Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan

Armenia (Chapter)

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Why Go?

Although Armenians carry a lot of psychological baggage from a traumatic 20th century, you'd hardly notice it from a quick tour around the country. The rapidly modernising capital, the boutique tourism industry and the warm welcome you'll receive everywhere seem to belie the country's reputation for tragedy. Rather than letting past woes weigh it down, Armenia (ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆ) has built its memorials, dusted itself off and moved on. For travellers, easily visited highlights include ancient monasteries, candlelit churches and high-walled forts – but lasting impressions lie more with the Armenians themselves. You'll easily find friends among these gracious, humble and easy-going people, even without a common language. The travel experience is wide-ranging – you can have a four-star holiday in Yerevan and Sevan or a much simpler experience in rural towns like Dilijan and Goris. Many travellers only spend a week or less as they shuttle around the region but those with more time get to experience the best spots in crowd-free bliss.

When to Go

Most of Armenia has a dry, high-altitude climate except for verdant rainy pockets in Lori, Tavush and Syunik.

Spring (March to May) is a riot of flowers but does get a lot of rain.

Autumn (late September to early November) has long, warm days and more stable weather.

Summer (June to August) in Yerevan can be 40°C for days at a time, while conditions in the north are mild.

Winter weather lasts until late April through much of the country, with temperatures falling to -10°C in some areas. See p295 for details.
Connections

The closed border with both Turkey to the west and Azerbaijan to the east means that connections to Armenia are somewhat limited. Land borders are open with both Georgia and Iran. As a result, many overlanders regard Armenia as something of a side trip from Georgia, heading south from Tbilisi for a week or two before returning to Georgia. Marshrutka (minibus) connections between Georgia and Armenia are fast and frequent, making it easy to pop between the two republics. Only a handful of travellers travel to/from Iran (given the visa restrictions of that country) but there are daily bus connections between Yerevan and Tehran. There are plenty of air connections between Yerevan and other regional cities, including Moscow, Dubai, Vienna, Prague, Paris, Riga and London.

ITINERARIES

Three Days

There’s lots to do and see around Yerevan: take in live music at a concert or restaurant, and shop for brandy, oghee (fruit vodka) and handicrafts. Take short day trips to Garni and Geghard, or Khor Virap, or a longer one to Lake Sevan and Dilijan.

One Week

Travel up to Lori to the awesome World Heritage–listed Haghpat and Sanahin churches, stay in Vanadzor or Dilijan, or concentrate on the best of the south – Tatev and Noravank in particular.

Two Weeks

Take some time around Yeghegnadzor and taste more of Yerevan’s cosmopolitanism; organise a village or town homestay, explore more of Dilijan; visit Gyumri; or head for Sisian and Goris in the south. Take some time for day hikes, spelunking in Vayots Dzor or hiking on Mt Aragats.

Visas

Armenian visas are available at all entry points – 21-day tourist visas cost AMD3000 and a visa valid for 120 days costs AMD15,000. Most Western nationals require a visa to enter Armenia.
1 Immerse yourself in the culture, cafes and museums of the capital Yerevan (p124)
2 Go exploring in the idyllic Yeghegis Valley (p177): old churches, quaint villages, a mysterious Jewish cemetery
3 Break in Dilijan (p157) for fine mountain scenery, hiking trails and its historic old town
4 Step back at Echmiadzin (p148), where St Gregory built Armenia’s first church
5 Marvel the World Heritage-listed monasteries Haghpat and Sanahin in the steep-sided Debed Canyon (p167)
6 Get mystified at Geghard Monastery (p145), an ancient, historic cave church
7 Soar to the castlelike Tatev Monastery (p184) on the new cable car then hike down
8 Relax by the clear waters of Lake Sevan (p152) when temperatures soar in summer
9 Stretch your legs on Mt Aragats (p151), a 4000m snow-covered mountain with distant views of Mt Ararat
While it’s the undeniable cultural, economic and political heart of the nation, Yerevan (ԵՐԵՎԱՆ) can at times feel like a city on permanent holiday. All summer long, Yerevanites saunter up and down the main boulevards, preening in high fashion and fast cars while occasionally popping into a parkside cafe to schmooze over a drink or two.

The city has some lovely 19th-century Russian edifices in its central core plus rings of parkland and handsome brick squares. Outer areas maintain an air of Soviet sprawl but these are limited by steep hills and gorges. Yerevan’s museums and monuments could keep you busy for a few days but the best thing about the city is the people. Expressive black eyebrows, proud noses and classical Greek and Persian profiles appear everywhere, in a street culture somewhere between that of Marseilles, village Armenia and old Beirut. The cultural life is intense for a city of its size, including dozens of theatres, concert halls, galleries and live music clubs.

At the geographic heart of the country, the city also makes a perfect base to explore other areas. You could even make day trips as far afield as Lake Sevan, Mt Aragats and Vayots Dzor.

History

Yerevan’s history dates back to 782 BC, when the Erebuni fortress was built by King Argishti I of Urartu at the place where the Hrazdan River widened onto the fertile Ararat Plains. It was a regional capital of Muslim khanates and Persian governors until the Russian annexation in 1828.

The Soviet rebuilding of the tsarist city removed most of its mosques and some of its churches, and hid others away in residential backwaters, but it kept some of the 19th-century buildings on Abovyan Poghorts and left the old neighbourhood of Kond more or less alone.

Alexander Tamanyan developed the current grid plan in the 1920s with the idea that main avenues (Mashtots, Abovyan and Nalbandyan) should point in the direction of Mt Ararat.

Sights

Yerevan has a dozen or so museums, plus several galleries and churches, all located in the city centre and easily reached on foot. We’ve broken down the sights into two main areas: the northern half of downtown, including Opera Sq (Operayi Hraparak) and the Cascade; and sights in the southern half of downtown, south of Republic Sq.

**OPERA SQUARE, THE CASCADE & MOSCOVYAN POGHOTS**

This leafy area of town is known for its fashion boutiques, upscale restaurants and outdoor cafes. It also has its share of small museums clustered between the Opera House and the Cascade.

**Cascade**

(Kaskad; Map p.130) A vast flight of stone steps and flower beds, the Cascade leads up to a monument commemorating the 50th anniversary of Soviet Armenia. There are five recessed fountains along the Cascade, some with sculpted panels and postmodern khatchkars (carved stone crosses).

Construction of the Cascade came to a halt in 1991 when funds dried up. In 2001, diaspora philanthropist and art collector Gerald L Cafesjian took over the project, repaired the escalators, built galleries and planted flower beds. The top of the Cascade remains unfinished but you can skirt around the edge and walk up to a plaza holding the 50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia Monument (Map p.126).

The new Cafesjian Museum (admission AMD1000; ☏ 10am-5pm Tue-Thu, to 8pm Fri-Sun) inside the Cascade houses a vast collection of art and glassware. You can wander through most of the structure as you please but to get inside the galleries you need to buy a ticket. Concerts are held most nights in summer in the topmost gallery.

Fernando Botero’s cheerfully fat sculpture Cat stands at the base of the Cascade, the first element of Cafesjian’s collection put into place. Botero’s naked Roman Warrior has a ‘rigid’ pose nearby.

**Opera House**

(Cultural Building; Map p.130; ☏ 52 79 92; 54 Tumanyan Poghorts) The landmark of the northern part of the city, the Opera House is surrounded by parks, cafes, nightclubs and shops. The building has two main halls: the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall and the National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre.

Tastes have broadened a bit since Soviet Armenia, and the music scene here goes beyond opera and symphonies to Russian pop, MTV and a nightclub in the bowels of the Opera House itself. Tickets range in price from AMD2000 to AMD12,000 depending...
on the seat location and the performance itself.

Matenadaran MUSEUM
(Map p130; www.matenadaran.am/en; 53 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission AMD1000, guide AMD2500; ☑10am-4pm Tue-Sat) Armenia’s ancient manuscripts library, the Matenadaran, stands like a cathedral at the top of Yerevan’s grandest avenue. It preserves more than 17,000 Armenian manuscripts and 100,000 medieval and modern documents. The first Matenadaran for Armenian texts was built by St Mesrop Mashtots at Vagarshapat (Echmiadzin) in the 5th century.

By the early 19th century only 1800 manuscripts were kept at Echmiadzin, after centuries of invasion, looting and burning. The collection grew in importance after the Armenian genocide in WWI saw the destruction of countless tomes. The current Matenadaran was built in 1959, with a research institute dedicated to preserving and restoring manuscripts attached to it.

At the base of the building there is a statue of Mashtots teaching his alphabet to a disciple, while six other statues of great scholars and writers stand by the door. The outdoor gallery has carved rock tombs and khatchkars brought here from ancient sites around Armenia. Inside, the collection includes Greek and Roman scientific and philosophical works, Iranian and Arabic manuscripts, and the 15th-century Homilies of Mush, so heavy that it was ripped in half and carried away to safety by two women after the 1915 genocide. The book was not put back together until years later – one saviour had emigrated to America. The illuminated works on display show swirls of red and gold combining classical borders with luxuriant flowers and gardens.

Many of the rarer books in the collection are researched behind closed doors and are not on display. The ticket office has a gift shop with a nice collection of books and souvenirs.

Martiros Sarian Museum MUSEUM
(Map p130; 3 Sarian Poghots; admission AMD600; ☑10am-5pm Fri-Tue, 10am-4pm Wed) This museum preserves the studio and some of the works of 20th-century painter Martiros Sarian. Some say the pick of his works adorns galleries in Moscow and Paris. Start your visit to the museum upstairs with his sombre early works, then watch the colours erupt as he falls in love with Persia and Egypt. His art seems to mature by fusing those colours into a vision of an Oriental Armenia, landscapes of stark mountains, green villages and plunging gorges. Sarian’s large studio remains as it was when the artist died in the 1950s.

National Folk Art Museum of Armenia MUSEUM
(Map p130; 64 Abovyan Poghots; admission AMD500; ☑11am-5pm Tue-Sun) Has a large display of Armenia’s finest crafts, which reveal the exotic influence of the East in Armenian culture. There’s also a nice lace exhibit and some interesting woodcarving.

Museum of Russian Art MUSEUM
(Map p130; 38 Isahakyan Poghots; admission AMD500; ☑11am-4pm Tue-Sun) A collection of 200 works by 19th- and 20th-century Russian artists, donated by Professor Aram Abrahamian, who had a taste for cheerfully picturesque landscapes. Enter on Tamanyan Poghots.

Yervand Kochar Museum MUSEUM
(Map p130; 39/12 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; admission AMD600; ☑11am-5pm Tue-Sun) Features

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GETTING YOUR BEARINGS IN YEREVAN

Yerevan sits in a valley edged on three sides by hills, with the little Hrazdan River cutting a serpentine gorge west of the city centre. Downtown streets are laid out on a grid with several ring roads, intersected by the redeveloped Hyusisayin Poghota (Northern Ave). In the centre is Hanrapetutyan Hraparak (Republic Sq), while the Opera House, a few blocks north, is another focal point. Mesrop Mashtots Poghota (avenue) is one of the city’s busiest thoroughfares.

The main bus station is the Kilikya Avtokayan west of town on the Echmiadzin highway, which also leads to Zvartnots Airport. Marshrutky (minibuses) to various parts of the country leave from all over the city centre, with a concentration around the Rossiya Mall on Tigran Mets Poghota.

The main train station is above Sasuntsi Davit metro station. Yerevan’s metro has four stations in the city centre, with the last stop at Barekamutyun.
the sculpture and cubist-style 3-D paintings of the brilliant draughtsman and artist.

Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum  
(MAP p130; 40 Moscovyan Poghots; admission AMD500, guide AMD2500; ☏11am-4.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-3pm Sun) Armenia’s greatest poet, Hovhannes Tumanyan, is celebrated in this museum, with displays of his personal effects and journals. It’s a must-visit if you have already been to (or planning a trip to) Tumanyan’s home village of Dsegh (p167).

