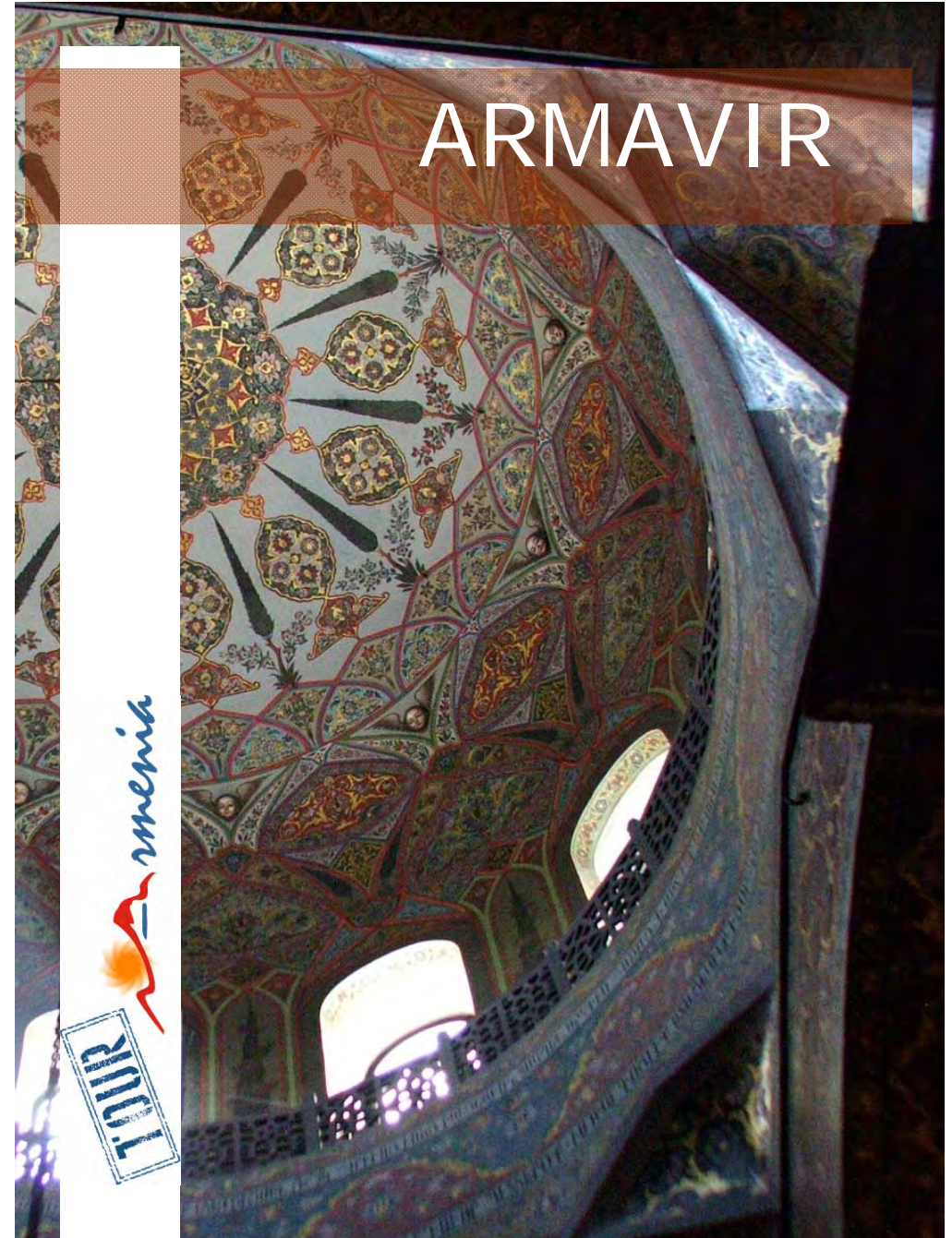


NOTES:





## ARMAVIR *marz* ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ մարզ

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*Note about pronunciation: I transcribe words into English using local dialect, substituting "i" for "y" (Sariguygh 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:** 1251 sq. km

**Population:** 160300

**Marz capital:** Armavir

**Distance from Yerevan:** 48 km

**Marzpetaran:** Tel: (237) 63 716

**Largest City:** Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin)

Armavir is Armenia's Cradle of Civilization; home to some of the oldest cities in the Near East, the world's oldest known forging of bronze, and its first Christian state. Both are just a few miles from each other, and taken together they explore a region that is among the oldest and most diverse in the world.



As you travel Armavir, you travel through the country's heartland; a farming area that produces the lion's share of the country's vegetables, especially its succulent tomatoes and crunchy cucumbers, the "bread and butter" on every Armenian dining table. Among the staggering number and varieties of crops, the marz produces several varieties of wine-producing grapes, considered by connoisseurs among the best semi-sweet producers in the country.

Its history may be the oldest in the country. Set on one of the Stone Age "super highways" of settlement, the Arax River, the marz opens to Western Armenia and Anatolia to the west; to Shirak and the Black Sea corridor to the north; to the Hrazdan River corridor and the Caspian region to the NE; and to the lower Ararat valley, Persia and the Gulf region to the south.

A dozen or so settlements inhabit the marz, dating back to the Stone Age, and the marz has fantastic

## Highlights

- **Visit Vagharshapat**, the Seat of the Catholicos and center of the Armenian Apostolic Church (p. 17)
- **Explore Metsamor**, the birthplace of bronze, and its 2800 BCE astral observatory (p. 55)
- **Attend Sunday service** (or Feast Day) at Echmiadzin cathedral; listen to its spectacular choir (p. 29)
- **Take the Cradle of Civilization Tour**, with excavations of settlements dating to 9000 BCE (p. 53)
- **Visit the World Heritage Sites** of Zvartnots Cathedral (p. 48), S. Hripsimeh (p. 38) and Guyaneh (p. 35)
- **Explore Argishtikhinili**, the Urartian capital of Armavir marz (p. 57)
- **Visit Armavir**, the Bronze Age-Orontid capital, one of 3 of Armenia's ancient capitals in Armavir (p. 56)
- **Be sure to see Sardarapat Battlefield**, where Armenia won its independence in 1918. Take time for the excellent ethno-museum in the same complex (p. 57)
- **Visit the small and impressive Khoren Ter Harutian sculpture museum** (p. 22)
- **Explore the Vordan Karmir Preserve**, the last native habitat for the source of medieval Armenia's gorgeous red ink; more prized than gold in the courts of Europe (p. 86)
- **Bird watch at the marshlands around Metsamor excavation** (p. 69) and in the Karmir Vordan Preserve (p. 86)
- **Explore the Western Desert**, with the ancient Armenian capitals at Bagaran (p. 89) and Yervandashat (p. 90)
- **Visit the Hovhannes Hovhannessian House Museum** (p. 21) and Mher Abeghian museums in Echmiadzin (p. 21)

excavations of some of the country's most famous cities, from each period of the country's history.

It is for its Christian history that the marz is most famous for locals and Diaspora Armenians, who make pilgrimages to Armenia as much to worship at the ca. 303 cathedral of Echmiadzin as to visit their homeland. And its Christian history is as dramatic as its ritual, borrowing from Pagan rites and beliefs that continue to thrive in their Christian context.

Armavir is featured in Armenia's Freedom Struggle after WWI, and is home of the battle that insured the country's independence, at Sardarapat. A bountiful land with hospitable people and amazing sites, Armavir is a must see on any tourist itinerary.

## NATURE ▲

Armavir is the north end of the Ararat valley, which lies between the Shirak Plateau, Mt. Aragats, the Geghama Lehr and Mt. Ararat in present day Turkey.



Armavir has a diverse ecosystem, encompassing desert and semi-desert landscape in its western district, which fertile soil springs to life each spring and when irrigated, large areas of salt and freshwater marshlands, small spring-fed lakes in the valley floor and small stands of woods in riverbeds and isolated locations.

Even the marz western desert blooms each spring for a few short weeks with emerald green grass and fields of wild flowers, including rare and endemic Iris, Tulip and Gladiolus. The soil, built from layers of volcanic ash, is one of the richest in

the world. Irrigated farmland extends far into even the most parched regions of the marz.

The rich deposits of lava that streamed into the Ararat Valley from its volcanoes also created spectacular rock formations and one of the largest deposits of tufa and basalt in Europe and Western Asia. Most of the quarries in the country are in Armavir, others in Ararat and Aragatsoth marz.



Covering huge primordial lakes and swamps, the enriched soil 'fermented' over millions of years to create the two largest agricultural valley in Western Asia, the other being the land around Van in historic Armenia, present day Anatolia. As late as 1300 BCE the valleys were noted by Urartian and Assyrian chroniclers as teeming with wildlife and deciduous forests. The museums at Erebuni displays wood trestles logged in the Urartu period, while excavations at Metsamor have uncovered wooden fragments more than 6000 years old. What remains of that great valley forest now are a few woodlands along river beds, hundreds of small marshlands, semi-desert terrain on the Western and Southeastern edges and the heavily farmed valley floor.

Much of the deforestation was probably complete before the rise of the Urartu Empire in the 10th century BCE, the wood used to fuel metal foundries at places like Metsamor, Aratashen, Mokhrablur and old Armavir. and its adverse affects were recorded as early as the reigns of Kings Argishti I and Rusa, who both left behind cuneiform tablets attesting to turning "deserts into paradise" with their new irrigation systems.

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 (Armavir and Ararat marz had become a major wine production centers) and western Armavir has mostly returned to its desert state.



**Water resources** Armavir has extensive water resources that continue to support large wetland areas. Marshlands can be found around Metsamor, Markara, Old Armavir and Sardarapat; home to a diverse waterfowl population, mostly made of storks and cranes, the storks nesting on rooftops and power line poles throughout the entire marz. There have also been sightings of seagulls and even the occasional Dalmatian pelican.

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. Several varieties of reeds, water flowers and ferns thrive in these marshland areas, which themselves are surrounded by cultivated land or semi-desert terrain.

**Irrigation** Armavir is heavily irrigated to produce agricultural crops 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 western Yerevan (Armavir border), including the Dalma canal, 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 tunnel and 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. Other ancient canals can be seen along the road to Echmiadzin, including the

misnamed Semiramis or Shamiram canal, attributed by legend to the Babylonian queen Semiramis, but in fact engineered by King Menuas I or earlier. Further expansion of the canal network beginning in the 1930's opened up vast tracks of semi-desert land in western Armavir and the area around the town of Armavir.

**Springs, Mineral Springs** Do not be deceived by its parched appearance; Armavir is one of the richest sources of water in the country, almost all of it from underground springs that percolate through tufa and basalt fissures under the soil. In primordial times a steaming lake, Armavir's valley gradually appeared over millions of years as surrounding volcanoes grew dormant, their dying gasps spurting out plumes of steam and hot mineral water.

Gradually these died out, leaving behind one of the largest aquifers in the Near East, the springs alternately between cold freshwater and hot mineral springs. While hot mineral springs do exist in Armavir, they are remote and not very plentiful, but if you stumble upon one, you do not want to miss the chance to drink a little or soak a toe or two into the soothing liquid.

One can easily recognize freshwater springs by the surrounding juicy vegetation and geothermal springs - by outlets fringed with ochre colored stones. The temperature of springs is close to constant over the year and varied from 4° C in Alpine springs to 22-55° C in thermae. Freshwater springs are situated everyway on the slopes of mountains.

**Thermal and Mineral Springs** Thermal Springs in Armavir include several types of mineral waters, including calcium, sodium and natural Hydrocarbonate. Cold mineral and sweet water springs are located near Metsamor and Aknalich.

**Minerals** Armavir 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** Armavir's flora is not as diverse as other regions of the country, with water loving plants thriving in the region's marshes and river beds, and mountain scrub and drought-resistant plants throughout the rest of the marz. The eastern marz is by and large farmland, with fields of irrigated crops covering the landscape.



The marz is alternately called Armenia's orchard and its garden, for the huge number of fields and yards dedicated to fruit trees; apples, apricots, cherries, plums, watermelons, strawberries, raspberries, melons, peaches along a few dozen other varieties of fruits, vegetables and nuts. Both the apricot and the peach are said to have their origins in the Ararat valley, of which Armavir is the northern part of.

Other crops includes small fields of cotton (once a major source of income, now kept mainly by those wanting to spin their own cloth), and in the far south, a once thriving silk industry that is all but forgotten, save the wild mulberries that crowd the region and their silkworms.

What the marz lacks in diversity it more than makes up for in the flowers that bloom during its short but glorious spring; several varieties of Poppy crowd fields of purple Betony and Gundelia (the "crown of thorns" pollen grains of which were found in the Shroud of Turin), yellow verbascum and purple gladiolus.

**Armavir Flora** Flora include several varieties of orange to red Poppy, Iris (*Iris lineolata*, *I. Caucasia*), Gladiolus (*Gladiolus atroviolaceus*), milk vetch (*Astragalus 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** (*Secale vavilovii* Grossh), **Cereal-Beans** (*Pisum elatius* Bieb., *Lens orientalis* (Boiss.) Shmalh.), **Fruits** (*Armeniaca vulgaris* Lam.), **Vegetable Melons** (*Beta macrocarpa* Stev etc., *Daucus carota*).

**Grapes** Armavir—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, Voskehat, Kangun) and one Georgian grape (Rkatsiteli); used to produce cognac and dessert wines.

**Armavir Flower Watching:** Armavir can be an excellent part of spring-flowering tours in Armenia, especially if combined with visits to Ararat, Aragatsotn and Kotaik marz. These are all within an hour or so drive from Yerevan, making them easy visits. Extended spring tours add Vayots Dzor and Siunik for 7-10 day trips. See our Nature Armenia chapter for detailed itineraries.



In Armavir, the best places to spot spring flowers are along the (H18) and (M9) in the western marz, and in the Selav-Mastara River canyon (H17) north of Miasnikian (Dalarik, Lernogog, Karakert). Small stands of poppies can be found throughout the marz, on rocky hills and in craggy surfaces. A rather striking group of poppies grow between the stone slabs surrounding the 1833 Tsar Nicholas Pillar on the road between Echmiadzin and Mrgastan, another at Shresh Blur Neolithic tell outside the village.

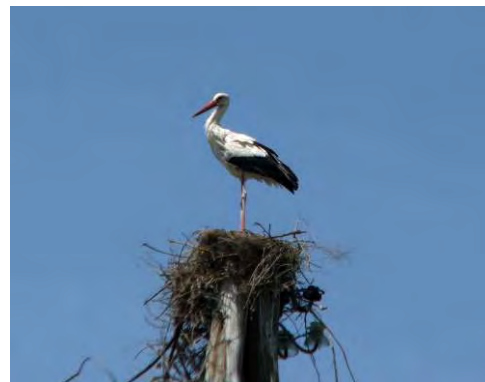
**Guided Tour** This tour (half-one day) is part of botanical tours in Armenia guided by Prof. Nora Gabrielian, the world's leading expert on endemic

species of 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. 92). Getting her to guide is not easy (see flower tours under [adventure tour operators](#), p. 15) but if you can, do it. She is worth every dram.

For detailed information and list of species see [TourArmenia Flora pages](#) ([www.tacentral.com/nature/flora.asp](http://www.tacentral.com/nature/flora.asp))

#### Fauna

**Birds** Armavir has the largest variety of birds in Armenian with the most species of water-loving birds. Bird habitats include marshes around Echmiadzin and Metsamor, river mouths and littoral swamps, all of which are experiencing a water drop due to over use by private fish ponds.



The most famous endemic species is the White Stork, which thrives throughout the marz, especially the eastern and southern regions, and on the Arax River. The stork builds its nests on top of power line supports, chimneys and special rooftop platforms built by villagers to encourage the nesting of this symbol of good luck and devotion (storks mate for life).

**Bird watching, migrations** Armavir and Ararat marz have the best places to bird watch 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 (Armavir) and Arpalich (Shirak).

#### Lakes, Reservoirs, Fish Ponds, Wetlands

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**, **CRACKES**, 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** (Stereorariidae): 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.



**Scrub** species include **WAXWINGS** (Bombycillidae): Bohemian Waxwing, **SHRIKES** (Laniidae): Red-backed Shrike; **ACCENTORS** (Prunellidae): Dunnock; **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.

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

#### Other Fauna

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

**Reptiles and Amphibians** are everywhere. The herpetofauna includes Marsh Frog (*Rana ridibunda*), Caspian Tortoise (*Clemmys caspica*), Minor Asian Newt (*Tritulus vittatus*), grass-snakes (*Natrix natrix*, *N. tessellata*), lizards (*Darevskia unisexualis*, *D. nairensis*). Lizards include the endangered Persian toad headed sunwatcher, a rare Mediterranean species that can be found around the villages of Bagaran, Hushakert, Sardarapat, Armavir town and village, Darakert, Parakjar, Musalehr, Arevshat, Zvartnots and Metsamor.



**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*), Armenian Birch Mouse (*Sicista armenica*), Nehring's Blind Mole Rat (*Nannospalax nehringi*), Turkish hamster (*Mesocricetus brandti*), Snow Vole (*Chionomys nivalis*), Dahl's Jird (*Meriones dahl*), Persian Jird (*Meriones persicus*), Tristram's Jird (*Meriones tristrami*), Vinogradov's Jird (*Meriones vinogradovi*), Striped Field Mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*), Yellow-breasted Field Mouse (*Apodemus fulvipectus*), Black Sea Field Mouse (*Apodemus ponticus*), Ural Field Mouse (*Apodemus uralensis*), Harvest Mouse (*Micromys minutus*), Afghan Pika (*Ochotona rufescens*), 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 include 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*).

#### RISKS/ ECO CHALLENGES

Cut up for agriculture, the marz faced its greatest ecological risks thousands of years ago, when intensive farming harvested hundreds of hectares of the region's only hardwood forests. Even then, it was not until the end of the 20th century that greedy businessmen cut the last forests of hardwood trees, to make furniture with.

What remain are a few stands of trees on river beds, where in the 19th century thick forests covered 20% of the eastern marz. Archeological botanists have uncovered evidence of Bronze Age forests that suggest the marz may in fact have been 50% covered by forests, though these were mostly cut in the Bronze and Iron Age to feed a thriving metal industry.

Efforts by the Armenian Tree Project ([Resources Online](#), p. 92) and other Eco-NGO's to reforest the area are ongoing, but they face uphill battles against local resistance to anything other than "useful" trees (i.e. fruit trees) and local governmental attempts to take protected forests for dachas or wood harvest.

One example is the Fast Growing Tree Project, which successfully planted an experimental grove of fast growing trees in an attempt to show locals how they can earn additional income by renewable tree production. The local authorities claimed the forest for themselves, to subdivide and build elite dachas on. An international outcry—like that which protected hundreds of hectares of land threatened by the new Kapan-Meghri highway—has resulted in a rare positive resolution. (See [Resources Online](#), p. 92).

The major threat to the marz has to do with water; the archaic method of irrigating fields results in significant loss of aquifer water to the atmosphere, but the cost of implementing drip irrigation and conservation methods that are a matter of course in the west and Israel (which is the world leader in reclaiming desert land with minimal moisture) will take decades to fully implement in Armenia.

The other is more pressing, and a serious risk. This is the current popularity of using ground and aquifer springs at hundreds of fish farms throughout the marz. There may be 5000 fish farms in the entire Ararat Valley, almost all of them artificially created by siphoning off aquifer water. The water is not recycled or filtered, but simply dumped into canals or streams where its pollution affects freshwater resources downstream. Another result even more serious is the loss of water pressure.



The Sturgeon, and endangered species in its native habitat

Villages and farms downstream from the fisheries (which 'bought' the spring sources for themselves) now have no water pressure for their fields or potable water for their homes. Rather than reclaiming valuable agricultural land, the country now faces the problem of village farms closing for lack of the one resource Armenia has plenty of, but which it lacks because of lucrative but destructive fishery practices.

Another risk is pollution, something the entire country suffers from, especially the Ararat Valley, which is hemmed in by mountains, creating a natural bowl that "cooks" the air during much of the year. This is made worse by the cement factory in Ararat Marz, which pollution streams north to Yerevan and Armavir by the prevailing winds. A 10-fold increase in cars, the natural dust particulates in the air, and the summer heat all combine to create a miserable period of 6-10 weeks in warm weather months. Once immune from this stifling problem, winter is now experiencing some of the same problems, through polluted fog that settles over the region in January and February.

Another risk is the continued destruction of the few areas of wilderness areas left, especially in the south and southeast, where bad farming practices have resulted in the salination of farmlands and a rush to "reclaim" wilderness areas for new fields. Weaned on farming in the Soviet days, when central authorities doled out petrochemical fertilizers that depleted the soil, and by soil erosion allowing salt deposits largely contained in the 19th century to return, local farmers are reluctant to change their ways. The results are bad land upon bad land, and a loss of livelihood and soil.

One area under threat is the [Vordan Karmir Reserve](#) (p. 92), 217 hectares marsh and grasslands that are the last native habitat for the Vordan Karmir (Cochineal) insect, and source of the deep red pigment used in Bronze Age, Urartian and Medieval cloth dyes and inks. The reserve is under pressure from nearby farmers and a state more interested in selling off public lands than preserving a 7,000 year heritage.



Pollution-obscured Mt. Ararat in the background.

#### DO: ▲

**Echmiadzin** Visit the complex of Echmiadzin, believed to be the site visited by Christ in a vision by the church founder Gregory the Illuminator. The complex includes the ca. 303 cathedral, with its beautiful frescoes and incredible cathedral museum displays (including relics of Noah's ark and a piece of the True Cross), the Catholicos Residency and Treasury, set in an idyllic courtyard of trees, flowers and grass. Arrange your visit for Sunday Service or a Holy Day, just to witness the majesty and haunting refrains of the church ritual and singing.

**Cradle of Civilization Tour** Take a half-day tour of Armavir's "Fertile Crescent", stopping at excavations of ca. 8000-5000 BCE settlements at

Mokhrablur, Adablur and Metsamor. The excavations are easy to find and just as easy to explore, with Metsamor boasting a compact museum with artifacts from each period of its existence. Sites include cyclopic stone walls, worship stones, and, at Metsamor, extensive excavations of the citadel and metal foundry.

Armavir has a dozen more excavations, including sites at Vacheh, Gai, Arevik, Karakert, Mrgastan, Dasht, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun, Aragats, Tsaghkalanj, and Tsaghkunk, among others.



**Metsamor Observatory** Be sure to climb the stone observatory at Metsamor, to see the star map carved on the rock surfaces (there are almost 1000 tiny depressions on the surface, in patterns that are thought by some to form a map of the night sky, highlighting important star positions, constellations—even signs of the zodiac).

**Armavir-Argishtikhinili** Visit the extensive 8th c BCE Urartian fortress of Argishtikhinili (next to Haikavan) and the Bronze Age-Hellenistic capital of Yervanduni (Orontid) Armenia, Armavir. Each site is within sight of the other, and each offers a fascinating glimpse into their separate worlds, replete with walls, foundations, and thousands of pottery shards from each period of their existence.

**Sardarapat** The battlefield memorial of Sardarapat is de-rigueur for Diaspora Armenians witnessing the 1918 victory by Armenians armed with nothing more than pitchforks and courage against far better armed Turkish soldiers.

The battle ended in a rout of the Turkish army and led to the formation of the First Republic, an 18 month experiment in democracy that ended in the creation of the Soviet Republic in 1921. The memorial includes the largest ethnographic

museum in Armenia, arguably the best museum in the country.

**Western Wilderness** Explore the western wilderness, a lunar landscape of desert and semi-desert terrain, rock and lava fields inhabited by scrub, wildflowers and grass fields that bloom for a few short weeks in spring. The land is an amazing contrast of colors, and will remind anyone from the American Southwest of their home. The area includes rare endemic species of flowers and remains of two of Armenia's most important ancient cities, Bagaran and Yervandashat. Sadly, permission is required to enter the border region and view these sites from across the Arax River, permission that is seldom given and sometimes ignored by Russian soldiers guarding the border.



**Northeast** In the shadow of Yerevan and Echmiadzin, Armavir's northeast has a string of old-world villages resettled in the 19th century by descendants of Persian and Western Armenian refugees, on top of prehistoric and medieval settlements. The area is as full and lush as the western marz is parched and deserted.

Sites include the Neolithic petroglyphs at a stone quarry near Aghavnatun, chalcolithic tells and Urartian fortresses and remains of some of the oldest churches in the country. The road north of Echmiadzin—passing these impressive historic sites—leads to Aragatsotn marz, passing Oshakan and Agarak on its way to Mt. Aragats.

#### Natural Armavir

Natural treks include exploring the western marz between Vanand and Karakert, and (if permission granted) the Arax canyon between Yervandashat and the Aragatsotn Border. There are no forests to rest or camp in, and the treks are difficult in the sun-blasted months of summer, but in spring and

autumn, the weather is milder and the going is easier.

**Camping** can be had at Aknalich and near the Metsamor excavations (marshland), and near villages, which orchards provide some tree cover (be sure and ask). The views of Mt. Ararat in the morning mists are well worth the open space and lack of privacy. The western desert (Mts. Spitakblur and Sevblur) also provide rugged, open vistas.

#### WHEN? ▲

The best time to visit Armavir is Spring, when the wildflowers are in full bloom and an otherwise desert landscape turns emerald green and expanses of yellow, red and white flowers take over otherwise brown fields. Flowers begin their bloom at the first thaw, and reach peak bloom in April, the season sometimes stretching to the end of May. Spring weather is also milder, allowing a more pleasant exploration of a region that is uncomfortably sultry (south and east) or parched (west) in summer.



Spring is also a wonderful time to visit Echmiadzin, especially at Easter, which—depending on the date—appears at the beginning of spring thaw or during peak blooming season.

By mid-May the days are already hot, and at Echmiadzin and Armavir it is uncomfortably humid. Summers are long and hot, lasting until October. Daytime temperatures regularly reach 40°C, seldom dropping below 30 °C. Summer is still the busiest season of the year, more because worldwide tourism peaks at the same time. The water-strewn feast of Vardavar (mid July) takes over the marz, from the Sunday service at

Echmiadzin to water fights and “bucket baptisms” at every village.

Many prefer autumn, when cooler weather takes over, and warm days pass into cool nights. Though the landscape is not as beautiful as spring, the harvest is in, and you get the bonus of feasting on mouth-watering fruits and vegetables just picked from the fields.

Winters are snowy and cold, its dormant nature punctuated by the beautiful Christmas service at Echmiadzin, which is decked out with lights and a crèche for the feast day. Because of the snow, ice and cold, few travel the marz in winter, and roads can be blocked or closed, locals settling in for a long winter's sleep.



#### HOW LONG?

Armavir is easily reached by car from Yerevan, and all trips can be done in half-day to one-day excursions. Take a half day to explore the Echmiadzin complex (Zvartnots, Cathedral, S. Hripsimeh and Guyaneh). Follow that by visits to Armavir's “Cradle of Civilization” sites at Mokhrablur, Adablur and Metsamor, then the Urartu and Hellenistic citadels of Argishtikhinili and Armavir, winding up at Sardarapat with its memorial and excellent ethnographic museum for a full day trip.

A two day visit would add the Church Treasury Museum and old Residence and other sites in Vagharshapat City to Echmiadzin on the first day, then take the Cradle of Civilization sites (Mokhrablur, Adablur, Metsamor), adding Aknalich, Armavir and Argishtikhinili and Sardarapat on the second day, traveling at a more leisurely pace. Take half day to explore the northeast villages, including the petroglyphs at Aghavnatun and the

beautiful 7th c Tarkmanchats at Aigeshat; and another half day to visit the south marz prehistoric sites at Vacheh and Gai and the Vordan Karmir preserve by J'rarat. The western marz can also be traveled in a half day (take a full day if you get permission to visit Bagaran and Yervandashat and hike the Arax River canyon), driving through the desert hills to Karakert, with its excavation of ca. 9000-4000 BCE Aratashen.

**Hitting the Highlights** Armavir Heartland: Zvartnots, Echmiadzin Complex, Mokhrablur, Adablur, Metsamor, Argishtikhinili, Old Armavir, and Sardarapat (1-2 days). Northeast: Argavand, Zvartnots, Dasht, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun, Aragats, Tsaghkunk (half-day). South: Gai, Vordan Karmir, Markara, Nalbandian (half-day). West: Bagaran, Yervandashat, Karakert (half-day).

## HISTORY ▲

As you travel through Armavir, you will spot sudden eruptions in the terrain, low hills that seem to appear from nowhere. They do not "fit" the land's contour. These are the remains of the first urban civilization to leave its imprint in Historical Armenia, Armenia's "Cradle of Civilization".



The culture was the earliest known to process bronze and iron, and are believed to be among the first (if not the first) astronomers, mapping the night sky as early as the 3rd millennium BCE.

While Kotaik claims the oldest found humanoid in Armenia, and Yerevan the oldest cave settlement, Armavir claims the oldest cities, beginning with Aratashen (7000 BCE), Mokhrablur (ca. 6000 BCE) and Metsamor (5000 BCE), the latter with the oldest known bronze forges in the world and a 2800 BCE astronomical observatory. These are conservative estimates; a growing body of historians believes that given increasingly older dates being placed on excavation sites throughout the region, it is plausible these settlements may be 1000-2000 years older.

And while Armavir's history reached back to the dawn of civilization, it also was at the heart of the country's development through the next several thousand years; with no less than four of the country's historic capitals, the kingdom's birthplace

of Christianity, and the birth of its first democratic republic.

## PREHISTORIC AGE ▲

In legend, the founding of the marz and its name is traced to Haik, the mythical founder of the Armenian race. His grandson, Aramais, is said to have settled here, giving the region his name. Perhaps explaining the proliferation of the Indo-Europeans into the valley, his descendants were all born here, from whence they spread throughout the country. They were Amassia, Aram, and Anushavan-Sosanver, the last the founder of a religious cult which worshipped at sacred groves of Platan (Plane) Trees near Old Armavir and Bagaran, listening to the rustling of leaves to predict the future (Hey, others 'read' the entrails of butchered bulls—at least this was less messy).

The development of metallurgy in the area (6th-4th millenniums BCE) saw a rapid development of cities, fortified megalithic walls and evidence of early warfare and invasion. The unsettled history of Armenia began early.

**Prehistoric (Chalcolithic/Neolithic levels) sites** in Armavir include lower level excavations at

Aratashen, Mokhrablur, Adablur and Vacheh; chalcolithic tells at Zvartnots, Teghut (Echmiadzin), Vacheh, Tsaghkalanj, Mrgastan and Tsaghkunk; the important 6th-2nd m BCE settlement of Khatunarkh at Gai; petroglyphs at the stone quarry near Aghavnatun.



## COPPER / BRONZE AGE ▲

Copper-Bronze Age (7000 - 2000 BCE) pictograms at Metsamor, Aghavnatun and on the Geghama Lehr include sophisticated celestial iconography, including the signs of the zodiac. Two observatories found in Armenia show a developed awareness of astronomy at least around 2800 BCE (Metsamor), and possibly as early as 5000 BCE (Karahundj site in Siunik). Using astronomy, Ancestral Armenians developed a calendar based on 365 days, one of the first compasses, and were able to envision the shape of the world as round. The appearance of the signs of the zodiac in Armenia occurred before the Hittite and Babylonian kingdoms, which were heretofore credited with developing astronomy.



The successful smelting of bronze (along with gold, silver and magnesium) and the mining of precious gems transformed the agrarian civilization in Armenia into to an urban one: the first signs of fortified cities are traced to this era: Metsamor (which incomplete excavation shows signs of settlement as early as 7000 BCE), Dari Blur (Armavir), Aratashen Blur, and Adablur.

In the 4th millennium BCE the first fortified walls of L'chashen had been erected by Lake Sevan, while in Armavir cities at Metsamor, Aigevan and Aigeshat were firmly established. By 4000 BCE a large kingdom was established around Metsamor with pilot cities at Mokhrablur, Jerahovit, Lejapi Blur, Voski Blur (Voski means "golden" in Armenian), and a settlement now known as Echmiadzin.

**The Metsamor Culture** Metsamor is distinct for its large size (it may have held 50,000 people at its height in the mid to late Bronze Age), and its focus on metal production, which vastly enriched the kingdom; Bronze was a far superior substance to forge tools and weapons with, and the secret of its production was still controlled by the tribes in the region which gave them great influence and wealth (as example, the Egyptians were not to discover the process until the mid 3rd m BCE, by which time the Metsamorians were already learning the process of forging Iron).

Metsamor's trade with the outside world increased as its metal foundries flourished; cylinder seals, jewelry, idols and pottery flowed between the Ararat Valley city and the great empires of the day; Sumeria, Assyria and Egypt.

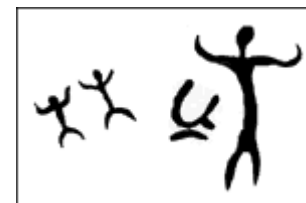
The Metsamorians left behind thousands of glyphs and symbols on their rocks; some are early maps of the region, showing towns, fields and irrigation channels while others record the positions of the five known planets, constellations of the stars, and

what experts say is the first calendar in the world, showing the four seasons and a spinning spherical world.



**The Indo-Europeans** One of the greatest evolutions in history occurred when Indo-Europeans began to migrate throughout Asia and Europe. Classical historians put this event sometime in the 3rd millennium BCE and thought the source for Indo-Europeans were someplace in Central Asia. New studies place the source of the Indo-European culture on or near the Armenian Plateau, with migrations into Asia and Europe beginning as early as 7,000 BCE.

Moving first into Central Asia and India in the East, then the Balkans and Europe in the West, successive waves of Indo-Europeans culminated in a ca. 2000 BCE migration into the Eastern Mediterranean which hallmarks the beginning of the Greek Doric culture.



Experts again point to the petroglyphs in Armenia to find the origins of a written language and the indo-European root sounds, among them the letter "Ah", the first letter of all Indo-European alphabets.

**Copper-Bronze Age sites** in Armavir include the museum, excavated citadel and observatory at Metsamor; Bronze Age levels at Mokhrablur, Adablur and Aratashen; the Teghut Tell just S of Echmiadzin; the city of Khatunarkh near Gai; Bronze Age towns at Mrgastan, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun, Mrgashat, Arevik, Karakert (Aratashen settlement); Bronze Age tomb mounds at Tsaghkalanj.

## IRON AGE ▲

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 Armavir settlements at Aratashen, Adablur, Mokhrablur and Metsamor.

This second wave of tribes (called the **Nairi** in 2nd m BCE Assyrian chronicles) clashed with their mother tribes, resulting in the destruction of Metsamor and surrounding towns; excavation levels from this period are uniformly blackened, the cities burned to the ground, with heaps of skeletons lying scattered outside citadel walls.

The new Iron Age buildings began to use every larger cyclopic stones placed in multiple layers around tall hills. It must have been a chaotic time, for the fortresses are gigantic; made to withstand great attack while positioned to spot enemy intrusion from a distance.

The period is marked by the rise of the L'chashen culture, which borrowed metal working, fire worship and star gazing from the Metsamorians while instilling religious beliefs and rituals unique for the area (the L'shashens buried their dead in chariots and wagons sunk into the waters of Lake Sevan). While no one knows the names these tribes called themselves, we have the names given by Urartians who conquered the area in the 9th c BCE: the Yerturni, Kuliani, Erikuakhi and Velikuni.

**Iron Age sites** include the settlement at Gai and cyclopic fortresses at Dasht, Aghavnatun, Yervandashat and the large fortress at Karakert. Iron Age finds were also found in layers of settlement at Metsamor, Mokhrablur and Adablur as well as at Old Armavir and Argishtikhinili.

## URARTIAN EMPIRE ▲

The Urartian King Argishti I crossed the Arax River and penetrated the Ararat Plain ca 786 BCE. He and his son, Sardur I, expanded the empire as far as the far shores of Lake Sevan, and to the edges of modern Georgia, incorporating most of present-day Armenia into the empire. In Armavir, the Urartians erected a number of fortresses and outposts, which served to both suppress local rebellions and foreign invaders, while serving as communication relay points; signals from post to post could relay warnings from the farthest stretch of the empire to its capital at Tushpa within hours.



Armavir's largest Urartian city was on the twin bluffs of Argishtikhinili and Old Armavir, built on top of the ruins of Neolithic-Bronze Age settlements at the site. Built for Argishti I, the city controlled the upper Ararat Valley, linked to the center at Erebuni by fortresses at Aragats and Karmir Blur. When Erebuni fell, Argishtikhinili became the largest Urartian city in the east, its eastern bluff the base for the 4th c BCE Orontid city of Old Armavir.

**Urartian sites** in Armavir include the huge excavated city-fort of Argishtikhinili (Haikavan) and its twin Old Armavir; the fortress-settlement at Aragats; Yervandashat; minor fortresses at Aragats, Dasht, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun; cuneiform inscriptions found at Armavir village and on display at Zvartnots; Urartu level settlements/fortresses at Metsamor and Karakert.

## HELLENISTIC & ROMAN ERAS ▲

Almost immediately following the collapse of Urartu, the tribes in the Armenian plateau reorganized into a new kingdom, the Armen or Arameh. Greek records began calling them Armenians, and their kingdom "Armenya". Armavir became part of the Armenian Satrapy under Persian rule, becoming a backwater of the Achaemenid Empire. Very few artifacts from this period have been found in the region, though there was continuous inhabitation of Echmiadzin (known as "Karlili", also spelled "Qarlili"), Argishtikhinili and Metsamor during the entire period. Armavir soldiers were recruited by Darius I to fight the Greeks in 490, and exposure to the Classic Greek culture is traced to this era.

The **HELLENISTIC PERIOD** in Armavir officially begins with the invasion of Persia by the armies of

Alexander the Great and the collapse of the Empire in 333 BCE. In 323 Armavir became part of Greater Armenia, the largest of the three Armenian provinces of the Seleucid Empire, though it retained a great deal of autonomy and Yervanduni (Orontid) rulers treated their lands as a sovereign kingdom.

The region became important as the center of power for the Yervanduni Dynasty (336-189 BCE), which actually rose to power as Satrap lords during the reign of the Persian Cyrus the Great (590-530 BCE). Xenophon mentions an Armenians king named *Tigranes (Tigran)* who was a favorite of Cyrus and hunting mate, and Armenian chronicles trace the Orontid dynasty to the reign of Orontes I Sakavakiats (570-560).

The Yervanduni Kings built both their capitals in the marz. Choosing a spot favorable for defense on a bend of the Arax River, the Yervandunis created their first capital in 331 on the regional



capital of Armavir, the right bluff of Argishtikhinili (next to present day Haikavan). The capital thrived until 302, when the unpredictable Arax River decided to move west about 50 kilometers, leaving Armavir high and dry. Orontes IV then moved his seat to present Yervandashat, across the river from their religious center at Bagaran.

Despite its sudden drop to number two status, Armavir continued to thrive throughout the Yervanduni Era, continuing into the Roman and medieval period as a regional center, town then fortified village that was finally deserted in the 18th century.

By the time they deserted Armavir for the high life to the west, Armavir's inhabitants had deposited 200 years of living and prosperity on the hills of the old city, evidence of which regularly surfaces each spring thaw and after each hard rain.

## ORONTID (YERVANDUNI) DYNASTY

### Orontid Kings in Armenian tradition

- Orontes I Sakavakyats (570-560 BC)
- Tigranes Orontid (560-535 BC)
- Vahagn (530-515 BC)
- Hidarnes I (late 6th c. BC)
- Hidarnes II (early 5th c. BC)
- Hidarnes III (middle of 5th c. BC)
- Ardashir (2nd half of 5th c. BC)

### Attested Kings and Satraps

- Orontes (401-344 BC)
- Darius Codomannus (344-336 BC)

### Orontid Dynasty

- Orontes I (336-331 BC)
- Mithranes (331-323 BC)
- Perdiccas (non-dynastic) (323 BC)
- Neoptolemus (non-dynastic) (323-321 BC)
- Eumenes (non-dynastic) (321 BC)
- Mihran (321-317 BC)
- Orontes II (317- 300 BC)
- Sames (260-243 BC)
- Arsames I (243-226 BC)
- Charaspes
- Arsames II
- Xerxes (226-212 BC)
- Abdissares (212 BC)
- Orontes III (212-200 BC)
- Seleucid rule (200-189 BC)
- Artashesian rule (189-163 BC)

The **Parthian era** begins with the ascendancy of the Parthian King Arshaces in 238 BCE, and incursions into Armenia throughout the 2nd c BCE. Roughly parallel with the Roman period, the Parthians had great influence on the Armenians, including the designation of a line of kings over their Indo-European kinsmen and forebears from the Caucasus (T'rdat I was the brother of the Parthian King Vologeses I, suggesting Parthians and Armenian rulers are from the same race) and the introduction of a form of Zoroastrian fire worship to the kingdom.

Already worshippers of the elements, Armenians—distantly related to their Indo-Iranian cousins and

to the Parthians through intermarriage in the royal houses—readily incorporated the Zoroastrian aspects of fire worship to their own pantheon, which was also based on the sun. Parthians introduced another aspect to the worship, which was the fire pit itself, and adopted in turn idols from Armenians and other sources.

**ROMAN ERA** Seleucid influence ended with their defeat by the Romans in 189 BCE, who allowed the two former Seleucid satraps to set up independent Armenian states. A local general named Artaxias (Artashes) declared himself King of Greater Armenia in 189 BCE with its capital at Artashat, 30 km south of Yerevan.



Later 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.

**Hellenistic/ Roman sites** in Armavir include Old Armavir Fortress-City, the Orontid religious center at Bagaran and the Yervanduni Capital of Yervandashat, built to replace Armavir.

### EARLY CHRISTIAN PERIOD ▲

By the time of the conversion, Armavir had become prosperous and important. It was home to the seat of the king and a thoroughway for caravans plying the Silk Road to Roman colonies in Anatolia. Rome and Persia still vied for control of the country but the Arshakunis had by and large successfully navigated between the two super powers, giving obedience to each while maintaining some autonomy. The situation change sharply when the Parthian House in Persia—related to the Armenian dynasty through generations of intermarriage—suddenly fell to a nationalistic and much more dangerous Sassanid dynast, which sought the immediate end of Armenian autonomy, and the destruction of its Arshakuni (Parthian) House.

The story of the conversion itself and the controversy surrounding its dating and reasons are covered in detail in the section on [Echmiadzin](#) (p. 17), but its result was immediate and total. By declaring itself now a Christian country, Armenia severed any tie it had with Persia, which still worshipped the old religion based on fire.

Perhaps even more revolutionary, when Grigor Lusavorich baptized King T'rdat III, who then ordered the conversion of his court, this severed cultural ties with Rome. Christian Armenia no longer worshipped a pantheon of Greco-Roman gods from which at least one (Mythra) it had itself introduced to the Roman Empire.



Grigor Lusavorich, 14th c mosaic, Pammakaristos (Istanbul).

Normally overly-patriotic Armenian historians are silent on this point, but others suggest that the Armenian conversion itself may have triggered conversions throughout the Near East, leading to the conversion of Rome. Perhaps spurious, but it does explain why a subject state of Rome (however nominally), ruled by a personal friend of the Emperor, would have made so bold as to reject the Roman gods, at the height of Roman persecution.

**The Pagan Wars** For whatever reason and however it actually played out, Grigor and T'rdat did initiate a campaign to squash the old religion, beginning with the Temples of Vahagn and Anahit at Ashtishat in Mush (in present day Turkey).

Soon the "crusade" was nationwide. Pagan statues and icons were smashed or melted down, and crosses were set in their place. Of the tens of thousands of pagan statues that stood inside

temples or lined the roads of the kingdom, only one fragment of one bronze statue, the head of Anahit, survives, housed in the British Museum. It is also believed by many that among the religious



items destroyed were all records of the early, or old, Armenian script. This old text was replaced with the Greek and Syrian used in the early Christian rites of the Near East. This would be easy to do, since Latin and Greek had become the languages of the court centuries before.

And of the hundreds of Greco-Roman temples in Armenia before the conversion, only a handful survived, and only one survived intact—the temple at Garni. Another, the temple to Mher (Mythra) recorded in

historic chronicles, was recently found during excavations of Artashat, though it survives only in fragments.

Others were simply demolished, over which new churches were built, or hastily converted by placing a cross over their entry and reversing the position of the altar, from west to east. Of the first type, Echmiadzin is the most famous example; it was completely rebuilt over the ruins of a fire temple to Mythra or Vahagn, though the original fire pit and the column bases for the old temple survived.

The crusade was not always peaceful, with rich and powerful pagans pitted against the Armenian Royal house. Several catholicos were martyred in this period, among them Grigor's progeny Vertanes, Aristakes, Nerses, and Husik Petros, the latter bludgeoned to death in a dispute over the construction of a church over a pagan site.

The conversion was also an astute political move. By converting to Christianity and then appointing Grigor (a fellow Parthian) as the first patriarch or Catholicos over the Armenian church, T'rdat insured continued Parthian control over both government and religion.

This was not lost on their rivals, and the lack of unity between the new Christian ruling class and a pagan population grew, despite the official church line of mass conversion.

Some districts readily converted to the new religion, while there were others in which the pagan element was more deeply rooted and involved economic and social interests. Pagan priests, who, thanks to their position had been able to amass large fortunes, controlled large numbers of peasants who cultivated their lands, whom they could arm to fend off threats to their hegemony. The conversion of the country, imposed from above, did not always take place in a peaceful manner. It took another 150 to 200 years to complete a conversion that many say is still ongoing.

After T'rdat's death, the seat of power was moved by his successor Khosrov II in 335 to Dvin, and Vagharshapat began to fall into decline. The region remained a part of the Arshakuni holdings up to the fall of the house of Arshakuni in 428, following the invasion of the kingdom by a renewed Sassanid Empire and the Battle of Avarair. Thereafter, it was divided and contested between the inheritors of power in Armenia, the Marzpanate governors and the Mamikonian, Kamsarakan princely families, and a fledgling house of newcomers, the Bagratunis.

When the Catholicos moved the Holy See to Dvin sometime in the 470s, Vagharshapat—and Armavir—became backwaters of the country, rarely mentioned in the chronicles. It would be another 150 years before the marz was again mentioned in the affairs of the country.

**Early Christian sites** include the 4th c. cathedral of Echmiadzin, the martyria of Ss. Hripsimeh and Guyaneh and the shrine at Shoghakat; the central spot at Zvartnots cathedral where Grigor met and supposedly converted T'rdat III to Christianity; the lower portion of Tarkmanchats vank at Aigeshat; the basilicas at Yervandashat and Bagaran; Tukh Manuks at Arevashat, Aghavnatun, Tsaghkalanj, Aknashen.

### MEDIEVAL PERIOD ▲

The early Christian era is marked by the struggle of the Armenians to maintain independence in the face of Sassanid attempts to subdue and apostatize the Armenians back to fire worship.

Widely declared the singular event that saved the Armenian culture from Sassanid assimilation, in fact the adoption of the Mashtots alphabet was but one important step in cementing the country and creating what is now accepted what it means to be "Armenian". The Pagan wars continued, encouraged by Sassanids to counter the

independence efforts of the church and state. Even the Greek Empire at Constantinople frustrated Armenian attempts to throw off the Persian yoke, angered at Armenian refusal to adopt the Orthodox doctrine on the question of Christ's true nature.



After the fall of the Arshakuni kings in 428, the aristocratic houses fell into disarray, the squabbling nakharar houses further frustrating attempts to unify the country. Add to this the intensifying battle between Persia and Rome (now a Greek Empire based in Constantinople) to control the country, with competing armies wreaking havoc on the country.

The struggle in Armavir is best summed by the departure of the Catholicos to Dvin in the 470s and the dearth of construction of churches in the marz. Except for the renovation of the main cathedral at Echmiadzin ca. 486 (sponsored by the Greek appointed governor Vahan Mamikonian, whose seat was just north in Aragatsotn marz and whose donation can be seen as much an attempt to cement his house as the true head of Armenia as it was a pious act to renovate the dilapidated mother church), church-building had practically come to a complete halt.

After 150 years of relative obscurity in the affairs of state (which focus laid on Dvin and the western provinces) Armavir suddenly reappears during the

reign of the Catholicos Nerses III (the Builder), who many feel completed the conversion of the country by restoring parishes lost to Sassanid paganism and building churches throughout the country.

The greatest of these was at Zvartnots, or Angelic Forces, the reputed site of the meeting between Grigor Lusavorich and T'rdat III, which began the conversion of the country.



The construction began about the time of the first Arab invasion, in 640. Attempting to stave pillaging of the country by the Arabs, Armenian nakharars decided to sue for peace. This enraged the Byzantines who had refused to help the Armenians, demanding they adopt the Greek Chalcedonian doctrine first. Nerses favored union with the Greeks over subservience to Arabs, and for this was driven out by the nakharars. When the Greeks drove out Arabs and took control of the country, Nerses was reinstated in Dvin and began his rejuvenation of the church in earnest, including the cathedral at Zvartnots. In 648 he convened the council of Dvin, which accepted the Council of Chalcedon, bringing it back into communion with the Roman Orthodox Church, though based on the Monotheist compromise.



Zvartnots was a significant achievement, the largest church in the world when it was completed in 661. The Byzantine Emperor Constans II attended the dedication, and is reputed to have been so impressed by the magnificent building he jealously ordered the architect to create a grander version in Constantinople.

The effort unified much of the country, though Nerses continued to battle nakharars led by Theodore Rshtuni who had mainly chosen titular Arab rule over complete control by Byzantines. On Nerses' death, the country slipped into Arab rule, though it maintained an amount of political and religious autonomy, especially under the Umayyads.

Armenian revolts in the late 8th and 9th centuries were ruthlessly repressed, and Armavir suffered invasion and large scale destruction. One of these Arab raids is believed to have resulted in the burning of Zvartnots cathedral and the removal of key stones that led to its collapse in a 10th c earthquake.



Arab rule ended in the late 9th century, and in 885 the Bagratuni Ashot I (the Great) assumed the throne of the new Armenian kingdom. Centered in the 10th century capital of Ani, the Bagratunis ruled over a prosperous, if fractured, kingdom, and Armavir benefited from the relative peace. Its churches were enlarged and the Silk Road was reopened under Bagratunis, the marz benefiting from being located on the Dvin-Ani road. Most of the basilica churches in the region date themselves to this period, when their early Christian structures were strengthened, and sometimes enlarged.

The Bagratuni era ended when the Byzantines conquered a weakened Armenian state, which was then unable to stave off Seljuk Turkish invaders in the mid 11th c. The Seljuks were much worse than the Arabs; they had no interest in preserving a prosperous subject state, instead choosing to raid, plunder and destroy what they could not take.

Destruction of all towns and religious monuments are found from this period, as were reports of widespread famine and disease (a disease much like the Plague is suggested in some descriptions).

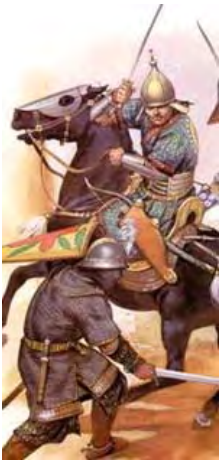
The region rebounded in the late 12th century, when the Seljuks were driven out by a coalition of Georgian and Armenian armies led by the Armenian generals Zakareh and Ivaneh Zakarian. The Zakarians fostered a new Golden Age of culture in the country, sponsoring new churches throughout the region, including the S. Tovmas Arakeal church at Amberd village in Armavir. The caravan routes returned, bringing greater wealth.

The Mongol invasions in the mid 13th century brought the golden era to an end, and the region went into further decline, accelerated by successive waves of 14th c Tatar (Ak-Koyunlu and Kara-Koyunlu) raids and, worst of all, the 14th-15th century Timurid invasions, which completely devastated the region. Led by a rabidly vindictive Timur Lenk (Timur Lame or Tamurlane), Timurids slaughtered the population and leveled towns and churches in their way.

This was the nadir of Armavir's history, when the entire region became a wasteland (the chronicles recorded cannibalism and the sale of human flesh by a starving population). Those who could, emigrated to Cilicia or Byzantium, their place taken by Kurdish and Tatar tribesmen who used the empty fields for pasturage.

**Medieval Sites** include (7th century) Zvartnots Cathedral, Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Shoghakat in Echmiadzin, Tarkmanchats vank in Aigeshat, Karmravor in Aghavnatun; (7th-9th centuries) renovations of Echmiadzin cathedral and Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh, Shoghakat; (8th century) Bardughimeos church and buildings at Aknashen; (10th century) S. Gevorg and S. Shushanik at Yervandashat; (12th c) Tovmas Arakeal at Amberd; (13th c) the funerary monument at Aghavnatun and S. Harutiun church at Samaghar; (14th c) Tsiranavor at Aghavnatun, Astvatsatsin at Bambakashat and S. Karapet pilgrimage shrine at

Arshaluis. Other sites include the medieval settlement and graveyard at Tsaghkalanj.



### DARK AGES (15th-18th CENTURIES) ▲

The 15th-16th cc are marked by continued war and destruction played upon an exhausted citizenry by the new super powers in the neighborhood; Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia, spent 150 years warring over the region before agreeing to a partition of the country in 1639 which gave the lion's share of Armenian lands to Ottoman Turkey, sporadic fighting continued until the end of the 18th century.

Initially, Persian rule meant forced emigration of Armenians into Iran; especially during the reign of Abbas I, who in 1604 led a forced march of hundreds of thousands of Armenians to Tavriz and Jhulfa in the wake of Ottoman invasion. This continued into the mid 17th century.

At the height of the Turkish-Persian wars, Armavir changed hands fourteen times between 1513 and 1737. Muslim subjects of the Shah continued to move into the barren Armenian lands, settling in historic Armenian towns and villages, felling forests and converting verdant farmlands into pasturage. Most of Armavir's villages are built over those reclaimed from Tatar (Kurdish) nomads who first entered Armenia in this period.

After the 1639 partition, the Safavids did bring some peace to Armavir and Echmiadzin—which had been restored to the Catholicos in 1441—began its revival in 1629 when Shah Safi extended his protection to the See and sponsored renovation of the complex, which added the western bell tower and vastly renovated the interior. The rest of the marz, which was a part of the Persian Erivan Khanate, began a slow period of revival, punctuated by the effects of the rebellions to the south by David Bek and the armies of Catherine the Great.



**15th-18th centuries sites** include the 1413 Islamic (Timurid or Kara-Koyunlu) funerary monument at Argavand, Echmiadzin renovations and S. Shoghakat and Astvatsatsin in Echmiadzin city; S. Gevorg at Aigesht; the round tower at Aghavnatun.

### 19th CENTURY ▲

Russia entered the scene in the late 1790's taking Caspian lands from the Iranians and conquering territories in Georgia and northern Armenia. The Safavids responded by fortifying military installations in the region, including the fortress of Sardari Berd near modern Hoktember, with British assistance. The fortress was also a summer residence for Sardar Hussein Qoli Khan, the last Iranian governor of the khanate.

At the time of the Russian conquest in 1828, Armavir was considered a Muslim principality under the dominion of the Safavid Empire. Armenians formed less than 20% of its population, though they held a majority in Echmiadzin, which had grown into a prosperous town under the patronage of the church, and which had the Gevorkian Seminary, the most influential educational center in the country, turning out generations of Armenian educators, scientists, writers and political activists.

The 1828 Treaty of Gulistan granted Eastern Armenia to the Russians, including Armavir. The Turkmanchai Treaty a year later recognized the grant by Ottoman Turkey, beginning the longest period of peace the country had known in 500 years. It was a time of prosperity and a remarkable rise in the education and fortunes of Armavir's citizens.



The marz was repopulated by Armenians who immigrated from Turkey and Persia after the Russo-Persian and Russo-Turkish wars, with additional migrants following the Russo-Turkish war of 1877. Most villagers trace their history to these two periods.

The economy boomed from the mid-19th century to the 20th, as Armenian schools, colleges and seminaries were established and flourished. The Gevorkian academy (Seminary) in Echmiadzin fostered the careers of the most prominent members of the Armenian bourgeoisie, including the "father of modern Armenian literature", Khachatur Abovian, the linguist and translator Hovhannes Hovhannessian, and such 19th--20th century luminaries as Yeghishe Charents, Hovhannes Tumanian and Alexander Shirvanzade, and the composer and Armenian musicologist Komitas.

The nineteenth century also fostered a lively and contentious nationalist movement, which was repressed by Russian authorities, but which grew nonetheless. As the century drew to a close nationalist and with socialist cells increasingly cooperated and set the stage for the independence movement that would burst on the world stage with the events of the genocide and the Russian revolution. As one of the country's most important intellectual centers, Echmiadzin and Armavir were at the forefront of the movement.

**19th century sites** include the 1810 fortress of Sardari Berd and 19th century reconstructions of churches at Argavand, Geghanist, Parakar, Arevashat, Baghranian, Amberd, Doghs, Aghavnatun, Haitagh, Hovtamech, Tsiatsin, Tsaghkunk, Gai, Arazap, Artimet, Aratashen, Armavir v., Aigesht, Tandzut, Haikevan, Lenughi, Nalbandian, Getashen, Karakert.

### FIRST REPUBLIC ▲

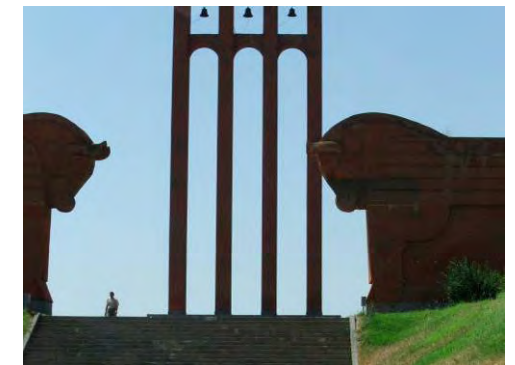
As WWI began, Armenian patriots joined the Czarist forces and Russian incursions into Turkey were quick and decisive, leading to an immediate crisis in the Young Turk movement. Their response was to initiate the first genocide of the 20th century, which led to the murder of up to 2 million Armenians supposedly under their protection.

The genocide had a terrible effect on Armavir ; refugees poured in from Western Armenia with

horrific tails of Turkish slaughter of up to 2 million compatriots. As refugees poured into the region many made their way to Echmiadzin, where they begged help from the church.

For reasons never completely explained, the Catholicos reacted by shutting refugees out of the compound, and it took the intervention of Hovhannes Tumanian to let them in (when challenged by the Catholicos at the gates, who said, "Do you know who you are talking to? I am the Catholicos of Armenia," Tumanian famously retorted, "Do you know who you are talking to? I am the poet of Armenia!" and forced the patriarch to open the gates to the refugees.).

**Sardarapat** Russian troops deserted the region after the abdication of the Tsar and a truce was made between Lenin and Turkey, which threw the region into a panic. Turkish troops that had been chased to central Anatolia regrouped and began a counter offensive, intent on finishing the eradication of the Armenian people and linking Turkey with Turkish speaking Tatars in the Caspian region, not yet named Azerbaijan. In 1918 the Turks began their attacks in earnest, routing Armenian held positions in Erzerum, Kars and finally, Alexandropol (Gyumri). Splitting into two armies, they began a final attack on the country, one army heading east to Kharakilisa (Vanadzor) and the other to Echmiadzin and Yerevan.



In one of the most dramatic reversals of war in history, Armenians of every stripe poured out of their towns and villages to meet the Turks, armed with simple rifles, pitchforks and knives, and in a decisive battle, Armenians under Movses Silikian defeated the Ottoman troops in a three day battle May 21-24.

The victory, as well as those at Kharakilisa and Bash-Aparan, drove the Turks to the other side the Arax River and allowed the Armenian National Council in Tiflis to proclaim the independence of the Democratic Republic of Armenia, which existed until the Bolshevik takeover of Armenia in November 1920.

**Early 20th century sites** include Sardarapat and early 20th century churches at Mrgastan, and Arshaluis.

#### THE SOVIET PERIOD / SECOND REPUBLIC ▲

The republic lasted 18 months, collapsing in 1920 by its inability to alleviate the needs of hundreds of thousands of genocide refugees, the flu pandemic of 1919 and the dual pressures of the Red Army and Socialists, and the Turkish Republic, now led by Ataturk. It formally ended on December 2, 1920, the same day the Armenian Socialist Republic was proclaimed by the Bolsheviks.



Like the rest of Armenia, Armavir was economically devastated at the formation of the Soviet Republic, with thousands of refugees from Western Armenia needing housing, and little economic activity. The church was also in difficult straits, under attack by the Bolshevik government which in 1922 confiscated church property as it nationalized the few Armenian industries that existed. The Catholicos Gevorg V died in 1930, and his replacement, Khoren I, was killed in 1938 by the NVD (KGB).

Churches throughout Armavir were shuttered, or converted into barns, a state that more than a few remain.

