) moved the capital to Dvin in 335, greatly reducing the city's importance. When the Persian king Shapur II (309-379) attacked Armenia in 368-369, he destroyed Artashat's fortress walls and stone structures, burning the rest. The city was again rebuilt and it remained as commercial city of some import until the fall of the Armenian Kingdom in 428.

Before Vardanants War in 451, the Catholics, bishops and princes met in Artashat (449) and wrote a now famous response to the Persian king's demand they revert to Zoroastrianism. This precipitated the war which ended in Armenia's defeat at the Battle of Avarair, but guerilla action and the weakening of the Sassanid house forced the Persians to allow Armenia's Christian religion to continue.

Its existence well recorded, the city's exact location was long an enigma to archeologists who used its anciently described location at the confluence of the Arax and Metsamor Rivers to find it. Once found, excavations revealed a large city built on a series of hills, not unlike the seven hills

of Rome, which were surely its inspiration. During excavations several important Hellenistic artifacts were found, including a marble statue of a female figure believed to be the goddess Anahit or Astghikh, the goddess of water, beauty and love, Armenia's version of Aphrodite.



Khor Virap

If Artashat's place in time was set by the founder of the Artashesian kingdom, Khor Virap's place is fixed by a member of same house; Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator, Greek: Γρηγόριος Φωστήρ or Φωτιστής, Gregorios Phoster or Photistes, ca. 257-334). The story of his life, imprisonment and ministry is as much a story of the survival of the Armenian Kingdom as it is the conversion of the country.

It begins (as all good tales do) with a murder. The murder was of the Armenian king, Khosrov the Great, at the hands of a disgruntled member of his retinue. The king was a member of the last surviving house of Parthia, his kinsmen in Persia having been wiped out by the Sassanids, who were bent on wiping out the Armenian branch of the old dynasty. Zoroastrians like the Armenian house, the Sassanids nonetheless abhorred the way the Armenian kings had Hellenized the old gods, turning the fire gods into Greek figures. They also lusted after the country, and wanted to eliminate the Armenian culture.

Khosrov resisted Sassanid invasions, defeating them in several battles until he was assassinated by the disgruntled Anak, a distant relative who had been recruited by the Sassanids in Persia to do the deed. The deed done, the Sassanids invaded, but not before Anak was captured and executed along with most of his family, while two of his sons (one of whom was Grigor) escaped to Caesarea.

The king's sole heir, T'rdat, was also squirreled away, to Rome where he was raised under royal patronage, becoming well versed in languages and military tactics. He was also a fervent pagan during some of Rome's worst reactions against a perceived Christian threat.

Sheltered in Caesarea, Grigor became well versed in languages and theory as well, only he had secretly converted to Christianity.

On reaching his manhood, the Roman emperor Aurelian decided to attack the Sassanids, placing T'rdat at the head of Roman legions sent to recruit an army and liberate the Armenian kingdom. En route T'rdat met and welcomed Grigor into his retinue, whose real identity was kept secret. T'rdat quickly raised an army drove the enemy out in 287. The Roman-Armenian relationship grew stronger, especially during the reign of Diocletian, who increased persecutions against Christian subjects to their highest level.



Armenia was known to have welcomed secret enclaves of Christians, though the new faith still jostled with Pagan beliefs, many of which were incorporated into the Christian ritual. Many Armenians worshipped both sects, hedging their bet on the afterlife. T'rdat was no different, worshipping different deities himself, but nonetheless towing the official line of anti-Christian rhetoric promulgated by his Roman liege Diocletian.

Chronicles state that during a pagan ceremony T'rdat ordered Grigor to place a flower wreath at the foot of a statue of the goddess Anahit in Eriza. Grigor refused, finally proclaiming his Christian faith. This angered the king, who became enraged on learning Grigor's true identity, the son of the traitor who assassinated his father. Grigor was

tortured and then thrown into Khor Virap, a deep pit in the castle keep at Artashat.

At the same time, a group of Christian maidens escaping persecution in Rome entered the scene, at Vagharshapat, one of the king's royal seats. They were of Roman aristocracy, and included a follower named Hripsimeh, a virgin of exceptional beauty. The king learned of this and summoned Hripsimeh, who came with Guyaneh, the group's leader. Details of the story are in the introduction to Echmiadzin in Ararat marz chapter, but suffice it to say she spurned her suitor, who became more enamored with each rejection. Finally declaring herself unavailable because she was "married to God", the spurned suitor had them stoned, Guyaneh's tongue cut out first to prevent her from preaching.

The king thereafter went mad, unluckily at the same time the Sassanids began another invasion of the country. In a dream, his sister, Khosrovadukht ("Daughter of Khosrov"), a secret convert to Christianity, had a vision wherein God told her to save the kingdom and her brother; he must summon Grigor from the pit.

Grigor was duly summoned (having survived all those years due to the charity of a poor townsman), the king begged mercy, repented, converted, and was miraculously cured. His army repelled the invaders, and the heretofore Pagan zealot became a zealous convert, ordering his kingdom to convert as well.

As you can imagine, this didn't go down too well with the temple priests who had amassed vast fortunes and influence, and suddenly found themselves without a job. The next 300 years are papered over by the church as a time of "struggles", but in fact it was an all out Civil War beginning with Grigor at the head of a Christian army battling the forces of paganism. Catholics well into the 7th c were still struggling to gain a foothold in the more remote areas, and several were assassinated during pagan resistance. So engrained are Pagan traditions in the modern lifestyle I would still say they have not completely defeated the pre-Christians; as any look at the talismans still used by locals to bring good luck or ward off the "evil eye" attests, along with continuing sacrifices and Pagan traditions that have been neatly dovetailed with Christian Feast Days to mitigate their earlier purpose.

All this occurred sometime between 301-311, the exact date fiercely debated by scholars and the church, each pointing out valid arguments for their

side. The date celebrated by the church and generally used in local brochures is 301.



As a side note, but perhaps more to do with these events than any sudden religious conversion, is the fact that both T'rdat and Grigor were part of the same royal family; they were both Arshakunis, of the Parthian House. T'rdat's miraculous conversion says as much about political expediency as it does his zealous belief, for it occurred at a time the kingdom was threatened by annihilation by Sassanids, who practiced a particularly fundamentalist version of the Pagan faith, one which had found favor in the local population and threatened to undermine the ruling house's authority.

There was also a rift in the Parthian house itself, its Persian branch snuffed out by the Sassanids. The Christians had already found a tolerant society to live in, and, to read that practically everyone around the king was already a convert helps put things into perspective. I have no doubt some kind of miracle occurred, but what kind is left to second hand sources that depend on belief more than evidence. This much is known: on his conversion, T'rdat reunited his branch of the Parthian House with Grigor's, and they succeeded in rallying the country and repelling the Zoroastrian fanatics in Persia, saving Armenia from complete assimilation.

In 302 (312) Grigor Lusavorich, accompanied by the king and his retinue, was consecrated as Patriarch of Armenia from Leontius of Caesarea, becoming Armenia's first Catholicos. In 318 he appointed his son Aristakis to be his successor, establishing the Grigorian (Parthian) line of Catholicos, which would last 100 years. Finally, around 331, having torn down pagan temples and all traces of pre-Christian religion (including libraries, and religious texts in what some believe

was the original Armenian script), Grigor withdrew to a cave and lived as a hermit on Mt. Sebuh in the province of Daranalia in Upper Armenia, where he died a few years later unattended and unobserved.



When some discovered the corpse it was removed to the village of Thodanum or Tharotan. The remains of the saint were scattered throughout the kingdom, his head is believed to be now in Italy, his right hand at Echmiadzin and his left at the Holy See of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon.

A shrine was built at the site shortly after the conversion, a large walled compound replacing the old city walls when Artashat was abandoned in favor of Dvin in the 5th c. The Catholicos Nerses the Builder commissioned a church over the pit in 642, and the site became a monastery and important education center during the Middle Ages, with the larger church going up perhaps as early as the 10th c, rebuilt along with the vank during the following centuries.

Abandoned in the Persian era (the community was a part of the forced migration of the Ararat valley during the reign of the Persian Shah Abbas I in 1604), it remained empty until three monks were sent to reconsecrate the site after the Russian conquest of 1828. It survived the USSR period somehow intact, if neglected, becoming an important part of Diaspora pilgrimage tours led by Intourist and a hard-currency hungry Soviet Armenia government. Freshened for the 2001 celebration of Christianity in the country, it has been renewed again of late, its walls rebuilt and the interiors spruced for a growing tourist trade, as well as a prime spot for weddings, photos and matagh (sacrifice).

SITES

Fedayi Statue At the turnoff to the Monastery, next to Lusarat village road, there is a large 20th c statue to the Fedaiyi, 19th c freedom fighters who first led armed resistance to Turkish pogroms.



Monastery Approach The approach is one of the most dramatic in Armenia, its walled form jutting out from a low hillside that is in turn framed by the huge Mt. Ararat. On clear days the mountain is one of the most beautiful sites in the world, its snow-capped crest jutting out in front of a clear blue sky. Clearly seen in the early hours of dawn, the mountain is a cauldron of clouds that build up from the day's heat, often below the mountain's top, creating the illusion of a second set of mountains on top of the main.



Outside the monastery and on your right as you reach the car park, there is a large **cemetery**, with mostly modern, but a few old graves and khachkars.

At the **car park**, in high season you will find a number of vendors and on occasions, circus performers or costumed cartoon characters, all

attempting to get your drams. Enjoy and buy if you wish.

 **KHOR VIRAP MONASTERY - ԽՈՐ ՎԻՐԱՊԻ ՎԱՆՔ**  (DD 39.87926 x 44.57763, elev. 830m)

The complex includes the walled compound, set on one of the hills of Old Artashat, the central S. Astvatsatsin Church, and a smaller S. Gevorg Church, which houses the pit where S. Grigor is believed to have been thrown.

Built on top of the 2nd c BCE castle keep, the monastery is a rare example of a Christian site that not built over a pagan worship site. Though venerated from the death of Grigor (ca. 334) and mentioned as a pilgrimage site in early medieval (5th-6th cc) chronicles, the contemporary monastery is traced to the 7th c, when the Catholicos Nerses (the Builder) in 642 had a small basilica built over the pit where Grigor is believed to have languished for thirteen years. Another church must have been at the site as well, judging from the older blocks of stone used to construct the larger, central church of S. Astvatsatsin, its latest renovation dating to the 17th c.

[MAP]

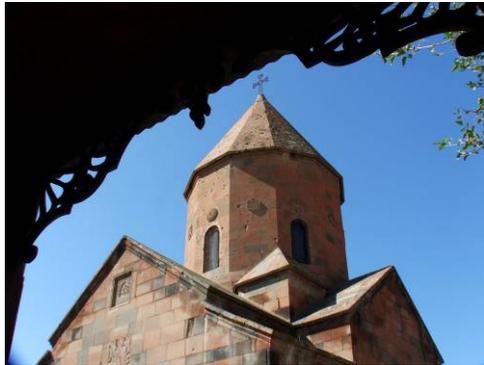
COMPLEX



The **walls** of the compound were recently rebuilt using imported stones. A few traces of stone from the old city of Artashat can be detected at the foundations, but almost all of the stone you see now is from the medieval to modern periods.

A large **courtyard** surrounds the remaining structures from a 7th-14th cc monastery that sat at the site. The eastern wall of the **main church, S. Astvatsatsin** (ca. 10th?-17th cc), is the first

structure you see after passing through the **gateway** (13th?-17th c). The church is built on top of a rock dome, loping edges of which jut out from the courtyard paving. The church, a domed hall type, was destroyed during the Timurid invasions of the late 14th c and rebuilt in the 17th c. It was damaged anew by earthquakes and rebuilt or renovated in 1939, 1949 and 1957 before its most recent renovation in the 21st century.



The church is unique in that instead of the domed cruciform with four corner annexes typical for the period of its original construction, the church is in instead a domed long hall with two annexes, one on either side of the apse. The hall is divided by a central arch, which forms the western side of the square that supports the drum of the dome. On its outside, it appears to be a domed cruciform, the rooflines forming the wings of the cross. Both the drum and the conical dome roof are eight sided, the drum holding four windows, located at the ordinal directions (NW/NE/SW/SE). The interior is more or less lavishly outfitted for the working church, and if you arrive on a Sunday morning, be sure to take in some of the service.

The western entry is protected by a 17th c **bell tower**, itself topped with an eight column bell space topped by a conical roof.

All around the courtyard and church are series of service, storage areas and office **rooms**, built into the fortress walls.

Grigor's Pit is located to the SW of the main church, underneath the 7th c (642) **S. Gevorg Church**, a small basilica with a semicircular apse. The building is entered from the north.

Unlike Armenian churches, which are oriented East-West, S. Gevorg is oriented NW-SE,

interestingly like the Temple at Garni, which is also oriented in the same directions, and was built over Urartian and Bronze Age worship sites.



In fact, these are the only two religious buildings in Armenia that are oriented in the same direction, giving some pause; both are of the same period (1st-2nd cc), and both are a part of the conversion story (the pit where Grigor lay for 13 years, the temple at Garni where the king spent his summers worshipping a Pagan deity). Not at all proven, this does however suggest they may be of the same origin; this may have been more than a castle keep that was later converted to a shrine; like Garni, it may too have been a religious site that was then built over with new intentions, much as the Hellenistic Parthians built their Greek temples over the Zoroastrian fire pit at Garni.



The current structure was built in 642 for one of the greatest catholicos in Armenian history, Nerses the Builder, responsible of most of the religious structures of the 7th c, which were either begun or completed during his reign. In many ways Nerses brought the religious civil wars to an end,

celebrating the Christian rites throughout the country, in churches and monasteries erected in its most remote spots. The church at Khor Virap has been repeatedly rebuilt during its history, after the Timurid invasions and after the 1679 and 1926 earthquakes.

Inside the church there are **two pits**, the farthest of which is believed to be the one where Grigor languished for thirteen years before being summoned before the mad king T'rdad. The entry is via one metal ladder with swarms of people going up and down. There is no crowd control, and it is not for the claustrophobic. Hang on tight as you descend or ascend.



The pit is 6 meters deep and 4.4 meters in diameter. It was originally located in the citadel's castle keep, a prison made for prisoners designated for execution. One can only imagine what it was like to be dropped into a pit like this, infested with snakes and scorpions, without light or food, prisoners dropped and forgotten; left to die. If the legend is true that a kind-hearted woman took pity on Grigor and kept him a live by lowering a basket of bread into the pit, then she would have been a part of the prison staff, perhaps married to the jailer. The pit now has a bank of candle tables and an altar.

Nerses the Builder is supposed to be buried in Khor Virap, along with relics of Gregory himself.



On top of the western wall, there is an **observation platform** with excellent views of Mt. Ararat and the Turkish border. The border can be spotted by looking for the guard towers that dot the landscape, then tracing them as they follow the flow of the Arax River. The large Turkish village opposite is Bashket. At night you can see the lights of NATO mountain military bases half way up the mountain.

ARTASHAT - ՄՐՏՈՒՍ  (DD 39.88217 x 44.54441)

On the NW side of Khor Virap there is a large hill, the top of which was the acropolis for Old Artashat, "Joy of Artashes", and Hannibal's retirement town. Movses Khorenatsi adds that there were numerous pagan temples constructed out of copper that were built in honor of the goddess Anahit-Artemis and Tir-Apollonia.