Churches
Churches in the area include the 1694 Zoravar Church (Map p130), one of the nicest little secrets in the city, tucked away...
YEREVAN IN ONE DAY

Start off with breakfast at a cafe on Abovyan Poghots with some freshly ground soorch (coffee). Take a look around the grand buildings of Hanrapetutyan Hraparak (Republic Sq), and have a browse in the National Art Gallery and the State Museum of Armenian History. Walk up Hyusisayin Poghot to marvel at Yerevan’s sparkling new pedestrian mall, then continue uphill to the Matenadaran, a fine building with a small but beautiful collection of manuscripts on display, or go up to the Cascade for a grand view over the city, surrounded by flower beds. If you have time (and energy) take a taxi to the genocide memorial. Then head out to a restaurant for a long dinner of Armenian khoravats (barbecued food) with salads, desserts and cognac. Check out a club or people-watch from any one of dozens of late-night cafes, around the Opera House or the Ring Park.

off Parpetsi Poghots. The tiny, 13th-century Katoghike (Map p130) is at the corner of Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan Poghots. The Soviets were demolishing a later church here in 1936, which exposed the fine inscriptions on the chapel. Amazingly enough for that era, a public outcry let the chapel survive. Fragments from the dismantled church lie around it.

REPUBLIC SQUARE, SOUTHERN MASHTOTS & KHANDJIAN POGHOTS
Sights in this section are grouped in the southern part of downtown. The area around Republic Sq includes government ministries, as well as some of the better hotels and embassies.

Hanrapetutyan Hraparak (Republic Square)
The former Lenin Sq is surrounded by the city’s finest ensemble of buildings, particularly the Armenia Marriott Hotel, and the National Art Gallery and State Museum of Armenian History, where Stalinist scale meets Armenian architecture in a huge yellow-and-cream building facing some massive fountains. The centre of the square (more of an oval) is now a flat stretch of polished marble. New lights and repaired fountains make Hanrapetutyan Hraparak (Map p130) a focal point on warm afternoons and nights. In summer, the fountains dance to music and lights between 9.30pm and 11pm.

TOP CHOICE State Museum of Armenian History
(National Museum; Map p130; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; admission AMD1000, guide AMD5000; 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) This museum spans Stone Age cave dwellers in the Hrazdan Gorge to the astronomy and metallurgy of 3000 BC Metsamor, the Urartu Empire and the gathering of the Hayk tribes into a nation in the 6th century BC. After that, centuries fly past through Hellenic Armenia, the arrival of Christianity and finally the long centuries under Muslim Turkish and Persian rule. There are medieval khatchkars, costumes, jewellery, coins, and models of buried settlements and lost churches. One of the most prized artefacts to join the collection is a 5500-year-old leather shoe discovered in a cave in Vayots Dzor region in 2008. Scientists have dubbed it the ‘world’s oldest shoe’ (see the boxed text, p176).

National Art Gallery
(Map p130; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; admission AMD800, guide AMD5000; 11am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) The National Art Gallery holds the third-biggest collection of European masters in the former USSR; many of the works here were appropriated in Europe during WWII. This national treasure includes works by Donatello, Tintoretto, Fragonard, Courbet, Theodore Rousseau, Rodin, Rubens and Jan Van Dyck. There are also many works by Russian painters, and Armenian painters, sculptors and graphic artists including Martiros Sarian, Yervand Kochar and Sedrak Arakelyan. If you can talk your way into visiting the roof there are opportunities here for sweeping city views.

Yerevan Brandy Company
(Map p130; 54 00 00; www.ybc.am; Admiral Isakov Poghot; tour & tastings AMD3000; 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, tours by appointment) ‘The fairyland of the world-famous Armenian brandy’, Yerevan Brandy Company runs fun tours with generous tastings from its iconic premises by the Hrazdan River. The company has cellars of barrels dating back to the 19th century, including one that won’t be opened until a Karabakh peace deal appears. Tours take 75 minutes, including tastings, and end
at the souvenir shop. It's a pleasant walk across the Hghtanak Bridge or a short taxi ride (AMD600) from the city centre.

**Blue Mosque**

(Map p130; 12 Mesrop Mashtots Pghota; 10am-6pm) Of the eight or so working mosques in Yerevan in 1900, the Blue Mosque is the only one remaining today. The **Iran Information & Communication Centre** next door has the key. It's appropriate to wear trousers and a long-sleeved shirt – no bare legs or shoulders.

The Soviets turned the mosque into the Yerevan City Museum until it was restored and somewhat ‘modernised’ by an Iranian religious-government foundation in the 1990s. It lives on as a sign of Armenia’s necessarily good relations with Iran.

The mosque was built in 1765 by the Persian Governor Hussein Ali Khan as a place for Friday sermons and features a medrese (religious college) built around a garden courtyard, a 24m-high minaret and a brightly tiled turquoise dome.

**Sergei Paradjanov Museum**

(Map p130; www.parajanov.com/museum.html; 15/16 Dzoragyugh Pghota; admission AMD700, guide in French AMD2500; 10.30am-5pm) This engaging, eccentric house-museum of an avant-garde film director and artist (see p190) stands by the Hrazdan Gorge near Surp Sargis. Paradjanov was born in 1924 in Tbilisi but retired to Yerevan after serving prison terms on charges of immorality in the 1970s and 1980s. This fine house showcases his colourful, amusing collages and framed found-object sculptures, as well as sketches and designs for his films. There’s real wit and flair to his work, and the museum is well worth visiting even if avant-garde 20th-century film isn’t normally your thing. There are postcards and videos of his major films for sale.

**Yerevan Museum**

(Map p130; www.yerevanhistorymuseum.info.am; 1/1 Argishti Pghota; admission AMD500, guide AMD3000; 11am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) This new museum covers the foundation, expansion and development of Armenia’s capital. The central display on the ground floor is an enormous scale model of 19th-century Yerevan (best seen from the balcony on the floors above). Other exhibits include the knives, jewellery, pottery and other artefacts discovered during recent excavations.

**FNPAK Gallery**

(Map p130; www.accea.info; 1/3 Pavstos Byuzand Pghota; admission free; 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) The Norarar Pordzarakar Arvesti Kentovon (Armenian Centre for Contemporary Experimental Art) is a large, well-appointed gallery and art complex facing the big Vernissage market. Yervand Kochar’s 1959 figure Melancholy pines at the entrance. Most of the artists in residence are in their 20s and 30s, and avant-garde concerts and performances are held in a huge auditorium. It’s viewed with healthy suspicion by the more conservative arts audience – the next Armenian cultural revolution might start here.

**Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral**

Modern Yerevan’s first real cathedral (Map p126) was built to celebrate 1700 years of Christianity in Armenia and was consecrated in 2001. This hulking building stands on a small hill where Khandjian Pghota meets Tigran Mets Pghota. It’s a bit brutalist in execution, possibly because it hasn’t been around for 1000 years and collected atmosphere and khatchkars. There’s a statue of Zoravar (General) Andranik at the bottom of the stairs that lead to the church (Map p130). Zoravar Andranik led the army that defeated the Turks at Sardarapat in May 1918.

**Museum of Modern Art**

(Map p130; 7 Mesrop Mashtots Pghota; admission AMD500; 10am-3pm Tue-Sun) Near the corner of Sarian Pghota is the main exhibition centre for contemporary Armenian artists, the Museum of Modern Art. It also has an impressive collection of works from the 1970s onwards. The museum is on a narrow lane just off Mashtots, hidden behind a row of shops.

**State Museum of Wood-Carving**

(Map p130; 4-2 Paronyan Pghota; admission AMD400; noon-6pm Tue-Sun) This is actually an interesting collection of some meticulous pieces, both modern and medieval. The entrance is slightly hidden, set back behind the food kiosk.

**Surp Sargis Church**

Near the Museum of Wood-Carving, look out for this 1853 church (Map p130; 1853), on Israeliyan Pghota off Mashtots, overlooking the Hrazdan River. The Sunday liturgy and choir are particularly good.
Central Yerevan

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OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

The following sights lie outside the central core and thus require a fair hike or a short cab or marshrutka ride.

Mother Armenia MONUMENT
(Mayr Hayastan; Map p126) Symbolism abounds in the huge statue of Mother Armenia. She looms over the city in line with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, on a classic Soviet plaza complete with tanks and jets set on pedestals at the eastern end of Haghtanak (Victory) Park. The 23m-high Mother Armenia glares out across the city towards the Turkish border with a massive sword held defensively in front of her. She replaced a Stalin statue in 1967. One soldier was crushed to death and several were injured when his statue was wrenched off unannounced one night, leading to grim muttering about Stalin still killing from beyond the grave.

Inside the 50m pedestal is a Military Museum (Map p126; admission free, photos AMD500; 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 3pm Sat & Sun). The interior is based on Surp Hripsime at Echmiadzin, a brave acknowledgment of religion by the architect during Stalin’s lifetime. The space on the main floor is devoted to the Karabakh War. The basement houses a mothballed collection of WWII artefacts (300,000 Armenians died, half of those sent to fight).

Haghtanak Park (Map p126), next to Mother Armenia, is a mostly overgrown patch of woods containing a small amusement park.
on to the murder of Armenian labour conscripts in the Ottoman army in late 1914 and early 1915. The arrest and subsequent murder of community leaders and intellectuals on 24 April 1915 marks the beginning of that nightmare summer. All over Anatolia men were arrested, marched out of their towns and murdered in shallow graves.

A permanent exhibition of paintings of half-dead, naked survivors stands in the hall. The final image is an enlarged photograph of an orphanage in Syria after the genocide. Outside there’s a magnificent view of Mt Ararat, the symbol of Armenia now 40km inside modern Turkish territory.

Nearby there is a khatchkar in remembrance of the 1988 Sumqayit massacre in

There is a row of trees planted by foreign leaders who recognise the genocide, despite the Turkish government’s determination to punish any foreign power that does so.

A broad pathway flanked by a 100m-long wall engraved with the names of massacred communities leads to the memorial, consisting of a 40m-high spire next to a circle of 12 basalt slabs leaning over to guard an eternal flame. The 12 tilted slabs represent the lost provinces of western Armenia, land lost to Turkey in a post-WWI peace deal between Ataturk and Lenin, while the spire has a fine split dividing it into larger and smaller needles, the smaller one representing western Armenia. Set on Tsitsernakaberd Hill (Fortress of Swallows) across the Hrazdan Gorge from central Yerevan, the memorial was built in 1967 after unprecedented demonstrations on 24 April 1965, the 50th anniversary of the genocide. In a rare acknowledgement of public discontent, the Soviets deposed the local Communist Party boss in response and gave permission for the memorial to be built.

A taxi (AMD600 from the city centre) is the easiest way to reach Tsitsernakaberd. Or take marshrutka 70 or 87 from Mesrop Mashtots Poghota; these drop you by the road near the memorial, from where it’s a 600m walk to the museum (after 200m take the road that forks left). From the memorial, continue walking down the steps, which leads back to the road where you can flag down a marshrutka.

Erebuni Fortress & Museum

Excavations began at the Erebuni Fortress (Map p126) site in 1959 after a farmer unearthed an inscribed stone tablet. Archaeologists swooped in and soon found a large cuneiform slab with the inscriptions of Argishti I, king of Urartu, setting the date the fortress was built at 782 BC. It reads, in part, ‘Argishti, the son of Menua, has built this magnificent fortress as a house for Khaldi, the Lord, to the glory of the Biayni countries and to the horror of enemies’, which says a bit about the nature of Armenian pride.

The view from the fortress takes in the city and Karmir Blur (Red Hill), where excavations have revealed similar ancient finds. Frescoes in the reconstructed palace wall are replicas. There are huge storerooms for wheat, along with gigantic pitchers for wine and oil, and tonir (oven pits). There’s also a place for animal sacrifices, and workshops (still buried) for making tools, including arrows for fighting and hunting. Sadly, ugly slabs of concrete now top most of the stone walls (preservation, Soviet-style).

The somewhat neglected Erebuni Museum (Map p126; 38 Erebuni Poghota; admission AMD1000, guide AMD3500; ☏10.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) at the bottom of the hill, has other cuneiform tablets and jewellery excavated from the site. It’s housed in a striking 1960s Soviet building with huge apricot-coloured tufa (volcanic stone) friezes, with exhibits that probably haven’t been updated since Brezhnev was in power.