On the other hand, Armavir—little more than an impoverished feudal state in 1920—grew enormously in the Soviet period, with universal education, health and social services that were unimaginable before. Politically repressed, the population was nonetheless brought into the 20th century, and created the first modern Armenian state.

Agriculturally, the region became the most productive in the country, after Ararat, while it also industrialized, with the creation of textile and light manufacturing industries at the new city of Hovktemberian and Echmiadzin.

The 1988 earthquake did not damage the region, but it began a downward spiral for Armavir, as the earthquake was coupled with the Karabakh movement (which led to war in 1991), the collapse of the Soviet Union, and most crucially, the end to economic ties with Soviet states.

When Turkey closed the border point at Markara, and Azerbaijan shut off gas supplies to Armenia, Armavir suffered several years of deprivation, its power cut for lack of gas and a closed nuclear plant (also shut in 1988 after Chernobyl's nuclear accident) and its markets no longer available.

The war over Karabakh resulted in a truce in 1994, and the Metsamor reactor was reopened in 1996, while export routes through Georgia and Iran developed in the 1990s.

#### ARMAVIR NOW ▲

Armavir marz, made up of the Soviet districts of Echmiadzin, Hovktemberian and Baghranian, is today a much different place than it was in the dark days of 1991-1996.

Echmiadzin has received millions of dollars of donations from Diaspora Armenians, prompting a construction boom, reclaiming property taken by the Soviets and building seminaries, hotels and offices. Farmers have benefited by a growing market for products and the privatization of their lands. The marz also benefits from its location to Yerevan which with 80% of the country's economic activity is the country's engine of growth.

At the same time, social services have by and large stopped; schools, clinics and hospitals have closed, or operate only as locals are willing to pay. Villages themselves, despite the relative wealth of farming in a still impoverished nation, face the same population drain as the rest of the country. Able-bodied workers began to leave the country in the late 1990s, for Diaspora communities in Russia and the west. They send remittances to relatives left behind, and this forms the backbone of the economy.

While official figures say the population of the marz in 2006 was 279,500, most say it is less than half that, and a visit to villages and Armavir city bears this out, the lion share of houses and

apartments shuttered, their inhabitants "gone to Russia". Only Echmiadzin (Vagharshapat) seems to have escaped the population drop.

#### PEOPLE ▲

Armavir has a mixture of cultures; primarily Armenians from the 1828 and 1918 emigrations from western Armenia. Others include small pockets of Russians, Yezidi shepherds and Yezidi descendants.

#### IN AND OUT ▲

##### By Rail

An **elektrichka (electric intercity) and Gnatsk (diesel interstate)** travel between the Yerevan Central Station and Echmiadzin, Armavir and Aragats. The elektrichka is daily, while the gnatsk, which connects Yerevan with Tbilisi and Batumi, travels each direction every other day. The train is a cheap way to get there if you don't mind the slow pace. It takes about 1 hr to Echmiadzin; 1.5 to Aragats. Trains leave early morning from Yerevan, beginning their return trip in mid afternoon. 650-4192 AMD depending on your cabin class.

##### By Air

Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport is in the east of the marz. See Yerevan In and Out for details.

##### By Road

The main road through Armavir is the **Yerevan-Gyumri highway (M5)**, which links Yerevan with Echmiadzin (Vagharshapat, 23 km) and Echmiadzin with Armavir (25 km) and Armavir with the border with Turkey (14 km).

The main north-south highway is the **Markara - Echmiadzin-Ashtarak highway (M3)**, which begins south of the marz at Markara, links with the (M5) at Echmiadzin (20 km), before continuing north to Ashtarak (38 km), Aparan (54 km), Vanadzor (114 km), Alaverdi (164 km) and Sadakhlo at the Georgian border (201 km).

The **(M9) highway** begins at Bagaran in the far west of the marz, and travels northerly towards Talin (43 km) in Aragatsotn marz.

A secondary highway that is well-traveled is the **Armavir-Gyumri highway (H17)**, which links Armavir City with the (M9) highway (25 km) before continuing north along the Turkey-Armenia border to Gyumri (91 km).

Another state road is the **Bagaran-Sardarapat road (H18)** which links Bagaran with the (M5) near Sardarapat (21 km). The **Armavir-Markara road (H15)** meanders through the southern heartland, arching south and then east from to Armavir (21 km). This road passes most of the central archeological excavations in Armavir.

In the north, the **(H19)** spur links to Oshakan (4 km), while the **(H13)** links Echmiadzin to Masis in Ararat Marz (10 km). In the SE, the **(H12)** links the (M3) with the border villages of J'rarat (3 km), J'rashen (4 km) and Arax (6 km) before ending at Masis in Ararat marz (26 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.

**Buses (Aftobus)** connect Yerevan (Mashtots/Sarian intersection) with Echmiadzin (220 AMD), Markara (350 AMD) and Armavir (350 AMD); buses from the central bus station connect to Armavir (850 AMD), J'rarat (200 AMD); buses from the Sasuntsi David Rail station connect Yerevan with Arevshat (300 AMD). Intercity/Inter-village buses depart bus stops in Echmiadzin (Komitas Square, on Atarbekian p. two blocks west of Komitas Square and in front of the Shuka on Tumanian) and link to all villages in the eastern half of the marz. Western villages are normally linked via Armavir.



**Minivans (Marshrutni Taxis)** connect Yerevan (Mashtots/Sarian intersection) with Echmiadzin (250 AMD) and Yerevan (Central Bus Station, Isahakian pta) with Armavir (400 AMD). Minivans are plentiful in both Echmiadzin and Armavir, connecting Echmiadzin with all villages in the

eastern half of the marz (100-200 AMD) and Armavir with Echmiadzin and all villages in the western half (100-200 AMD). Sample routes from Echmiadzin include Taronik (Metsamor excavation), Vacheh, Markara, Gai/J'rarat, Zvartnots, Parakar (Zvartnots Airport), Baghranian, Mrgastan, Aigeshat, Aknalich. Sample routes from Armavir include Haikavan (Argishtikhinili excavation), Nor Artages (Armavir excavation), Sardarapat, Miasnikian, Bagaran, and Yervandashat. Minivans run mornings and evenings, ask around for times.

*Taxis/Cars with drivers* can be hired in Echmiadzin, Armavir and at most villages. Most welcome 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** Armavir has a number of overnights, most of them restaurant-hotels congregated on the (M5) between Echmiadzin and Yerevan.

Near Echmiadzin is the ubiquitous Zvartnots Hotel, a large complex of 30 rooms renting by the hour, half day or night. Don't be fooled by the tête-à-tête atmosphere—the staff have been catering to revelers and tourists for 15 years and their complex is convenient and secluded. Others are more temporary in nature, but all welcome tourists and most are quite accommodating. Figure 10,000-30,000 AMD for doubles –suites.

Several restaurant-hotels are on or near Aknalich just south of Metsamor town, and make up for their rent-by-the-hour attitude with pretty views of the lake. A few cater to local oligarchs and may not welcome tourists, but worth a try for the seclusion and the gorgeous views of the Ararat valley.

Armavir City has a Soviet Hotel (cheap but very run down) and a couple of restaurants-hotels that welcome tourists. 2500-30,000 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 Echmiadzin, Armavir, Vacheh (Mokhrablur excavation), Taronik (Metsamor excavation), Markara (Turkish border), Haikavan (Argishtikhinili excavation), Nor Artages

(Armavir excavation), Arax (Sardarapat), Karakert, Bagaran, Yervandashat.

*Camping* can be had throughout the marz (except border), near villages and in wilderness areas. However, note this is primarily semi-desert terrain with no forests or woodlands—unless you camp in someone's orchard or garden, you will be out in the open, which can be suffocating hot. Paid camping is possible around Aknalich (2000-5000 AMD, not very pleasant). Free camping can be had around the lagoons and marshes adjoining Metsamor excavation and next to Argishtikhinili and Old Armavir excavations; near Sardarapat, and on the Kasakh, Metsamor and Sev Jur Rivers.

For those who don't mind open-space camping, the Selav-Mastara River Canyon and the western expanses around Mts. Spitakblur (1255m) and Sevblur (1110.6m) have spectacular views of wide open semi-desert spaces. The best time to camp is in the Spring (April-May), when the normally barren region bursts with emerald carpets of grass striated with fields of red, yellow and purple wildflowers.

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. 52).

**Eating out** in Armavir is available at roadside stands, restaurant-hotels and cafes in Armavir City, Echmiadzin and on the (M5) highway between Echmiadzin and Yerevan. There are also restaurants at Aknalich and a café at Sardarapat that serve full menus (1500-4000 AMD). One delicacy that many choose is fish raised in one of the marz many spring-fed fish farms (5000-10,000 AMD). Roadside grills can be found around Echmiadzin, Armavir City, Zvartnots and Parakar (1500 AMD per shish of khorovats). Armavir City and Echmiadzin have shukas, mterks and kiosks selling food, drink and candy.

**Water** Reliable bottled water is available at mterks and restaurants throughout the marz. Armavir has sidewalk fountains in Echmiadzin. 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.

## DESTINATIONS ▲

Armavir's main destination is Echmiadzin; perhaps the most visited spot in Armenia. But that is by far not the only must-see in the marz: just 15 minutes from Echmiadzin is one of the most important prehistoric sites in the world; the citadel and ancient star observatory of Metsamor. Other major sites that should be on anyone's must-see list are the Urartian city of Argishtikhinili, the Hellenistic city of Armavir and the 1918 Memorial and excellent folk museum at Sardarapat.



**Picturesque locales** include the view of Mt. Ararat from Echmiadzin (S. Guyaneh is particularly good), Zvartnots and the entire SE rim of the marz; Aknalich; the marshes of Metsamor; Metsamor citadel; J'rarat and the Vordan Karmir Preserve; Kasakh River at Aratashen and below; The view of the valley from Argishtikhinili & Old Armavir; the lower plain from Sardarapat; the western desert between Bagaran, Argina and Karakert; Springtime at the Selav Mastara River canyon (between Miasnikian and Karakert).

**Prehistoric sites** include lower level excavations at Aratashen, Mokhrablur, Adablur and Vacheh; chalcolithic tells at Zvartnots, Teghut (Echmiadzin), Vacheh, Tsaghkalanj, Mrgastan and Tsaghkunk; the important 6th-2nd m BCE settlement of Khatunarkh at Gai; petroglyphs at the stone quarry near Aghavnatun.

**Copper-Bronze Age sites** include the museum, excavated citadel and observatory at Metsamor; Bronze Age levels at Mokhrablur, Adablur and Aratashen; the Teghut Tell just S of Echmiadzin; the city of Khatunarkh near Gai; Bronze Age towns at Mrgastan, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun, Mrgashat, Arevik, Karakert (Aratashen

settlement); Bronze Age tomb mounds at Tsaghkalanj.

**Iron Age sites** include the settlement at Gai and cyclopic fortresses at Dasht, Aghavnatun, Yervandashat and the large fortress at Karakert. Iron Age finds were also found in layers of settlement at Metsamor, Mokhrablur and Adablur as well as at Old Armavir and Argishtikhinili.

**Urartian sites** include the huge excavated city-fort of Argishtikhinili (Haikavan) and its twin Old Armavir; the fortress-settlement at Aragats; Yervandashat; minor fortresses at Aragats, Dasht, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun; cuneiform inscriptions found at Armavir village and on display at Zvartnots; Urartu level settlements/fortresses at Metsamor and Karakert.

**Hellenistic & Roman-Parthian era sites** include Old Armavir Fortress-City, the Orontid religious center at Bagaran and the Yervanduni Capital of Yervandashat, built to replace Armavir.

**Early Christian sites** include the 4th c. cathedral of Echmiadzin, the martyria of Ss. Hripsimeh and Guyaneh and the shrine at Shoghakat; the central spot at Zvartnots cathedral where Grigor met and supposedly converted T'rdat III to Christianity; the lower portion of Tarkmanchats vank at Aigeshat; the basilicas at Yervandashat and Bagaran; Tukh Manuks at Arevashat, Aghavnatun, Tsaghkalanj, Aknashen.

**Medieval sites** include (7th century) Zvartnots Cathedral, Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Shoghakat in Echmiadzin, Tarkmanchats vank in Aigeshat, Karmavor in Aghavnatun; (7th-9th centuries) renovations of Echmiadzin cathedral and Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh, Shoghakat; (8th century) Bardughimeos church and buildings at Aknashen; (10th century) S. Gevorg and S. Shushanik at Yervandashat; (12th c) Tovmas Arakeal at Amberd; (13th c) the funerary monument at Aghavnatun and S. Harutiun church at Samaghar; (14th c) Tsiranavor at Aghavnatun, Astvatsatsin at Bambakashat and S. Karapet pilgrimage shrine at Arshaluis. Other sites include the medieval settlement and graveyard at Tsaghkalanj.

**Dark Ages / (15th-18th cc)** include the 1413 Islamic (Timurid or Kara-Koyunlu) funerary monument at Argavand, Echmiadzin renovations and S. Shoghakat and Astvatsatsin in Echmiadzin city; S. Gevorg at Aigeshat; the round tower at Aghavnatun.

**19th c sites** include the 1810 fortress of Sardari Berd and 19th century reconstructions of churches at Argavand, Geghanist, Parakar, Arevashat, Baghranian, Amberd, Doghs, Aghavnatun, Haitagh, Hovtamech, Tsiatsin, Tsaghkunk, Gai, Arazap, Artimet, Aratashen, Armavir v., Aigeshat, Tandzut, Haikavan, Lenughi, Nalbandian, Getashen, Karakert.

**Early 20th c sites** include Sardarapat and early 20th century churches at Mrgastan, and Arshaluis.



## NATURE TOURING ▲

**Natural areas** are few and far between in Armavir (this is an agricultural area with intensive farming, especially in the eastern half of the marz). The small Aknalich and its nearby reservoirs and ponds are pretty, though they are mostly taken by weekend picnickers, revelers at restaurants-hotels and fish farms. The western desert is the most remote area of the country, especially the area around Mts. Sevlur and Spitakblur. Most explore the region in eh spring, when the weather is cooler and most of the plants are in bloom.

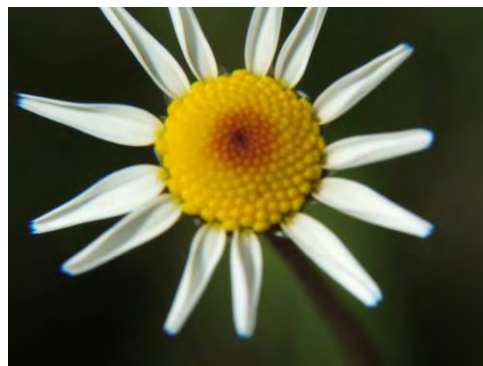
The Vordan Karmir Reserve, a salt marsh habitat stretching between Argavand, Arazap and Sovetakan has some interesting spots, though it is under pressure by farmers draining the reserve for new fields. Birders find the marshlands around Metsamor excavation and south to be fruitful places for spotting birds in the spring (March-May).

**Hiking and trekking** Armavir has a few hiking routes in the western desert, and along its rivers. The rest of the marz is so populated with villages and farms; you will never fully get out of the eyes of inquisitive locals.

Suggested hikes and treks are detailed in [Natural Armenia](#) (p. 7)

**Mountain treks** There are very few mountains in Armavir, which is perhaps the (relatively) flattest marz in the country. Most are in the west of the marz: The tallest is Mt. Kogh (1310.2m) in the far NW of the marz, 6 km W of Shenik. Shenik is 4 km N of Mt. Spitakblur (1255.0m), itself 5 km NW of Mt. Uchtepe (1128.2m) and 9 km from Mt. Sevlur (1110.6m). About 4 km NW of Arax (Sardarapat) stands Mt. Grehako (1018.0m) with Bronze and Iron Age ruins on its slopes. Both Old Armavir (924.1m) and Argishtikhinili (937.4m) were built on low mountains. The sole mountain in the eastern marz is Mt. Dashtakar (1064.4m) which is due north of the Metsamor nuclear reactor on the marz border with Aragatsotn. The NE end of the marz (due N of Echmiadzin) has a large number of bluffs and tall mounds, most between 900-1000 m in height. All of them have the ruins (some intact, others lost) of Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age fortresses, settlements or grave mounds.

**Flower Watching** Some flowers begin to bloom as early as late March in protected areas like river canyons but the main blooming season waits until April and May, with peak blooms in the west between mid-April to mid-May. Best places to look are along the highway between Miasnikian and Karakert (Selav-Mastara River Canyon), the fortress above Karakert, the Arax River canyon between Yervandashat and Bagaran (permission required), around Mts. Spitakblur, Uchtepe and Sevlur. For a list of flowers [see Flora](#) (on page 4)



**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 south and east of Armavir and Metsamor. Other

marshes are between Sovetakan, Argavand and Arazap. The western marz is good for semi-desert birds like hawks and eagles. The large number of orchards serves as habitats for a large cross section of birds. Good spots are by Janfida, Tandzut, Arevik, Zartonk, Metsamor, Vacheh, Yeraskahun, J'rarat, Arax, Taronik, Aratashen, and on the Kasakh River north of Echmiadzin. See [Birds](#) (on page 5) and [Resources](#) (on page 92).

## Adventure Tour Operators ▲

**Haik Melkonian**, tel. 091-71-73-82, email: [ajdahag@yahoo.com](mailto: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](mailto:avarayr@arminco.com), URL: [www.avarayr.am/](http://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.

**Ashot Levonian** (tel. 010 57 03 28, mob. 091 49 58 34), e-mail: [levash77@mail.ru](mailto:levash77@mail.ru) is an expert hiking/climbing/camping guide, his team arranges hiking, mountain climbing, caving, geology tours, churches and fortresses. They will arrange hotels in Yerevan, airport pickup, transport, sight-seeing, etc. Group support includes guide, translator, cook, medic and driver. Standard tour is a two-week hiking trip averaging 5-10 km walking a day: Yerevan - Mt. Aragats - Alaverdi - Ijevan - Dilijan - Sevan - Martuni - Yeghegnadzor - Kapan - Meghri - Jermuk - Yerevan.

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](mailto: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@verphi.am](mailto:spitak@verphi.am), [moon.verphi.am/~spitak/adventure.htm](http://moon.verphi.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](mailto:zhanna@netsys.am), [www.ecotourismarmenia.com](http://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](mailto: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](mailto:adventour@netsys.am), URL: [www.armeniaexplorer.com](http://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](http://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 Gabrielian 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 never see Armenia the same way again. 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](mailto:m_agababian@hotmail.com)).

#### **Archeological Tours ▲**

*MassTour* (tel./fax. 010 27 78 32), 8 Komitas, Yerevan, e-mail: [info@masstours.com](mailto:info@masstours.com), URL: [www.masstours.com](http://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 basic tour packages with expert guides. Excavation packages begin from \$750/week for full service land-expeditions.

See [Resources](#) (p. 92) for more Archeological options.

the pre-eminent pilgrimage destination for 9



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**ECHMIADZIN (VAGHARSHAPAT)** ▲  
(DD 40.53281 x 44.72044, elev. 887m)

**ECHMIADZIN** – **COMPLEX** – **S. GUYANEH** – **S. HRIPSIMEH** – **SHOGHAKAT** – **ZVARTNOTS**

**Echmiadzin Map with Legend** (p. Error! Bookmark not defined.)

✳ **ECHMIADZIN (VAGHARSHAPAT)** – **ԷՃՄԻԱԾԻՆ / ՎԱԳՆԱՐՇԱՊԱՏ** **ԷՃՄԻԱԾԻՆ (Վաղարշապատ)** (also spelled Ejmiadzin, Edjmiatsin, Echmiatsin; in fact Vagharshapat but generally referred to as Echmiadzin, pop. 35,000) is the most popular destination in Armenia. The cathedral dates back to 303, and along with the 4th-7th cc. Guyaneh (also spelled "Gayane") and Hripsimeh ("Hripsime") martyria and churches, it is

million Armenians worldwide. Echmiadzin is also the See of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and residence for its head, the Catholicos.

Steeped in tradition that is literally carved onto the walls of the cathedral and the pagan crypt under the main altar, to witness High Service at Echmiadzin is one of the grandest events in Armenia. In addition Echmiadzin lies in the heart of Armenia's Cradle of Civilization, an area that gave birth to the first bronze and iron civilizations in the ancient world. Three 7000-8000 year old excavations are within a fifteen minute drive of the city. Echmiadzin is also a short drive from two of Armenia's ancient capitals; Armavir and Argishtikhinili; and the important battlefield of Sardarabad, which includes the best folk traditions museum in the country.

The city is surrounded by the fertile Ararat valley, teeming with natural springs, ponds and lakes that are home to birds which travel through Armenia (two-thirds of all species in Europe and Western Asia migrate through the Ararat Valley).



Add one of the most impressive Modern Sculpture collections in the CIS, a museum with a collection of Soviet Armenia's "Heroic Art", and a delightful home residence harking back to the elegance of the 19th century, and you'll find more to do than one day allows. Give yourself two days to explore this area properly.

## BACKGROUND ▲

Echmiadzin lies in Armavir Mars (Armavir Region) and at the Western part of Ararat Valley, once a lake surrounded by volcanoes in the Mesozoic Era (500 million years BCE). The volcanoes gave rise to the current mountain ranges rimming the valley (both Mt. Aragats and Mt. Ararat are dormant volcanoes). The receding waters in the Miocene and Pleistocene Eras (10,000,000-500,000 BCE) left behind rich alluvial sediment that nourished large forests and grasslands. The valley remains one of the most fertile in Western Asia.

Echmiadzin also lies in the shadow of Mt. Ararat (the tallest mountain in the world in real measurement from base to summit), which looms over the region like a huge brooding force. The valley has the most fertile soil in Western Asia, among the first to receive cultivation of wheat, grape and apricot. Domesticated wheat has been dated to 12-15,000 years BCE, before strains found in Central Anatolia.

The valley was once covered with forests, but mass deforestation begun in the mid Bronze Age

turned it into a heavily cultivated land, dependent on irrigation and massive artesian springs.

The springs continue to support the most diverse wildlife population in Europe and Western Asia. More than 2/3rds of Europe's bird species can be spotted in Armavir region during their seasonal migrations, including the endangered Dalmatian Pelican, Greater Flamingo and the Imperial Eagle. Thousands of cranes inhabit the region, building their large nests on the tops of village homes and telephone posts.



## HISTORY ▲

**Pre-History** Echmiadzin (Vagharshapat) was itself the site of a Bronze Age settlement, with some thought (however controversial) that as a center for early metallurgy, the city may have developed into a religious center based on fire and sun worship. The pictograms discovered on rock sides in the area are filled with fire, sun and star imagery.

Certainly in Echmiadzin proper, fire pits and what are thought to be temple objects have been uncovered in and around the cathedral area. The fire pit under the main altar is a Zoroastrian (5th c. BCE) reconstruction of a much earlier pit (mid to early Bronze Age), used as part of a ritual to worship/sacrifice to pagan deities.



## The Founding of Echmiadzin

**Urartu** The city was already an important site by the time Urartians conquered the region, but some trace its "founding" and its first name to this period. A cuneiform of Rusa II records the construction of a canal in the environs of Karlini (also spelled Quarlini or Qarlini) in the heart of modern Echmiadzin. The city thrived as an agricultural center, and as a site of worship; some trace the origins of the fire pit under the cathedral's altar is to Urartu.

**The Yervandunis** Despite titular control of the region by Achaemenid Persians following the collapse of Urartu, local control was held by the "Orontids"—the Yervanduni (also Yervandid or Yervandian) dynasty, into the Hellenistic era. During the reign of king Yervand Sakavakiats (570-560 BCE), the brother of the king's wife, Vagharsh Manuk (Vartkes the youngest) greatly rebuild and reshaped Karlini and renamed it "Vagharshapat" in his honor.

**Hellenism** began in the region during the Seleucid Period, and Echmiadzin became an influential part of the Yervanduni (Orontid) landholdings in the Ararat Valley. The influence of Hellenism was great, and rapidly assimilated. Armenian culture absorbed Greek philosophy, architecture and religion, giving Armenian deities Greek names, and eventually, their human likeness. The development of Greek temples in the area is traced to this period, and there is evidence that temples at Echmiadzin were transformed at this time to Greek buildings, adopting Greek patterns and Doric columns in construction. Still overshadowed by the Yervanduni capitals at Armavir and Yervandashat, Vagharshapat nevertheless thrived enough to earn the recognition in the next period.

By the reign of Tigran the Great (95-56 BCE), Vagharshapat had become a major center for commerce, on the road to the religious center at Yervandashat and connected by a Roman Road to Artashat. Greco-Roman statues, shrines and fire temples were predominant, one still lying underneath the main altar of Echmiadzin cathedral.



Echmiadzin achieved supreme status in the 2nd century, when the Arshakunis, led by Artashes, built a new capital at Kainepolis (present day Echmiadzin). Meanwhile Roman and Parthian domination continued into the early Christian era, when Armenia became the focus of religious as well as political change in the Western world. Two Roman inscriptions found in Echmiadzin (State History Museum) show the presence of a Roman legion in Echmiadzin, on the fringe of Rome's Caucasus lands. One of the inscriptions was commissioned by a tribune of the 15th Legion in memory of his wife and daughter.

The Arshakuni king Vagharshak (193-213) moved the capital to present day Echmiadzin and named it Vagharshavan, setting the stage for the city's—and Armenia's—greatest historic era.

**The Story of the Conversion** is steeped in myth and legend, with a smattering of history. It begins in the 1st century, when the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus are reputed to have preached in the Armenian kingdom. Legend ascribes a famous meeting of the two at a spot near Echmiadzin. Another famous event in legend was the birth of an Armenian nobleman who would forever change Armenia's history, on the same spot,

In later years the pagan kingdom became known for being—if not supportive, at least tolerant of Christians, which led many to take refuge in Armenia as they fled increasing suppression in Rome.

The situation became critical when the Persian Ardashir, a descendant of a certain Sassan, murdered the Persian Parthian family and overthrew the Parthian dynasty in 226, establishing the neo-Persian empire (the Sassanians or Sassanids), with roots based in radical Zoroastrianism. King Vagharshak, an Armenian Parthian, was killed in battle against the Sassanids. The destruction of their Parthian kin and the murder of their own king brought a rapprochement between Armenia and Rome.

This was during the reign of Khosrov the great (213-261), who appealed to the Roman Emperor for help. The emperor sent troops from Egypt and Pontus to Armenia, and with them, Khosrov defeated the new Sassanid King Ardashir, forcing his retreat. Ardashir, realizing he could not defeat Khosrov, resorted to espionage. He promised 'if any should arise who can avenge me and assuage my wrath I will award him second place in my realm, inferior only to the monarch himself.' He made peace with the remaining Parthians in his

court, promising them, 'you will more easily succeed in this because of your friendship and kinship.' He promised to give any Parthian who killed Khosrov the city of Pahlav and the countries of the Kushan.

A man named Anak, belonging to the Suren branch of the Pahlav family promised to do the deed, whereupon Ardashir is written in the chronicles as saying, "If you can manage this, Anak, I shall honor you with a crown."



Anak feigned revolt against the Sassanid King and escaped to Khosrov, bringing his family with him. Khosrov received him warmly and sent him to the province of Artaz. Legend has it he accidentally pitched his tent on the spot where the apostle Thaddeus had been killed, and that night his wife gave birth to a child, a child who would have the greatest influence on Armenia's history.

Two years elapsed before Anak could act upon his promise. One day, while they were out hunting, he and his friends murdered the king. They fled to Artaz, pursued by Khosrov's army, who had managed to live long enough to order the death of Anak's family.

This they did, throwing Anak from a bridge over he Arax River and murdering his family, except for two infant sons, who were smuggled out of Armenia by their nurses, one to Persia and the other to Caesurae, where he was educated and converted to Christianity.

Ardashir invaded Armenia and slaughtered Khosrov's family. The nobility in Armenia appealed to the Emperor Valerian to intercede, but Ardashir defeated local attempts at resistance before help could arrive. Valerians concluded an agreement with the Sassanids, in which Armenia was divided between Ardashir and the Romans. Ardashir introduced fire-worship and demolished the local temples, including the temple to the sun and moon at Armavir.

Khosrov's son, the young prince T'rdat was smuggled by a close friend of the dead king, Artavazd Mandakuni, to the safety of Rome. At the Roman court, T'rdat, adopted by the Lord Licinius, became a favorite of the Emperor, who became his benefactor and protector. As he grew into manhood, his immense, superhuman strength was noticed by contemporary historians.

*"He (T'rdat) signified his youth by deeds of valor and displayed matchless dexterity, as well as strength in every martial exercise"*  
— (Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London 1862).

A description of the prince by 5th century historian Movses Khorenatsi (Moses of Khorene) said "T'rdat was physically so powerful that he could seize two wild bulls by the horns and break the horns of with his bare hands". Another account by Khorenatsi relates leapt off his chariot and stopped both his own and his rivals chariots by sheer strength. Another story told by Armenian and Roman historians relate how Prince T'rdat, single handedly fought off a group of soldiers who sought to assassinate Licinius.

Finally, Agathangelos (T'rdat's 4th c. biographer) records that a Gothic chieftain challenged Licinius' emperor, Diocletian, to combat.



T'rdat stood in the emperor's place and defeated the chieftain. The emperor is said to have been so grateful he gave T'rdat an entire army of Roman Legions

to regain the throne of Armenia.

Arriving in Caesurae, T'rdat was joined by Armenian nobles (nakharars), including his cousin, Grigor, still unknown to him as the son of the man who killed his father. T'rdat defeated the Sassanid king Shapur and was appointed king of Armenia in 286-287.

When T'rdat returned to Armenia in 288 he attempted to force the country to adopt the old pagan religion, which was based on the cult of Vahagn, Anahit and Mythra, all of which had been abolished by the Sassanids and converted to Zoroastrian fire worship.

Legend has it that when T'rdat celebrated his return with a veneration of the goddess Anahit, Grigor refused the king's order to follow other officers in his retinue and place a wreath of flowers before the idol, instead extolling the king to not "stupidly worship empty stones". Enraged, T'rdat had Grigor tortured; first muzzling him as a mule and forcing him to carry a block of salt for 7 days, and then hanging by one foot for 7 days. Neither torture swayed Grigor, who continued to implore the king to convert.

About this time a prince of the court told T'rdat Grigor's true identity; the son of the man who killed his father. He was then sent to the prison in Artashat, where he was thrown into a pit (The Khor Virap) and left to die. A woman is said to have taken pity on the prisoner, lowering food into the pit so that he survived.

In 297 events changed again. T'rdat's patron, the emperor Diocletian, invaded Armenia in 297 and concluded a treaty (behind T'rdat's back) with Sassanid Persia, taking a vast territory from Western provinces of Greater Armenia, which became "protectorates" of Rome.

The truce with the Sassanid Persians in Nisibis, in 298, enabled Diocletian, Augustus of the Orient, to create five Roman provinces beyond the Tigris, and facilitated a period of relatively peaceful relations between the two empires. But it did little to protect Armenia.

Stung by this betrayal, T'rdat plotted revenge.

**Out of the Pit** Armenian tradition dates the official recognition of the Christian faith and the construction of the first churches to the year 301. As with so much of Armenia's history, the story of Christianity mixes fact with myth and legend, and it is sometimes hard to know the difference between the two. And like so much of Armenian history, the identity of Armenians can be found between the three.

At the time of conversion, T'rdat was still smarting under the betrayal of Diocletian, who had signed a secret pact with the Sassanids, which did nothing to protect Armenia from imminent invasion by the Persians.

At the same time Rome launched the systematic repression of Christians, who were by now considered a threat to Roman social order. These were carried out by Diocletian's most trusted general, Galerius, who was appointed governor of the eastern regions of the empire, including Armenia.

T'rdat was well known to the Roman court and he would have been well aware of the members of the court who were struggling with the Christian question. T'rdat could not help but know of the martyrdom of fellow courtiers, such as St. George (of 'slaying the dragon' fame). St. George was a Roman soldier and close friend of Diocletian's, who attempted to sway the emperor against his suppression of the Christians. Failing, he quit the

declared the new law was against God and resigned his commission. He was arrested, tortured and executed.

The affect of the martyrdom of one of Rome's most famous generals could not have gone unnoticed in Armenia; T'rdat and George were comrades in Rome and favorites of the emperor. It symbolized a groundswell of Christian support in the innermost workings of the court, and to Pagans would have seemed like a rotting from within; a threat to the entire empire's religious, and therefore, political structure.

**Diocletian's Edicts Against the Christians** The succession of Galerius, following the abdication of Diocletian in 305, led to particularly severe repressive measures against Christians, inspired by the new emperor's fanatical attachment to the Roman pagan tradition. Tradition has it that after a serious illness during the winter of 310-311, Galerius - having repented his crimes - issued a decree at Nicomedia on 30 April 311 urging clemency for the Christians under his jurisdiction, two years before the more famous Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine. Some have thrown doubt on the year 301 for Armenia's conversion, pointing to the improbability of



Diocletian

T'rdat—a close vassal of the Roman general—converting his country to Christianity when it would be a direct challenge to Rome at the height of their persecutions. These doubts are given substance by historic accounts noting the official baptism of T'rdat and his court in 311, when Grigor was anointed archbishop at Caesura. However, a deeper look at the political and economic situation in Armenia at the time provides an impetus for an earlier conversion.

The Sassanids brokered a peace with the Romans and divided the Armenian Kingdom between the two powers after having eliminated the Parthian-Arshakuni ruling class in Persia. The Armenian King T'rdat was a Parthian-

Arshakuni, and was related to the Persian Parthian royal house by generations of intermarriage between the two kingdoms. The destruction of the Arshakuni ruling class was a blow not only to the



peace between Armenia and Persia; it was the end of blood ties between the ruling houses of each country. As a result of the Sassanid invasion, the Armenian kingdom was in a state of crisis. T'rdat was well aware that with the rise of the Sassanids in Persia, his own rule was in jeopardy, and eventual invasion of his remaining kingdom only a matter of time.

For several centuries Armenians had shared language, culture and religion with the Parthian (Arshakuni) Persians. Threatened with invasion by the Sassanid "barbarians", T'rdat needed to separate the Armenians from their ties to Persia's culture, or face total assimilation in the new empire. Not to mention annihilation of his own royal house. The immediate threat by Persia was greater than possible repercussions by Romans persecuting Christians West of his kingdom. T'rdat had other reasons to turn to the Christian faith.

Unknown to most, T'rdat's grandfather had secretly converted to Christianity. Even during the worst of Roman persecutions, there is no record of a systematic persecution against Christians in Armenia at the time of conversion. In fact, Armenia was considered a safe haven for Christians escaping persecutions. No doubt this created tensions between the Empire and Armenia, precipitating the events of 301-311.

**Hripsimeh and Guyaneh** At the end of the 3rd century a group of Christian converts, led by Hripsimeh (collectively called the thirty-nine maidens), who were from the noble Roman class, came to Armenia to escape persecution in the Western Empire. They found refuge, and began preaching the new faith in and around Vagharshavan.

Tradition says that Hripsimeh was the daughter of a Roman nobleman, the most beautiful maiden in the empire and betrothed to the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Learning they had escaped to Armenia, Diocletian sent a message to T'rdat asking him to capture the maidens, offering Hripsimeh as a reward if T'rdat wanted her. If not, he asked she be returned to Rome.

Struck by her extraordinary beauty, T'rdat fell madly in love with Hripsimeh at their first meeting and asked her to live with him in his palace. Her refusal led to the group's imprisonment and her martyrdom.

One of the more interesting versions of the legend relates how, with each advance T'rdat was rebuked by Hripsimeh in more and more eloquent ways. Suspecting Guyaneh of coaching escapes from his advances, T'rdat commanded his soldiers to silence the older maiden. They did this quite effectively, cutting off her tongue before stoning her to death. Hripsimeh and the remaining maidens were kept in the palace for several months while T'rdat attempted to persuade Hripsimeh to marry him. However, Hripsimeh became more and more eloquent in her refusals, finally declaring she could not wed one when she was already promised to another. Furious, T'rdat demanded to know her suitor. "Christ," was the reply, and in a rage T'rdat had Hripsimeh and the rest of her entourage beheaded, their bodies buried in a common burial site.

Just after this, T'rdat became gravely ill, raving like an animal. Medieval drawings and carvings depict his insanity by placing the head of a wild boar on his head, and the more vivid legends interpret this literally to mean he turned into a pig. Actually the depiction is a symbolic one, meaning he had become "subhuman", since wild boars were considered among the most subhuman animal Armenians knew.

T'rdat's sister Khosrovadukht ("daughter of Khosrov"), herself a Christian, then had a dream where she was told that the only way to cure the king and save the nation was to release Grigor. She convinced T'rdat to free Grigor and come into his presence. Having survived 13 years imprisonment in the virab at Artashat (legends say through the kindness of an old woman who threw bread and drink into his pit), Grigor came before the king in rags covered with the train of his hair and beard. Laying his hand on the head of the king, he is believed to have told the king he would cure him of his madness only if he were to publicly

repent of his sins and erect martyria in honor of three of the 39 Virgins (Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Shoghakat) he had ordered killed. T'rdat agreed, and Grigor cured him.

To show his gratitude, T'rdat agreed to be converted to the Christian faith, together with his family. Grigor, who returned in 310-314 to Caesura to take his vows and, at the same time, to be ordained bishop by the Greek archbishop Leontius, baptized the royal family and its entourage on the banks of the River Euphrates in

311-314.

This date coincides with Galerius' edict of clemency for Christians in the winter of 310-311, suggesting the official conversion of the state more likely to have occurred in 311, some say 314. The dating is under intense debate. Others point to a separate set of events that make the earlier date the time of conversion.

These historians point to T'rdat's decision to convert together with his entire family as a tactical move to preserve his kingdom. By allowing Grigor to become the first Catholicos (supreme patriarch), it maintained the hold of power within the Parthian class. During the entire 4th century the succession of the Catholicos was ensured by the direct line of male descendants of Grigor, legitimizing the role of spiritual father of the Armenian Church in the same degree that the male descendants of the Arshakuni (Arshacid) dynasty were legitimized as successors to the throne of Armenia. It also facilitated solidarity among the feudal nobles of the nation.

Regardless of the date, the kingdom of Armenia is widely accepted as the first to officially embrace Christianity as its state religion. The Roman Empire did not do so until 380, under the Emperor Theodosius.

T'rdat then became just as fanatic a Christian as he was a pagan, demanding his family, the entire court and military convert as well. When Grigor was ordained archbishop in Caesurae, the entire royal house went with him and was baptized in the Arazani branch of the Euphrates River, at Pakerich. This precipitated 300 years of gradual conversion of the country, referred to as The Pagan Wars (see [Armavir History](#), p. 8).

**From Then to Now** Vagharshapat grew in political and religious importance in the 4th c, when the conversion of the country to Christianity expanded and was the focus of attacks by invading armies, including another Persian invasion in the mid 4th c. The attacks precipitated the transfer of the Holy See to Dvin, the new capital of Armenia. Vagharshapat went into gradual decline so that now no vestige of the original walls, the royal enclave or early buildings remain except for sections of the Hripsimeh and Guyaneh martyria and sections of the Cathedral.

The Holy See returned to Vagharshapat in the 17th c, when extensive alterations and renovations to Echmiadzin Cathedral and the surrounding complex were done, and the town experienced a period of revival. As the center for the Church, the city also became the most important center of learning, fostering and sometimes fighting the emergence of some of Armenia's greatest intellectuals. Abovian, Nalbandian, Tumanian, Charents, Hovhannessian, Terian and Shivarndedzhe were all closely tied to the intellectual currents swirling around the seminaries and schools in Echmiadzin, and collectively they ushered in the modern Armenian literature movement, which pushed the country into the modern age. Echmiadzin was at the center of social change from a feudal society to one based on the European model when the genocide began in 1915.

When the red army invaded Armenia in 1920, Echmiadzin was a center of fierce resistance, and suffered at the hands of the soviets. Churches and seminaries were closed, the Catholicos Gevorg VI was reputed to have been murdered in 1938, and Vagharshapat went into decline as a city and center of culture.

In 1945 the name of the city was changed to Echmiadzin as Soviets began to lure Diaspora Armenians to immigrate to help build a new country. The city was industrialized and the church was allowed to incrementally expand its work. Under Vazgen I (Catholicos 1955-1994), the cathedral complex was renovated and expanded along with churches throughout the country. Since Armenia's independence in 1991, the church has begun taking back property confiscated by the soviets, and embarking on a large construction program that will eventually

reclaim the entire area between the cathedral and Guyaneh.

The name of the city was changed back to Vagharshapat in 1991 when Armenia declared independence, but habits die hard, the city was always vehemently referred to as Echmiadzin by locals and its name was eventually changed back again to Echmiadzin.

## NAVIGATING THE CITY ▲

Echmiadzin is 20 kilometers from Yerevan and 10 kilometers from Zvartnots Airports, on the Yerevan-Armavir Highway. From end to end Echmiadzin is a 30 minute walk, but in the dog days of summer, it is more comfortable to go from center to outskirts by taxi or bus.

Echmiadzin's center is *Komitas H'raparak* or Komitas Square, at the juncture of three main streets that will give you coordinates: *Mesrop Mashtots ("Mashtots") poghots, Atarbekian and Araratian poghots*.

*Mesrop Mashtots p.*, also known as old Miasnikian Street, runs west to the Yerevan-Echmiadzin Mairughi (highway). *Atarbekian poghots* runs west to Taronik village and the Metsamor excavation. *Araratian poghots* runs south to the *Markara Janapar* and the Turkish border. Due north of *Komitas H'raparak* is the tree-lined *Mashtotsi Aigee poghota*, lined by the Mashtots Boulevard. This is the shortest route to Astvatsatsin Church. Other north-south main streets include *Baghranian* off of Atarbekian, and *Kirov* off of Mashtots. *Araratian poghots* passes Echmiadzin Cathedral Complex, Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum, and Guyaneh Monastery en route to the Markara Janapar and the Turkish border. Looping over Echmiadzin is the *Armavir-Yerevan Highway*, which continues north along the Turkish border to Giumri (120 kilometers), and the capital (20 kilometers).

The **S. Echmiadzin Cathedral Complex** is just south of Komitas Square off of Araratian poghots (Or take the first gate into Zbosaigi (Stroll Park) at the south end of the square. The parking area is 50 meters beyond).

**S. Guyaneh Monastery** is 300 meters south of the Cathedral Complex on Issy les Moulineaux poghots.

**S. Hripsimeh Monastery** is 2 kilometers east of Komitas H'raparak on Mesrop Mashtots poghots.

**S. Shoghakat Church** is 1.5 kilometers east on the same street, then 150 meters north.

The **shuka** is located one block north of Atarbekian between Baghranian and Alavardian poghots. The hospital and main polyclinic are north of town, between Baghranian and Kirov poghots on Sendarian.

**Guest homes** are located close to Shoghakat, Guyaneh and Hripsimeh Vanks, and off of Atarbekian poghots near Komitas H'raparak.

**Buses** from Yerevan arrive via Mashtots poghots, passing Zvartnots, Hripsimeh and Shoghakat Churches on the way, stopping at the bus station on Atarbekian. The bus station for Taronik and the Metsamor excavation is on the same street.

## CITY SIGHTS ▲

[Komitas Square](#) (p. 20)

[Mher Abeghian Museum](#) (p. 21)

[Hovhannes Hovhannessian Museum](#) (p. 21)

[Astvatsatsin Church](#) (p. 21)

[Zbosaigee](#) (p. 22)

[Khoren Ter-Harutian Museum](#) (p. 22)

**SELF TOUR** Since almost all of Echmiadzin's main sites are located within 500 meters of Komitas Square (Shoghakat and Hripsimeh are 1.5 and 2 kilometers east), a walking tour is the most enjoyable way to see them.

Though the tour can be done in one day if you race from place to place, and eliminate some sites it is more advisable to break it up over a couple of days, taking time to take in what you are seeing, and to stroll through parks, stop at a café or bistro, and sample the local color.

➡ *This tour is the most convenient route which avoids backtracking, and begins at Komitas H'raparak.*

## KOMITAS SQUARE - ԿՈՄԻՏԱՍԻ ԳՐԱԿԱՐԱԿ (Կոմիտասի Գրապարակ)

The square is named after Komitas (Soghomon Soghomonian, 1869-1936), whose statue (29) lies directly on the north side. Born in the village of Kiotaia (present day Turkey), Komitas is considered one of Armenia's cultural icons. A graduate of the Gevorkian Seminary in Echmiadzin as a specialist in Sacred Music, he spent much of his time collecting Armenia's folk songs, many of which are direct descendants of Armenia's pagan era. His efforts had a profound effect on the European music world, fostering the acceptance of folk music melodies in classical repertoires.

Komitas efforts to decipher medieval Armenian musical notation is also credited with helping to read Europe's medieval music. Ironically, Komitas research into polyphonic musical notation (that found on ancient manuscripts) helped to decipher Gregorian chant notation, which had its antecedents in Armenian medieval music, reputedly introduced to Pope Grigor by an Armenian monk. By the beginning of the 20th century Komitas believed he had succeeded in cracking the notation code, and was about to make public his research when the genocide ended his career.



On April 17-18, 1915, in an Armenian church in the Ghalatia quarter of Constantinople (Istanbul), Komitas conducted the premiere of his Patarak (Messiah). The second concert was to be scheduled for May 3rd, but on April 24th, along with other Armenian intellectuals in the city, he was arrested and exiled from the city.

En route he witnessed the genocide first hand, and the horror drove him into insanity. Because of the intercession of influential Turkish and foreign authorities, he was brought back to Constantinople, but it was too late. The remaining years of his life were spent until 1919 in the military hospital in Constantinople, and then in the Hospital for the Insane in Paris, where he died in 1936. In the same year his ashes were transferred to Yerevan, where they were interred at the newly created Komitas Pantheon.

Komitas' unraveling of the medieval code was lost with his sanity, and it is only recently that researchers believe they have succeeded in deciphering the notation. It should be noted that current musical notation of Armenian medieval music is still considered imperfect without this code. Komitas is venerated by Armenians

worldwide, and his repertoire of both sacred and folk music is a hallmark of Armenia's and Europe's music traditions.

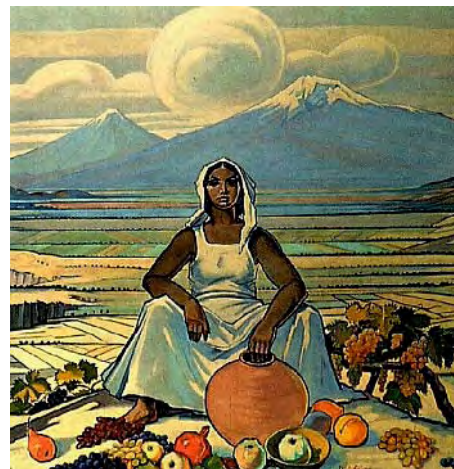
Unfortunately the museum space dedicated to his life and work has been usurped by the seminary, but a few items are on display at the Old Residence museum inside the cathedral complex.

➡ *To continue the tour, cross the western side of the square (left as you face the statue), where the Mher Abeghian Museum and gallery is located.*

#### **MHER ABEGHIAN MUSEUM - ՄԻԵՐ ԱԲԵԴԻԱՆԻ ԹԱՆԱԳԱՐԱՆ (Միեր Աբեդյանի Թանգարան)**

The museum is just west of Komitas Statue (across Mashtots pta.) and is open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm during May-October, and from 10 am to 4 pm during November - April. Admission is free.

This museum is small enough to walk through in less than half an hour, but revolving exhibitions in the first hall make a longer stop worthwhile. The museum displays paintings by Mher Abeghian (a protégé of the expressionist Martiros Sarian), whose work combined approved social realism from the Soviet era with Sarian's mystical landscapes and evocative color schemes.



Abeghian's resume reads like one of the communist faithful, with honors and medals awarded at regular intervals (Abeghian was both Honored Artist of Armenia and People's Artist of

the USSR), as well as the frequency of his "inspirational trips" abroad. His work should by no means be judged on that level alone, though, but rather as a study in how an artist caught in a repressive system could both tow the official line while painting officially forbidden themes. Remember he worked when the communists had stamped out all attempts at experimental art.

His huge triptychs Hairenik (Fatherland) and Hayastan are based the Armenian Expressionists mode, incorporating themes and subjects from mythology (definitely not approved material) that are still monumental and proletarian enough to satisfy even the staunchest Social Realism critic.

➡ *To continue the tour, go through the archway into the back courtyard.*

#### **HOVHANNES HOVHANNESSIAN HOME MUSEUM - ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԵՍ ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԵՍՅԱՆԻ ԹԱՆԱԳԱՐԱՆ (Հովհաննես Հովհաննեսյանի Սուն Թանգարան)**

The museum is in the courtyard behind the Abeghian museum, though the archway (tel. 53370). In front is a tufa wall with a wooden door, often locked. No matter--turn right and follow the wall to the northwest end, where a small wooden door lies. Knock. It is open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm during May - October, and from 10 am to 4 pm during November - April. Admission is 300 AMD.



This wonderful little home museum is worth the visit just to sample a bit of Old Echmiadzin elegance, as well as to escape the pulverizing summer sun within its shaded walled garden with fountain. The home was built in traditional Armenian design with a large wooden porch, thick stone walls and narrow windows, but the effect is

still light and airy. Though displays are in Russian and Armenian, they still capture a way of life and intellectual prowess that crosses all language barriers.

Hovhannes Hovhannessian (1864-1929), was a part of the Ashkharabar or Modern Armenian literature movement, which used a simpler and more easily understood form of the language. Separate from Grapar (grah-PAHR) or old Armenian, Ashkharabar was used by Abovian, Nalbandian and others to create a new form of expression, and to question the feudal system that was entrenched in Armenia in the early 19th century.

Part of the intellectual circles that arose in the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century, best known as a linguist and translator, Hovhannessian was a contemporary of Charents, Tumanian, Shirvanzadeh, Terian and Komitas, all of whom studied in Vagharshapat. Together with the Russian linguist and writer Valeri Briusov, he translated the first edition of ancient Armenian manuscripts into Ashkharabar. Hovhannessian also translated the first modern Armenian editions of works by Schiller, Pushkin, Goethe, Nekrasov, Ibsen and Hainze. His translation of the Shakespeare canon is still considered one of the most accurate translations into any language.

The museum displays pictures and artifacts from his life, including his study, with his favorite fishing pole and the copy of Turgenev left exactly as he placed it on the day he died. Part of the intellectual circles that created the new socialist republic, he was among those suspected by Stalin as a counter-revolutionary, yet died before the great purges began in 1936, which wiped out the intellectual class in Armenia.

➡ *To continue the tour, take the walkway on the north side of the old Arevti Tun (Universal Store) facing Mesrop Mashtots Park, and go west one block. Astvatsatsin church is about 50 meters ahead, on the right.*

#### **ASTVATSATSIN CHURCH - Աստվածածին Եկեղեցի**

The church is open from 8 am to dusk seven days a week. Also called the "village" or "peasant" church, Astvatsatsin is in the heart of Echmiadzin, yet often neglected on visits, which is a shame, since it amply shows how the vast majority worshipped, denied access to the grander monasteries nearby. It also houses a beautiful Rococo style altar, the only of its kind in Armenia.

and hold one of the most elegant altars in Armenia, a work of Italianate art in itself.



First consecrated in 1767, Astvatsatsin became known as giughi vank (village church), a place of worship for the common folks who did not have a church to use for weddings or baptisms since Echmiadzin, Guyaneh and Hripsimeh were reserved for the Holy See or as monasteries and seminaries.

The original church was built from wood, and was replaced in the 19th century with tufa walls imbedded with khachkars from the same period. Beginning the end of the 19th century, the church fell into disrepair, especially during the Soviet period when it was used as storage shed.

The Catholicos Vazgen I initiated a period of church reconstruction throughout the country, including Astvatsatsin which was reconsecrated in 1986. The bell tower was added in 1982.

Astvatsatsin is very much a village church, with locals visiting to light candles, pray or rest. The most striking part of the church is the altar, which was designed in the Italian Baroque style using marble and gilded wood. The sky blue and white paint with gold leaf lend a bit of extravagance to an otherwise simple building, and is unlike any other altar in Armenia.

The church itself is a pleasant space of clean and simple lines, with baptismal font and pillars adorned with simple 19th - 20th cc paintings of Ss. Poghos (Paul) and Petros (Peter), and Christ. Two 19th century paintings in the church by the Hovnatan brothers are Srapion and Markar. The large Virgin and Child was painted by Yeghishe Tatevosian.

➔ *To continue the tour: From the front of the church, either retrace your steps to Komitas H'raparak, or go south on the small side street between the church and the Arevtri Tun to Atarbekian p. and cross the street. Take any entrance into the park facing you.*

#### ✦ ZBOSAIGEE - ՉԲՈՍԱՅԳԻ (Չբոսայգի)

The park is on the south side of Komitas H'raparak and Atarbekian p. The park is open from dawn to 10/11 pm seven days a week. Cafes are open warm weather only from 9 am to 10/11 pm or when the last customer leaves. Rides are open generally in summer from 10 am to 8/9 pm.

Echmiadzin's Zbosaigee or Stroll Park has carnival rides and sidewalk cafes (the center café is also a bistro, with cabanas facing a central fountain), and is a popular "hangout" for all Ages. Though narrow, it is shaded with tall trees and makes a good rest stop.

Monuments in the park include one to the Armenian Bolshevik Stepan Shahumian (40) and another to Anastas Migoyan (44), elder brother to the developer of the Soviet MIG fighter plane, and one of Stalin's henchmen. The statues were kept as a testament to Armenia's history, however grim, though nameplates were carefully removed to prevent identification and feared vandalism.



The park is a popular hangout, though few tourists seem to take advantage of the cool shade and delicious ice-cream served in the outdoor cafes. Full course meals or sandwiches can be ordered and are worth the price of around \$5 for a complete meal to 150 drams for coffee or a simple b'rduch (sandwich).

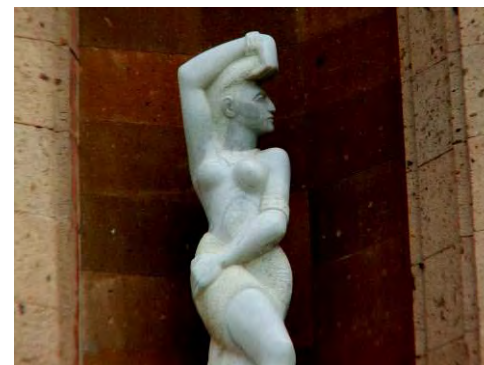
The shade trees are massive, beautiful reminders of how forested the entire valley once was, and are

de rigueur for recovering from the intense sun just a few yards away on the streets. Unkempt, this park is still more genuine and lively than the packaged gardening inside the complex. Come here to see how the other 99% live.

There is also a children's amusement area with kiddie rides and a line of (closed) carnies attractions. A few of the rides were working when we visited, but all seem to be under some attention, and may be back in order in time for the 1700 celebrations.

On the eastern edge of the park is a large tufa mural and fountain (unfortunately not working). New construction on a residence/hotel for the Holy See is opposite the newly renovated Gevorgian Seminary. Between them is a paved way into the Cathedral Complex parking lot.

➔ *To Continue the Tour, exit the park at Komitas square and cross the street to the post office side, then turn R (S) on Araratian p for about 1 block to the Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum*



#### KHOREN TER-HARUTIAN SCULPTURE MUSEUM - ԽՈՐԵՆ ՏԵՐ-ՀԱՐՈՒԹԻԱՆԻ ԸՆԴՀԱՆՆԵՐԻ ԹԱՆԱԳԱՐԱՆ (Խորեն Թեր-Հարությանի Բանդակների Թանգարան)

The museum (tel: 52038) is located 100 meters south of H'raparak on the eastern side of Araratian p. It is across the street from the Gevorgian Seminary.

The museum is open Tuesday to Sunday from 9 am to 5 pm during May - October, and 10 am to 4 pm during November - April. Admission is 200 AMD, and donations are appreciated. The museum

displays sculptures, graphics and paintings created by a Diaspora Armenian who was one of the foremost sculptures of the Modern Art Movement in the 1940's-1960's, and whose most famous works can only be seen here. Unfortunately, there are no guide booklets in English, and the displays are all labeled in Armenian.



**Background Born** Khoren Ter Avetissian in 1909 in Ashotavan Village in Western Armenia (present day Turkey), Ter Harutian barely escaped the 1915 genocide. Except for his mother, a sister and the artist, his entire family (23 members, including his father, a priest, and brother) were killed by Turkish soldiers. In 1921 they immigrated to the USA, and Ter Harutian then moved in 1930 to Jamaica, where he began his painting career.

In the 1930's he traveled to England where he became interested in sculpture, first working with wood (lignum vitae, mahogany, eucalyptus, satinwood) and later in stone, almost exclusively in marble. His graphics and paintings have a slight resemblance to the work of Salvador Dali, but the content is less intellectual, much more visceral in their depictions of human tragedy and hope.

In 1982 Ter Harutian gave 100 sculptures, 250 graphics and 50 paintings as a gift to Armenia. First housed at the Komitas Museum in the old seminary next to the Cathedral Complex, the collection was moved to its current location in 1994 when the church repossessed the seminary building. Originally a cinema, the space displays 79 of Ter Harutian's works in the lower level. Others are stored in the upstairs cinema hall. Abandoned by state subsidy (staff salaries are US \$20 a month), the director and staff of the museum work completely out of devotion for the artist's legacy.



**Outside the Museum** In the niches on the upper wall are two large sculptures made in 1949 from Georgian marble. On the left is **Pillar of Salt** (1) and on the right is **Hope** (2), both from a series based on Sodom and Gomorrah. From right to left on the ground level are **David Sasuntsi** (3), **Mother of the Cliffs** (4) (dates unknown, marble) and **Fertility** (5) (1966, serpentine marble). The two bronze plaques are miniatures of the **Life of Mher** series, done for a Philadelphia exhibition in 1976.

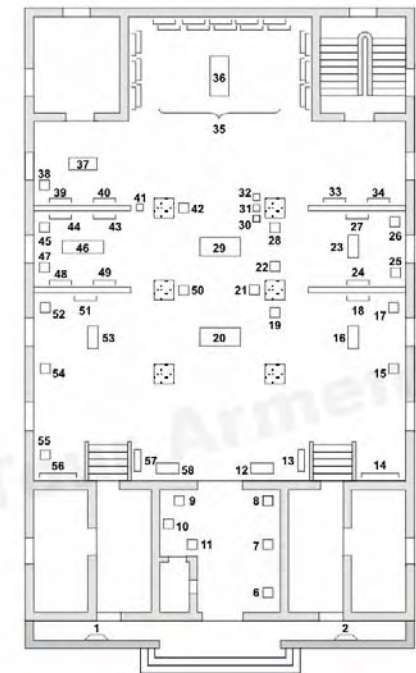
**Inside the Museum** The entrance lobby and main hall displays the bulk of the collection including Ter Harutian's Genocide Series (25 graphics, 1 painting, a large bronze plaque and a huge bronze statue of a vulture perched over a decaying corpse), the marble sculptures *Rhythmic Dance*, *Euphrates Foam*, *Echo* (19), **Leda and the Swan** (57) and **Man of Sorrows** (32). Others include **Ani** (16), **Awakening Man** (52), **Catching Fish** (29), **Do Not Kill** (21) and **Struggle for Life** (23). A remarkable piece is **Descent from the Cross**, a massive carving from Georgian Marble on rough timber. The figure is sculpted like a death mask in the medieval period, yet appears as installation art. Ter Harutian combined Urartian monumental design with figures from Armenia's Christian era, as in his **Vartan Mamikonian**, **Sacrifice** and **John the Baptist**. Take a look at **Gorilla** and **Tragedy** and you seem to be peering into two sides of the same mirror.