This ancient city was a rival to the best cities in the Roman Empire, with its own amphitheatre, coliseum, and a grand entry lined with idols and statuary, ending at the Arax River at a grand temple that is described by excavators as even more elaborate than the one at Garni.

Complex detail

The site of such an important city in the history of the Near East is sadly not well preserved or even mentioned by most tour guides except as a footnote in the trip to Grigor's pit.

This is not exactly surprising, given there are no historical markers or plans of the old city to guide your exploration of the site, and most guides are less than aware of what actually happened there.

But it is well worth hiking up the hills around Khor Virap to gain a little perspective on what a magnificent city it once was. Ongoing excavations

of the Pagan temple precincts is shedding light on the city's extensive contacts with the outside world, plus showing just how grand it really was.

COMPLEX

Artashat maintained its status for 6 centuries (2nd c BCE – 5th c) and was built on twelve hills, the largest of which still dominate the landscape.

Now surrounded on the west by swamps and marshland, the entire city was built at the confluence of two **rivers**, the Yeraskh (Arax) and Metsamor, which were in turn fed by the Hrazdan, Kasakh and Azat. Now mostly drained off for irrigation use, the waters that flowed then created a turbulent, deep channel at Artashat; a formidable natural defense. The deep waters were also navigable for much of the Arax River.



Drawn in 1265 by a monk from Colmar, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* showed the trade routes of the medieval world, including Artashat (Artaxata) in the top left of this picture.

There is some thought that the river may have actually run to the east of the city, with manmade channels on the west and south. If so, the river then ran roughly along the same line as the modern roads to and past the SE village of Lusarat before joining with a man made channel that still serves as an irrigation canal. The city walls were built roughly along the same line; 1.9 km SE of the Khor Virap, before turning sharply NW for 3 km to meet the N wall that arched up and over the steep hills.

Artashat occupied about 400 hectares of territory and in its heyday had a population of about 150,000; one of the largest in the world. From on top of the tallest hill you can detect both the city's

boundaries and the original flow of the rivers, and if you carefully comb the earth, you will still find small shards of pottery from different periods of the city's existence.

Excavations begun in the 1970s on the old city's hills have uncovered streets, foundations of villas and other buildings, as well as Mediterranean and Hellenistic artifacts. Other sections remain buried, waiting future excavations. What has been uncovered shows a very sophisticated city, with running water, waste disposal, and public baths.

But it is already too late to excavate some of the old city, which was built on veins of marble that were mined over the centuries, the city's structures razed to make room for the quarries. What does remain are the outline of the complex city walls and foundations of the citadel, patrician villas, houses of commerce, and the king's palace on the far NE hills (Artashat Hill 1).

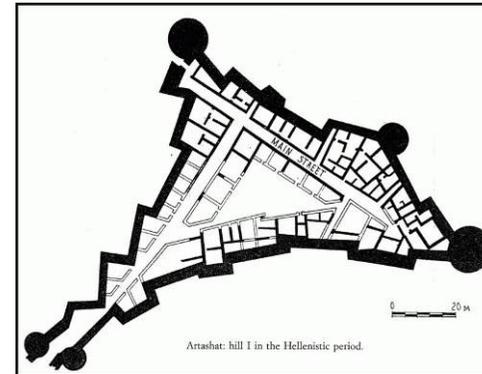


The **fortification walls** of the city stretched for more than 10,000 meters; 4,500 of which were unearthed by archeologists in 1970-80s. There were two sets of walls around the citadel, which in times of attack created a double fort.

Walls were made of white limestone, carved using a bossed technique that emphasized the beauty of the walls while obscuring the joints. It gave the appearance of a monolithic structure while also catching the sun rays in a way to make the walls look more impressive. On the west end, black marble was used in the structures, which would have emphasized the wall design even more.

Block joints were dovetail, a sort of "bow tie" hole carved in each which, when poured with lead and cooled, created a strong bond. The bossed technique and dovetailing can be found in Urartian structures and in 2nd c BCE Garni walls.

The walls have long since been torn down, mostly to reuse the white basalt and black marble stone in building the "new" capital, Dvin. On the North end of the farthest hill there is a detectable wall of mud brick, which may not be from the 2nd c BCE.



Hill 1 Hill 1 is at the farthest NE of the complex, most easily reached by taking the N dirt road before the cemetery and car park to the far side of the hills.

The top of the hill contains the citadel and palace, and it remains the best preserved part of the complex. The main street, side streets and building foundations are clearly seen (Google Earth Khor Virap/Artashat to see just how well preserved the outlines are). The city walls form a pincher at the citadel entrance, forcing all how passed to expose themselves to guards above.

Many of the 1000 seals uncovered in Artashat were found here, in the political heart of the city. The number and origin of the seals showed researchers how far-reaching commerce was in Artashat; seals came from most of the capitals of the ancient world.

Other artifacts include jewelry, pottery, utensils and weapons.

[plan]

4th, 5th, 7th Hills These hills are NW of Khor Virap, where the entire complex narrows on its way down and then up the largest hill to the NE. The walls came to another pincher formation here, and excavators uncovered a large area section of the lower city, with foundations of buildings,

streets and a number of artifacts. Pottery shards can still found on this section of the complex.

[map]

Khor Virap Hill (Hill 6) is the most popular site today, the site where Grigor languished for 13 years in a deep pit before beginning his ministry. In Hannibal's day, the hill was where the prison keep was placed, far removed from the citadel while looming above and over the lower city (citizens no doubt looking up in dread at the prison's towers, overhearing the cries of anguish by those being tortured inside. There is no reason to believe that punishment in Artashat was any less brutal than elsewhere in the antique world; public whippings, crucifixions and impalement were common in the Near East and Rome. If the city followed the same practices, one of the outside hills to the city was reserved for public execution).

Southeast mound (Turkish border) The lower hill far to the W and on the Arax River/Turkish border (closed to tourists) is where excavators have uncovered the most remarkable finds in the old city; the remains of a gorgeous **Temple to the sun god Mher** (Areg-Mihr-Apollo-Hermes-Tir) and an adjoining large **Roman baths**.



Temple precincts

The **baths** were located in a building made up of 7 rooms at 75 square meters each. Found were a mosaic floor and a tiny brook, bases and pools with beautiful ornaments. Uncovered were a large number of bricks and tiles used in the bath structure: round hypocaust supports, floor bricks and other parts of the hypocaust system. The system used a large boiler at one end of the baths, heated by a fire maintained by slaves. Clay pipes brought the hot water to the bath itself, while the fire also heated the basement of the building,

where special clay stones and bricks radiated the heat up through the tile floor.

Located to the north of the temple structure, the baths used the hypocaust system to heat the rooms and water, as at Garni. The size of this second set of baths in the city, located next to the temple, suggests the level of urban life in Artashat, and that they may have been used before performing sacrifice at the temple itself.

In the same area as the bath and temple a number of artifacts were uncovered; fragments of tiles, and decorated bricks. 1st-2nd c pottery, trilobite jugs, pitchers and a fragment of a polished red slip clay bowl with a lug (handle) in the shape of a lion head and a rope design on the lip.

Clay pipes carried water for the baths, but also water for the city and sewerage. Public toilets were also found at the site. Public toilets and a sewer system were remarkable for its time; especially considering most village houses still have no modern plumbing.

Temple to Mher (Mythra) Ongoing excavations have opened up an Avenue of idols that connected the citadel with the River, and a temple to Mihr (Mythra) – the sun god of Armenian mythology. The temple – the symbol of sun-worship in the kingdom, is well recorded in medieval chronicles, but its exact location was lost, the temple smashed during the reign of T'rdat III during the conversion of the country to Christianity.

Archeologists, led by Professor Zhores Khachatryan, renewed stalled excavations in 2003, found the temple in 2007, a limestone building on the Left Bank of the river, on a hill that was surrounded by thick walls.

There were two levels to the building. The earliest temple complex (ca. 2nd c BCE) was destroyed in the early 1st century, perhaps during the Roman campaign led by Domitius Corbulo, which sacked the city in 58. A new platform was built over the old and new temple—similar to that at Garni—may have been built. Remains include foundations and pieces of the decorative carvings that adorned the large space. There were 23 stairways to the temple site.

At the temple site excavators uncovered a lion-headed lug bowl, suggesting the temple was dedicated to the sun (the lion being the symbol of the summer sun and in the Near East was a symbol of the sun, fire, heroes and kings). Also found were a large quantity of imported vessels, which were used to hold olive oil and perfume, also

pointing to the building's use as a temple. The carved stones that have been found are beautiful—more beautiful than those at Garni, which would have been the way of course.

Excavators believed that there may be enough surviving fragments to reconstruct the temple, though they face a daunting challenge in raising funds to continue their work. SO far the state has allotted only \$4800 for work that will require millions.



Anahit Statue from Artashat

Temple to Anahit Among artifacts found in its early excavations was the head of an idol to **Anahit**, goddess of fertility and motherhood. The temple was located where the present church at Khor Virap now stands.

One of the most beautiful sculptural pieces from the Near East, a copy is in the State History

Museum in Yerevan. The original is now housed at the British Museum, the curators choosing to ignore its Armenian origins in their description.

Risks The site faces severe harm by local village heads who are selling off parcels of the supposed protected area to erect dachas.

Note that because of its location on the border, Russian guards do not allow tourists to visit the site. If you can swing permission from the Security Forces, excavation are conducted June-July each year and Professor Khachatryan welcomes viewers.



Part of the Excavation workshop collection (Arpi Vardanian)

Overnight in either village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** is possible around the village, ask first; **Food** at mterks and grill stand at Pokr Vedi village.



CONTINUE TRIP 3

➔ **Backtrack to the (M2), turn R (SE) and continue for about 3 km; take the L (NE) Aralez/Vedi exit and in about 1 km turn R (SE) on the (H8); continue for another 1.7 km and through Aralez to where a low round mound appears to the L (N) of the road, the 4000 BCE settlement just outside (Aigevan, DD 39.87609 x 44.65803, elev. 840m)** 🗺️ 🏠 🌿

SIDE TRIP: Aigevan – Այգեվան (till 1945 Reghanlu, pop. 700) borders an important archeological find to its NW; the 4000 BCE- 6th c settlement that makes up the low mound (852m) on the N side of the highway. The mound includes foundations of buildings (mostly

medieval), traces of a protective wall, and pottery shards.

Overnight in village (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** possible around the village, ask first; **Springs** in village.

➔ From Aigevan, continue SE on the (H8) for about 5.4 km to a L (N) main street that leads eventually into central **ARARAT CITY** (DD 39.85504 x 44.69474, elev. 836m) 🗺️ 🏠 🌿

🗺️ **ARARAT CITY - ԱՐԱՐԱՏ (Արարատ)** 🏠 (founded 1920, pop. 13,000) is the marz' largest city and the economic engine for the region, such as it is. To the NE of the town there are two large relics of the Soviet era that continue operating; the Ararat Cement factory (est. 1929), its unfiltered smokestacks the cause of 70% of the Ararat Valley's particulate air pollution, and a gold ore processing plant, its massive tailings the source of secondary income from residual gold pouring money into the pockets of politicians and a multi-national corporation.



The textile and carpet factories were shuttered in the 1990s for lack of an export market (the rail line stops at Yeraskh on the Nakhichevan border). Despite the millions made at the gold processing center and cement factory, most families still get most of their income from remittances from family members living abroad.

SITES

The town has an exhausted air about it, with soviet era stores shuttered en masse, interspersed with a small working mterk or khanut (shop).

The **square** is fronted by a dormant culture center, Univermag and a dry fountain. Taking the

street to the L of the culture center as you face it, and continuing N, you soon pass a closed ethnographic museum (no one knows who has the key and the windows are shuttered) and in a short distance, the city park, with a restaurant-hotel, a large **WWII monument**, some fountains and flowers. There is also a **small monument** to a Soviet Armenian soldier who lost his life in the great patriotic War.



The town has a small state university, a medical and a musical college, an art school, a cultural center, and a sports center.



The **park**, though rather tires, is a pleasant place to rest on a hot day. At one end of the park there is a **restaurant-hotel** (pleasant DBLs at 5000 AMD /5 hours or 10,000 AMD / all night) and at the other end an **amphitheatre** that has been converted into an outdoor **night club**, which really looks rather interesting in its own kitsch way. The music is Rabiz, but the service is OK and the food pretty good.



ARARAT VILLAGE

Adjoining the town on its SE is the suburb of Ararat Village, known in late medieval times as Davalu, the capital of the Persian Vedi-Basar Mahal. Populated by Turcoman shepherds and Kurds who claimed the area in the wake of the forced migration of native Armenians by the Persian Shah in 1508, the village was repopulated during the population swap of 1828-1829.

Today, Ararat village is (in) famously known as the birthplace of Vazgen Sargsian, Armenia's first defense minister-cum-prime minister of Armenia who was assassinated in 1999. Depending on who you talk to, Sargsian (b 1959) was either the savior of the Armenian Republic or a scourge on the planet who deserved to be killed. He is largely credited with the Armenia's successes in the battlefield in Nagorno Karabakh, resulting in a truce in 1994. His and other government officials' sudden increase in wealth at the same time caused more than a little notice in the poverty stricken population and many feared him.

On October 27, 1999, Sargsian, Karen Demirchian, the last Soviet Armenia Communist Party Chairman, and 6 other officials were gunned down by five gunmen who entered the Parliament building under still suspicious circumstances. The government has refused to comment on the case or the killers, which were sentenced to prison for a capital offense in 2003, causing many to believe that the assassination was engineered by political rivals. None of it is proved, but conspiracy theories are the stuff of manna in this part of the world.

Sargsian is buried in the military cemetery at Yerablur, in Yerevan, while Ararat village has a home museum dedicated to his memory.

MINERAL SPRINGS

ARARAT MINERAL SPRINGS (tel. 093-325502, 091-409422) are an open air set of pools fed by a warm mineral springs that erupt from the ground. The springs are located inside a walled garden that is well maintained and run by friendly group of locals.

The springs are located SE of the cement plant and due S of the gold processing center, just N of the outlying Zodk neighborhood that housed workers at the gold plant.



To get there, backtrack to the entry street you used to get into Ararat, and turn L (SE) on the (H8), then continue for about 2.3 km to where a train platform is by the side of the highway, taking the next L (N) for about 800 m to where a L (NW) angle road ends at a gate and stone surrounding a park. In inside the gate you will find the springs.

You can also reach the springs by taking the Yerevan-Yeraskh elektrichka, getting off at Zodk district east of Ararat City, then walking up the N road to the springs. The cost is about 1000 AMD R/T.

The springs are open year round, though in winter you need to call ahead. They have a constant temperature of 28° C, pleasant year round. The fee is 200 AMD for as long as you want. The managers provide food at the ticket office in the summer and you are welcome to bring your own picnic.

There are showers, a picnic area and a large pool for soaking. The garden has fruit trees and tall grass. For a cheap soak, you cannot beat this family-run place. A find!



[MAP]

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 238
 Long Distance: 0238 + local number
 From abroad: + (374) 238+ local number
 Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel (Beeline), 093/094 VivaCell (MTS)
 International callers: Armentel/Beeline + (374) 91 + number, VivaCell-MTS + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0238) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 238 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Train

Elektrichka trains connect Ararat (central station & Zodk) with Yerevan (David Sassuntsi metro). The Trains leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the evening. Tickets at 250-500 AMD makes this the cheapest way to town.

By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minivans (marshrutni taxis) connect Ararat with Artashat, Vedi, Massis, Yerevan and villages in the area. Intercity buses stop at Ararat on their way to Vayots Dzor and Siunik (ask which bus to take). The bus stop is by the train station.