To get here from outside the Armenia Marriott Hotel, take marshrutka 36, 86 or 76.

Activities

The local football league has a regular winter season. Basketball is popular among kids, while nardi (backgammon) is the elders’ game of choice, along with chess.

Water World

The main sport and leisure facility in Yerevan is Water World, a large complex of pools and slides. Water World is open from June to September but next door is the Aquatek ( ☏58 88 88; www.aquatek.am; admission AMD5000), an indoor complex that stays open year-round. Women are required to wear a swimming cap. Both facilities are located on the outskirts of town on the road towards Sevan.

Arena Bowling Centre

Yerevan’s best bowling alley is modern and costs AMD6000 per lane per hour during the day, or AMD12,000 per hour after 6pm. On weekends it’s AMD12,000 all day.

Tours

The Envoy Hostel (p135) offers free walking tours several times a week (depending on demand). The tours last around 2½ hours and the guides do a great job of introducing Yerevan’s unique history. They also do free night walking tours in summer. Three times a week the Envoy has a ‘Communist History’ tour for AMD8500, with visits to moribund
factories, metro stations and other legacies of the USSR. Other recommended agencies for Yerevan tours include Hyur Service and Menua Tours (p142).

Courses
Lazaryn Dpratoon

LANGUAGE
(2)52 37 78; www.ldt.am; 21a Sayat-Nova Poghota)
An Armenian- and Russian-language school for all levels. It’s in a building set back from Sayat-Nova Poghota. The door is on the southeast side of the building (but hard to find as there are many doors and no signs in English). It’s best to call ahead before coming over here.

Festivals & Events
Fireworks seem to celebrate a national holiday or commemorate some event or other every fortnight or so. The independence days sometimes see concerts on Republic Sq or in the parkland around the Opera House. The Golden Apricot International Film Festival (www.gaiff.am) is held in July. The High Fest (www.highfest.am), in early October, sees the arrival of international theatre groups for a variety of performances. For those willing to brave the cold, the Armenia Winter Festival takes place between December 25 and January 6 and features outdoor concerts in public parks.

Sleeping
Besides the following listings, travel agencies (p142) can organise a homestay for around AMD6000 per night or an apartment rental starting from around AMD15,000 per night. You can also check www.armeniainfo.am, which has listings for B&Bs. The hostel scene was developing rapidly at the time of research with new places popping up every month; expect changes in this category during the life of this book.

OPERA SQUARE, THE CASCADE & MOSCOVYAN POGHOTS

TOP CHOICE
Envoy Hostel

HOSTEL $ (Map p130; 2)53 03 69; www.envoyhostel.com; 54 Pushkin Poghots; dm AMD7000-8000, d AMD20,000-23,000, all prices incl breakfast; 6) This large, European-style hostel has eight dorm rooms spread over two floors. The beds are very comfortable and lockers in the rooms are available. The hot showers are legendary. Try to get a room on the main level as downstairs rooms are boxy, windowless cells. It has friendly English-speaking staff and almost-daily tours to sites around the country (and free walking tours in the city). It even runs a weekly shuttle to Tbilisi (p142). It’s a real hive of activity, as is the neighbourhood – there are loads of cafes and bars nearby. On the downside, it can get a bit noisy when big groups roll through. Kitchen facilities are available and the free breakfast includes bread, cheese and tea, and they sometimes add eggs or sausages. Despite the address, the door is actually on Parpetsi Poghots.

Meg Hotel

HOTEL $$ (Map p130; 2)58 10 08; www.hotelmeg.com; 1 Jrashat Poghots; r from US$80; 6) This smart little hotel has a business feel to it, with coffee-coloured furniture, polished fittings and all mod cons and services. Breakfast is served in your room. It’s a roomy, comfortable place and a fine choice in this price range. It’s a little hard to find: as you walk up Mashtots take a left just after the bookshop (into the small compound), and the hotel is up the little hill on the right.

Penthouse Hostel

HOSTEL $(Map p130; 2)94997794, 098894224; www.penthousehostel.org; 5 Koryun Poghots, apt 33; per person €11.30; 6) This guesthouse, run by the friendly Yanaa and Artur Nazaryan, has modern double rooms and a three-bed dorm. The outgoing owners speak English and French and attempt to create a cozy, homelike atmosphere. The simple breakfast includes some Armenian dishes. You need

APARTMENT RENTALS
Renting an apartment is a common practice among visitors to Yerevan. Prices peak between June and October. At the time of writing, AMD15,000 a day got you a single-bedroom apartment with sporadic water supplies a marshrutka ride away from town. Upwards of AMD25,000 a day rented a two- or three-bedroom apartment in a more convenient location. Up to AMD40,000 a day earned a three- or four-bedroom renovated apartment or house. Besides the travel agencies (p142), which frequently arrange apartments, there are some specialists for standard and luxury apartments: www.hyurservice.com and www.visitarm.com.
to hike up five flights of stairs to reach the door but you will be rewarded with excellent views of Mt Ararat.

**Parev Inn**  
GUESTHOUSE $$  
(Map p130; 55 99 85; www.parev.am; 71 11th Aigestan Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD22,000/28,000) A pleasant guesthouse just up from Mkhitar Heratsi Poghots (near the Nork cable car), run by a Canadi-an-Armenian couple. Generous discounts are available in the low season (from November to March). The rooms are large and comfortable, with splashes of colour, plus a kitchenette and modern bathrooms. The access road is a little hard to spot – take a sharp right before the CPS petrol station.

**Anahit Stepanyan**  
HOMESTAY $  
(Map p130; 52 75 89, 091502071; Apt 25, 5 Sayat-Nova Poghot; per person AMD6000) This popular homestay consists of two large dorm rooms, a private room and a loft. It has an authentic homestay feel – there is no front desk, just English-speaking Anahit greeting you at the door. It has a slightly dishevelled atmosphere but this somehow adds hominess – just don’t come looking for a proper hotel. The entrance is on Sayat-Nova Poghot, between Our Village restaurant and a shoe shop called ‘No One’. Press the button for apartment 25 and Anahit will buzz you inside. If it’s full, you can try a more basic set-up at the home of Gayane Simonyan, in apartment 22 (just below Anahit).

**Ani Plaza Hotel**  
HOTEL $$$  
(Map p130; 58 95 00; www.anihotel.com; 19 Sayat-Nova Poghot; s/d AMD41,000/51,000, ste from AMD70,000, all prices incl breakfast) This landmark in the heart of town has been updated to an upper-midrange hotel. Cheaper rooms have not seen renovation on the same scale as the deluxe rooms, but all are modern and comfortable. Rates include use of the indoor swimming pool.

**Foreign Students Hostel**  
HOSTEL $$  
(Map p130; 56 00 03; ysugh@xter.net; 52 Mes-rop Mashtots Poghot; s/d AMD16,000/25,500) Simple and small rooms are on offer at this university hostel, usually occupied by exchange students. It’s a handy option for budget travellers looking for more privacy than the hostels can offer. There is no reception desk, just go and talk to the administra-tor in room 106.

**Central Hostel**  
GUESTHOUSE $  
(Map p130; 52 86 39, 094484 673; Apt 31, 4 Vardanants Poghots; dm incl breakfast AMD6000) As the name indicates, this place has

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**REPUBLIK SQUARE, SOUTHERN MASHTOTS & KHANDJIAN POGHOTS**

**Best Western Congress**  
HOTEL $$$  
(Map p130; 58 00 95; www.congresshotelyerevan.com; 1 Italia Poghots; s/d AMD44,400/60,600; Next to a pleasant park and overlooking leafy Italia Poghots, the Congress offers quiet serenity in the city centre. The 126 rooms are clean and modern, although the singles are a little poky. The hotel is best known for its big outdoor swimming pool; nonguests can swim for AMD7000 on weekdays and AMD9000 on weekends.

**Europe Hotel**  
HOTEL $$  
(Map p130; 54 60 60; www.europehotel.am; 32-38 Hanrapetutyan Poghots; s/d AMD38,000/43,000, ste AMD61,000-71,000, all prices incl breakfast) This quiet hotel in the centre of town has a flair for bright colours in its decor, and a groovy bar and cafe on the ground floor. The rooms are a little small but perfectly comfortable.

**Armenia Marriott Hotel**  
HOTEL $$$  
(Map p130; 59 90 00; www.marriott.com; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; r from AMD75,000; With its posh address on Republic Sq, the Marriott stands out as the place to be seen in Yerevan. The hotel includes a ritzy buffet breakfast (not included in room rates), a 24-hour gym (one of the best in town), an Italian restaurant and a popular streetside cafe. Wi-fi is free in the lobby but in the rooms you need to pay US$7 a day. Rooms in the back are quiet and have views of Mt Ararat.

**Yerevan Hostel**  
HOSTEL $  
(Map p130; 54 77 57; www.hostelinyerevan.com; 5 Tpagrichner Poghots; dm/d incl breakfast AMD6500/20,000) This hostel is buried in the basement of a large apartment block, close to Republic Sq. It’s a decent-sized place with bunk beds spread around two large dorm rooms plus a couple of private rooms. The set-up is a bit awkward, with the shared bathrooms and dorms at opposite ends of the hostel, so that you need to walk through the common areas to reach the showers. Howev-er, the atmosphere is clean and friendly and also quieter compared to some of its competi-tors. The English-speaking staff can help with logistics. The breakfast is a simple spread of bread, cheese and butter.
a good, central location near Republic Sq. However, despite the name, it resembles not so much a hostel but is more of a 'guesthouse' as it consists of just two rooms in a family apartment. Owner Susana Grigoryan prepares a basic breakfast and son Vahan speaks English. It is located above the Ankyun restaurant but the entrance is around the back of the building. Look for entrance III, apartment 31.

AUA Suites
(Map p130; ☏ 56 75 67; www.hybusiness.com; 8 Hanrapetutyan Poghots; s/d/ste AMD22,000/38,000/55,000; ☆☆☆) Not a typical hotel, this place is designed for extended stays or families – rooms are large and come with kitchens. Internet is a pricey AMD2000 per day. It’s associated with the American University in Armenia.

Hotel Avia Trans
(Map p130; ☏ 56 72 26; www.aviatrans.am; 4 Aboyan Poghots; s/d/tr incl breakfast AMD38,000/45,000/60,000; ☆☆☆☆) An anonymous exterior belies an otherwise pleasant lobby and friendly reception in this central hotel. By comparison, the rooms are a bit bland and furnishings are dated but the bountiful breakfast buffet makes up for these shortcomings.

OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

Hotel Bass
(Map p130; ☏ 22 26 38; www.bass.am; 3/1 Aigedzor Poghots; s/d AMD32,000/36,000, ste AMD44,000; ☆☆☆) A friendly boutique hotel in an interesting neighbourhood close to Marshall Baghramyan metro station. Large and homey rooms are decked out with TVs and DVD players. Sauna and indoor pool are among the amenities. Ask for big discounts in the low season (November to March).

Hostel Glide
(Map p126; ☏ 27 40 27; www.hostelinyerevan.am; 16 Galents Poghots; dm/s/d AMD6000/12,000/18,000; ☆☆☆) This private house has several rooms, two common lounges and a big kitchen, all clean and well maintained. Paragliding, skiing, hiking and other adventurous activities can be organised. To get here, take the metro to Barekamutyan. In the underground mall, walk right to the third exit and take the right fork when going upstairs; this will lead you to Hakobyan Poghots. Walk up Hakobyan for 50m and turn left onto a little alley (Galents Poghots), and continue to number 16.

Boris Family B&B
(Guesthouse $ (Map p126; ☏ 27 37 27; sayvazyan@gmail.com; 42 Barbyus Poghots; r AMD6000; ☆☆☆☆) This huge private house has three guestrooms that share a clean bathroom. It’s a little out of the centre but Boris and his family get high marks for hospitality. The excellent views of the Hrazdan River are a bonus. From Barekamutyan metro walk 600m along Kiyevyan Poghots, take the first right on Orbeli Poghots (also called Blur) and then a left on Barbyus Poghots.