➡ To continue, cross the street to the east gate into the Echmiadzin complex (p. 24)

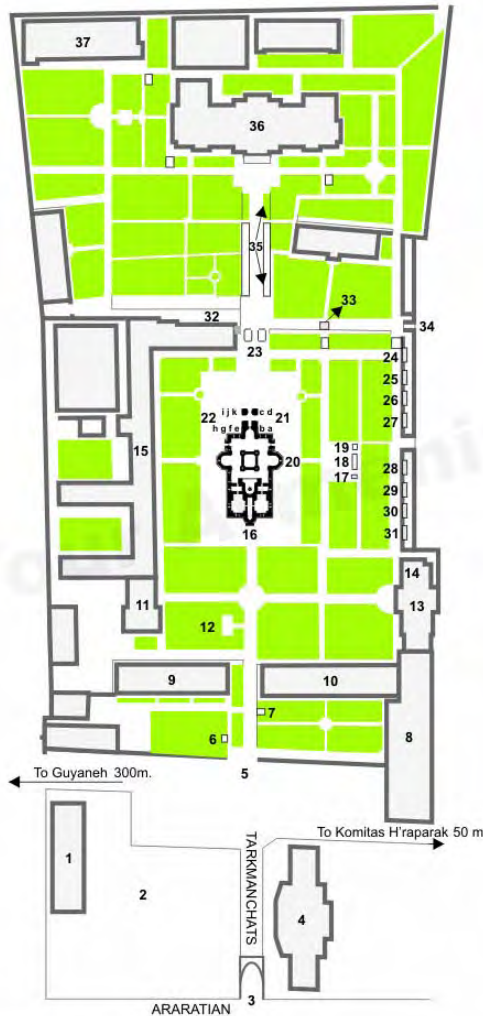
### Ter-Harutian Map Legend

1. Pillar of Salt, 1949, Georgian marble
2. Hope, 1949, Georgian marble
3. David Sasuntsi, marble
4. Cliff Mother, marble
5. Fertility, 1966, serpentine marble
6. Spring, 1980, Italian marble
7. Childhood Memories, 1957, serpentine marble
8. Cliff Mother, 1966, marble
9. Rhythmic Dancers, 1945, Georgian marble
10. Leda Waiting for the Swan, bronze
11. Self Portrait, 1965, bronze
12. Maternity, 1947, English alabaster
13. Vartan Mamikonian, 1963, bronze
14. Genocide, 1976, bronze
15. Tragedy, 1940, mahogany
16. Ani, 1962, bronze
17. Concerning Sculpture, 1960, bronze
18. Cats, graphic
19. Echo, 1949, Portuguese onyx
20. John the Baptist, 1956, marble
21. Don't Kill, 1963, bronze
22. Rhythmic Dance, 1946, Tennessee marble
23. Struggle for Life, 1944, mahogany
24. In the Waves of Euphrates, oil on canvas
25. Mt. Ararat Summit, 1967, Italian marble
26. Euphrates Foam, 1968, Italian marble
27. Reclining Woman, graphic
28. Voice of Orpheus, 1967, tufa
29. Seabird Catching Fish, 1948, Skyros onyx
30. Bird, 1955, green serpentine marble
31. Yolanda, 1982, Italian porphyry
32. Man of Sorrows, 1944, Jamaican porphyry
33. Genocide, graphic
34. Genocide, graphic
35. Genocide Series, 22 graphics
36. Genocide, 1975, bronze
37. Leda and the Swan, 1980, bronze
38. Son of Ararat, 1947, Napoleon gray
39. Genocide, graphic
40. Rhythmic Movement, graphic
41. Meditation, 1955, Rosato marble
42. Male and Female Deer, 1944, Italian marble
43. Genocide, oil on canvas
44. Ararat War, oil on canvas
45. Propheet Head, 1944, Jamaican porphyry
46. Descent, 1952, Georgian marble
47. Meditation, 1945, Rosato marble
48. Escape, oil on canvas
49. Ter Zor, oil on canvas
50. Fighting Cocks, 1963, bronze
51. Curse the Day I was Born, graphic
52. Awakening Man, 1941, Spanish green marble
53. Sacrifice, 1964, French marble
54. Gorilla, 1945, mahogany
55. Harm's End, 1943, mahogany
56. Vartan Mamikonian, 1976, bronze
57. Fallen Man, 1963, bronze
58. Leda and the Swan, 1946, Alabama marble

### Ter-Harutian Museum



## Echmiadzin Complex



### COMPLEX MAP LEGEND

- 1 Astral Observatory
- 2 Park
- 3 Gate - Monument
- 4 Gevorkian Seminary
- 5 Old Gate
- 6 Book Store
- 7 Sodk Khachkar, 1563
- 8 New Dormitory
- 9 T'paran, 1771
- 10 Old Dormitory, 19th c
- 11 Hotel
- 12 Katnaghbiur
- 13 Theological Seminary, 1909
- 14 World Council of Churches
- 15 Rectory, mataghatun
- 16 Echmiadzin Cathedral
- 17 Khrimian Hairik Ladle
- 18 Genocide Monument
- 19 Urartu Menhir, 1st m BCE
- 20 Shah Abbas I Carving
- 21 North Tombs
  - a Ter Ter Khoren I
  - b Hovhannes R. Karbetsi
  - c Gevorg IV
  - d Ter Matevos II Kostandnapoetsi
- 22 South Tombs
  - e Daniel I Paiyetsi
  - f Nerses V Ashtaraketsi
  - g Mkrich I Vaneti (Khrimian Hairik)
  - h Gevorg VI
  - i Vazgen I
  - j Ter Ter Gevorg V T'p'khisetsi
  - k Makar I
- 23 T'rdat Gate
- 24 "Amnaprkich", 1279, Vayots Dzor
- 25 Sodk Khachkar, 1543
- 26 Old Juga Khachkar, 1602
- 27 Geghard Khachkar, 13th c
- 28 Sodk Khachkar, 1543
- 29 Aghjots Vank Khachkar, 1278
- 30 Geghard Khachkar, 13th c
- 31 Makenis Khachkar, 9th c
- 32 Old Residence museum
- 33 Grigor Haghbakian Khachkar, 1233, Imerzek
- 34 Clock Tower
- 35 Khachkars, 15th-18th cc
- 36 New Residence
- 37 Treasury Museum

## ECHMIADZIN COMPLEX - ԵՉՄԻԱԾԻՆ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԱԿԱՆ ԴԱՍԱՆԻՐ Եկեղեցական Դամալիք) ▲

- [Cathedral Complex](#) (p. 25)
- [East Gate \(Main Entry\)](#) (p. 25)
- [East Gate Khachkars and Seminary](#) (p. 26)
- [East Courtyard](#) (p. 26)
- [Inner Main Courtyard](#) (p. 26)
- [Cathedral Exterior](#) (p. 27)
- [Bell Tower](#) (p. 28)
- [Cathedral West Entrance](#) (p. 29)



The complex is open from 8 am to dusk seven days a week. High service is at 10 or 10:30 am Sundays.

The cathedral museum is open 9 am to 5 pm Tues-Sun, except during High Service on Sundays.

Echmiadzin Cathedral and the surrounding complex is the Mother See of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the most sacred shrine for 9 million Armenians worldwide. Echmiadzin Cathedral is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which includes Hripsimeh Church, Guyaneh Church, and Zvartnots Cathedral.

On a scale much smaller than the great temples in Asia and the cathedrals in Europe (all of Echmiadzin's complex could easily fit into St. Peter's plaza in the Vatican), the site is nonetheless a remarkable and at times awe-inspiring destination, despite the obvious business-oriented atmosphere that surrounds it. Built 700 years before the Gothic cathedrals, the engineering for this and other churches in Armenia directly influenced their grander designs.

The treasures housed at museums in the complex are often eye-popping for both their beauty and

access to the average visitor. Remember you are literally rubbing elbows with some of the oldest Christian relics on earth. You will find it wise to be cautious as you see and can touch artifacts that would be sealed and roped away from view in the west.



### HISTORY, BACKGROUND

The story of Echmiadzin and the beginning of the Armenian Apostolic Church is tied to the story of King T'rdat III and Grigor of Parthia.

By converting to Christianity, and then appointing his kinsman Grigor as the first patriarch or Catholicos over the Armenian church, T'rdat insured continued Parthian control over both government and religion. (See [Echmiadzin History](#) for details, p. 18)

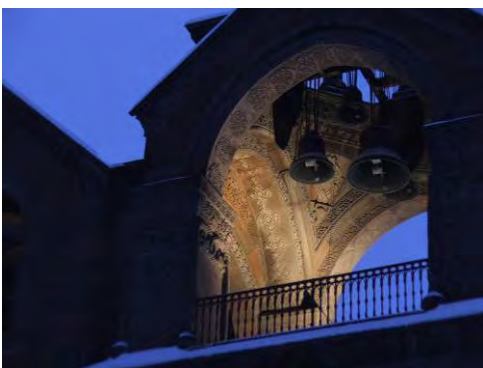
### THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

There are other churches of Armenian Christianity, including Roman Catholic and Protestant, but by far the largest congregation is the Armenian Apostolic Church. It is one of two main branches of Christianity divided between Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian churches. These are subdivided between the Western Orthodox (Greek, Russian, Serbian and Macedonian), Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Oriental Orthodox churches (Armenian Apostolic, Syrian, Coptic and Indian Malabar).

The main difference between the branches is in how they treat the nature of Christ, did he come to earth in both human and divine form, or in one form only, both human and divine? This seems to be pulling at straws, but in its day it was a reason for schisms between the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches, and before that, the schism between the Armenian Apostolic and Greek Orthodox churches. The argument precipitated

divisions in the Empire, and was an excuse for many a war. The Armenian Apostolic Church accepts the latter view, thereby being a Monotheist or "Monophysist" church.

The relationship between these branches is best described in terms of their patriarchal structure. Armenians prefer to call the relationship between the Roman Catholic Pope and the Catholicos as equal, but add that the Pope is considered "first among equals," a lesson in diplomacy if ever there was one. When the Pope and the Catholicos ceremonially meet, they are always seated on equal levels, and there is close contact between the two churches.



The use of statues never took root in the Armenian Church, except for the cross. Frescos were a part of all church décor, often covering entire interior surfaces. The earliest frescos directly influenced Byzantine fresco art, and through it the Romanesque and early Italian fresco tradition. Records show that Armenian artists were lent to Byzantine and Italian courts as early as the mid 4th century. The worship of Astvatsatsin (The Mother of God) assumed greater importance beginning in the 7th-9th centuries and is now a feature of all church altars.

Those acquainted with pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic or Oriental Orthodox services will have some understanding of the rituals. Chanting and polyphonic music make up much of the background to the ritual, which is accompanied by heavy doses of incense and closing the curtain during Eucharist. High services are up to three hours long.

#### CHURCH ETIQUETTE

In most of the Armenian churches there are no benches or seats, though Echmiadzin does have

seats up front (reserved for dignitaries and some foreigners--feel free to take a seat if you are invited).

Considered disrespectful in churches is placing your hands in your pockets, or standing in a way that can seem casual. Women should wear headscarves, and outlandish clothes or shorts are frowned upon (indeed, older members of a congregation may be quite vocal in admonishing incorrect dress or behavior). It is traditional to walk backwards out of the church (i.e. not to turn your back on the image of God). Candles are sold (40 AMD, 80 AMD, 120 AMD, 250 AMD depending on size of candle) inside the church, and large stands are placed in front of particularly holy spots or paintings. Feel free to purchase and light candles if you wish.

During services the more devout will repeatedly bow and cross themselves, sometimes crying out during a service in prayer or anguish. Be respectful of their privacy, and under no circumstances should you attempt to take pictures of this--church members will escort you from the church for doing so.



Do not take flash pictures or use equipment that makes a lot of sound (i.e. automatic wind devices) during a liturgy service. However, at weddings and baptisms locals are notorious for flash pictures and video taping. If you are present when one of these ceremonies is performed, be surreptitious in your picture taking, but often you will be invited to join in, as Armenians feel a foreigner's presence lends an extra polish to their celebrations.

#### RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

The church pulls out the stops for *Armenian Christmas* on January 6 (Epiphany), *Easter* and the *Feast of the Annunciation* (the second Sunday of

August), when the Catholicos blesses the grape crop. According to locals, you should never eat grapes until after that feast.

Other celebrations are *Terendes* on February 13th, based on a pagan fire ritual where newlyweds purify their marriage by jumping over fire, and *Vardavar* in July (days vary according to the pastoral calendar), which is a purification by water. Vardavar is also celebrated by the masses with people pouring water on unsuspecting passersby.



**The Feast of Meron** Meron is something akin to the holy oil used in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, a mixture of 40 types of flowers and herbs found in the bible, distilled in olive oil and water. Made every 7 years, or in the year a new Catholicos is appointed, the ritual is one of the most important in the Armenian Church.

The belief is that the first Meron was made by Grigor, and when the next was made, they mixed the remaining portion from his first Meron to the new, therefore the holiness and blessing from the first Meron is distilled into the new and distributed to Armenian and Orthodox churches worldwide. 40 types of flowers and herbs are used to distill the aromatic oil, including frankincense and myrrh. Distilled in water for three days, they are then added to purified olive oil and the remaining Meron from the previous ceremony.

➔ To continue the tour, cross the street to the east gate into the Echmiadzin complex.

#### CATHEDRAL COMPLEX - ՄԱՅՐ ԴԱՏԱՐԻ ՀԱՄԱԼԻՐ (Մայր Դաճարի համալիր)

This tour will take about two and a half hours (3+ if you take time to look at everything in detail),

and is divided between the Complex (45 minutes), the Cathedral and Museum (60 minutes), and the Old Catholicos Residence (45 minutes).

Enter the complex through the East Gate on Atarbekian p. (opposite Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum).



#### EAST (MAIN) ENTRY GATE

The towering stone gate was erected for the 2001 celebrations of 1700 years of Christianity as a state religion in Armenia. The front (east) of the gate is topped with the words "Mair Ator Surb Echmiadzin (Mother Seat of Holy Echmiadzin)" and features the carvings of King T'rdat III (T'rdat the Great, left figure) and Grigor Lusavorich, their arms extended toward a central cross. The inscriptions next to each figure read (left) "Surb T'rdat G (III) Arka Haiyots (S. T'rdat III King of Armenia)" and (right) "Surb Grigor Lusavorich (S. Grigor the Illuminator)". The long inscription to the right is in grapar (grabar, old Armenian).

The design is an interesting use of Sacred Numerology handed down from the days of Pythagoras, with the left (south) side using 7 angles (the number "7" represents completion of cycle and the day of resurrection in sacred numerology; there are seven days in a week, there were seven known planets in the ancient world; 7 evil spirits. The Augustinian God was the God of seven: he rested on the seventh day and Christian life is ordered by seven; seven capital sins, seven virtues and seven sacraments).

The four sided block making up the main part entry for the gate has four arches, corners and is topped by an open circle where a dome might have rested, mimicking the vision Grigor had when he saw the church with a "dome of the heavens". The

number Four represented the division of time (the four seasons), the four directions, the four rivers of paradise—it was unity divided into equal parts.

The north side of the gate (where you enter), above, has a prehistoric Vishap Stone that has been carved with religious symbols to "baptize" it to the new faith. Priests at the complex dispute this, saying the stone was carved in the Middle Ages as a Christian piece, but its Pagan roots are definite. On the back (west) face of the gate the inscription reads in grabar, "Khachi Koi Kristos Yerkir Pagahneh-amk yev Z'surb Yarutiunk Paravoremk (we will kiss the heavenly cross of Christ and we will glorify your resurrection)"

The two other figures carved on the facade are S. Tadevos and S. Bartolomos (the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew) who are believed to have preached in Armenia in the 1st c .



### EAST GATE KHACHKARS AND SEMINARY

A row of khachkars line the long walk to the main complex. Behind them is the 18th c. **Gevorkian Seminary** (4), under reconstruction. The khachkar or Stone Cross began its development in the 4th century as pagan menhirs and monuments were carved with crosses. The Khachkars in the Echmiadzin Complex cover its development between the 9th-17th centuries.

When Grigor's followers began the conversion, they were confronted with multiple Pagan deities and a plethora of icons. Like the Roman church, the new faith was adept at usurping pre-Christian traditions, turning them into a new, Christian way of worship. The same is true of the icons. Christians incorporated pagan symbols into their iconography, showing the triumph of the new god over the old. Hence the Cross is figured

surrounded by stylizations of the Pagan Tree of Life (as seen in Mesopotamian/Urartian religious carving), sometimes resting on top of a disk, or sun symbol (some say the first god in Armenia).



The khachkars are, in order from the new gate:

- Basalt **three-cross khachkar** using pomegranates for the top icons. The pomegranate is a symbol of love, life and well-being from the Pagan era.
- Two **tufa khachkars** from Gladzor, 1296 .
- Black tufa khachkar** with carefully incised patterns, the two crosses that flank the main cross forming the stylized tree of life, a hallmark of the pre-Christian belief that was incorporated into Khachkar Art.
- Khachkar**, Old Jugha, 1602. Five crosses in top panel, memorial carving of prince on horse at bottom (represents the donor).
- Three khachkars** showing different icons for the interior/tree of life. One uses grapes (the sign of life and the blood of Christ), another, the cross form and the third crosses for the tree of life but very stylized grapes for the top.

f. **Khachkar**, Old Juga, 1576. Four crosses on the top shelf, small bas relief main cross with a large sun symbol (believed to have been the first, primary Pagan God in Armenia) underneath.

➔ To continue the tour, enter through gate to in front of the Seminary.

### EAST COURTYARD

Most of the buildings and monuments inside the current complex were constructed from the mid 17th century forward, after Holy See returned to Echmiadzin. The complex is divided into three main courtyards: East (main entrance gate), Central (Cathedral) and West or Residential Quarter (New and Old Residences, Church Treasury). The entire complex is surrounded by tufa walls and the exteriors of several buildings.

Before entering the complex, you will find small stands selling everything from khachkars, paintings and jewelry crosses to refreshments and worry beads. The captive birds are meant for matagh, or sacrifice, and predominate on Sundays and major holy days. We had a friend who used to purchase one on each visit and set it free--seems there are no rules what you do with the animal once it is bought, as no wrath of God was poured on her head for doing so.

**Outer Buildings** The outer buildings comprise the **Observatory** (1), uncompleted, a large **park** (2) and the new **Main Gate** (3) which leads up Tarkmanchats p. past the **Gevorkian Seminary** (4) and the parking lot to the main complex.

The **Old Eastern Entry (old main gate)** (5) opens onto the East Courtyard and gardens, framed on the western side by the back of a 19th century **Seminary Dormitory** (10) and the 1771 **T'paran** (9) lie. The new **guest house** (8) is used by church dignitaries and special guests. The **book store** (6) sells religious and souvenir books, maps and gift items, including a small introductory booklet to Echmiadzin in English, and a beautiful (though hefty) Treasures of Echmiadzin, priced at 50,000 AMD.

To your right as you continue are a **water fountain** and the 1563 **Sodk Khachkar** (7) from Sevan region. The simplicity of the design and the choice of black basalt make a striking impression, especially when it appeared with hundreds of others on the wind-swept hills above Lake Sevan.



The sidewalk between the Old Dormitory and the 1771 **T'paran**, or Publishing House (9) leads to the tree-lined central courtyard. The walls on the old dormitory are pockmarked with rifle shots, and we have heard everything from fighting during the Persian era (not likely since the building is early 19th century) to fighting against Red Army invaders to explain this. It seems no one really knows, is wants to tell, as 50 visits later, the explanations get more interesting or faces more quizzical. Locals have a need to explain everything, even if uncertain (though the Persian explanation came from a western Armenian) , so you may find the answer, or you may just have to create your own myth.

➔ To continue the tour, continue W through the car park to the old inner courtyard.

### INNER COURTYARD

An oasis in the hot summer months, the cool shadows and carefully tended central courtyard swarms with worshippers during major holidays. During the funeral for Vazgen I, the outpouring of mourners filled the entire complex and surrounding areas including Komitas Square. It is a large courtyard, divided into sections by carefully maintained flower beds and shrubs. If you've been huffing it through the tour so far, take time to rest on one of the benches and soak in the atmosphere. This is the center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the ground beneath you had witnessed more than 5000 years of history.

The church is the latest incarnation of temples going back to the Mid Bronze Age (uncovered) or to the late Stone Age (conjectured). Throughout Armenian history temples were built at the necropolis of settlements, so the immediate surrounding area would equate to the city of

Karlini, Vartkesavan and Vagharshapat. The Residential area is thought to lie where the King's Palace once stood, the "T'rdat Gate" the place of entry to the old temple and current cathedral.



On your far left as you just enter the courtyard is the **Church Hotel** (11) reserved for church dignitaries and clergy. On the far right is the **1909 Theological Seminary** (13), closed by the Soviets and reopened in 1991. The **Column of Khachkars** (13a) is a tradition from medieval times. The local office for the **World Council of Churches** (14) is in the seminary building, a helpful starting point for visitors of member churches. They aren't a tour office, but they will arrange for specialized guided tours and meetings between member visitors and Armenian clergy.

On your left as you approach the cathedral via the center walkway is **Katnaghbiur**, or Milk Spring (12), a memorial fountain to 28 victims of the genocide. Dedicated in 1965, the inscription reads in part "...for...grandfather Avak and parents Manuk and Aziz Ter Grigoriants, in the 1915 genocide died twenty-eight relatives and their father's garden milk spring."

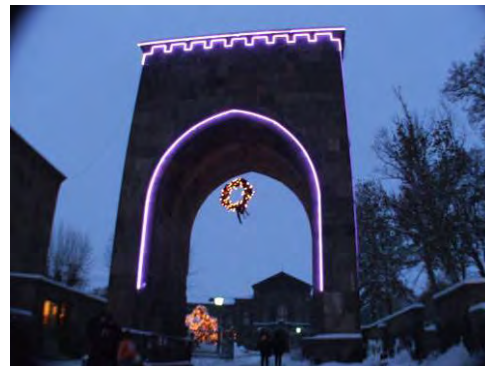
You approach the **Cathedral** (16) facing the eastern or annex side, an addition built in 1869 to house the first treasury museum. On the left are the **Cathedral Rectory** and **Mataghatun** (15). Look to your right as you walk along the north side of the cathedral and you will see three large monuments.

The **Khrmian Hairik Ladle** (17) deftly alludes to a comment the then Catholicos Khrmian (r. 1883-1907) made after returning from the 1878 Berlin Conference following the defeat of Ottoman Turkey by Russia. During the conference the World Powers first gave, then led by Bismarck, took away

independence of Armenia and other ethnic groups in Anatolia while Bulgaria and Hungary were allowed to form republics. "It's ironic," the Khrmian Hairik said, "they gave us a big pot of porridge, and all the big groups took out their ladles and (made a country). But all I had was a ladle made from paper (the original agreement by the world powers giving independence to Armenia). How could I take my portion with a paper ladle?" The memorial is of a large eagle guarding a ladle made from stone. Pure spring water gushes from the ladle, a symbol of life to all who will partake.

The center **Genocide Monument** (18) was dedicated in 1965. The **Urartu Menhir** (19) is from the 8th-7th centuries BCE. The monolith was uncovered during the 1955-57 renovation, lying directly below the Ijman Seghan altar, or the spot where Christ is believed to have struck the earth to show the location for building the cathedral. Its excavation, plus that of an older fire pit under the High Altar, strengthened the reliability of using ancient sources to uncover locations of Armenia's pre-Christian monuments.

From the northern monuments, go west (right as you face the cathedral's northern side) past the Cathedral to the large arched gate that leads to the western or residential quarter.



The **T'rdat Gate** (23) commemorates King T'rdat III, and was first constructed in the 7th century as the main approach to the cathedral. Legend has it the stones came from his 2nd century palace, but probably the gate is at the approximate location of the entrance to the old palace, since the pagan temple the church was built over would have been adjacent to the royal compound. The gate was renovated in the 19th century. Beyond the gate is the Residence Quarter, where the **Old Residence**

(32), new Residence (36) and **Treasury Museum** (37) are located. See next section of details on the Residence Quarter.



Go to your right, by the **Bell Tower**, added in the 18th century. Flanking each side are **Tombs of the Catholicos** (21 and 22). Approach the **Clock Tower** (34) on the Northern wall, and you will see part of the collection of Khachkars in the complex. The first you will see is the large **1233 Grigor Haghbakian Khachkar** (33), up on your left as you approach the clock tower. The Grigor Haghbakian Khachkar is considered one of the masterpieces of Khachkar art, sculpted during the period when stone crosses reached their most elegant expressions.

Astounding to remember is that in Armenia more than 40,000 khachkars were carved (some say more than 100,000), and no two are alike in their intricate patterns. Khachkars along the Northern wall: from west to east:

(24) "**Amnaprkich**", 1279, Vayots Dzor.

The Amnaprkich Khachkar is an advanced form of Khachkar, and the closest thing to statuary in Armenian religious art. A deeply etched depiction of the crucifixion with twisting vines in the background, sun symbols over a bull and eagle, the Virgin Mary and Joseph below the cross, and a supplicating figure. At the base is a hunting scene, perhaps symbolizing a victory.

(25) **Sodk Khachkar**, 1543.

Wide based black basalt, with alternating panels of saints and crosses flanking the central cross. Sun burst is a geometric knot, a line with no beginning or end.

(26) **Old Juga Khachkar**, 1602.

The Old Juga Khachkars are distinguished by their deep relief and oriental geometric patterns. Juga

is in current Nakhichevan and the Juga khachkars represent the last golden age of Armenian arts. This khachkar and those in front of the old residence were part of a field of 10,000 khachkars which was destroyed by Azerbaijanis in 2007.

(27) **Geghard Khachkar**, 13th century.

Red tufa, with elaborate and fluid depiction of the cross surrounded by ripening fruit.

(28) **Sodk Khachkar**, 1543.

A companion to (25), the black basalt design is similar in its simple yet striking design.

(29) **Aghjots Vank Khachkar**, 1278.

(30) **Geghard Khachkar**, 13th century.



(31) **Makenis Khachkar**, 9th century. In shape and design, this Khachkar is very close to pagan menhirs and marking stones. Rounded at the top with bas relief cross and sun symbols above and on either side of the upper part of the cross. The tree of life is as dominant on the surface as the cross.

➡ Continue to the S side of the cathedral.

## CATHEDRAL EXTERIOR

As you return to the cathedral on the northern face, you can see the different strata of construction, beginning with the main wall, which has blocks of stone from the original 301-303 edifice, inscribed in Greek, the language used before the adoption of the Mashtots Armenian Alphabet (ca. 405). You can also see angled cornices in the upper wall, which show where the original roofline was. A reconstruction of the original design shows that the original church had a central "drum" topped with a conical roof, and four smaller "drums" over the four corner chapels.



An extensive renovation of the cathedral in 484-486 under the patronage of Prince Vahan Mamikonian transformed the church into a central plan with protruding walls at the cardinal points (the semi-circular walls below the small domes). A central dome, probably made of wood, was set above the entire edifice.

The **dome** was built in 618 under the patronage of Catholicos Komitas I, as were four smaller ones at the cardinal points. Alterations were made to the large and small domes in 1627, the western dome was replaced by the bell tower in 1658 and bas relief carvings were added to the facade.



The **carvings** found on the outside of the church include the twelve apostles on the facets of the drum and carvings of the evangelists and St. Grigor on the bell tower. Around the drum of the main dome is a series of 48 stone "seals", elaborate geometric patterns including a Star of David.

Look just above the arch supporting the northern dome. In place of an apostle or evangelist, a likeness of **Shah Abbas I** (20) appears, linked with history and legend. The story goes that in the early 17th century the Persian army was advancing on Echmiadzin to destroy the cathedral. Overnight the carving the Shah appeared, and when they army arrived, they were asked if the Shah wanted to destroy his own image. Hearing that his own likeness was on the face of the church, the Shah became its protector instead, lavishing gifts on the cathedral.

#### CATHOLICOS TOMBS (21,22)

The graves on either of the bell tower are for eleven Catholicos from the 19th-20th centuries, each of which had a profound impact on events of their time. Most written in Grapar or old Armenian, they are the most asked about and least deciphered monuments in the complex:



#### North side (21):

- a. **Ter Ter Khoren I** - 1873-1932-1938
- b. **Hovhannes R. Karbetsi** - d. 25 March 1842
- c. **Gevorg IV** - b. 5 July 1813 d. 6 December 1882
- d. **Ter Matevos II Kostandnapolets** (from Constantinople) - b. 22 Feb. 1845 d. 11 Dec. 1910 - (Catholicos) 1908-1910

#### Southside (22):

- a. **Daniel I Paiyetsi** - 39 Oct. 1808
- b. **Nerses V Ashtaraketsi** - b. 13.02.1761 d. 1302. 1857
- c. **Mkrtich I Vaneti (Khramian Hairik)** - b. 4 Apr. 1820 d. 29 Oct. 1907
- d. **Gevorg VI** - b. 2 Nov. 1868 d. 9 May 1954

e. **Vazgen I** - 1908-1955-1994

f. **Ter Ter Gevorg V T'p'khisetsi** - 1911-1930  
- b. 28 Oct. 1847 d. 8 May 1930

g. **Makar I** - b. 13 Apr. 1813 d. 16 Apr. 1891

➔ To continue the tour, continue to the W side of the cathedral and the bell tower, then the interior.

#### BELL TOWER

Built in 1658, the Bell Tower is richly adorned in the "Armenian Oriental Style", which borrows inspiration from both the Persian and European classical styles. The eight sided dome is set above heavily carved arches and pediments.



The interior of the bell tower dome is covered with frescos and painted carvings, crowned by 8 six-winged cherub heads. The winged cherub is repeated throughout the cathedral design and on Armenian chalices, vestments and scapulars. The figure bears striking resemblance to ancient Mesopotamian and Urartian winged figures found on pagan temple walls.

**Why six wings?** In sacred numerology the number six was considered a perfect number (the sum 3+3, or 1+2+3, or 2x3; 3 was considered the holiest number, and now stands for the trinity). In the bible God created the heavens and earth in 6 days, Christ died in the sixth hour of the sixth day.

It was considered the number before the end and the resurrection in early Christian symbolism. There are eight sides to the dome with eight supporting mantels. The first number after seven (connected with celestial life), eight was considered the symbol of life, the new life after baptism (both in pagan and Christian times). The

resurrection of Christ occurred on the eighth day. The octagon is the favored form for the baptismal font and conical domes.

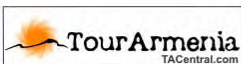
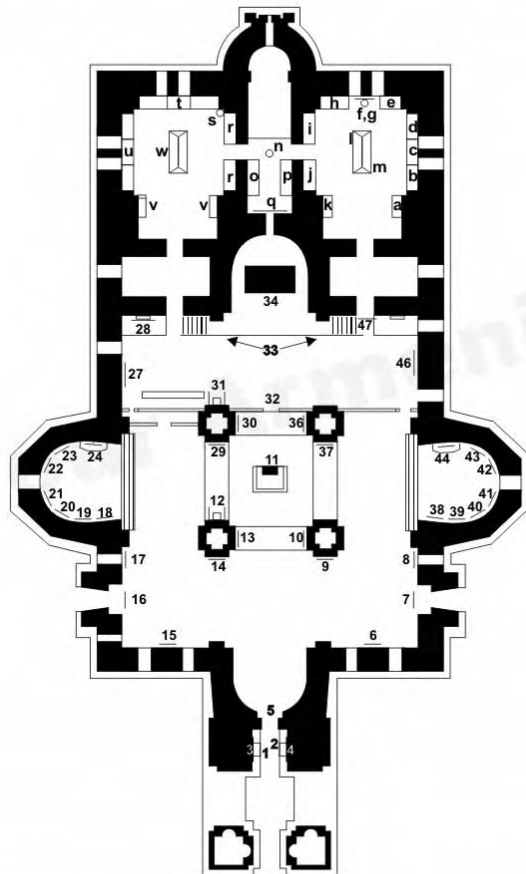


The painted carvings on the mantels are some of the most interesting artwork. Each mantel is a unique design with three geometric seals and animal imagery. Flanking each upper seal are male and female pelicans, ducks, geese, cockerels, falcons, peacocks, storks and bluebirds. Between the lower two seals are a Stag, Boar, Lion, Unicorn, Goat, Bison and two carvings of an Elephant.



The outer walls, arches and pillars are carved with geometric patterns, grape vines, plants and intertwining lines. The carvings on the upper arches depict two snakes (also called dragons) with open mouths. The symbol of wisdom, snake imagery is pre-Christian in origin, gloriously usurped in this design motif. The whole is a baroque fantasy surprisingly in harmony with the solemn 5th century exterior.

## Echmiadzin Cathedral



0 3.5m. 7m.

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### CATHEDRAL MAP LEGEND

- 1 Tomb
- 2 Tomb
- 3 S. Poghos Fresco
- 4 S. Petros Fresco
- 5 Main Door
- 6 Christ Entering Jerusalem, N. Hovnatanian
- 7 Hovnan Horotnetsi, N. Hovnatanian
- 8 Crucifixion, Hovnatanian Bros.
- 9 Avetun: The Annunciation, S. Lehatsi
- 10 Sahak Hairapet, S. Nersissian
- 11 Ijman Seghan
- 12 17th c Throne
- 13 S. Mesrop Varapet, S. Nersissian
- 14 Avetun: Gabriel, S. Lehatsi
- 15 Baptism, Hov. Hovnatanian

- 16 Nerses Shnorhali, H. Hovnatanian
- 17 Madonna and Child, H. Hovnatanian
- 18 Apostle Hakopos Zebetehai (Jacob)
- 19 Apostle Petros (Peter)
- 20 Apostle Poghos (Paul)
- 21 Apostle Bartughimeos (Bartholomew)
- 22 Apostle Tovma (Thomas)
- 23 Apostle Andreas (Andrew)
- 24 North Chapel
- 25 Astvatsatsin, anonymous
- 26 Baptismal Font
- 27 Founding of Echmiadzin, anonymous
- 28 Christ in the Garden, H. Hovnatanian
- 29 Christ Washing the Apostles' Feet, H. Hovnatanian
- 30 S. Thaddeus Apostle, H. Hovnatanian
- 31 Throne, 17th c
- 32 Railing, 17th c
- 33 Altar Frontal, N. Hovnatanian & sons
- 34 High Altar Apron: Cushion for the True Cross
- 35 Altar, Virgin and Child, N. Hovnatanian
- 36 S. Bartholomew Apostle, H. Hovnatanian
- 37 Last Supper, H. Hovnatanian
- 38 Apostle Simeon (Simon)
- 39 Apostle Tadevos (Thaddeus)
- 40 Apostle Hakopos Alpeai (Jacob)
- 41 Apostle Matevos (Mathew)
- 42 Apostle Hovhanes (John)
- 43 Apostle Pilippos (Phillip)
- 44 South Chapel
- 45 Christ Praying in the Garden, H. Hovnatanian
- 46 Coronation of the Virgin, H. Hovnatanian
- 47 Grigor Lusavorich, H. Hovnatanian

### CATHEDRAL MUSEUM

- a. Radiating crosses, flabellum and dove chrisn
- b. Silver chalices, 16th c reliquary
- c. Reliquary of the Thorn, scripture covers, chalices, crosses
- d. Psalters, reliquaries and silver crosses
- e. Reliquary of St. Andreas
- f. Meron Vessel
- g. Vazgen I, 20th c
- h. silver, gold and bronze reliquaries
- i. Annaprkich (All Savior) of Havuts
- Tar
- j. Relic of Geghard, Relics of Thaddeus and Bartholomew
- k. Chalices, 13th c Aragats S. N'shan Reliquary
- l. Patriarchal staffs

- m. King Tigran the Great Coin, Manuscripts
- n. manuscripts, Silver crosses with amber and jewels
- o. Shah Abbas I lamp
- p. Right Hand of John the Baptist Relic
- q. Vestments
- r. St. George Slaying the Dragon tapestry
- s. Censors and vessels
- t. Komitas
- u. Komitas Crown
- v. Vestments
- w. Collection of staffs
- x. Russian Icons

### CATHEDRAL WEST ENTRANCE

The **two paintings** flanking the main doors are of Ss. Poghos (1) and Petros (2), and the two grave stones underneath are inscribed in Grapar: (left of door) "1163 - 9th month... in 1405 Ter Aghexander Catholicos laid in the mausoleum November", and (right of door) "Son of Christ the only son Zraghksand'r Riiznadtsi - November 10".

### CATHEDRAL INTERIOR

Legend and Movses Khorenatsi's 5th century History of Armenia say that the first cathedral at Echmiadzin was erected by King T'rdat III and Grigor Lusavorich in two years (301-303).

According to these accounts, the exact location and design for the cathedral appeared to Grigor in a vision, where Christ descended to the Ararat Valley with a golden hammer in his right hand and struck the locations where four churches were to be built: three Martyria (two of which were to be dedicated to the martyrs Hripsimeh and Guyaneh), and the future cathedral at Vagharshapat.

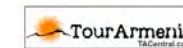
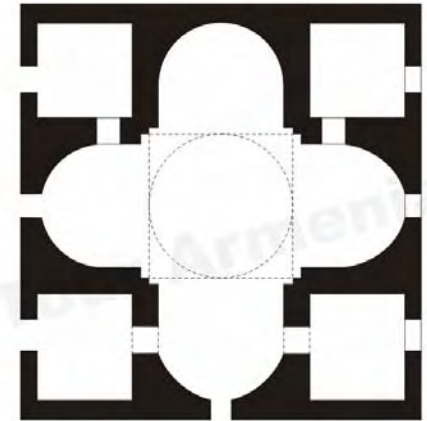
The "Ijman Seghan" or Altar of Descent at the center of the Cathedral is the location of Christ's appearance in the vision; hence the name Echmiadzin ('the descent of the Only Begotten').

The vision described the church composition while interpreting its elements. The main site was marked with a circular base of gold on which rested a column of fire with a capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light. The whole was surmounted with four pillars of fire and one central dome. The sites for the martyr's chapels were marked with red bases, columns of clouds, capitals of fire, and crosses of light; these columns were lower than the central column. The whole construction was surmounted by a canopied construction of cloud in the form of a dome.

### LAYOUT

As you enter the church, look at the floor plan. The original cathedral was intended as a physical duplication of Grigor's vision, and is believed to have had a quadruple apse (cruciform) hall with four corner chapels and entries on the west and southern sides. The whole was surmounted by five pointed domes; four in the corner and one central.

Close off the corners of the present church; imagine the entire structure as a square with very thick walls and one window, and you have what many consider the original design (See Figure 1).



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[Figure 1]

However, there is some disagreement on this, with others saying that the original structure was a basilica, in keeping with the Greco-Roman style for Pagan temples in vogue at the time of the conversion. If true, then the building had little resemblance to Grigor's vision, and went through substantial changes when it was renovated in the 5th century.

### WAS ECHMIADZIN A FIRE TEMPLE?

Of course there was a fire temple on the site before the cathedral was erected—the fire pit under the main altar with its Greco-Roman pillars confirms the fact. However, some have asserted that the fire pit was added after the first church was built by 5th c. Sassanid Magis intent on subverting the new religion.

There is no historic record to back this up, and it is much more likely that—if the pit is 5th c—the magi re-erected an existing one, since the country was steeped in the practice at the time of conversion. But if they did, then the entire story of the first church is called to question, and the original cathedral was indeed the Greco-Roman temple that surrounds the fire pit—something no historian is willing to admit. It also flies in face of Grigor's vision for the cathedral, which first destroyed the old temple (Christ's hand strikes the spot with

golden hammer—destroying what was before) and then built a new.



Zoroastrian fire temple on 2nd c coin

And reading his vision carefully, an intriguing possibility arises, which may indeed confirm the fire pit story while preserving Grigor's vision. Pagan temples of this type were widespread and commonly designs, with an inner sanctum surrounded by Greco-Roman columns set on a pedestal. This suggest a basilica, not a cross form suggested in Grigor's vision.



Zoroastrian Fire Temple; note "columns of fire" in the corners.

But what if the design was a combination of several types? Look at the image below of a Zoroastrian Fire Temple in Iran. Note at its square outline, the four corner columns (with room

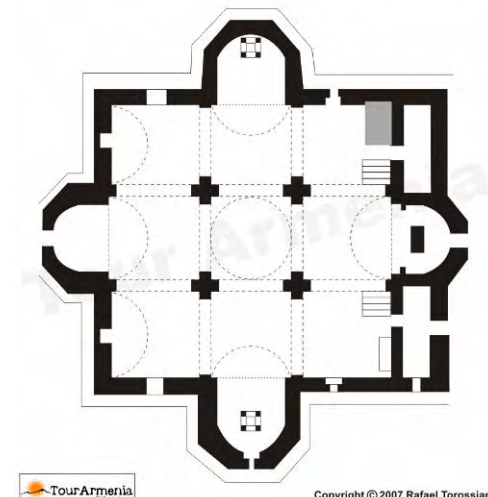
enough for annexes), and the four central archways. The building is topped by five points: four corner bases with fire pits and a central modified dome.

Now, close off the four arches (with semicircular apses) and place a window or doorway in three of the closed arches. Replace the upper fire pits with four pointed domes with a larger pointed dome in the center, and then look again at Figure 1.

Reread Grigor's description of the church as "*a column of fire with a capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light.*" No look at this figure of a 3rd c fire temple:

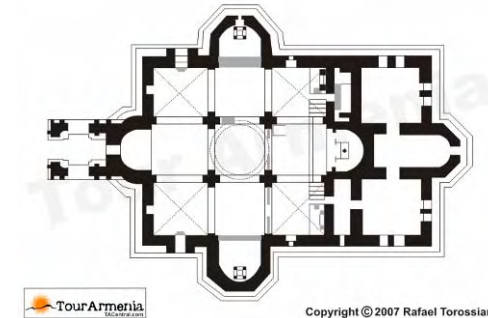
#### 5TH CENTURY RENOVATION

When the church was rebuilt in 484-486 into a central plan with corner niches, the four semicircular apses were extended out from the walls, and two chapels were added on the North and South sides, flanking the main altar. That is essentially the church as it exists now, except it had a smaller wooden dome which was replaced by the current one in 618. Of the original building, only small multi-colored blocks in the altar apse (remnants of gilded stone mosaics) and the bases of four pylons which were used as the inner abutments of the central-dome building. (See Figure 2)



[Figure 2]

Now add the 18th c bell tower, the church museum behind the main altar, and the results of a 1955-57 renovation when the pagan fire pit was discovered under the main altar, the structure and foundation were reinforced, the floor was marbled, and the murals were restored. This is the building you see now. (Figure 3)



[Figure 3]

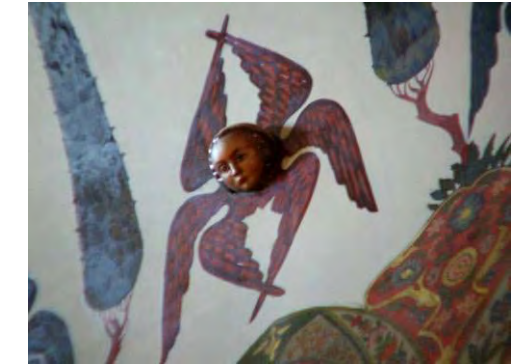
#### DÉCOR

The overall decoration of the Echmiadzin Cathedral is tied to the Hovnatanian family of painters. The first of these is the painter Naghash Hovnat (1661-1722), who was also a poet and scribe of Shorot as well as a bard. The painted dome is a portion of his work. Another is the Madonna painted on the **marble frontal** (33) of the high altar.

The entire composition was later completed by his descendants, including the Twelve Apostles by his sons Hakop (ca. 1757) and Harutiun (mid 18th century). During the reign of Catholicos Ghukas, Naghash's grandson Hovnat Hovnatanian (1730?-1801) continued decorating the Cathedral, adding most of the paintings. Assisting in his work were unknown Armenian apprentices. Paintings were also created for the cathedral by Hovnat's son Mkrtum (1779-1846).

Also as you enter, you will see a repeated pattern of **cherubs** with six wings. Gold leaf sets off the each face against a deep color tone. The number 12 is repeated throughout the dome: twelve windows in the supporting drum, twelve winged angels above each window, twelve 'trees of life' pointing to the inner circle of the dome. The color scheme moves from more earthly tones at the lower edge to blue and gold and green as the design reaches the upper dome, with red and gold delineating the inner design. Unfortunately years

of candle and incense smoke hide much of the detail, and the interior is poorly lit.



Like the frescos and marble paintings, canvas paintings are almost exclusively by the Hovnatanian family and school, except for the Avetun diptych facing the entrance: **Archangel Gabriel** (14) and **The Annunciation** (9), which were painted by Stepanos Lehatsi (?-1689), and Stepanos Nersissian's (1815-1884) portraits of **Mesrop Mashtots** (13) and **Sahak Partev** (10).

For many, the classical depictions will wear thin, but it may help to know that these paintings represent the bulk of Armenia's artistic efforts in the 18th c, before more secular and western influences captures artists' attention during the Russian Imperial Era. Without it, the later romantic painting might not have occurred as suddenly (and on such an epic scale) as it did.



Interspersed with traditional themes like Hovnat Hovnatanian's **Madonna and Child** (17), **Baptism** (15), **Christ Washing the Apostles'**

**Feet** (29), **The Last Supper** (37) and **Coronation of the Virgin** (46) are purely Armenian subjects such as the anonymous **The Madonna with John the Baptist and Grigor the Illuminator**, and Hovnatanian's **Grigor the Illuminator** (47), **S. Thaddeus the Apostle** (30), **S. Bartholomew the Apostle** (36), **S. Nerses Schnorhali** (16), Naghash Hovnatanian's **Hovhan Hovnetsi** (7), and the anonymous **The Founding of Echmiadzin** (27).

Included in **The Founding of Echmiadzin** are pictures of Armenian kings, from the first king Haik to a contemporary of Christ named Apk'ar, to the figures between T'rdat the Great and Khosrov. Two altars face the main entrance to the church. The one in front is the **Ijman Seghan** (11), or Altar of Descent, where Christ is believed to have struck the earth with his golden hammer in S. Grigor's vision. The lower edge of the marble platform is painted with tongues of fire. Originally the altar had a marble canopy set on pillars, which was moved to the high altar at Guyaneh Vank.

To the left of the Ijman Seghan is an elaborately carved **17th c. throne** (12), with a model of the cathedral on the canopy. It was a gift from the Roman pope to the Catholicos Yeghiazar.



The **High Altar** (34) in front of the Ijman Seghan is called the Cushion for the Holy Cross. A relic of the true cross is believed to be within the reliquary just below the painting of the **Virgin Mary and the Christ Child** (35). Note that the crosses on the columns on either side of the altar emphasize the number 3, and that each end of the cross incorporates 3 design points (for the three natures of God).

The **frontal decoration** (33) were painted with gold leaf detail and feature the 12 apostles, the

Virgin and Child, S. Stepanos on the left, and S. Piliptos (Philip) on the right. Repeated use of cypress-like trees reinforces the tree of life effect in the dome.



A **second throne** (31) is to the left of the high altar, and was probably made in the city of Ak'n, donated to Echmiadzin in 1712. It is heavily gilt with gold leaf, the columns and side panels covered with mother of pearl. Both thrones are used by the Catholicos when he attends service.



North and South Chapels **paintings of the apostles** include those of Ss. Thaddeus (39), Paul (20), and Bartholomew (21), who are believed to have preached in the provinces of Siunik and Goghtn (present day Nakhichevan) ca. 100 . They are also believed to have been killed by King Sanatruk Arshakuni who considered the conversions a danger to his power: among those who converted were members of the court and his sister, killed with other early converts. The Armenian church is an Apostolic Church, tracing its roots to these Saints.

## CATHEDRAL MUSEUM - ՄԱՅՐ ՏԱՃԱՐԻ ԹԱՆԱԳԱՐԱՆ (Մայր Տաճարի թանգարան)

Enter the museum on the south side of the high altar through the door under the painting **Grigor Lusavorich Taken from the Tree**.

The museum is closed during services, otherwise open Tuesdays through Sundays from 9 am to 5 pm. No admission, but guides encourage donations. The museum also has the entrance to the Pagan crypt, which may or may not be open to the public (the church wavers from admitting to denying the existence of the Pagan Fire Pit underneath the Ijman Seghan).

**South Hall** The museum houses but a portion of the church treasury, but is still impressive with its collection of relics, artifacts, church vestments and tapestries. It is not possible to describe each item in detail, but the most notable items on display are (by display case):

a. 18th century **Flabellum and Dove Chrism**. The flabellum is rimmed with bells which ring during the Eucharist.

b. **Reliquary of Noah's Ark** of silver and gold.

c. The centerpiece is the **Reliquary of the Thorn of Christ**. Silver and gilt Scripture covers, chalices and crosses.

d. **Psalters**, reliquaries and silver crosses.

e. **Relic of St. Andreas**.

f. **Meron Vessel**, 19th century

g. **Painting of Vazgen I**, 20th century

h. Among the silver, gold and bronze reliquaries and crosses is a small wooden panel, the 9th-10th century **Amnaprkich** (All Savior) of Havuts Tar which represents Christ's descent from the cross. In the center of this composition is Jesus with cross-adorned halo, long curly hair, being lowered by two workmen, one holding a pair of pliers to pull the spikes out. The overall artistic concept as well as the details resembles Gothic sculpture.

i. One the most impressive display cases hold **The Relic of Geghard** in a 1687 silver reliquary. "Geghard" means "spear", and the relic is believed to be the spear that pierced Christ's side. The relic was originally kept in Geghard Monastery (Vank). The two gold reliquaries hold the Relics of St.

Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, a gift from Pope John Paul II .

j. Among the silver chalices from the 17th-19th centuries is the 13th c **S. N'shan Reliquary**, originally housed at Saghmsovank.

k. **Patriarchal staffs** of silver, wood, ivory, gold and inlay.

l. **Coins**. The oldest coins in the treasury collection date from the 5th century BCE. Early coins were struck in Greece and Asia Minor, using Greek and Hellenistic figures. Hellenistic Coins are silver struck with the portraits of Alexander of Macedonia and the Seleucid kings. The center piece is the King Tigran the Great Coin, from the 1st. c BCE.

m. **Manuscripts** from the 14th-16th centuries, silver crosses encrusted with amber and jewels.

## EAST HALL

n. **Shah Abbas I lamp**, 17th c gift from the Shah to the church.

o. **Right Hand of John the Baptist Relic** and the Right Hand of Thaddeus, both of gilded silver with filigree and jewels. The hand is held with the tip of the middle finger touching the tip of the thumb. The circle formed represents the world, while the three remaining fingers symbolize the trinity.

p. **17th-19th centuries Vestments** of silk, gold and silver thread, beaded with pearls and jewels.

q. **1799 St. George Slaying the Dragon**, hand woven tapestry from India, measuring 63 sq. meters.

**Pagan Crypt**. The entrance to the crypt is directly behind the large tapestry on the inner east wall. Ask to be let in, if you look like a tipper, they might do, though lately they have been denying admittance (sometimes, denying the existence of the fire pit under the main altar). The crypt was discovered in the 1950's by workers shoring up the foundations. The fire pit with remnants of classical column bases was the temple over which T'rdat built the first cathedral ca. 303-311 . Some kind of temple has been at the spot from at least the early Bronze Age, attested to by the layout of the Pagan inner sanctum, identical to those found in early Bronze Age sites at Mokhra Blur, Adablur and Metsamor, nearby.

The church has never been comfortable with the site's existence, one time denying its existence before Soviet era archeologists published their excavation findings, with pictures. Still, they never openly publicized the site, reluctantly opening the door to the pit for (persistent) enquiring visitors. Lately they seem to have resorted to their previous form, removing the key to the door and even telling some one unsuspecting visitor we talked to that the pit never existed in the first place! Ask, and be persistence, you may just be the lucky one to gain entry.

#### NORTH HALL

r. **17th-18th century silver and bronze Censors** and vessels. The crystal crosses date from the 10th century and they include the Altar Cross of Ani (966)

s. **Bust of Komitas**, based on death mask.

t. **Komitas Crown** on the center shelf.

u. **18th-19th cc. Vestments**

v. **Collection of staffs**. One of the most unique symbols developed by the Armenian church is found in its staffs. Repeated use of the Vishap (dragon, which in old Armenia was a snake-like fish) motif evolved into Christian symbolism on the staff mounts. The designs are very close to those found on dragon stones from pagan times.

The demons are always framing a central cross that was mounted above, or formed into a spiral pattern. Stunning examples of how symbolism remained while exterior design changed are two spiral staffs.

A 17th century gold staff is surmounted by six snakes entwined together so that only their heads are free. Close to it is a 19th -century staff that has reduced the realistic picture of the snakes to a baroque fantasy of gilded blooms and leaves. But look closer and you will still find the six snakes; the 'heads' are the gilded flowers, the leaves their jaws, and they are swallowing or ejecting the next head of blooms.

w. **Russian Icons**, 17th-18th century.

➡ To continue the tour, exit cathedral and proceed W to the T'rdat gate and the Residence Quarter.

#### THE RESIDENCE QUARTER - ՎԵՅԱՐԱՆԻ ԶԱՐՈՐԴ (Վեհարանին քարոդը)

Patriarch Church Secretariat, tel. 517123.

The Residence Quarter houses the **Old Residence** (32), the **New Residence** (36), Offices and the **Treasury Museum** (37).



The Residence Quarter is on the western side of T'rdat Gate. A guard station is on the southern side of the gate. They don't keep official hours at the Old Residence, but we were told to come by in the mornings and early afternoons during the week, and after High Service (about 1 pm) on Sundays.

Only invited visitors are allowed to view the Old Residence as long as they are escorted, but most are refused entry to the New Residence and Treasury Museum (reserved for bigwigs and donors). Sometimes they do allow walk-in visitors, but you need permission and an escort to get past the guard. Ask around the compound for permission to enter the museum. Many guards do not speak English, so ask "Karogh em aitselel hin veharanuh?" (kah-GHO ehm ai-tseh-LEL heen veh-hah-RAHN-uh/ 'May I visit the Old Residence?').

The effort is well worth it, since the Old Residence is probably the most interesting museum in the complex, presented in much the way it was when in use as the office and residence for the Mother See during the 18th-19th centuries.

#### RESIDENCE QUARTER KHACHKARS

The quarter itself holds some beautiful Khachkar examples:

35a. **Sodk Khachkar**, XVI c.

#### Residence Quarter



35b. **Geghard Khachkar**, XIII c. Red tufa with tree of life opening to twelve spirals. The ends of the cross are formed from a continuous geometric knot pattern, and the sun disk is made from two birds with their necks intertwined.

35c. **Geghard Khachkar**, XII-XIII cc.

35d. **Geghard Khachkar**, XIII c.

35e. **Noradus Khachkar**, 1745

35f. **Aghjots Khachkar**, 1278 Deep geometric patterns forming a patchwork of crosses in the frame surround the central cross with two smaller ones resting on a large tree of life.

38. **Winged Khachkar**, XVII-XVIII cc.

39. **Hovhanavank Khachkar** by Vardan, 1171

40. **Khachkar**

41. **Gladzor Khachkar**, 1279

42. **Hairavank Khachkar**, 9th c.

43. **Sodk Khachkar**, 1297

44. **Gladzor Khachkar**, 1296

45. **Jugha Khachkars**

A **Jugha**, 1602

B **Jugha**, by Grigor, 1602

C **Jugha**, 1601

D **Jugha**, 1602

E **Jugha**, 1602

➡ To continue the tour, proceed to old residence (32).

#### OLD RESIDENCE - ԳԻՆ ՎԵՅԱՐԱՆ (Գին Վեհարան)

This 1736 building was both home and office for the Mother See until the New Residence was completed in 1962. In 1971 it was converted into a museum to house artifacts and treasures of the church.

#### OUTSIDE

There is a small courtyard outside with five Old Juga Khachkars and an animal icon from the 1st millennium BCE. The Khachkars are examples from the old Armenian quarter in Jugha:

a. **Khachkar**, Old Juga, 1603. The cross is carved like the frame of church window. Top panel shows seated Christ with geometric designs on both sides. Bottom panel has kneeling figure of donor in front of sun symbol.

b. **Khachkar** by Grigor, Old Juga, 1603. Masterpiece of geometric design with cross in a 'window case'. Top panel shows four supplicants on either side of enthroned Christ seated over the four evangelists.

c. **Khachkar**, Old Juga, 1603. Deeply etched cross in gothic-style window representation, with double bodied winged horse and kneeling angels in top panel.

d. **Khachkar**, Old Juga, 1603. Five crosses in top panel, memorial carving of prince on horse at bottom.

e. **Khachkar**, Old Jugha, 1603. Geometric sun symbol has design echoed in side panels and the stylized tree of life on either side of the cross. The Persian influence is clearly seen in the repeated shapes and the florid details.



There is also an exquisite wooden **khachkar panel** inside the portico, lower level. It is unbelievably intricate in its design and execution, and sadly, deteriorating to the degree that museum staff are afraid to move it indoors for fear of it crumbling. It is 18th-19th c (dating unsure). See it now before it evaporates.

## INSIDE

Enter through an antechamber which holds a variety of silver and bronze Meron Vessels and ceremonial pitchers used to pour fragrant essences from Kilikia, Armenia and Balasah. Also in the antechamber is a 13th -century khachkar.

The main residence is up a flight of stairs flanked by five large **paintings**, *Christ in Gethsemane* (Arshakvert), *The Annunciation*, "Voghph" (Pahlevi, 17th c), *The Crucifixion*, and a large 1835 *Last Supper*.

## THE OFFICE

The Office is left as the Catholicos Gevorg VI (r. 1945-1954) used it. When you enter this space, you go back in time to the lives of 20 Catholicos. The floors are covered with 16th-18th cc. **carpets**, the walls are hung with early 19th c. Mkrtum Hovnatanian paintings and others of Gevorg VI, Khoren Murahakian (reputedly killed by order of Stalin in 1938), Gevorg IV, Martiros Izmilian and Nerses Ashtaraketsi.

The **Hovnatanian paintings** include Aram Takavor (King), T'rdat Takavor, Tigran Takavor and Agat Takavor. Display cases show vestments, gold and silver implements, and a collection of

staffs in ivory, silver, gold and gold with imbedded jewels.

## SECOND ROOM

This small room has a display showing objects belonging to Khrmian Hairik, including a large amber *tsbekh* and silver watches. An 18th c mosaic is opposite as is a collection of miters and silver crosses. The carpet you are walking on is a *Kharabi* and like the icon to your right, is 17th - century.

## KHOHANOTS (KITCHEN)

The old kitchen has a large fireplace set into a niche on the far wall. In front is a display of china, samples of those used by each Catholicos who lived here. On the walls are photographs and paintings including a small one, Nerses Ashtarak Meets the Russian Army, which was a favorite of Vazgen I (no doubt an inspiration during the Soviet period).

A very small display case shows photos and letters belonging to Komitas, barely a fraction of the collection from the old Komitas Museum which was closed to make way for the Gevorkian Seminary. 18th century manuscript miniatures also line the walls.



## DINING HALL

The most striking part of the Dining Hall is the large 18th century **wall hanging** (a) with scenes from the bible. The painting was made by wood-print. It is as detailed as an embroidered tapestry. At the far end of the hall is the 1791 **tapestry** Son of Christ (b), incredibly detailed and intricate. The two 18th century **paintings** flanking the tapestry are David Anahaght (Invincible) (c) and Movses Khorenatsi (d), by Hovnatanian Hovnatanian (1730?-1801). **Icons** (e), **tapestries** and **woodblock paintings** (f) line the other walls, as do **glass**

**cases** (g) holding gold and silver embroidered vestments, gold, silver and jeweled scapulars, crosses, miters and belts. The 18th century hand-woven carpet is based on a dragon design.

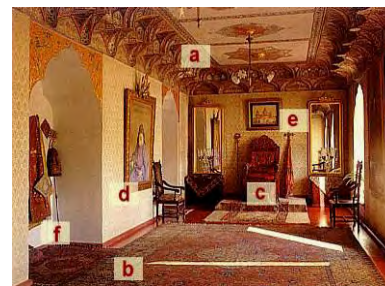
The most amazing piece is usually missed by visitors. The black wrought iron **chandelier** (h) is so intricate and smoothly executed it is often considered machine made. Adorned with clumps of grapes and delicate vine tendrils, the piece is actually 11th c. made for an Armenian prince in Kilikia.

## THRONE ROOM

The centerpiece of the residence is the throne room, where the Catholicos held council and met dignitaries. The **ceiling** (a) is lined with two tiers of oriental pilaster work, covered with frescoes painted by Hakop and Harutiun Hovnatanian between 1739-1740.

The frescoes are incredibly detailed using geometric patterns then in favor at the Persian court, yet on closer look they are actually from Armenia's medieval manuscript tradition. They have never been retouched. The oriental **carpets** (b) were made by Armenian weavers in the 18th century and follow the patterns established by Hovnatanian on the arches.

The **throne** (c) was carved in 1838. The paintings in the throne room are **portraits** of Gevorg IV, Khrmian Hairik (d) (Y. Tadevosian, 1900), Markar Catholicos (who brought Komitas to Echmiadzin), Hovsep Aghutian, and The Vision of Grigor the Illuminator (Y. Tadevosian, 1901) and an embroidered Echmiadzin Cathedral **tapestry** (e).



In the small room off the throne room are two pieces of note: a 16th century **chandelier** using a dragon design, and the 18th century walnut **chair** in the corner. Carved from one piece of wood by a Spanish Armenian, the chair is an intricate web of design, resting on carved lion heads.

➡ To continue the tour, exit old residence and proceed to the New Residence (36).