Buses Frequent connect Ararat to Yerevan (350 AMD). From Yerevan they depart from the Bus area behind the central train station (M: Sassuntsi Davit) and arrive at the Ararat bus stop/train station. Buses from Ararat include those to Artashat (150 AMD) and Vedi (150 AMD). Small orange buses connect to villages in the region and cost around 100-150 AMD each trip. Most leave villages in the morning and return in the evening. For destinations and times, ask when you arrive.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop at the train station. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Minivans connect Ararat to Yerevan (Central train Station, 400 AMD), Artashat (150 AMD), Vedi (200 AMD) and Massis (250 AMD). Some interstate minivans stop in Ararat on their way south or north—again, ask when you arrive for particulars.

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it is cheaper.

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Artashat at 100-150 AMD per kilometer with a 600 AMD minimum charge. Taxis should charge 4600-6900 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone for same price. There are dozens of taxi services to choose from. Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

By Car (note: distances are from Ararat Center) Ararat is on the (M2) and (H8) highways. Both lead N to Artashat (14 km), Massis (28 km) and Yerevan (46 km), while they join the (H10) halfway to Artashat which is another 7 km to Vedi.

The (H8) merges with the (M2) SE of Ararat and continues to Yeraskh (11 km) before turning NE to the Urts Valley to join the (H10) (9 km) and the Tuhmanuk Pass at Vayots Dzor in another 9 km. From Ararat it is 46 km to central Yerevan, 14 km to Artashat, 11 km to Yeraskh, 65 km to Yeghegnadzor, 126 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 81 km to Vaik, 114 km to Jermuk, 149 km to Sissian, 178 km to Goris, 241 km to Goris, 267 km to Kadjaran and 307 km to Meghri.

AROUND

On foot is fairly easy; from end to end the city is but 2 km long. There are two main streets, the one you came up on and the main that fronts the square and rail station.

Taxis Ararat has plenty of taxis. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (few speak English). The general rate is 500 AMD anywhere in town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

- Fire – 101
- Police – 102
- Ambulance service – 103
- Rescue Hot Line - 118
- Gas emergency service – 104

Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs

Ararat is covered by both Armentel/Beeline and VivaCell-MTS (47/32 Khanjian p.) mobile services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office* (32 Shahumian p.), [See HayPost site for list \(http://www.haypost.am/\)](http://www.haypost.am/). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegraphs.



Internet

ARMINCO has a local representative in Ararat (Andranik Minassian, Arman Gabrielian), 32a Isahakian p, tel. 42888, 44705, email: gama@arminco.com. They offer prepaid card service.

There is an **INTERNET CAFÉ** in the town and an Internet Center at city schools.

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks:
ACBA-CREDIT AGRICOLE, 31 Shahumian p.
ARDSHININVESTBANK, 12a Khanjian p.
ARMECONOMBANK, 58 Shahumian p.

Shopping

There are a number of shops in town, and a lively yarmaka and shuka. Shops include mterks, souvenirs and clothing stores. Most are around the central square and its side streets. The Shuka and Yarmaka are on the main street in town.

Film, etc.

Film can be bought at film developers and mterks. Batteries are suspect, bring your own.

Pharmacy

Apotekas (Armenian: deghatuner) can be found in the center of town, on Khanjian and Shahumian pts.

Hospital, Polyclinic

There is a hospital and clinic in town. For a medical emergency, contact your lodging venue or go to Yerevan.

ARTASHAT HOSPITAL, tel. 43556

OVERNIGHT

Restaurant/Motels



Ararat has a **RESTAURANT/MOTEL**, located on the W end of the park (take the west side street by the culture house). It is used for weddings, celebrations and tête-à-têtes, and the motel welcomes tourists to clean rooms in multi-story building with DBLs at 5000/5 hrs or 10,000/overnight.

Boarding/Apartment

This is a distinct possibility, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. Apartments are mostly in the north side of the tracks, houses on the south side. 4000-5000 AMD for B&B in clean space is fair. Be sure there is water and power.

HRASMIK, tel. 42511, has an apartment with water, basic, clean. 5000 AMD.

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovats Grills, Srjarans and cafes, and restaurants/motels on the (H8). Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.

\$ = 1500 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks

\$\$ = 1500-2500 AMD
\$\$\$ = 2500 AMD or more

ARARAT RESTAURANT-MOTEL, City Park, has Armenian menu. Fish is good but expensive at 6000 AMD. Khorovats is 2000 AMD. \$\$

The main streets have **CAFES** and **BISTROS** serving sandwiches, grill, kebab and khorovats at competitive prices. \$-\$\$



CONTINUE TRIP 3

➔ From Ararat, continue SE on the (H8) to the (M2) intersection, taking the (M2) SE for about 5 km to the SE end of (**Surenavan**, DD 39.79000 x 44.77548, elev. 810m) 🏠 🍷 🐟

SIDE TRIP: Surenavan – Սուրենավան (till 1946 Avshar Mets, pop. 1000) is a fishing/farming village, making a go of it by selling the luscious fruits (and melons!) and vegetables from roadside stalls, and for the “Mets Dzuk” (B-I-I-I-I-G FISH!) raised in the nearby fish ponds.

The village is named for Suren Spandarian, an activist in the revolutionary movement in Russia, Armenian literature critic, publicist, member of RSDRP (Russian Socialist Democratic Workers' Party) beginning 1901, and Bolshevik. He was so successful at his work (he has been nicknamed the “Professional Revolutionary”) his name was placed in the list of “most dangerous people” by the Tsarist Secret Service. Spandarian died in 1916, one year before the October Revolution.



The small road to your R (SW) leads to the first set of **fish ponds**, the source of most of the fish

raised in the valley, plus a prime breeding ground for migratory water fowl.

Birding The fish ponds here and further SE at Armash are considered by many the best spots for water fowl birding in the country. Most of the migratory birds that wing their way through the valley stop at one of these ponds, some for a short stay, others to nest and breed. They arrive at different times; check *Birds In Armenia* web site ([Resources Online](#), p. 57) for a detailed list and trip reports by birders who have visited Armenia

Birds that have been known to visit the ponds include Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*), Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*), Whooper Swan (*Cygnus Cygnus*), Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons albifrons*), Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*), Greylag Goose (*Anser anser rubrirostris*), Red-breasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*), Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas Penelope*), Gadwall (*Anas strepera strepera*), Common Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*), Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*), Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta acuta*), Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Marbled Duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*), Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*), Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*), Ferruginous Duck (*Aythya nyroca*), Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*), Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila marila*), Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*), Velvet Scoter (*Melanitta fusca fusca*), Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula clangula*), Smew (*Mergus albellus*), Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*), Goosander (*Mergus merganser merganser*), White-headed Duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*).

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village and fish ponds—ask first); **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Surenavan continue SE on the (M2) for about 3.9 km to the fish pond turnout just before (**Armash**, DD 39.76252 x 44.80283, elev. 805m)   

SIDE TRIP: **Armash – Արմաշ** (founded in 1925 as Yayji, pop. 1200) was founded on the sites of prehistoric marshland settlements, most of which have yet to be excavated. The village is home to a unique **Museum of Sanitary**

Culture, found in 1971, and shuttered in the 1990s. The dilapidated building still boasts displays of Soviet hygiene in dusty display cases that can be seen from the windows. No one knew who had the key when we visited, but a logical place to check is the village clinic, which serves the entire southern marz.



The profusion of **migratory birds** and water fowl in particular that visit the nearby ponds is truly amazing; Armash and Surenavan share the same river delta, which has been diverted into these huge ponds. Intensive farming has only dented the habitat for these migratory species, the largest that occurs between Eurasia and Africa.

Birding is the same as that at next-door Surenavan (they share the same marshes and fish pond complex), though Armash itself is more popular.

May Sightings include Black-headed Buntings, White Storks, White-winged Terns, Sand Martin, Herons, Little Bittern, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Great White Egret, Little Egret, White-headed, Ferruginous and Marbled Ducks, Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, Garganey, Pygmy Cormorants, Great Reed, Caspian Reed, Paddyfield, Sedge, Cetti's and Savi's Warblers, Bearded Reedlings, Eastern Olivaceous; Little Stints, Ruff, Grey Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Sanderling, Spotted Redshank, Caspian Tern, Mediterranean Gull, Black-headed and Slender-billed Gull.

June Sightings at ponds, reed marshes and deltas include White Storks, Black-headed and Corn Buntings, Rose-colored Starlings, Montagu's Harriers, Pygmy Cormorants, Glossy Ibis, Black-headed Wagtail, Owl, European Bee-eaters, Little Egret, Grey Herons, Great Crested

Grebes, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous and Marbled Ducks, Gadwall, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Northern Lapwing, Little Stint, Bearded Tits, Great Reed Warblers, Gull-billed and Little Terns, Little Bitterns, White-headed Duck, Common Kingfisher, Western Marsh-harriers, Short-toed Eagle, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Ringed Plovers, Garganey, Common Shelduck, Whiskered Terns, Paddyfield Warblers, Moustached Warbler, and White-tailed Lapwings.



Ecological Problems The fish ponds here, at Surenavan, and at Sis in northern Ararat are the cause of serious ecological problems generated by the fish industry, which has sunk deep wells to capture the running spring water and needlessly dumps it into drainage ditches or open fields. The result is dangerously low water pressure for the rest of the valley, which has led to further desertification of the valley. At the same time, the excess water floods cultivated fields, ruining local farmer crops and literally drowning orchards. The water also has led to salination of the land, the salts poisoning the soil. Since most of the fish ponds are owned by high-ranking public officials who bribe officials to get the permit and sink a well, no one stops the ruin. Environmental specialists say the resources are simply being mistreated since a managed circulation system could ensure re-use of water up to five times. Oligarchs refuse to make the investment of a simple pump and sand filtration system (about \$2000), preferring easy profits.

Villagers complain they have no pressure for irrigating fields or even drinking water (both true), but don't expect them to become better caretakers of the ecological treasures that surrounds them; if given the chance, they would drain the ponds and all marshes for farming, destroying the largest water habitat for eastern

European migratory birds in the world. Welcome to the New Armenia!

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village and ponds—ask first); **Food** at roadside fish grill, produce stands and village mterk; **Springs** in the area.



➡ From Armash continue SE on the (M2) for about 3 km to (**Yeraskh**, DD 39.74131 x 44.82923, elev. 807m)   

SIDE TRIP: **Yeraskh – Երասխ** (before Arazdayan, pop. 500) is a sad, sad, sad little place literally at the end of the road on the Armenians side of the Ararat Valley; a once bustling rail depot is closed (much of its rail track was pulled up during the 1990s), a victim of the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.

On the other side is Nakhichevan, the fabled spot where Noah descended after the flood (Nakhichevan, from the Armenians roots for "First", "Descent" and "Stop or Rest"). This tired, dusty hamlet is made of a few farmers, but mostly the leftovers of a once bustling town that could not get away to work abroad. It is that sad.



The sadness has another face each springs, as tens of thousands of wildflowers literally cove the valley floor, with several rare species of poppies taking over the rail embankment.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village-no shade); **Springs** in village.

➡ From Yeraskh, the highway turns abruptly NE, leading to the Urts valley (Trip 4) or Vayots Dzor and the South. From Yeraskh you can easily connect to Trip 4 or return to lodgings in Ararat marz or Yerevan.

END OF TRIP 3



TRIP 4: URTS VALLEY ▲

(*Yeraskh Stone Age Workshop*) – (*Tigranashen*) – (*Vardashat*) – (*Zangakaton*) – (*Urtsalanj*) – (*Lusashogh*) – **S. KARAPET VANK** – (*Lanjanist*) – (*Shaghap*) – (*Urtsadzor*) – **GEVORG MARZPETUNI CASTLE** – (*Khosrov Reserve: Vedi entrance*) – **VEDI** – **YERAKH VALLEY** – (*Goravan Sands Preserve*)



Trip 4 can also be done in reverse, beginning from Khor Virap/Artashat, and crossing over the (M2) highway instead of heading south to Ararat and the Armash fish ponds. If you go in reverse, you will loop around the Urts Mountain Range to Yeraskh and Armash, passing Ararat City on your way back towards Yerevan.

But we prefer the trip this way, beginning from Yeraskh at the end of Trip 3, in the Badlands of the Ararat Valley, a still fertile if desert terrain that grew the first grape vines more than 3000 years ago in carefully terraced, irrigated vineyards. From there the trip rises to the upper highlands and the tall mountain passes that lead to Vayots Dzor. On the way you skirt the Nakhichevan border and pass through the last habitat for one of Armenia's rare species of Iris. Nearby mountain caves are said to be deep enough to pass into Nakhichevan and Vayots Dzor.

The trip then turns sharply into one of the country's best kept secrets, the Urts Valley. And the contrast could not be greater, with just one mountain ridge separating the hot valley floor from a cool expanse of mountain meadows, green fields and snow-covered mountain tops. The trip includes one of the country's hidden architectural jewels as well, the monastery of S. Karapet, hidden from view 15 km off the main road.

The trip includes a stop at the birthplace and home-museum for one of Armenia's most famous modern poets, Paruir Sevak, a firebrand of a wordsmith who has been compared to the medieval master Narekatsi for his poetry and imagery.

Iris Valley Trip 4 includes stops at two of Armenia's most unique habitats; the Goravan Sands Desert Preserve and Yerakh Valley, a.k.a. "Iris Valley" for its splendid display of Iris blossoms. The iris blooms for a few short weeks in April and May, and the

Birding The valley includes Yerakh Valley near Vedi town (also known as "Vedi Hills" by birders), an excellent birding habitat, especially for those seeking the Red-tailed Wheatear.



Stay: Guest houses/apts. in Vedi; village homes (rustic) throughout the marz; Camping by S. Karapet, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Tigranashen valley, and near villages (esp. Lanjanist, Shaghap and Urtsadzor).

Eat: Cafes in Vedi; mterks and kiosks in Vedi and villages.

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, and Vedi.

➔ Starting from Yeraskh (end of Trip 3), take the (M2) NE for about 9 km to the N exit to and roadside monument at (**Paruir Sevak**, DD 39.77100 x 44.92265, elev. 1224m) 🏠 🍴 🌿



SIDE TRIP: Paruir Sevak – Պարուիր Սևակ (founded 1978, pop. 200) is named for the late twentieth century poet who died in a car crash under suspicious circumstances (most believe he was killed for his anti-authoritarian views). See Zangakaton in this same trip for more

about Sevak. A small monument to Sevak is by the side of the road. To the S, reached by a rutted dirt road, is a Bronze Age excavation, which sadly has been taken over by the army and sued as a border watch point. Don't try to go; they will stop you.

Just N of Paruir Sevak on the (M2) you pass a series of important **Stone Age open air workshops** on both sides of the highway. The area looks bleak and foreboding, but if you stop and explore the hills, you will find thousands of shards from the flint work the workshops hewed into weapons and tools.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Spring** in the village.

➔ From the (M2) exit to Paruir Sevak, continue NE on the (M2) for about 2.3 km to the S exit to (**Tigranashen**, DD 39.78606 x 44.94270, elev. 1358m) 🏠 🍴 🌿



SIDE TRIP: Tigranashen – Տիգրանաշեն (till 1990 the Azerbaijani enclave of Kyarki, pop. 650), is on the S of the road, now inhabited by a mixture of local Armenians and refugees from Azerbaijan. The village is set in one of the most gorgeous places in Armenia; where the Urts Mountains plunge into the Zangezur, a place of deep valleys, huge labyrinth caves and soaring rock crevices. If you are trekking through Armenia, and you do not stop here, you are missing one of the most idyllic landscapes the country has to offer.