Eating

Yerevan’s dining scene continues to improve, with dozens of international offerings. Traditional fare is also thriving; there are plenty of places for carnivores to taste the best lamb, pork and beef khoravats (barbecued food) Armenia can offer. Street snacks like kebabs wrapped in lavash (thin flat bread) and pastries are sold from stalls and bakeries in every neighbourhood.

OPERA SQUARE, THE CASCADE & MOSCOVYAN POGHOTS

Lagonid Bistro-Cafe
(Middle Eastern $ (Map p130; 37 Nalbandyan Poghots; meals AMD2000; ☆☆☆) A good-value restaurant serving terrific Syrian-Armenian cuisine, including tabouleh (AMD600), hummus (AMD600), and grills and kebabs for around AMD1300. The decor is fairly simple but the food is fresh and tasty.

The Club
(Fusion $$$ (Map p130; 40 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD3000-5000; noon-1am; ☆☆☆☆) One of the classiest places in Yerevan, the Club fuses western Armenian and French cuisine into a fresh and tasty dining experience. It includes a main dining hall, a drinks-only room with cushions on the floor, and a hidden cafe in the back. Live music is occasionally on offer and there is a separate section selling books and handicrafts.

Old Erivan
(Armenian $$$ (Map p130; 2 Tumanyan Poghots; meals AMD2500; noon-midnight; ☆☆☆☆☆) Part spectacle, part restaurant, this place serves Armenian cuisine amid boisterous minstrels belting out folk music. The atmosphere is cavelike, with lots of antiques and crafts, although the winged centurions are a little over the top.

Liban Restaurant
(Lebanese $$$ (Map p130; 23 Sayat-Nova Poghots; meals AMD2000-5000; noon-1am; ☆☆☆☆☆) This casual
place is a great option for tasty, filling and delicious Lebanese food, with a huge array of grilled meats and tasty sides dishes. It makes a nice hummus and the speciality is samke harra (baked fish with nuts and garlic).

Karma

(Map p130; 65 Teryan Poghots; meals AMD2200-3500; (©) North Indian restaurant offering excellent tandoori chicken and vegetarian dishes in beautifully decorated surrounds.

Artbridge Bookstore Café

(Map p130; 20 Abovyan Poghots; sandwiches AMD1500-2500, coffee AMD600-1100; (©) This is a comfy, arty café behind a bookshop that sells concert and drama tickets. The food is reasonably priced, the decor is very European and there are even nonsmoking tables. Foodwise, you can’t go wrong with the excellent French toast, but the sandwiches and pastas we tried were mediocre for the price.

Artashi Mot

(Map p130; Spendarian Poghots; shwarma AMD650) This midrange Armenian restaurant is divided into two parts: a takeaway shwarma joint on the main floor, and a sit-down restaurant in the basement. Try either for an excellent mushroom khoravats, or putule, a mutton-and-veggie soup cooked in an individual glazed crock.

Tumanyan Shwarma

(Map p130; 19 Tumanyan Poghots; shwarma AMD650; (©) Popular Armenian fast-food place offering shwarma (AMD650) and khoravats (AMD2500), plus ice cream and smoothies.

REPUBLIC SQUARE, SOUTHERN MASHTOTS & KHANDJIAN POGHOTS

Dolmama’s

(Map p130; 10 Pushkin Poghots; meals AMD7000-10,000; (©) This small, upmarket restaurant has a homely atmosphere and a kitchen that creates unique variations on local cuisine. Try the mountain lamb stew or chicken in wine and walnut sauce, made with the freshest produce available. Dolmama’s is highly regarded among Yerevan’s elite – the president dines here regularly and foreign dignitaries are often brought here. Smart casual dress is recommended.

Caucasus Tavern

(Map p130; 82 Hanrapetutyun Poghots; meals AMD1500-3000; (©) This is one of the more successful ‘tourist’ restaurants in town. Waiters in Georgian garb dish up cheap drinks such as mulberry oghee shots for AMD400, feasts of khachapuri (cheese pies) and main barbecue platters to the sound of live folk music. It claims to be open all night but may close in the wee hours.

Ankyun

(Map p130; 4 Vardanants Poghots; meals AMD3500-6000; (©) Ask Yerevan foodies where to get the best Italian food in town and they will probably recommend this place. Excellent appetisers, steaks and pastas are available in a quiet, candlelit atmosphere.

Shah Pizza

(Map p130; 34 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; meals AMD1500-3000) This Middle Eastern hookah joint feels more like Damascus than Armenia. Most of the clientele are Arab businessmen, travellers and expats. It serves, salads, kebabs and of course pizza, as well as flavoured nargile (hookah).

Square One

(Map p130; 1/3 Abovyan Poghots; meals AMD2500-3500; (©) A handy, American-style place with sandwiches, pizzas, pastas, salads, burgers and tasty breakfasts (served all day). One section is blissfully nonsmoking.

Urartu

(Map p130; 17 Dzorap Poghots; meals AMD3000-5000; (©) The combination of atmosphere, views and traditional cuisine has made Urartu a popular place for a night on the town. It’s perfectly set on the edge of Hrazdan Gorge and serves some delectable platters of khoravats. Service can be slow.

Drinking

Practically all restaurants and cafes serve drinks and are open late, so this is just a selection of specialist drinking spots.

POPLOVOK JAZZ CAFÉ

(Map p130; Isahakyan Poghots) A café complex centred on a large pond. Poplovok is the one by the side of the pond, with live jazz most nights. Former president Kocharian is a jazz fan and sometimes drops by.

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the bar, tables, chairs and walls. So that you don’t freeze your bum off, the bouncer will give you a thick jacket to wear inside. Sure, it’s a novelty but if you visit in August when temperatures are soaring this is one of the city’s main attractions.

26 Irish
(Pub p130; 26 Parpetsi Poghots) About as Irish as you can get in Armenia, this wee pub has a smoky atmosphere, foosball, a dartboard and frothy glasses of beer.

Calumet
(Bar p130; Pushkin Poghots; 5pm-2am) Very casual bar owned by Hrach, a diaspora Armenian from Lebanon. The name is French for ‘peace pipe’, which is somewhat symbolic of this all-inclusive club. It’s popular with locals, Peace Corps volunteers and travellers.

REPUBLIC SQUARE, SOUTHERN MASHTOTS & KHANDJIAN POGHOTS
Stoyka
(Bar p130; 46 Nalbandyan Poghots; 7pm-late) A cheerful, youthful pub popular with tourists, diaspora Armenians and locals. It’s known for late-night hedonism and a lethal array of drinks.

Entertainment
Theatre, Ballet & Classical Music
Billboards by the Opera House and on Abovyan Poghots advertise upcoming events; the Armenia Information office (p141) and the Artbridge Bookstore Café (p138) can help with tickets and information. Tickets are a steal at just AMD1000 to AMD2000 for most events. The Opera House (p124) has a concert hall and a theatre for opera and ballet. Most theatres close during July and August.

Theatres in Yerevan:

Aram Khachaturian
Concert Hall
(Classical Music, p130; 56 06 45; Opera House, 46 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots)

Arno Babadjian
Concert Hall
(Traditional Theatre, p130; 58 27 73; 2 Abovyan Poghots)

Chamber Theatre
(Comedy, Drama, p130; 56 63 78; 58 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)

Hakob Paronyan State Musical Comedy Theatre
(Comedy, p130; 58 01 01; 7 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots)

Hovhannes Tumanyan Theatre of Marionettes
(Puppet Theatre, p130; 56 32 44; 4 Sayat-Nova Poghots)

Hrachia Ghapliyan Drama Theatre
(Drama, p130; 52 47 23; 28 Isahakyan Poghots)

Komitas Chamber Music Hall
(Classical Music, p130; 52 67 18; www.ncoa.am; Isahakyan Poghots)

National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre
(Opera, p130; 52 79 92; www.opera.am; Opera House, 54 Tumanyan Poghots)

Nightclubs
The local club scene is well developed, with everything from Manhattan miniclubs to European-style techno caverns.

Giza
(Club, p130; admission AMD3000; until late Wed-Sun) This club is located in a huge underground space next to the Opera House. Anything goes here, from flying popcorn parties and lip-sync competitions to breakdancers and everything in between.

One Club
(Club, p130; 1 Teryan Poghots, Citadel Business Centre; admission AMD3000; until late Wed-Sun) Mixed music sets are pumped out of the sound system at this club for the 20-something crowd. Well-known DJs from Europe often spin here.
Kami Club (Map p130; 18 Abovyan Poghots; ☑ until late) Small lounge and part-time disco with Mondrian art theme and dancing on Friday and Saturday. The rest of the week it hosts live music acts. It’s back behind the Syrian sweet shop.

Live Music
Malkhas Jazz Club (Map p130; 52 Pushkin Poghots; admission AMD2000; ☑11am-3am) Laid-back club with two levels: a bar upstairs, and a lounge in the basement where the bands perform. It also serves excellent food, including steaks, pork chops and pasta, plus a full range of drinks. Owner Levon Malkhasian is considered the father of Armenian jazz – he has a huge library of jazz books and CDs and often closes the club in the daytime so young musicians can rehearse.

Stop Club (Map p130; www.stopclub.am; 37 Moscovyan Poghots; admission AMD1000-4000; ☑noon-midnight) This place is a popular live-music venue for a variety of genres. The musical spectrum ranges from jazz to reggae and rock. Check the website for upcoming events.

Gay & Lesbian Venues
Gay life is fairly low-key in Yerevan and places are not well advertised – check www.gayarmenia.blogspot.com. The park in front of the Best Western Congress hotel is a popular cruising spot.

Cinemas
Kino Moskva (Map p130; ☑52 12 10; 18 Abovyan Poghots; admission AMD1500) Tickets are cheap and there is a bar, an internet club and a nightclub. Nice Soviet-classical balcony. Documentaries are sometimes screened here.

Casinos
Looking like a Lego version of the Las Vegas Strip, Yerevan’s low-rise casino strip (Map p126) stretches from the city limits out towards the airport along Admiral Isakov Poghota. For new arrivals, it makes for a somewhat surreal entry into Armenia as the neon signs flash past. Despite the novelty of it all, these places rank fairly low on the local entertainment scene and the empty sidewalks are testament to this. It’s hardly worth the cab fare to get out here.

Shopping
Cognac is a popular item to bring home (but you’ll need to put it in your check-in baggage because of restrictions on taking liquid on aeroplanes). There are lots of cognac stores on the main streets (Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Sayat-Nova Poghota and Abovyan Poghots).

There are two big shukas (food markets): Shuka No 1 (Map p130; 3 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota) and Shuka No 2 (Map p126; 35 Movses Khorenatsi Poghota), just off Tigran Mets Poghota.

Vernissage Market (Map p130; Pavstos Byuzand Poghots) The main weekend flea market is a popular place for antiques, old communist medals, chess sets, carved jewellery boxes and locally produced handicrafts.

Vernissage Art Market (Map p130; Mesrop Mashtots Poghota & Sayat-Nova Poghota) Around the Martiros Sarian statue across from Opera Sq, this market deals primarily with paintings; you can turn up some real gems here at negotiable prices. Purchases are made both from dealers and the artists themselves.

Salt Sack (Map p130; 3/1 Abovyan Poghots) Better-than-average souvenir and handicrafts shop with some maps and books for sale, and a range of jewellery, pottery, items like woven salt sacks, carpets, dolls and T-shirts.

Treasures of Armenia (Map p130; 1/1 Abovyan Poghots) Craft gallery run by local designer Nina Hovnanian, showcasing unique jewellery, crafts, cushions and clothing. Everything is handmade and of high quality, with high prices to match.

Carpet Shop (Map p130; 27 Tumanyan Poghots) One of several carpet shops around town. Costs are inflated so you’ll need to bargain like mad for a reasonable price.

Arbridge Bookstore (Map p130; 20 Abovyan Poghots; ☑8.30am-midnight) Has a small but well-chosen range of titles and a book exchange.

Noyan Tapan (Map p130; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak) Has a few English novels plus maps and books on Armenia.
Bureaucrat BOOKS
(Map p130; 19 Sarian Poghots) This chic little bookshop specialises in art books but also has a cafe serving snacks and drinks.