## NEW RESIDENCE - ՆՈՐ ՎԵՅՆԱՐԱՆ (Նոր Վեհարան)

The New Residence is both the home and office for the Catholicos for All Armenians. Open by invitation only. To try your luck, call the Monastery Office (5-34-34), where English speaking staff is available.

In case you do get in, a few pieces to look for:



The first floor **vestibule** and **grand stairway** are rather impressive, using Armenian stonework to a sumptuous degree. At the top of the stairway are two Khachkars of note:

One of the most beautiful Khachkars ever sculpted is the 1308 **Noravank Khachkar** by Momik. The design features 14 geometric patterns on the sides of the cross, a sun burst of patterns below the cross, with three figures in bas relief in the top pattern. The intricate design and incisions into the stone to create the lace pattern is mind boggling.

The 14th century **Artsakh Khachkar**, brought from Nagorno Karabakh, the Khachkar almost rivals the Momik Khachkar with its deeply cut intricate geometric pattern. Two angels are shown immediately below the cross, three above. Beautiful oriental details that is uniquely Armenian.

## THRONE ROOM

The Throne room of the new residence has white marble floors with polished cream cover stones on the walls. At the top of the wall are representations of pilgrimage churches in Armenia, including Ani, Zvartnots, and of course, the

cathedral. The throne is located at one end of the room.

The 1983 **Vardanank Tapestry**, by G. Khanjian is in a large hall opposite the throne room. On the end wall is a huge tapestry. Hand woven, it depicts the triumph of Armenians over adversity, and includes a who's who of Armenian history. The entire design and complexity is extraordinary, as is the mammoth size.

The 1448 **Holy Banner of Grigor the Illuminator** depicts on one side the saint, who is blessing with his right hand while holding the Bible in his left. Beside him are T'rdat III and St. Hripsimeh. The other side of the banner illustrates Christ enthroned, holding the Gospel in his left hand while his right is held in benediction. Over him are pictures of the sun and the moon.

➡ To continue the tour, proceed to Treasury Museum (37).

## TREASURY MUSEUM - ՓԱՆԶԵՒԻ ՊԱՆԳՐԱՆ (Փանծեի Թանգարան)

Here's where your eyes pop out (those lucky few who gain entry, that is). The Treasury Museum houses an extensive collection of artifacts and gifts given to the Echmiadzin church. The collection is truly astounding, both for its rare and precious collection, and for the depth and breadth of the holdings.

The museum is open to invited guests only between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., by special arrangement (see [Residence Quarter](#) p. 32 for details). Even if you can't get in, use these notes to further understand the artifacts and relics on display in the Cathedral and Old Residence museums.

The following is a short introduction and description of the art forms and objects in the museum.

### METAL ART

A variety of metals such as iron, copper, bronze, gold, and silver were used in Armenia for metal art. In addition to smelting, engraving, and stamping, metal art included threading, meshing, granulation and burnishing.

Metal Art at the museum includes incense holders, chalices, cups, belts, Vargas's, crosses, staffs, crowns, rings, and nimbuses, cymbals, chandeliers, candelabra, and lamps.

Gold and silver smith work includes the Khotakeratz St. N'shan, commissioned in 1300 by Prince Ichi Proshian. The ornamentation of its blinds and the delicacy of its engravings are examples of master goldsmiths.

Others include a 1443 closet and the 17th century St. N'shan of Aragats.

Engraved metal work includes the **1656 paten (wafer box)**, and Gospel covers and copper bowls prepared by the workers of Caesura and Tokat.



Smelted objects include a 12th century cross, as well as a number of chalices.

### WOODCARVING

Wood was widely used in the making of lecterns, church doors, frames and book bindings. In the early medieval period the palaces at Dvin and Ani featured engraved wooden panels. Armenian churches and monasteries used wooden doors decorated with fine artistic shapes (such as at the Arakelots monastery in Mush, Tatev, Sevan, and Theodosia) on which geometric and floral designs were carved along with thematic pictures.

The best examples of these in the Museum are the wooden Column Capitals from the Arakelots Church of Sevan. Among the wooden crosses is a 13th century Cross. The cross has a fine mesh like engraving and is fastened to a metal handle on which there is an engraving of the crucifixion. The work is detailed with gold and precious gems.

### RUG WEAVING

The oldest woven rugs uncovered in Armenia were found at Artik and Karmir Blur (Urartian period). Armenian rug weaving used wool and natural dyes, such as alizarin (or madder) and Vordan Karmir or Vordan Red, which was made from a special type of beetle only found in Armenia. Vordan Red was prized throughout Europe and the Middle East for its vivid hue and ability to last for centuries.

Traded through Europe and the Middle East, Armenian woven rugs developed into separate schools of design, and it is possible to distinguish between those made in Caesurae, Sebastia, New Julfa, Lvov, Vaspurakan, Goghtn, Artsakh, Siunik, Kars and the Ararat Valley.

The most famous are the dragon rugs which, as the name suggests, were woven with intricate dragon designs. The oldest known dragon rug dates from the fifteenth century, which was probably the beginning of the golden era for Armenian rug weaving.

In addition to dragon rugs, Armenians developed other types of rugs including Gohar rugs, Eagle rugs, and Serpent rugs. 18th century Armenian rugs and travel rugs woven in Artsakh are featured in the museum collection. Beautiful plant motif rugs from Artsakh, Siunik, and Vaspurakan regions are also included.

### EMBROIDERY

Armenians developed a variety of regional embroidery patterns and styles at embroidery centers in Vaspurakan, Marash, Aintap, Ararat, Karin, Shirak-K'ghin, Siunik, Kilikia, Cappadocia, Tbilisi, Istanbul, Smyrna, Bursa, Crimea and Astrakhan.

Religious needlework falls into three groups, Manuscript and Book Covers; Curtains, Banners and Embroidered Cloth; and Ritual Vestments.

The most impressive examples use intricate needlework on deep red silk with contrasting colored silk, silver and gold thread, accented with pearls and precious stones.

Also impressive are embroidered scenes from scripture and religious characters, the Madonna, Christ, and the Evangelists. Particular masterpieces on display include the Miters of Catholicos Khachatur and Catholicos Pilipos; miter covers showing Grigor the Illuminator in Vestments; and armlets, which have a complex needlework pattern depicting scenes of The Annunciation and Baptism.

Also included in the collection is a chasuble made in China and embroidered buckles with precious and semiprecious stones; and ritual dragon slippers.

### IMPRINT ART

Imprinting is one of the oldest forms of Armenian applied art. Patterns were carved on oak or pear

wood and fabrics were imprinted with dyes applied to separate wooden casts. Wool, cotton, silk, and other fabrics were used, while dyes were made from animal, plant, and mineral sources.



Armenian imprinted cloth reached Russia and other European countries via caravan routes. Particularly prized were Armenian fabrics imprinted with the Vortan Karmir. Van, Shorot, New Julfa, Istanbul, and Madras were among the most important centers of Armenian imprinting.

Samples of Armenian imprint art can also be found in the internal binding of manuscripts showing an early mastery of the art form.

The imprinted altar curtains preserved in the collection at the museum are of the late period, prepared in the 17th century in Tokat, Madras and Tbilisi. The curtains depict scenes of St. George slaying the Dragon, the Founding of Echmiadzin, or multiple themes such as the Glory of Christ, the Annunciation, the Crucifixion, the Ascension, Adam and Eve and the Sacrifice of Abraham.

## MINIATURES

The miniature is one of the most beautiful forms of Armenian Christian art. The first samples of this art from the museum date back to the 5th century. The museum has a large number of miniature manuscripts preserved from the 9th to the end of the 12th c. that show an evolution of the form as well as various schools.



By the end of the 12th century, after the fall of the Bagratuni and Artsruni dynasties, new schools of miniature art begin to take shape. The most important of these are those at Kilikia and Vaspurakan. The Kilikia school lasted 200 years and developed at a number of centers near Byzantium. The Vaspurakan style developed in Greater Armenia and lasted into the 18th century.

The illuminated manuscripts of Echmiadzin are essentially of the later period, beginning in the 14th century, and incorporating regional and European influences. There are also manuscripts, such as the Kiutahia Bible (1641) on which Byzantine influence can be seen.

The oldest illuminated manuscript at Echmiadzin is the N. 194 Bible, written in Adana (Kilikia) in 1293. It contains the pictures and name sheets of the four evangelists, a variation of the Kilikian School. A strong Kilikian influence appears in the Isfahan Manuscripts written in the 17th century, and the name sheets from manuscript N. 16 (Sharaknots, dated 1654) with the peacocks and bird letters pictured in magnificent Kilikian blue. In comparison with the other schools, Kilikian miniature art is distinguished by a deft representation of human movement and the uniqueness of colors where gold, blue, red, and green predominate.

The collection also includes miniatures influenced by Gothic Art. These include two Bibles, Ns. 54 and 462 (Constantinople, 1619), which combine Kilikian with late Gothic influence.



The 1374 Grigor Tatevatsi Bible includes miniatures added by Khachatur Kesaratsi. At the end of the manuscript is Tadevatsi's rhymed colophon (page 329 and on) and a poem by Hovhannes Vorotnetsi (pages 327a and 328b). In conjunction with these texts the manuscript also displays frontal portraits of Hovhannes Vorotnetsi and Grigor Tatevatsi, represented as saints under the arches. The tradition of portraying

contemporaries and historical figures in manuscripts evolved from the 11th century, beginning with the Kars Bible.

## PAINTINGS

Other than those in the cathedral and Old Residence, the museum collection of paintings includes amazing seascapes by Hovhannes Aivazovski (1817-1900), and representative work by a who's who of Armenian painting: Gevorg Bashindjaghian (1857-1925), Vartkes Sureniantz (1860-1921), S. Khachatryan, V. Makhokhian, H. Pushman, E. Shahineh, H. Alkhazian, Martiros Sarian, H. Kojoyan, S. Arekelian, J. Orakian. p. Topalian, Carzou, A. Galentz, G. Khandjian, Hakop Hakopian, among others.

## COINS

Included in the collection are 2nd c. BCE Thrace coins, Roman Republic dinars from the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE depicting Victoria, Mars, Jupiter and the Roman Twins, with Latin inscriptions; Roman Imperial coins depicting portraits of Augustus Octavius, Nero, Domitianus, Marius Trajanus, and Marcus Aurelius; 2nd c. Roman coins; Late Roman coins from the 4th- 5th centuries; Herodotos;



Parthian coins with portraits of Arshakid rulers Mithridat, Orontes, Sanatruk, Vartan and Vagharsh; Sassanid coins minted in the 2nd-3rd centuries, Late Sassanid coins bearing pictures of



Khosrov Anushirvan and Khosrov Parvis, widely used in Armenia and neighboring countries; Byzantine coins from the 12th century in gold and copper (copper was reserved for internal trade); Umayyad and Abbasid currencies minted in the 9th- 10th centuries in Iraq and Iran; Abbasid coins minted in the cities of Dvin and

Partav; Seljuk and Mongol coins from the 12th-13th centuries, including those minted with the Christian cross, struck in 1180 during Hulagu's reign; Armenian Kilikia coins, with almost all the kings of Kilikia represented;

Copper coins from the Safavid, Ahajarian, and Afsharian dynasties in Iran (with Persian inscriptions struck in Yerevan); Silver and copper coins with Persian inscriptions struck in Tbilisi, Georgian coins (19th c) and coins from the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Western Europe and the Americas.

## END ECHMIADZIN COMPLEX.

➡ To continue: backtrack to Echmiadzin complex parking lot and follow the narrow street south of the parking lot as it winds right and then left past an old cemetery, then due south past a few houses. The next cross street is Issey les Moulineaux p. Turn right and the entrance is on the left in about 30 m.

## GUYANEH (GAYANE) VANK - ԳԱՅԱՆԵ ՎԱՆԵ (Գայանե Վանք) ▲

Located 300 meters south of Echmiadzin Cathedral Complex on Issy les Moulineaux p. The vank and church are open seven days a week. Opening time varies depending on whether an early service is held, but generally the complex is open from 9 am to dusk. No admission charge. S. Guyaneh Vank was built over the saint's 4th c. burial crypt between 630-641, and is one of the holiest shrines in the Armenian Church.



Guyaneh is a shrine, a museum and a working parish church, with a mataghatun (sacrificial house), and a lively group of parishioners. Go to the cathedral for high drama, Hripsimeh for quiet

reflection, and to Guyaneh to see how locals worship.

## BACKGROUND

In some legends about the early years of Christianity in Armenia, Guyaneh is described as Hripsimeh's wet nurse, but official church history marks her as the leader of the 39 maidens (a.k.a. "Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and the 37 maidens") who sought refuge at Vagharshapat from Roman persecution, and the first to be martyred, by stoning. Shortly thereafter Hripsimeh and the other maidens were tortured, beheaded and their bodies piled in a common burial plot. Clandestinely reburied by Christians, Guyaneh's body was supposedly lost until Grigor' vision where Christ showed the location for building the martyria (shrines) for both Guyaneh and Hripsimeh.

Originally a small stone crypt, the current Martyrion was built 387-428 under the patronage of the Catholicos Sahak I, (of the adoption of the Mashtots alphabet fame). The church was built between during the reign of Catholicos Yez'r (630-641), and represents the last major edifice by the church before the Arab invasion of Armenia (which began in 640).



As a side note, Yez'r (also known as Ezer) is notoriously known in Armenian history for having bowed temporarily in 632-633 to pressures by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius for a forced union of the Armenian church to the Byzantine Church. Having rejected the counsel of Chalcedon a century earlier, this temporary rapprochement by Yez'r, and his successor after the Arab advance, further divided the Armenian clergy and populace at a time when unity was required. Though built at roughly the same time, Guyaneh and Hripsimeh are very different in their styles and purposes.

Hripsimeh is clearly a shrine for pilgrims, and little of the monastery structure survives. Guyaneh was a working monastery and center for learning, and the surviving structures allow one to imagine what it must have been like in the golden days of Armenia's monastic period, when monasteries like Guyaneh were prominent as universities, libraries, scientific centers, and preservers of its glorious manuscript and miniature art.

## GUYANEH COMPLEX

As you enter the complex through the **main gate** (1), you pass through outer gardens and a small graveyard. Along the eastern wall are two long buildings, the **old seminary** (2), now a Sunday school, and the **rectory** (4), built in 1652, along with the **churchyard gate** (3).

## COURTYARD

The inner courtyard has a large garden and the church plaza. To your far right as you face the church is the **mataghatun** or sacrificial house (5). Matagh or sacrifice in Armenia continues much as it did in pre-Christian times, the faithful bringing sheep, doves or pigeons (as they can afford) to the orh'nakar or **bleeding stone** (6), which is about 20 meters from the church portico.



The church does not officially condone sacrifice, but it will bless the animals with salt outside the church. Long discounted by urban Armenians, the ritual is steeped in rural tradition, and is perhaps the strongest link between modern Armenia and its pagan past, performed as an act of thanks or intercession. The meat is divided into seventh's, distributed among seven needy families. Sacrificial sheep are slaughtered and dressed at the mataghatun, which also has a dining area.

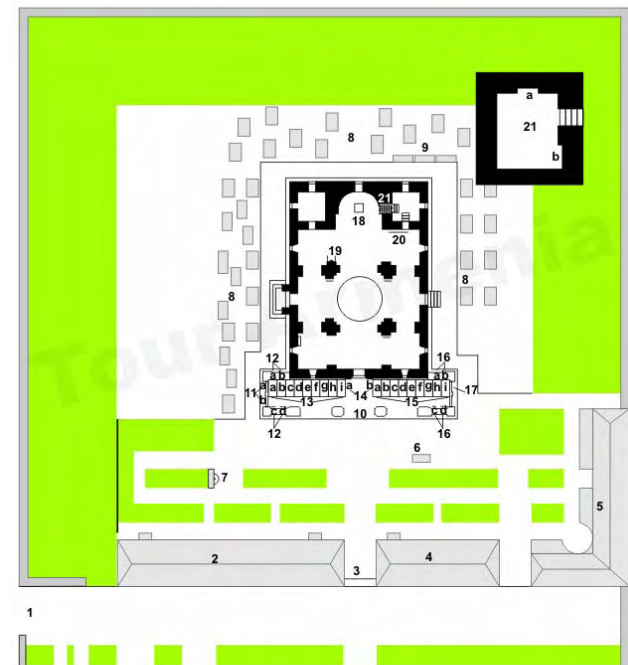
## GUYANEH MAP LEGEND

1. Main Gate
2. Seminary
3. Churchyard gate
4. Rectory
5. Mataghatun
6. Orhanakar
7. Fountain
8. Graveyard
9. Khachkars
10. Portico
11. North Khachkars
12. North Frescos
13. North Tombs
14. Door Khachkars
15. South Tombs
16. South Frescos
17. South Khachkars
18. Altar
19. Throne
20. S. Hripsimeh, 18th c.
21. Crypt Entrance
- a. Monument
- b. Relics

## Tomb Inscriptions:

- 13 a. "Shamaketsi Zorkocheh..."  
b. "Monument (to) Ter Ter Yeghiazar Aintapetsi 1682-1691"  
c. "Haik Gosar"  
d. "Catholicos Mateos Ist K. Polsetsit Died 21st August 1865"  
e. "Millikents Hovsep..."  
f. "The Prince killed...Russian Ambassador ...Georgia 1829 January 30th. In his grave 1829 April 26"  
g. "1817 November laid into the grave by the Catholicos' blessing"  
h. No inscription  
i. No inscription
- 15 a. No inscription  
b. No inscription  
c. "Ter Barsegh Pantsali - 1812 September 7"  
d. "1801 March 9 - Ter Hovsep Pantsali"  
e. "Tovma Yovsepian - 1842 First Prosecutor of Echmiadzin"  
f. "Ter Ghukas Catholicos December 8...(year missing)"  
g. "Ter Ter Minas A. Akchetsi - Catholicos 1751-1753"  
h. "Ter Ter Abraham B. M'shetsi - Catholicos 1730-1734"  
i. "Semeon Yerevantsi (from Yerevan) - Catholicos..."

## Guyaneh Vank



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A **fountain** (7) is located in front of the seminary building. Located on the north, east and southern sides of the church is a **graveyard** (8). Three old **khachkars** (9a, 9b, 9c) stand just beyond the southeast corner of the church.

### CHURCH EXTERIOR

The front **portico** (10) was constructed in 1683 and was covered with **frescos** (12, 16) in the Hovnatanian School (17th-18th cc). Fragments and sections can still be seen, though the ceilings were stripped to their brick inner layers long ago. Further damage to frescos occurred in the Soviet period, and those that remain were preserved during an extensive renovation in 1960-1962.

Two **khachkars** (14) flank the entrance under signs entitled "Singing Walls" asking visitors not to deface the remaining frescos with graffiti, since "these walls already have their stories".

The Northern and Southern ends of the portico have been closed off with walls imbedded with **khachkars** (11, 17) from the 10th and early 11th centuries. As you look at the bottom of the khachkars (especially the two large ones on the North end), you will see Armenian letters carved around the sun disk.

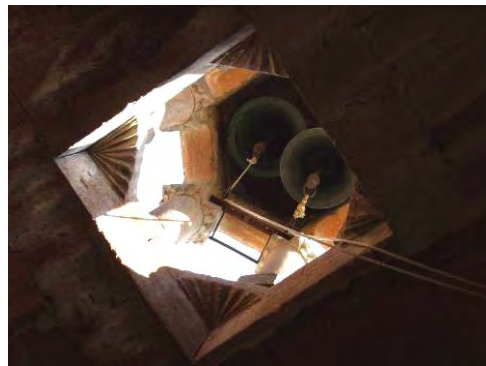


### DATING OLD KHACHKARS

The letters are actually numbers, using Mashtots' original counting system, where each letter of the alphabet represented a number between 1 and 9000.

Dates on stone monuments are often marked by the letters **ԹՎ** or the like, often with a line over them, indicating "t'vin" ("in the year") followed by one to four letters, each of which stands for a number based on its place in the Mashtots alphabet.

Medieval dating inscriptions are based on the Armenian Calendar system, which began in 552. To translate into years, add 551 to the dates found on early and middle medieval monuments. Later monuments (beginning in the 17th c. or so), adopted our "standard" dating system.



Having said all this, there are a number of exceptions to this rule, and you may wrong as much as you are right, since numbering and dating in Armenia was as subject to the dominating cultural calendar as anything else. When under Arab domination, the Islamic calendar system was imposed, when under Russian domination, the Gregorian calendar was in vogue. There are monuments that incorporate more than one dating system, including the Armenian Era. It can be confusing.

The northern **khachkar** on the left (11b) does not have the letters **ԹՎ**, and is inscribed **Ռ Ձ Ձ**, literally "1000+80+6", or the year 1086, either AE (Armenian Era) or 1637 which is unlikely for this work. The one on the right (11a) is inscribed **Թ Ջ Է** or (t'vin) 907 AE (Armenian Era), or 1458 in the Common Era.

**Khachkars** on the south end (17) have been defaced except for that on the lower right, which is inscribed **Թ Ռ Ի Ը**, literally "9-1000-20-8" in the old counting system, which signifies either "t'vin" or the 9th month of the 1028th year. Either interpretation is possible.

The portico also holds 18 **burial vaults** (13, 15) from the 17th-19th centuries including those for several Catholicos. The inscriptions are mostly written in Grapar, or old Armenian, which is something of a lost language, and is almost impossible to decipher to the average Armenian.

### GRAVESTONES

Among the inscriptions found on the gravestones, the **gravestone** on the north end of the portico (13f), stands reads in part, "The Prince killed...Russian Ambassador...Georgia in 1829 January 30th. In his grave 1829 April 26." Since this date was at the time of the Russian-Persian Wars and the beginning of Armenia's Czarist period, it seems this anonymous figure earned his place of prominence at Guyaneh as a member of the resistance.

### CHURCH INTERIOR

The church is a triple nave basilica and is distinguished from earlier churches with its integrated central dome. The 7th century was a period of architecture innovation as cruciform domed churches began to replace single, double and triple nave basilicas, and the great cylindrical cathedral at Zvartnots allowed Armenian architects to master large dome engineering.



Guyaneh is a transitional building between early medieval (early Christian) and middle or high medieval (first golden era), with the roof line imitating the cruciform style topped with a barrel dome of the later period, while the interior remains an earlier period basilica divided into three naves by support columns. Four large columns and their arches support the dome.

The most arresting image on entering the church is the 17th century marble canopy over the **altar** (18), which protected the Ijman Seghan at Echmiadzin Cathedral until brought to Guyaneh in the 1980's. The decorative design and the figures of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost are by the Hovnatanian family, and were painted directly on the marble, as was the Madonna and Child on the main altar piece, which

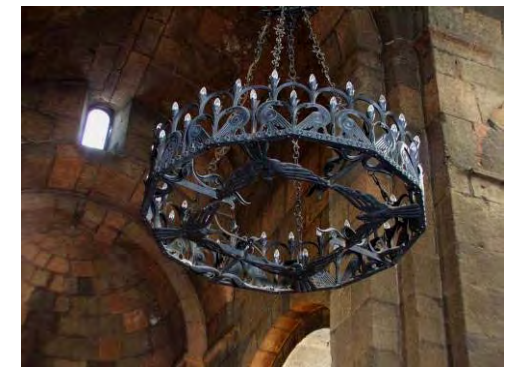
is a renovation of the original 7th century stone altar.

Other paintings in the church are from the 19th-20th centuries, except the large one hung above the entrance to the crypt. The **painting** of S. Guyaneh (20) hung over the entrance to the crypt is by Hovnatan Hovnatanian.

The Catholicos **Throne** (19) is from the 16th century, brought to Guyaneh when the mother of pearl throne in Echmiadzin Cathedral was restored in the 1980's. It is richly carved with biblical symbols and mounted like the other thrones with a model of the church as seen in Grigor's vision. Unique to Armenia is having a Catholicos throne in a church other than the Mother See, a sign of favor not lost on the members of this church.

Just under the dome is a wrought iron chandelier (under dome), designed in a ring of doves. Hripsimeh Vank has a chandelier just like it. Legend has it that the center point directly below the dome and chandelier is the location where a shaft of light in the shape of a cross appeared to Grigor in his vision, showing him the location of Guyaneh's relics. Another shaft of light is also believed to have appeared at the spot where Hripsimeh was buried, directly below its central dome.

That center point is believed by church workers to have curative powers, and one lively guide told us how the insane and people with seizures have stood under the chandelier and been cured. Even non believers have reported feeling a slight energy pulse by standing under the chandelier for a few moments. Truer than fiction? You decide.



## MARTYRIA

The entrance to the **crypt** (21) is to the right of the altar. The stones in the first room or inner chapel were in legend hand carried by T'rdat III from Mt. Ararat as penance for ordering Guyaneh's execution. Doubtful though that story is, they are among the stones used to build the first Martyrion in the 4th century.

Follow the steps to your left and you will enter the crypt, situated directly below the altar. The large black **monument** (21a), carved from a single block of marble and inscribed S. Guyaneh is often mistaken for the site of her grave. To the left of the entrance is a niche in the wall which is directly below the altar, and the actual location of the saint's **relics** (21b).

Our guide almost relished telling us the painting illustrating her martyrdom is not accurate. In fact, it was much more gruesome: Guyaneh's tongue was cut from the back of her throat before she was stoned to death, so that her cries would not disturb the king's sleep.

➡ Go back to Komitas H'raparak and walk, drive, taxi or bus (Zvartnots Bus # 1, 2, 3) the 2 kilometers E on Mashtots p. to **HRIPSIMEH VANK** (DD 40.16701 x 44.30954, elev. 875m)

## HRIPSIMEH VANK - ՀՐԻՍԻՄԵՆ ՎԱՆԶ (Հրիսիմեն Վանք) ▲

**NOTE:** Use **HRIPSIMEH VANK** plan for this visit. Hripsimeh is located 2 kilometers east of Komitas H'raparak on Mashtots p. . It is on the eastern edge of the city, just past the Echmiadzin bypass if approaching from Yerevan. Ease left as the bypass approaches to enter the city. The church and complex are on the right. The vank is open 9 am to 6 pm seven days a week.

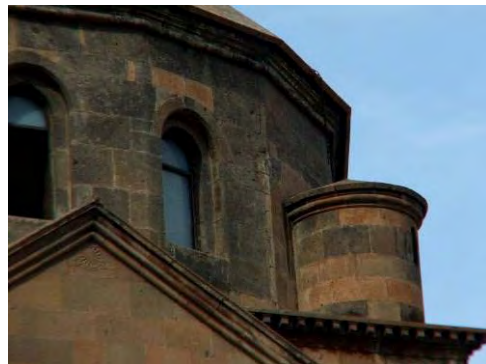


The Church is normally the first stop by tourists visiting Echmiadzin from Yerevan. It--and Zvartnots Cathedral, 7 kilometers further east--deserve to be the last, since they represent the last, and greatest triumphs of Armenia's sacred architecture in the 7th century, and were both pivotal in promoting Christianity during the long Pagan Wars.

Hripsimeh Church is built over the burial crypt of the martyr S. Hripsimeh, the maiden coveted by both the Roman Emperor Diocletian and the Armenian King T'rdat III. Hripsimeh is a UNESCO World heritage Site.

## BACKGROUND

Hripsimeh's martyrdom, as well as those of Guyaneh and 37 other Roman maidens precipitated King T'rdat's madness and later conversion to Christianity. As such, Hripsimeh is often cited as the determining factor in the conversion of the nation.



One tradition says that Hripsimeh was the daughter of a Roman nobleman, and was to be wedded to the Roman Emperor Diocletian. A Christian, Hripsimeh escaped with Guyaneh and the other maidens to Armenia. Diocletian sent a message to T'rdat ordering him to capture the maidens, offering Hripsimeh as a reward if T'rdat wanted her.

If not, he asked T'rdat to return Hripsimeh to Rome so he could have her. Hripsimeh is described in legend as the most beautiful maiden in the empire, and T'rdat fell madly in love with her at their first meeting.

One of the more interesting legends says that with each advance T'rdat was rebuked by Hripsimeh in

more and more eloquent ways. Suspecting Guyaneh of coaching escapes from his advances, T'rdat commanded his soldiers to silence the older maiden. They did this quite effectively, cutting off her tongue before stoning her to death. Hripsimeh and the remaining maidens were kept in the palace for several months while T'rdat attempted to persuade Hripsimeh to marry him.

However, Hripsimeh became more and more eloquent in her refusals, finally declaring she could not wed one when she was already promised to another. Furious, T'rdat demanded to know her suitor. "Christ," was the reply, and in a rage T'rdat had Hripsimeh and the rest of her entourage beheaded, their bodies buried in a common burial site.

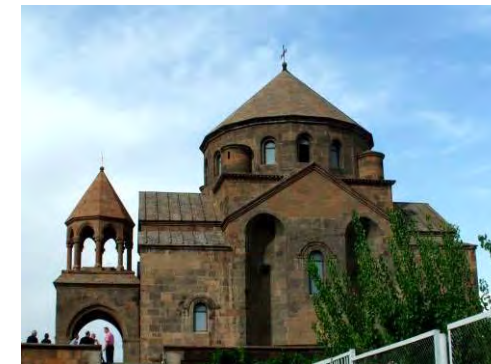
Just after this, T'rdat became gravely ill, raving like an animal. Medieval drawings and carvings depict his insanity by placing the head of a wild boar on his head, and the more vivid legends interpret this literally to mean he turned into a pig. His sister Khosrova dukht ("daughter of Khosrov"), herself a Christian, then had a dream where she was told that the only way to cure the king and save the nation was to release Grigor. She convinced T'rdat to free Grigor, setting the stage for the conversion.



The original martyrion was built in the 4th century over Hripsimeh's burial site and was reconstructed in the 5th century as a two story monument (a 5th-6th centuries picture of the monument can be found carved on the southeast stele at Odzun Vank in Northern Armenia).

The present church was built in 618 under the patronage of the Catholicos Komitas I. This was during the twilight of Armenia's first golden age, 20 years before the first Arab invasions brought a

violent end to an intense flowering of culture and independence. As such, the church is considered a crowning achievement of Armenian architecture, its proportions a perfect representation of the cosmos and sacred geometry for that time. The bell tower was added in 1790.



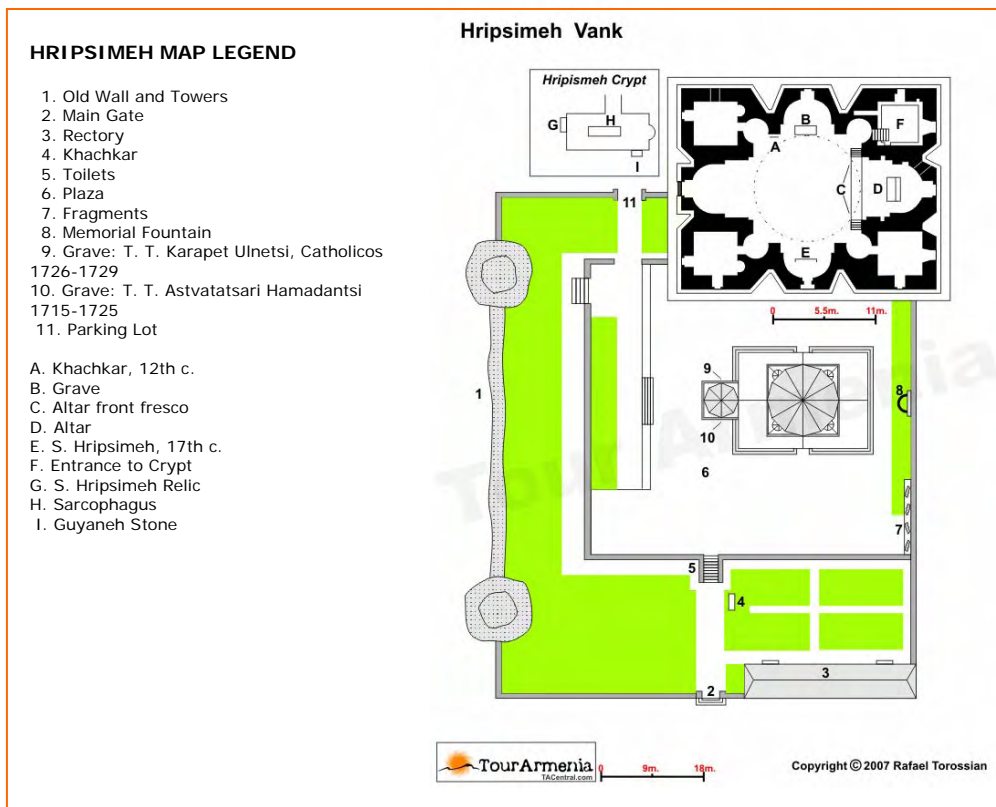
## COMPLEX

The fortress **walls and towers** (1), were originally built at the same time as the church, rebuilt numerous times, and are believed to have originally been more than 15 meters high. These standing are probably reconstructions from the 15-17th centuries. When first constructed, Hripsimeh was a fortress-vank. Persian and Roman invasions had already decimated the royal city of Echmiadzin-Vagharshapat, and complete conversion had not yet occurred.

Lying half way between Echmiadzin and Zvartnots (which was still a pagan temple at the time), Hripsimeh was literally a fortress for Christians in the wilderness.

As you enter the vank from Mashtots p. , you will pass the 18th century **rectory** (3), and a **khachkar** (4), date unknown. Immediately to your left, under the plaza are the only **public toilets** (5) in Echmiadzin.

Up the stairs is a large plaza (6) surrounding the church, with Khachkar and carving fragments lining the **eastern wall** (7). A new aghbiur or **memorial fountain** (8) is immediately behind the main apse of the church. At the entrance to the church are two **graves** (4, 5) for Armenian Catholics. The one on the left (9) reads "Ter Ter Karapet Ulnetsi (from Ulneh) Catholicos 1726-1729" and the other (10) reads "Ter Ter Astvatsatar A. Hamadantsi (from Hamada) 1715-1725".



## EXTERIOR

The church is considered one of the masterpieces of early medieval Armenian architecture, a perfected form of that begun at Echmiadzin. Following the plan of Echmiadzin (cruciform with semi-circular apses at the cardinal points, chapels on the diagonal points), the architects at Hripsimeh created a harmonious and elegant space, one of the earliest uses of placing the dome directly over the supporting walls.

There are few of the carvings found on the Echmiadzin Cathedral, or even the geometric and symbolic carvings that covered Zvartnots. Even Guyaneh appears more intricate in its design, though built in the same period.

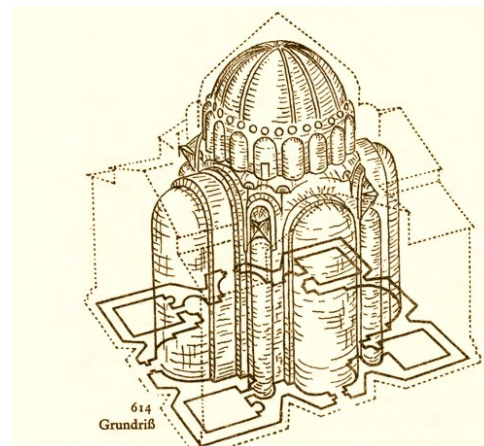
Hripsimeh seems austere and as a martyr shrine, that serves its purpose well. But unlike Guyaneh or even the Cathedral, the church saves it most impressive features for the inside. Just as the

crypt and sanctuary were once covered with rich tapestries and gold imagery with precious stones, the architecture is covered with a kind of tapestry, and soars in its grand design--from the inside.

The large niche' on the southern flank were not meant for statuary--Armenia originally prescribed to the iconoclasts and refused 3 dimensional representations. By the time icons became more widely accepted, the Arabian and Persian dominations were so deeply felt (human representations were forbidden) that the greatest expressions of faith artistically are the geometric designs on Khachkars and the sides of later churches.

Hripsimeh's geometry is sacred geometry in the way the lines of the building converge to points and circular patterns in a stunning display of lightness for such an obviously heavy structure. Numerology abounds: 2 niches and 3 openings on

each side, 3 roof lines on each end, the 2 to 3 ratio in measurements--everything outside the building reinforces the sacred numbers 2 (duality of God on earth and in heaven) and 3 (The Holy Trinity); while all inside reinforces the number 4 (The totality, seasons, all time). It is a purest form of worship in architecture. Even the 8 niches (not at all common in Armenian church architecture) represent the 8th day, in biblical terms the day of resurrection, the beginning of life after God rested.



## INTERIOR

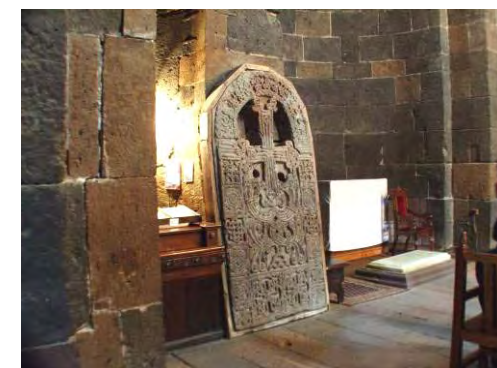
Originally the inner walls were covered with frescos depicting the crucifixion, annunciation, the Apostles and S. Grigor and Hripsimeh, but they were lost long ago. Even without the original frescos, the masonry and angular niche patterns show a mastery of craftsmanship.



At other early churches central pillars support the dome, but Hripsimeh's dome covers the entire central hall, and the support fluting gives the illusion of lightness that defies the dome's massive weight. The engineering was such that the church survived intact several severe earthquakes.

During renovations in 1959-1962 a number of segments from the previous structures were discovered in the foundation of the church, and can be seen underneath glass floor plates.

To your left as you enter the church is a large 12th century **khachkar** (A), an early example of the open cross form (where the stone is completely cut through). Just beyond it in front of the northern apse is a **gravestone** (B) engraved "1104 year 25 March died Haghbaktsi (from Haghbak) Ter Pilip Pos Sakia Catholicos". This is a rare example of someone other than a martyr being interred within a church.



The **paintings** (C) covering the altar platform wall are a reconstruction of original fresco work, depicting the Virgin and Child flanked by The Apostles and Ss. Stepanos and Pilipos.

The **altar** (D) is newly carved from light brown stone, showing pomegranates (symbolizing love) and grapes (the blood of Christ) flanked by eagles (supreme power).

The painting Astvatsatsin over the altar is 20th century. Over the southern apse and door is the large 17th century **painting of S. Hripsimeh** (E) by Hovnatn Hovnatanian.

## MARTYRIA

As you face the altar, the entrance to the **Crypt** (F) is to the left. The first room has fragments of Khachkars and inscription stones, as well as an old

wood and bronze door. To enter the crypt, go into the unlit passageway to the right and down the steps.



The crypt's design, like the martyrium at Guyaneh, has its roots in the pre-Christian period, and resembles Urartian sanctuary design, as well as the inner sanctuary at Garni. In fact, the size and proportions are proportionately identical to the sanctuaries of Sushi at Erebuni and Mythra at Garni.

Armenian crypts are probably inherited from these traditions via the Roman and Syrian catacomb tradition. On the outskirts of the Roman Empire, Christians in Syria adopted the Semitic tradition of Mesopotamia regarding the individual construction of tombs, cut into rock, or partially or completely excavated below ground level.

The entrance usually featured a façade preceding an antechamber. The design of Hripsimeh and Guyaneh Martyria closely follow this example.

The inner chamber of the Martyrion holds the remains of **Hripsimeh** (G) behind the wall to your right as you enter. A 1986 painting of the saint is on the large marble **sarcophagus** (H) in the center of the chamber. Next to it in a small wall **niche** (I) is a glass window protecting a black stone, which is believed to have been one used to kill her with.

➡ To continue the tour, retrace your steps to Mashtots pta, and go west, taking the first right (Hoktemberian/Martirosovi) which skirts Hripsimeh walls to the large cemetery on the right.

## OLD CITY CEMETERY - Հին Արեւելյան Քերեզմանոց (Հին Արեւելյան Քերեզմանոց)

The old cemetery north of Hripsimeh is still used by locals lucky enough to have spaces reserved (some from more than 100 years ago). The mix of modern and old through emerald green pathways (spring) or burnt umber weeds (summer) is a bit melancholy, sometimes ironic, but always surprising.



I admit I love cemeteries, not in any morbid sense but as markers or bygone eras. Here, the monuments do not disappoint, from some of the grandest arched domes to the humblest solitary stones, they evoke a number of eras of Vagharshapat's history.



Deep inside the warren of graves, on a low hill, is a deteriorating mud-brick hall, its inner walls lined with bricks and stone. The structure is massive for its type and was used as funeral chapel and *hokehatsi tun* (literally "soul food house," or funeral dining hall), where funerals were

performed and the after-funeral dinner was served.

This dinner is still a part of Armenian tradition, called "*hoke hangisti hats* (dinner to quiet his soul)" by modern Armenians. Locals say it dates back to the middle ages, but its rapidly deteriorating mud brick exterior speaks to a later period, perhaps the 18th-19th cc. It probably rests over earlier structures of its kind, perhaps even from the Pagan Era.

➡ To continue the tour, take Nalbandian (the street facing the cemetery) one block west to Shoghakat Church (DD 40.16810 x 44.30485, elev. 873m)

📌 **SHOGHAKAT CHURCH - ՇՈՂԱԿԱՏ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԻ (Շողակատ Եկեղեցի)** ▲ is located 150 meters west of Hripsimeh at the corner of Nalbandian and Zoyayi p. . The church is open from 9 am to dusk seven days a week.



## BACKGROUND

Built over a pre-Christian shrine in the early Christian era, Shoghakat's original structure follows the same outline and size as its pagan forbear. The current building was reconstructed in 1699, largely replacing the original 4th-5th-7th cc. church. Shoghakat is often confused as the third martyrium in Grigor's vision. In fact, so many locals believe that the third martyr was Shoghakat it has become a part of local history, despite the church's attempts to preach otherwise. Meaning "A drop of sunbeam" or "Effusion of Light" in Armenian, Shoghakat was constructed in honor of a different saint named Shoghakat, who is buried in the southeast chapel.

Excavations to the southwest uncovered a small single nave chapel adjacent to the southwest

chapel which time could not be absolutely fixed but which the church accepted as a 4th c Christian edifice. Perhaps, but just as likely it may have been a Pagan temple that was converted into a church to celebrate the martyr buried there (which herself might have been a relic of the pre-Christian time, and anathema to suggest in church circles though no definitive testing of the remains has been done to confirm its period). The southwest chapel was built on a three-stepped platform with a small semi-circular apse, hallmarks of pre-Christian shrines, though the sign outside the church suggests it might have been a portico for a south entrance to the original church.

For the record, she had nothing to do with the 39 Maidens, but her church is perhaps the most pleasant of all those in Echmiadzin, surrounded by a well maintained garden and peacefully set off the main roads. It's worth a visit just to get away from the heady history at the other sites and rest a spell.

The caretakers are very friendly and enjoy gossiping with visitors and trading spiritual legends. The church is also set opposite several of the best home stay venues in Echmiadzin.



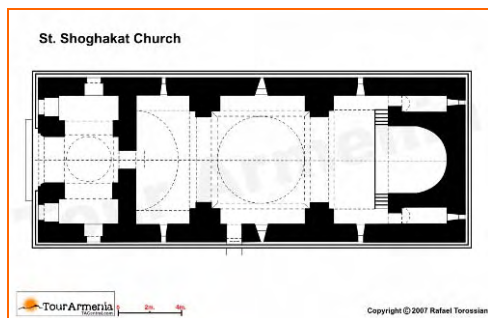
## COMPLEX

The courtyard is probably the prettiest in Echmiadzin, with flower lined walkways, khachkars and khachkar fragments scattered about the yard. There is an English language information sign outside the church with a history that follows the church line, claiming the site was the third in Grigor's vision and was first erected for a third (unnamed) martyr.

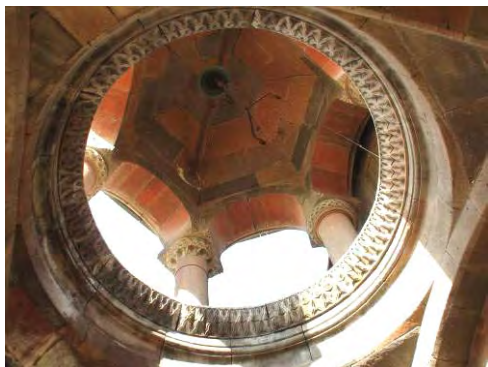
## CHURCH

The church is a central dome type with the dome placed slightly west of center (a practice begun as

early as the 5th c, and common in the 6th-7th cc). As a result, some think a form of the current church may have been built in that period. The interior has a horseshoe-shaped apse and two small chapels flanking the altar. The SE chapel contains the remains of Shoghakat. The church hall is small, following the dictates of the times, which were harsh for Armenians, who had become a minority in much of their own country.



The economy was mostly in tatters, once abundant croplands lay fallow or pasturage for Turkish and Yezidi tribes. Persia and Turkey were in a protracted war that had only recently (1639) abated, though hostilities continued and the Safavid Shahs of Iran which controlled Armenia were in their last throes of power.



It would not be until the late 18th c that a new flowering of Armenian culture would begin, as Russian Imperial forces began their march to Iran and Turkey. In such times, Shoghakat should probably be considered a miracle, the finely hewn walls of tufa and the sometimes exquisite carvings on its walls demonstrating a mastery of technique

that had somehow survived 400 years of deprivation.

As with cruciform and central dome hall churches of the 9th-13th cc, Shoghakat's octagonal drum rests on a central square, with pendentives providing the transition to the base of the drum.

The Bell Tower is a later addition, and for once, it does not detract from the original building's design, carefully integrated into the original church plan. It has some of the best wall carvings, with geometric signs and cross forms hailing to Armenia's most ancient iconography. The main arch has multiple layers, each with its own geometric pattern. The all cornices and window frames echo the same details.

The frontal piece over the small entrance is painted with red dye and inscribed in grapar (grabar, old Armenian). I could not find anyone who could translate (including the church priest), so its beautiful script remains a mystery. Perhaps you will have better luck.



Inside the church is decorated in a style reminiscent of the Middle Ages, with neighborhood church embellishments and icons, carpets and candelabra. This is a working church, one favored of local residents. For some insight into the differences in the church's meaning in people's lives, visit on a Sunday, after visiting the cathedral at Echmiadzin.

➔ End Shoghakat and Echmiadzin Churches.  
Continue back to center for **Other Sites**

## OTHER SITES ▲

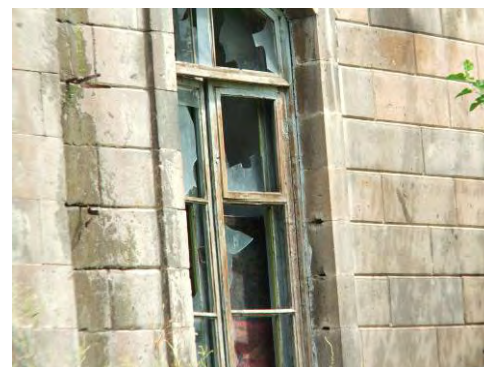
**FOLK HISTORY MUSEUM - Ժողովրդի Պատմության Տանգարան**

Located in the municipal office, working in fits and starts is the wonderful Folk History Museum, which everyone should catch before it is emptied to make way for one of the mayor's business projects.

The museum was established in 1964. In 1984 it was relocated to its present space, on Mashtots pta. The full collection has around 12,000 artifacts, of which 500 are on display, including late stone-age items. Mostly the artifacts cover 5000 BCE to the 20th century. Of note are the carvings on the wooden doors to the museum.

Exhibits include a replica of a 4th m BCE round house discovered during regional excavations, demonstrating one of the earlier known bricks and mortar technique and a *tonratun* (tonir house; the tonir is a large ceramic vase buried into the ground and used for baking lavash and cooking meats).

As with all of Armenia's regional museums, curatorship and upkeep is undertaken entirely by dedicated staff, who receive no (real) income from the state or city to maintain the priceless exhibitions. If they are open (ask around to see if someone can locate the director Hasmik Hakobyan to let you in) do donate as much as you can to support their efforts.



The museum is slated to be moved to an undisclosed location (the mayor's office says it will take over the civil registration office, which was news to the folks at civil registration); the prime real estate (valued at more than \$100,000) was sold at a widely-regarded bogus auction for \$7000 by the mayor in 2005. Look for a mafia joint to rise on the premises.

## ENTERTAINMENT

*Outdoor cafes* make up the bulk of evening entertainment, locals sipping drinks, catching up

on local gossip, or simply watching the world go by while taking incessant cell phone calls.

## THEATRE, PERFORMANCE

The *Echmiadz'ni M'shakuiti Cultural Palat* (24 on city map) or Echmiadzin Culture Palace, is located on the north side of Mashtots Poghots, midway between H'raparak and Hripsimeh Vank. The building is a large classical building made of tufa stone.

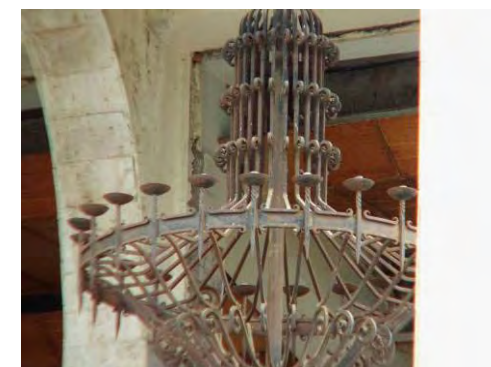
The center includes the Aznavor Theatre, which performs frequently; traditional dance and music groups (worth a visit just to watch rehearsals), and the Children's Center (tel. 53054, 47770), managed by a nonprofit NGO dedicated to providing clothing, food and traditional classes to Echmiadzin's children.

So far they are assisting 250 children in the city, free of charge. They give occasional traditional music and dance performances, and their craft center has an amazing collection of fabric art, macramé and woodcarvings made by the children, on sale to support their work. If a performance from any group is on, a sign will be placed on the sidewalk outside the palace.

For culture events, check with the *Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum*; they will know if an event is about to occur.

*Computer games* are located next to the Dentist Polyclinic on Atarbekian Poghots.

If all else fails, you can always visit the *Bingo Hall*, opposite the Culture Palace on Mashtots Poghots.



## LIBRARIES

The *Main Library* (26) is located on the Western side of Komitas H'raparak at the corner of

Atarbekian Poghots. The library is open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 1 pm and 2 to 5 pm. The staff is extremely helpful, pulling heaps of books and old maps from their archives. All are in Armenian or Russian, but the drawings, plans and maps are easily understood. Library pass costs 50 AMD a year, but donations are appreciated (and should be given).

A treat is the *Children's library* (63), located one block south of Mashtots Poghots on Kostanian Poghots (across from the kiosks), open from 9 am to 1 pm and 2 to 5 pm Monday to Saturday. The library is small, but the children's books are excellent for learning Armenian from. The collection of Armenian legends and history books are masterworks of design.

### SWIMMING, SPORTS

A nice surprise, *the public swimming pool* is 200 meters west of Guyaneh Vank on Issey les Moulineaux Poghots (take the steps to the right as you reach the point where the street curves to the left). Free admission. The original pool is gargantuan, covering more than a hectare of surface. Unable to maintain a pool of that size, the city wisely focuses on the diving well, and a constant flow of water keeps the pool clean and inviting.



A caution to women travelers: the pool is used exclusively by Armenian boys and young men, who strip down to their underpants while swimming. No one will stop you from swimming, but expect a lot of awkward moments and stares.

Just east of the steps to the pool is a *weight room*, open Mondays to Saturday from 10 am to 5 pm. Echmiadzin breeds weightlifting champions and boxers, so the workouts are taken quite seriously,

and trainers are available to take you through your paces. Admission is 2000 AMD per month.

Next to the pool is a large *soccer field*, open to any who wants to play.

### PRACTICALITIES ▲

Area Code: 231

Long Distance: 0231 + local number

From abroad: +(374) 231 + local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell

International callers: Armentel +(374) 91 +

number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 or 94+ local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the

(0231) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374)

231 prefix if calling from abroad.

### IN AND OUT ▲

#### By Air

Zvartnots International Airport is ten kilometers east of Echmiadzin. Taxis will run to Echmiadzin for around 2500 AMD, even though they always start the bidding at 5000 AMD (or the more popular "for you, \$20").

#### By Bus

Buses regularly connect Echmiadzin with Yerevan, Ashtarak, Masis, Markara and Armavir. Prices quoted are for the entire trip, so if you are getting off someplace between, ask the price beforehand. Despite announced hours, village buses will wait until enough passengers justify a trip.

**Yerevan, Zvartnots, Masis** Yerevan buses arrive and depart from the Bus Station on Atarbekian p. 100 meters west of Komitas H'raparak. The Yerevan bus is #111, which leaves every 15 minutes between 7 am and 6 pm (220 AMD, one hour), stops at the villages of Zvartnots (200 meters east of the church, 100 meters from Zvartnots Motel), Petkhunk, Musalehr, Parakar, Airport Road and Argavand, then in Yerevan at the Shengavit Bridge, Yerevan Bus Station and the Modern Art Museum terminus.

**Buses from Yerevan** begin on Sarian p. next to the Modern Art Museum.

To go to **Zvartnots** (village, motel or church) take bus #1, 2 and 3 which leave every 10 minutes between 8 am and 5 pm (100 AMD, 15 minutes). To go to **Masis and the lower Ararat Valley**, take the Masis Bus from the same point (150 AMD, 2 hours), which leaves at 8,9,10 and 11 am and at 12, 1, 2 and 3 pm daily. **Taronik and Metsamor**

**Excavation** The Bus to Taronik village by the Metsamor Excavation (100 AMD, 30 minutes) departs from opposite the Yerevan, Zvartnots and Masis Bus Station (50 meters west in front of the Apoteka Shop) hourly between 10.30 am and 4.30 pm. **Ashtarak Buses** depart from the Bus Stop directly in front of the Shuka on Tumanian p. at 8.30 am and 5.30 pm daily (200 AMD, one hour). **Armavir-Yerevan Express** The Armavir-Echmiadzin-Yerevan bus leaves every 30 minutes between 7 am and 5 pm at either end (400 AMD, 30 minutes either way). To catch the bus in Echmiadzin, go to the intersection of Tumanian and the Armavir-Echmiadzin-Yerevan Highway on the northwest end of town, and flag the bus from under the overpass.

**Villages, Metsamor, Armavir Buses** to northwestern regional villages depart from the bus stop at the corner of Tumanian and Baghranian p. **Buses to Metsamor-Armavir** (250 AMD, 30 minutes) leave daily at 11 am, 12.30 and 2.10 pm. **Buses to the village of Arshaluis** (100 AMD, 90 minutes) leave at 10.45 am and at 12.30, 2, 3.30 and 5.30 pm, passing through the villages of Tsaghkunk, Tsiatsin, Hovtamech, Samaghaz and Haitagh. **Buses to Aghavnatun** (100 AMD, 2 hours) leave at 8.30 and 11 am, 1 and 3 pm, passing through Doghs, Franganots, Aghlighala and Aragats villages.

**Markara** The bus to Markara at the Turkish border leaves from Yerevan (250 AMD, one hour) at the intersection of Sarian and Mashtots p. and makes a one minute stop in Echmiadzin at the corner of H'raparak and Araratian before continuing to Markara (250 AMD, 30 minutes). The first bus leaves from the bus garage in Yerevan at 7.00 am and stops in Echmiadzin about 8.00 am. Others leave from Sarian p. in Yerevan at 8.10 am and at 12.45 and 5.00 pm arriving in Echmiadzin about 30 minutes later. Get there early.



### Minivan (Marshrutni Taxi)

**Yerevan Private vans** (also called "RAF") to and from Yerevan travel the same route as the bus. In Echmiadzin the vans are located in front of Zbosaigee near the bus station. In Yerevan they depart from in front of the Shuka on Mashtots Ave. Vans leave when there are enough passengers to justify a trip, and cost 250 AMD from 7am to 7pm, 300 AMD thereafter. The trip lasts between 30-45 minutes.

**Taronik, Metsamor Excavation** One van a day leaves for Taronik (150 AMD, 30 minutes) at 8.30 am, returning to Echmiadzin around 9.30 am. Obviously not a convenient arrangement for seeing the Metsamor excavation, you can arrange with the drive to return at a later time and collect you for about 3300 AMD.

### By Taxi, Car

A taxi from the airport is around 2500 AMD, but expect to haggle. Taxis to and from Yerevan cost around 2000 AMD. To other cities, the rates are negotiable, generally 100 AMD per km, and quoted for up to 4 passengers. Rates given at the time of writing were: Armavir 2000 AMD; Giumri 10,000 AMD; Ashtarak 2500 AMD; Masis 2500 AMD.

To rent a car with driver, ask at the taxi stands located at the Yerevan and Markara Bus Stations and by the Shuka. All prices are negotiated, and in Armenia's time-honored tradition of trading, the first price quoted by the driver is just that--the first price. Expect the final price to be about 25% lower.

Prices generally go down the more days you use a car or taxi, and they go up the later in the day. At the time of writing, prices for a car and driver (up to 4 passengers) were from around \$30 for one day to \$120 for a week's drive anywhere in Armenia. Prices for cars and drivers do not include petrol or gas, which must be figured into your calculations.

### AROUND ▲

**On foot** is the best way to take in the city's atmosphere, most worth seeing is within a 15-20 minute stroll. The main streets are *Mesrop Mashtots* ("Mashtots") p., *Atarbekian p.* and *Araratian p.* (See [Navigating the City](#), p. 20)

**Bus, Van** Local bus routes were discontinued years ago, but unless you are lugging a lot of gear, you won't find walking from point to point difficult

in Echmiadzin. However, Echmiadzin-Yerevan Bus #111 departs every 15 minutes between 7am and 6pm from the bus station on Atarbekian p. and stops at the Markara Bus Stop (Komitas H'raparak), WW II Monument, Zoyayi p. (Shoghakat Vank) and Hripsimeh Vank en route.

The **Zvartnots Bus (#1, 2 & 3)** leave from the same point every 10 minutes between 7am and 6 pm, travels the same route. Use either bus to get to Zvartnots Church or Zvartnots Motel.

**Taxi, Car** Taxis are 100 AMD per km, and some charge an up front price of 500-600 AMD, which covers up to 5 km. If you want to use one for longer trips or wait while you visit a site, they will ask for more. Most are willing to negotiate rates for long trips or daily use. In negotiating, take into account how long you will use the taxi and the distance involved. A quoted rate is for the car and driver, which can seat up to 4 passengers. Rates given at the time of writing varied between \$20 for a half day in Echmiadzin only to \$30-40 for a full day trip taking in the city, Zvartnots Vank and the excavations at Mokhrablur, Adablur and Metsamor.

#### **Taxi Services**

Call taxis in Echmiadzin are reliable and affordable. 100 AMD/km. One we used is based about 80 m E of Zvartnots and was only 100 AMD per km (tel. 73939, 093-72-50-54). Echmiadzin call taxi numbers are 41011, 43131, 49981.

#### **TOUR GUIDES ▲**

*Harutiun*, the director of the Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum (tel 52038) has been closely acquainted with both the Cultural and Historic Scene for over 20 years. The result is a very personal guided tour of the city and historic sites. Harutiun can also arrange admission into the Catholicos residence and treasury museum with advance notice. He knows guides who speak English, French and German. A full day guided tour is \$25 or \$10 per person for groups of 3 or more.

At the *Echmiadzin Complex* you can sometimes find a priest or deacon who will provide an informal tour. We were lucky enough to find a priest from Detroit, who not only showed us around the entire complex, but invited us to lunch at the seminary. The museum in the cathedral always provides English speaking guides. Staff are forbidden from taking direct donations, boxes are placed in the cathedral and museum.

#### **COMMUNICATION ▲**

Fire – 101  
Police – 102  
Ambulance service – 103  
Gas emergency service – 104  
Trunk Line – 107  
Telephone directory information – 109  
Paging service – 189

#### **Phone, telegraphs**

The *Central Post Office* is on Komitas Square. Two others are at 5 Charentsi p. Vartan Mamikonian.

[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.

Additional phone services are around town. They advertise in front of their shops, sometimes with internet.