The valley is deep and winding, beginning as a gentle slope to the E of the village, then plunging into folds in the mountains. From the highway just E of the village you can scope the

entire view. The mountain slopes that erupt above the valley are extremely tall and included several fascinating limestone formations, including a "wave formation" on the slope closest to the highway.

Caves are very deep and not yet completely mapped. A professional guide is required for anyone other than the most experienced spelunker, and locals caution from going too deep—caves also lead to Nakhichevan and going too far might get you in trouble with Azeri border guards on the other end. The caves house several of Armenia's endemic bat colonies



Iris The area has one of the last habitats for an increasingly rare Armenian Iris (*Iris elegantisima*). At one time inhabiting the rugged hills and mountain slopes all along the Urts Mountain Range, this once-prolific flower is now endangered, by humans picking the flowers and selling them on the streets of Yerevan, but more because once restricted pasturage is now open season with local shepherds, their flocks decimating the flower. The crisis is so severe that experts in the Botanical Institute now encourage serious botanical tourists to help propagate the flower in their gardens, somehow saving the flower from extinction.

Tigranashen is also inside the southeastern most part of the **Khosrov Reserve** well endowed with geological formations and fossil sites.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area; **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Tigranashen continue NE on the (M2) for about 4.6 km and past the Urtsalanj road to the

N 1.4 km spur to (**Vardashat**, DD 39.81715 x 45.02566, elev. 1681m) 🏠 🏠 🏠

SIDE TRIP: Vardashat – Վարդաշատ (till 1948 Ghashka, pop. 150) is set off the main highway, straddling the Vardashat River. The valley mountains have spectacular geological landscapes, with Paleolithic open air workshops, limestone formations and caves.



[MAP]

Hiking trails head N following the river to the Armik and Vedi Rivers, and further N into the Khosrov Reserve.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From the Vardashat spur, continue E on the (M2) for about 800 meters to the first L (N) turnoff into Zangekatun, which if followed leads in about 300m to the Paruir Sevak home museum in (**Zangekatun**, DD 39.82035 x 45.03251, elev. 1672m) 🏠 🏠 🏠



SIDE TRIP: Zangakatun – Չանգակաձուն (till 1948 Chanakhchi, then Sovetashen, pop. 700) is the last village before the Tuxh Manuk pass and Vayots Dzor marz. The village straddles the Aratsoget River which courses through a dramatic landscape of rolling hills hemmed in by towering mountains and alpine meadows.

The village was the birthplace and home for one of Armenia's most famous 20th century poets (some say one of the greatest ever), and has a museum dedicated to his life and work. **Paruir (Paruyr) Sevak** (1924-1971) was born Paruir Rafaeli Ghazarian, in a village of farmers. The land, and the work on it, was an important influence on his work, and he chose to write much of his work in the place of his ancestors.



His studies took him to Yerevan State University and Moscow's Gorky Institute of Literature. A doctor of philology, from 1963 until his death in 1971 Sevak was a senior researcher for The Literature Institute of the Academy Of Sciences,

and in 1966 he was elected as the secretary of the Writers Union Of Armenia.

If you don't read Armenian, it is hard (if not impossible) to understand the impact Sevak had on Armenian literature, or the comparisons often made with the literary giants of Armenian writing, especially with Grigor Narekatsi, who is considered one of the best philosopher-poets in the medieval world in any language.

His work more secular than the spiritual treatises of his medieval mentor, Sevak nonetheless infused his work with the same quests and the place of the human heart in a world devoid of spiritual meaning. Heavy stuff, but what made his work so accessible (and he had a Rock Star following not unlike that of his contemporaries in the west), was the way he phrased his sentences; meanings buried deep within phrases that are outwardly easy and pleasing to read. He knew how to turn a phrase, and use Armenia's rich language to great effect.

All of this is lost on those who do not speak the language, and it is still felt that no translation of his work yet captures the essence of his meaning. Too bad for us!

However his life was as dramatic as his work, filled with loves, trials and his struggle against the authoritarian Soviet government, a struggle that many believe ended with his "accidental death" that was orchestrated by the KGB. To date, the outpouring of grief and the hundreds of thousands of mourners who followed his coffin at his funeral remains unmatched in modern time.

His poetry collections are *The Immortals Command*, 1948; *Unreconciled Intimacy*, 1953; *UNRECONCILED INTIMACY*, 1953; *The Way of Love*, 1954; *Again With You*, 1957; *The Ever Ringing Bell Tower*, 1959; *The Man in the Palm*, 1962; *Let There Be Light*, 1971; and *Your Acquaintances*, 1971. In addition there remain a number of unpublished manuscripts.



The **Home Museum** (open 10-5m M-S) is a pilgrimage point for local and Diaspora Armenians alike, and who can shed light on his life, work and why he still has such a profound impact on Armenian literature almost 40 years after his death.

The dedicated staff maintains the small museum and the superb garden that surrounds it, which includes Sevak's grave and memorial, a huge block of black stone with carvings.

Hiking The village is 2 km S of the Zangekatun Reservoir and 1 km N of Karalich reservoir and Mt. Khunut (2065.8m). Both have good alpine camping and hiking in the area; from Zangekatun Lake north along the Aratsoget River to Mt. Gndasar (2878.0m), and from Karalich SW to Tigranashen and the **Khosrov Reserve**.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➡ **To Vayots Dzor:** From Zangakatun continue E on the (M2) for about 2 km to the watershed for the marz and the border with Vayots Dzor, the (**Tuxh Manuk Pass**, DD 39.81004 x 45.06655, elev. 1795m) 🏠 🏠 🏠



SIDE TRIP: Tukh Manuk Pass – Թուխ Մանուկ Լ-ՊԵ (1795m) marks the point where the watershed for rivers that feed the Arax River flow west, and those feeding the Vorotan in Vayots Dzor flow east. It is a windswept barren land of tall mountains, and other than a sign and a small picnic table, not much to see, or much of a dramatic entrance. A few kilometers beyond the road switchbacks to the Yelpin Valley, one of the most beautiful in the country (see Vayots Dzor chapter).

➔ From the Tukh Manuk Pass backtrack for about 7 km to Urtsalanj turnoff (H10), turn R (N) and then E for the 1 km spur into **(Urtsalanj, DD 39.82254 x 44.99413, elev. 1865m)** 🏠 🗺️ 🌿

SIDE TRIP: Urtsalanj – Ուրցալանջ (pop. 200) is set among alpine hills and rugged mountains; barren in the summer but lush and green at spring time.



As you approach the village you will spot a large hill on the left; find your way to its top where

the old cemetery, wall fragments and foundations of a large **Hellenistic-Medieval Settlement** stand. The tombs stones are prolific and profound, combining tomb stones that appear to be Iron Age with later Hellenistic and Medieval markers.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Urtsalanj, backtrack to the (H10), turn R (W) and continue for about 1.6 km to Lanjar; continue another 1.5 km to a switchback where a dirt road begins (at small rusty sign) and heads west for about 7.1 km through dirt and gravel roads (impassable in wet weather save with a Jeep), and leads through a now ruined village and summer nomad camp and then in another 1.5 km or so to **(S. KARAPET MONASTERY, DD 39.84422 x 44.90538, elev. 1850m)** 🏠 🗺️ 🌿

✠ **S. KARAPET MONASTERY – Ս. ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏ ՎԱՆՔ (Ս. Կարապետ Վանջ)** is located in a fold of mountains that spurt off the Urts Mountain Range. The mountains divide the monastery's valley from the long Shaghapi-Selav River valley which forms the heart of the marz.

S. Karapet is located in one of the remotest parts of the country, which quickly becomes apparent as you approach the ruins of Djindjirlu medieval village (now a nomad camp) with its ruined foundations and small cemetery with khachkars, then continue NW following a stream towards the distant monastery (1 km from the nomad camp).



Once teeming with trees, the area is mountain steppe, an important habitat for hawks and eagles, and the occasional owl. It is also lush meadow

land, which draws the Yezidi and Armenian shepherds to the nomad camp.



En route you pass several khachkars, some grouped together as parts of now ruined shrines, others marking graves for important persons and monks. In its heyday the community was rather large but most of the graves were ruined or buried over during 14th-16th century Turcoman and Persian raids.

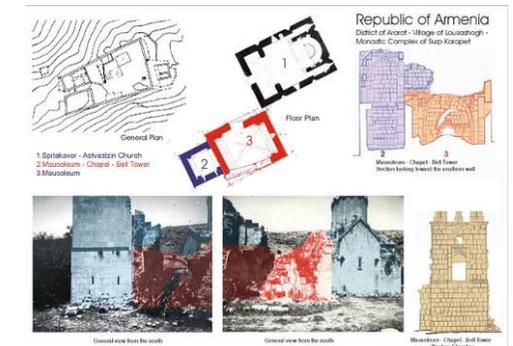
S. Karapet ("The Forerunner", or John the Baptist) is quite old; its origins are in the Pagan era, when sacred springs were developed into a shrine and worship area. The worship sites was converted into a Christian shrine in the 4th century, replaced over time until the current church was built in the 13th-14th century (experts disagree on the date, one setting it at 1254 during the reign of Smbat Orbelian, while another places it in the early 14th century, during the last, great, reign of the Orbelians, led by Burtel (Burtegh) Orbelian, who is most famously responsible for the three-story chapel that bears his name in Noravank, Vayots Dzor. Interestingly, S. Karapet also has a three-story chapel with a bell tower.

S Karapet (along with the nearby Aghjots Vank, Havuts Tar Convent and Geghard monastery), is part and parcel of the Orbelian influence on Armenian medieval life and architecture. Built for this powerful ruling family, this string of monasteries that hug the Geghama and Urts Mountain Ranges form a string of religious communities that reached their zenith during the Mongol period (ca. 1220-1340s), benefiting from Smbat Orbelians' fast-footed diplomacy with the Mangu Khan.

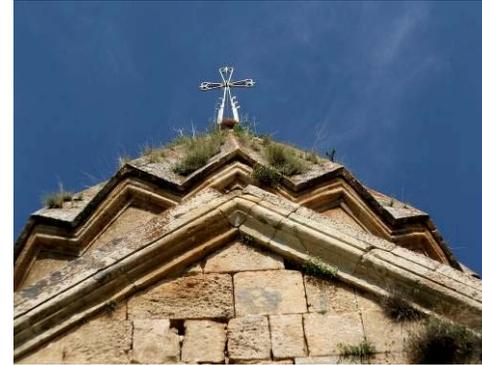
Convincing the khan to make his landholdings a protected (and of course tax-exempt) fiefdom under the khan, he wasted no time in

commissioning monuments befitting his status. The result is the last golden age of the Middle Ages, when Armenian architecture, and arts reached their zenith. In this short 100 year period, those churches, khachkars and monuments most identify with the "Armenian Style" were perfected.

There is little known of S. Karapet's community; in contemporary chronicles it is mentioned in lists of religious centers that thrived at their day, and it managed to survive the Dark Ages that followed the Mongol Era, when Turkish emirs, Timur's hoards, the Persians and Ottomans waged a 300 year war over the Armenian lands, devastating the country in return. It was also an important link in a string of mountain monasteries that stretched from Geghard to Tatev, roughly identifying the northern and southern borders of the Orbelian landholdings.

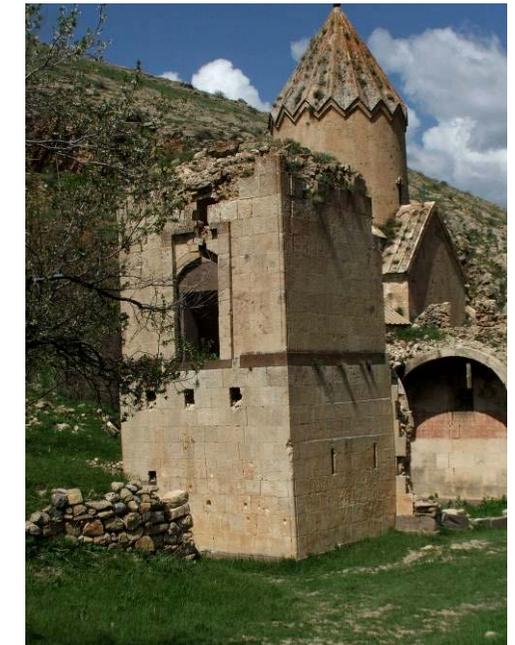


Complex
The complex (abandoned in the late 19th century) includes the S Astvatsatsin (also Spitaavor) Church, a mausoleum, three-story Mausoleum (with Chapel and Bell Tower), ruins of dwellings and service rooms, a small cemetery and defensive walls.



Taking the idea from their ancient brethren, medieval Armenians took the idea and created a new form, combining a tomb memorial with a second floor chapel and a third floor belfry. Later Armenians reinvented the form again into the belfry entries that adorn some churches today.

S. Astvatsatsin There are two dates suggested for the contemporary monastery, both of which may be correct. A 1254 dating corresponds with Smbat Orbelian's successful trek to Karakorum to woo the Mangu Khan, and may mark the vank's official establishment, while the later early 14th century dating may refer to the three-story chapel and bell tower, the gavit and some of the out buildings. Both dates would correspond with the construction at S. Karapet's sister vanks Noravank, Aghjots Vank, and Havuts Tar, as well as Geghard's Orbelian (Proshian) period.



The second floor is also vaulted, with a semicircular apse for the altar space. This was reached by steps that no longer survive.

The third floor - the **Bell Tower** - was crowned with rounded arcades, a spherical dome and octahedral spire. It no longer survives, no doubt because its open form with columns to support the dome was less solidly built.

A medieval earthquake destroyed much of the complex, including the bell tower and the gavit. The church, though survived with relatively little damage, a testament to its engineering. The chapel and bell tower are thought to have largely survived because of its engineering, while the third



The only entry is from the west, where the now-destroyed gavit (narthex) was built sometime after the church. The entry door has a door frame with a **double carving** topping the doorway. The lower tympanum shows the Virgin flanked by two angels, set in front of deeply cut fretwork. The top panel shows Christ in a characteristic pose, flanked by icons of the four evangelists with what is thought to be the likenesses of two saints or perhaps the donors at the bottom corners of the panel.

The **gavit** was a square space, with intersecting arches supporting a vaulted roof. The arches were supported by half-columns and wall pylons, typical for the period.

The 14th century work is attributed to the architect But (pronounced "Boot"), the church built in a central dome cruciform style, with an extended western end. The dome dominates the inner space, with its drum that seems overly tall on the outside fitting remarkably well with the interior hall. The altar apse is horseshoe shaped, flanked by two-story sacristies.

The monastery's **Mausoleum** is attached to the south-west corner of the church. From the outside it appears to have been square like the gavit, which it also adjoined, and had a double slope roof supported by cross vaulting. The mausoleum held (and still does), members of the Orbelian family, abbots and wealthy parishioners.

The **Three-story Grave Monument and Bell Tower** adjoins the western wall of the mausoleum. The structure was designed very like the three story structure at Noravank, Yeghvard (Kotai) and the grave monument at Aghudi (Aghitu) near Sissian. These monuments took their ideas from grave towers that populated the Near East from at least the Bronze Age, with a particular style popular in Zoroastrian Armenia.