Information
Cultural Centres
American Corner (Map p130; ☎ 56 13 83; yerevan@americancorners.am; 4 Nalbandyan Poghots; ☕ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat)
Has a library, internet access and a series of films and lectures.

Emergency
Emergency services ☎ 103
European Medical Centre ambulance ☎ 54 00 03
Fire ☎ 101
Police ☎ 102

Internet Access
There are internet clubs scattered across the city; most stay open late into the night and charge around AMD400 per hour. You may also have to pay for the megabytes used, so costs rack up every time you click a new page or upload/download something. Nexus (Map p130; 49 Pushkin Poghots; ☕ 24hr) near the Envoy Hostel and the Internet Club (Map p130; 18 Abovyan Poghots; ☕ 9am-10pm) at Kino Moskva are both decent options.
Fortunately, free internet and wi-fi come standard in many of Yerevan’s hotels and cafes. Hotspots are indicated with a ☭ icon.

Laundry
Most hotels, B&Bs and hostels can arrange clean laundry. If yours does not, try the following. Laundry Service (Map p130; 56 Pushkin Poghots) Convenient if you are staying at the Envoy Hostel.

Media
The English-language weekly newspaper Noyan Tapan can be found at Artbridge Bookstore. There are a handful of tourist publications such as Yerevan Scope, which have short articles and local listings. These are available in hotels and some cafes. International magazines and newspapers are available at Artbridge and some upscale hotels.

Medical Services
Pharmacies, marked by the Russian word apteka, are common and there’s one open late in every neighbourhood. For things like dental emergencies, embassies usually have a list of recommended specialists.

Yerevan has the best medical facilities in the country. Among the following, Nairi has the best reputation.

Yerevan’s Tempting Fountains
Drinking fountains are located all over Yerevan and across the country. While these may look tempting, especially on a hot summer day, we suggest avoiding them as the water is not filtered and may contain bacteria such as Giardia. If you are the unfortunate recipient of a Giardia bug go to the nearest chemist for a box of tinidazole (aka Tindamax).

4th Yerevan City Polyclinic (Map p130; ☎ 58 03 95; 13 Moskovyan Poghots)
Nairi Clinic (Map p130; ☎ 53 75 00; www.nairimed.mn; 21 Paronyan Poghots)

Money
There are moneychangers everywhere in Yerevan and ATMs dispensing drams are becoming quite common. Euros, US dollars and roubles can be changed nearly everywhere; the British pound and Georgian lari are less commonly traded. HSBC (9 Vazgen Sargsyan Poghots) is the leading international bank and has several branches with ATMs around the city. Handy ATMs that accept Visa and MasterCard include Anelik Bank (Map p130; 41 Pushkin Poghots) and Arexim Bank (Map p130; 20 Tumanyan Poghots). The airport arrivals hall has a moneychanger and an Armbusinessbank (ABB) machine that changes cash currency.

Post
The public mail service in Yerevan is slow but fairly reliable. The Haypost Main Office (Map p130; Hanrapetutyan Hraparak; ☕ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) is centrally located. Several local and international companies compete for the parcel business:
FedEx/Transimpex (Map p130; ☎ 53 00 29; tripex@arminco.com; 40 Mesrop Mashtots Poghota)
UPS Express-Hayk (Map p126; ☎ 27 30 90; omae@arminco.com; 1 Kievyan Poghots)

Telephone
Telephone services in Yerevan are reasonable, and your hotel will most likely allow local calls for free. Internet cafes offer cheap VoIP international calls. Many internet cafes also have Skype (www.skype.com).

Tourist Information
Armenia Information (www.armeniainfo.am), the local tourist office, was closed at the time of research. If and when a new office opens, the contact details should appear on its website.
There are lots of useful travel agencies offering everything from one-day minivan tours to private car tours, from a day to a week anywhere in the country. A selection of recommended agencies:

**AdvenTour** ([48 22 71; www.armeniaexplorer.com]) Specialises in adventure trips – hiking and mountain biking – plus speciality interests such as photography, bird-watching and archaeology. Call first as the location is hidden outside the centre but staff will meet you in town.

**Ajdahag Mountain Hiking Club** ([www.ajdahag.narod.ru]) Arranges one-day hikes up the southern peak of Mt Aragats and Mt Ara, a two-day climb up to Aragats’ highest peak, plus hikes in the Gegham mountains to the petroglyphs on Mt Azhdahak and other peaks.

**Avarayr** ([Map p130; 52 40 42; www.avarayr.am; 1 Pavstos Byuzand Poghots]) Avarayr is an adventure-tour company offering hikes from three to 12 days (the latter covering much of the country), camping trips for groups, and some unusual cultural and archaeological tours.

**Caravan Tours** ([Map p130; 56 52 39; www.caravanarmenia.com; 42/1 Teryan Poghots]) Arranges apartments, homestays and tours; garners good reports for prompt individual service.

**Envoy Tours** ([Map p130; 53 03 69; www.envoytours.am; 54 Pushkin Poghots]) Runs day trips near Yerevan and into northern Armenia to popular places like Garni, Geghard, Echmiadzin and Mt Aragats. Operates out of the Envoy Hostel.

**Hyur Service** ([Map p130; 56 04 95; www.hyurservice.com; 96 Nalbandyan Poghots]) Rents apartments and does trips around the country including many day tours from Yerevan.

**Levon Travel** ([Map p130; 52 52 10; www.levontravel.com; 10 Sayat-Nova Poghota]) Good for outbound travel and booking airline tickets.

**Menua Tours** ([Map p130; 51 20 51; www.menuatours.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots]) Does daily tours to sites around the country and is a reliable organiser of apartments, car rental, mobile-phone rental and other services.

**Tatev Travel** ([Map p130; 52 44 01; www.tatev.com; 19 Nalbandyan Poghots]) Specialises in travel to Iran, including arranging visas. It can also arrange bus and air tickets to Tehran.

Yerevan can be reached by air from many countries, by road from Georgia and Iran, and by rail from Georgia. While there are a couple of arduous bus services to Turkey via Georgia, and flights to Istanbul, the land border is closed. There are no direct routes to Azerbaijan; it’s most easily reached via Georgia.

**Air**

**Zvartnots Airport** ([flight information 187], 11km from Yerevan, is Armenia’s major airport. A multimillion-dollar overhaul of the airport was completed in 2011.

The arrivals hall has a money exchange and booths for mobile-phone companies if you want to buy a SIM card for your phone. See p302 for information on flights that serve Zvartnots.

**AIRLINE OFFICES**

**Aeroflot** ([Map p130; 53 21 31; www.aeroflot.ru; 12 Amiryan Poghots])

**Air France** ([Map p130; 51 22 77; www.airfrance.am; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots])

**Armavia** ([Map p130; 56 48 17; www.u8.am; 25 Sayat-Nova Poghota])

**Austrian Airlines** ([Map p130; 51 22 01; www.aua.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots])
**Baltic Air** (Map p130; ☎ 52 82 20; www.balticair.com; 25 Teryan Poghots)

**BMI** (Map p130; ☎ 51 22 03; www.flybmi.com; 9 Alek Manukyan Poghots)

**Czech Airlines** (Map p130; ☎ 52 21 62; www.csa.cz; c/o Visa Concord Travel, 2 Marshall Baghramian Poghtot)

**Fly Dubai** (Map p130; ☎ 51 88 56; www.flydubai.com; 7 Movses Khorenatsi Poghots)

**Iran Aseman Airlines** (Map p130; ☎ 52 44 01; info@tatev.com; c/o Tatev Travel, 19 Nalbandyan Poghots)

**S7 Airlines** (Map p130; ☎ 54 41 10; www.S7.ru; 34 Tumanyan Poghots)

**Syrian Air** (Map p130; ☎ 53 85 89; c/o Astron Travel, 3 Movses Khorenatsi Poghots)

**Bus**

Buses are generally late Soviet models, and while they may be half the price of a marshrutka they’re often twice as slow as well. Buses mostly serve on village and suburban routes. The main bus station is the Kilikya Avtokingan (Map p126; ☎ 56 53 70; 6 Admiral Isakov Poghtota), past the Yerevan Brandy Company on the Echmiadzin road, which has international bus services and marshrutky to Sisian, Stepanakert, Jermuq and Stepanavan. The Hyusisayin Avtokingan (Northern bus station; Map p126; ☎ 62 16 70; Tbilisian Mayrughi) is on the Tbilisi highway, 4km from the centre, and serves Sevan and Dilijan.

**Car & Motorcycle**

Several agencies rent out cars in Yerevan, including big names like Sixt and Hertz. A three-day rental ranges between AMD56,000 and AMD176,000 depending on the make and model of the car. It’s also possible to hire a driver with the car. Policies on taking the car out of Armenia (eg over the border to Georgia) vary between companies so be sure to clarify what is allowed.

**Hertz** (Map p130; ☎ 58 48 18; 7 Abovyan Poghots)

**Sixt** (☎ 59 31 53; Zvartnots Airport) The office is outside the centre but if you book a car it can be delivered to your hotel or you can pick it up at the airport. Sixt has a desk in the arrivals hall of the airport.

**Marshrutka**

Yerevan is the hub of the national network, and marshrutky (minibuses) leave from spots around the city. Try to arrive about 30 minutes before departure to make sure you get a seat. Marshrutky almost always leave on time and may even depart a few minutes early.

The following list outlines the destination, departure point in Yerevan, price, journey duration and departure times. Note that Araji Mas can be reached on bus 33 from Republic Sq.

**Agarak (near Ashtarak)** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD300, 40 minutes, 9.55am, 11.55am, 1.55pm, 4pm and 5.55pm

**Alaverdi** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD1500, three hours, hourly between 7am and 7pm

**Armavir (Hoktemberyan)** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD400, 50 minutes, every 15 minutes from 7.30am to 8pm

**Ashtarak** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD250, 40 minutes, one or two per hour between 8.40am and 6.40pm

**Dilijan** Hyusisayin Avtokingan, AMD1200, two hours, hourly between 10am and 6pm, plus Ijevan services

**Echmiadzin** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD250, 20 to 30 minutes, every 10 minutes between 8am and 10pm

**Goght (for Garni)** GAI Poghots near Mercedes Benz showroom, AMD250, 25 minutes, every 50 minutes between 7am and 9.30pm

**Goris** Sasuntsi Davit metro, AMD2500, six hours, 8am. Most transport to Goris is by shared taxi.

**Gyumri** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD1500, two hours, every 20 minutes between 7.30am and 7pm

**Hrazdan (for Tsaghkadzor)** Raykom Station, AMD400, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes between 9am and 6pm

**Ijevan** Hyusisayin Avtokingan, AMD1700, 2½ hours, hourly between 10am and 6pm

**Jerum** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD2000, two hours, 3pm

**Kapan** Sasuntsi Davit metro, AMD5000, eight hours, hourly between 7am and noon

**Khor Virap** Sasuntsi Davit metro, AMD400, 40 minutes, 11am and 3.30pm

**Meghri** Sasuntsi Davit metro, AMD7000, 10 hours, 7am

**Sevan** Raykom station, AMD600, one hour, hourly between 9.30am and 6.30pm

**Sisian** Kilikya Avtokingan, AMD2000, four hours, 10.30am, noon, 2.30pm

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**YEREVAN MARSHRUTKA SHUFFLE**

Every so often the authorities in Yerevan decide to shuffle around the departure points for marshrutky (minibuses) leaving the city. Departure times are also subject to change. The list on this page was updated at the time of research but it’s a good idea to consult with your hotel or guesthouse regarding possible changes to departure points and times.
YEREVAN MARSHRUTKY

Handy in-town routes:

11 Erebuni Museum, Tigran Mets Poghota, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak, Hakhtanak Bridge
13 Kilikya Avtokayan, Hakhtanak Bridge, Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Marshall Baghramian Poghota, Barekamutyun metro
18 Yerevan train station, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak, Nalbandyan Poghota, Marshall Baghramian Poghota, Ajapniak
43 Nor Zeytun, Azatutyun Poghots, Hakhtanak Park, Yeritasardakan metro, Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral, Gortsaranayin metro
51 Mesrop Mashtots Poghata, Aboyyan Poghots, GAI Poghots (behind the Mercedes showroom)
75 Mesrop Mashtots Poghata, Kilikya Avtokayan
81 Avan, Nalbandyan Poghots, Tigran Mets Poghota, Erebuni
101 Hyusisayin Avtokayan (Northern bus station), Tbilisi Hwy, Komitas Poghota
108 Zvartnots Airport, Echmiadzin–Yerevan Hwy, Tigran Mets Poghota, Zoravar Andranik metro

Stepanavan Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD1500, three hours, 9am, 11am, 1.30pm, 2.30pm, 3.30pm
Vanadzor Kilikya Avtokayan, AMD1200, two hours, every 30 minutes between 7.30am and 7pm
Vayk Araji Mas, AMD1200, two hours, hourly between 8am and 7pm
Yeghegnadzor Araji Mas, AMD1200, two hours, hourly between 8am and 7pm

Train

The Yerevan train station (Map p126; information 184; Sasuntsi Davit Hraparak) is off Tigran Mets Poghota south of the city centre, with the Sasuntsi Davit metro station underneath. The booking office is on the ground floor to the right as you enter the station. Information boards are in Armenian and Russian, but some of the staff speak English. The main rail route loops west and north through Gyumri (3½ hours), on through Vanadzor (8½ hours) and Ayrum near the border (11 hours), and on to Tbilisi (16 hours). There are a couple of local trains south to Yeraskh (near the Naxçivan border), and northeast to Hrazdan (continuing in summer to Sevan).