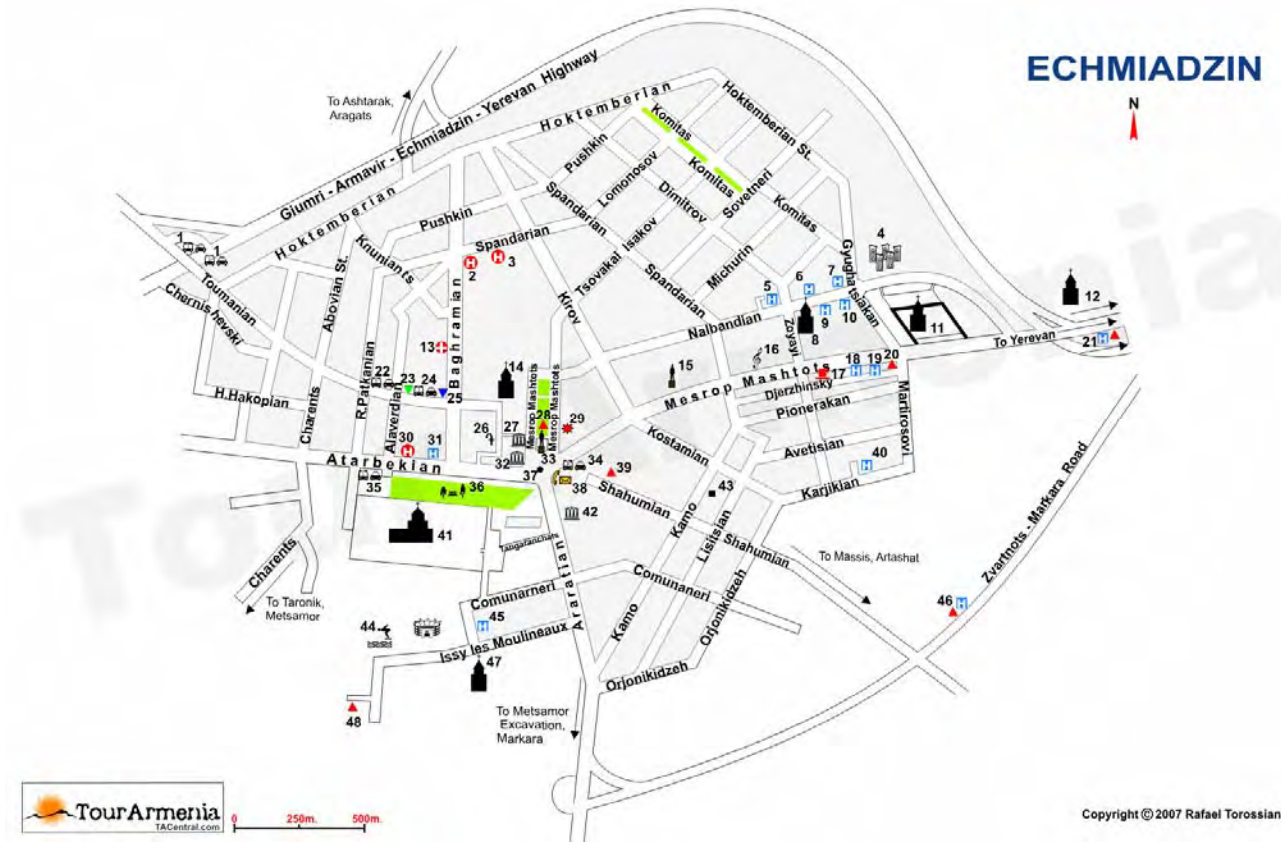
*Armentel* is at 4 Mashtots pta, (tel. 42662)

#### **Internet**

*Arminco*, the largest internet provider in the country, has a rep. office at SIUNY, 110 Mashtots pta, (tel. 44533, 010-51-22-34, 010-59-35-80), e-mail: [levon@u8.am](mailto:levon@u8.am), ask for Levon Ghazaryan or Hunan Ghazaryan,

*Internet cafes* provide dial up, computer usage and slow SMS/VOIP services. Venues and prices fluctuate; ask at your overnight for the latest place.

**See MAP next page.**



## ECHMIADZIN CITY WIDE KEY

### OVERNIGHT

- 5 Guest House Nalbandian Arachin Nerpans 5a
- 6 Guest House Nalbandian 45
- 7 Guest House Nalbandian 73
- 9 Guest House Nalbandian 68
- 10 Guest House Nalbandian 70
- 18 Guest House Mashtots 48
- 19 Guest House Dzerzhinsky 82b
- 21 Motel Zvartnots
- 31 Guest House Atarbekian 98
- 40 Guest House Karjikian Arachin Nerpansk 4
- 45 Guest House Sovetakan Banaki 38
- 46 Motel Van

### FOOD & DRINK

- 17 Cafe Ring

- 20 Vagharshapat Restaurant
- 21 Motel Zvartnots
- 28 Armenian Kitchen
- 39 Jasharan
- 46 Motel Van
- 48 Odjakh

### BUSES -MARSHRUTNI TAXIS

- 1 Buses to Armavir
- 22 Buses to NW Villages, Metsamor, Armavir
- 24 Buses to Ashtarak
- 34 Buses to Markara
- 35 Buses to Yerevan, Zvartnots, Masis

### MUSEUMS, ART GALLERY, SCHOOL

- 27 Abeghian Museum
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### MONUMENTS - SITES

- 15 WWII Monument
- 33 Komitas Monument
- 37 Komitas H'raparak

### MONASTERY, CHURCH, CEMETERY

- 4 Old East Cemetery
- 8 Shoghakat Vank
- 11 Hripsimeh Vank
- 12 Zvartnots Church
- 14 Astvatsatsin Church
- 41 Echmiadzin Complex
- 47 Guyaneh Vank

### THEATRES, MUSIC

- 16 Culture Palace

### SHOPS, SHUKA, SOUVENIRS

- 23 Shuka
- 25 Tonavajar/Yarmarka
- 17 Three Stars Store

### STADIUM, SPORTS

- 44 Swimming Pool

### INTERNET, PHONE, POST

- 38 Telephone, Telegraph
- 38 Armentel

### GOV. OFFICES, LIBRARY, POLICE

- 29 City Hall
- 43 Police

### BANK, ATM

- 26 Central Bank
- 20 Analik Bank, ATM

### APOTEKAS

- 13 Pharmacy "Karma"

### MEDICAL/HOSPITAL/CLINIC - DENTAL

- 2 Polyclinic
- 3 Hospital
- 30 Dental Polyclinic

### PARKS

- 36 Zbosaigee



## ECHMIADZIN CENTER Key

### OVERNIGHT

- 4 Hotel Vagharshapat
- 5 Guest House Nalbandian Poghots
- 15 Guest House Atarbekian 98
- 79 Guest House 38 Homestay

### FOOD & DRINK

- 21 Armenian Kitchen
- 23 Echmiadzin Cafe Bistro
- 30 Cafe Bistro
- 31 Armenian Kitchen
- 32 Cafe Bistro
- 43 Zbosaigee Cafe Bistro
- 60 Grill
- 69 Bistro "Doka"

### OUTDOOR CAFE

### BUSES -MARSHRUTNI TAXIS

- 1 Buses to NW villages, Metsamor, Armavir
- 3 Buses to Ashtarak
- 12 Buses to Yerevan, Zvartnots, Masis
- 41 Private Vans to Yerevan
- 47 Bus Stop for Markara

### MUSEUMS, ART GALLERY, SCHOOL

- 24 Mher Abeghian Painting
- 25 Hovhannes Hovhannessian Home
- 70 Echmiadzin Cathedral
- Old Residence
- New Residence
- Treasury

- 73 Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture
- 30 Hovhannessian Museum

### MONUMENTS - SITES

- 27 Church Models
- 28 Church Models
- 29 Komitas Statue
- 38 WWII Memorial
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## BANKS, SHOPPING, ETC.

### ATM, Bank, Exchange

Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks; money exchange at banks and exchange points throughout the town.

*ATMs are at most banks in town:*

**ACBA-CREDIT AGRICOL Bank**, 30 Mashtots pta, tel. 53754.

**ANALIK Bank**, 48 Mashtots pta, tel. 49693

**ARDSHININVESTBANK**, 1 Nar- Dos p, tel. 52032

**ARMECONOMBANK**, 8/a Mashtots pta, tel. 57078 54713.

**UNIBANK**, 8 Atarbekian p, tel. 41210.

### Shopping

The *Book Store* (71) of the *Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin*, located just inside the front Gate to the Complex, has a good selection of reasonably priced books, booklets, historic maps and pamphlets in Armenian and Russian, with a few in English.

*Three Stars*, 40, Mashtots P., is a new super market.

*Souvenirs* include decently priced gold and silver necklaces and bracelets, ceramics, hand-carved wooden khachkars and hand-painted replicas of medieval manuscript miniatures. Open seven days a week from 9 am to 5 pm.

Another *bookshop* (10) is located across the bus station on Atarbekian Poghots, at the corner with Baghramian Poghots. Armenian and Russian language books only and some office supplies.

The *Univermag* is the big building north of Komitas Square on the left. The once bustling Soviet store that theoretically offered everything ("Univer") in one store ("mag" short for "magazin"), is being renovated and already open with a few shops.

The *Shuka (market)* is between Alaverdian and Baghramian and sells fresh produce, meat and staples. Prices are cheaper than Yerevan, the food fresher in the summer, atmosphere is pure haggle.

There are *food markets* throughout the center.

### Film

*Kodak and Konica Film Shops* (11, 16, 39, 56) are located along Atarbekian and Mashtots Poghots.

The Kodak Shop (16) at the corner of Atarbekian and Baghramian Poghots can do same day development. Open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 6 pm.

### Laundry and Dry Cleaner

The *laundry and dry cleaner* (82), (tel. 43812, 43583) is on Issey les Moulineaux, one block west of Araratian, open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 3 pm. The building is not marked, but has metal grills over the windows and door. Laundry is 500 AMD per kilo, dry cleaning varies from 500 AMD per pair of pants to 1500 AMD for suit coats. They will pick up and deliver for an additional 1000 AMD.

### Pharmacy

Baghramian Poghots is called Deghatun or Apoteka p. for the number of pharmacies located there. Except for narcotic medication, most medicine can be bought without a prescription. A 24 hour deghatun is *Karma* (4 on city map), (tel. 52532 or 37888 after 11 pm) at 47, Baghramian.

### Hospital, Polyclinic, Optician

For a medical emergency, dial 103.

If you can, go to Yerevan for medical aid.

*Echmiadzin Hospital* (3 on city map), (tel. 53310, 56027) is located behind the Maternity Hospital on Spondarian Poghots, 50 meters east of Baghramian Poghots. Look for the Russian AITTEKA sign next to the main entrance. Open 24 hours.

The *Main Polyclinic* (2 on city map), (tel. 52568) is located at the corner of Baghramian and Spondarian Poghots, and is open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm.

An *optician* is located opposite the bus station on Atarbekian Poghots, open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 5 pm.

### Dentist

Atamnabuzhner can be found at the *State Dental Polyclinic* (13), (tel. 56331), next to the Computer Games on Atarbekian Poghots, 50 meters east of the bus station, open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 5 pm.

A 24 hour service *private dentist* (35), (tel. 42527) is located one block north of Mashtots Poghots on Kirov, at the end of the apartment building on the west.



### OVERNIGHT

*NOTE: Overnight spots change rapidly in Armenia, and Echmiadzin is no different. Expect prices to rise, guest house owners to have emigrated, other spots to come up, and hotels and motels to change hands (or close) overnight.*

Of the two hotels in the city, City Hotel is now reserved exclusively for Church officials and their guests, and the other, Hotel Vagharshapat, is in terrible condition, with one wing housing refugees from Artsakh, and the other perhaps the cheapest place in town—if you don't mind sleeping without plumbing, windows or doors.

### Hotel/Motel

**GOLDEN CITY HOTEL COMPLEX**, Tsaghkunk Village (Echmiadzin Hwy), tel. 0231-56688, cell: 094-556688, email: [goldencityhotel@yahoo.com](mailto:goldencityhotel@yahoo.com), proprietor: Yervand Danielian, is just W of Echmiadzin on the (M5). The hotel-restaurant opened in late 2007, and is focused on both local and tourist trade. Amenities include heating, a/c, Internet connection (suites) and sauna. Largest suite can sleep up to 6 people. Prices are per room with SGL/DBL/STE at 8700-10,000/12,000-25,000/25,000-40,000 AMD.

**VAN MOTEL/RESTAURANT** (tel. 48024) is located on the Markara-Zvartnots Janapar, 2 kilometer east of the Markara Road. The motel is also a restaurant, with individual glass-roofed dining rooms off of each double room. There are also three luxe suites. Spacious rooms are basically clean with hot showers. Air-conditioned doubles/luxe cost 15,000/20,000 AMD. The complex also includes an outdoor pool and sauna,

which cost extra. Meals are breakfast \$3-4, lunch \$5-6 and dinner \$6-8.

**ZVARTNOTS MOTEL/RESTAURANT**, Echmiadzin Hwy 200 meters W of Zvartnots, 3 km E of Echmiadzin, tel. 52024, 282423, 091-402631, Fax: 237-46619, is located 3 kilometers east of Hripsimeh (200 meters west of the entrance to Zvartnots Vank) on the north side of Echmiadzin-Yerevan Highway. The air-conditioned cottages have separate living/dining rooms, baths, bedrooms and porch, with ample space for folks to move around. Satellite TV, stereo system, maid service and Jacuzzi tubs in the quads round out this well-maintained complex. Double/Quad cottages from 15,000-50,000 AMD. Meals around 3000-5000 AMD.

### B&B

This is a very short listing of the possible homes to stay in--if any are full or you find yourself in a different part of town--just start asking. By the time we left Echmiadzin the local grapevine had already been humming, and 5000-7000 AMD for B&B was the going rate.

*Advance Bookings:* Always call ahead before home stays, even if you don't speak the lingo. By just showing up you may be wasting a lot of walking time. Check with Harutiun (tel. 52038) at the Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum to arrange home stays w/dinner and breakfast for 3500-6000. Also check with Khachik at Echmiadzin Shop (tel. 52084 at the shop, 56459 at home) for the same.

### Near Guyaneh Vank

**MRS. AGHUMIAN** (tel. 56583), Sovetakan Banaki 38, lives in one of the red-tiled cottages opposite Guyaneh. She has two spare beds upstairs, and has hosted guests before.

### Near H'raparak

**SURIK** (tel. 57304), Atarbekian 98, has two beds in a single room available for lodgers.

### Near Shoghakat/Hripsimeh

The area above Shoghakat and Hripsimeh Vanks, between Nalbandian, Spondarian and Hoktemberian Poghots, has some of the nicest traditional homes in Echmiadzin. Homes are built around central courtyards with large porches or balconies overlooking the gardens.

**MRS. HASMIK AZATIAN** (tel. 41630), Nalbandian Arachin Nerpansk 5a (1st Cul de Sac off of Nalbandian, house 5a). The house is on the right

as you turn the corner into the cul de sac., has a pleasant little home with lace curtains on the window and a large porch in back overlooking her garden. She has two beds.

Three other homes on Nalbandian Poghots are #68, #70 and #73. Spaces vary from spare rooms to an entire home. Call or see David at Van Motel (tel. 48024).

#### South of Mashtots Poghots

**ANDRANIK AZATIAN AND ANZHAK PETROSSIAN** (tel. 55503), Nalbandian Poghots 45, have a large hostel-style building about 500 meters south of Echmiadzin on Manukian Poghots 1, with 12 rooms, shared bath, and a huge walled-in garden. The rooms are still being furnished, but this is an excellent option for small groups with their own bed rolls. 10,000-15,000 AMD per person.

**SURO** (tel. 43983) at Kardjikian Arachin Nerpank #4 (1st cul de sac off of Karjikian, house # 4) has a private house with a spare room for two lodgers.

Next to the Ring Café is **JULIETA BABAIAN** (tel. 57829), Mashtots Poghots 48 apt. 20, who has a spare room with two beds to let for single sex or married lodgers only. **Nora Sarkissian** (tel. 52463), Dzerzhinsky Poghots 82b, has a spacious and clean room.

**Boarding/Apartment** is a distinct possibility in Echmiadzin, the locals crave the income and some have very sweet little places to offer. Ask around and you will have your pick of several rooms or apartments to choose from. 5000-7000 AMD a night for bed and breakfast is fair.

#### FOOD AND DRINK ▲

*NOTE: Eateries change rapidly in Armenia, and Echmiadzin is no different. Expect prices to rise, and venues to close and open almost overnight. Summer season will have the best options, winter will seem like a desert.*

Cafes and bistros are throughout the city, as are khorovats joints in town and on the Highway to Spitak/Alaverdi. Food can also be bought at mterks and kiosks around town.

\$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks  
 \$\$ = 2000-3000 AMD  
 \$\$\$ = above 3000 AMD

#### Cheap Eats

Inexpensive food is found at the **FOOD STANDS** in and around the shuka, and include hot dogs, hamburgers, fried perashkis, cheburekis, Gharsi khorovats (a sandwich of grilled slivers of meat with onions, herbs and a tomato sauce) and khachapuri selling for 150-500 AMD a serving. \$

**SHUKA** The cheapest of course is buying your own fresh meats, cheese, bread, vegetables and fruit at the shuka and preparing on your own. The Shuka is open from 9 am to 6 pm \$

**KIOSKS** line Kirov and Kostanian Poghots one block north and south of Mashtots, and sell cookies, sodas, ice cream, as well as other staple goods. \$

A number of **MTERK** shops line Mashtots and Atarbekian Poghots, selling meats, cheese, canned goods and other staples. \$



#### Cafés

In the summer, outdoor café's can be found around Komitas H'raparak. One of the most pleasant cafes is in the Zbosaigi (Stroll Park) just south of H'raparak. Open during the summer, the café includes four cabanas and serves kebab, grill and sandwiches. \$-\$\$

#### Center

An **ARMENIAN KITCHEN**, catty-corner from the Central Bank serves khorovats (2000 AMD a shish), kebab (1000 AMD) and chicken grill (1000 AMD). \$-\$\$

Another **ARMENIAN KITCHEN** is located just above the Komitas Statue in Mashtots Park and has the same menu and prices. \$-\$\$

A **GRILL** is located between the Mterk Shop and Xerox on Mashtots Poghots, and serves sandwiches and kebab for 250-1000 AMD a serving. \$

**KHOROVATS STANDS** Khorovats stands proliferate on Baghranian Poghots, in and around the Shuka, and on Kirov Poghots. A shish of khorovats with lavash, onions and greens costs around 1500 AMD, a kebab sandwich is 400-1000 AMD. \$

#### Near Guyaneh

**ODJAKH** (tel. 52718), located 150 meters southwest of the public swimming pool off Issey les Moulineaux (just before it narrows to one lane, take the road to the right). Open 10 am to 10 pm. The building is a white stucco caravan tent design, with dining hutches off a central buffet. A filling meal of khorovats, dolma, salads, fruit and dessert costs 30500+ AMD. \$\$\$



#### Near Hripsimeh

**RING CAFÉ** (57829), Mashtots Poghots 48, is set in a small garden with a pair of peacocks roaming the premises. In addition to their café menu, they also serve grilled chicken and kebab for 1000-2000 AMD. \$-\$\$

**VAGHARSHAPAT**, Mashtots pta, across from Hripsimeh monastery. The restaurant serves Armenian fare at reasonable prices (2500-3500 AMD for full meals), and features wedding parties on weekends. \$\$-\$\$\$

#### Outside

**URENI BISTRO**, open 10 am to 10 pm, is on the Echmiadzin-Yerevan Highway off of Sovetneri

Poghots. Khorovats is sold at 4000 AMD a kilo, enough for four people. \$

**ZVARTNOTS RESTAURANT/MOTEL**, (tel. 48024) is located on the Markara-Zvartnots Janapar, 2 kilometer east of the Markara Road. The motel is also a restaurant, with individual glass-roofed dining rooms off of each double room. Armenian feasts are their specialty, hard to get out for less than 3500 AMD. \$\$\$

**VAN RESTAURANT/MOTEL**, (cell 091-40-26-31, ask for Valodia) complex continues to grow with cottages, a full-service restaurant, bar, disco, casino, outdoor pool, sauna, weight room, all set in a tropical garden. Feasts, expensive. \$\$\$

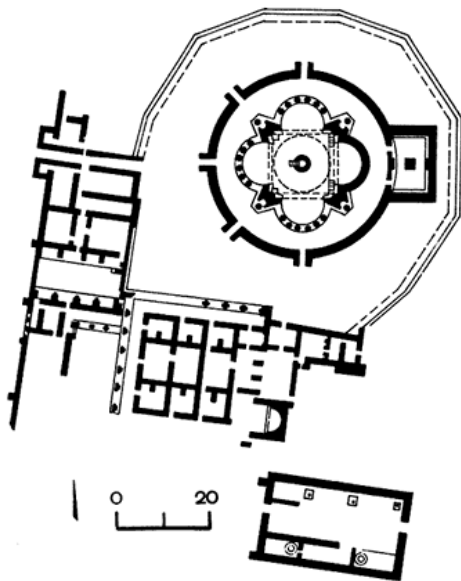
#### END ECHMIADZIN



➡ From Echmiadzin (S. Hripsimeh), go E on the Echmiadzin Hwy (M5) and continue for about 2.5 km to a metal gate and large stone column topped by an eagle on the S side of the highway enter onto a 900m asphalt drive to **ZVARTNOTS CATHEDRAL** (DD 40.160115 x 44.336709, elev. 882m) 📍 🗺️

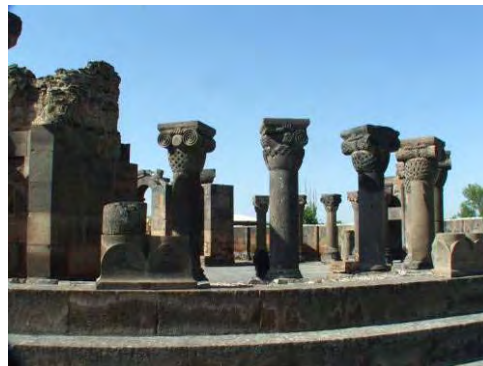
🏰 **ZVARTNOTS - ՉՎԱՐԹՆՈՑ (Չվարտնոց)**  
 ▲ (cathedral and village, Pop. 750), open 10-5, 1000 AMD, is located in the village of the same name (also called Echmiadzin), next to Ptghunk, on the Echmiadzin Highway about halfway between Zvartnots airport and Hripsimeh Church in Echmiadzin.

**MAR**



The cathedral, referred to as both Zvartnots and Grigor Lusavorich by medieval historians, was built at the spot where legend has it Grigor Lusavorich met and cured the mad king T'rdad, thus initiating the conversion of the country to Christianity. It is also believed to be the spot where the 1st c apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew met during their ministry. And further, it is said to be the spot where Grigor Lusavorich himself was born, under a tree, while his family was fleeing the persecution

of the Armenian King Khosrov in the mid 3rd century.



The church was a physical embodiment of the vision of Grigor saw in establishing the new religion, supposedly named for the archangels or "celestial soldiers" in his dream. In reality the church was built over one of Armenia's main Pagan complexes, a site of still practicing clandestine rituals in the 7th c when the cathedral destroyed the old temples and finally drove the pagans underground.

It was also the focus of Armenia's changing fortunes during the early Arab period, when Byzantium struggled with both the Arabs and Armenians for dominance over the region; with Arabs to stop their relentless drive west; with Armenia to force it to renounce its monotheistic religion and adopt the Greek Church entirely. Built for a Catholicos who was sympathetic to Byzantium and Armenia's struggle against Arab dominance, Zvartnots came to symbolize both the final triumph of Christianity over Paganism and a symbol of independence in the face of Moslem foes.

In 2000, Zvartnots, along with the churches of Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and the Mother See at Echmiadzin, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

#### BACKGROUND

The site has been the focus of worship from at least the Bronze Age, as evidenced by a fire pit and Vishap fragments uncovered at the site. Excavations also uncovered Urartian temple foundations and a sacrificial altar. The name itself is the stuff of controversy. Usually attributed to a vision Grigor Lusavorich had when establishing the

Armenian Church, it has been variously translated as "Vigilant Ones", "Vigilant forces", "Archangels" and "Celestial Beings" or variants on the theme of soldiers, angles and celestial.

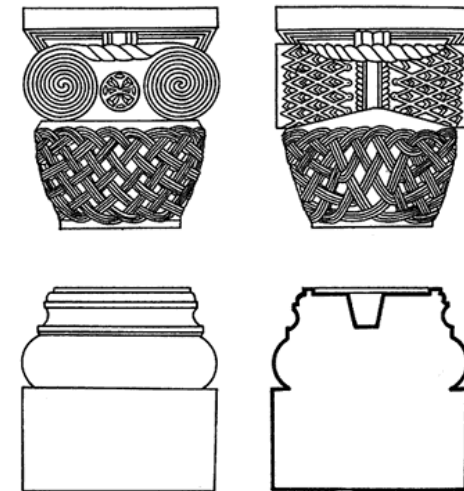


Another suggestion is more controversial, saying the name derived from the pre-Christian word "Zvartnonk", a name given to a spirit that roused the dead to life.

Denied by church officials, this name nevertheless fits the pre-Christian period for the site and the discovery of Vishap fragments there, associated with rebirth and life after death. And for centuries the site was known as the center of a cult that lasted well into Armenia's Christian era, the church waging fierce and apparently fruitless battles to wipe out a center of Paganism just 3 km from the Holy See at Vagharshapat, on the main road to the Armenian capital of Dvin.

According to this view, finally, by order of the Catholicos Nerses III (known as "Nerses the Builder" for the number of churches built during his tenure, and the capitulation of paganism under his reign), a Christian church was built on the site between 640-662, and the holy seat of the Armenian Church was transferred there, thereby converting the center of paganism to Christianity.

Inspired by an interpretation of the Apocalypse that predicted the second coming of the Lord when the seven main churches of Christianity came together, Zvartnots was built to be the 'seventh seal of the seventh tier of God's presence on earth'.



Interlaced with this was the 640 invasion of Armenia by Arab hordes, a sudden and fierce incursion by fanatics bent on forced conversion and plunder. Dvin and Vagharshapat suffered devastating destruction at the hands of the Arabs, who swept through on their way West, into a 200 year confrontation with Byzantium. Some attribute the date for laying the first stones of the church to 643, as Armenia sought to recover from the initial invasion. Continued Arab raids forced a stop to the construction.



At the same time, Armenia had been waging a carefully orchestrated diplomacy between their previous overlords that Achaemenid Persians and

Byzantium, both of which sought control over Armenian lands. The Arabs wiped out the Persian Royal family in their first invasion, leaving only the Byzantines to offer resistance. During the Marzpanate period, the Byzantines had used Armenia as a buffer zone in their fights with Persia, but now that the Persians were gone, and misunderstanding the seriousness of the Arab invasion, the Byzantine emperor Constans II (Constantine Heraclius) chose to ignore warnings and pleas for help from Armenia, instead demanding the Armenians apostatize their monotheist belief and convert to the Greek Orthodoxy.



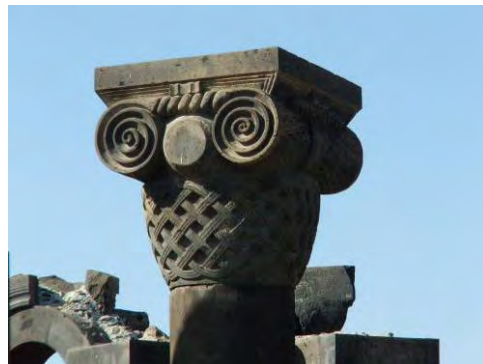
Finally, in an attempt to stave off the Arabs, Armenians sued for peace with the Arabs in 652, incurring the wrath and invasion of the Byzantines the same year, who took the capital of Dvin, again demanding a religious union with the Greek church and adoption of the tenets of Chalcedony; namely the acceptance of the "full humanity and full divinity" of Christ, as opposed to the Armenian monotheist belief that Christ is only divine.

Arab supporters (mainly nakharars who stood to gain from making compact with the Arabs who offered semi-autonomy while the Byzantines demanded complete subservience), took the upper end and forced the Byzantines out, along with the Catholicos, Nerses, who actually favored union with the Greeks. He settled in the village of Ishkhan, where he supervised the construction of a church that became one of the precursors to Zvartnots.



Not long after the Byzantines took the upper hand again, this time at the behest of the Armenians (ever reliable in switching sides), and the Catholicos returned to Vagharshapat, determined to complete his cathedral at Zvartnots. Supported by both the Greeks and Armenia's nakharars, the church was completed in relatively record time, sometime before 661, when the Arab era resumed.

An amalgam of Byzantine and Syrian styles, the new cathedral combined aspects of both into a unique structure never before seen, and can truly be called Nerses' masterpiece. The tallest church on earth when it was built, Zvartnots was the most significant architectural development in the Byzantine Empire.



In 652, the Byzantine Roman Emperor Constantine II attended the consecration of the temple, and, impressed by its design and achievement, decreed that a similar church be erected in Constantinople. The church architecture has a direct impact on the

dome of St. Sophia in Istanbul, since the master architect for Zvartnots was commissioned to design the dome using the tubular arch system developed at Zvartnots.

The church became known as S. Grigor for the relics of the saint that were housed there. Similar churches in the region, built in the same period were the 7th c Ishkhan (present Turkey) and Liakit (present Azerbaijan), 7th-8th cc Bana (Georgia) and S. Grigor at Ani (ca. 1000).

Its fall is as controversially debated as its construction. According to a 10th c historian, the church lay in ruins in the same century, though no reason was given. Many suggest earthquake as the cause, though its construction technique defies that reason alone for the total collapse of such a well engineered building, one meant to last 1000 years (the projected date of the second coming of Christ).

Excavations uncovered signs of an earlier attempt to destroy the church through fire, possibly by invading Arabs. The fire had the reverse affect of strengthening the joints, firing them into brick.

One thought is that it took the pulling out of strategic key stones in the structure to ultimately weaken the structure. Still, it is believed that it took decades of exposure to natural elements to finally weaken the second tier, which fell in the 10th c (ca. 930).

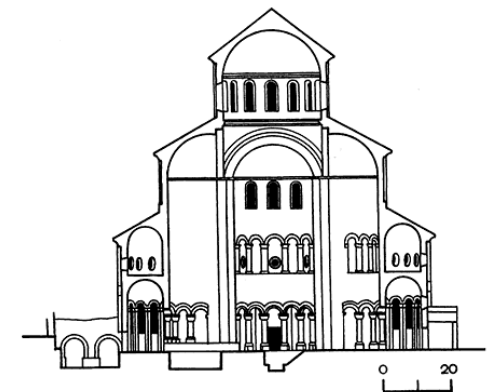


**Excavations** Some excavations were done in the 12th century, and the church is believed to have been depicted in a relief panel at Paris' St. Chapelle (1240), showing the church on top of Noah's Ark on Mt. Ararat. Since this depiction was made 300 years after the church's destruction,

some say the church could not have been a direct inspiration for the panel. Models of the church could have; they were preserved into the medieval period, including a close copy of the church at Ani, which may have been the inspiration for the Paris image.

The church in Ani is considered a perfect copy of the original and has been used to reconstruct Zvartnots (see below). Still, the original building became buried over time, its exact location lost.

An archimandrite monk named Khachik Dadian discovered the site in 1905. Comprehensive excavations were done between 1904-1907, continuing off and on through the 1950's, when the palace and a winery were uncovered.



#### RECONSTRUCTING THE CHURCH

As with its birth and death, what it actually looked like is also hotly debated in historical circles, with some consensus on the general outline but little else in the details.



King Gagik. The medieval historian Stepanos Asoghiketsi wrote

*"It was at that time, at the end of the 1000th year of Our Lord's incarnation, at the time of the Emperor Basil, that Gagik, King of Armenia, was taken with the idea of building in the city of Ani a church similar in size and plan to the great church at Vagharshapat, dedicated to St. Gregory, which was then in ruins."*



The most widely accepted reconstruction was done by an Armenian architect in 1905 (refined in 1942). Toros Toramanian based his design on detailed excavations that painstakingly pulled stones out of the rubble and pieced them together on the grounds, assembling a huge jigsaw puzzle that explained much of the outer walls on the first and part of the second tier, but which failed to tell much about the roofing and the top tier.

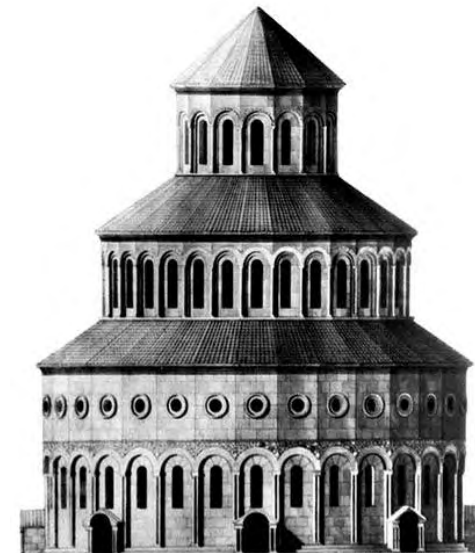
Considering what he had to work with were foundations, pieces of vaulting, a few capitals, bases, piers, columns and fragments of relief sculpture, the resulting design is remarkable, its basic layout widely accepted as correct.



Toramanian had some help with excavations done at the same time as Zvartnots, at the Bagratuni capital of Ani current Turkey). There excavators (including Toramanian) uncovered the foundations, fragments and a model of a later church, S. Grigor, which was built around 1000 for the Bagratuni

Toramanian and his colleagues pieced together a design in 1905 after comparing the finds at Ani with that at Zvartnots, and especially the discovery of a large Model Statue of King Gagik that stood on the east wall of the Ani church.

Statuary like this was common in medieval times, church donors depicted in bas relief figures on the apse wall, holding a model of the church. It should be noted that an actual model of either church was never found, and most modern historians (and tour guides) rest the argument on an artistic rendition done by a Polish artist at the Ani excavation, based on supposition only. Still, enough of both excavations survived to allow Toramanian and his colleagues to make a preliminary reconstruction.



**Toramanian reconstruction**

Toramanian's design was widely disseminated until later excavations (Kuznetsov 1951, Marutunian, 1963; Mnatsakanian, 1959, 1971) refined the design and proposed different roofing and minor details. But by a large excavators agreed on the basic design of the huge building.

According to these men, the church was built in a three tiered circular design, which tapered like a wedding cake to the top. The walls were faceted, with 32 facets on the ground floor, 16 on the second and 8 on the third, the whole thing topped by a tent style or cupped dome.

The roofing over the other floors was either circular as well, or as the second picture on the right suggests, circular on the first floor and tent-roofed over four protruding second story apses and cupped on the top. Each facet had a window, with round windows like those at Ani on the ground floor. Much debate has centered on the type of elevation and form of what may have been the second level, shown by the opposing designs.

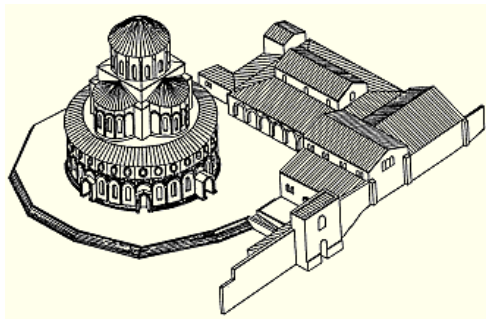


**Mnatsakanian reconstruction**

What is agreed to is that the interior was a cross, with arches, columns and pendentives supporting the second and third floors and the dome. The bottom floor was surrounded by a two story gallery (the faceted walls) with closely placed windows letting in light from all directions.

Four massive columns (or pylons) rose from the junction of the semi-circular arms of the cross, with monumental columns behind crowned by eagle crested capitals supporting the circular foundations of the second tier. The third tier was supported by four semi-columns with linking arches, which formed a square shape joined by pendentives (triangular sections of vaulting between the rim of a dome and each adjacent pair of the arches that support it) with the circular dome.

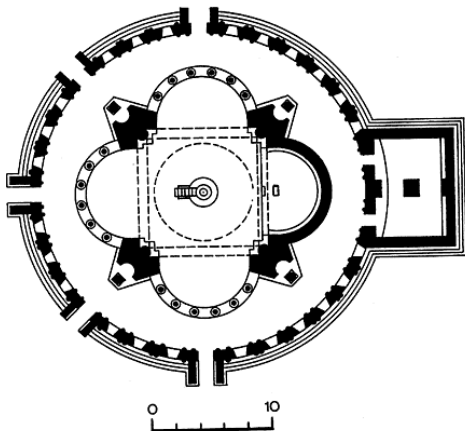
The interior was covered with rich detailing, including relief sculptures, mosaics, architectural detailing and frescoes of the saints, especially on the altar walls.



#### COMPLEX

The cathedral was surrounded by a large plaza and a number of buildings made from polished tufa, and the complex includes the church, the Catholicos' palace and clergy buildings, and a winery.

#### THE CHURCH



The overall design was inspired by the Hand of God, with the palm on the Eastern end, the five fingers stretching to the west. The actual design is circular, but it is not hard to imagine the hand imprint; the Eastern sanctuary (the palm) was shut from human eyes while doors lie at five points on the main circle (the fingers). The number 5 and 7 predominate in the design and dimensions; both sacred and eruptive numbers, signaling the builder's intent that the church was an end of one era, and the beginning of a new age. Adding the digits you arrive at the number 12 (twelve apostles, months, signs of the apocalypse) and by

adding those tog ether you arrive at ... 3 (the holiest number, the number of the trinity).

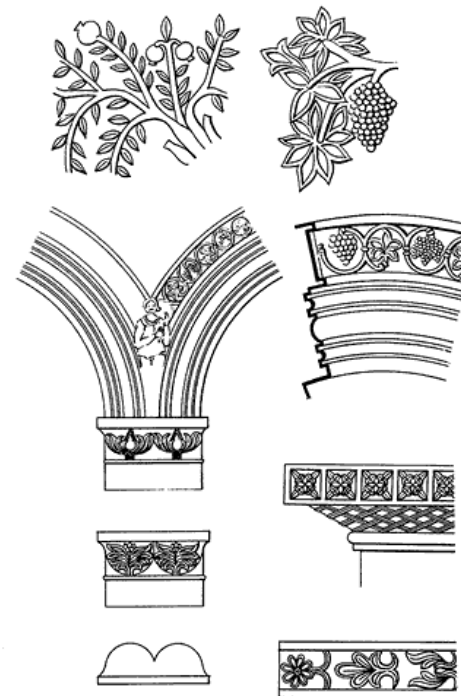
The church was actually one meter larger when it was first built, due to the use of lime cement that was deliberately laid to compress over time. Over 50-100 years the weight of the stones slowly settled to a much tighter and stronger edifice that was meant to last 1000 years (the predicted time for the coming of the Lord after the joining of the seven churches). On the north was a multi-step stylobate (foundation), which--with the then unheard of size of the church-- gave the entire complex a tremendous sense of grandeur.

The arms of a cross are made by six massive columns erected on a semi-circular plane, the eastern arm (where the elevated altar apse was placed) ending in a blind wall, covered with mosaic and fresco paintings. The ends of the cross created interior apses, the joints between held mighty pylons that supported the drum and dome by means of a series of spherical pendentives. The columns and the inner arcature for the four apses served as buttresses for the second floor, with a likewise series of supports for the third floor.

Placing the altar on the Eastern side of the church alters a tradition handed down by some pagans, which oriented the inner sanctum to the West. On one side of the altar was a stone pulpit with a baptismal font facing it. The vestry room was located immediately behind the altar in the back.

Using an early-medieval central dome design, Zvartnots extended the base to a 37.75 meter diameter circle (note the numbers 3-7-7-5). The church was built in three tiers, with the first and largest housing the congregation. It was girded by a corridor ringing the entire hall. The corridor was lit through the circular windows, one for each facet in the circular outer walls.

The three tiers formed three corridors, or inner circles, where the congregation stood during services. The uninitiated (folks like you and me) were forbidden from entering the inner two circles. Initiated (the baptized, priestly class and the favored aristocrats) were allowed in the second inner circle, while the innermost circle (where the baptismal font was located) was restricted to the most elect.

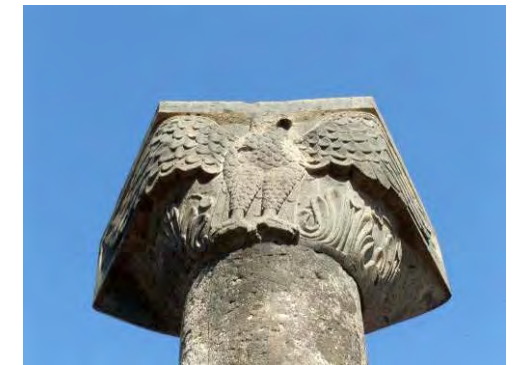


One of the outstanding features of Zvartnots is the decoration; frescoes covered the walls (especially at the altar) and highly decorative stone carvings were everywhere, incorporating florid designs on the five portals, decorative arcades, capitals of columns, spandrels (with images of the builders in high relief), the surface of facets, edges, window casings and cornices.

The images of the builders are particularly interesting, as they are rare instances of crediting builders other than through their initials or mark. The half-sized figures show the builders holding tools, with initials or names nearby (one says "Ionn" or "John"). Some say these depict the founders instead. In either case, they are a marvel of realistic depiction for the 7th c, showing individual faces, clothing and poses.

On reconstructed columns, you can see original capitals that combine Corinthian and early Armenian Khachkar (Stone Cross) geometric

patterns. Among them are interior capitals combining cross hatching with volutes or a cross, each embellished with a letter standing for "Nerses" or "Catholicos". Other capitals represent the eagle, while outer wall designs contained a continuous rim of grape vines and pomegranate trees with ripe fruit. The plasticity of the carvings established a new level of artistry in Armenia. Following the tradition of carving Khachkars so that no two are alike, the designs on the facade of the Zvartnots are each a unique creation of the master, some of whom were represented on faceted gargoyles on the church facade.



#### PALACE

The palace complex, southwest of the church, consists of western and eastern wings divided by a corridor. This was where the catholicos lived and worked, leading the church in its struggles with the Arabs, Byzantines and the last vestiges of Pagan resistance in the country. It was his office, home and the Seat of the Apostolic Church.

Nerses' palace was the largest civil structure in 7th century Armenia, and was built to impress the eye while complementing the cathedral's design. Its plan was almost square, with the rooms roofed over in the peasant style, with wooden roofs topped by open holes. The arcaded gallery on the north and south ends were built using oversized arches supported by wall buttresses and columns, designed to conceal the palace walls while complementing the massive cathedral.

From the North the throne hall abutted living quarters. The eastern wing of the palace held living quarters for clergy and a single nave church predating the palace. The wing facing the temple square had an arcade gallery. The winery

consisted of four wine-press rooms where grape juice trickled down and along an inclined surface into round stone vats in the next two rooms.

The western wing had two large halls, one of which was the main hall (the "summer hall"), where receptions and conferences were held. The triple nave hall had vaulted ceilings and rows of support columns.

The second, smaller hall was the refectory and throne room, adjoining the main hall to the South. Like palace halls in Dvin and Harich, the Zvartnots hall had wall buttresses to support the vaulted roofing, which separated the walls into arched niches.

Later additions to the south of the throne room included three winery rooms that held square vats for fermenting wine. Each vat held 4-5 thousand liters of wine, with total capacity of 22,000 liters (almost 5,800 gallons). The large jar on display in this area is a copy, but it gives some idea of the size of the jars used to ferment and store wine.

The East Wing included living quarters, service rooms and private quarters, including storage and a bath. The bath was divided into public and private areas (reserved for privileged guests). The bath was similar to the Roman baths at Garni, with hypocaust heating under its tiled floors to heat the rooms in successive stages, from the dressing room to the cold bath, warm bath (tepidarium), a hot or steam bath (caldarium) and a cooling (frigidarium) room.

Adjoining the bath on its south side was a small 5th-6th century chapel, to the south of which was the large wine-press.



## MUSEUM

I have been coming to Zvartnots for 15 years and the museum is ALWAYS closed; always in a state of "preparing the exhibition." Yet the museum is the exact same state of readiness it was 15 years ago—all displays are complete and ready for visitors.

I've become so fed up with this obvious attempt to not work, I have resorted to simply walking in and acting like I don't understand when they try to shoo me away. And my 'ignorance' works. My advice: pretend you don't understand and see how far it gets you. Another: they do speak English.

Museum hours (such as they are) are from 10-5, seven days a week. Tickets are 500 AMD.

It is a real shame the place is always "closed", for it has a small but well thought introduction to the site and brings the varying designs and reconstructions together.







There are also some good artifacts on display, including a sun dial with the inscription "Pray to God as He expects", and an inscription by Nerses III in Greek. A small hall has a large wall display of the church outlines, a great help in understanding ruins.

In front of the museum there is a basalt obelisk of the Urartu king Rusa II (685-675 BCE) with a cuneiform inscription commemorating the construction of a canal from the Hrazdan ("Ildarun") River.

**Food** at mterks and grill stands in the village; **Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, at hotels situated between, or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Springs** in the area.

## EXPLORING THE REGION ▲

Most of these trips can be done in a single day by car, depending on how many sites you visit and how long you spend at each stop. Sites in UPPER CASE are considered sites definitely worth a stop, while those in (*lower case italics*) have value in visiting, but will probably take up more than a day 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 may be reached only by a rocky path or pot-hole filled road, and could take 30-45 minutes to get to.

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

## TRIP 1: NORTHEAST ARMAMIR ▲

**ARGAVAND** – (*Geghanist*) – (*Arevashat*) – (*Baghrmian*) – (*Parakar*) – **PTGHUNK/MUSALEHR** – **ZVARTNOTS** – (*Mrgastan*) – (*Shahumian*) – (*Dasht*) – **AIGESHAT** – (*Amberd*) – (*Doghs*) – **AGHAVNATUN** – **ARAGATS** – (*Tsaghkalanj*) – (*Samaghar*) – (*Haitagh*) – (*Arshaluis*) – (*Aviator Monument*) – (*Tsaghkunk*) – (*Tsiatsan*) – (*Hovtamech*)

Trip 1 explores Northeast Armavir marz, wedged between the Zvartnots International Airport and Echmiadzin. The region is also home to Zvartnots Cathedral, which everyone tires to see, and a large

number of interesting stops most people never see.

This is a real shame, since the northeast has some great stops for the history buff, and tasty vegetables and fruits for the rest, all easily accessible from Yerevan or Echmiadzin. It also has some of the friendliest villagers in the country, thrilled to have visitors come by and proud of their heritage. Most villages were resettled in the 19th century, so memories of the bygone past may be sketchy (interlaced with stories of their "real home" in Western Armenia).

The Northeast has been the vegetable and fruit basket for Armenia for thousands of years, as well as capitalizing on Armenia's flower craze; the eastern marz has thousands of greenhouses in just about every villager's backyard, growing exotic varieties of roses, lilies and even orchid. Don't expect to get much of a discount though, locals sell wholesale to tourists at retail prices.

It has only recently started to experience a new purpose, as bedroom communities for the burgeoning capital. Four-story dachas and lavishly decorated houses are springing up between Yerevan and Echmiadzin, and their ostentatious displays of wealth (and outlandish taste) do not always sit well with old-timers, but it is a fact of life (and growing land wealth) for the rest, who seem to take it in stride as they farm their lands in the shadows of their new neighbors.



**Stay:** Hotels, restaurant-hotels and motels on the (M5) from Yerevan to Echmiadzin, Aknalich and near Armavir; guest houses/apts. in Echmiadzin and Armavir; village homes (rustic) throughout the marz; Camping at Aknalich and near villages (no forest cover).

**Eat:** Restaurants & cafes on the (M5), Echmiadzin and Armavir, Sardarapat; restaurant-hotels on the (M5) and Aknalich; mterks and kiosks in Echmiadzin, Armavir and villages.

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, Echmiadzin, Metsamor, and Aknalich.

➡ **From Echmiadzin:** (S. Hripsimeh), taking the (M5) E for about 11.8 km to the last stop light in Argavand, taking a R (S) for 200 m to the WW II monument at Argavand.

**From Yerevan:** (Cognac Factory), where the Echmiadzin Highway (M5) begins. From the factory continue about 3 km to the cloverleaf

intersection for “Bangladesh” neighborhood; Continue W on the (M5) for about 2.5 km to the retail and casino district for Argavand. There is a stop light at the village entry; take a L (S) onto a narrow road that winds its way behind the furniture shops and casinos for about 200 m to a R (W) that leads to the WWII monument at **ARGAVAND** (DD 40.15638 x 44.43998, elev. 892m) 🏠 📶 🌐

🌟 **ARGAVAND - ԱՐԳԱՎԱՆԴ (Արգավանդ)** ▲ (pop. 2250), technically in Ararat marz, is located on the right bank of the Hrazdan River as it widens and empties into the Ararat Plain. Wedged between the western districts of Yerevan (Shengavit is across the river and “Bangladesh” just east) and Zvartnots Airport, the village is made prosperous by the boon in the flower trade and its infamous positions as Armenia’s “**Little Las Vegas**”.

As to the first, every yard is taken up by greenhouses that overshadow their front homes and grow the roses, daisies and lilies street vendors charge a fortune for in Yerevan. For the latter, the main highway that fronts the village is taken up by mini-casinos and gambling joints elbowing room with neighboring cheap furniture stores, the den of many a ruined husband trying to win his family’s fortune.

The casinos can be dangerous; according to locals, fights involving knives and guns are more of a common occurrence than the authorities want to admit to. If you really want to try your luck, there are higher end (and relatively quieter) casinos on the E end of Yerevan on the road to Garni, and in the Hrazdan valley north of Yerevan at Ptghni.



The village center (200m S of the highway) has an impressive **1413 Tatar Funerary Tower**. Attributed to the Kara Koyunlu period, which immediately followed Timur Lenk’s devastating rule, the tower celebrates in Arabic the piety and humility of an equally ruthless Pir Hussein abn Sa’ad, a local tribal leader who ruled the area during the reign of Pir Budaq and Kara Yussuf, leaders of the Turcoman Kara Koyunlu (Black Sheep) tribe which inherited Timur’s Persian possessions, including Armenia. Pir Budaq shared the throne with his father before his death in 1413.

Tatar like the Timurids and the Mongols before them, the Black Sheep came from Central Asia, and ruled Armenia for about 50 years before being expelled by the Ak Koyunlu, of White Sheep who ruled for about 70 years before being wiped out by Ottomans. Historians are split on the effects of the Black and White Sheep rule, some pointing to treaties between a dying out nakharar regime with Black Sheep leaders as a tentative period of peace (one could not call it prosperity—Timur literally decimated the entire country, and famine was widespread). Others point to the continued loss of lands to Tatar, Kurdish and Turkish tribes, and treatment of Armenian subjects that made some reflect on the Mongol invasions as a time of relative peace and quiet.

As a side note, the tribes’ names come from the color of the heraldic forms on their battle flags, not from their herding preferences or, being better or worse than the Timurids—in fact, their reign in many ways cemented the splintering of the Armenian lands and the exile of native Armenians from the territory.



In front of the entrance is a ram’s head stone found in the yard during excavations, some saying medieval like the stones at Ria Taza in Aragatsotn, others saying Bronze Age like other ram head stones found throughout the country.

The tower is a tall 8-sided column that was once topped with a colored ceramic brick dome (assumed to have been blue like the ceramic bricks ringing the upper octahedron). The monuments rest in the center of a small cemetery, and inside there are a number of items found during excavations. They include vase and jar fragments and a number of small stones round on one end with petroglyph carvings on their face; designs resembling Egyptian hieroglyphs or constellations.

They have not been dated, but some suggest they may be the remnants of a standing stone circle that once stood at the site, since covered over by the tower. Interestingly, on the outer face of the tower there are a few carvings much in the same vein as these smaller ones, and inside, a large khachkar stone with a central ansk (eye-hole) is embedded in one of the walls.



The Arabic inscriptions begin with a *Sura* from the Koran, then extol the virtues of the assumed exhumed, and read:

*In the name of Allah gracious and merciful! Allah -- there is no god besides him, alive, real; neither drowsiness nor sleep can seize Him, He owns everything in the Heavens and on the Earth. Who will plead, except with His permission? He knows what was before them and what will be after them, while they perceive nothing from His knowledge other than He*

*wishes. His throne embraces the heavens and the earth, and He is not burdened by guarding them. Indeed Great and High is He.*

*Ordered to build this blessed tomb (kubba) the greatest, the noblest, abundant in generosity and magnanimity, the support of kings and sultans, refuge for the weak and the poor, guardian of scientists and those who seek knowledge, aid to the poor and wayfarers, the glory of the state and the faith, Emir Pir-Hussein, son of the late absolved Emir elevated to His [Allah's] patronage, the most merciful Emir Sa'ad, -- may the soil lie light upon him -- in the days of reign of the Great Sultan, the most generous Khakan, the Sultan of Sultans in the East and the West, the aid of the state and the faith, Pir Budaq Khan and Yussuf Noyon, -- may Allah perpetuate their power, on the fifteenth of Radzhab of the year 816 [October 11, 1413].*

Next to the funerary tower is an impressive **WWII monument**, with the soldier posed deep in thought with his long coat flowing outwards.



The tower faces a three-prong road fork: take the central (a small sign above the street with a color picture of a miniature painting points the way) and continue S for about 100 m to **S. Sarkis church**, substantially renovated and “upgraded” in a 1997 redo to commemorate the 1700th anniversary celebrations. Despite the poured concrete and erasing much of the character of the old church, traces of its original building survive, including stones and basement from an original pagan use.



A basilica, the church has a few remnants of old khachkars on its perimeter, and one in the front portico that is embedded with ceramic pictures of S. Sarkis, the crucifixion and other religious images. This stone is one of the oldest, and may have originally been a vishap or standing stone.

Backtrack to the tower and take the R (SE) road that in about 100m reaches the NE edge of the old cemetery. Almost in its middle are the scant ruins of the 5th c **S. Harutiun church**, surrounded by graves, bushes covered with tied strips of cloth and a couple of ancient stones. An upright stone in front of the makeshift metal altar is either a vishap or phallus, suggesting the pagan origins of this tiny sacred spot.



**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels situated in-between or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Food** at grill stands in the village and restaurants-hotels on the (M5); **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Argavand, continue SW on the main street for about 800 m from the rail bridge to central (**Geghanist**, DD 40. 14596 x 44.42736, elev. 869m) ք Թ Զ

**SIDE TRIP: Geghanist - Գեղանիստ** (till 1948 Kolkat, pop. 2500) is also technically in Ararat marz, but more easily reached via the (M5) and is just across the marz border from Arevashat in Armavir. The small village with dozens of greenhouses growing flowers, greens, tomatoes and cucumbers, has a **basilica** that was rebuilt in 1852 on the ruins of an older shrine.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Food** at (M5) restaurants-cafes, mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Geghanist, continue SW on the main road for about 1 km to a R (NW) road that leads in 1 km to a L (SW) turn that leads in about 700 m to Arbat center, where a R (NW) turn leads across the S end of Zvartnots Airport and in about 2 km makes a sharp R (NE) then L (SW) turn at the edge of the runway into (**Arevashat**, DD 40.14242 x 44.37269, elev. 851m) ք Թ Զ

**SIDE TRIP: Arevashat - Արևաշատ** (till 1946 Varmazyar, pop. 1250) has a **basilica church** (19th century built over ruins of older shrine) and a **Tukh Manuk** ("Dark Youth") shrine. The name denotes the color of the skin of this ancient deity that is an amalgam of Sanskrit-Caucasian origins and that is in some traditions a randy blood-thirsty youth that doles out pain and favors in equal measure, depending on the sacrifices given. Steeped in the mists of time, the tradition is believed to come from at least the early Bronze Age, when Indo-Iranian and Indo-Aryan (Indo-European) tribes from the Caucasus scattered into Iran, India, Central Asia and the Mediterranean, combining proto-myths and religions into unifying concepts that extend to the present day.

Tukh Manuks are single sanctuaries with one identifying tomb or sacred stone that marks a long-forgotten sacred person or event that occurred at the spot. Converted into Christian shrines in medieval times, the Tukh Manuk never quite lost its pagan blood-thirsty meaning, local villagers continuing to perform

matagh (ritual sacrifice) and to tie strips of cloth to nearby bushes (wishing trees or a "burning bushes") at the site. In fact, while the village church is venerated in due Christian form, villagers often reserve their most fervent prayers for their Tukh Manuk, women especially who are barren or worried about conception.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Arevashat backtrack to Argavand and the (M5) highway, turn L (W) and continue for about 3 km to the church at (**Parakar**, DD 40.16216 x 44.39787, elev. 864m) ք Թ Զ

**SIDE TRIP: Parakar - Փարակար** (before Shirabad, pop. 2000), like Argavand, is equally flush with cash from the casinos and flop houses lining the (M5) highway, with the equally disruptive influences of mafia "oligarch" fights breaking out among the sharkskin suits coming and going.

The village has a recently renovated 19th c. **S. Mariam Astvatsatsin** basilica facing the highway, a well-loved and well-used neighborhood church that receives an influx of pilgrims on the high holidays. The church has a few old stones in the yard, suggesting an older history than its brand-spanking new red tufa walls suggest.

The village also has a **S. Harutiun** church dated to 1855, which seems built over medieval and early Christian structures, though scant remains to tell the tale.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Food** at restaurants on the (M5) or mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➔ From Parakar (S. Mariam), continue W on the (M5) for about 2.8 km to the Musalehr monument road that forms the E edge of **PTGHUNK/MUSALEHR** (DD 40.19071 x 44.36853, elev. 937m) ք Թ Զ

✠ **PTGHUNK/MUSALEHR - ՊՏԴՈՒՆԷ/ՄՈՒՍԱԼԵՐ** (Պտղոնք/Մուսալեռ) (pop. 800) is

distinguished solely for its location next to the Musalehr monument and restaurant complex on its E and a hotel in the village to the south.



**Musa Lehr Monument** commemorates the heroes of Musa Lehr (also spelled Musa Ler or Musaler; Musa Dag in Turkish), members of a community of six villages on the small Musa Lehr (Lehr means mountain in Armenian) on the Turkish Coast who chose to refuse Turkish death squad orders to evacuate their mountain during the genocide of 1915. Knowing the fate of their brethren who complied with Turkish orders (up to 2 million were slaughtered or starved to death on force marches led by Turkish and Kurdish forces), the citizens of Musa Lehr chose to resist, building fortifications on the small mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.



For 53 days they repelled onslaughts by Turkish troops until French sailors sighted a banner the Armenians had tied to a tree on the mountain emblazoned with the words: "Christians in Distress: Rescue." French and British naval ships then evacuated some 4,200 men, women and children from Musa Ler to Port Said in Egypt. The Armenians were allowed to return after WWI to their homeland in the newly formed Syria. The people of Musa Ler were soon forced to relocate, after Turkey annexed the region. Many were resettled in Lebanon, in the village Anjar, and

many others settled in Armenia, in the village of Musa Ler.

Turkish denial of its complicity in the genocide began early, as Musa Lehr shows. When Franz Werfel's novel about the events of the resistance, "Forty Days of Musa Dagh", was published in 1933, it so infuriated the Turkish government that when Hollywood began a film version of the story, the Turkish government pressured the State Department to force MGM Studios to stop production. A filmed version of the story was eventually made independently and was released theatrically in 1982.

The **Museum** inside the memorial includes historical information and artifacts from the original Musa Ler settlement in present-day Turkey, as well as displays about the community across the highway. The cemetery outside the monument is reserved for descendants of Musa Lehr, some of which fought in the 1991-1994 Karabakh War.

Every September descendants of survivors of the Genocide from Musaler in Western Armenia offer traditional Armenian Harisa (porridge) and dance in honor of the heroes of the Battle of Musaler.

#### OVERNIGHT

There is a **HOTEL** in Musalehr village, just south of the village taking a S road about 150 m west of the Musalehr monument road. The hotel is a converted private house and caters to locals on trysts or partying, so can be loud, but safe. Basic DBLs with shared and separate baths go for 7,000-15,000 AMD.

#### FOOD & DRINK

**MUSALEHR MONUMENT AND RESTAURANT** (tel. 505655) is about 2 km W of Parakar, at the end of the border road to Ptghunk village, on top of a hill. Hugely popular with weddings, birthdays and family celebrations, the restaurant offers spectacular views of the Ararat plain and Mt. Ararat (on velar days), and reasonable prices (2500-5000 AMD for full course meal).

Other **overnight** in village home (rustic; 4000 AMD for B&B is quite fair, though hard to find); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Ptghunk (Musalehr road), continue W on the (M5) for about 2.2 km to an intersection, where a R (N) turn and another 3.5 km takes

you into central (**Baghramian**, DD 40.19071 x 44.36853, elev. 937m) 📍 🏠 🍷 🍴

**SIDE TRIP: Baghramian - Բաղրամյան** (founded 1947, pop. 1500) was named for General Hovhannes (Ivan) Baghramian (1897-1982), Hero of the Soviet Union. Baghramian, a Bolshevik in the Red Army, fought for Sovietization of Lori and Georgia, and became Commander of the First Armenian Cavalry Brigade (1923-1931). In Kiev at the onset of the German invasion, Baghramian successfully led the 1941 winter retreat of the Red Army, leading counter-offensives as Commander First Baltic front in Byelorussia and East Prussia (June-October 1944).