To some, these towers trace back to genesis and are the remnants of "Towers of Babel" that once populated the biblical world, squat memories of once grand follies. To these believers, the hand of God that destroyed the great tower mentioned in the bible was none other than an earthquake that shook and tumbled the tall structure.

level dome collapsed because it was attached to the lower chapel and gavit.

The earthquake destroyed the adjoining mausoleum, rending it in two—the cracks can be seen in the interior walls, with 50-80 centimeters gaps.



The **graveyard** has a number of prone stones on the ground, with some elaborately carved khachkars, a few with traces of their pre-Christian origins (look for eyeh-holes to spot those that were used as standing stones and stone telescopes).



Camping at the site or in the area (near sheep farm – no shade); **Springs** at the site.

➔ From Karapet Vank, backtrack to the highway, turn L and continue for about 3 km to central (**Lusashogh**, DD 39.85183 x 44.97991, elev. 1979m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

SIDE TRIP: Lusashogh – Լուսաշող (till 1978 Karakhach, pop. 1500) has the elegant remains of S. Hovhannes, reached by turning off the main road into the village and going uphill. The foundations are on the east end of the village, near the graveyard.



The church looks more of a chapel, and the standing edifice is indeed a bell tower on the western end of the ruins, walled up with rubble stone that once filled the church walls.

The church dates to pagan times, its Christian history beginning sometime in the late 4th-early 5th centuries, when the area was officially converted to the new religion. The bell tower is

mid or late medieval, while the foundation stones that outline the old church are thought to be contemporary with nearby S. Karapet Monastery.



Its ancient age is discernable by the pagan stones littering the field, "baptized" by crosses in the early Christian/medieval era.



Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Lusashogh turn R (NW) on the main road and continue W for about 4.2 and through a mountain pass with switchbacks to a village road that travels another 1.5 km into central (**Lanjanist**, DD 39.87091 x 44.95074, elev. 1755m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

SIDE TRIP: Lanjanist – Լանջանիստ (till 1968 Khidirli, pop. 600) has a ruined church to the N of the village, while the highway boasts

gorgeous fields of snow drops during springs winter thaw, followed by teeming stands of poppies, straw flowers and narcissus. The ruins are enigmatic, but the flora spectacular. Come in mid April for the displays.



Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Lanjanist backtrack to the main road, turn R (W) and continue for about 7 km and through more mountain pass switchbacks, alpine ponds and fields of wild flowers to central (**Shaghap**, DD 39.88080 x 44.89189, elev. 1290m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

SIDE TRIP: Shaghap – Շաղափ (till 1968 the Azeri village of Shaghaplü, pop. 800) has a Turkish cemetery (with fragments of gravestones) about 150 m uphill at the end of the village, and supposed Tuxh Manuk/chapel on the top of one of the mountains overlooking the village (though 5 villagers had five versions

of whether one even existed, where it was, and how to get there).

Take solace with the fields of bluebells that grow just outside the village.



Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area

(near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Shaghap continue R (W) on the main road for about 7.6 km to the village outskirts, where a R (NE) will lead in another 1 km to a L (N) and another 600 m to the bridge/Vedi intersection at the N end of (**Urtsadzor**, DD 39.92175 x 44.82772, elev. 1059m) 🏠 🏕️ 🌿

SIDE TRIP: **Urtsadzor – Ուրցածոր** formerly *Chimankend*, pop. 2000) has to its S a ruined basilica (pagan/early Christian era) and nearby an Early Iron Age/Bronze Age cemetery.

In fact, the village has several ruined sites—of hamlets, structures and graves—on its east, south and west ends. Villagers have faint-to-naught memories of an are they migrated into recently, but youngsters (boys around the age of 9-12 seem to be the most knowledgeable) may not know the name or history, but can point out the locations of old rocks and ruins found while exploring the area (as 9-12 year olds are want to do). Still, as interesting as the search may be may be, these ruins are a hard second against the sites to be found East of the village, en route to the Khosrov Preserve.

Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Urtsadzor, take a R at the Vedi intersection (E) and continue along the Vedi River for about 5.5 km to a fork, where a L (N) turn on a deteriorating road leads in another 2 km to another fork with a L (NW) that leads in 2.5 km to third fork with a L (NW) turn that leads in about 1 km to the **GEVORG MARZPETUNI CASTLE** (DD 39.96204 x 44.86234, elev. 1299m) 🏠 🏕️ 🌿

🏰 **GEVORG MARZPETUNI CASTLE – ԳԵՎՈՐԳ ՄԱՐԶՊԵՏՈՒՆԻԻ ԲԵՐԴ (Գեվորգ Մարզպետունիի բերդ)** is a small fortified structure with a church within its compound. The castle is set on a low hill, suggesting it may not have been built as a castle per se, but rather as a fortified monastery.

The castle is named for Gevorg Marzpetuni, the 10th century Sparapet (commander in chief) of Armenian forces during the reign of Ashot Yerkat (the Iron) Bagratuni, who forged the resurgent Armenian kingdom by evicting Arab invaders and cementing the power of the Bagratuni dynasty.

Marzpetuni is the subject of a famous 19th century book by the Armenian author Muratsan (Grigor Ter-Hovhannessian) (1854–1908) from *Gevorg Marzpetuni (1896)*, based on a *History of Armenia* by Hovhannes Draskhanakerttsi (Catholicos John V of Draskhanakert) (c. 840-c. 930).



In the history (and novel) King Ashot (Yerkat; “of Iron”), his power riven by Arab raids and internal divisions in his kingdom (caused in no little part by his affair with the wife of one of his most important allies, Tslik Amram), is forced to rely on the efforts of Marzpetuni to defeat the Arabs and bring about the restoration of the Armenian kingdom, the Bagratuni Dynasty.

Prince Marzpetuni is actually buried in the courtyard of S. Gevorg Cathedral in Bagaran (Armavir) the ninth capital of the Armenian kingdom. His residence was almost certainly in the nearby (and daunting) fortress of Kakavaberd, in the Khosrov Preserve, which steep walls perch over sheer cliff drops of 100 meters and more.



Kakavaberd is the site of the defeat of the Arab chieftain Beshr by Marzpetuni in 924, and it may be that the monastery in front of you was built in memory of that event, its fortress walls deemed necessary to stave off attacks in uncertain times. It seems certainly named to commemorate the deeds of one of Armenia’s most important princes and generals, though little known to the average Armenian.

Marzpetuni is contemporary with other powerful nakharars, whose petty rivalries and raw greed did as much to delay the kingdom’s liberation from the clutches of Arab rule as the Arabs themselves. By the time of Armenian revolts in the 920s these princes –Marzpetuni, Ashot Yerkat, Tslik Amram and Sahak Sevada—were each ruling petty kingdoms that were autonomous of Arab rule while still dependent on their tribute to the Arab caliph.

When they revolted, the caliph sent the Atrapetene tyrant Amir Yusef to avenge him and to restore Arab control. Led by Marzpetuni, Armenian forces won several decisive victories in the 920s, finally evicting the Arabs in the same century and establishing the Bagratuni dynasty, which moved its capital to Ani, the “city of 1000 churches” and one of the largest cities in the medieval world.



The castle monastery has an extensive set of inscriptions on the walls, detailing its founding and the reign of the prince for which it is named. On the east wall, flanking the altar apse, exposed walls show hollow ceramic “jugs” that were embedded into the wall rubble. Thought by Arabs to hold treasure, they were exposed during raids on the church, but in fact these hollow vessels were used to enhance acoustics in the church, deacons adding or taking out sand to tune the church hall.



Camping in the area (no shade); **Springs** at a summer camp you pass on the way to the site.

➡ From Gevorg Marzpetuni, backtrack to the Urtsadzor road, turn L (E) and continue to the gates of the **Vedi Entrance to the Khosrov Preserve** (DD 39.94729 x 44.90067, elev. 1266m) 🏠 🗺

SIDE TRIP: Khosrov Preserve (Vedi Entrance) – *Ուրցածոր* is closed to the casual visitor, but with escort or permission, you can explore the nature area, with several ruins, castles and stunning nature. [See Trip 5: Vedi Entrance](#) for detailed descriptions.

➡ From Gevorg Marzpetuni, backtrack to the main road and turn R (SW), continuing on the main road for about 5.5 km to Urtsadzor and continuing past for another 8.8 km to central **VEDI** (DD 39.91386 x 44.72288, elev. 909m) 🏠 🗺

🌸 **VEDI - ՎԵԴԻ (Վեդի)** ▲ (pop. 6,500) is a drab, dusty outpost of humanity tucked in the folding curves of a set of mountains overlooking the Ararat plateau and Mt. Ararat. The small town is bordered by the Cedi River to its SE and the rising Urts Mountain Range to the North and Northwest. To its east lie the sands of Goravan, a nature preserve and Armenia's only official desert, while the craggy slopes of Mt. Yerakh and its meandering gorge harbor on of the largest collections of wild Iris in the Caucasus. In springtime the area is as green as Ireland but the desert sun quickly burns off vegetation to a burnt umber and the cliffs of the Urts Range boast multi-hued variegated shades of red, yellow, orange and burnt umber for much of the year.

Hard to believe when you gaze on baking soil and heat waves in the dog days of summer, but this is

where many believe the development of mankind occurred, at least for the last 500,000 years or so, as Neanderthals gave way to Homo Sapiens who in turn discovered the domestication of sheep, goats, of wheat, and grapes, later the forging of wine and the joys of fermenting those grapes into something more powerful than juice.

Give or take 1,000 years or so ago in the last 10,000 years, the area you sweat through now was teeming with water, a moist climate with bountiful vegetation that was much kinder to humans than it seems now. Seems, because with irrigation the land is still incredibly fertile, and this area grows some of the best fruits in Armenia, with grapes taking pride of place at the fermenting table.

Vedi is also home to one of Armenia's major wine and alcohol concerns, famous locally for its semisweet wines and potent spirits.

[MAP]

SITES

One of the most startling effects is achieved each time you look South, where the dusty, broken pavement and forlorn housing gives way to magnificent views of **Mt. Ararat**, which hovers over the streets like a gift of the gods, something to look forward to whilst slogging through the broken pavement and clouds of baked soil.

Beyond that, there is little to draw your attention, and most use the town as a drive-through point en route to the nature areas around it.

With the exception of a decaying ethnographic museum and the Vedi Alcol winery/distillery, your options are limited to a couple of Oligarch motel-restaurants (read: "bozetuns"), and the thrill of strolling up one dust-infested road and down the other. To be fair, there are some friendly folks inside all that dust, and the town lies adjacent to two top-notch flower sites; [Goravan Sands Preserve](#) to the South and the spring flowering Irises in the [Yerakh Valley](#) gorge on the opposite side of town (See "[Vedi Hills](#)", below)

Vedi Alcol (Office in Yerevan, tel: +374 10 547401, +374 10 547402, +374 10 547403, e-mail: info@vedi-alco.am, URL: <http://www.vedi-alco.am/pages/?lang=2>) offers guided tours with pre-arrangement. Vedi-Alcol is a complex of two viniculture enterprises: the Getap Winery, established in 1938, and Vedi Winery, established in 1956. The distillery/winery is located in the town on its edge, and while it normally does not provide walk-in tours, you might be the lucky one to

sweet-talk them into giving you a personal tour, with tasting.

While its more famous products includes the popular semi-sweet wine called Vernashen, do not miss the chance to sample its flavored vodkas, including spirits made from apricot, cherry, mulberry and pear fruits.



City park is in the center, with trees, a **WWII monument** and a forlorn **amphitheatre** made from summer concerts but which has seen much its better days long before Brezhnev and his cronies began Soviet Armenia's gradual decline. The park, though rather tired, is a pleasant place to rest on a hot day.

The town houses a (mostly closed) **ethnographic museum** in the center; ask when you arrive for the 'tangaran' and someone will guide you. It also has on its far NE end (on the road out of town, just before the road enters the wilderness) the **headquarters of the Khosrov Nature Reserve**, (director Samvel Shaboyan, local telephone 21332), which can provide permission to enter the preserve through its Vedi entrance. Don't hold you breath though, they routinely deny access to unescorted tourists while giving hunting, herding and other concessions to locals, for a price. This is one of the most corrupt offices in the country, and should be reason for concern by its WWF partner.

AREA SITES

The town may be dead, but the area annually draws hundreds of naturalists to view its spectacular displays of Flora and Fauna. Each spring hundreds of thousands of wildflowers bloom up and down the otherwise barren foothills, while its overlapping topography and climatic zones makes the area one of the top ten places to bird watch in Armenia.



Vedi Hills

The deadness that permeates the town is a blessing to the surrounding nature areas, populated by rare and extraordinary displays of flowers and birds. The area has been nicknamed "Vedi Hills" by groups of migrating birders, to describe the Yerakh Gorge to the NW of town, Goravan Sands Preserve to the SE and the spectacular canyon entry to the Khosrov Preserve to the North and Northeast. As they aptly describe the area, it is easy to dismiss for its arid semi-desert / desert terrain, which blooms thick with flowers each spring rain, and teems with overlapping populations of birds.



Flower Watching and Birding

Detailed descriptions of the Yerakh Valley and Goravan Sands Preserve flora and fauna follow immediately after Vedi Town (p. 49)

From Vedi to Turkey: Ancient Ararat

Vedi lies in the heart of the Ararat Valley, a high plateau with complex climactic and topographic zones that experts feel made the place eminently suited to have been the center from which the human race spread in all directions.

Even with its high elevation the region is fertile, with abundant pasturage, its soils producing good crops of wheat and barley, while the vine is indigenous.

Don't be fooled by the arid climate now; the area teems with unmistakable indications that in early times there was a much more abundant rainfall. The climate was then better adapted to the wants of primitive man. How else to explain the vast underwater reserves that supply the valley's current needs, and the upper elevation beaches surrounding Lake Sevan, Van (in Western Armenia; modern Turkey), Urumiah (in present day Iran) and even throughout central Asia.

Great quantities of mammoth bones have been found in these bordering lacustrine deposits corresponding to those found in the glacial and postglacial deposits of Europe and America. In Armenia, bones have been found in Shirak, Armavir and Ararat marz, with evidence of ancient to rich grasslands that fed the hulking beasts.



The waters are also referred to in one of the oldest histories in recorded time, the bible. Even if taken only as a non-literal description of events, pointing to rather than describing real history, the bible still offers important data to archeologists and researchers.

In the Genesis description of the great flood and Noah's ark, it notes that the drying up of the waters of the flood was very gradual—170 days from the time the waters began to subside before Noah could disembark. We know that it was many thousands of years before present conditions were established, the climate modified to a corresponding degree by the proximity of vast surrounding bodies of water and the human-caused decimation of forests and green land.

Ancient Ararat

Not all agree that Armenia, or the Ararat Valley, was the actual place of Noah's landing, despite expeditions up the mountain claiming to have found a monolithic structure matching the biblical description of the ark, and local belief that Noah was buried in neighboring Nakhichevan, which translates as the "the place of first descent".

Most accept that the place noted in the bible is in fact a region and not a particular mountain, the bible (Genesis 8:4) stating that Noah landed in the mountains (plural) of Ararat, or the Armenian lands, which stretched between Anatolia and the Caspian, the Black Sea and the Taurus Mountains.

The mountainous plateau encompassed the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Arax and the Khoruk rivers, Assyrians noting the land was the "place of Rivers" ("Nairi"). Lake Van, which like the Dead Sea has no outlet, is nearly in its center, and Armenians claim Van as the heart of their historic lands.