There are also daily elektrichka trains to Gyumri at 8am and 5.50pm; an open-seating (bench) ticket costs AMD950.

Train 372 departs for Tbilisi on even days at 10.35pm, arriving theoretically at 9am, though a couple of hours late is normal. In summer its run on a daily schedule and the train continues past Tbilisi to Batumi. Schedules and times are subject to periodic change so its best to get the latest departure times from the train station (or ask your hotel or guesthouse for updates). There are separate classes for the train to Tbilisi; open seating costs AMD5000, kupe (standard) compartments cost AMD12,160, while SV (deluxe) compartments cost AMD16,800. There is an AMD500 booking fee when you buy the ticket.

The toilets aren’t great and the carriages aren’t new, but it’s a very pretty ride. Book compartments a day ahead, and take food and drinks with you.

Getting Around

To/From Zvartnots Airport

Minibuses from Zvartnots Airport leave from the car park 300m from the main terminal. Yerevan minibus 108 (AMD200, every 20 minutes, 7.30am to 10.30pm) runs between the airport and Barekamutyun Hraparak (which has the Barekamutyun metro station). The driver may charge you an additional AMD100 for your luggage. On the way the marshrutka makes a stop at Rossiya Mall, where you can hop on a marshrutka to other parts of the city, or get on the metro (Zoravar Andranik station)

The price of a taxi to and from the airport depends on whether you arrange it in advance or chance it with the cowboys outside arrivals. If you book the taxi inside the airport terminal it will cost around AMD6000, but if you walk outside to the parking lot the price drops to around AMD2000 (depending on your bargaining skills). Going to the airport from town you’ll just pay around AMD2000. The trip takes about 15 to 20 minutes to/from central Yerevan.
Public Transport
The main way around Yerevan is by *marshrutka*. There are hundreds of routes, shown by a number in the van's front window. They stop at bus stops but you can flag one down anywhere on the street. You pay AMD100 when you leave. Ask to stop by saying ‘kangnek’. Women travelers should try to sit near the front and next to a female passenger if possible (or risk probing hands).

There are also buses and electric trolleybuses following numbered routes. Tickets cost AMD100.

Bus 259 is useful. It goes from Kilikya Avtokoyan (the main bus station) up Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, past the Opera House, to Hyusisayin Avtokoyan (Northern bus station) every 20 minutes or so.

Best of all there’s the clean, safe and efficient *Yerevan metro* (AMD100; 6.30am-11pm), which runs roughly north–south through these underground stations: Barekamutyun, Marshall Baghramian, Yeritasardakan, Hanrapetutyan Hraparak, Zoravar Andranik near Surp Grigor Lusavorich Cathedral (and Rossiya Mall) and Sasuntsi Davit at the Yerevan train station. The line continues west and south on ground level to stations in the industrial suburbs. Trains run every five to 10 minutes.

Taxi
Taxis are cheap and plentiful, from well-loved Lasdas to late-model Benzes. There are two types: street taxis and telephone or call taxis. Prices are AMD600 for the first 5km and then AMD100 per kilometre. Make sure the driver switches the meter on or you will be overcharged. You’ll see numbers for call taxis stencilled on buildings everywhere. Tourist publications such as *Yerevan Guide* carry listings for many companies.

AROUND YEREVAN
Because Armenia has so much history centred on its capital, it’s easy to see many sites on half-day excursions from Yerevan. You can easily hire a taxi to see many of these places, but it often works out to be cheaper and less hassle to take a day tour with a company like Hyur Service or Envoy Tours (p142).

Garni Temple
This comprehensively rebuilt Hellenic temple (adult/student AMD1000/250, guide AMD2500; 10am-8pm) was dedicated to the heathen sun god, Mitra. Armenia’s King Trdat I built it in the 1st century. It became a summer house for Armenian royalty after the Christian conversion.

The area around Garni has been inhabited since Neolithic times, with archaeologists finding Urartian cuneiform inscriptions dating back to the 8th century BC. The high promontory site is protected on three of four sides by a deep valley with rock cliffs, with a wall of massive blocks on the fourth side.

The wall featured 14 towers and an entrance graced by an arch. Ruins of the fortress are on the left and right sides as you walk towards the temple from the parking area. The Avan Gorge, carved by the Azat River, lies below.

A Roman bathhouse, now partly covered by a modern structure, was built for the royal residence. In the 7th century a church was built nearby. The bathhouse features an intricate mosaic, made with 15 colours of natural stones, depicting the goddess of the ocean.

In the ruins of the church next to the temple is a vishap (carved dragon stone). This is a marker to show the location of water. Some marks on the middle of the stone are in fact writing from King Argishti from the 8th century BC, which reads: ‘Argishti, son of Mena, took people and cattle from Garni to Erebuni [the original site of Yerevan] to create a new community.’

In summer, Garni stays open until 10pm, but you’ll have to pay an additional AMD200 to see it illuminated by floodlights.

If you want to stay overnight, try Chez Yvette B&B (091357966, 093755811; www.armenie-voyages-garni.com; per person incl breakfast AMD7000), run by a French-Armenian family, located 1km up the road towards Geghard. This is a clean, comfortable house with shared bathroom. Meals are available on request.

In the village of Garni, Tavern Restaurant (11am-10pm) serves fish and meat kho-ravats. At the entrance to the temple is a horde of locals selling delicious dried fruit and locally produced honey.

See p147 for information on getting to and from Garni.

Geghard Monastery
Named after the holy lance that pierced Christ’s side at the crucifixion, Geghard Monastery stands in a steep scenic canyon 9km beyond Garni. The spear itself was
once kept here but is now housed in the holy treasury at Echmiadzin.

Legend has it that Geghard Monastery was founded in the 4th century. The most ancient of the cave churches, St Gregory’s, dates back to the 7th century. Once called Ayrivank (Cave Monastery), Geghard was burned by invading Arabs in 923.

As you approach the monastery, look to the left up the hill for caves that house monastic cells built by monks. Trees here are often dotted with strips of cloth, as are trees on the other side of the monastery near the river. It is said a person can say a prayer or make a wish and tie a strip of cloth to a tree near the monastery to make it come true.

Inside the monastery walls, Geghard’s two main churches date from the 13th century. The principal structure, Surp Astvatsatsin Church (Holy Mother of God Church), was built in 1215. The adjoining vestibule, larger than the church itself, with an intricate carved ceiling and nine arches, dates from 1215 to 1225. Outside, above the south door, is a coat of arms of the family of the Zakarian prince who built it. The theme is a common Near Eastern one, with the lion symbolising royal might.

On the right-hand side of the vestibule are two entrances to chapels hewn from the rock. The left-hand one dates from the 1240s. It contains a basin with spring water believed to be lucky or holy. Splashing some of this water on your body is said to keep your skin youthful.

The right-hand chapel, constructed in 1263, includes the four-column burial chamber of Prince Papaq Proshian and his wife, Hruzakan. The family’s coat of arms, carved in the rock above, features two lions chained together and an eagle.

Outside, steps on the left lead up the hill to a 10m passage into another church that has been carved out of the raw rock. The proportions in this room are nothing short of extraordinary, considering it was carved from the rock around it. The acoustics of the chamber are also quite amazing (on weekends, choir groups sometimes perform here). In the far corner is an opening looking down on the church below.

On the right-hand side of the church are steps that lead to some interesting monastic cells and khatchkars. Outside the monastery, next to the stream, is an active matagh (sacrifice) site.

### Getting There & Away

**Marshrutky** to Garni (AMD250, 25 minutes, every 50 minutes from 10am to 9.30pm) depart from GAI Poghots (behind the Mercedes Benz showroom) in Yerevan. You can get to the showroom by taking marshrutka 51 from Mesrop Mashtots Poghota.

In Garni the bus leaves you on the main road, a short walk to Garni Temple. The main road continues for 10km to Geghard, but public buses don’t go that far. Bus 284 continues to Goght but then it’s another 4.5km to Geghard (from where you could walk or hitch a ride the rest of the way). Alternatively, a taxi from Garni to Geghard and back with a one-hour wait is AMD3000 (drivers hang around Garni and will find you).

### Zvartnots Cathedral ԶՎԱՐԹՆՈՑ

Built from 641 to 661, the ruins of the church (admission AMD700; ☼10am-5pm) of Surp Grigor Lusavorich (St Gregory the Illuminator) at Zvartnots are different to every other set of ruins in Armenia. Catholics Nerses II the Builder (building might have been his profession before joining the clergy) sponsored construction of the cathedral. Reputedly one of the most beautiful churches in the world, it housed relics of St Gregory, the first Catholics (patriarch of all Armenians) of the Armenian Church.

A model of the partially reconstructed church in the State Museum of Armenian History in Yerevan shows it to have been a round creation with a hood-shaped dome 45m high. An earthquake in 930 caused the building to collapse. An arc of finely carved pillars and a massive stone floor are what remains, along with a profusion of decorated stone fragments. Architecture historians argue over whether the reconstruction in the museum is really true to the church’s original design. Either way, the pillars evoke a feeling for a Greek- and Roman-influenced Levantine Christianity similar to many early-Syrian church ruins.

A pool in the centre of the building was used to baptise adults. Around the cathedral are the ruins of the palace of the Catholicos and the wine press and stone tanks of a massive medieval winery. Zvartnots lies in rich farmlands and orchard just south of the Echmiadzin–Yerevan highway, next to the delightfully named village of Pghunk, 17km from Yerevan and 4km from the centre of Echmiadzin. It’s easy to catch public transport either way along the highway.
Holy Echmiadzin is the Vatican of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the place where Surp Grigor Lusavorich saw a beam of light fall to the earth in a divine vision, and where he built the first Mayr Tachar (Mother Church of Armenia). For Armenian Christians, Echmiadzin (Descent of the Only Begotten Son of God) has unparalleled importance. Echmiadzin (sometimes spelt Ejmiatsin or Etchmiadzin) was the capital of Armenia from 180 to 340, when Christianity was first adopted by the Armenian nation. The seat of the Catholicos wandered across western Armenia for centuries before returning to the Mayr Tachar in 1441, with substantial rebuilding in the 15th century. The cathedral has sprouted more bell towers over the last 400 years, but the core is much as St Gregory’s vision guided him. The Palace of the Catholicos in front of the Mayr Tachar is the home of the present Catholicos, Garegin II, enthroned in November 1999. He is the supreme prelate of the 1700-year-old Armenian Apostolic faith.