He was made Marshall of the Soviet Union in 1955, one of only 4 Armenians to be awarded this highest position in the army.

Otherwise the village is nondescript, though it has a **church** and a **S. Sarkis Shrine** built in 1997.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Baghramian backtrack to the (M5), turn R (W) and continue for about 1 km to where the eagle column and metal front gates are on the S side of the highway, opening to an 900m driveway to **ZVARTNOTS** (DD 40.15638 x 44.43998, elev. 892m) 📍 🏠 🍷 🍴

🏠 **ZVARTNOTS - ԶՎԱՐԹՆՈՅ (Զվարթնոց)** 📍

For details about Zvartnots complex, see p. 48.



➡ From Zvartnots, continue W for about 1.8 km to the Echmiadzin (merge L or W) turnoff; stay on the highway bypass (merge R or NW) and continue for about 1.9 km to the first R exit onto a small road that heads N and in about 1.4 km ends at the (**Battle of Oshakan Pillar**, DD 40.18968 x 44.30868, elev. 891m) 📍 🏠 🍷 🍴

**SIDE TRIP: Battle of Oshakan Pillar - Օշականի ճակատամարտի հուշայուն** is set in a bend in the road surrounded by farm fields. The tall pillar was commemorated in 1833 during the state visit of the Russian Tsar Nicholas I. The pillar commemorates the Battle of Oshakan, during the Russo-Persian War which resulted in the ceding of Eastern Armenia to the Russian Empire.

Armavir marz was left in Persian hands after the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, which ceded southern Armenia and Karabakh to the Russians. When fighting broke out again in 1827, the Persians blockaded Echmiadzin, supporters of the Tsarist forces, and were threatening to move on Tflis (Tbilisi) and retake Karabakh.



On Aug 17, 1827 Russian regiments from Sevastopol and Crimea engaged the Persians at the Battle of Oshakan, fighting in the fields around you. Russian victory broke the blockade and evicted Persian forces from Armavir and then Yerevan, ending with the ceding of all of Eastern Armenia to Russia in the 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchai.

When the Tsar announced his visit to his new domains in 1833, Echmiadzin clergy raised an obelisk at the site of battle in commemoration of the 1131 Russian soldiers who fell during the battle. The current monument was erected later.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5); **Camping** by the monument (no tree cover, better elsewhere); **Food** in Echmiadzin.

➡ From the Oshakan Battle Monument, continue W for about 1.3 km on the connector road that ends at a T intersection; turn R (N) and continue for about 450m to a L (W) turn that in about 1.4 km enters (**Mrgastan**, DD 40.19907 x 44.27992, elev. 907m) 📍 🏠 🍷 🍴

**SIDE TRIP: Mrgastan - Մրգաստան** (till 1935 Hajjilar, pop. 500) has an impressive WWII monument on the side of the road as you enter the village, to the R (S).



**S. Hovhannes Church** is located behind the Culture Center (from the statue, take a R (N) at the school to the center, then two blocks to the culture center, then behind). The triple nave basilica is newly renovated, with new polished tufa stones clapped over the 1912 structure.



**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (no tree cover); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From the north edge of Mrgastan, take the N village road that courses north, east, then north and east again for about 1.3 km to a bridge over

a canal and immediately after a field on the L (N) with the remains of Shresh Blur on the W end of (**Shahumian**, DD 40.21056 x 44.29153, elev. 923m) 🗺️ 🏠 🌳 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Shahumian - Շահումյան** (till 1935 Mullah Dursun, pop. 450) is surrounded by fertile farmland that has nonetheless failed to sustain the old village—most villagers live in Yerevan or Russia, sending remittances to family members back home.

The village was renamed from its older Tatar name Mullah Dursun to Shahumian in honor of the leader of the 26 Commissars of the 1918 Baku Commune. The commune started the Sovietization of the oil-rich city before being evicted by Dashnaks, arrested by the White Army and imprisoned, liberated by the Red Army, escaped to Krasnovodsk where they were captured again, and finally executed by a firing squad between the stations of Pereval and Akhcha-Kuyma.



**Shresh Blur** is a Neolithic-Bronze Age Tell and tomb field with stones from Hellenistic and medieval structures that once stood on the site. The blur is really a low brow about 50m N of the side of the road, in a field that covered with tall grass and wildflowers in the Spring and early summer. The field alternates as a marshland in the spring, so watch as you step!



**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (no tree cover); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Shresh Blur, continue E through Shahumian village to the Echmiadzin Road (M3), turn L (N) and continue for about 1 km to the L fork into central (**Dasht**, DD 40.22831x 44.30170, elev. 936m) 🗺️ 🏠 🌳 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Dasht - Դաշտ** (founded 1926, pop. 400) is located at the top edge of Armavir marz, with rich irrigated fields to the west ("Dasht" means field) and barren land to the right of the Lower Hrazdan Canal.

Villagers who resettled the village were from Western Armenia, and they named much of their surrounding after their homeland, including the tall 1024.1m hill to the NE, which is the site of an important **Bronze-Iron Age cyclopean Fortress** (DD 40.23756 x 44.30075, elev. 1029m). To get there, take the NE turn to the cemetery at the top of the village and start climbing the hill, heading towards the electric pylons.

Calling the site **David Ardar** ("David the Just"), locals say they followed a tradition of their ancestors, though none seem to know why. Most point to Sasuntsi Davit, the hero of an 8th century epic poem about the wars against the Egyptians and Arabs (Davit is a demi-god in Armenian literature, battling the forces of evil to save his homeland). The poem is believed to have its origins in the Bronze Age as it uses figures from Armenia's founding myths.



Another explanation for the name comes from the Bible; the book of David. King David is called "the Just", and he subjugated northern tribes that inhabited the area of Western Armenia. Locals, who transferred the name from their homeland, may have simply continued a tradition begun during the reign of David (1037-932 BCE)—about the time the western Thraco-Phrygian tribes moved into the region to begin the cross-fertilization that resulted in the Armenian kingdom.



Whatever, the site is impressive for its size, if there are few structures remaining to show the grandeur of what once was. At the topmost western hill there is what seems at first glance just a pile of rocks, but on closer inspection prove to be stacked in an orderly fashion—these are the remains of a round tower which formed the topmost defense. Once on top, survey the entire valley—all of which was under the watch

of soldiers to the king. Traces of walls can be detected running from this structure, showing the extent of the large space.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (tree cover in orchards, ask first); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Dasht, take the western road for about 1 km to the SE edge of **AIGESHAT** (DD 40.23571 x 44.28924, elev. 947m) 🗺️ 🏠 🍷 🌿

🏠 **AIGESHAT - ԱՅԳԵՇԱՏ (Այգեշատ)** 📍 (till 1935 Hajighara) is located on the left bank of the Kasakh River, like Dasht with fertile irrigated fields around and arid terrain to the E (the tall eastern hill is the Adar Davit fortress in Dasht v.). The village has had a mixed Armenian/Kurdish population for most of its recent history.



The 7th c **Tarkmanchats Vank** is located in the NE of the village. From the SE corner (where you arrived), take the eastern edge road about 500 m to an intersection. Left takes you to the center of the village and main square; instead go straight into a narrow street and in about 50m on the L you will see a gate and behind the substantial ruins of the vank. The gate is locked, but an old woman across the street (ask for "Tatik" or 'grandma') has the key.

Tarkmanchats ("Holy Translators") is named for Mesrop Mashtots and Sahak Partev, credited with inventing the new Armenian Alphabet and translating the Bible into Armenian. The adoption of the Mashtots script secured Armenia's cultural identity and independence from Sassanid Persians

and Byzantine Greeks who were each trying to subjugate (and assimilate) the Armenian Parthian court.



The now ruined vank was once a major monastery and center for propagating the new language. Located just 4 km S of Mesrop Mashtots' burial shrine in Oshakan, and 8 km north of the Mother Cathedral in Echmiadzin, Tarkmanchats was a monastery, school and manuscript center.

Built in the mid 7th century, the church was—like Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Zvartnots—a bastion of civilization in a wilderness of infidels, its outer defense meant to stave off dangerous resistance to the Armenian Church by Arabs and Byzantines alike.



Attributed to the reign of the Catholicos Nerses III the Builder, the church was built over a small church that was either a Pagan temple or built using the ruins of the old temple in the 4th-5th cc

(note the three step platform—a sign of Pagan origins).

A supporter of union with the Greek Church, Nerses seems to have added Byzantine forms to Tarkmanchats Church: the layout is a stretched cruciform with the addition of two small protruding apses on either side of the western hall. The result is a "Greek Cross" form that is unique in Armenian churches. The outlines of the small apses are clearly seen in the northern wall foundations.

The church was damaged in the 10th c earthquake that destroyed Zvartnots, but was rebuilt and sacked several times afterwards, finally succumbing to Timurid attacks in the early 15th c and later earthquakes.



The **yard** is filled with cemetery stones from the early Christina to medieval periods, and stones from the ruins of the church. There are also a number of ceramic pieces from the medieval period lying about, the results of a 1980s excavation and attempt to rebuild the church.

Backtrack to the central road, turn R (W) and continue for about 200m to the village's "Red Square", where an impressive **WWII monument** is set to the R (N), as well as the village mterk.



Continue W on the main street and take the next L (an alley), where in about 25 m you will find the 18th c **S. Gevorg church**, with a 1905 commemorative plate over the S entry. The church uses finely hewn polished stone on its S end, with plastered tufa walls on the other sides.



The interior of this triple-nave basilica has a wonderful example of the thatched roof style used in parish churches in the late medieval period (15th-19th cc). Unable to afford the stone columns and slate roofs used by their forebears (or replacing broken slate roofs), builders opted for wooden supports made from trees imported from Western Armenia or Lori (some being the actual columns used in Western Armenian churches abandoned during forced exile) and an ingenious roofing made from thatched reeds and sod roofs. Each spring, these earthen roofs literally spring to life with grass and wildflowers, adding an enchanting aspect to their design. Sadly, S.

Gevorg replaced its earth roof with corrugated asbestos in Soviet times.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (tree cover in orchards, ask first); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From central Aigeshat, take the western road for about 1 km to a spot on the N side of the road (cross and follow the Kasakh River to just after it bends away and heads W) on the E end of (**Amberd**, DD 40.23809 x 44.27730, elev. 938m) 🏠 🚶 🗺

**SIDE TRIP: Amberd - Ամբերդ** (till 1978 Frankanots, pop. 800) is set just off the Right bank of the Kasakh River, the source of its fertile alluvial soil and countless generations of human settlement on the upper Ararat Plain. The small village is well laid out in the Soviet style, though relics of the past point to a deeper history than the 19th century resettlement by emigrés from Western Armenia.



The spot before you (under some trees and surrounded by plowed farmland) is all that remains of a once prosperous monastery, Tovmas Arakeal (The Apostle Thomas). Built sometime in the early Christian period (some trace it to the 9th c, the open air ruins are all that are left of the large triple-nave version of what may have been domed cruciform in the medieval period. All that remain are a stone and earthen entry, submerged walls made from rubble stone and tufa blocks collected from the area, and the eloquent relics of local worship;

religious prints, embroidered cloth and plastic bits of Jesus.



The site is peaceful and strangely moving: open to the sky and filled with khachkars and khachkar fragments, pieces of ancient stones, and signs of the faithful.

Continue W and take the first R (N), entering the village. The road naturally curves L (W) to reach the center. On your right is the WWII monument, which has undergone some renovation and additions, adding the portraits and names of Karabakh warriors to those who fell in the Great Patriotic War.



Just beyond and to the L (S), wedged between and behind two buildings are the fragmentary remains of the small triple-nave **Poghos Petros** basilica, built over a Tukh Manuk in the 19th century in its last incarnation, but showing signs of a much older structure. To the right of

the altar there is a small shrine with a gravestone to a now-forgotten saint and a small black khachkar. Locals still burn candles in the outdoor shrine and leave offerings on the stoop.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (Kasakh River, no shade); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Amberd backtrack to the Aigeshat road intersection, cross over and continue S for about 1.2 km to a fork, where the L (SE) fork leads in about 250 m to S. Stepanos in (**Doghs**, DD 40.22516 x 44.27401, elev. 927m) 🏠 🚶 🗺

**SIDE TRIP: Doghs - Դոցս** (pop. 600) overlooks the Kasakh River, sharing farming fields with its neighbor Amberd to the north. The small village is reputedly the site of an important Bagratuni Victory (894) by the forces of Smbat I (the Martyr) Bagratuni over those under the Emir Apshin of At'rapatakan, effectively curtailing Arab control over Bagratuni lands. The victory accelerated the ascent of the Bagratuni clan, ushering in the so-called Second Golden Age, which reached its apogee under Smbat's heirs Ashot II the Iron (who cemented Bagratuni control by crushing the Arab army in Gegharkunik) and Ashot III the Merciful, who began construction of the Bagratuni capital at Ani. Sadly, nothing of the battle remains, nary a marker to point t this important moment in history.



Doghs has the **S. Stepanos church** built in the 19th c over the ruins of ancient structures, among them a medieval church built to

celebrate the Bagratuni victory, and well before that, offerings to unknown gods. The current structure is built over a pre-Christian base.

**Overnight** in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (Kasakh River, no shade); **Food** at mterks or kiosks in the village; **Springs** in the village.



➡ From central Doghs take the W road for about 2 km to central **AGHAVNATUN** ( DD 40.23011 x 44.25053, elev. 921m) 🏠 🚶 🗺

🏠 **AGHAVNATUN - ԱԳԱՎՆԱՏՈՒՆ** (Աղավնատուն) 🗺 (pop. 1000) was an important settlement in prehistory, judging by the number of prehistoric artifacts found in and around the village. The huge tufa quarry W of the village was once covered with hundreds of Paleolithic-Bronze Age petroglyphs, most sadly cut away by quarry owners in a hurry to make a buck off the construction boom in Yerevan. Only in Armenia can you find 12,000 years of history sliced away with such abandon.

The village must have been a major settlement and religious center, judging by the large number of prehistoric structures and shrines found here. These include two Tukh Manuks, a 4th-10th century domed hall church and a 7th-14th century cruciform church (both built on the foundations op pagan temples), Bronze Age tomb stones in the cemetery, a round tower to the north and a petroglyph field outside the village. There is also an Arabic "Gumbaz" or honey-comb tomb from the medieval period.

Individually these are small sites (save the round tower which should be on everyone's list of must-sees in Armavir, if as is suggested, it may be a Zoroastrian tower), but taken together they form a unique picture of about 6,000 years of history, all in one spot.



In the W of the village (As you arrive in the center from Doghs, go S then W to the old section, then to the NW outskirts—the cemetery is on a hill above the village) is the old **cemetery** (DD 40.23235 x 44.24269), which has a number of old standing stones fallen on the ground, some Bronze-Iron Age gravestones and a medieval **princely tomb**. With a small khachkar on top of its five-step base. Nearby are the remains of medieval walls and the small **S. Karapet Tukh Manuk**, plastered over in gray with white trim and a corrugated asbestos roof. The tiny space is nonetheless ancient, with its telltale gravestone features in the eastern altar, decorated with religious prints and offerings.

From the top and back of the cemetery you can see the ragged crest of the western **Bronze-Iron Age Fortress** hill to the W. The hill bares trace marks of its once-mighty cyclopean walls, whittled down over the millennia by industrious residents taking stones to use in barns and houses.

From the cemetery, take the deteriorating road that skirts the cemetery on its E side northwards and across the Hrazdan canal, taking the next L dirt path that skirts orchards and fields for a km or so before turning sharply R (N), skirting the same fields as it wends its way to a stone cutting complex. Navigate through the complex to the old Quarry road (ask for the “old stone tower” - **հին շրջանաձև աշտարակ** - “hin sh’rjanadzev

Ashtarak”). From there you pass through the old quarry, site of important petroglyphs.

**Quarry Petroglyphs** The stone quarry may provide jobs for locals, but it unfortunately also means the destruction of the village's 12,000 year history: the quarry is the site of important Paleolithic, chalcolithic (Copper) and early Bronze Age petroglyphs, most of which have been sliced away to create blocks for buildings in the “New Yerevan”.

There are almost no traces left of the hundreds that once adorned the tufa mounds around you. The area is vast, stretching for 2 kilometers in either direction, and a recent survey of petroglyphs has not been done (and not allowed now that the site has been “bought” by a local oligarch), but a little exploration might yields a few trace designs on rock deposits that have not yet been cut away. For details about the destruction of Aghavnatun's petroglyphs, see [Resources: Online](#), p. 92.

Continue N and NE through the quarry, following dusty trails used by trucks and earth moving equipment; skirt around the field office and look for a dirt path that heads to the NW (ask at field office). The road rises to the base of a sharply rising hill, crowned by a rough stone round tower.



**Round Tower** (DD 40.25754 x 44.22110, elev. 1050m) is located about 6 NW of the village (7 as the rough roads course). The tower is made from stacked stone, some pieces quite large. It has one narrow entrance that requires scrambling over fallen stone slabs and stooping to get through—a great defensive design forcing all who enter to drop their weapons and bend over.

The tower is undated, but in good shape, suggesting to some it is not as old as its assumed origin in the late Bronze or Iron Age. Towers like this were common in the Urartian period; outposts and relay stations for communicating with the capital of Tushpa some 265 km to the S.



Others say the tower is actually prehistoric in origin, built in the Bronze or early Iron Age, when fire worship or funerary towers like this were common. Still others say its solid form and remarkably good condition speaks to a later time, perhaps the Sassanid era when the country was being pressured to adopt a radical form of Zoroastrianism.



Whatever the origins, the shape and size is remarkably like Zoroastrian funerary towers that can be found throughout the Near East and into India. Translated into “Towers of Silence” by a member of the British Raj in India in 1832, the

original name for these structures is not actually known, though they were called *dakhma* or *dokhma* (from Middle Persian *dakhmag*) in Sassanid Iran, which originally denoted any place for the dead. Built to expose the dead to the elements, their construction is absolutely unique, fitting for a device created to remove the polluting effects of a rotting body from the community.

“Towers of Silence” have an almost flat roof, with the perimeter being slightly higher than the center. The roof is divided into three concentric rings: bodies of men are arranged around the outer ring, women in a second circle, and children closest to the center.

The bodies are left in the open to decay or be eaten by birds and animals. After a year or so, the sun-bleached bones are then collected into an ossuary in the center of the tower, where lime is added to the bones so that they gradually disintegrate, the resulting material slowly washed through sand and cola filters as it seeps into the ground (in Zoroastrian belief, the body thus returns to the sea from whence it came. For details about the Towers of Silence, see [Resources: Online](#) on page 92.

Backtrack to the village cemetery, then head to the next juncture, a fork in the road where a severe R back angle leaves the village and passes the Iron Age Fortress to the right (N), and, in about 800m, to a L turn that ends in another 200m at the **Karmavor Tukh Manuk**.

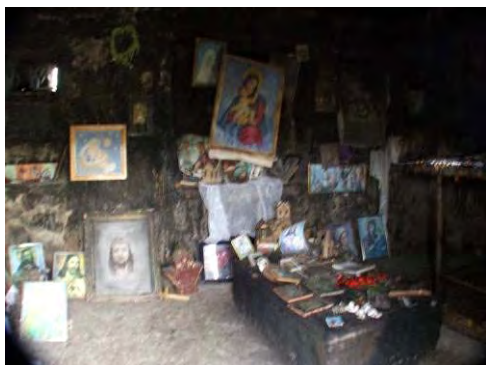


The small shrine is what is left of a once substantial church and monastery community, the trace remains of which line the side of the yard to the S of the current shrine. Walk along the

perimeters of the yard and you can also detect the outline of the inner walls that ring the sanctuary.

Located in the midst of fertile alluvial land that springs to life with a little water, the monastery at Karmavor is believed to have been first built in the 7th century, during the religious revival initiated by Nerses III the Builder, who tried to join the Armenian Church with the Greek Orthodox as a defense against marauding Arabs and rebellion in his own Nakharar corps.

The name comes from its original (lost) structure, which used red tufa ("Karmavor" = red in color). A couple of columns from the old structure lie in the grass near the current plastered structure. There is a "burning bush" south of the shrine, with torn bits of cloth tied to its branches; wishing totems from the faithful.



The shrine may be the remains of a part of the original church, one of the side chapels, though its telltale grave stone is uniquely found in all Tukh Manuks. The shrine is the favored religious spot for the village; the yard is well maintained, the inner sanctuary is covered with religious prints and embroidered cloth, the walls blacked with candle soot and it is swamped with worshippers at religious holidays throughout the year.

Backtrack to the village, and at the fork you used to get to Karmavor, now turn R (S) and in about 50 m you reach the substantial walls of the 10th c **S. Gevorg basilica**.

The current building is an 18th-19th century renovation of a much older building. Its triple-nave basilica form closely follows the outline of its 10th century version, which was totally destroyed

during late medieval raids and earthquakes. It in turn is thought to have been an enlarged version of an early Christian building that had its origins in the pagan era.



The current open-air building is quite large, with 7th-10th century khachkars embedded in its walls. There is also an interesting stone altar panel in the main apse, which was painted. The church is otherwise unadorned, though it was plastered and white washed in its day. The roof collapse in the 20th century, and locals wait for the church in Echmiadzin to cough up the funds to renovate the building.



Continue SE to the next juncture, turning L and then immediately R onto a narrow street that in about 700m leads to a house, with the **Gumbaz Tomb** (DD 40.22882 x 44.24504, elev. 920m) in a potato field in back.

The gumbaz is a unique funerary tomb favored by Turcoman and Kurdish tribes, while borrowing its form from the Zoroastrian "towers of silence". The most famous Gumbaz is the Gol Gumbaz in India, which has the largest unsupported domed space in the world. Aghavnatun's more humble version has space enough for three, the caskets for which are now gone.



Finely made from carefully carved tufa. The building is nonetheless slipshod in its details, with a simple graphic on the arched stone over the entry (which same say was taken from an early Christian or Hellenistic temple at the site), and a bare carving of a horseman warrior on the inner wall. Another stone inside the chamber has an ansk (eye-hole) showing its Bronze Age origins as part of an astronomical observatory—wherefrom is anyone's guess, though considering the other prehistoric sites nearby it may have come from around the village.

Backtrack to the road fork, now turn L (S) on the SW road exiting the village and in about 400 m on a low hill on the R (W) side of the road are the remains of the 9th-14th cc **Tsiranavor church**.

Tsiranavor is set on a triangular promontory that forms a natural defense on the S and W approach to the village. Traces from the Bronze Age suggest the site was both military and religious in origin. As you approach the site from the north, you pass a smooth stones with "posner" (hollowed out cup-holes) in them.

These are exactly like those found at Bronze Age sites found throughout the country including Metsamor in Armavir marz and Agarak just N of Aghavnatun. The holes are thought to have been

used to extract liquids, part of the reduction process in the refinement of metal, and as they cover large areas of rock, as star maps. These were probably used to reduce liquids or as holders in production of some sort, though they may have been parts of small altars.



In springtime the site is covered with bright white, yellow and red wild flowers with deep green undercover, lending a surreal effect to the ragged tops of the eastern apse and northern walls that make up the current building. The black tufa walls on the outer edges of the hill are believed to have been placed in the late Bronze or early Iron Age.



The 9th-14th c church stands at the apex of the low hill, and was built from large blocks of tufa, many of which remain scattered on the hillside. The foundations, east apse and large portions of the north and south walls remain, as do a number of finely carved capitals, bases, columns and decorative details.

The tiny church was a domed cruciform type with a squared western wall. Uniquely, entry is from the north, with two worn columns marking the doorway. The altar space is decorated with a few religious items, but is mostly bereft of offerings, like its brother church S. Gevorg. Instead, villagers seem to prefer the two Tikh Manuks, which are covered with religious offerings and artwork.

Outside the church there are few khachkars, including one fine sample made from orange tufa. It is judged to be 14th century, though the artwork suggests it borrows heavily from early Christian iconography.



**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak, or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.



➡ From Aghavnatun (Tsiranavor) continue SW for about 1.5 km to central **ARAGATS** (DD 40.21730 x 44.23289, elev. 905m) 🗺️ 🏰 🌿

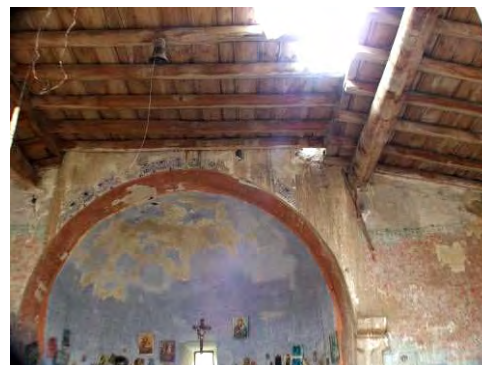
🏰 **ARAGATS** - ԱՐԱԳԱՏ (Արագած) 📍 (pop. 1200) is on the left bank of the Lower Hrazdan canal, the lifeline of its agricultural endeavors, which stretch east and south of the village. Due to its population drop in the late 1990s, the western foothills are no longer cultivated, which provides a stark contrast in dry months between the green farm fields and orchards and the desert scrub to the west.



Just W of the village's "Red Square" are the remains of **S. Stepanos** (DD 40.21712 x 44.23183, elev. 922m), its 1870 dating pointing to a complete reconstruction that totally obscured the older medieval structure. Used for storage in Soviet times, most of the thatch and earthen roof is now missing, though enough remains to show how it worked. The roof still sprouts with grass and wildflowers each spring, turning to a burnt umber by summer.

The large building is triple nave, made from finely cut and polished basalt stone that was plastered on the inside with painted texture and a stenciled blue pattern on the inside walls. Evocatively, a sapling grows in the center of the hall and the slate floor is covered with a thin layer of earth; grass sprouts in the cracks in the sanctuary floor.

The support columns and roof trusses are massive; locals say they were imported from Western Armenia when the villagers first arrived.



The horseshoe shaped apse was painted with blue background and is still in remarkably good shape. Its walls are covered with religious prints and embroidered cloth, with an especially refined cloth over the baptismal font.



The village has an impressive **WWII monument** (DD 40.21883 x 44.22821, elev. 934m), set above the canal to the west. Ask for the best way to get to the monument—the western village is a web of meandering alleys and dead ends. It is worth it; for both the huge monument, the goddess Victory holding both a shield and an olive branch in a demure but defiant pose. The garden in front is lined with trees, and the view from the monument is spectacular—you can see the entire Echmiadzin plain including the mother cathedral and in the distance, Mt. Ararat.

The well preserved ruins of an Urartian Fortress (DD 40.21262 x 44.22468, elev. 918m) is in the SW corner of the village, in a place called "Halaju". To get there, as you face the multi-story building NW of the center "square" take a L (NW) and then an immediate L (SW) behind the marzapet office onto a long street. Take the 1st R (NW) and 2nd L (SW) onto a street that leads into the orchards. The road peters into a path; take the path for about 50 m to the ruins.



The fortress-settlement was built over Bronze Age foundations, using the original stones to create outer walls, house foundations and streets. It is possible to trace the entire citadel, which foundations are well preserved and excavated, including a couple of subterranean rooms.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** near the village (no shade); **Springs** in the village.



➡ From Aragats square, take the SE main road for about 1.5 km to the north edge of (**Tsaghkalanj**, DD 40.20352 x 44.23136, elev. 893m) 🏠 🗺

**SIDE TRIP: Tsaghkalanj - Շաղկալանջ** (till 1978 Aghjaghala, pop. 450) is a small village meshed between the desert foothills west of the Lower Hrazdan Canal and the fertile soils to the east. Once a mixed Kurdish-Armenian population, the remaining villagers are almost all Armenian.



By turning L (W) at the north edge of the village you will reach the **cemetery** which is the oldest part of the village, and location for most of the sties.

The village has **Bronze Age tombs** in the cemetery, which connects to a slightly higher hill with cyclopic stones to the SE that is the spot for the **Neolithic-Copper Age tell of Aghjaghala**. The entire promontory, including the cemetery and the area to the NW was a part of the original site, and there are intriguing circular "pockets" in the NW area, which was taken over as a cattle breeding center in Soviet times but which now lies empty. The pockets seem man-made and bear future investigation.

The cemetery served countless generations of inhabitants, with an equal amount of historic layers. Neolithic, Bronze Age and Hellenistic artifacts can be found below medieval remains and modern graves. Little of it has been excavated for obvious reasons (who want s to dig up the bones of the recent dead just to see the bones of the ancient deceased?).

Located in the western side of the cemetery is a small "shed" that covers a tiny but locally important Tuh Manuk, the so-called **S. Gevorg church**. The building has a large black marble slab advertising a local who paid for the renovation (and which probably cost more than the renovation itself).

Inside, the rough tufa walls and tin roof cover an earth floor and one lower foundation of the original structure, or what appears to be a foundation (it may be a Bronze Age grave slab). There is small khachkar in the center of the highly decorated interior.



Go back to the main road, turn R (S) and continue to the next R (W) which enter s the village. Take the next R (N) and a little over halfway up to the cemetery, on your R (E) there is a green painted door with a small cross on it. Knock and ask to see the **Amnaprkich shrine** (Tuh Manuk), which is located in a subterranean space in their yard.

This is an ancient space; created in the original layer of the village's settlement (Neolithic-Chalcolithic Era). The shrine is made of the foundations for the original structure and a large slab that protects the bones of the holy one underneath (a Christian martyr, according to the local caretaker). The whole is protected by plastered tufa walls and corrugated tin roofing.

What makes this otherwise nondescript chapel so interesting is its museum-like display of offerings from the thousands of pilgrims whop have made their way to the shrine to pray for intercession: Shrouds and embroidered cloth crowd religious prints, paintings and drawings,

which crowd plastic, wood and metal crosses, candelabras, statuettes, khachkars and painted panels. The enter is taken up with candle tables coated with black soot. It is a strangely moving feast of local fervor and simple taste.



**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Tsaghkalanj S end (bridge), continue SE road for about 1.6 km to the N central intersection in (**Samaghar**, DD 40.18512 x 44.24223, elev. 881m) 🏠 🗺

**SIDE TRIP: Samaghar - Սամաղար** (also Geghaker, pop. 800) is nestled between the villages of Haitagh and Hovtamech on fertile alluvial soil. Nonetheless, like its neighbors, it has lost most of its able bodied men to Russia and the west.

Samaghar has the impressive **S. Harutiun church** (DD 40.18509 x 44.24376, elev. 888m), which is reached by turning L (E) at the point you arrived at in the directions above, and stopping just over half way down the long block. The church is on the R, behind a house. Its roof can be seen between the house and its neighbor.

S. Harutiun is a triple nave basilica which was first mentioned in 13th century chronicles. The current building dates to the 19th century, using stones from the original structure and replacing the roof. The whole is handsomely covered with

plaster with brickwork framing the windows and the main portal. The brickwork may be medieval; it shows a distinctive Persian style.



The interior is massive for a village church, suggesting a very large parish at one time, or the hubris of building too big. Still, it is one of the tidiest and prettiest I have visited in Armenia. The altar is whitewashed with carvings and the altar has a nice painting of the Madonna and child.



The large chamber has a few rows of benches in the front, the rest empty. The roof is new, and beautifully done. It is protected by a second roof of corrugated asbestos roofing.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From Samaghar take the SW road for about 850m to a 3-way intersection in (**Haitagh**, DD 40.18206 x 44.23411, elev. 887m) 🏠 🗺 🚶

**SIDE TRIP: Haitagh - Հայտաղ** (also called Geghakert, pop. 800) has a mournful ruin of a **church** in the north of the village (DD 40.18206 x 44.23411, elev. 887m). To get there, from the 3-way intersection turn R (N) and go 1.5 blocks; the church is on the left. The 19th c building was mostly destroyed in Soviet times, but locals say the roof only caved during the torrential rains of 2006. Both it and the village are sad relics of better times, but idyllic nonetheless.



**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➡ From central Haitagh take the main road S and SW for about 2.5 km to central (**Arshaluis**, DD 40.16882 x 44.21315, elev. 861m) 🏠 🗺 🚶

**SIDE TRIP: Arshaluis - Արշալիս** (till 1935 Kyorpalu, pop. 950) the name means "Dawn" in Armenian, and the village does face one of the prettiest views of dawn, far off Mt. Ararat in the SE. The village is notoriously home of a mafia head and one of the most bloodthirsty of Armenia's officers in the Karabakh war (reputedly personally responsible for the death of a number of Armenian soldiers) who alternately terrorizes and patronizes his neighbors.

The village has a **S. Astvatsatsin church** just east of the center (DD 40.16858 x 44.21630, elev. 873m). To get there, go east on the main street from the square two blocks and turn R; the church is half a block S. The large church was erected 1903-1909, using black tufa blocks. The handsome building is locked and the neighbor with the key is not easily found—plan on waiting a bit before they find her.



Back to the square, there are the bare suggestions of foundations for an old **fort** that sat behind the monument, easy to miss unless you know what to look for; long depressions in the ground.



Outside the village to the S and across the (M5) are **two Tuxh Manuk shrines, the S. Karapet Pilgrimage Site** (DD 40.15253 x 44.21365, elev. 858m). To get there, take the Taronik road to the (M5), turn L (E) and go to

the next road/path (about 50m), turn R (S) and continue about 500m to the site.

The shrines are two small buildings in an area that was once a monastery. Dated to the 14-18th cc, S. Karapet is actually much older; stones from the original 7th c vank line the side of the yard outside the shrines.



The first shrine is in the best preserved building, and consists of an apse from the old vank with a large sacred stone in the center. The shrine—like that at Tsaghkalanj—is a museum of primitive religious art: embroidery, carvings, religious prints, painting and drawings crowd the walls and are draped over the sacred stones.



The second shrine is about 50m S of the first, and is more primitive on the outside, but just as stocked with religious offerings and artwork as the first. We are told that the Sunday after

Easter and the August feast day of the Assumption, the shrines are filled with thousands of locals who visit the site seeking special intercession.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➡ Backtrack to the (M5), turn R (E) and continue for about 3.7 km to the (**Yugoslav Aviator Monument**, DD 40.16611 x 44.25707, elev. 881m) 🏠 🗺 🚶

**SIDE TRIP: Yugoslav Aviator Monument - Հրավազվածի օդաչուների հիշատակի հուշարձան** commemorates 7 Yugoslav aviators who died in an airplane crash in December 1988 while delivering supplies for survivors of the Spitak earthquake.



The crash was more or less expected as authorities' ability to cope with the horrific destruction collapsed, and bungling bureaucratic operations stymied efforts to deliver aid. Zvartnots was packed with transport planes from 46 countries trying to deliver aid, the largest such effort since WWII. The crash came a day after a Soviet military transport plane crashed at Leninakan (Gyumri) airport, killing 9 crew members and 69 military personnel sent to aid in rescue work.

The monument was built from the remains of the airplane, and has the names and portraits of the aviators, plus words of gratitude from the Armenian people.



About 50 m behind the monument is a small mound, "**Tasghkunk**" or **Mkhitapa Neolithic tell**, with hundreds of pottery shards littering the ground. The tell is topped by a square tufa building, which is used as a Tuhk Manuk, with appropriate sacred stone, religious art and burnt candles.

- ➡ Continue E on the (M5) for about 2 km to the Tsaghkunk overpass exit, turn L (NW) and continue for about 1 km to central (**Tsaghkunk**, DD 40.17753 x 44.26940, elev. 880m) 📍 🏠 🚶

**SIDE TRIP:** **Tsaghkunk** - **Ծաղկունք** (till 1946 Abdurahman, pop. 600) is a suburb of Echmiadzin, its villagers farming the surrounding alluvial plain.



The village has a 19th century **Astvatsatsin**, uniquely built combining tufa blocks in its lower

courses with thin slabs of tufa and bricks in the upper walls. The construction speaks to combining materials of different ages, and the church is in the oldest part of the village. The roof is missing its outer layer but the under trusses, columns and thatching are still in good shape.



In the village center there is a small fenced in park with a now closed café, some benches and a headless Lenin statue. The statue shows Lenin in his famous pose pointing to the future. The villagers tried to destroy the statue in the heady days of the Soviet collapse, but finding the statue a bit too strong for hoes and hammers, they settled for decapitating the body and leaving the statue to the elements.

#### OVERNIGHT

**GOLDEN CITY HOTEL COMPLEX**, Tsaghkunk Village (Echmiadzin Hwy), tel. 0231-56688, cell: 094-556688, email: [goldencityhotel@yahoo.com](mailto:goldencityhotel@yahoo.com), opened in late 2007. Amenities include heating, a/c, Internet connection (suites) and sauna. Largest suite can sleep up to 6 people. Prices are per room with SGL/DBL/STE at 8700-10,000/12,000-25,000/25,000-40,000 AMD.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair): **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask): **Springs** in the village.

- ➡ From central Tsaghkunk take the NW road for about 800m to the edge of Hovtamech village and a R (NE) road that leads in about 500m and past the Aghavnatur road into central

(**Tsiatsin**, DD 40.18682 x 44.26406, elev. 885m) 📍 🏠 🚶

**SIDE TRIP:** **Tsiatsan** - **Ծիածան** (till 1978 Gerampa, pop. 600), which name means "Rainbow", has the bare ruins of the 18th-19th c triple nave **Astvatsatsin basilica** (DD 40.18979 x 44.26819, elev. 896) in its far NE end (Take a R (E) at the triangle park at the village entry, 2nd L (N), immediate R (E), follow to the last street, L (N) then 3/4s N. The ruins are off an alley to R (E) ).



Back at the small park on the W end of the village, there is a metal plaque commemorating local guardsmen from Tsiatsin who fought against Turkish forces during the battles of Sardarapat and Arshaluis, keeping the front against Turkish attempts to break through to Yerevan. Their efforts—along with those of countless individuals from Yerevan and surrounding villages—routed the Turkish invasion of Eastern Armenia (decisively so after the battles of Kharakilisa (Vanadzor) and Bash-Aparan), leading to Armenia's declaration of independence on May 28, 1918. The plaque loosely translates:

"Here in 1918 was organized a group of 200 fighters led by Hovhannes Ter-Mkrchian. This group fought on the front lines at the battles of Sardarapat May 22 and Arshaluis on June 15." --Dept. for the Preservation of Historic Monuments

Interestingly, there is no record in the history books of a second battle at Arshaluis, but, though the Turks were routed at Sardarapat, Kharakilisa and Bash Aparan, they did not stop

their attacks, and they had overrun the area when the treaty of Batum was signed in June 1918, returning Eastern Armenia only while losing WWI with the Armistice of Mudros was signed on October 30.



**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair): **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask): **Springs** in the village.

- ➡ Backtrack to the Hovtamech-Tsaghkunk road, turn R (W) and go about 300m to central (**Hovtamech**, DD 40.18386 x 44.25947, elev. 884m) 📍 🏠 🚶

**SIDE TRIP:** **Hovtamech** - **Հովտամեջ** (once Mughanjik, pop. 700) has one of the most interesting churches in the region; a massive **triple-nave basilica** made from brick and slab stone.



Located a half-block N of the village center, the church ruins—with a missing roof and deteriorating walls—is still one of the most evocative buildings in the marz. Perhaps it is its extraordinary construction of slabs and brick plastered over with mud-based plaster, or the window frames that hang suspended in time, open, closed, closed, open; or maybe it is the artifacts that strew the inner landscape, the acoustic jars once set into the walls and filled with sand to muffle the echo bounce in the cavernous space, but which now lie precariously exposed in the uppermost walls.



It may be just seeing it on a cloudy spring day with wildflowers springing from crevices and the sky's mood matching the forlorn piles of rock, wood and earth that once mightily called itself a house of God. Whatever, this building stands with austere, broken spirit in a landscape of neglect, a ruin of memories and pride.



The jars are an ingenious invention, inherited from Hellenistic temple traditions (Greek oracles used a temple's acoustics to "whisper god's breath" and jars filled with water or sand to control vocal projection goes back to temples in Egypt and Mycenae) and it was refined to great degree in Armenian churches. Through trial and error, sand was poured or emptied from the jars (which were set with their mouths facing the sanctuary), until the desired balance was reached. A couple of jars can be seen buried in the rubble at the top of the SW wall.



The church is slated to be renovated in the next few years (locals who made good in Russia as donors), which will shore up the walls and re-roof the building, but in all likelihood erase its unique character. This is probably the last place you will put on your list of things to see in Armenia, but try to make time to see it anyway. And pick a cloudy, moody, spring day, when the buds of May shiver under the gray sky.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

➡ **END OF TRIP 1**



**TRIP 2: CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION** ▲

(Teghut) - **MOKHRABLUR** - (Artimet) -  
**ADABLUR** - **TARONIK/METSAMOR** -  
 (Aknalich) - (Metsamor v.) - **ARMAVIR** -  
**HAIKAVAN/OLD ARMAVIR** - (Nor Artages) -  
 (Nalbandian) - **ARGISHTIKHINILI (NOR ARMAVIR)** - **SARDARAPAT (ARAKS)** -  
 (Vostanik) - (Hoktember) - (Bambakshat)



Trip 2 covers 17,000 years of history, starting at the Paleolithic-Bronze Age settlements of Mokhrablur, Adablur and Metsamor, continuing to the Iron Age/ Urartian city of Argishtikhinili, the Orontid capitals of Old Armavir, Yervandashat and Bagaran. It ends at the site of the 1918 Battle of Sardarapat, which victory was instrumental in the formation of the First Republic. The ethnographic museum at Sardarapat is arguably the best museum in the country.

**BACKGROUND**

Armenia's "Fertile Crescent" is located along the Arax River, its tributaries a series of liquid ribs along a central Ararat spine. Within this valley lies a smaller crescent of land, still bearing the marks of a vast marshland and forests that once covered the entire valley floor. As you wander through this area, you can spot sudden eruptions of the terrain, hills that seem to appear from nowhere. They do not "fit" the contour of the land around you. These are the remains of the first urban civilization to leave its imprint on the ancient world: they are the sentinels of the Cradle of Civilization.

Within the larger Cradle of Civilization, ancestral Armenians developed a smaller "fertile crescent", where between 9000 and 7000 years ago, a series of cities appeared on the Ararat Valley plain: the

inhabitants were among the first to forge copper and bronze; and are the first recorded to discover the properties of and successfully smelt iron.

As Mesopotamian empires rose, they referred to a rival power to the North, in the "Land where the Mountains of the gods live"; a land rich in bronze, gold and precious stones.



The metal ore mined in this area was among of the purest in the world, and the natives shaped their culture around it. They believed the technique for forging metal was given to them from the heavens, and they became the first recorded astronomers: they are earliest recorded to have sophisticated observatories, the earliest to create a calendar that divided the year into 12 segments of time, they were among the first to devise the compass, to envision the shape of the world as round, the first to design the signs of the zodiac.

**Note:** The sites are cultural treasures: they are one of a kind, priceless because of their rarity and age, and unique in the history of the world. Don't muck them up. It is strictly forbidden to carry any object from the site away, including shards or fragments of pottery and stone. Count yourself very lucky you can touch them and feel the history, but put them back. You wouldn't take a chunk of the Parthenon as a souvenir, and (most of) you wouldn't cart off a Khachkar, so leave this part of history in its place too, and let others see how important Armenia's contribution to world history is.

The sites at Yervandashat and Bagaran are both on the border with Turkey, and off-limits to the casual visitor. Special permission and escort is required to gain entry. This permission is hard to get even if you are well connected (and impossible if you

are not). Russian border guards are not as easy to convince as their Armenian counterparts to let you pass. We include the sites in the hopes that the border restrictions will relax while this book is still in print. Forewarned is forearmed.



**Stay:** Restaurants/Hotels & Motels on the (M5), Armavir and Aknalich; guest houses/apts. in Echmiadzin and Armavir; village homes (rustic); camping near villages and Metsamor excavation (no tree cover).

**Eat:** Restaurants & cafes on the (M5), Armavir, Aknalich, Sardarapat; mterks and kiosks in Armavir and villages.

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, Metsamor excavation.

➔ From Echmiadzin's Komitas Square, go S on the Makara road (M3) for about 2.8 km to an intersection where a left rough road angles back and in about 1.6 km passes on the L (W) a low hill, the Neolithic tell of (Teghut, DD 40.144244 x 44.28631, elev. 860m)

**SIDE TRIP:** Teghut - **Տեղուն** is a Copper-Early Bronze Age settlement dated between 8000-4000 BCE, depending on the scientist involved. The metal objects found at the site have suggested the culture Teghut belongs to may be older (the so-called Shulaveri-Shomu culture) than that accepted by western archeologists who are not active in the area and rely on old data for refuting the claim with comments that frankly smack of cultural racism. The site is covered over, but after rainfalls, trace shards and object appear on the slope.

➔ From Teghut, backtrack to the (M3), turn R (S) and continue for about 1.9 km to a small hamlet just before a railroad overpass. Turn R (W) to go behind the hamlet, and onto a dirt path into the back fields, and in about 100 m at a fork in the road continue straight and follow an earthen canal for about 800 meters to a low hill 200 meters on the left (S) with the gate about 200 m beyond on the far W side to the **MOKHRABLUR EXCAVATION** (DD 40.12017 x 44.28050, elev. 843m) 📷 🏠 🌿

🏠 **MOKHRABLUR** - **ՄՈՔՐԱԲԼՈՐ** (Մոխրաբլուր) ▲ ("Ash Hill"), located 400 meters E of the village of Vacheh (old name Griboyedov), is an open-air excavation of a citadel and town

that housed a thriving religious, administrative and metal industrial complex (ca. 4000-3000 BCE). The site is fenced in with a locked gate, but the fence is easy to get through with several breaches along its rim. Village boys from nearby Vacheh tend calves in the yard and can show the way.



**THE EXCAVATION**

Mokhrablur (which means "Ash Hill" or "Ash Bluff" -so noted because of the dark flecks of blackened stones and pottery found in the site) lies among drained marshland that makes up the area's rich farmland. The excavation ("peghum" Պեղում), led by Professor Alishian, uncovered 11 meters (36 feet) of earth before reaching the uppermost strata of the city's development.

A total of 12 levels ("sherteir" շերտեր) or generations ("sehrundteir" սերունդներ) of the city's history were uncovered before the excavation stopped. When you look at Mokhrablur, you are not looking at a hill, you are looking at what remains of more than 6000 years of continuous living on one spot. As each layer was uncovered, bones, pottery, jewelry and metallic artifacts were discovered, each older than the previous. Several levels were covered with blackened heaps of bones and broken objects, indicating a battle that destroyed the city. Like Troy, later generations rebuilt on top of the ruins of their ancestors.

One of the most remarkable things about Mokhrablur is its isolated location and the feeling you get of discovering it for the first time. Shards and fragments of pottery and bones litter the site, and one can scoop up history with each handful. The locals say that whenever there is a good rain,

they can still find intact perfume flasks and pottery loosened from the soil.

**[MAP]**

A. As you walk up towards the gate, you will pass a small swamp ("jahidj" յահիճ), fed by spring water. This is what remains of the marshland that spread out in all directions around Mokhrablur 6-8000 years ago. The marshland formed an excellent natural protective barrier, as well as a reliable source of drinking water. The excavation site itself is the fortified center of the town. It served as the religious and military stronghold for the city. As in other cities of the era, townspeople lived outside the main walls. The entire city stretched to the edge of the village behind you, holding up to 10,000 inhabitants (which was a large city in those days).

B. As you walk up the hill from the gate, look towards your left at the top of the hill, and you can see an outline of a cyclopic wall ("pahrisp" պահիսպ) that encircled the central fortified citadel in the 4th-3rd millennia. The wall was made from foundations of blocks of stone averaging 1-2 tons each. These stones were drug to Mokhrablur from sources 10-20 kilometers away. There is some thought that the stones might actually be the middle level of an older wall. Since excavation stopped before they could complete uncovering layers, the actual age of the city is possible another 1000 years older. If so, these stones were either drug on sleds from unheard of distances at that time, or--using a relic the excavators found at the lower levels of the dig as a sign--they were among the first to use the wheel. Unfired mud brick was used to complete the walls above the stone foundations, which accounts for the current mound shape of the site.

At the top of the mound you will arrive on a large flat area with a series of holes in it. These are the actual digs.

C. The first pit on your right is shallow. You can see fired brick ("Aghius" աղիւս) forming the top of an interior wall in a building constructed around 4000 BCE. The rooms uncovered at Mokhrablur were not large or high. Skeletons uncovered in the area show that the average height of inhabitants was 4-½ feet (1.35 m). All about you are fragments of pottery, in different

colors. The black unglazed pottery is among the first of its kind discovered in the ancient world. It and red pottery come from the earliest layers uncovered, ca. 6000-4000 BCE.



Geometric patterns on some fragments depict wheat shafts, snakes and spiral designs, and come from a later period, late 4th millennium BCE. The spirals are unique in that they are joined together in the center into a "V" shape, depicting a ram head. Before the discovery of the observatory at Metsamor, they were understood to be a symbol of a god, but are now also believed to be depictions of Aries the ram, one of the constellations of our galaxy. The glazed black pottery is 3rd millennium BCE, but shows a sophisticated glazing process predating any other found in Asia Minor. And you hold these in your hands! Put them back now, since they cannot leave the site.

D. Next to the brick wall is an extension of the same building, but it is divided into two smaller rooms. The pottery found here suggested it was a living quarters.

E. On the other side of the hilltop is a very large pit. This is where the bulk of the excavation occurred. All along the slopes of this pit rain continues to wash free both intact and fragments of pottery. Though 20 feet deep, it is not bottom most layer of the site, as can be seen by comparing it with the surrounding landscape. If excavation resumes, it may well discover origins closer to the Mesolithic Period, just after the 13,600 BCE great flood that covered this part of the world.



F. There is an indentation on the far side of the pit. This is where the excavators discovered 12 intact levels of the city, and located most of the archeological finds. While we were visiting, our host scoured around and found from the central strata (3rd millennium BCE) of the excavation wall a perfume flask, the bottom of a large earthen hearth, and pieces of a beautiful green stone the inhabitants used to create jewelry from. This stone is not native to these parts, or present day Armenia. They are commonly found in the Sinai, which may be the source of the stones at Mokhrablur.



G. Next to the indentation is a section of the pit where archeologists discovered at one of the middle strata signs of a sudden and violent destruction: there were hundreds of human skeletal remains, heaped in piles by the cyclopic wall defenses, the pottery and metal implements charred by fire. Skulls showed that many of the people had been killed by head

blows inflicted by heavy weapons, their position along the wall suggest they were either trapped, or herded together and killed en masse.

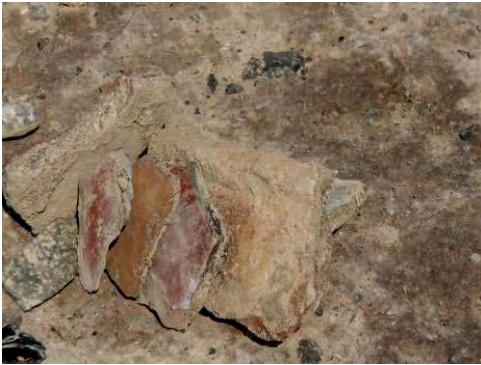
It is at this strata where most of the jewelry and precious items were discovered, indicating that whoever destroyed the city did not bother to raid it before burning it down. The middle strata of excavation is the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium BCE, and corresponds with the huge migration of Indo-Europeans into Asia Minor. An hypothesis has been made that these charred bones and pottery are all that remain of the last non Indo European group to inhabit the area; all layers above this charred one show pottery designs and inscriptions like those used in Anatolia, by Indo-European speaking people (remember that Armenian is an Indo-European language).

H. The most unique feature of the excavation lies at the bottom of the pit: a 10-ton solid block of pure basalt, cut in the form of a rectangle column. The column is lying on its side, but was originally up right. Archeologists are unsure what its purpose was, and there are no inscriptions on its polished sides to give clues. Standing upright it would be as high as at the top of the present mound, which suggests it was a freestanding column in an open courtyard. The engineering feat of hand cutting and polishing a ten ton piece of stone 6000 years before our time is one thing to contemplate. 6000 years ago they had not yet discovered the use of iron, and copper was a poor substance for cutting stone. They had to use stone tools to wedge the piece free from its source, and special polishing stones to create the smooth surface.

The real feat was in how it got there at all: the nearest sources of that type of basalt are in Mount Aragats or Mount Ararat. It is 30 kilometers to the nearer of the two. Even using wheels, they would have had to build up a roadbed through the marshland to get it there. One can only gaze and wonder what the need was to place a mammoth block of basalt in the center of a marshland, in a fortified citadel, in a city of 10,000 people. Basalt is a mineral rich lava rock, and this stone is closely tied to the metal industry in the Metsamor Kingdom. It is thought that the volcanic properties (molten fire) of the stone was considered a talisman against evil. The huge stone column may have

been a protective idol worshipped by the inhabitants.

- I. The large round concrete building by the large pit was built by a now defunct cooperative farm nearby. It is contemporary, but it covers a spring that is located within the walls of the citadel, a source of sweet water during times of siege.




It is worth a visit to Vladik's in nearby Vacheh village, since he has begun a house museum of sorts, made up of artifacts discovered during the excavation and thereafter. He is eager to show his finds, the only artifacts not carted off to the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Even the Yerevan museum (Republic Square) does not display much of anything found at Mokhrablur. Vladik's is your only chance.

There are a few items, but among them are a small clay lion figure from the 6th layer (ca. 3500 BCE); a fragment with a fluted top around a central "pipe", which is thought to be from a musical instrument; a carpet needle shaped from a bone (they found fragments of woven cloth and carpets at the site), a miniature clay wheel from a small cart (not toys, these are found at other sites in Armenia, duplicates of life-size carts used to bury royalty for their trip to the other world), an amulet ring carved from animal teeth, one of 1000's found in the excavation at all levels.

The ring is interesting for its pentagon shape of the center hole, each point in the pentagon possibly standing for one of the five known planets at that time, the central space representing the known

**Overnight** at Echmiadzin and on the (M5) Highway near Metsamor or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village and site-no shade); **Springs** in the area.

➔ From Mokhrablur, backtrack to the (M3), go S about 1.5 km to a R (W) turn into (Vacheh/Griboyedov, DD 40.11055 x 44.27226, elev. 841m) 


**SIDE TRIP: Vacheh/Griboyedov** - Վաչեհ/Գրիբոյեդով (till 1978 Aralikh Kyolanlu, then Griboyedov, then Vacheh, now Griboyedov and Vacheh, pop. 1000) is just W of Mokhrablur, a tidy village with greenhouses in just about everyone's backyard, goring tomatoes and cucumbers for a hungry Yerevan population. The village is named for the Russian traveler and playwright Alexander Griboyedov, who's "Woe from Wit" is considered the beginning of 'modern' theatre in Russia, and is still one of the country's most popular farces. The play premiered at the Persian governor palace in the Yerevan Fortress, which also marked the first performance of European theatre in Armenia.

Griboyedov first visited Armenia as an adventurer in 1819, following the conquest of the Caspian and central regions in 1818, returning as a diplomat for General Paskevich during the Russian-Persian war of 1828, which resulted in the ceding of all Armenian lands to the Empire. Griboyedov was chief negotiator on the Treaty of Turkmanchai that concluded the war, though he was murdered in 1829 along with the rest of the Russian staff for the Tsar's Embassy in Tehran, by an enraged mob that thought he was there to instigate an invasion. The return of his body to Russia was immortalized by Pushkin, who met the funeral party at Pushkin Pass in Lori marz.

The village is the home of **Vladik**, who worked on the Mokhrablur excavation and who has a sort of home museum of artifacts from the site. When not tending fields he welcomes visitors and offer to show folks around the site (he speaks Armenian and Russian). To get to his house, from the village center, turn R at the street just E of Culture Center. Go past the school and WW II monument to where the road stops at a "T" intersection. Turn R. Vladik's house is the 4th on the left, #46, Shirvanzadeh p.

SW of the village in a bend in the Sevajur River is an important **Chalcolithic Tell**, with depressions in the hill showing the main walls.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From the NW edge of Vacheh continue NW for about 2.9 km to the Aratashen road intersection in central Khorunk (before Lenughi, 1880 S. N'shan church), turn L (W) and go for another 1.9 km and out of Khorunk to the bridge over the Kasakh River at **ARATASHEN** and the **ADABLUR EXCAVATION** (DD 40.12952 x 44.23308, elev. 847m) 

✂ **ARATASHEN - ԱՐԱՏԱՇԵՆ (Արատաշեն)** (till 1978 Zeyva Haiyi) is just west of the Kasakh River on fertile alluvial land. Inside the village there is a **basilica church** built in 1870.

The village is also the site of the important **ADABLUR – ԱԴԱԲԼՈՒՐ (Ադաբլուր)** excavation which straddles the Kasakh River S of the village bridge. There is a café/shop just past the bridge where you can get pretty good fare for about 1000-1500 AMD. The N dirt path immediately W of the bridge takes you to Adablur (which you can see from the bridge: A collection of low mounds about 800 meters from the bridge). Drive/walk north on the dirt path 700 meters, and stop at the metal bridge over a diverted river channel. Adablur will be on your right, about 100 meters NE.

**Guide:** Adablur is not a working excavation and it has no museum. The site is simple enough there is no need for a guide, but if you want to talk to a local who knows a few facts, ask for Vartan Terterian, who lives in the village, on the street just past the Kasakh river bridge, 5th house on your right.

#### BACKGROUND

Adablur is an open-air excavation of a city straddling the Kasakh river (ca. 5000-3000 BCE). What remains of the site of Adablur are the outlines of the city walls, excavated rooms and buildings, and fragments of pottery and obsidian shavings. The river has shifted over millennia, dividing the once unified city into two sub-sites. On the edge of Aratashen Village, Adablur sits in a direct path between the ancient homes of the

gods: from the top of the highest mound at the excavation, you are in a perfect line between Aragats and Ararat.

**[MAP]**

#### THE EXCAVATION

Adablur is located in a bend of the Kasakh river. Built along the same lines as Mokhrablur, the mound is actually the remains of a central fortified citadel, surrounded by living quarters outside the defensive walls. Unlike Mokhrablur there are no stone foundations for the wall, which was entirely made from unfired mud brick.

The site is highest nearest the river, and has been eroded by the relentless movement of the river waters. The excavation began about the same time as Mokhrablur and ended in 1988, due to lack of funds (or as the director of Metsamor will tell you, it ended because Armenian archeologists were discovering too much that rivaled the official Soviet line on each ethnic group being no more equal than the others).

A. As soon as you cross the small bridge at the site, you will be entering the territory of Adablur. About 50 meters beyond are the excavation pits of burial sites. The city stretched from the edge of Aratashen behind you to the other side of the riverbed, about 5 hectares in size. Because the large number of skeletons found at the burial site, they believe the population was larger than Mokhrablur (about 6000 people). Most of the archeological discoveries are housed at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and in the warehouse of the Yerevan History Museum. There were large numbers of burial relics (jewelry of copper, bronze, agate and amber; burial pots and urns) discovered in the burial area.

B. Go up onto the hill, and you will see three large oval pits. These were the primary excavation digs. They uncovered brick walls much like those at Mokhrablur. There are fewer fragments of pottery at the site, probably due to it's proximity to the village. You can find many shards of paper-thin obsidian, which are the remains of carvings done by the inhabitants of the site.

Some are Armenian "arrow heads", you can spot them by their distinct pointed shapes. Others are larger and flatter along the top edge. Obsidian, though brittle, can be carved into very

delicate forms, and many of these fragments are transparent, suggesting they were part of an early "glass industry", used for jewelry, amulets, bowls, cups and boxes. The excavation revealed tens of thousands of these obsidian pieces, as well as a few intact bowls and jewelry pieces.

C. From the top of the hill you can clearly see the bend of the river and the way it has changed its course over time. From circling the citadel, it now winds on the east side of the mound, and cuts through its center. The citadel was roughly twice its current size. Vartan told us that each Spring when the river swells, it washes more layers from the site, and reveals more obsidian, pottery fragments and bones.

They have yet to find the pot of gold reputed to be buried in the area. Pot of gold?! Well, every site has to have some mystery about it... It seems the villagers think there are more treasures to be found under the mound. Who knows? Maybe you'll be the lucky one to find it (and then turn it over to the archeology department, right?)

D. While you're on top of the hill, draw that imaginary line between Aragats and Ararat. You're just about exactly halfway between them. At night during the solstices you can draw exact East, West, North and South coordinates from this location to navigational stars. Now, of course you can do this from any point on earth, but carvings found at Mokhrablur and especially at Metsamor show the earliest recordings of this kind of plotting the stars.