The name The Babylonian name was Urartu, the consonants being the same in both words. In 2 Kings 19:37 and Isaiah 37:38 the word is translated in the King James Version "Armenia", which correctly represents the region designated. It was to Armenia that the sons of Sennacherib fled. In Jeremiah 51:27 Ararat is associated with Minni and Ashkenaz, which according to Assyrian monuments lay just to the east of Armenia.

Mt. Ararat is not directly referred to by the Assyrians, Babylonians or Genesis, which leads some to think the actual point of landing for Noah lies elsewhere, but none of the other candidates are proved and none are as impressive as the mountain that looms over the Ararat Valley, the birthplace of metal and one of the cradles of civilization.

Rising from the lowlands of the Arax (Aras) River to a height of 5165 m (16946 ft), supported by another peak (Sis), which tops out at 3,896 m (12,782 ft), the mountain dwarfs the landscape, reason enough for many for its claim as 'the' mountain of Noah. However, it is only in comparatively modern times that the present name has been given to it. Armenians still call it Massis, believing that Noah was buried at Nakhichevan near its base.

[MAP]

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 234

Long Distance: 0234 + local number

From abroad: + (374) 234+ local number

Mobile Phones: 091/099 Armentel (Beeline), 093/094/077 VivaCell (MTS)

International callers: Armentel/Beeline + (374) 91 or 99 + number, VivaCell-MTS + (374) 93 or 94 or 77 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0234) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 234 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Train

Elektrichka trains connect Vedi (Voskepar Village, 7 km to the SW) with Yerevan (David Sassuntsi metro). The Trains leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the evening. Tickets at 250-500 AMD makes this the cheapest way to town, if slow (figure 1.5-2 hours).

By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minivans (marshrutni taxis) connect Vedi with Artashat, Ararat, Massis, Yerevan and villages in the area. The bus stop is in the town center.

Buses Hourly buses connect Vedi to Yerevan (350 AMD). From Yerevan they depart from the Bus area behind the central train station (M: Sassuntsi Davit) and arrive at the Vedi bus stop station. Buses from Vedi include those to Ararat (150 AMD), Artashat (150 AMD), Massis (200 AMD) and Vedi (150 AMD). Small orange buses connect to villages in the region (Urtsadzor, Shaghap, Landjar) and cost around 100-200 AMD each trip. Most leave villages in the morning and return in the evening. For destinations and times, ask around when you arrive.

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) are more plentiful leave from the bus stop. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages; more often to towns and cities. Minivans connect Vedi to Yerevan (Central train Station, M: Sassuntsi Davit, 400 AMD), Ararat (150 AMD), Artashat (150 AMD), and Massis (250 AMD).

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it is cheaper.

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Artashat at 100-150 AMD per kilometer. Taxis should charge 5300-7850 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone for same price. There are dozens of taxi services to choose from. Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

By Car Vedi is on the (H10), which spurs off from the (M2) highway at Voskepar, some 7 km the SW. To the NE, the (H10) leads to Urtsadzor (9 km), the Khosrov Preserve Vedi gate (21 km), Shaghap (17 km), Landjanist (24 km), Lusashogh (27 km), S. Karapet Monastery (36 km), Landjar (30 km), Urtsalandj/(M2) highway (32 km).

To the SW, it is 7 km to Voskepar and the (M2) and (H8) highways, parallel routes that lead N to Artashat (14 km), Massis (28 km) and Yerevan (46 km) To the SE the (M2) exit leads to Ararat (7 km), Yeraskh (22 km), before turning NE to the Urts Valley to join the (H10) (39 km) and the Tuhmanuk Pass at Vayots Dzor in another 9 km. From Vedi it is 53 km to central Yerevan, 14 km to Artashat, 22 km to Yeraskh, 79 km to Yeghegnadzor, 1140 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 95 km to Vaik, 128 k to Jermuk, 163 km to Sissian, 192 km to Goris, 255 km to Goris, 281 km to Kadjaran and 321 km to Meghri.

AROUND

On foot is easy enough if you are in shape; from end to end the city is 3.5 km long. There is one main street, the one you entered on, with small offshoots from its main thoroughway. Shops, cafes and most apartment buildings are on the main street, with the main "square" boasting the best choices.

Taxis Ararat has taxis. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (though few speak English). The general rate is 500-600 AMD anywhere in town.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101

Police – 102

Ambulance service – 103

Rescue Hot Line - 118

Gas emergency service – 104

Trunk Line – 107

Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs

Ararat is covered by both Armentel/Beeline and VivaCell-MTS (2 Tumanian p.) mobile services. International calls can be made at the *Central Post Office* (Central Square), [See HayPost site for list](#)

(<http://www.haypost.am/>). The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegraphs.

Internet

ARMINCO has a local representative in nearby Ararat (Andranik Minassian, Arman Gabriellian), 32a Isahakian p, tel. 42888, 44705, email: gama@arminco.com. They offer prepaid card service.

You can also try at the city offices and at an Internet Center at the town school.

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks:

ACBA-CREDIT AGRICOLE, 61 Araratian p.
ARDSHININVESTBANK, 61 Araratian p.

Shopping

There are a number of shops in town, yarmaka and a shuka. Shops include mterks and clothing stores. Most are around the central square and on Araratian p, the main street into town. The shuka and yarmaka are in the center.

Film, etc.

Film can be bought at film developers and mterks. Batteries are unreliable for anything other than a portable clock, bring your own.

Pharmacy

An *Apoteka* (Armenian: deghatun) can be found in the center of town, on Araratian p.

Hospital, Polyclinic

There is a hospital and clinic in town. For a medical emergency, contact your lodging or go to Yerevan if at all possible.

VEDI HOSPITAL
VEDI MATERNITY HOSPITAL

OVERNIGHT

Restaurant/Motels

Owing to the Vedi Alcohol Company, based in Veid, there are a couple of RESTAURANT/HOTELS-MOTELS in town, located on the W end of the park (take the west side street by the culture house). It is used for weddings, celebrations and tête-à-têtes, and the motel welcomes tourists to clean rooms in multi-story building with DBLs at 5000/5 hrs or 10,000/overnight.

Boarding/Apartment

This is a distinct possibility, though done informally, there are no organized rentals. Ask around when you arrive. Apartments are mostly in

the north side of the tracks, houses on the south side. 4000-5000 AMD for B&B in clean space is fair. Be sure there is water and power.

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of Khorovats stands, S'rjarans and cafes, and restaurants/motels on the (H8). Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) and kiosks in town.

\$ = 1500 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks
\$\$ = 1500-2500 AMD
\$\$\$ = 2500 AMD or more

ARARAT RESTAURANT-MOTEL, City Park, has Armenian menu. Fish is good but expensive at 6000 AMD. Khorovats is 2000 AMD. \$\$

The main streets have CAFES and BISTROS serving sandwiches, grill, kebab and khorovats at competitive prices. \$-\$



CONTINUE TRIP 4

➔ From central Vedi, take [redacted] street to the to YERAKH VALLEY (DD 39.94468 x 44.70193, elev. 1042m) 🏠 🍷 🌄

✠ YERAKH VALLEY – ԵՐԱԽ ՉՈՐ (Երախ Չոր) juts into the striking Urts foothills through a seemingly barren landscape with towering red, amber and yellow rock formations dotted with cultivated vineyards and small garden plots. The view most the year is decidedly daunting, and few make the trek into this arid wonderland, replete with a hot mineral springs pool and, in the spring, thousands of rare and endemic wildflowers.

The nature area's potted road stretches for [redacted] km from NW Vedi to Mt. Yerakh (1418.5 m), continuing for another [redacted] km to the village of Narek near Dvin and its nearby nature area.

[MAP of NAREK-VEDI]

including the elegant and fascinating Armenian Iris (*I. lycotis*)

Further NW, near Narek, on a low mound among wormwood scrub, you can see and photograph a

large number of the beautiful *Iris elegantissima* whose variety of forms and colours is impressive. Other rare and endemic species can also be found there: *Leontice armeniaca*, *Ornithogalum navaschinii*, the lovely *Allium materculae*, *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Scorzonera gorovanica*, etc.

This arid hillside is characterized by low ridges with clayey and loose rocky slopes barely covered with short semi-desert vegetation and scrub. There are several gorges here with dry river beds, rocky walls and outcrops that are gradually crumbling away, even with a light gust of wind or under the clumsy step of a Chukar. Water sources in the area are localized and in the hot summer months attract the local fauna like a magnet. Some such gorges with natural mineral springs are found just a few km north of Vedi town.

Flora This is one of

Birding For birders, there are several main attractions in this area. **Mongolian Finch**, which was first found in Armenia in 2001, was subsequently proved to breed here, and the site remains the only known place in the country, where the species can be observed regularly, albeit with variable success due to the low number of breeding pairs and 'birder unfriendly' habits. **Trumpeter Finch** is seen here more frequently and regularly and is far more 'cooperative', nevertheless it displays an equally enigmatic pattern of occurrence - common in some years and not found in others. One of the most sought-after West Palearctic birds, **Grey-necked Bunting**, in contrast to the previous two species, is hard to miss at this site and in the heat of the day it is the only bird that continues to sing, pausing for only short breaks. Breeding stars of this area also include **Finch's Wheatear**, **Upcher's Warbler**, **Eastern Rock Nuthatch**, **Woodchat Shrike**, and **Pale Rock finch**, irregularly **Eastern Orphean Warbler** and with luck the **Eagle Owl**. Common breeders here are **Chukar**, **Crag Martin**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Black-eared Wheatear**, **Rock Sparrow** and **Black-headed Bunting**. From nearby areas the water source is visited by **Ortolan** and **Rock Buntings** and occasionally by **Crimson-winged Finch**.

On the way to the hills from Vedi town the road passes between orchards and vineyards, where **Ménétries's Warbler**, **Lesser Grey Shrike** and restless flocks of **Rosy Starling** can be found. Further along the way, at an open badland area common birds include **Hoopoe**, **European Bee-eater**, **Roller**, **Crested Lark**, **Rufous Bushchat** and **Isabelline Wheatear**. Gentle slopes with

ridges hold **Woodlark**, **Short-toed Lark** and **Tawny Pipit**, a riverbed with meager amounts of water supports breeding **Little Ringed Plover**. Regularly breeding raptors of the area include **Egyptian Vulture** and **Long-legged Buzzard**, while a good selection of them, such as **Lammergeier**, **Griffon** and **Black Vultures**, **Golden**, **Lesser Spotted**, **Short-toed** and **Booted Eagles**, visit from the nearby Khosrov State Reserve.

➔ From central Vedi, take the SE main spur street towards the SE set of apartment blocks and cross the bridge over Vedi River into (Goravan, DD [redacted], elev. [redacted] m) 🏠 🍷 🌄

SIDE TRIP: Goravan - Գորավան (previously Goravan, Yenikend) village lies adjacent to Vedi, just across the water canal on its south underbelly. The village, though in plain site of the town, stubbornly maintains its village roots, with hodgepodge homes and rutted streets leading to desert fields east, home of the **GORAVAN SANDS PRESERVE**.

➔ To reach Goravan Sands, immediately after you cross the bridge over Vedi River, turn L (NE) bridge to the northern edge of the village, where the street naturally turns R (SE) and continue to the end of the village and onto a dirt path leading to the village dump and past it a line of high power lines. Follow the path(s) as best you can towards the power lines, and soon you will enter what seems to be a wasteland, but which in fact is **GORAVAN SANDS PRESERVE** (DD 39.89442 x 44.73320, elev. 940m) 🏠 🍷 🌄



✠ **GORAVAN SANDS PRESERVE** – ԳՐՈՐԱՎԱՆ ԱՎԱՆՉԱՅՆ ԱԳԵԼՕՑ (formed [redacted]) is

one of the strangest places in Armenia. A desert for most of the year, the area teems with life in the short Spring season, and is home to some extremely rare flora and fauna species, including



The area is in plain site of Mt. Ararat, with one of the most spectacular views of the great crest, not least because of the contrast between the snow laden mount and the lunar landscape surroundings of the preserve.

Overnight at in Goravan village home (rustic, 3000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – no shade); **Springs** in the village.

➡ END OF TRIP 4



TRIP 5: KHOSROV RESERVE ▲

AZAT RIVER / GARNI ENTRANCE - HAVUTS TAR - BAIBERD - METS GILANLAR - (Elijah) - AGHJOTS VANK - NAREK ENTRANCE - (Giolaizor) - (Kerpikend) - (Mets Gilanlar) - AZAT CAVES - KAKAVABERD - VEDI ENTRANCE - (Mankunk) - (Gegharkunik) - LANJANIST/LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE

Trip 5 explores Khosrov Preserve, one of the most important habitats in Armenia. The site is the home of several endangered species (the Armenian or Persian Leopard, the Caucasian bearded goat, several species of birds) and is host to endemic flora only found here. It is also home to several outstanding historic sights, including two ruined monasteries, each of which bears incredible mosaics and carvings not found anywhere else in Armenia. Though it is off the beaten path and requires hiking or guided visits, this is a must see for those wanting to experience Armenia's nature in the raw, and, as one friend told me "to be somewhere in Armenia where it is absolutely silent—no traffic, hoards of tourists—just the sounds of birds, rushing water and the breeze". Heaven.



Eat: Restaurants & cafes on the road to Garni, Geghard, Vedi; mterks and kiosks in Garni, Vedi.

Stay: Hangsti Goti (cottages or tents), restaurant/hotels-motels on the road from Yerevan to Garni, in Garni, Geghard and Vedi; home-stays (some rustic) in Garni, near Geghard and Vedi; Camping inside the Preserve (arranged at the Garni information center).

Camping: Inside the preserve (arrange at the Garni visitor center)

Springs: freshwater cold springs at Garni, Geghard, Vedi, and inside the preserve.

GETTING IN:

Travel Agents: Several adventure travel agents can arrange 1-3 day tours of the preserve, including entry fees, transportation and overnight in or out of the preserve (tents, motels, hotels). Among the more interesting is Armenian Travel Bureau (<http://www.atb.am>) who has a page dedicated to Khosrov Preserve and its tourist possibilities (<http://www.khosrov.am/>).

On Your own: Easy, just go to Garni, down into the gorge and to the visitor center. They sell tickets for entry, offer tips on hikes, guide services for longer visits, and camping spots at select sites.

✳ KHOSROV FOREST RESERVE - ԽՈՍՐՈՎԻ ԱՆՏԱՌ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ԱՐԳԵԼՈՅ ▲

(DD 40.1135 x 44.7427, elev. 1315m) Directly across from Garni temple are the Khosrov Mountains and the western entry to the **Khosrov Forest Reserve**. The reserve is one of Armenia's largest protected areas and its most unique, hosting dozens of rare or endangered species of insects, birds and mammals, including the Caucasian Bearded Goat and the extremely rare Persian Leopard.

Note: permission is required to enter the Khosrov Reserve. Locals in Garni can organize half-day road trips to 3 days camping treks into the gorge. A new WWF (World Wildlife Fund) supported office for the Reserve has opened and sells tickets to the site and can provide (for a fee) a guide and overnight camping sites. They have a scant web site with limited information about the site and no practical information on tickets, times and how to get there (good for us!) The site is <http://www.khosrov.am/>.

PRACTICAL INFO: The information center is located at the bottom of the Garni gorge, reached via the village (follow the signs). It is opened 7 days a week, generally from daylight to dusk (though not always prompt). Tickets are at time of writing ____ AMD, guide services available for partial day/full day/multiple day visits at ____ AMD to ____ AMD. Camping sites are arranged on the spot and cost from ____ to ____ AMD.