Sights

Holy See of Echmiadzin

The main cathedral, Mayr Tachar, stands in a quadrangle of hedges and lawn surrounded by 19th-century buildings. The original church was built in 301–303. The building later fell in ruin and was rebuilt in 480–483. More work and expansion occurred in the 600s, 1600s and 1700s. By the main entrance at the southern end the large grey 2001 Papal Visit Monument, built for Pope John Paul II’s visit and Mass in 2001, stands next to the Gevorgian Seminary. The 19th-century seminary was closed in 1921 when Echmiadzin was swamped by refugees from the genocide, and it was forbidden to reopen under Soviet rule. The main gate leads past the bookshop, between buildings holding monastic cells, to the central compound. Bearded clergymen in hooded black robes glide along the garden paths around the Mayr Tachar.

The three-tiered bell tower at the entrance of the church is richly carved and dates from 1648. Inside, the church is modest in scale, about 20m by 20m, but the roof gleams with frescoes. At the centre is an altar at the place where St Gregory saw the divine light strike the ground.

At the rear of the church, through a door on the right of the altar, is the treasury (admission AMD1500; open 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1.30-5pm Sun); buy your ticket from the unsigned souvenir shop outside the church. It houses 1700 years of treasure collected by the church, including the Holy Lance (Surp Geghard), the weapon used by a Roman soldier to pierce the side of Christ while he was still nailed to the cross (to see if he was dead). It’s a suitably brutish spearhead set into an ornate gold-and-silver casing. It was brought to Echmiadzin from Geghard Monastery. There is also an image of the Crucifixion, which, according to tradition, was carved by St John. The treasury has relics of the apostles Thaddeus, Peter and Andrew, some in hand or arm-shaped reliquaries, and fragments of the Holy Cross and Noah’s Ark.

A door from the treasury leads under the main body of the church to a pagan shrine with a fire altar, seemingly left in situ in case this whole Christianity thing turned out to be a fad and the old faiths reasserted themselves. The shrine can be visited with a prior appointment through a travel agency, or with a bit of luck by asking one of the clerics in the treasury.

The gardens of Mayr Tachar have a 1915–23 Genocide Monument and many fine khatchkars assembled from around the country. The archway leading to the Palace of the Catholicos was built by King Trdat III in the 4th century. The Manougian Museum (Museum of the Old Residence) stands next to the palace. It’s off limits to casual visitors but if you have some clout with the Armenian Church it can be visited. Travel agencies in Yerevan can arrange visits to the church’s private museum. There are some particularly fine khatchkars across the garden from the museum’s entrance (some are also near the Papal Visit Monument), including examples from the recently destroyed cemetery in Culfa’s old town in Naxçivan.

Other Churches

The Surp Gayane Church is a short walk past the main gate of the Holy See from the town’s main square. St Gayane was the prioress of the 32 virtuous maidens who accompanied St Hripsime to Armenia. The original 6th-century chapel over her grave was rebuilt into a church in 1630. It’s a fine
orange-toned building with a plain interior and some fine khatchkars scattered about.

The 17th-century Surp Shogahat Church rather pales beside the splendour of its neighbours in Echmiadzin, but it's a sturdy stone structure with simple, elegant lines. It was rebuilt on the foundations of a chapel to one of the companions of Hripsime and Gayane.

Surp Hripsime was originally built in 618, replacing an earlier chapel on the site where Hripsime was slain after she refused to marry King Trdat III, choosing instead to remain true to her faith – she was a pagan who had earlier fled marriage from the Roman emperor Diocletian. In the small chamber in the back of the church, look out for the niche that contains a few of the rocks purportedly used to stone Hripsime to death.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutky for Yerevan (AMD250, 20 to 30 minutes, every 10 minutes), 21km east, leave from Atarbekyan Poghots, two blocks up from the main traffic circle. Transport further west towards Armavir (AMD250, hourly between 11am and 4pm) leaves from Tumanyan Poghots. The minibuses to Echmiadzin leave from Sarian Poghots in Yerevan near the corner with Mesrop Mashtots Poghota.

Sardarapat

About 10km past the small city of Armavir (Hoktembery), in the orchards and farms of the Ararat Plain, stands the venerated war memorial site of Sardarapat. It was here in May 1918 that the forces of the first Armenian republic under Zoravar (General) Andranik turned back the Turkish invaders and saved the country from a likely annihilation. Built in 1968 with statues of giant bulls, a 35m stone bell-tower shrine to the fallen, five eagle statues built of tuff and a memorial wall, the site puts an Armenian twist on Soviet war memorials. Nationalist Armenians treat a visit here as a kind of pilgrimage. The nearby museum (admission AMD700, guide AMD1000; 11am-5pm Tue-Sun) has relics from the battle itself in the first hall, as well as exhibits of items from the Neolithic Age up to the Middle Ages. Upstairs there is a treasure trove of carpets, jewellery, ceramics and handicrafts, the sum of which represents the country’s best ethnography collection – a celebration of Armenian culture, survival and life.

Getting There & Away

Sardarapat is about 10km southwest of Armavir, signposted near the village of Araks. Consider combing a visit with Echmiadzin. Marshrutky leave from Yerevan’s Kilikya Avtokayan for Armavir (AMD400, 45 minutes to an hour, every 15 minutes, 7.30am to 8pm). A taxi from Armavir with two hours at Sardarapat should cost about AMD2000 with bargaining.

Ashtarak

Ashtarak is a midsized regional town on the Kasagh Gorge, 22km northwest of Yerevan and somewhat higher at 1100m. Ashtarak is an interesting old town with lots of 19th-century buildings. There's a 16th-century stone bridge below the new bridge, and four churches around town. These include the little 7th-century Karmravor Church with intricate carvings and a cemetery with khatchkars a short way north, and the 6th-century Tsirana-vor Church on the edge of the gorge. Ashtarak has some very rural neighbourhoods as well, full of fruit trees and haystacks in late summer. While there is no great need to come to the town itself, it does make a decent transit point for the Kasagh Gorge churches if you are travelling by local transport.

Sights

Kasagh Gorge Churches

Churches from the 6th to the 16th century dot the landscape north and south of Ashtarak along the gorge of the little Kasagh River. Across the gorge from Yerevan on the northern outskirts of Ashtarak is the village of Mughi, with the splendid Surp Gevorg Church, finished in 1669, featuring striped bands of stone around its central drum and a classic half-folded umbrella cone on top. The village is an easy turn-off from the main highway that runs north to Spitak.

About 4km north of Mughi, along the same highway, is the village of Ohanavan. Perched on the edge of the village, overlooking the gorge, is the 7th-century monastery of Hovhannavank, famous for producing manuscripts and for its wealth of inscriptions and decorative carvings. It's right on the lip of the gorge, looking as though it pins down the flat volcanic grazing land, preventing it from tumbling into the chasm.

Getting back on the main road, another 5km north leads to perhaps the prettiest monastery of all, Saghmosavank, a cluster
of drums and conical domes from the 13th century.

A trail at the bottom of the gorge links Hovhannavank and Saghmosavank – you can cover the distance on foot in less than 90 minutes. The trail begins at the new cemetery on the northern part of Ohanavan village. It’s unlikely you’ll find a taxi at Saghmosavank once you reach the end of the trail. You could arrange to have one from Ashtarak meet you at an appointed time, or just hitch back from the main highway, another 20-minute walk from Saghmosavank. Another option is to take a cab to Saghmosavank, do the walk in reverse and arrange transport back from Hovhannavank (which is close to Ashtarak).

About 8km southwest of Ashtarak in Oshtakan is a 19th-century church built over the tomb of St Mesrop Mashtots, the genius who created the Armenian alphabet.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Ashtaraki Dzor**

HOTEL $$$$  
(3 67 78; Kasagh Gorge, Ashtarak; per person incl breakfast AMD10,000) This midrange hotel, built on terraces down the walls of Kasagh Gorge, is best known for its dining and entertainment. Khoravats dinners cost AMD3000, and there’s live music. The hotel rooms are modern with satellite TV, though the service is a bit rusty. It’s about 4km north of the town centre.

### Getting There & Away

Ashtarak is on a major road, so public transport is easy. In Yerevan, Ashtarak marshrutky leave from Kilikya Avtokayan, (AMD250, 40 minutes, one or two per hour from 8.40am to 6.40pm). There are also marshrutky from here to villages such as Voskevaz and Agarak that go via Ashtarak around 3pm or whenever it’s full. Marshrutky return to Yerevan from Ashtarak’s main shuka.

To visit the local sites (eg Hovhannavank and Saghmosavank) by taxi you can save a little money by taking the bus from Yerevan to Ashtarak and then hiring a local taxi at a rate of AMD100 per kilometre.

### Byurakan & Around

The landscape around the village of Byurakan, about 14km northwest of Ashtarak on the southern slopes of Mt Aragats, includes a couple of astronomical observatories and the impressive remains of the fortress of Amberd, 15km up the mountain. The Surp Hovhannes Church in Byurakan is an interesting early basilica model. Other churches and villages in the vicinity have khatchkars and vishap scattered about.

The fortress of **Amberd** was constructed on a ridge above the confluence of the little gorges of the Amberd and Arkashen streams. The high stone walls and rounded towers are a rough but effective defence, rebuilt many times but mostly dating from the 11th century. It’s easy to see why the site was chosen – at 2300m above sea level it commands a position above the farms and trade routes of the Ararat Plain. According to local lore no army ever breached the thick walls of the fortress. A church stands downhill from the fortress with the ruins of fortified houses and a substantial public bathhouse. A small kiosk here sells drinks and snacks.

The fortress is about a two-hour hike from the scout camp near the very end of Byurakan village. The scenery along the footpath is rewarding. Walk along the Mt Aragats road until you reach the ski house. A sign in Cyrillic and Latin script points ahead – take the left-hand fork anyway. The fortress can be seen from a distance, but you have to walk around a steep valley before reaching it. Although the fortress is geographically close to Byurakan, the paved road makes a 15km long circuitous route.

The first part of the road heads uphill towards Kari Lich (lake) and then branches off to the left 5km before the fortress. As you walk or drive through this landscape look for the large green or white tents owned by Armenian shepherds who graze their flocks here in summer.

The **Tegher Monastery** is about 5km uphill from the village of Aghtsk in the old village of the same name, on the far side of the Amberd Gorge from Byurakan. Mamakhatun, the wife of Prince Vache Vahutyan, built the church in 1232.

### Sleeping

**Byurakan Observatory Hotel**

HOTEL $  
(094910986; per person AMD5000) This is an old Soviet establishment on the grounds of the observatory. The hotel itself is a lovely pink tuff building with basic but satisfactory rooms. For an extra AMD1000 you’ll get a tour of the observatory at night.
Getting There & Away

There are four buses per day from Yerevan to Byurakan, departing at 10.30am, 12.45pm, 3.45pm and 5.30pm from the bus stand on Grigor Lusavorich Poghsota in Yerevan (AMD350). If you don’t catch one of these there are also a few buses to Agarak, 6km south of Byurakan on the Ashtarak–Gyumri highway. From Agarak you could walk, hitch or hire a taxi. There are very few, if any, taxis in Byurakan itself so if you need a cab to go to Aragats or Amberd its better to take one from Ashtarak or Yerevan. The four buses return to Yerevan at 7.30am, 9am, noon and 4pm.

Mt Aragats

Snow covers the top of the highest mountain in modern Armenia almost year-round, so climbing is best in July, August or September. Beware – even in August, clouds can gather in the crater by about 10am, so it’s good to start walking as early as possible. It’s not unusual for hikers to start on mountain ascents at 5am. The southernmost of its four peaks (3893m) is easy enough for inexperienced climbers, but the northern peak (4090m) is more challenging and requires crossing a snowfield (experienced hikers only). Check the Mt Aragats page on www.armeniapedia.org for details.

The road from Byurakan winds 27km up to the Cosmic Ray Institute observatory and the waters of Kari Lich. The scientists run an informal B&B (per person AMD8000) at the institute. Hot water and clean bathrooms are available. Alternatively, there are camping places for those suitably equipped with a tent.

The road ends at the lake, and uphill the route is rocky and strewn with debris. There’s no path, but the peaks are visible so you basically slog it uphill. The northern summit can be reached in four to six hours. To get there, walk over the easy pass between the southern and western summits. From the southwest pass, the route descends into the crater where you navigate fields of volcanic stones, then up again to the ridge and northern summit. Alternatively, hike up to the southern summit in just two hours.