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

➡ From Aratashen, continue W on the main road out of the village for about 3.8 km to the far west side of the next village, **TARONIK/METSAMOR** (DD 40.13252 x 44.19812, elev. 849m) 🏠 🍷 🌿

✳️ **TARONIK/METSAMOR EXCAVATION - ՏԱՐՈՆԻԿ/ՄԵՏԱՄՈՐԻ ՊԵՂՈՒՄ (Տարոնիկ/Մեծամորի պեղում)** (once Zeyva Turkakan, pop. 965) 📍 are both located on the Metsamor (Sevajur) River, the fertile soil yielding crops and artifacts by the bushel full. The village is also a

major nesting area for Storks, which build their huge nests on power line poles and rooftops throughout the village.

On the west edge of the village an asphalt road turn S and follows a canal / irrigation channel for about 1.5 km to the **METSAMOR EXCAVATION** (DD 40.12560 x 44.18814, elev. 870m).

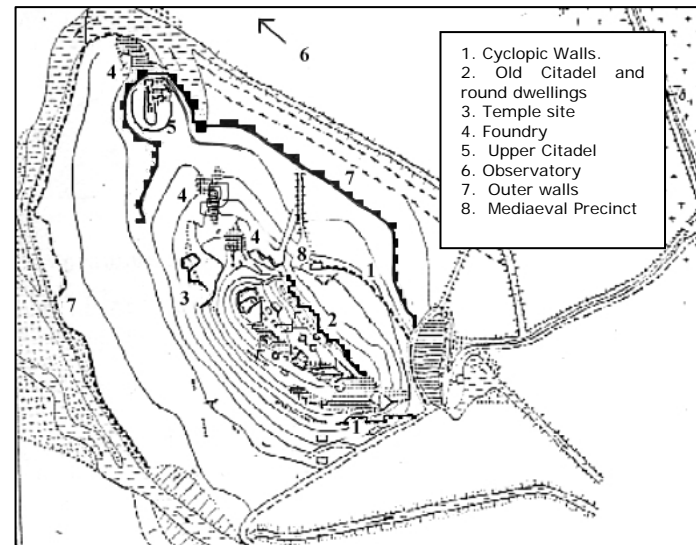
✳️ **METSAMOR EXCAVATION - ՄԵՏԱՄՈՐԻ ՊԵՂՈՒՄ (Մեծամորի պեղում)** 📍 ("black swamp" or "black quicksand"), open 10-5, 1000 AMD, is not to be mistaken for the nuclear power plant that lies nearby. The excavation is located on the western fringes of the village of Taronik, and is named after the Metsamor (Sevajur) River that once flowed through the site but which moved long ago, though it still replenishes the area's marshlands.

Once a working excavation with a museum, Metsamor no longer conducts active digs, its last director, Emma Khanzadian (d 2007), an eccentric and fearless leader who single-handedly saved the site from certain end in the tumultuous 1990s, forced into retirement a couple of years ago without a replacement. The resulting vacuum further threatens the site, a sure candidate for World Heritage Status if ever there was one in Armenia; Metsamor is the site of habitation from roughly 7000 BCE (its city status is 5000 BCE) into the modern age, the location of the oldest known smelting of Bronze and Iron, and location of a 2800 BCE astronomical observatory.

The site is a 15 minute drive from Echmiadzin, and for some of the deepest history you will find in Armenia, it is a must-see on your trip. Take in the 4th c church at Echmiadzin for Christian perspective, and then come to Metsamor for a look at how people in the 5000 years before Christianity behaved.

#### BACKGROUND

The complex sits on top of the volcanic hill is about 10.5 hectares in size, but the entire city is believed to have covered 200 hectares at its greatest extent, housing up to 50,000 people (making it a metropolis in the Bronze Age). Nearby spring-fed marshes and lakes suggest the extent of the wildlife that covered the area up to the bases of Mount Aragats and Ararat. The area was rich in water, mineral and hunting resources at the time of the development of Metsamor. The nearby



Metsamor River provided both transportation and the first irrigation source recorded in Armenia.

Excavations began at Metsamor in 1965 and have shown strata of occupancy going back to the Neolithic period (7,000-5,000 BCE), but the most outstanding features of the site were constructed during the early, middle and late Bronze Ages (4000-2,000 BCE). Inscriptions found within the excavation go back as far as the Neolithic period, and a sophisticated pictograph form of writing was developed as early as 2000-1800 BCE. The "Metsamor Inscriptions" have a likeness to later scripts, including the Mashtots' alphabet.

The excavation has uncovered a large metal industry, including a foundry with 2 kinds of blast furnaces (brick and in-ground). Metal processing at Metsamor was among the most sophisticated of its kind at that time: the foundry extracted and processed high-grade gold, copper, several types of bronze, manganese, zinc, strychnine, mercury and iron. Metsamor's processed metal was coveted by all nearby cultures, and found its way to Egypt, Central Asia and China. The iron smelting process was not advanced in Metsamor, probably due to the vast quantities of pure bronze alloys at hand, and Metsamor primarily mined and sold iron ore to neighboring cultures which took better advantage of its properties. One of the early examples of R&D not getting past the lab

door. It is not until the Early Iron Age that Metsamor took full advantage of the high-grade iron ore it had been selling to others.

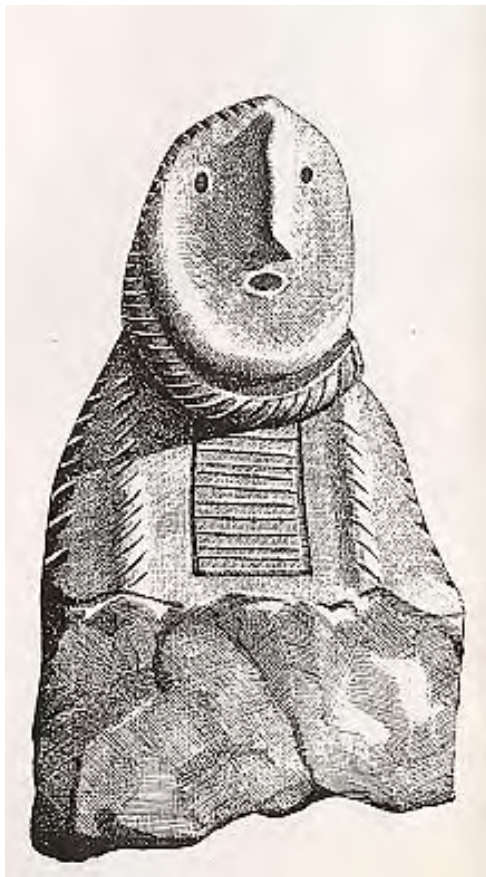
The **observatory** predates all other known observatories in the ancient world-- that is, observatories that geometrically divided the heavens into constellations and assigned fixed positions and symbolic design. Until the discovery of Metsamor it had been widely accepted that the Babylonians were the first astronomers. The observatory at Metsamor predates the Babylonian kingdom by 2000 years, and contains the first recorded example of dividing the year into 12 sections. Using an early form of geometry, the inhabitants of Metsamor were able to create both a calendar and envision the curve of the earth.



#### COMPLEX

The complex you are in was a large urban settlement which occupied an area of 10.5 hectares and consisted of a citadel within the inner cyclopic stone walls and an observatory at the farthest point from the museum, on the edge of the rocky hill (ca. 5th-4th millennium BCE). The fortress further encompassed a series of oval shaped dwellings with adjacent out buildings. By the Late Bronze Age a more pronounced class system had occurred, shown by burial artifacts uncovered at royal tombs.

During the Middle Bronze Period (late 3rd to mid 2nd millennium BCE) there was a surge of urban growth and a development of complex architectural forms which extended the boundaries of the settlement to the area below the hill. Basically, that area within the inner cyclopic walls are the older city and that beyond represent newer areas. By the 11th c. BCE the central city occupied the lowlands stretching to Lake Akna, and covered 100 hectares (247 acres).



About 500 meters southeast of the citadel is the location of the traditional necropolis (town dwellings), which covered an additional 100 hectares of land. With a population of 50,000,

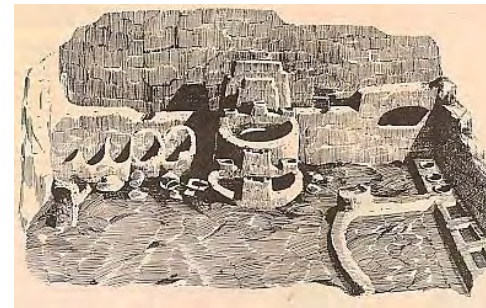
Metsamor rivaled in size the largest cities in the world at that time.

Another 70-80 hectares (170-200 acres) next to the Necropolis comprises the main burial site, where thousands of people were buried in simple graves and large burial mounds. Once uncovered, these graves revealed an underlying layer of crushed-stone which further revealed large mausoleums built from red tufa, encircled by a series of cromlechs (monoliths of arched stone). What the excavators uncovered in the process was both a history of Metsamor's burial rituals and a concern for hiding wealthy tombs. Like the Pharaohs buried in the Valley of the Kings, Metsamor's rulers tried to thwart grave robbers by hiding the locations of royal tombs. Fortunately the grave robbers at Metsamor were not as lucky as those in Egypt, and the Mausoleums revealed intact and richly adorned burial vaults, giving us an excellent glimpse into the traditions for preparing the body for the afterlife.

Among the artifacts uncovered in the royal tombs were evidences of great wealth: gold, silver and bronze jewelry and adornments were found over and next to the body, which was placed in a sitting fetal position in a large stone sarcophagus (early Metsamor) or lying in a casket (late Metsamor). The bodies were laid out with their feet oriented towards the East, so they could greet the sun and follow it to the afterlife in the West. Included in the vaults were the skeletal remains of horses, cattle, domesticated dogs and humans--presumed to be servants or slaves to the deceased. The sacrifice of slaves and animals was a common feature of burial rituals during the Bronze and Early Iron Age, as they were considered necessary to assist their master in the next life. In addition to jewelry, pottery and tools, excavators discovered pots filled with grape and pear piths, grains, wine and oil. The fruit piths are a prominent part of the food offerings, and considered a necessary part of the funeral rites.

Other funeral objects discovered were rare amethyst bowls, ornamented wooden caskets with inlaid covers, glazed ceramic perfume bottles, and ornaments of gold, silver and semiprecious stones, and paste decorated with traditional mythological scenes typical of local art traditions. Egyptian, Central Asian and Babylonian objects were also found at the site, indicating that from earliest of times Metsamor was on the crossroads of travel routes spanning the Ararat plain and linking Asia Minor with the North Caucasus and Central Asia.

By the early Iron Age Metsamor was one of the "royal" towns, an administrative-political and cultural center in the Ararat Valley.



By looking at the uncovered layers you can see traces of wars, devastation and fire. At a recent excavation a mass of human bones were uncovered below the walls, piled one upon the other. The bodies were dumped by survivors of a cataclysmic event (a siege or plague).

A complete destruction of the city is dated to the Urartian conquest in the 8th c BCE. Immediately afterwards, the Urartian conquerors rebuilt the site, including the cyclopean walls. Metsamor became a subject city and later, a regional center for the Armenian kings.

The city continued to be inhabited through the Hellenic period and the Middle Ages to a sudden end in the 17th c CE. Excavations from these periods can still be seen on the hilltop and its eastern slope, as well as by glazed earthenware and luxury items now housed in the museum. Special among these are coins excavated from the Medieval period: they include the coin of Levon II (1270-1289), coins from the Khulavites mines minted in Tabriz (16th c) and West European 13-14th cc coins.

#### THE MUSEUM

The Museum of History and Archeology at Metsamor was opened in 1968. It is the repository of more than 22,000 items, almost all uncovered at the site.

Overview: The museum is laid out on three levels. Our self-tour walks you through the museum in the order tour guides follow.

**[MAP]**

#### Ground Floor

The ground floor shows the chronological development of the site from the Neolithic through the Middle Ages, and includes artifacts and materials discovered at each layer of the excavation, including examples of the metal working process used at Metsamor. One section is devoted to the observatory and explains the astronomical significance of the site.

In the entry lobby are two maps, one showing the current excavation site (citadel and central city), the other the extent of the Ancestral Armenian culture in the Armenian plateau during the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Ages.

Take the steps to the ground floor, and turn to your left.

#### 1st Gallery, Ground Floor

1. The first display is a strata-map, showing the various layers of the excavation, and samples of artifacts (pottery) found in each layer.

A. Early Bronze Age: A feature of this period is black lacquered ceramic, the earliest of its kind discovered in Asia Minor. The technique for creating the glaze required a sophisticated knowledge of both firing technique and minerals to create the even glaze.

B. Middle Bronze Age: Reddish ceramic with detailed designs showing wheat and spiral designs evolved along with a glazing process over the black pottery. It is in this period that a hierarchic social structure evolved, along with a preoccupation with elaborate ornamented design. The pottery and design details resemble those found on Mycenaean ceramics discovered at Santorini and elsewhere, but are older.

C. Late Bronze Age: The designs and patterns are closer to those found throughout Asia Minor. You could very well be looking at pottery from Greece, Egypt and Cyprus, which incorporated designs like that used at Metsamor.

2. The second display holds samples of weapons and jewelry from the Early and Middle Bronze Age.

3. In this display you can see some early examples of chinaware and pottery from the Late Bronze Age. China is an extremely difficult process to

master, and though the pieces you see are not as delicate or refined as Ming Dynasty masterpieces, they are amazing engineering samples nonetheless, predating the Ming by 3000 years.

4. Jewelry display.

5. Jewelry display.

6. In the large display opposite cases 2-5, there is a large display showing pottery jugs and vases, and other implements found in the excavation. Most are from the Late bronze to early iron age. The jugs and pottery held wine, wheat, seeds and oil, and include serving and storage vessels.

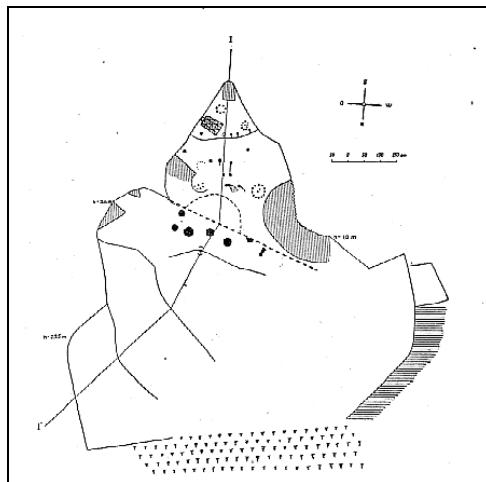
7. In the same display hangs an Incense burner with lion head hanging in the center of the display. It has a bronze chain and bells, and was used in the temple (Late Bronze Age). The lion head is an often-used feature in royal and worship designs, and there were lions and tigers that inhabited this area at that time. There are still a few leopards inhabiting Armenian wilderness areas, but the lion was the preferred symbol.

**The Name** The term Metsamor is a more recent name. The inhabitants of the city did not use a writing system as we do. They used a pictograph system of drawings that represented ideas and events, but did not spell out names as we do. We do not know what these people called themselves, but since Ancestral Armenia was a bridge between Asia and Europe we do know what other cultures at the time called the people living in this area.



The Persians called them the "Ermani", the Babylonians "Arata", the Assyrians "Nairi". Later

the Indo-European name "Ararat" and "Armeni" become predominant names, though "Hai" was used by the Hittites. Our guide suggested that though "Hai" and "Armen" were both names for the same people, the word "Hai" is in fact an older name, as etymologists believe it originated in the Ararat and Geghama mountains and migrated with Ancestral Armenians into Anatolia and Asia Minor.



#### The Observatory Map

8. At the end of the first exhibition hall is a display featuring the observatory uncovered at Metsamor (4th-3rd millennium BCE) and its use in the study of the cosmos.

The development of astronomical study at Metsamor grew from a need by the inhabitants to orient themselves in space and time. They had a specific need to understand where the spirit went in the afterlife, to understand the conception of time, and to fix their position in space. This is a far cry from earlier people's who stared at the heavens and simply wondered at it all: this was a sacred study, so to speak, to actually fix the culture in the heavens, and to predict its influence on their destiny.

The means of orienting oneself are the beginning steps of social group development, and are usually very simple. For the people at Metsamor, it was typical to orient themselves, their culture, and their place in time and space by East and South.

#### Inner illustrations:

A. In the picture on the wall, you will see both a schematic of the observatory, and a series of illustrations showing how they charted the stars and created the first known calendar of time, a division of the year into twelve segments.

B. The small lines on the wheel illustration show 3 observation points on the actual wheel inscription uncovered at the observatory. Near these points were found star symbols (representations of Aries, Leo and Taurus), and a compass.

C. Explorations of the first observatory site show that by ca. 3000 BCE it was possible to observe the brightest star in the Northern sky, Sirius. Sirius lies in the constellation Canis Major, and is very close to earth, only about 8.6 light years away.

#### 2nd Gallery, Ground Floor

9. The displays in this gallery focus on the Early Iron Age, when the culture at Metsamor advanced to a high level. The first display shows both implements used to smelt refined metals, and examples of finished products.

Jewelry made of tin and Silver is included. The inhabitants of Metsamor were able to extract gold from other ores, and there is even evidence they fabricated synthetic gold from other substances.

10. The next display focuses on the Urartian period of development, and you will notice in the farthest case several stone carvings that emulate the male genitalia. The Urartians believed that infertile women who worshipped and touched (one can only wonder how) these phallus idols would become fruitful and multiply.

11. There is a very black stone, called gisher, ("night" stone, also obsidian) in the display which was used for its medical properties.

#### Upstairs

The second floor is divided into two sections. The first displays materials in trades common at Metsamor: stone, jewelry, textiles and leather, carpet weaving, ceramics, plus the glazed bluish-green decorative tiles that ornamented the palace and temple halls. The second section is devoted to the temple excavation and religious worship. Included are idols, phallus

sculptures, fire hearths, pintader seals for stamping scared bread loaves and amulets.



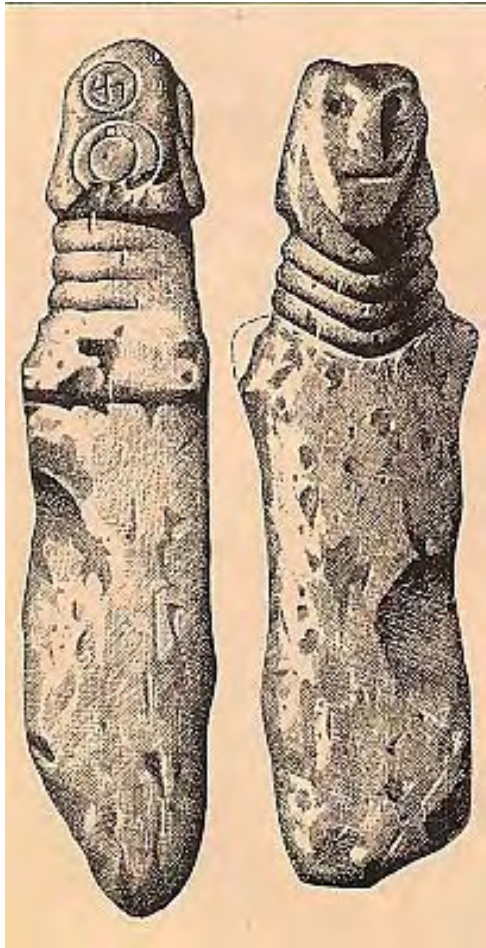
12. Ringing the stairwell and along the walls of the upstairs gallery are large wine and oil pots, jugs and vases, all found from the Early to Middle Bronze Age (5000-3000 BCE). Note the design of the snakes and mountain rams on the surfaces. The snakes were considered life-giving creatures, and were worshipped as gods. The rams were at first thought to be god images, but are now known to also represent the constellation Aries in the horoscope, a power associated with the home, the hearth, and sustenance.

The Greek constellation and word for Aries did not arise until the 2nd millennium BCE. If you have read the history of Armenia so far, remember the importance of the first two letters "AR". Etymologists believe the word Aries is not in fact Greek, but actually came from this area.

13. If you turn left as you enter the gallery from the stairwell, you will see a large bronze object in the center of the wall. This is an enlargement of one of the prize possessions of the museum, a Babylonian frog weight carved from agate and onyx.

On the surface of the frog, in Babylonian cuneiform is written "I, Burna Burarishi, am a son of King Buran Burarishi". The weight of the original (in the basement vault) is 8 grams, 62 decigrams. It was used as jewelry, a measurement tool and a standard of weight. Found in one of the royal tombs around the neck of a woman, it is the only example of its kind in the world.

14. Before you reach the back wall of the gallery, notice a portable fire hearth, divided into thirds. The fire hearths were at first thought to be portable stoves, and the History Museum in Yerevan still ascribes them to that purpose.



It is now thought that they were also temple worship hearths, where rare myrrh, frankincense and other incense were burned in worship to the local deities. Some of the incense discovered at Metsamor has its origins in India and China, verifying early use of the

Northern trade routes between Asia and Asia Minor.

15. In the right display case on the back wall are temple worship artifacts uncovered at Metsamor (Early to Late Bronze Age). Among these are several small carved stones, including one with the design of a swastika on one side and another with the head of a dog carved on the back side (the example at left is carved with a human deity). The swastika carving is one of the oldest sacred symbols in the world, and cave drawings in the Geghama Mountains dating back to the Neolithic times (7000 BCE) include them. It is unfortunate the Nazis corrupted their meaning in our times, as the swastika is a strong link between the Indo-Europeans and the indigenous cultures of ancient times. In Armenia examples of swastikas include swirling arms to both the right and left. Not a crooked cross, as some people call them, they are actually one of the first drawings of movement, showing a swirling power burning in the heavens. The swastika was the primary symbol assigned to the gods for several thousand years.

16. Included in the temple display is an illustration of the temple interior from the late Bronze Age. The worship of the bull was included in the deities, but it had a strong and negative position in the Metsamor pantheon: it was also used for placing curses. It is not until later, during the Urartian period, that it became a symbol of strength and fortitude.

17. Behind the central back wall, standing by the stairwell, is a large stone idol (11th-9th BCE). Yup, it's a phallus.

18. The other half of the gallery is devoted to tools and implements used in the various trades in Metsamor. The last display holds examples of the types of stones and minerals mined and used at the foundry.

#### Lower Level

The lower level holds the most valuable archeological finds in the museum: a funerary crypt from the Urartu period and a collection of gold, silver, semi-precious stones, amber and paste jewelry, as well as other examples discovered at burial sites in the excavation.

19. Just at the bottom of the stairs is a replication of an Urartu burial site. It positions the artifacts and skeletons exactly as they were found

during excavation. The skeleton lying on its side is a wealthy slaveholder, the heads along the side his slaves. The most important part of the body was understood to be the head, and Urartian burial rites included cutting the heads from the bodies of slaves when their master died, preserving their "identity" so the deceased master could recognize them when he went to the other world.

#### The Gold Rooms

There are several cases in two rooms in the gold vault. The craftsmanship and detail of the work was intricate and sometimes minuscule: take care to examine the pieces, and then imagine people creating such fine work more than 4000 years ago.

##### 1st Gold Room

1st case: Gold jewelry pieces discovered in mausoleums, featuring a gold necklace with intricate design, 3rd-2nd millennium BCE.

2nd case: Hollow cylinder made from sardonic (a red-veined onyx), 4th millennium BCE.

3rd case: actual frog weight carved from agate and onyx, 4th-3rd millennium BCE.

4th case: jewelry made from gold and carnelian (a semi-precious quartz gem). Gold medallions imbedded with cruciform design, 2nd millennium BCE.

5th case: royal seal made from carnelian, gold clasps, 3rd millennium BCE.

6th case: gold jewelry, including hairpin and medallion, 3rd-2nd millennium BCE.

##### Second Gold Room

1st case: amber necklaces, 4th-3rd millennium BCE.

2nd case: "matsuk" animal heads with eyes made from lapis lazuli, 4th millennium BCE. Lapis Lazuli was considered more valuable than gold in the ancient world, and was prized for its medicinal and cosmetic, as well as artistic value.

3rd case: amber jewelry and small agate stone called "achki ulunk" (eye beads), 4th-3rd millennium BCE. These are considered to be protective eyes warding off evil, and are still popular amulets worn around the necks of newborns in Armenia.

4th case: two belt decoration pieces in the shape of lions, made from bronze with silver overlay. Swastika detail on the hindquarters of the lions. The overlay process was probably created in the Armenian plateau, as this is one of the earliest examples found in Asia minor (3rd millennium BCE)



#### Store Room

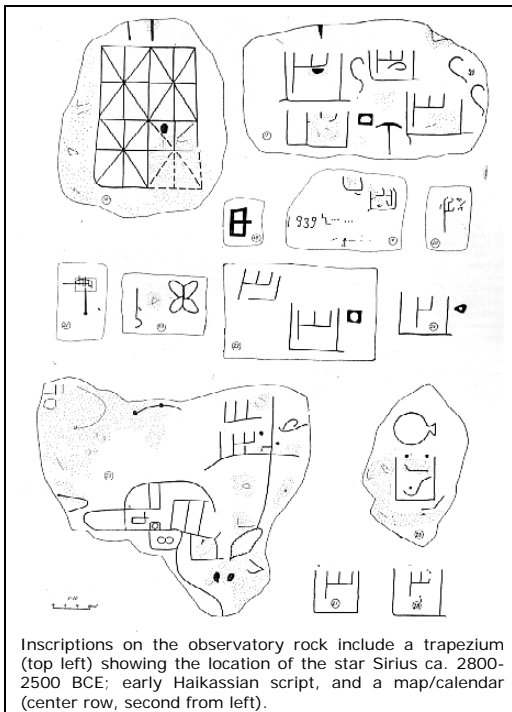
IF you're really lucky, the guides may allow you into the store room, where 20,000 additional artifacts are kept. One of the most rare and beautiful of them is kept there; a reddish brown ceramic lamp with seven fluted openings on the top: the openings represent the sun, moon and the five known constellations at that time.

#### THE EXCAVATION

##### [MAP]

1. **Cyclopic Walls** The cyclopic walls date from the 2nd millennium BCE, fortified during the Urartian Era. The stone blocks average 20 tons in weight, more than 3 meters thick.

2. **Old Citadel and round dwellings** The Old citadel was the first to be excavated at the site, and is the probably location of heretofore undiscovered archives. When uncovered, the area showed a complex of round house dwellings, temples and palace structures, dating back to the 4th millennium BCE.



**En route to the Temple Site**, just below the old citadel, is an incline on the stone hill. Carved into the hill is an intricate and large (almost 20 meters long) design. The design resembles a rudimentary map, and the shape of the rock resembles the Ararat side of Mt. Aragats in miniature. Inscriptions also include several early Haikassian script symbols (though carved at Metsamor much earlier, ca. 3000 BCE), and forms one of the basis' for establishing the old Armenian script during the Bronze Age around Metsamor.

**3. Temple site** Three temples were uncovered and are covered by a metal structure. Vandals have desecrated most of the altars you see. Luckily they are only three of an entire complex that was preserved by recovering them after the initial dig in 1967. The temples are unlike any other uncovered in Western Asia and the Ancient world, indicating a very distinct culture at Metsamor during the 2nd-1st millennia.

Within the altar spaces are numerous bowls set into the temple floor and a complex series of clay holders. Very little is understood about the ritual that occurred here, though animal sacrifice was a part. The holders probably held rare oil mixed with myrrh and frankincense, purified wine, wheat and fruit (seeds were discovered in some of the shallow bowls).

**4. Foundry** The foundry dates from the Early Bronze Age (ca. 4000 BCE), though recent digs in the area uncovered signs of metal processing as early as 5000 BCE. The complex of smelting furnaces and molds around you date from the mid Bronze to Early Iron Age (3000-2000 BCE). The complex becomes more astounding the more you walk through it. Several huge underground caves were uncovered that are thought to have been storehouses for base metal, as well as a granary for winter months. Stretching just below and around the Upper Citadel, the foundries processed Copper, Bronze, Iron, Mercury, Manganese, Strychnine, Zinc and gold. The first iron in the ancient world was probably forged here, though it was not considered as important as bronze, giving the jump on development to the Babylonians.

**5. Upper Citadel** The Upper citadel is covered over, except for a few pits. The main building was the city palace or main temple. The inner walls ring the site on three sides, with the foundries just below.

**THE OBSERVATORY**  
(DD 40.1285 x 44.1856, elev. 857m)



The observatory rivals the discoveries at the citadel for importance, substantiating theories on the birthplace of the zodiac and origins of astronomy in the ancient world. Dated ca. 2800-2500 BCE, when the zodiac is figured to have been

### The First Astronomers?

It should be no surprise to anyone who knows something of Armenia's history that astronomy is such an important part of the national character. Sun symbols, signs of the zodiac, and ancient calendars predominated in the region while the rest of the world was just coming around, culturally speaking. Egypt and China were still untamed wilderness areas when the first cosmic symbols began appearing on the side of the Geghama Mountain Range around 10,000 BCE.

At Metsamor (ca 5000 BCE), one of the oldest observatories in the world can be found. It sits on the southern edge of the excavated city, a promontory of red volcanic rocks that juts out like the mast of a great ship into the heavens. Between 2800 and 2500 BCE at least three observatory platforms were carved from the rocks. The Metsamor observatory is an open book of ancient astronomy and sacred geometry. For the average visitor the carvings are indecipherable messages. With Elma Parsamian, the first to unlock the secrets of the Metsamor observatory as a guide, the world of the first astronomers comes alive.

"The Metsamorians were a trade culture," Parsamian explains. "For trade, you have to have astronomy, to know how to navigate." The numerous inscriptions found at Metsamor puzzled excavators, as indecipherable as they were elaborate. Hundreds of small circular bowls were carved on the rock surfaces, connected by thin troughs or indented lines. But one stood out. It is an odd shaped design that was a mystery to the excavators of the site, until Professor Parsamian discovered it was a key component to the large observatory complex. By taking a modern compass and placing it on the carving, Parsamian found that it pointed due North, South and East. It was one of the first compasses used in Ancient times.

Another carving on the platforms shows four stars inside a trapezium. The imaginary end point of a line dissecting the trapezium matches the location of star which gave rise to Egyptian, Babylonian and ancient Armenian religious worship.

Sketch the locations of the Jupiter moons over several nights and you're repeating an experiment Galileo did in 1610. Chart a star over several years and you repeat an experiment the Metsamorians did almost 5000 years ago. By using the trapezium carving and a 5000 year stellar calendar, Parsamian discovered that the primary star which matched the coordinates of its end point was the star Sirius, the brightest star in our galaxy.

"Sirius is most probably the star worshipped by the ancient inhabitants of Metsamor," Parsamian explains. "Between 2800 and 2600 BCE Sirius could have been observed from Metsamor in the rising rays of the sun. It is possible that, like the ancient Egyptians, the inhabitants of Metsamor related the first appearance of Sirius with the opening of the year."

Those wanting to plot the same event from Metsamor will have to wait a while. Sirius now appears in the winter sky, while the inhabitants of Metsamor observed it in the summer. (Because of the earth's rotation within the rotation of the Milky Way galaxy, stars change their positions over time. In another 4000 years or so Sirius will again appear as it is plotted on the Metsamor stellar map).

The Metsamorians also left behind a calendar divided into twelve months, and made allowances for the leap year. Like the Egyptian calendar which had 365 days, every four years the Metsamorians had to shift Sirius' rising from one day of the month to the next.

"There is so much I found in 1966," Parsamian adds, "and so much we do not know. We believe they worshipped the star Sirius, but how? I like to imagine there was a procession of people holding lights. These carved holes throughout the complex may have been filled with oil and lit. Just imagine what it must have looked like with all those little fires going all over the steps of the observatory. Like a little constellation down on earth."

Parsamian has a special regard for Metsamor, since it was she who uncovered many of the mysteries of the inscriptions on the observatory, answers which explained other finds uncovered at the excavation site. "When you walk over this ancient place, you can use your imagination to complete the picture. I love to visit Metsamor since I feel I am returning to the ancients."

concluded, the observatory was also the primary religious site and navigation center for the Metsamor culture.



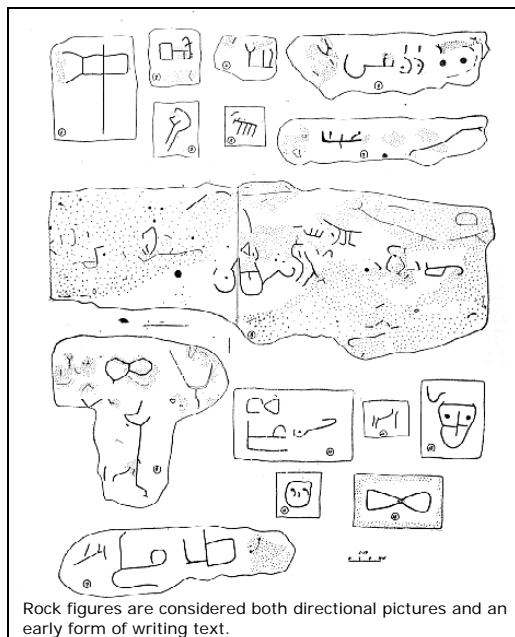
Hundreds of shallow bowls are carved onto the surfaces of three large rocks that rise above the surrounding river delta. The use of the bowls is unknown, many are linked by equally shallow "canals" (we're talking real small here, no more than a few inches in diameter for the bowls). They might have been filled with oil that was lit at night as part of a ritual celebration (if so, they would look very much like a 'bowl of the universe' on earth), or they may have been used to smelt and forge metal in another sort of ritual. Imagination allows you to decide for yourself.



You need to be very careful while exploring the observatory site, since the inscriptions are carved on basalt and tufa, and have already been eroded by exposure to the elements since uncovered in 1967. For more information on the site, see The First Astronomers?

**7. Outer walls** The outer walls are 2nd-1st millennium BCE, laid during Urartian times. The walls mark the greatest extent of the ancient citadel, though the necropolis and graveyard extend for another 200 hectares into nearby Taronik Village.

**8. Mediaeval Precinct** The Medieval Precinct was located on top of the old citadel. The discovery of medieval coins and artifacts there prompted the 1967 excavation. Foundations were removed to uncover the older layers of the city.



**Overnight** at Aknalich (see next entry), Echmiadzin, Yerevan or village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village or excavation—no shade); **Food** at village mterks and Armavir Highway cafe; **Springs** in the area.

➔ **Backtrack** to Taronik and turn L (W) at the intersection. Continue W for about 2 km on that road as it winds to (**Aknalich**, DD 40.14174 x 44.17226, elev. 852m) 🏠 🍽️ 🌳 🌊

**SIDE TRIP:** **Aknalich** - Աղակալիժ was made by damming the waters of the Metsamor River.

Once the haunt of local Soviet bigwigs manning the nuclear reactors and running things in Hoktemberian (Armavir City), the tiny nature area (10 hectares) was privatized and converted into rendezvous restaurant-hotels and a Hangestian Goti (rest area) for locals. It is crowded on weekend, but deserted on weekdays (save the tête-à-têtes) and is for Armavir a pretty spot.

#### Overnight, Food & Drink

1.5 kilometers from the Metsamor excavation turnoff, going west (away from Taronik and towards Armavir City), is "LICH MOTEL", with 7 bright and comfortable units, a lake to call your own and one of the best views of Ararat we've seen, unspoiled by urban growth. They have cable TV, an International telephone connection, central heat and air conditioning, hot showers, and the freshest food at their pier restaurant. At 10,000 AMD a room (double occupancy), they beat anything in Yerevan (note they also rent by the hour).

**SETRAKI RESTAURANT/MOTEL**, tel. 093-555652, is located on Aknalich, 700 meters from Lake Motel entrance (turn left on side street at a rock wall, go 200 meters, green wire gate is on left). 10 cottages in wooded area, no phone, but swimming pool, hot water, air conditioning and central heat, beautiful walks through wooded area up to edge of lake. 20,000 AMD for two people, meals included.

A new **RESTAURANT-MOTEL** is outside the E side of the lake and caters to revelers by the hour or night, depending on how busy they are (popular with local oligarchs). 6500 AMD per person in dining cottage with bedroom in back.

On the (M5) highway the #7 **RESTAURANT MOTEL** offers rooms at 4000-5000 AMD (per 5 hours or overnight).

#### Camping

The lake has a **HANGESTIAN GOTI**, next to the Cottages and restaurant. 2000-3000 AMD per day.

**Springs** are in villages and at the lake.

➔ From Aknalich dam take the W road about 4 km and through Aknalich village to the (M5) and R (W) turn that takes you in about 1.8 km to the main entrance to (**Metsamor village**, DD 40.14348 x 44.10828, elev. 848m) 🏠 🍽️ 🌳 🌊

**SIDE TRIP: Metsamor village** (pop. 1000) was purpose-built for the nearby Nuclear Plant, and houses the families of plant workers. The reactor is located some 5 km N of the village.

The reactor is controversial for several of reasons, not least of which is its design, which is a later form of the infamous Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine, which had a meltdown in 1988 and was forced to close, but not before killing or causing severe illness to tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Europeans. As a result of this, Armenia's fledgling Green Party led protests against the reactor in Armenia, prompting authorities to shut it down.

Built in the 1970s (going online in 1976 and 1977) to supply the country's burgeoning electric needs (and as a response to the severe drop in the waters of Lake Sevan due to hydroelectric power production), the reactor promoted the growth of industry and population in the 1980s while easing the reliance on hydroelectricity which the country had depended on since the 1930s.

After the 1988 Spitak earthquake, ongoing protests on the Karabakh issue joined with Green protests against the nuclear reactor for mass demonstrations against the reactor, and both units were shut down in 1989. This victory against an entrenched Soviet government morphed into widespread anti-Azeri demonstrations and Karabakh's declaration of independence, precipitating the undeclared war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The resulting blockades by Turkey and Azerbaijan created severe energy shortages in Armenia with widespread blackouts and panic. Attempts to send Russian gas to replace that lost from Azerbaijan largely failed as Azeri partisans in Georgia repeatedly blew up gas pipelines in 1993-1995.

In the face of this, the new government decided to reopen the plant in 1993, the first time any decommissioned reactor was restarted. Protests by European states and the US against the effort had little effect, especially since none offered to replace the lost energy with new supplies, or to guarantee sage gas supply. Finally, the US and Russia contributed funds to reinforce the reactors against earth tremors.

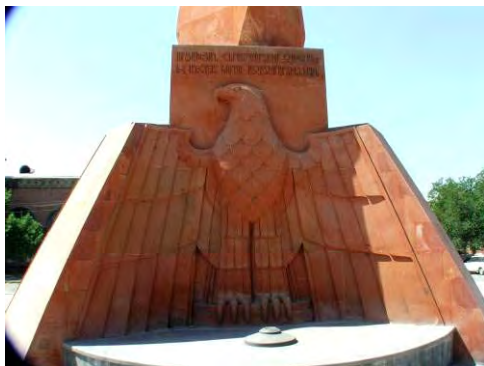
On October 26, 1996 unit 2 was brought back on line, generating 400Mw or 60% of the country's power in 1996. By 1999 that was down to 40%. Hydroelectric plants in Siunik generate another 25% and small hydropower stations and gas generators supply the rest. Enough is generated that—in a strange twist of fate—Armenia now sells energy to Turkey, which continues to blockade the land border.

The reactor will be decommissioned by 2016, when a new reactor, generating 1000Mw will go online. Turkey is already seeking to buy a portion of the power.

**Overnight** at Aknalich motels, Armavir Highway motel, in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area; **Food** at motels; **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Metsamor village continue W on the (M5) for about 6.5 km to the train station in central **ARMAVIR CITY (HOKTEMBERIAN)** (DD 40.14695 x 44.03278, elev. 866m) 🏠 🚗 📶 🌐

🌸 **ARMAVIR - ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Արմավիր)** (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) 📍 is the capital of Armavir marz, and once a large industrial, canning and textile center for the country. The collapse of Soviet Armenia, the Karabakh war and the Turkish blockade dealt the city a severe blow, from which it has not even begun to recover.



From an all time high population of 46,900, the city has barely 12,000 (though officials refuse to budge from an inflated 26,000, fearing their loss of tax income and influence in the central

government). The result is an empty, rusting town that barely gets by on remittances sent from relatives living in Russia and the west, and spin off trade from the marz' agricultural economy.

**Background** Despite is sad modern exterior, the town has a storied history, though in different locations. It started as an important obsidian and trade center (ca. 600-1000 BCE), as a few artifacts from this early period show. There was a settlement at the site of the town, but the large Armavir Hill was the town's first location (7 km S), when the Urartu King Argishti built a city on the hill. Later, Orontid (Yervanduni) kings established their capital on the same hill, where it lasted until the 4th c BCE, when they moved their seat to Yervandashat. The town on the hill thrived through Romans, Arshakuni and Persian periods until its demise in the 15th c at the hands of the Timurids. The population scattered (some remained on the hill until the 19th c), and 16th-18th c Safavid Iranians governed the region from Sardari Castle just SW of the town. The current site was a speck in the desert when the Russians came to town and built the first railroad, placing a switching station in the settlement. This literally put the town on the map, as Sardarapat.



And as Sardarapat the then village became the focus of Turkish attempts to capture Yerevan, after succeeding in Alexandropol (Gyumri). Their failure at the Battle of Sardarapat, followed by routes at Vanadzor and Aparan, insured the regions freedom and a fledgling First Republic.

The village became a town in Soviet times, growing off of increasing farming (canning), cotton production (textiles) and light industry, its goods

shipped to Russia via the rail line built in the 19th c.

**Bearings** **Armavir** is extremely easy to get around in. There is one main street, the (M5) highway, and it divides the town into two parts. To the North is the new town, with its wide streets, railroad station, hotel, cafes, shops and banks, and apartment blocks. To the far NE lies the park and sports stadium. This makes up the largest part of the town. To the south of the highway and rail line is

## SITES

Despite the fact all sites worth seeing are outside of town, I would not discount it as a place to crash if you are going to explore the western marz in detail, or are heading NW to Aragatsotn and Shirak.

Within 45 minutes drive of Armavir you can hit all sites in the marz, with those near the town including the **Argishtikhinili** and **Old Armavir** excavations, **Sardari Castle**, **Sardarapat Battlefield and Museum**, **Yervandashat** and **Bagaran** and the entire **western desert**. Armavir is within 1 hour drive from all of southern Aragatsotn, and 90 minutes from Gyumri on the western road. It is 20 minutes to Echmiadzin.

## MAP

1. Armenian Restaurant/Hotel
2. WWII Monument
3. Rail Station, Bus Station
4. Hotel
5. Converse Bank
6. Tickets Agency
7. Trade Hall
8. Shuka/GUM
9. College
10. Srjarian - khorovats

## PRACTICALITIES 📍

Area Code: 237  
Long Distance: 0237 + local number  
From abroad: + (374) 237+ local number  
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell  
International callers: Armentel + (374) 91 + number, Viva Cell + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0237) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 237 prefix if calling from abroad.

## IN AND OUT

### By Train

Elektrichka and Gnatsk trains connect Armavir with Yerevan and Gyumri, originating at the Central Station in Yerevan, arriving at the main station in Armavir. The Elektrichka leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the afternoon. Tickets at 703-3650 AMD makes this the cheapest way to town. The gnatsk continues to Tbilisi, with a connecting train to Batumi (and ferries to the Ukraine and Istanbul).

### By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minivans (marshrutni taxis) connect Armavir with Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Ashtarak, Talin, and villages in the marz. The bus station is on the (M5) or at the train station, ask.

**Buses** Buses to Armavir from Yerevan depart from the corner of Sarian and Mashtots pts (350 AMD) and Central Bus Station on Isahakian (850 AMD) and arrive at the Armavir bus stop. Buses from Armavir include to Echmiadzin (250 AMD).

**Minivans** (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop on the (M5) or at the train station. Ask. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Armavir Minivans connect to Yerevan (400 AMD, Central bus station), Echmiadzin (200 AMD), Sardarapat (100 AMD), Nalbandian/Old Armavir (150 AMD), Haikavan/Argishtikhinili (200 AMD), Hoktemberian village/Sardari Castle (100 AMD), Yervandashat/Bagaran (300 AMD), Karakert (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. Armavir call taxis at tel. 61081

**From Yerevan**, just about any taxi will take you to Armavir at 100-150 AMD per kilometer. Taxis should charge 5000-7500 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone (5000-6000 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** Armavir is on the (M5) highway, which leads to Echmiadzin (25 km) and Yerevan (50 km) to the E, and Sardarapat (10 km) and the Turkish border (19 km) to the SW. The (M5) in Armavir connects to the south and southeast (H15) leading to Haikavan/Argishtikhinili (9 km) and Markara (21 km). To the NW it connects to the (H17) which leads to Karakert (25 km) and the (M9), which leads to Bagaran (19 km) in the south, and to the N Talin (14 km) and the (M1) highway that leads N to Giumri (53 km). From Armavir it is 50 km to Yerevan, 25 km to Echmiadzin and 92 km to Giumri.



## AROUND

**On foot** is easy enough in the center, with the entire stretch from rail station to the Stadium only 2 km. If you want to hike, it is not that far to regional sites like Sardari Castle (7 km), Sardarapat (10 km), Argishtikhinili (8 km) and Old Armavir (10 km).

**Taxis** Armavir has plenty of taxis, throughout the town but most in the center. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (but few speak English). The general rate is 600 AMD around 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

Armavir is covered by both Armentel and VivaCell (28 Hanrapetutian) 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 Armavir at 7 Hanrapetutian p. (Manuk Simonyan), tel. 61452, 61456, e-mail: [armavir@arminco.com](mailto:armavir@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:  
**ARMECONOMBANK**, 8 Spandarian  
**ARDSHININVESTBANK**, 17 Hanrapetutian  
**CONVERSE BANK**, 22a Yerevanian  
**INECOBANK**, 17 Hanrapetutian  
**UNIBANK**, 29/5 Hanrapetutian

## Shopping

There are a number of shops in town, including mterks, souvenirs and clothing stores. Most are on Hanrapetutian p and its side streets. The Shuka and Yarmaka are on the first street to the R W of the railway station.

## 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 Nairian p.

## Hospital, Polyclinic

The hospital and clinic are on the first street to the right, just west of the railway station. For a medical emergency, contact your lodging venue or go to Yerevan.

Hospital: tel. 62640



## OVERNIGHT

**HOKTEMBER HOTEL** is located on the main street (M5), almost opposite the railway station. The hotel houses refugees from the Karabakh war, but there are rooms in a basic way (water included, not much else) at 4000 AMD for DBL.

**ARMAVIR RESTAURANT/HOTEL** is one block north of the (M5) opposite a park. The hotel caters to weddings and tête-a-têtes with decent rooms with hot water, TV and clean linen at 5000-20,000 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. 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 the restaurant at Armavir Hotel. Food can also be bought at Mterks (food shops) around town.

\$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks  
\$\$ = 2000-3000 AMD  
\$\$\$ = 3000 AMD or more

**ARMAVIR RESTAURANT-HOTEL**, one block north of the (M5) using the street before the railway station, has Armenian, khorovats menu. Meals can go for as much as 4000 AMD. \$-\$\$\$

**SRJARANS/CAFES** are on the west end of the town on the (M5). Cheap eats with sandwiches at 500-1000 AMD and khorovats at 1500 AMD per shish. \$-\$\$



➡ From central Armavir cross over the rail tracks to the S side of town, head south two blocks, turn R, then L at the next block to the SE road for about 6 km to the main intersection in the village of **HAIKAVAN** (DD 40.08852 x 44.04557, 861m). Merge L and in about 400 m take the R (SW) Nor Artages road for about 1.5 to the **OLD ARMAVIR** excavation (DD 40.07918 x 43.03445, elev. 937m) 🏰 🗿 🏛

✳ **HAIKAVAN / OLD ARMAVIR - ՀԱՅԿԱՎԱՆ / ՀԻՆ ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ (Հայկավան / Հին Արմավիր)** 🏰 (till 1935 Ghrdghuli/Kuru-Kili, pop. 1350) The Hellenistic city of Old Armavir sites on a tall hill just SW of the villages of Haikavan and Armavir.



Old Armavir is often mistaken for Armavir Village to the NE and the city of Armavir further N. The city was once Hoktemberian, a name locals still insist on calling the once thriving, now derelict Soviet era town.

Complicating things further are two hills to the west of Old Armavir, both of which share much of the same history and were inhabited at the same time. These are (first) the Urartian city of Argishtikhinili (p. 79), which lies barely 3 km away, and (second) the battlefield of Sardarapat, just 4 km further west.

## Background

The hill you are at was inhabited from the 6th millennium BCE, when the tall hill was surrounded by the Arax River and a delta of water that created a thick bog; a near perfect natural defense against enemy incursions. Excavated artifacts from the period include obsidian tools, bronze pieces and pottery fragments. The Bronze Age was particularly rich in finds, and was the source of the cyclopean wall stones.

In the 8th c BCE Urartians established their administrative center at the next hill to the west (see Argishtikhinili), but Armavir continued to be inhabited, as an Urartian possession. The hill, and the city, really came into its own in the wake of Alexander the Great's march through Persia, when in 331 BCE the Armenian Orontid Kings asserted their independence from the Persian Achaemenid Empire, and Armavir was chosen as their seat of power.



The entire hilltop was refortified with cyclopean stones, and topped with a citadel, the necropolis growing to perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. Clay tablets from this period, written in Elamite and recounting episodes of the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic have been found, showing a developed level of contact between the Orontids and the Near East. The tablets are written in an archaic language even for the Achaemenid period, and might have been treasured by the Orontids for centuries before they were brought to the city.

Other writings include 3rd c BCE Greek inscriptions, including the poems of Hesiod, texts by Euripides, a Macedonian Calendar and a name list of the Orontid kings.



When the Arax River shifted southwards, the capital lost its best defense and was moved by to Artashat in 189 BCE. Armavir continued to be an important (if defenseless) religious and trade center, apparently continuously inhabited throughout the Artashesian and Arshakuni Dynasties of Armenian kings, the early Christian era (though curiously, the only Christian structures found are at the bottom of the pagan temple hill), until its capture by Arabs in 645.

The history of the city becomes confused with that of the region and the other two hills in the area; Argishtikhinili and the hill called Sardarabad. The temple was converted to a church in the early Christian era, with some 5th c evidence of alteration. Objects dating to the Arab, Bagratuni and Seljuk eras have been found at the site, suggesting some kind of habitation, though all vestiges of administrative importance were by now gone, royal favor placed on the Bagratuni capital at Ani.



The Byzantine conquest of the region lasted barely 20 years before the Seljuks devastated the city, followed by a short revival in the late 12th-early 13th cc and the early Mongol era, before a period of long decline began. Still inhabited (perhaps as a defensive spot only for surrounding villages), the hill was finally abandoned sometime during the 17th-18th c, during the protracted Persian-Turkish wars.

What remains now are traces of massive wall formations, foundations for the large Hellenistic Temple, a few capitals and carved stones, and thousands of pottery shards, including a few glazed pottery fragments from the medieval period.

## The Site

It is a steep climb up the massive hill; you'll need 20-30 minutes and sturdy shoes. At the bottom there is a large cemetery that wraps three sides of the hill.



Part way up the hill there is a metal cross over a large cave shrine, replete with icons and candles. The cave may have at one time connected to the hill top by a series of tunnels (not unusual for the period). What remains are rock walls bedecked with religious fragments, embroidered cloth, pieces of plastic crucifixes and innumerable pebbles stuck to the wall with melted candle wax.

Facing the border are remains of old Soviet defenses, designed to foil Turkish/NATO surprise attacks. The abandoned, decrepit tank-topped bunkers are still considered national defense points, and technically off limits.



Several paths wind their way up the hill, take the easiest for you to navigate to the top. As you walk up, the outline of the wall defenses become clearer, their massive blocks of basalt stone carefully hewn and laid in layers.

Though evidence of Bronze Age inhabitation have been found, including mammoth blocks of stone, surviving structures date to the 8th c when Urartians built on this and the next hill to the west. The layout, foundations and overall design bear a striking likeness to the Urartian layer at Metsamor, suggesting both sites were utilitarian settlements in support of nearby administrative cities (in this case, Argishtikhinili). Metsamor was a center for forging iron in Urartian times, while Armavir seemed dedicated to crafts and arts.



At the very top there is a large platform surrounded by fallen blocks of stone. This is the temple mount, once surmounted by a large structure that no longer remains. Excavations

showed the temple to have followed Urartian, Achaemenid and then Hellenistic styles, though none of the wall blocks remain, suggesting it was dismantled and used elsewhere, perhaps in a later capital, or by locals for their own purposes. The black tufa stones at the site are from the medieval church that replaced the old temple.

If it followed the same conventions as other temples from the era, its original fire worship temple would have been converted into a temple to one of Urartu's deities (Khaldi?), oriented N-S, with an inner courtyard surrounding the sanctuary building. It would then have been used again as a fire worship temple in the Achaemenid period (Ahuramazd/Aramazd, Mher), later reserved for one of the Hellenistic Armenian deities (Mythra, Astghikh, Vahagn) before its conversion to a Christian church. The lower cave shrine shows evidence of pagan rituals into the modern era, suggesting the conversion of the temple mount never fully took hold. Recent excavations have opened an entrance on the east end of the temple, typical for Pagan sites.



Excavations also opened another sanctuary on the North face of the hill, with a rocky outcrop worked into a three-stepped pedestal (parakon) for a statue of a god. A basalt idol was found at the base of that pedestal. Also found were the bones of sacrificial animals and a movable stone altar.

To the west there is a substantial excavation of the Hellenistic period, important in understanding the Seleucid period in the region. Once covering two cliff areas, the installation of Soviet defenses obliterated all evidence of this period from one of the cliffs (including a famous inscription of the 5th

c BCE Greek playwright Euripides), leaving only the current area for archeologists to explore.



It includes five inscriptions (which you can still see if you comb the western hills) of historical importance:

(A) A listing of the headings of three 3rd c BCE histories of Armenia, saying they had to be returned to the archives at the temple (an early stone library card?);

(B) A list of Macedonian calendar months;

(C) A tribute by the Greek condottiero (leader) Numenio, ca. 188-160 BCE, describing how a shipment (Arms? Goods?) from the Syrian king Antioch IV helped the first king of Armenia Artashes to secure his independence from the Achaemenids.



The medieval layer shows continued craft production, as well as large bakery that was uncovered in 2002 excavations. A layout of the streets, and two approaches to the temple mount can be seen from the last excavation.

Pottery shards proliferate around the hill, including a few rare fragments of medieval glazing.



**Overnight** at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village and site-no shade); **Food** at Haikavan & Armavir Village mterks and cafe; **Springs** in the area.

➔ From Old Armavir continue SW on the road for about 3 km to central (**Nor Artages**, DD 40.06895 x 44.00508, elev. 874m) 🗺️ 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP: Nor Artages - Նոր Արտագես** (pop. 600) ekes out an existence from the fertile soil that surrounds the village, limited by competing claims on land from next door Nalbandian and down stream Janfida. It should be prosperous, but the main portion of villagers live in Russia, working as day laborers, and not much of their incomes seems to have returned to the village.

The village has an impressive **monument**, its main and only site. The WWII monument shows a triumphant warrior holding his son aloft in a distinctly god-like pose (shades of Dionysus/Mher!). The monument is on the main road to Nalbandian.

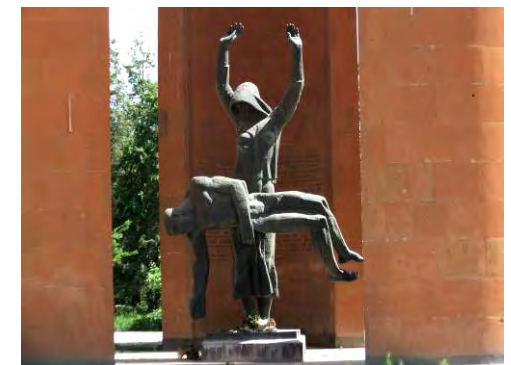
**Overnight** at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (near village – shade in orchards, ask); **Food** at mterks and Armavir; **Springs** in the area.



➔ From central Nor Artages continue SW on the same road for about 2 km to the main intersection in (**Nalbandian**, DD 40.06234 x 43.98767, elev. 875m) 🗺️ 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP: Nalbandian - Նալբանդյան** (formerly Shahriar, pop. 2024) was once a prosperous farming community, and could be again, save the remittances sent back from half its citizens now living in Russia which have spoiled the rest into listlessness.

The village gave an inordinate amount of its sons during the Great patriotic War, and partly because of this (and partly because a local Soviet boss pulled in favors), the village was chosen to receive one of the most moving WWII monuments in the country, if I do betray my aesthetic tastes.



The imagery is typical for Soviet edge, combining an obvious **Pieta** motif with

monumental size and angles and an equally obvious church imagery with the three apse arches and the cross form in the placement of the bodies. This was as much a statement striking against the Soviet aesthetic forms as it was an artistic expression of pain and grief.



Nearby there is a small Tuxh Manuk shrine in a private house, the so-called S. Hovhannes (DD 40.06477 x 43.98518, elev. 879), reached by taking the street at the big tree 1 block from the WWII monument, the metal roof is seen from afar. The village has some interesting buildings and homes.



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

➔ From Nalbandian's central intersection take the N road for about 2 km to a T-intersection where

A R (E) turn leads in about 700 m to a dirt path on the R (S) that climbs past a monument to the top of the hill that is the **NOR ARMAVIR/ ARGISHTIKHINILI EXCAVATION** (DD 40.07993 x 43.99601, 912m) 🏰 🗺️

🏰 **NOR ARMAVIR/ ARGISHTIKHINILI - ՆՈՐ ԱՐՄԱՎԻՐ/ԱՐԳԻՏԻՔԻՆԻԼԻ ՊԵՂՈՒՄ (Նոր Արմավիր/Արգիշտիխինիլի պեղում )** 🏰 sits within spitting distance of Old Armavir on a hill that skirts the south side of the village of Nor Armavir. The hill is more easily mounted than Old Armavir (there is a navigable dirt road to the top), and the site has more extensive fortifications; a good example of how the Urartians engineered their defense systems.

Otherwise the site has few of the dramatic effect (pottery shards, temple mount, caves) of Old Armavir, and—except for the magnificent view it affords of the Ararat valley—should be reserved as a secondary trip or for those mad about archeology.

#### Background

As early as the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmanaser I (1280-1266 BCE), the first mention of Urartu is made, under the name “Uruatri”. By the 9th c. BCE the Urartu kingdom had established its regional power far beyond its capital at Tushpa. The Urartians called their country Biainili (the name Urartu comes from the Assyrian).



Old Armavir from Argishtikhinili

The people of the Urartu kingdom created a specific and highly developed civilization, one that rivaled all regional empires. It occurred at the same time as the ascendancy of the Greek city-states, Babylon, Assyria, the New Kingdom in

Egypt, and the Chan dynasty in China. It ended abruptly in the 6th c. with wars with Assyria and the Achaemenids and the destruction of the capital of Tushpa.



The two volcanic hills that make up the ancient capital were—like Armavir—inhabited from prehistoric times, and like Armavir, naturally defended by a web of waterways cut through the area by the Arax River.

It is most famous for its Urartu period, when the hill was chosen in 776 BCE by King Argishti I as a fortress and capital to accompany those at Karmir blur and Erebuni, linchpins of his extension of the empire that included the Ararat valley, the Lake Sevan basin and southern Georgia. The city became known as Argishtikhinili.



Argishti left a calling card at the site in the form of a basalt stone cuneiform that reads:

*To the greatness of our god Khaldi, Argishti son of Menua, says: I built a great fortress and made its name of my own, Argishtikhinili. The land was a wilderness: nothing there was flourishing. I tamed them. Out of the rivers I made four canals; (from them) the grape lands and fruits lands were divided. I made many great heroic things there.*

The fortress was one of many in the Ararat valley, part of a complex string of defensive positions established by Argishti, built to arrest invasions by “Northern Tribes” (the Scythians and Cimmerians) who were attempting to migrate into the region. His father, king Menua, had established a foothold in Armavir region, referred to as Etius in Yazlitash and Zolakert inscriptions, the name of its capital as Lununis. The capital is assumed to be the same hills occupied by his son Argishti.

The capital lasted until 5th c BCE raids by Scythians, who had made compact with Medians to capture the Urartian empire, plundered the city, burning it to the ground. Rebuilt and reinhabited in later periods, the site's last important period was during the medieval period, which left pottery shards and mud-brick structures behind.

[MAP]

#### The Complex

The excavated remains flow along the top and inner valley of two hills, roughly forming the S and SE end of the village of Nor Armavir.



The **walls** towards the top of the main hill (road entry on the NW side of the hill, or SW end of the village; there is a stone monument to the site

about 50 m uphill), are the most impressive, a series of cyclopic stone walls forming a series of defensive positions to protect the innermost citadel. Just below the top there is a simple plaster of Paris diorama map of the site and area, replicating an early stone map from the site. It shows the extensive settlement and irrigation channels engineered by the Urartians in the valley, some of which still feed area croplands.