[PRESERVE MAP]



Background

The Khosrov Argelots (Reserve) or Khosrov Antar (forest), named after King Khosrov II Kotaka (r. 332-339), the founder of the capital at Dvin. Khosrov ordered the planting of a forest on both sides of and running the length of the Azat River.

ECOLOGICAL ALERT

The preserve is under ecological attack by international and local huntsmen and an ambivalent to cynical government that instead of protecting endangered species or those at risk instead actively hunts or sponsors hunts into the officially protected area. Reports of military officers organizing helicopter hunting trips into the preserve, where protected species are hunted down with automatic weapons are common. While gatekeepers stop eco-tourists from entering the area, generals, ministers and wealthy international hunters use the park as their private hunting grounds, further endangering the species that attempt to survive in the park.

I don't mind hunting per se, as a Texan I understand and even support the sport if it does not target endangered species. Responsible hunting does have its purposes and it brings important income to local communities as well as helps to preserve the environment by seeking to preserve it. **However, Armenia is blighted with hunting firms that organize the hunting of endangered species in Armenia, including the Armenian mufflon and the Bearded Goat (Ibex) these three easily found online:**

Outfitters hunting endangered species:

Safari International (run by the Marzpet and several high ranking officials in the current government)
info@safariinternational.com

Blue Water Big Game (may no longer be involved in Armenian hunting)
106 Medalist
Austin, TX 78734
ph: 1-512-261-1990
fax: 1-203-774-2002

Powers Internationale
powersint@aol.com

Balkan Hunters Club
<http://www.stiliyankadrev.com/en/armenia-hunting-price-list.html>

Please contact these companies and tell them how you feel about their targeting endangered species in Armenia, and contact Green Peace (www.greenpeace.org) and World Wildlife Federation (www.worldwildlife.org) to lend your support to stop animal extinction in Armenia.

Links:

[Video of a kill](#)
[ArmeniaNow article on illegal hunts](#)

The forest remains to this day, having grown beyond its original boundaries to encompass most of the Goghti River above Garni and Geghard, and a large area between the Azat, Khosrov, Mankunk and Vedi Rivers on the eastern side of Ararat District.

Khosrov is reputed to have had planted over one million trees, creating a private hunting preserve while saving a piece of Armenia's unique ecosystem for hundreds of generations. Most of the forests from his time are gone, clear-cut by Mongols, Safavid Persians and modern Armenians on illegal logging expeditions.



The reserve is still important and quite large, consisting of 29,196 hectares, 9000 of which have trees, mostly scrub and cedar. The national park protects more than 1800 species of plants, 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or on the verge of extinction, listed in the Red Book. Fauna include rare insects, amphibians, snakes, the Armenian mufflon (*Ovis orientalis gmelinii*); Caucasian Bearded Goat (*Capra aegagrus*) and the Caucasian or Persian Spotted Leopard.

The *Caucasian Bearded Goat* (also called the Bezoar or Persian Ibex, or the wild goat by scientists who believe it is the ancestor of the domestic goat) is an endangered species that has almost been hunted to extinction in Armenia.

Male bearded goats are marked by large, scimitar-shaped horns, their front edges in a sharp keel with a series of bold, sharp-edged, widely separated knobs above. Females are smaller than males and have short, slender horns, but no beard. The goat favors rugged country at all levels, descending into the lower valleys in the winter and upper regions in the summertime.

The bearded goat is listed in the Red Book and in the IUCN list of Endangered Species.

The *Caucasian or Persian leopard* is said to be the largest of all subspecies of leopards. It can grow to up to 1.5 to 2.7 feet tall and weigh as much as 155 lbs. Before 1990, when Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkmenistan were the Soviet republics, the scientific names of the leopard used in these countries were *P.p. tulliana* and *P.p. ciscaucasica*, whereas the name *P.p. saxicolor* had been traditionally used by the western specialists for the cats in Iran and, partially, Afghanistan.

Most Leopards are light tan or fawn with black spots, but their coats are very variable. The spots tend to be smaller on the head, larger and have pale centers on the body.

The name Leopard is a combination of *leo* (Latin for lion) and *pard* ("panther"), the animal believed to be a hybrid of lions and panthers. Interestingly, the panther is simply a darker version of the spotted leopard, they are very much related. The leopards are remarkable felines, able to hunt in trees as well as on the ground, feeding on everything from insects and rodents to fish and large game. Excellent tree climbers, leopards often protect their larger kills by carrying them up a tree.

In Armenia, the Persian leopards live in the juniper sparse forests and, to a lesser extent, in arid and mountain grasslands, subalpine and alpine meadows. Their haunts are extremely rough terrain; rock outcroppings and cliff sides. The leopard uses the same trails during regular movements, enabling researchers to find and study the reclusive animals. Unfortunately this also enables poachers to hunt the animals (see side column). The leopard in Armenia is threatened by disturbance, poaching and wild fire, but perhaps mostly by the wholesale slaughter of their main food, the mufflon and bearded goat,

both almost poached out of existence in their main hunting grounds.

For more information visit the Persian Leopard web site at www.persianleopard.com/index.htm

Other fauna in the preserve include Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Wild cat (*Felis silvestris, ornata* group), Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), Stone marten (*Martes foina*), Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) Indian porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), European hare (*Lepus europaeus*), Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*)

Among the 67 types of **birds** registered in the Armenian Red Book are sixteen in the preserve, including Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures, Lammergeier, Golden and Lesser Spotted Eagles and Northern Goshawk.



Flora in the preserve is as rich and varied as its stunning terrain, with over 1800 plant species (more than half of Armenia's total), 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or verging on extinction. A number of species listed in the Red Book grow only here. Khosrov Preserve is the only Caucasian natural preserve of mountain xerophytes terrain combining semi-deserts, phryganoid formations, arid thin forests and tragacanthys steppes.

Camping is possible in the preserve (ask at the Garni visitor center); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** along river beds.

➔ From --- to **AZAT RIVER / GARNI ENTRANCE** (DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🚶

✂️ **AZAT RIVER / GARNI ENTRANCE - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր)** ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

➔ From --- to (**HAVUTS TAR**, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🚶

✂️ **HAVUTS TAR - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր)** ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

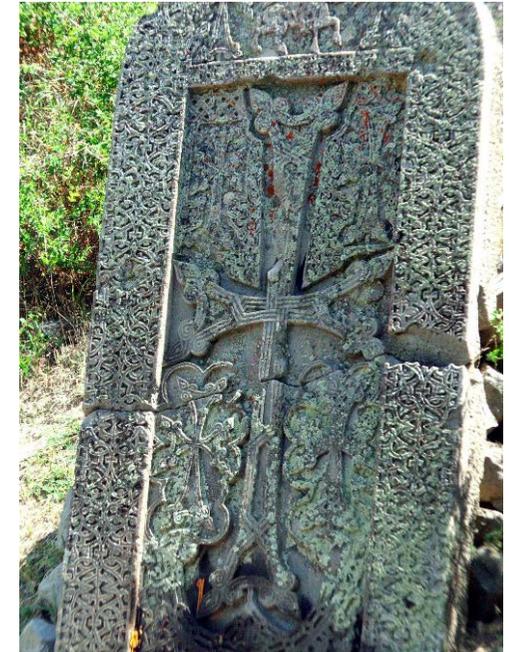
to **Havuts Tar Vank** (DD 40.1291 x 44.8148, elev. 2093m) 🏠 🗺️ 🚶

✂️ **HAVUTS TAR - ՀԱՎՈՒՑ ԹԱՆ** ▲

The path to the convent is narrow and surprisingly difficult for such a slight incline. There are few shady spots on the way, in hot weather take a hat and water. A spring is about 2/3rds of the way up.

The path has stunning vistas of Garni temple, the village and the area. As you get closer to the convent, you will pass some khachkar fragments, intricately carved pieces of once grand monuments. About 2/3rds of the way there look for a couple of **khachkars** on a hill on the left, plus the base of what was once a great khachkar. Closer to the convent is a bend in the path and a stunning **12th c khachkar**.

Just past this khachkar the **ruins of the village** begin, a myriad of stone foundations of homes, shops and shrines for the once thriving community that supported the convent's work and farmed its lands. The ruins cover the hillsides all around the complex. About 500 m past the 12th c khachkar is the gate to the walled Havuts Tar complex.



Background

Havuts Tar is one of Armenia's most beautiful ruins, its stones dripping with delicate lacework as elaborate as any monastery in Armenia.

A Pagan temple lay on the site during the glory days of Roman rule, replaced with successive shrines and wooden structures during the early Christian period. Its importance as a convent is traced to the 11th c, when Prince Grigor Pahlavuni (990-1058), heir to the prince of Bjni and nephew of the Bagratuni sparapet Vahram Pahlavuni, founded the church of Amenaprkich on the western outcrop of the complex.

Grigor is better known in Armenian history as Grigor Magistros, a title he took after Byzantium annexed the Kingdom of Ani and Grigor went on to serve as the Governor-general of the province of Edessa.

The Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus bestowed upon him the title of Duke. An erudite layman, Grigor's letters are a mine of information on theology, literature, mythology, politics and other matters of his time. They are written in an arcane style by a man with philhellene tendencies. His chief poetical work is a long metrical narrative of the principal events

recorded in the Bible. This work, we are told, was written in three days at the request of a Mohammedan noble, who, after reading it, became converted to Christianity.

The convent thrived under Grigor Magistros patronage, becoming a leading center of learning and the arts. Along with housing members of the royalty who dedicated their lives (or were banished for infidelities) to prayer and contemplation at the convent, Havuts Tar held important relics, including the 9th c masterpiece *The Savior of All of Havuts Tar*, now at the Echmiadzin Treasury.

The “Kusanats anapat” (convent) continued to find favor with succeeding nakharars, including the Chalcedonian Ivaneh Zakarian who funded its great spurt of growth in the early 13th century, introducing the intricate lace-like design covering the walls of the convent. Later, the Khaghbakians (Proshians), well known for their work at Geghard, were equally responsible for the crowning works at Havuts Tar and the nearby Aghjots vank.

The convent was destroyed and rebuilt during Seljuk, Mongol and the Timurid invasions, succumbing to the 1679 earthquake. It was rebuilt in the 18th century for the Catholicos Astvatsatur, saving the western Amnaprkich Church and the main basilica in the compound, then deserted and left to ruin by the Soviet Armenian government. The site awaits further renovation.



The Savior of All of Havuts Tar, 9th century.

The Complex

The complex is large, taking up several hectares inside the walled compound, with the remains of the surrounding village and two churches from the 7th-10 cc on a western hilltop, the site of the original pagan temple and the convent's first Christian structures.

The current **gate** to the site is embedded into the **compound walls**. The foundations of the original wall remains are traced to the 9th c when the convent was established, though there is some

thought walls from the Bronze Age may also have existed at the site. Originally made from finely hewn basalt and tufa, the walls were mostly destroyed during the Timurid invasions and the 1679 earthquake. When it was rebuilt in the 18th c, workers used rubble left over from the earthquake, including khachkar fragments and pieces of decorated stones from the original buildings.

[PLAN]

1. 4th-13th c wall and gate
2. Red Khachkar
3. Khachkar
4. Khachkar
5. Khachkar
6. 9th-13th c Church
7. 9th-13th c Chancellery
8. 9th-13th c Church
9. 9th-18th c Storage rooms
10. 9th-18th c Service building
11. 13th c Gavit
12. Dormitory, dining, storage
13. 11th c Amenaprkich
14. 7th c Church

The **Red Khachkar** above and the left of the main gate is probably from the 12th c, though its highly stylized design may place it in the Zakarian/Proshian periods. I am not sure who it celebrates, but it seems likely to be a memorial stone to a benefactor or—more likely—the tombstone of a venerated member of the community, the khachkar making a sort of ‘talisman’ for the reconstructed convent. On the opposite side of the gate there are **three khachkars** in the upper walls, again either for benefactors or venerated saints from the original convent.

In front of the gate and to the left are the foundations of one of the two churches in the walled compound, a **basilica** from the 9th c with major renovations during the 12th-13th centuries. The layout is close in form to pre-Christian temples and may well have been built over a pagan footprint, expanded over time. The walls are made from gray basalt clapped over rubble stone set with lime. The décor is more severe than its neighbor to the north, attesting to its earlier ‘iconoclastic’ origins.

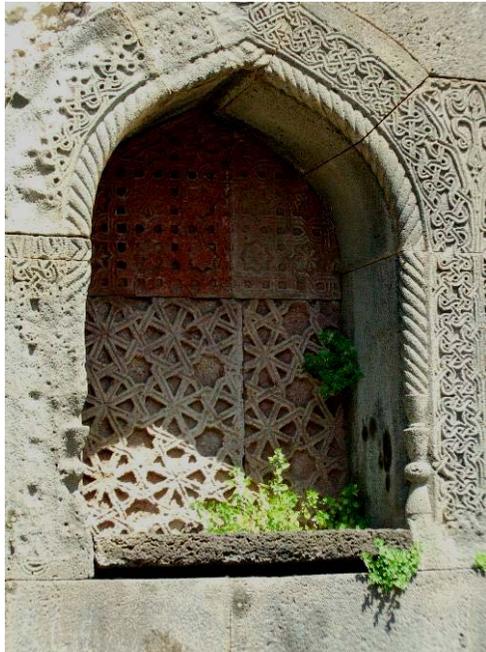
Just to the E and N of the basilica (moving around the compound in a counterclockwise direction), there are a number of fallen stones, decorated with elaborate carvings. These are the remains of a public building, perhaps the **chancellery**. Some think this was a gavit, though it is rare to have one

placed to the east of a church. Fallen stones in this section are very elaborate, including some massive capitals for large squat support columns. The northern wall of the 9th c church have a number of carvings, including some beautiful intertwining crosses and examples of the 12th c experimentation with the tree of life symbol, a precursor to the 13th c masterpieces that added the sun symbol.

Continue west through the rubble of the chancellery and you reach the ruins of the magnificent **13th c gavit**, which resembles a public square with columns. The gavit had a substantial gabled roof, supported by interconnecting cross-arches and barrel vaulting. The girth of the columns indicates the size and weight of the roof, as well as marking out the inner space. Columns were placed in the center of a gavit, supporting arches that intersected above at the very center and then continued to the outer walls. Imagine a distance equal to that of the columns to the very center of the room, then mark it to the outside and you can imagine just how large this gavit was, which housed a religious academy, a scriptorium, vestal embroidery, as well as community center and overflow prayer hall.



To your right is a large building with **three vaulted halls**. The 9th-13th cc building was rebuilt in the 18th c and used to house members of the convent. The farthest west is believed to have been the kitchen/dining hall for the dwindling community. Khachkar fragments were incorporated into the walls during reconstruction.



The scattered capitals, columns and stones on the ground outside the church, as elaborate and beautiful as they are, they are but a taste of the magnificence that awaits you inside. The 13th c renovation of the church included replacing gray basalt stone with decorative red and black tufa, adding extravagantly carved stone casements and frames throughout the building.

The effect is breath-taking, and unlike any other church we have seen in Armenia. Many churches of the 13th century added florid details on their walls, but none so completely, or luxuriantly as Havuts tar. The comparison to lace embroidery is not an exaggeration; niches, columns and frames are covered with intricate lace patterns of never-ending lines, unbreakable cords and flora and geometric details.

Walk to the south exterior of the church, and you have to wedge between two very large, intricate carved stones, weighing a half a ton or more. Note the back of the one with a large carved handle. This was a **door** for the gavit or church, one of a handful surviving to this day and truly impressive entry to what must have been an extraordinary building.



The southern wall is as elaborately carved as the northern, with crosses, icons and royal markings on the façade.

The south walls of both churches, abutting the fortress walls is a large **underground chamber**, seen from its western side. The top appears to be a grassy mound and it had an upper chamber that was destroyed before the 18th c renovation. The chamber was used for storage in the original convent, then as a dormitory and dining area in later times.

The second church, a **9th-13th cc cruciform** type with a square exterior was built like its southern neighbor, with gray basalt clasped onto strong rubble walls fixed with lime. The church once had a drum and dome set above its central space, supported by protruding wall abutments supporting the main arches. You can detect the slight curve of the arch base inside. The four corners were open to the main space, marked off by the abutments. When erected, it must have had a keen sense of space. Other churches of the time closed off the corners into chambers and focused on a tight space before the apse.

This church appears basilica in form, with a large volume of space for worshippers. Its foot print is almost identical to the earliest cruciform churches in Armenia (Echmiadzin), which were universally built over pagan fire temples. The heart of the walled complex, this church is almost certainly pagan in form, "baptized" with stone and Christian iconography to the new religion.

The exterior is elaborate, a precursor to the rich ornamentation that lies inside. Recessed walls, arched niches and faux columns are on the western façade, while deeply incised religious symbols adorn the gray stones, including a royal brand of the Bagratuni or Zakarian dynasty.

About 100 m to the west, on a rough path marking the main street of the medieval village is the 10th c **Amnaprkich** with a 7th c basilica next door. Amnaprkich was built in 1013 for the young Grigor Pahlavuni a.k.a. Grigor Magistros, well before he became his nom de plume and during the last heyday of the Bagratuni period.

Amenaprkich is a classic cruciform central dome type with antechambers in the four corners. The building is built from red and black tufa clasped over rubble filled walls. The antechambers on the east side flank the horseshoe-shaped apse and were used as vestal changing room and chapels.

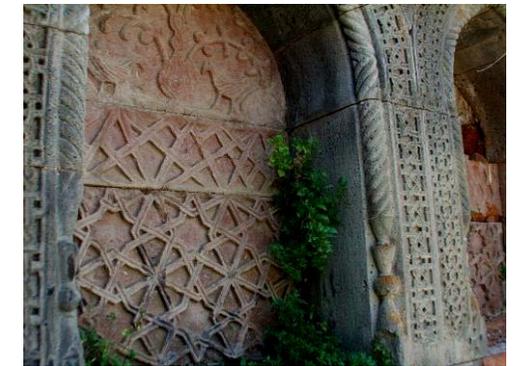


The rear chambers were probably chapels as well. The structure was well-built, surviving a number of invasions and attempts to destroy it, succumbing only to the forces of nature, when the 1679 earthquake toppled the dome and severed the western and eastern walls, which no doubt must have seemed a judgment of God's wrath to the faithful, like the rending of the temple cloth in Jerusalem. Even so, the building has survived well the last 300 years, retaining most of its original structure. There is relatively little of the extravagant decoration found inside the walled compound, window casings and some framing shows signs of 13th c carving, but otherwise the church maintained its original integrity and the beauty of its rich lines. This was a building meant to impress, and it continues to, despite its ruined status. The view of the Garni valley is wonderful from here. Bring your binoculars or zoom lens.

The impressive altar apron is decorated with a series of khachkars with prominent tree of life iconography, popular in the 10th c. The apron is framed with another popular design motif, the pre-Christian water line, representing the Biblical flood and redemption by baptism for early Christians but recognized by lingering pagans as the symbol of

life, the primordial 'soup' that spawned all of creation in pagan mythology.

The **7th c church** to the south is also considered a chapel, but its age and position next to the impressive Amenaprkich indicates a more important status. Most of the building has collapse, save the northern wall and part of the arched western façade. Built over a pagan site, the building carefully follows the imprint of the original structure, a single aisle basilica with a gabled roof. The deity worshipped here in Pagan times is not known, but considering it has a companion pagan site inside the walled compound, it is possible this was part of a large site with several temples in honor of Hellenized Armenian gods and goddesses (Artamazd, Anahit, Nuneh, etc.). We may never know.



There are numerous gravestones and khachkars all around the convent, and exploration may uncover signs of medieval plumbing, well worth exploring on a pleasant day.

Camping is possible at the site or nearby; **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Spring** about 2/3rd of the way to the site from the reserve gate.

📍 From --- to **BAIBERD** (DD 40.0892 x 44.7818, 1344m) 🏠 🗺

🏘 **BAIBERD - ԲԱԻԲԵՐԴ** 📍

The village is deserted with mostly foundation ruins to commemorate its once thriving community of Armenians, Kurds, and Azeris who inhabited the village at successive times. The last community of Armenians were deported in the 17th c to Persia by the Safavid Shah Abbas I as part of a scorched Earth retreat in the face of Ottoman advances during the Turko-Persian wars of 1602-1620. Also

surviving are the remains of a single nave **hall church** with a protruding apse, built over a Pagan temple in the 4th-5th centuries. The church was built from finely hewn stone with chamfered joints (beveled) on its edges. The semi-circular apse has a pentagonal exterior and there are equal crosses carved over the doorway and at the keystone for the apsidal arch, which itself rests on a unique set of columns, their palm pattern echoing those on the pilasters in the outer gallery found at other churches (Tekhor). A second church was added to the southern wall in the early Middle Ages.

The village houses a few of the Reserve workers and their families, who may be willing to point you to some of the area's more interesting sites, including graveyards and the remains from the pre-Christian era.

Camping is possible in the river gorge or village (permission required); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the area.

➡ From --- to **METS GILANLAR** (DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

🌿 METS GILANLAR - ՄԵՏ ԳԻԼԱՆԼԱՐ ▲

Mets Gilanlar's few huts are all that remain of a village that thrived on sheep herding and simple farming. Like the residents of Baiberd, inhabitants were force-marched to Persia in the 17th c, and later Kurdish and Azeri residents left in the 20th century. The area is now a prime breeding ground for several of Armenia's Endangered species, including the Persian Leopard, Armenian Mufflon and the Armenian/Persian Ibex. The terrain is rough and sparsely vegetated, and while there are some excellent hikes to the North and East, it can get bloody hot in the summertime and sun screen, bottled water and a good hat is required. A good guide is also strongly advised, both to get to the good spots for bird and animal watching, and as part of your permission to enter the reserve. A local guide can be found in Garni (Call Samvel Ohanian at tel. tel. 72076, cell 091-77-87-52) and through one of the [Adventure Tour Operators](#) listed at the beginning of this chapter.

Hikes A good 1-3 day hike with overnight on the Geghama Lehr, is to strike out NE following the Gilanlar River (now Karahun River), which in about 10.3 km runs to the south of Vishaplich Lake (the lake is about 1-1.5 km to the north), a good camping spot and the site of several Pagan monuments. At the end of the river (another 3.5 km) you pass between Mts Vishaplehr (3157.7 m, 3 km to the north) and Geghasar (3443.m, 6 km

to the south), with Mt. Ughtusar (3170 m) about 3.5 km to the south of Geghasar. Ughtusar is one of the prime breeding grounds for the Armenian Ibex and prime hunting ground by international hunt expeditions after the endangered species. Be very careful if you come across hunters, they are armed and should be considered dangerous.

📍 [HIKE MAP]

Camping is possible in the area (be sure you have permit to stay in the reserve); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** along river beds.

➡ From --- to (**Elijah**, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

SIDE TRIP: Elijah – Ughu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ From --- to beautiful **AGHJOTS VANK** (DD 40.1071 x 44.8083, elev. 1715m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

🌿 AGHJOTS VANK - ԱԳՅՈՏ ՎԱՆԷ ▲

Aghjots Vank is perched on a mountain ridge overlooking the Gilanlar River. Local lore traces its founding to Grigor Lusavorich (Gregory the Illuminator) in the 4th c on the site of the martyrdom of S. Stepanos (a companion of Hripsimeh), which places the site in the Pagan era, Grigor spending his time knocking down or converting Pagan temples. The site was part of a Bronze and Iron Age culture in the area, developed into a walled compound by the 2nd millennium BCE. You can find the remains of Bronze Age fortresses and Vishaps in the surrounding mountains.



If the Christian church was established in the 4th century, it was probably a wooden structure, rebuilt in later centuries before becoming an important vank that was greatly expanded in the 13th c, resulting in its current layout. Sacked in 1603 during Shah Abbas' deportation of Armenians, the vank was partially restored in the 18th c along with Havuts Tar, only to be sacked again in the same century and permanently ruined during Azeri/Armenian fighting in 1905-06.

The vank was quite large; as large as nearby Havuts Tar and possibly bigger. The **outer walls** once rung around the entire complex but all that remain are on the western and northern edges. The remaining walls contain the ruins of outer buildings, sunken chambers and still to be excavated residential quarters.

S. Stepanos, a central dome type, dates to the 11th c, about the same time as Amnaprkich at Havuts Tar. The dome has collapsed, but the bulk of the church remains, showing its classic cruciform type with antechambers at the four corners. The tall central hall was buttressed by strong corners of basalt stone, which in turn supported the drum arches. The church was made of red and black tufa, now discolored by wear but in their heyday a colorful addition to the hill top. Cornices are edged with smooth ribbing, as are the windows. Inside, the simple lines of the structure are enhanced by ribbing while the apron has geometric patterning and places where a series of painted icons once stood.

The **13th c gavit** was added in 1207 for the vank's benefactors, Atabeg Ivaneh Zakarian and Prince Grigor Khaghbakian. Unlike the gavit at Havuts tar, the gavit at Aghjots Vank has enough surviving structure to give some sense of its large size. And height. The walls tower above the central plan, matching the church walls but increasing the volume of the entire structure exponentially.

The roof was supported by interconnecting arches, supported by central columns and columns placed along the outer walls. A 'ghosting' of the arches can be seen on the western façade of the church and the remaining gavit walls, showing how the gavit was divided into 9 square spaces. The aperture, and the roof, no longer remain, but the style is classic, much as the remaining gavits at Haghbat and Hovhanavank. There are a number of inscriptions on the gavit wall and the floor was once paved by tombstones.

The jewel of the vank (and what all that hiking was for) abuts the north wall of S. Stepanos; the stellar

S. Poghos-Petros (Sts. Peter and Paul) chapel built in 1270. The little chapel is covered on its western façade with extraordinary carvings of khachkars, geometric patterns and two remarkable depictions of S. Petros (Peter, left) and the S. Poghos (Paul, right). The depiction of religious figures this large on the façade of a church is rare in Armenia. I haven't found any other quite this large in the country. Others do exist, in the western Armenia, famously Aghtamar at Lake Van in present day Turkey.



All around the site are the remains of service buildings and the terracing used for farming. Much of the gavit's walls and many of the khachkar tombstones have tumbled down into the gorge, worth the effort for the physically dexterous to see up-close.

Camping is possible in the area (be sure you have permit to stay in the reserve); **Overnight** in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the area, riverbed.

➡ From --- to (**NAREK ENTRANCE**, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

🌿 **NAREK ENTRANCE - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ** (Արմավիր) ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

➡ From --- to (**Giolaiyzor**, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) 🏠 🗺️ 🏞️

SIDE TRIP: Giolaiyzor – Ughu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

the former village of Gyolaysor (trans. Assyrian garden) located in the Khosrov forest. The village, settled in 1833, was razed to the ground on the actor's birthday, May 3, 1949. This was the only instance, a period during May 1 to May 15, when the Assyrians were persecuted in the Soviet Union. It was a time when the Assyrian movement overseas had gathered momentum and when, naturally, the Assyrian communities both here and abroad were in contact with one another. It was also a period when speaking to a foreigner openly on the street could be perceived as an act of treason to the fatherland.

There were eighty households in Gyolaysor. The villagers had moved down into the Araratian plains. Most had relatives in the village of Verin Dvin and relocated there soon after the death of Stalin. 2,000 of the 2,700 Assyrians living in Armenia settled in Verin Dvin.

➡ From --- to (VEDI ENTRANCE, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

✂ VEDI ENTRANCE - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր) ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

➡ From --- to (Mankunk, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

SIDE TRIP: Mankunk – Uhu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ From --- to (Gegharkunik, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

SIDE TRIP: Gegharkunik – Uhu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ From --- to (Kerpikend, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

SIDE TRIP: Kerpikend – Uhu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ From --- to (LANJANIST/LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

✂ LANJANIST / LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր) ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

➡ From --- to (Mets Gilanlar, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

SIDE TRIP: Mets Gilanlar – Uhu (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ END OF TRIP 5

➡ From --- to AZAT CAVES (DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   



✂ AZAT CAVES - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր) ▲ (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) official

➡ From --- to (KAKAVABERD, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)   

✂ KAKAVABERD - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր) ▲ (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

RESOURCES ▲

READINGS

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Ararat Ecology

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eatsc.com

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users.freenet.am/%7Eecoteam

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Blogs

www.noteshairenik.blogspot.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORS ▲

Rick Ney (*author*) first came to Armenia in 1992 to work at the American University of Armenia. In 1993 he began his work in humanitarian aid and development for USAID-funded projects at the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development, the latter as Caucasus Region Director. This morphed into writing about Armenia for various publications, which became the first English language complete guide to Armenia in 1996 (online) and 1998 (CD-ROM). It has since become an online resource, visited by more than 24 million unique visitors (www.TACentral.com and www.TourArmenia.info). Rick is passionate about Armenia's deep history, amazing ecology, and making the country accessible for independent travelers, whom he believes will be the basis of Armenia's entry into the open world. In 2000 he began dividing his time between Armenia and caring for a parent in Texas, both of which he considers the richest experiences of his life.

Rafael Torossian (*research, maps, and graphics*) has been collaborating with Rick on TourArmenia since 1996, providing some much needed reality checks and commentary along the way. In his other life Rafael designs flash sequences, ads, graphics and web sites for TWRJ, for a variety of sites and content management projects. In a previous life Rafi was a field and track athlete, setting the All Armenia record (still unbroken) for the 60 meter dash, then as Assistant to the Minister for Sports, serving (surviving) 6 ministers, before meeting Rick, when they worked together on several humanitarian aid projects managed by the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development. In a world where engineers are taxi drivers, Rafi became the finance manager for these projects, creating the first multi-denomination accounting system for USAID projects in the Caucasus, tracking currency that inflated at one time 150% per day. Rafi is an Honored Coach of the Republic of Armenia and lives in Yerevan, a proud Yerevantsi who did not leave during the dark years of 1991-1995.

Bella Karapetian (*Editing, Translations, Russian Edition*) first met Rick in 1993 when she came to the American University and worked in his office as Faculty services Manager and Special Events Coordinator. There she had the chance to use her remarkable patience and good humor with wide-eyed professors wanting to know where the nearest shopping mall was (God give us patience and a good dose of Pantalgin). She then worked at the World Food Program in Armenia as administrator and Program Officer. In her previous life Bella worked with International architects at ArmStateDesign Institute as an information program assistant and translator. She is currently Executive Director of the NGO Historic Armenian Houses. History and architecture are her true loves and she has traveled to China, Thailand, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, and Lebanon and throughout the former Soviet Union. Bella tops this off by maintaining her membership in the World Esperanto Association. *Saluton!*

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