Foundations of Urartian and medieval dwellings (the latter are mud-brick and straw), lie scattered throughout the main and secondary, eastern hill, those excavated in the inner valley between were covered up after archeological digs, and some lie below the modern cemetery.

#### [MAP West Hill]

The western hill has the most developed foundation system, a large complex of rooms, temples and palaces that stretch more than 200 m.

#### [MAP East Hill]

The East hill had a large citadel, carefully protected by several rings of defensive walls. It is here the governor lived and where the king slept when visiting the area. Excavations uncovered a more sketchy outline of the area; it was badly damaged at the end of its life.



Look carefully as you walk through the site; though picked over by legions of travelers before you, you still may find (especially after rainfall) pottery shards from the various periods of inhabitation. Black burnished ware was favored by Urartians, red is normally (not always) of later

periods. Very rarely, visitors report finding an ancient coin (mostly Arab and later periods).



Below the W hill, on its E side, there is small **Tuhk Manuk dedicated to S. Davit**, its recent renovation unable to obscure its prehistoric origins (look for the ancient stone lying inside the chapel. Outside, a small casket stone replaces an ancient one that sit nearby, worn into a saddle shape by hundreds of generations of use. The new stone is decorated with flat pebbles, wishing stones seeking favor with the gods. The legend goes that if you can make a stone stick to the casket sides, your wish will be granted. Some cheat with candle wax, others rub their smooth stones vigorously before attempting the task.

**Overnight** at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (no shade); **Food** at village mterks and Sardarapat cafe; **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Nor Armavir backtrack to the T-intersection and continue forward (W) for about 1.5 km to central Amassia; continue W for another 2.8 km to the (M5) above Hushakert where a R (NE) turn leads in about 2.8 km to the **SARDARAPAT (ARAX)** (DD 40.07993 x 43.99601, 928m) 🏠 🚶 📶 🌊

🏠 **SARDARAPAT (ARAKS) - ՍԱՐԴԱՐԱՊԱՏ (ԱՐԱՔՍ) / Սարդարապատ (Արաքս)** 📍 (Araks pop. 500), Sardarapat memorial, URL: <http://ac.aua.am/skhachat/Web/index.html>, open 10-5 every day, except Mondays and National Holidays (open Independence Day: May 28), 300 AMD, guided tour +500 AMD, is located 15 km S of modern Armavir (called Hoktemberian by locals), 7 km W of Argishtihinili excavation and overlooks

part of the site of the May 1918 battle between the Turkish 36th army and local Armenians that led to Turkish defeat at the hands of local Armenians, many of which were armed only with pitchforks and scythes.

Further defeats of Turkish forces near Aparan and Vanadzor cemented the end of Turkish aspirations to eliminate the Armenian people and establish a Pan Turkish Empire, and to the establishment of the First Republic of Armenia.

The site includes an excellent Ethnographic museum with artifacts from nearby 8th c BCE Argishtihinili, 4th c BCE Armavir and medieval Armenian life.

#### BACKGROUND

Part of the Ararat Fertile Crescent, the area is site to prehistoric settlements from the Stone Age, with small settlements dating to ca. 9000 BCE and more complex urban sites to 6000 BCE. The three hills to the E of Sardarapat have excavations of two of Armenia's prehistoric capitals; immediately east the two fortified hills of the Urartian capital Argishtihinili (8th-6th cc BCE), and further east the large 4th c capital of Armavir. About 30 km west are two more; the Orontid capitals of Yervandashat (302 BCE) and Bagaran (211-200 BCE).

After the removal of the capital to Artashat, the citadels all fell into slow decline, remarked only in a few written sources, including one by the Roman historian Tacitus describing the Roman invasion of Armenia by the general Corbulon in 59 CE.

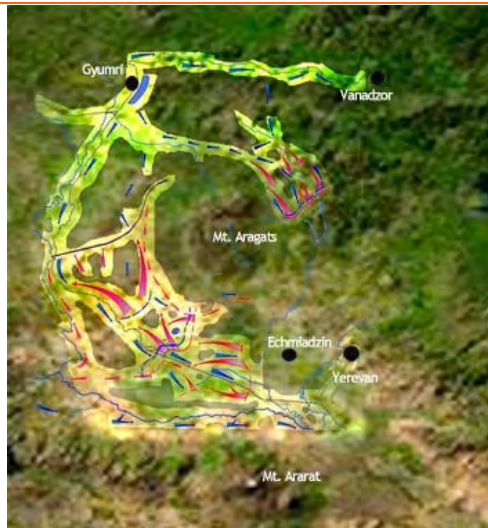
In the middle sits the long, low brow of Sardarapat, once a key stop on the Kars to Isfahan Rail line, a linchpin in control of the Ararat Valley. The hill (site of the monument and museum) formed the battery of Armenian forces that fought the Turkish 36th army to a standstill and then retreat in a series of battles between May 21-29, 1918.



#### The Battle of Sardarapat

Following the entry of Turkey into WWI on the Axis side, and a disastrous Turkish campaign to invade Russian-controlled Eastern Armenia, the Young Turk government instigated a campaign in 1915 to wipe out their Christian populations. This included up to 2 million loyal Armenian subjects.

Russian advances in 1916-1917 halted the slaughter in the farthest East of Anatolia and threatened to finally retake historic Armenia from the Turks, but when the October Revolution came, the Bolsheviks signed a treaty of peace and then the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which gave all of the Eastern Anatolian territory captured by Russians in the 1877-78 War with Turkey back to the Turks. The Russian army was then called back to Russia, leaving Armenia defenseless against Turkish aggression.



The Battle of Sardarapat was in fact three battles between May 21-29, 1918, at three locations: Sardarapat, Kharakilisa (Vanadzor) and Bash Aparan (Aparan). It started with the fall of Alexandropol on May 15, 1918, and the division of the Turkish army into three prongs, in an effort to cut off rail aid at Kharakilisa and to surround Yerevan, the last free Armenian city.

The map above shows the movements of the Turkish Army 36th division (**blue arrows**) which marched down the Alexandropol Rail line towards Yerevan, taking the village and rail station of Sardarapat on May 21.

In a last gasp effort to survive, Armenians troops and militia under the command of General Silikyan (**red arrows**) began a counter attack, aided by commoners armed with hunting rifles, pitchforks and knives. The battle was indecisive until May 27, when Turkish forces endured terrible loss and their lines broke, causing a rout and further Turkish casualties. The failure of Turkish forces to break through Aparan Pass to aid their brethren at Sardarapat (May 23-28); and to invade Tavush via Kharakilisa broke the Turkish back and ended their invasion.

The Turks had encountered repeated defeats in the war, leaving its army demoralized, but when the

Russians left Eastern Armenia, they rallied and—led by Vehib Pasha—the 3rd army stationed its troops facing the Armenian irregulars and began a second campaign to exterminate the Armenians and smash through the Caucasus to join with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian territories.



The Armenians were forced to evacuate one city after another in Eastern Anatolia, until the 3rd army captured Alexandropol on May 18th of 1918, and split into three prongs, the 36th division sent down the Kars-Yerevan railway to capture the Ararat Valley. Other divisions were sent to the Aparan Plain to take Kotaik/Gegharkunik and link with Azerbaijan, while another headed to Kara-Kilisa (present day Vanadzor).

Lore has it that church bells rang throughout the country after the fall of Alexandropol, summoning Armenians to the defense of their country. Interviews with remaining survivors of the battle tell of a mass uprising by Armenians who had endured the horrors of the genocide, turning out in droves with any weapon they could find, bent on taking revenge.

[MAP]



The Turks got as far as Sardarapat (present Armavir City) Railway station on May 21 when the counter attack began (May 22), repeated on May 25. Led by Movses Silikyan, the Armenians fought the Turks to a draw, then used a battery on the long ridge that makes up the current monument and museum to cannonade Turkish forces. Having spent the last 3 years slaughtering Armenians with little resistance, the Turkish division was caught off guard by the fierce counterattack by Armenian partisans, soldiers and townspeople (some only brandishing a pitchfork or kitchen knife), panicked, and fled, many hacked to death in their retreat. The Turks were forced N and to the right bank of the Arax River.

**Casualties** The Turkish 36th division numbered 35,000 soldiers, of which 30,000 were counted as casualties after the battle (wounded, killed). Armenian forces numbered 45,000, with the same number of casualties.

The other two Turkish divisions sent to support the central thrust were also halted, first at the Battle of Aparan-Bash on May 21-24, which pushed the Turks back to Alexandropol. Meanwhile, Armenian forces at Alexandropol (Gyumri), at first surrounded by Turks, retreated to Kara-Kilisa (Vanadzor), where their resistance cut off Turkish advances towards Baku (May 22-28), forcing a general retreat of the defeated army back into Anatolia.

Turkish attempts to invade did not end at the Battle of Sardarapat; the defeated army regrouped in a few months began anew to put pressure on Armenian forces, often by sending Kurdish raiding parties into Armenia. In the meantime, Georgia, worried of Turkish aggression against their lands, made compact with Germany, who forced the Turks to stop at Batumi. Azerbaijan was again isolated, and immediately faced an internal crisis as Bolsheviks began to agitate oil workers to revolt and establish a Socialist Republic.

While the battle of Sardarapat did not end Turkish aggression, it did buy crucial time for Armenia, enough to establish the Democratic Republic of Armenia (DRA) on May 28, 1918. The republic was short-lived, harassed by Turks and Kurds on its western borders, an increasingly proactive Bolshevik movement, and a swollen population of 394,000 refugees from the genocide, and ensuing starvation, disease (the Spanish Flu was particularly brutal during the winter of 1919), poverty and lack of housing. The republic fell to political infighting, an invasion of Turks in September of 1920 and the Red Army in November of the same year. Yerevan ceded control to the Bolsheviks on December 2, 1920, finally ending Turkish aggression.

#### The Complex

The site was dedicated in 1968 and includes a memorial to the Sardarapat Battle of 1918 and perhaps the best ethnographic museum in Armenia, with well-kept interpretive displays of life from the prehistoric era to the 19th c, using artifacts unearthed from the area. There are also a café and restrooms.

[MAP]  
N▲



### THE MEMORIAL

The Memorial (Architects and Sculptors: R. Israelian, A. Harutiunian, S. Manasian, A. Shahinian) sits at the end of a long walkway south from the parking area, and is made of two large Urartian style bull sculptures which frame a large carillon.

The 26m high tower is made of 9 arches and twelve bells, one for each of the Western Armenian towns and regions in Anatolia where Turkish atrocities are known to have occurred. The bells are rung for groups of tourists and continuously on May 28). A group of memorials to the fallen of the 1988 Nagorno Karabakh conflict sit to the W (R) of the bell tower.



To the E (L) of the tower there is a long walk flanked by Eagle carvings, which leads to the curved 55m long Wall of Glory, with imagined scenes of the battle carved on the wall.

### THE MUSEUM

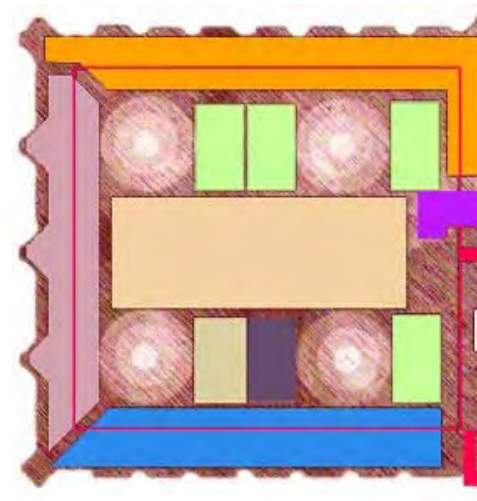
The Ethnographic Museum (tel. 091-425026) is located behind the Wall of Glory, at the end of a long walk. It was founded in 1978 as the first comprehensive ethnographic museum in Armenia, and remains its largest. The collection includes artifacts collected beginning in 1906 by the Tflis (Tbilisi) Ethnographic Society, augmented with items from the vast collection at the State History Museum in Yerevan.

The square building is built around an enclosed central hall with three domes designed in the traditional peasant "hazarashen" style, and serves as a gallery for temporary exhibitions. The gallery halls are in turn built around inner courtyards that hold small gardens and outdoor exhibitions. The building is in turn surrounded by a wide walkway with carved stones and khachkars, including a mountain spring vishap ("dragon stone", ca. 4000 BCE).



The museum is on two floors, divided into seven galleries.

### [PLAN]



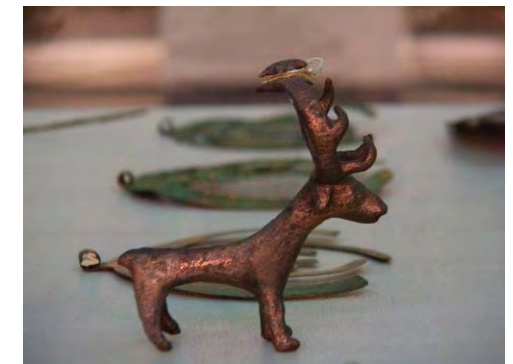
### 1-st FLOOR

Entrance & Course of Exhibition	
Central Hall - Temporary Exhibition	
Ancient Armenia	
Farming	
Handicrafts	
Research Departments	
Library	
Inner Courtyard	
Museum Shop	

**Ancient Armenia** contains one of the richest collections of antique artifacts in the country, with over 7000 items on display. The displays are chronologically organized from the Middle Stone Age to the late Medieval periods. Of note are artifacts uncovered during excavations at Argishtihinili, Old Armavir & Zeiva (Armavir marz), Dvin, L'chashen & Zolakar (Gegharkunik marz), Lori Berd (Lori marz), Noyemberian (Tavush marz), and Shirakavan (Shirak marz/Turkey border).



The first part of the gallery is a collection of model heads, an attempt by A. Chagarian to show comparative proto-Armenian head types from excavated skeletal remains at various sites in the country. The attempt looks vaguely reminiscent of the 19th c pseudo-science of phrenology, which attributed character traits and mental abilities to the shape of the head. (and which the Nazis distorted to illustrate the superiority of the Aryan race).



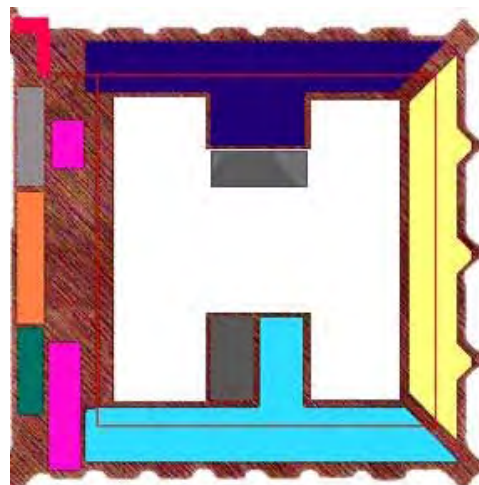
Included are Bronze Age arts and crafts, an Urartian cuneiform stone found at Argishtihinili, and elaborate khachkars from the medieval period.



**Farming** constituted the greatest part of Armenian life for the longest period, and not surprisingly, it makes up the longest gallery in the museum, with displays focusing on the life style and the implements that made it work. Displays break agrarian life into different climatic and geographic zones, as well as auxiliary rural occupations and the variety of traditional food.



**Handcrafts** include an extensive collection of Armenian folk art that was widely used in the Armenian household and community. Crafts artisans constituted the major population of the urban centers in both Eastern and Western Armenians (80 per cent of urban dwellers in Russian Caucasus were Armenians craftsmen). Items include handmade tools, utensils, weapons and other objects of the pre-industrial Armenian world.



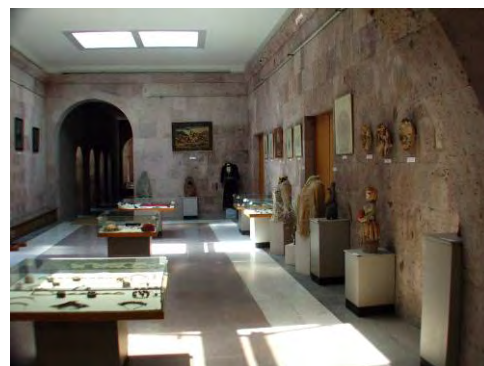
## 2-nd FLOOR

Urban Life	Dark Blue
Family and Community	Yellow
Modern Decorative Arts	Cyan
Special Exhibition Areas	Pink
Conference Hall	Dark Green
Video Hall	Orange
Administration	Grey

The second floor **Urban Life** galleries have displays on the 19th c life of the relatively few Urban dwellers who lived in the few urban centers of the time: Yerevan, Alexandropol (Gyumri), Echmiadzin, Nor Baiyazet (Gavar), and Goris. Built on a new European model of living, these inhabitants (usually no more than 20,000 in each city) led gracious, cultured lives in an otherwise agrarian, tough world, and the artifacts on display reflect that; furniture, costume, objects of art, and the incorporation of traditional folk art on "modern" items.



The **Family and Community** gallery exhibits focus on folk and the traditional family and community as it was before the onset of industrialization and the modern era. On display are artifacts and examples of folk Christian and pre-Christian customs and design, the village, which formed the essential fabric of Armenians' life in the pre-industrial world, and the rites that reflected this pre-modern world; agriculture, fortune telling, traditional dwellings and interior design, community rites.



The **Costume** collection includes examples of traditional costume design from Armenia's diverse regions. Displays show both urban and rural clothing samples, embroidery and weaving, and particular designs organized along the historic provinces of the country in the late 19th c.



**Modern Decorative Art** includes displays of arts and crafts from the 1980s; ceramic ware, carvings, glass and wood work that incorporate traditional design motifs in their modern form.

**Overnight** in Armavir (Hoktemberian); **Camping** in the area (little shade); **Food** at museum café, grills on the road to Armavir, Armavir; **Springs** in the area.

➡ From Sardarapat take the (M5) to the NE for about 3 km and past Arax v. to a L (NW) turn that in about 1.4 km leads to central (**Vostanik**, DD 40.123812 x 43.96105, 890m) 📍 🏠 🚰

**SIDE TRIP: Vostanik** – (till 1946 Aghlanli Nerkin or Yasakhli, then Lenughi, pop. 500) has a **S. N'shan church** built in the 1870s.

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

➡ From Vostanik, backtrack to the (M5), turn L (NE) and continue for about 3.8 km to central (**Hoktember**, DD 40.13009 x 44.00492, 924m) 📍 🏠 🚰

**SIDE TRIP: Hoktember** – (till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 2600) is the actual village mentioned in the Battle of Sardarapat, captured along with the rail station to the N by Turks on May 21, 1918. The battle began to the N and W as Armenian militia began a counter attack that pushed the Turks back to the Arax River on May 27.

The ruins of the important **Sardari Castle** are 2.2 km NW of Hoktember, on the R (NE) side of the Dzerzhinsky road (the cemetery). Using British aid, the castle was built in 1810 for Sardar Hussein Khan Qajar (Sardari Iravani), the last Qajar governor of the Erivan Khanate (r. 1807-1828). The Persians had divided the Caucasus into khanates, Erivan being one of several.



Grigor Gagarin, "Trick Riding of Kurds and Tatars in front of the Fortress Sardarapat in Armenia", 1840s (The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg)

The Qajars (also known as Ghajars or Kadjars) were the last Persian rulers of Armenia, inheriting the country from the Safavids in 1781. The Qajars ruled in Iran until 1925.

Sardari castle was built using blocks of stone from Old Armavir and some stones in the ruins still bear the cuneiform from the Urartu era. The castle became the administrative center for Sardarapat district and the summer residence for the Erivan Khan.

Encouraged by the British, who were fearful of Russian incursions into the Near East (and their lucrative trade routes to India), the Qajar Fath Ali Shah declared war against the Tsar in 1803. The war marked the first eclipse of Qajar power in Iran and its dominions.

The Qajar army suffered humiliating defeats and was forced to surrender in 1813, signing the Treaty of Gulistan which recognized Russian annexation of Georgia and much of the Caucasus. It did not include Erivan Khanate and Nakhichevan, which was ceded to Russia after the Russo-Persian War of 1827-1828.

Sardari Castle was lost to the Russians at the end of the war, despite its strong fortifications and the efforts of Hussein's brother, Hassan Khan Sardari Iravani, to defend the fortress. It was taken in 1828 by forces under the Russian General Paskevich.


## ➡ END OF TRIP 2



The history of the British and Armenia is complicated, their acting sometimes as friends but more often as foes, but goes a long way towards explaining the striking animosity of British Colonial historians against the Armenian state. Engaged in the battle for colonies against the other members of the Great Powers (France, Germany and Russia) England's concern for Persia and Ottoman Turkey had little to do with genuine concern for the old boys as much as it had to do with their raw grab for power. As Russian power swelled in the late 18th century, England became alarmed at the threat against its trading routes through the Middle East and Egypt.

The site consists of ruins and traces of the once massive walls that rung the castle—the castle was dismantled in Soviet times.

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

➡ From Hoktember take the S road for about 2.8 km to central (**Bambakashat**, DD 40.10536 x 44.01600, 869m) 

SIDE TRIP: **Bambakashat** – *Բամբակաշատ* (before Mullah-Bayazid, pop. 1000) the name means "Lots of cotton", an apt name for a village that excelled in cotton production. It now lives off of vegetable and animal husbandry, though most of its citizens have found their way to Yerevan or Russia to earn a living wage.

The village has a 1914 renovation of the 14th c S. Astvatsatsin, which appears to have been built over an early Christian structure. The church was renovated in 1991, which has done little to preserve its original character.

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

### TRIP 3: SOUTH ARMAVIR ▲

(Aknashen) – (Gai) – (J'rarat) – (Markara) – (Arazap) – (Argavand) – (Tandzut) – (Aigeshat) – (Janfida) – (Nalbandian) – (Getashen) – (Arax)

Trip 3 does not cover mainstream sites, and is not for the visitor on a whirlwind “greatest hits” tour; not even close. This collection of villages is part of a backwater of the marz, even of the country, many maintaining old world ways in the face of 21st century mechanization and a distressing loss of their population to greener fields in Russia and the west.



Despite (or *in spite of*) all this, the trip's three-four hour tour can be a pleasant escape from the jostling crowds at Echmiadzin, exploring a land of old world farming, intense heat and laid back ways. The trip explores the area's extensive marshland and river delta (good birding sites), the Vordan Karmir preserves (the last native habitat for a small ground beetle (Cochineal) which red excretion formed the basis of an ink prized by the courts of Arabia, Egypt and medieval European) and skirts along the same byways as sites in Trips 2 and 4, allowing a pleasant diversion from either one.

The trip includes Markara, on the Turkish border (the closest you can get in Armenia without breaking border rules), which may well become a boom town and bring prosperity to the region, when the border is finally opened (no one is placing bets on that momentous event yet). It also includes villages with extremely friendly locals who follow up their surprise you bothered to visit with cups of coffee (and home-made brew), fresh

fruit and vegetables from their garden and a peppering of questions about your neck of the world.

Note: While Markara is on the trip, the border is closed, and you are advised not to get too close to the border crossing, which is manned by Russian guards who are not at all as understanding as their Armenian compatriots.



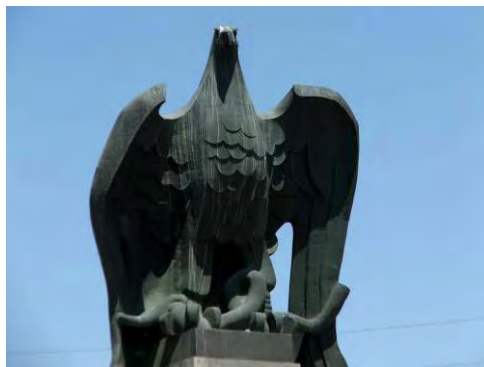
**Stay:** Hotels, restaurant-hotels and motels on the (M5) from Yerevan to Echmiadzin, guest houses/apts. in Echmiadzin, village homes (rustic); camping near villages (no tree cover).

**Eat:** Restaurants & cafes in Echmiadzin; mterks and kiosks in Echmiadzin and villages.

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, and Echmiadzin.

➔ From Echmiadzin, take the (M3) S about 6.6 km to the Vacheh turn off; continue S for another 600 m to a L (SE) turnoff into (Aknashen, DD 40.09547 x 44.28493, elev. 839m) 🏠 🍽️ 🏕️

SIDE TRIP: **Aknashen** - Ակնաշեն (till 1978 Verin Khatunarkh, pop. 450) was named for the wife of the Persian Safavid governor, Sefi Khan, who ruled over the Erivan Khanate in the late Persian period (16th-19th cc). The village—like most on this tour—was part of a vast marshland that bred the Vordan Karmir (cochineal), which fed a thousand years of prosperity for those who controlled the trade. Details follow in the J'rarat entry.



The village center has a **S. Bardughimeos (Bartholomew) church**, next to the WWII memorial column. The church is one of just a

handful named after the apostle Bartholomew, one of two apostles believed to have preached in Armenia in the 1st century (the other is Tadeos, also known as Tadevos or Thaddeus). Bartholomew is connected to several Near East and Indian traditions, including a Syrian belief that his name was originally Jesus (which was a common name for the time, like John is for England), and he changed it when he became an apostle.

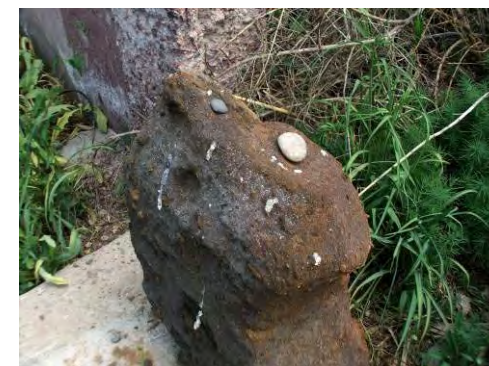


Another is that that after the Ascension, Bartholomew went on a missionary tour to India, where he left behind a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. Other traditions say he preached in Ethiopia, Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Laconia. His Parthian mission may have been the origination of his ministry in Armenia, for his work here is traced to the beginning of Christianity in the country. There is also a local tradition that he was martyred at the site of the Maiden Tower in Baku, by being flayed alive and then crucified head down. His body was believed to have washed to Sicily where it was taken by the Roman church and preserved as a relic. Another relic of the saint is kept at the Treasury Museum in Echmiadzin.

The **church** is being entirely reconstructed on top of the medieval church that was destroyed by Timurid raids and earthquake. The original was a Pagan temple that may have been converted into a Christian church even before the conversion in the first decade of the 4th century. Nearby there are some trace stones of the old church/temple, including column bases and a makeshift shrine with religious images and candles.



About 1 km southeast of the village center is the small, reconstructed **S. Sarkis Tuxh Manuk**, just in front of a **Bronze Age Tell** (the low hill behind the building) (DD 40.09057 x 44.29546, elev. 839m). The shrine is built over an ancient site, and the area in front has a number of Bronze Age Vishap and worship stones, including one low stone with an telescopic eye hole carved throughout its top. The stones mark the probable location of a Bronze Age cromlech (stone circle) at the site, connected to the Tell that is behind the shrine.



**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From Aknashen, SE about 1 km to central (Gai, DD 40.08321 x 44.30455, elev. 834m) 🏠 🍽️ 🏕️

SIDE TRIP: **Gai** - Դայ (pronounced “Guy”, till 1978 Khatunarkh, pop. 1000) was resettled in

the on top of medieval ruins during the reign of Sefi Kuli-khan II (ca. 1670 - 1675), and named Khatunarkh for his sister-cum-concubine.



Sefi was ruler of the Erivan Khanate during the waning years of the Safavid Persian dynasty, which had engaged in a life-or-death struggle with Ottoman Turkey over control of the Caucasus. One of the tactics used by Safavids during this 150 year struggle was a slash-and-burn campaign during retreat, forcing Armenians locals to emigrate to Iran and wasting the lands left behind. Thus the destruction of the medieval village. The Soviets vastly rebuilt the village so that nothing remains of either its medieval or Persian times, save some stones.



The village was renamed Gai in honor of Gai Nahapet (Haik Bzhishkian, 1887-1937), a general of the Russian Imperial Army who joined the Bolsheviks and routed the White Czechs in 1918. Arrested in 1935, he was executed on orders of Stalin during the Great

Purge. For more details, see Yerevan Chapter, Nork Monuments, and Gai Nahapet Statue. Sites include the working **S. N'shan church**, rebuilt between 1888-1892 and newly renovated in the 1990s; and the remains of the important 6000-2000 BCE **settlement of Khatunarkh** to the E.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From Gai, head SW for about 3.8 km and past Metsamor village to central (**J'rarat**, DD 40.06971 x 44.26636, elev. 834m) ԳՅՈՒՂ ԳԱՅԻ

**SIDE TRIP: J'rarat - Ջրաշատ** (formerly Gharkhun, pop. 1200) is a tired looking village, its rail station and once bustling warehouse empty and bereft of any human activity. The village seems deserted; even the 50% cut in population seems conservative.

The **Vordan Karmir Reservation** covers a wide swath of marshland beginning at J'rarat and hop-scotching to Arazap, Argavand and Nor Alashkert (Sovetakan). The reserve is the last native habitat for the Vordan Karmir, an endemic cochineal (*Porphyrophora hamelii*) that thrives in the area's salt marshes and unique vegetation (*Aeluropus littoralis* (Gouan) Parl. and *Phragmites australis* (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud.).

The name also means both "red dye" and the color is one of the strongest and most resilient of natural dyes, which was the reason for its popularity in ancient times.



While written descriptions of the dye and how to make it date to the 5th century, the dye is known to have been used in the late Bronze Age and especially the Urartian period, when it was exported to Egypt and the Mediterranean.

Its native habitat once stretched into Ararat marz and beyond; medieval chroniclers wrote that cochineal "worm" was so common on both

banks of the Arax River that the soil was 'red like a carpet'; so seeped in the beetle's red secretions that the animals grazing there seemed dipped in paint.



The natural dye (also known as carmine red) extracted from Ararat cochineal and known in the Orient as Armenian "krmizi" ("wine-colored") was superior in hue and stability to that later produced from Mexican and Polish cochineal. It was prized by royal courts of medieval Europe and the Caliphate in Baghdad. Its color was used in royal and spiritual treatises, in miniatures and manuscripts, and in frescoes on the walls of churches and palaces in Armenia, Persia, Byzantium and Europe.



Vordan Karmir used on fresco at Noravank, Vayots Dzor marz.

The color was also prized by some of Europe's most famous artists, including Rembrandt.

It was not easy to extract the color. The color comes from the female beetle, which can be picked only from the end of September through October, the female emerging only a few hours in the morning. The beetles must be hand picked, then boiled to release the color, strained, and mixed with special oils to create the dye. It can be dried to make cloth dye. The exact process for creating carmine ink, paint and dye is lost; though it was superior, competition of more plentiful (and cheaper) cochineal carmine from Poland and Mexico suppressed demand, and synthetic dyes ended all natural production.

The natural habitat for the Armenian cochineal was decimated in Soviet times. Once covering the entire Ararat valley, the salt marshes required to nourish the beetle were reduced to 3000 hectares in the mid 20th century, when intensive reclamation for farming (which failed due to the salt left it the soil) destroyed the insects' habitat in Ararat Marz, causing its extinction there. Ironically, despite failing with land "reclaimed" from the vordan's habitat, farmers continue to drain salt marshes thinking they can somehow till the saline soil. Instead, they simply destroy more natural habitat, leaving wasteland in their wake. The preserve is not protected by law, and what remains are a few hundred hectares of land and a small research office trying to recover the process for making the carmine color.

This is a tragedy, since natural dyes have made a comeback, and cochineal carmine is highly prized by make-up, fashion and natural product companies, a growing multi-billion dollar business, and several companies are particularly interested in Armenian carmine, which is longer lasting. It has yet to make a difference in the fate of this important part of Armenian culture and history.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

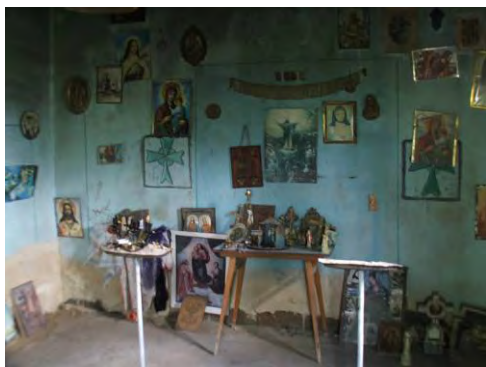
➔ From J'rarat, take the N road for about 2.8 km to the (M3) intersection in Lusagiugh; turn L (SW) and continue for about 10.5 km and past Yeraskhahun and Vardanashen to the Turkish border in (**Markara**, DD 40.03061 x 44.17886, elev. 840m) ԳՅՈՒՂ ԳԱՅԻ

**SIDE TRIP: Markara** - Մարգարա (in 1830 Margara-Gök, pop. 700) had a few heady years as the closest Turkish border crossing to Yerevan, and high hopes for a booming future as transit and customs point between Turkey and a newly independent Armenia in 1991. That quickly soured when Turkey closed the border in protest against Armenian gains in its undeclared war with Azerbaijan over the Armenian-inhabited enclave of Nagorno Karabakh. The village sleeps, dreaming of a new bright future when the border reopens. "When pigs fly," retort the more rabid Turkish nationalists, but most believe it will, as a condition of Turkey entering the EU.

Once it does open, this border point will become the natural crossing point to explore Mt. Ararat, Ani and just 16 km S, the city of Igdir, an important Urartian and Armenian city with Bronze Age cromlechs and the impressive remains of a stone age star map on the face of a large boulder.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From Markara center backtrack to Vardanashen and take the L (W) road for about 3.5 km to central (**Arazap**, DD 40.03928 x 44.15664, elev. 849m) 🏠 🗺 🌿



**SIDE TRIP: Arazap** - Արազափ (till 1947 Evjilar, pop. 750) is a border village with splendid views of Mt. Ararat and Western Armenia, from whence its citizens come (they are descendents of Sumarlu émigrés). The name means 'on the

banks of the Araks', so true for this village that is but 200 meters from the riverbank.

The village has the small **S. Astvatsatsin** Tukh Manuk, in the old center, and its surrounding marshlands are a part of the **Vordan Karmir Preserve** (see p. 86).

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From central Arazap take the slightly NW village road for about 5 km into (**Argavand**, DD 40.05649 x 44.09931, elev. 855m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Argavand** - Արգավանդ (till 1947 Uzunoba, pop. 1200) is also part of the **Vordan Karmir Preserve** (see p. 86), in the areas to the south and west.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From Arazap take the N/NW road for about 2.4 km to central (**Tandzut**, DD 40.07072 x 44.07910, elev. 860m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Tandzut** - Տանձուտ (formerly Armutlu, pop. 900) is just NW of Argavand and by rights it should be included in the Vordan Karmir Preserve: the village sits just beyond a wide arc of marshlands and river deltas that form the preserve. For information about the **Vordan Karmir Preserve** see p. 86.



The village has one of the most impressive **WWII monuments**, if the size of the statue matters; the stout goddess of victory that looms over the main square is a welded mass of steel and weighs in at several tons.

Taking the small street to the right of the statue as you face it, you soon meet the back of the renovated S. Sahak, originally built in 1912 on the site of a Tukh Manuk. The renovation is one of the most successful church preservations in the country, maintaining the integrity of its 19th-early 20th century structure while remodeling the building.



This is mostly due to the donor, a French-Armenian who—according to locals ordered to fix the church in a vision—gave the funds and directed the renovation in 2004.

Before then the church was in ruins; In Soviet times it was used for wheat storage, which caused mildew and salt release in the walls and roof, gradually eating away the structure.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From central Arazap take the NW road for about 1.5 km to central (**Aigeshat**, DD 40.07576 x 44.05845, elev. 883m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Aigeshat** - Այգեշատ (till 1950 Ghuzigidan, pop. 800) has an impressive culture palace frontispiece, and next door, the newly renovated **S. Gevorg basilica**. The church is just west of the central road.

There are several old khachkars in the yard and walls, which point to a much older origin, but the main church was built in 1890, using rubble stone that was plastered over and painted with frescoes. The new work adds pink tufa stones to the new portico and frames the side walls with arches.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From the central intersection in Aigeshat take the SW road out of town for about 4.8 km to central (**Janfida**, DD 40.04527 x 44.02955, elev. 865m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Janfida** - Ջանֆիդա (pop. 1200) is barely a spec on the horizon save its World War II monument designed by Ara Sargsian, and its location on the Turkish border.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

- ➔ From Janfida back track to Aigeshat, then take the NW road for about 1 km to central (**Haikavan**, DD 40.07918 x 43.03445, elev. 937m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

**SIDE TRIP: Haikavan/ Old Armavir** - Հայկավան / Փին Արմավիր (till 1935 Ghrdghuli/Kuru-Kili, pop. 1350) has the nearby Old Armavir Excavation. For a description see Trip 2, page 76.

- ➔ From Haikavan take the N road for about 6 km to **ARMAVIR** (DD 40.14695 x 44.03278, elev. 866m) 🏠 🗺 🌿

➔ **END OF TRIP 3**



**TRIP 4: WEST ARMAVIR ▲**

(Miasnikian) – (Baghramian) – (Dalarik) – **KARAKERT** – (Argina) – (Shenik) – **BAGARAN** – **YERVANDASHAT** – (Vanand)

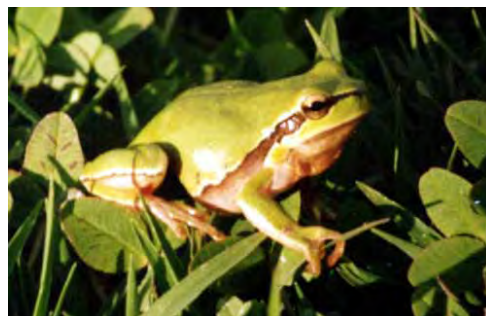


Trip 4 explores the Western dessert, in reality a semi-desert land of scrub and brush, which blooms an emerald green in the spring with large swaths of yellow, red, pink, blue and fuchsia from March through May. During the rest of the year the ground turns to the color of old leather, with striations of red, black and green on the slopes of dormant volcanoes and the ragged cliffs of the Arax and Selav-Mastara Rivers.

Summer can be blistering hot and the area tough country to explore, its salt marshes and once verdant grasslands reduced to the dessert space that surrounds you. The deforestation of primeval forests in the area meant the desertification of the western region as early as the Iron Age, requiring irrigation canals to keep the fertile soil useful. That ended in the late medieval period, when Armenians were forced off the lands they had cultivated for millennia and the lands went arid. Limited irrigation has reclaimed some of the western desert, but most is still untilled, the marks of its ancient tillage petrified by hundreds of years of neglect.

Despite the lunar landscape, the area has fertile soil, and it is slowly becoming known as Apricot Country, due to the distribution of over 30,000 high-quality apricot trees to villages in the region by the Armenian tree Project. The combination of arid climate, hot days and cool nights is ideal for

producing incredibly juicy, naturally sweet fruit. If the ongoing population-loss reverses, the area could become a prosperous fruit-growing area.



Herpetologists (amphibian fans) will find the region a good place to find for rare and endangered species of vipers, lizards and other reptiles. The area around Karakert has an important wetland habitat for rare species of batracho-fauna (water frogs) and reptiles.

The region has its charms (most in the spring), and several important sites worth investigating; the Bronze Age fortress at Karakert and the Iron Age empire capitals of Yervandashat and Bagaran.

**Note:** Bagaran and Yervandashat are still technically off-limits to foreigners, but they definitely deserve a stop, with the ancient Armenian political and religious capitals on both sides of the river. It is becoming more possible to visit the villages, but you still may be stopped and asked for “dokumenti” by Russian guards. If you can make the arrangements (ask at a travel agency like one of the [Adventure Tour Operators](#), p. 15), do try; the sites are enigmatic reminders of a bygone day and locals are living history books.




**Stay:** Hotel, restaurant-hotel at Armavir; guest houses/apts. in Armavir; village homes (rustic); camping near villages and Mts. Spitakblur and Sevblur (no tree cover).

**Eat:** Restaurant & cafes at Armavir; mterks and kiosks in Armavir and villages.

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, Armavir.

➔ From the Armavir rail station, take the western highway (H17) out of Armavir for about 10.8 km

to the rail station in (Miasnikian, DD 40.18372 x 43.91854, elev. 902m) 

**SIDE TRIP: Miasnikian** - Մյասնիկյան (also spelled Myasnikian or Miasnikyan or Myasnikyan, pop. 1800) was named for Soviet Armenia's first Prime Minister and Secretary of the Communist Party. Alexander Miasnikian (1886-1925) joined the Bolsheviks in 1904, was elected to the Central Executive Committee of Belarus in 1919, and then became commissar of Armenia in 1921.

His short tenure (1921-1925) is considered by some the last free period for the socialist country, as Miasnikian—never an enemy to the communists—strove also to create a soviet state derived from Armenia's distinct culture. Worse, as far as Moscow was concerned, Miasnikian pushed for revolutionary activity in Western Armenia, with an eye to reclaiming the historic homeland. This flew in the face of Stalin, who had an instinctive dislike for Armenians and wanted to curry Turkey's favor, plainly telling them he was ready to trade Armenian lands for peace.




Miasnikian was officially reported killed in an air-crash, but rumors suggest he was poisoned after a protracted disagreement over Western Armenia.

Miasnikian was admired by the artists, statesmen, writers and thinkers of the day, for his bravery and insistence on an Armenian national vision of socialism. His admirers included Martiros Saryan, with whom he had shared the same room and who in 1909 chose Miasnikian as a model for the significant painting, “The Agriculturist”, which has not survived.

The village has anew 1997 **Amnaprkich (All Savior) church**, with little of architectural interest but plenty of local design in the religious paraphernalia and candles that adorn the new walls.


**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From Miasnikian, continue NW on the (H17) continuing forward at the Dalarik intersection and in about 4 km turning R (N) to (Baghramian, DD 40.19355 x 43.85468, elev. 1032m) 

**SIDE TRIP: Baghramian** - Բաղրամյան (pop. 900) is barely hanging on, despite intensive aid efforts by international aid. There is no reason for the village to exist; it was purpose built in 1983 with an eye to turning it into a industrial town and administrative center for old Baghramian Raiyon. The stone quarries and ore mines in the area were the instigators of this ill-fated attempt to force urban activity in place that hadn't any. The village is less than a quarter of its official population of 3500, with those who could having already left for greener pastures in Yerevan or Russia, and those who can't lingering on in a quiet, desperate way.

There is an eerie atmosphere in the hamlet, with 5 and 6 story apartments inhabited by a handful of families, and the hubris of Soviet technology rusting everywhere.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From Baghramian backtrack to the (H17) at Miasnikian, turn L (NW) and continue for about 5 km to a L (W) and another 1 km to the train station in (Dalarik, DD 40.23034 x 43.87596, elev. 1006m) 

**SIDE TRIP: Dalarik** - Դալարիկ (till 1965 Mastara, pop. 1200) was founded in 1902 as a rail stop on the Alexandropol (Giumri)-Yerevan railroad. The area has stone quarries and some mining, but mostly lives on remittances sent from abroad. Like Karakert, Miasnikian and nearby Lernagog, Dalarik receives support from the Children of Armenia Fund (COAF) (see [Resources Online](#), p. 92) in an attempt to reverse rural trends of population loss and poverty. The village is reviving a renovated school and other infrastructure upgrades.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➔ From Dalarik continue NW on the (H17) for about 6 km to the train station at **KARAKERT** (DD 40.24885 x 43.82220, elev. 1090m) 🏠 🌳

✳️ **KARAKERT – ԶԱՐԱԿԵՐՏ (Զարակերտ)** (pop. 1200) 🏠 is a “Model Village” sponsored by an Armenian charity organization with funds from a wealthy Diaspora Armenian and international and US aid. The village has newly renovated schools, culture center and new trees in the park, with perhaps the most important aid coming from the school projects and the Armenian Tree Project, which started a tree nursery at the village that supplies high quality fruit and shade trees to villages in the area. If it continues, the program will reverse the desertification.



The village has on its outskirts a tall hill above the row of barns, the site of the important **Aratashen settlement**, officially dated to 8000-4000 BCE, with a suggestion the site may actually date to 9000 BCE. The site is well chronicled in the Yerevan State History Museum, with displayed artifacts from the various periods of excavation, and a timeline of ancient sites in Armenia featuring Aratashen. Climbing the hill you pass numerous cyclopic rocks that once made up the fortress walls, and approaching from the E, you can find an alley of sorts that leads to the crest, which is itself hemmed in by trace walls. The ground is littered with pottery shards and locals often find more valuable artifacts after strong rains.

**Nature Preserve** The village is also the site of a small Batrachofauna (frogs) and herpetofauna (reptiles) preserve for the dwindling endemic species that thrive in pre-mountain semi desert habitats. These include the Armenian viper (*V. raddei*), *Testudo graeca*, *Phrynocephalus helioscopus* and many other arid species.

**Apricot Country** Karakert is the new capital of Armenia’s “Apricot Country”, a region that encompasses the arid semi desert regions of Armavir and southwestern Aragatsotn. The name is still a bit premature—apricots are harvested by the ton in other marz, but with 50,000 apricot trees distributed or planned for the villages around Karakert, it will soon become a reality.

As in the American southwest, apricots thrive in high altitude arid climates with hot days and cool nights, a description of western Armavir if ever there was one. The fruit is made naturally sweet in this otherwise daunting landscape, providing hope for a dwindling population.



**Community Center** The center was recently renovated with aid from the US government, and provides a welcome reversal of fortunes for the village.

**Internet** Karakert School #2 has an Internet Connectivity program, and seems eager to share their connection in exchange of you sharing some expertise to their students.

**Outside the village** (Note these sites are in the Border zone and are off-limits to most people. You need a permit from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is best gotten by someone who has business

in the area and connection at the ministry. Do not expect to get one on your own.)

From the SW corner of Karakert, take the W/SW road for about 12 km to a R (N) road that leads in another 5.5 km and into the Border Zone (permission needed from Ministry of Foreign Affairs—or a well connected guide), where a 200 m hike W to the Akhurian River gorge takes you to the hexagonal **Aragats Church** with tile roof, just under the gorge crest. Opposite the river to the NW are the ruins of the Armenian village of Karabagh, with a medieval church and cemetery.

Backtrack using the further W path and in about 1 km where the path bends to the SE, stop and walk W for about 500 m to the ruins of a **hamlet and a tiny church** looking over the River gorge to the Turkish Village of Kilittasi (see Bagaran, below). The church walls facing Turkey have a number of bullet holes, not all of them from the 1918 war.

➔ From the SW corner of Karakert take the S road (M9) for about 6.5 km to (**Shenik**, DD 40.21141 x 43.77134, elev. 1127m) 🏠 🌳

**SIDE TRIP: Shenik – Շենիկ** (pop. 600) was founded in 1971 as a commune farming community specializing in wheat production. The name comes from a village in Sassun, where most of the villagers descend.

As happened to all Armenian communes, when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the farms—there were no seeds, fertilizer or water available to farmers, and they lost their way of living. The country faced the possibility of real starvation of the first time in 80 years.

It was not until US assistance came in the late 90s that the newly privatized farms were finally able to become self-sufficient and the population loss was staunch. A recent US grant has renovated the school and sports complex, and Shenik is a part of the COAF “Model Community” program, along with Karakert, Miasnikian and Dalarik.

The village has a **5th century basilica** built over the remains of a pre-Christian worship site.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

**NOTE:** The next two sites are inside the Turkish border area and technically still require permission to enter. The Russian guards are at times not very accommodating to tourists. Permission can be had at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (almost impossible for walk in tourists) or through well connected guides. Check [Adventure Tour Operators](#) (p. 15) for escort.

➔ From Shenik continue SW on the (M9) for about 12 km to **BAGARAN** (DD 40.14706 x 43.72527, elev. 1200m) 🏠 🌳

✳️ **BAGARAN - ԲԱԳԱՐԱՆ (Բաղարան)** 🏠 (till 1935 Haji Bairam, then Bakhchalar, after 1968 Bagaran, pop. 300) is set just above the confluence of the Akhurian and Arax Rivers, and is populated by Armenian villagers, most of which emigrated from historic Bagaran across the Turkish border. Recent gifts from foreign aid organizations have reclaimed hundreds of hectares of land that had become desert in Soviet times and the village—though still tiny, is by no means destitute.

And the villagers maintain a strong tie to the historic city across the river, even children able to recount the history of Bagaran and historic Ani, which is 35 km N on the Turkish side of the Akhurian River.



19th c print showing Bagaran with temple in background

Literally meaning “God’s Place”, Bagaran was founded at the end of the 3rd century BCE by the Armenian King Orontes III (also Yervand or Yervand I, r. 220-201) to house idols of the gods, the remains of royal ancestors, and the treasury, brought from the old capital of Armavir which was left dry after the Arax River shifted 5 km south.

Bagaran was built on the right bank of the Akhurian River, immediately after he established his new capital in Yervandashat at the confluence of the Akhurian and Arax Rivers.

Yervand established his brother Yeruaz (Yervanz or Yervand) there as high priest of the Armenian pantheon, and established a sacred forest at the site, populated by animals and called *Ts'nendots Antar* ("new born forest"). During his reign Bagaran became the religious center for the Armenian kingdom.



Shapuh Sassanid silver coin, ca. 241, showing Zoroastrian fire column

The founder of the Artashesian dynasty, Artashes I (Artaxias I, 190 BC - 160 BCE) occupied Bagaran and Yervandashat when he took power, killing Yervand and his brother and giving 500 of Yeruaz' servants to his favorite general Smbat, who settled them in a new city in Masis canyon, which they also named Bagaran.



Silver Arab coin, ca. 692

Artashes had the idols moved to his new capital downriver at Artashat (Artaxata), the 'Joy of Artashes' and reputedly designed by the Carthaginian general Hannibal. In spite of the removal of its idols, Bagaran remained an

important religious center until the conversion of the state.

One of the most important rituals attributed to Bagaran took place in the sacred woods, in a grove of Plane Trees. Priests and the elect were said to have been able to predict the future by listening to the rustling of the leaves; the 'voices of the gods'.

Later, when the Sassanids decimated the Parthian (Partev) House and claimed the Persian throne, one of the Parthian princes, Kamsar, escaped to Armenia with his family. T'rdat III the Great (287-330) granted to Kamsar the provinces of Shirak and Yeraskhadzor, and appointed him to senior status.

Yeraskhadzor was then renamed Arsharunik after Kamsar's son, Arshavir, and its possessions included old Bagaran, which became the Kamsarakan Seat of Power. And thus began the Kamsarakan House of princes.

Forming alliances with rivals nakharars the Mamikonians and Arshakunis, the Kamsarakans expanded their lands and power, soon rivaling the ruling Arshakuni House. Overplaying their hand, the Kamsarakans were almost wiped out during an insurrection against Arshak II in the mid 4th century. They were further decimated in the 772 revolt against Arab rule, and forced to sell their lands to Ashot IV (the Meat Eater) Bagratuni in 780. They then left for Asia Minor where they reestablished their dynasty in the Byzantine empire.

Ashot established his dynastic center at Bagaran, building a family palace and sepulchre inside he walled city. In 790 he was made Armenian Prince of Princes and lived at Bagaran until his death in 826.

Arab revolts occurred throughout the Arab Caliphate (652-858), the strongest led by the Mamikonians in 747-750 and 774 and the son of Ashot the IV, Bagrat Bagratuni in 850. The Arab Caliphate finally recognized Armenian autonomy by appointing Ashot as Armenian Sparapet (855-862) and then Prince of Princes over the Armenian Caliphate. Ashot used this position to create an army of 40,000 well trained soldiers and surround himself with Armenian Ishkhans led by Gevorg II Garnetsi Catholicos (877-897), becoming king in 885. The Caliphate immediately recognized him, sending a crown and royal raiment in the same year.

Not to be outdone, their rivals the Byzantines, under Basil I (867-886) sent a crown and declaration recognizing the Bagratuni kingdom. Thus began the Bagratuni kingdom (885-1045), which had its initial capital at Bagaran.

The ducal palace (replaced later by the royal palace) was built on an acropolis, the city formed on three hills encircled by a large wall. At the same time, the churches of S. Theodore and S. Shushanik were built (see below).

Ashot died in Karspar near Bagaran and was buried in the family sepulchre. On his death one son Smbat was crowned, and another, the Sparapet Shapuh, inherited Bagaran.

In 890 Smbat I (890/91-914) moved the capital of the kingdom to Yeraskavors (Shirakavan), establishing his seat at Ani.

Bagaran continued to flourish as a stop on the transit trade route from there to the West, and as a supplier of fruit to the royal table. It was destroyed during Seljuk attacks in 1048, rebuilt and then destroyed permanently by the Timurids in 1394.

One branch of Bagratuni family in the middle of 9th c established the Georgian Bagratuni kingdom which ended in 1801 when the country was annexed to Russia.

**The complex** Most of the site is across the border in Turkey, but some parts are in Armenia. The Turkish side includes traces of the walls, the main palace, residences and temples/churches. A cemetery and small church are on the Armenian side.



The Turkish side has the ruins of the important **S. Theodore**, which was built between 624 and 631 for Prince Bout (Butyl) and later for his wife Anna. The church is a domed cruciform with the dome resting over 4 pillars.

The church became a model for western churches—one being the Carolingian Oratory of the villa Episcopal Théodulpe (806) at Germigny des Pres, France, built for Charlemagne. The architect for Théodulpe, Odo, who also designed the cathedral of Aachen, was an Armenian.

In 1909 the dome was destroyed but the walls remain more or less stable. The church site is now used as a border guard office.

On the Armenian side of the border is the small **S. Shushanik Church** was probably built in the 9th-10th century, over the place of a Pagan shrine. The red tufa building was a 'Hexaconque', or six-sided central dome church with niche buttresses in each side.



**Overnight** at village home may be possible but up to the border guards (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **spring**s in village.

➡ From Bagaran continue SE on the Yervandashat road for about 4 km to central **YERVANDASHAT** (DD 40.12707 x 43.73250, elev. 1196m) 🗺️

📍 **YERVANDASHAT - ԵՐՎԱՆԴԱՇԱՏ** (Երվանդաշատ) ⚡ (formerly Kheyri-Begli, also spelled Ervandashat, pop. 500) is S of the site of the historic capital of Armenia, which now lies in ruins across the border at the confluence of the Arax and Akhurian River.

The ancient capital (one of three in Armavir) was established ca. 302 BCE by King Orontes (Eruand or Yervand) II (317-300), who is said in a 5th century history to have been forced to move his Seat when the Arax River moved 5 kilometers S, leaving the original capital of Old Armavir high and dry. In reality the move had more to do with political expediency and Yervand's alleged paranoia and fear of court intrigues and the instability of his reign.

Embarking on the massive construction project, Yervand included in the fortress plans the creation of an inordinate number of secret rooms and cells embedded in the walls for his retinue, supporters and soldiers. When completed, he moved the state treasury and many of the residents of the old capital at Armavir. He then had built the religious center of Bagaran across the canyon, and a little north of the capital he built Yervandakert Dastakert, his country estate.

Early excavators noted both the strength of the massive walls (secured by copper locks at the gates) and the number of cells—far more than found in any fortress excavated to that time. He strengthened the entrance to the city and bored tunnels to the bottom of the hill in order to take water during times of siege.

The locks and secret chambers could not save an unstable reign, and Yervand lost his crown and city to Artashes I, a rival kinsman whose battle against Yervand was instigated by the Seleucid king Antiochus III, who was losing grip over the renegade country.

Winning the battle, Artashes took Yervandashat and had Yervand and his brother (and head priest of the temple) killed. He then declared Armenia independent of the Seleucids, establishing the Artashesian dynasty (189 BCE-1). Artashes moved the capital to his new capital at Artashat.

Until the 4th century Yervandashat was one of the biggest cities but the army of the Sassanid king Shapur II occupied Yervandashat, forced 20,000 Armenian families to flee and ruined the city. Afterwards Yervandashat became a small settlement, never recovering its former glory.

**About the Orontids** The Orontid dynasty is said to have originated in Armenia around 400 BCE first ruling from Old Armavir, and then Yervandashat.

The Orontids (Yervandunis) established their reign over Armenia around the time of the Scythian and Median invasion in the 6th century BCE, or at the end of the Urartian Empire at the hands of Scythians and Medes (ca. 610 BCE). Orontids ruled over the Kingdom of Sophene for a short while and in Commagene until the year 72.

Most get confused with the names, which have been bandied about by Azeris and Armenian nationalists to prove or disprove Armenia's origins. In fact the name "Orontes" is the Hellenized form of a masculine name of Iranian origin; Yervand in Armenian. The name is only used in Greek (Gr.:Ὠρόντης), which adoption by western historians has led to much of the confusion.

An Avestan connection is Auruuant (brave, hero) and Middle Persian Arvand. Some say it is tied to the Hittite name Arnuwanda. The Hittites are said in some histories to be one of the origin tribes for the Armenians.

**Nature** The river gorge is a native habitat for the endangered Persian toad headed lizard (Phrynocephalus persicus), which is already extinct in Echmiadzin region, and live only in pockets in the rest of the marz.

**The ruins** are on the ridge overlooking the Akhurian at its confluence with the Arax River, about halfway between modern Yervandashat and Bagaran (2 km N of Yervandashat). The site is also opposite old Bagaran, which became the religious center for the kingdom in the late 3rd century.

Yervandashat (literally "a lot of Yervand" or "the power of Yervand") was destroyed by the Persian King Shapur II (353-372) in the mid 360s. In the 360s AD, Yervandashat was destroyed and what have been preserved today are traces of houses, streets and city fortifications. Recent archeological digs have uncovered extensive waterworks and signs of the villas, the palace and gardens celebrated in Movses Khorenatsi's 5th century History of Armenia.




The Akhurian River gorge has traces of an **Orontid bridge** connecting Yervandashat to the fortress of **Yervandakert** on the opposite bank of river.

Nearby is a **4-5th c. ruined basilica**.

**Flora** the Akhurian canyon is home to several endemic species of flora, including newly

discovered varieties of Poppy. The best time to visit is late April-May.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➡ From Yervandashat backtrack to Bagaran and take the (H18) east for about 15 km to (**Vanand**, DD 40.10219 x 43.82227, elev. 1015m)   

**SIDE TRIP: Vanand - Վանանդ** (pop. 1200) was founded 1984 from a collective and is the improbable modern capital of a medieval nomadic terrain, the so-called Saadli mahal of the Safavid and Qajar Armenian domains. Once a major center of Armenian activity (the Arax River still runs plentiful throughout the year and the region was once teeming with orchards, fields and villages), the area was taken over in the late medieval period by nomadic Kurds, Shaddadids and Yezidis. Armenians began to reclaim the area in the 19th century, but it remained mainly empty until the 1970s when the Soviet authorities tried to repopulate and industrializes the area.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **camping** near village (flat lands, no trees); **springs** in village.

➡ Return to Armavir by continuing SE on the (H18) for 9 km to the (M5); turning L (NE) and continuing another 14 km to the town limits.

➡ **END OF TRIP 4**



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[www.zangezur.tripod.com/rugs/armrug.html](http://www.zangezur.tripod.com/rugs/armrug.html)

## Information, Guides

### Maps of Armenia (to buy)

[www.mapsworldwide.com/sec.asp?secid=29](http://www.mapsworldwide.com/sec.asp?secid=29)

### Maps of Armenia (to look)

[www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/doc404?OpenF&orm&cc=arm&rc=3](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/doc404?OpenF&orm&cc=arm&rc=3)

[ArmeniaGuide.com](http://ArmeniaGuide.com)

### Visa Information, Foreign Ministry

[www.armeniaforeignministry.com](http://www.armeniaforeignministry.com)

### E-Visa

[www.armeniaforeignministry.am/eVisa](http://www.armeniaforeignministry.am/eVisa)

[www.virtualarmenia.am](http://www.virtualarmenia.am)

[www.armgate.org](http://www.armgate.org)

## News, Books

[www.ArmeniaNow.com](http://www.ArmeniaNow.com)

[www.abrilbooks.com](http://www.abrilbooks.com)

[www.stvartanbookstore.com](http://www.stvartanbookstore.com)

[www.littlearmenia.com](http://www.littlearmenia.com)

[ArmenianHouseLiterature](http://ArmenianHouseLiterature)

[www.cac-biodiversity.org/arm/index.htm](http://www.cac-biodiversity.org/arm/index.htm)

## Blogs

[www.noteshairenik.blogspot.com](http://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](http://www.TACentral.com) and [www.TourArmenia.info](http://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 [TWRL](http://TWRL), 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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