Several tour companies can arrange walks up Mt Aragats, including the Ajdahag Mountain Hiking Club and Avarayr (p142). A two-day trip including guide, transport and camping equipment costs around AMD45,000 per person. Serzh Hovsepyan (35 00 46; serzh_hovsepyan@yahoo.com) is also a recommended guide for climbing the mountain’s peaks. Serzh is a member of the Spitak mountain-rescue team.

Khor Virap Monastery

Khor Virap Monastery, 30km south of Yerevan, is a famous pilgrimage site with an iconic location at the foot of Mt Ararat. You’ll see plenty of tempting pictures of the place on postcards and souvenir books long before you get there.

The monastery is on a hillock close to the Araks River, overlooking river pastures, stork nests and vineyards, 4km off the main highway through the village of Pokr Vedi (sometimes also called Khor Virap).

The pagan King Trdat III imprisoned St Gregory the Illuminator (Surp Grigor Lusavorich) in a well (khor virap means ‘deep well’) here for 12 years, where Christian women secretly fed him. The king was later cursed by madness (or, in a more colourful version of the tale, cursed by sprouting the head of a boar) and miraculously cured by St Gregory. Historians contend that Trdat may have switched allegiances to tap into the strength of Armenia’s growing Christian community in the face of Roman aggression. In any case the king converted to Christianity and St Gregory became the first Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and set about building churches on top of pagan temples and teaching the faith.

The ground-level buildings at Khor Virap have been repeatedly rebuilt since at least the 6th century, and the main Surp Astvatsatsin Church dates from the 17th century. Khor Virap is an important pilgrimage site and people often visit for a baptism or after a wedding to perform a matagh (sacrifice, often of sheep or chicken), which keeps the priests busy on weekends. It’s a shivery experience to climb down the 7m-deep well. The well is lit, but you need to wear sturdy shoes to scale the metal ladder. Just outside the monastery walls are some excavations on the site of Artashat, Trdat’s capital, founded in the 2nd century BC.
The Armash Fish Ponds, 25km downstream from Khor Virap near the border town of Yeraskh, are home to a great variety of migrating birds in spring and autumn as well as local species.

Getting There & Away
There are two marshrutky a day to Khor Virap from Yerevan (AMD400, 40 minutes, 11am and 3.30pm), and two buses per day (9am and 2pm), all from the Sasuntsi Davit metro station. Going the other way, the marshrutky leave at 1.20pm and 5.20pm while the buses leave at 10.20am and 3.20pm.

The main highway is 4km away, with lots of public transport to and from Ararat and towns further south. A return trip by car from Yerevan costs about AMD10,000 through a taxi service.

NORTHERN ARMENIA
Northern Armenia comprises the marz (provinces) of Shirak, Lori and Tavush, and also includes the rugged bare highlands of Gegharkunik around gorgeous Lake Sevan. We have listed the sights in the order they are most commonly visited from Yerevan – most travellers head up to Lake Sevan and then on to Dilijan with a side trip to Ijevan. Travellers usually overnight in Vanadzor before going to Georgia via the Debed Canyon. Stepavan and Gyumri are also worthy side trips.

Lake Sevan
Perched at 1900m above sea level, the great blue eye of Sevana Lich (Lake Sevan) covers 940 sq km, and is 80km long by 30km at its widest. The lake is perfect for escaping Yerevan’s summer heat. Its colours and shades change with the weather and by its own mysterious processes, from a dazzling azure to dark blue and a thousand shades in between. The freshwater lake supports a healthy fish population, including the ishkhan (prince trout), named for a row of spots like a crown on its head.

When Sevan’s outlet, the Hrazdan River, was tapped for hydroelectric plants and irrigation in the 1950s, the lake fell and is now about 20m lower. Other Soviet plans to drain the lake down to one-sixth its size thankfully went nowhere. The retreating waters uncovered forts, houses and artefacts dating back some 2000 years, and made Sevan Island a peninsula.

The exposed land has been designated the Sevan National Park, although some of it is disappearing again as conservationists have convinced the government of the need...
to raise the level of the lake. Since 2002 it has risen more than 2m, an environmental achievement that has meant cleaner water and more fish. Much to the consternation of local investors, the rising tide is also starting to flood into some of the beachside resorts.

Tourism is picking up around the lake, but except for a hectic 10 weeks in summer it’s usually quiet. The stark volcanic highlands and plains around the lake endure a long winter, and except for a string of achievements in medieval church-building around the lake’s edge, the hinterlands of Gegharkunik marz are not often visited.

Sights

Sevanavank

Sevan Monastery is up a long flight of steps on the peninsula’s turtle-backed hill and has commanding views of the lake. In summer and autumn a thick carpet of cloud pushes over the Areguniats mountains to the north and evaporates at the lake’s edge.

The first monument on the steps leading up to the monastery is dedicated to a 20th-century navy captain, commander of the Russian fleet on Lake Sevan. The first church is Arakelots (Apostles), followed by Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God) with a courtyard filled with khatchkars. St Mesrop Mashtots had a vision of 12 figures walking across the lake, who showed him the place to found a church. Queen Mariam, wife of Vasak of Syunik, built the churches in 874, and they have recently been restored. In the 19th century the monastery was a place to reform errant monks – there was a strict regime and no women were allowed.

Continue up the hill past the foundations of the Surp Harutyun Church to the highest point of the peninsula, with panoramic views. On the far side of the hill are two buildings: one belongs to the National Writers’ Union (closed to the public), the other is the president’s vacation home, protected by a high fence. The building on the north side of the peninsula is a new seminary for the Armenian Apostolic Church. The students sometimes play football in the car park near the stairs. There are a couple of souvenir stalls and the Ashot Yerkat Restaurant too.

Marshrutky (AMD100) to Sevanavank leave hourly between 9am and 5pm from the avtokayan (bus station) in Sevan. Otherwise, taxis are plentiful in Sevan; a taxi to and from the monastery with 30 minutes’ waiting time is AMD2000.

Sleeping & Eating

Sevan’s beach resorts start to fill up – and raise their prices – around late May. Prices
may jump by 40% in the high season. The season slows down again in early September. In spring and autumn resorts remain open with reduced rates and in winter most are shut entirely. A unique form of shelter here are domiki (converted metal cargo containers), which gives you some insight into Armenian resourcefulness.

Local restaurants crank up the volume of their stereos extra loud when tourists arrive, so you may have a hard time finding a quiet place to enjoy the birdsong and lapping waters of Lake Sevan.

**Kambuz**

HOTEL $$  
(2 00 76; Sevan peninsula; r AMD20,000-30,000)  
Located on the beach near Sevanavank, this is one of the few places to include a permanent structure, rather than domiki. Rooms are relatively modern and include either one or two bedrooms.

**Ishkan**

DOMIKI $  
(Sevan peninsula; r AMD10,000)  
Very basic place next to Kambuz featuring colourful domiki. The buildings are flimsy and beds hard as a rock but it's the cheapest around. Food is available, including kebabs, salads, bread and beer (everything on the menu seems to cost AMD500).

**Nirvana**

COTTAGES $$$  
(2 21 21; Yerevan Hwy; cottages AMD35,000)  
Between the Harsnaqar complex and the peninsula, Nirvana has five-person cottages with hot and cold water and a refrigerator. There's a cafe-bar here open late and a wide stretch of beach at the front.

**Albatross**

COTTAGES $$  
(091485245; Yerevan Hwy; cottages AMD15,000)  
About 2.5km southeast of Sevan town, Albatross occupies a quiet stretch of beach with a few colourful domiky. Paddleboats and jet skis are available.

**Harsnaqar Hotel Complex**

HOTEL $$$  
(2 00 92; www.harsnaqarhotel.am; Yerevan Hwy; s/d AMD30,000/40,000)  
This is the large Holiday Inn–style hotel where the highway meets the lake. It has a water park, tennis courts, lawns and a private stretch of beach. It also has an excellent restaurant, with a terrace overlooking the lake.

**Ashot Yerkat Restaurant**

ARMENIAN $$  
(meals AMD2000-3500; 10am-9pm)  
You can feast on kebabs, grilled ishkhan trout, salads and lavash on the terrace of this restaurant out on the Sevan peninsula. Try the house speciality, ‘eat and shut up’ – a concoction of sautéed meat and potatoes.

**Art Café**

CAFE $  
(Demirjan Poghots; snacks AMD1000-2500; 11am-10pm; E)  
Adding a splash of flair to Sevan, this place has loud music videos, big comfortable seating arrangements and a billiards room. The mostly Western menu includes pizzas, salads and sandwiches.

**Information**

The Tourist Information Centre (2 02 20; 164 Nairyan Poghots; 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat), located in the Qaghaqapetaran (city municipality building), can supply you with a

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**THE AYAS NAUTICAL RESEARCH CLUB**

One of the best stories about post-independence Armenia concerns a medieval sailing ship in a landlocked country. The Ayas project began back in 1985 when the club’s founders became interested in the times of the Cilician Kings, from the 10th to 14th centuries, when Armenian naval vessels and traders plied the eastern Mediterranean from the ports of Ayas and Korykos. Club members discovered old plans of Armenian ships in the British Library. Armenia hasn’t had a sea coast since 1375, but they set out to build a sailing ship the old way.

After independence, the fuel shortages made the timbers of the Ayas a target for people on the verge of freezing. Club members lived and slept in the boat for several years to protect it. The vessel survived to sail on Lake Sevan in 2002 and in 2004 sailed on the Black Sea then all the way to Portsmouth, England. In 2006 the ship continued its journey from Portsmouth to St Petersburg, Russia, and along a series of rivers all the way back to the Black Sea where the trip began. The Ayas Nautical Research Club (Map p130; 1-57 85 10; 1 Charents Poghots, Yerevan) has a substantial library of books on maritime Armenia and its fleets. The club’s latest project is to build 10 small sailing vessels for use on Lake Sevan. When complete, an annual regatta is planned on the lake. More information is available at www.ayas.am.
map of the area and ideas on activities or accommodation (note that the hours are pretty ad hoc so someone may or may not be there when you arrive). Internet Club (Nairyan Poghots; 9am-1.30am) is on the corner opposite the avtokayan. Converse Bank (Nairyan Poghots) is one of many banks to offer an ATM service on the main street.

Getting There & Away
By car Yerevan is only 60 minutes away by free-way. Transport to Yerevan (AMD600, one hour, every hour 8am to 5pm) leaves from the corner of Nairyan Poghots and Sayat-Nova Poghota in the centre of Sevan town.

There’s a marshrutka to Vanadzor from the corner of Nairyan Poghots and Shinararneri Poghots at 10am (AMD1000) that can drop you in Dilijan. This corner is also a taxi stand. A taxi to Yerevan (67km) costs about AMD7000, to Dilijan AMD4000 and to Tsaghkadzor AMD3000. A taxi to one of the hotels around the peninsula costs AMD1000. A four- or five-hour tour of Sevanavank, Hayravank and the khatchkars of Noratus should cost around AMD7000.

In summer a train runs from Yerevan to Sevan (AMD200, four hours, 8am), though it’s so slow that it could only be considered for the experience.

Around Lake Sevan
About 30km south of Sevan is the charmingly typical tufa monastery, Hayravank – 1100 years old, sturdy as the day it was built, and with khatchkars in the cemetery attesting to centuries of Armenian life. The promontory it stands on has a fine view of Lake Sevan. Further south is Noratus (sometimes spelt Noraduz), an old village and a fine place to wander around. There’s a tall chapel of Surp Grigor Lusavorich at one end of town and an ancient khatchkar-studded cemetery on the eastern side of the village. According to one legend, an Arab army was once forced to take cover nearby as the commander mistook the field of khatchkars for a battalion of enemy soldiers. They only moved on after a scout discovered the ‘soldiers’ were nothing more than harmless stone tablets. Noratus is a good area to find a beach away from the bustle of Sevan.

The provincial capital of Gegharkunik marz is Gavar (Kamo), population 30,000, on the cold slopes of the Geghama mountains west of Lake Sevan. It’s a quietly poor
town, similar to Martuni at the lake's southern end, with a few cafes, a Soviet-era hotel and a feeling that it is just struggling to survive. Hourly marshrutky travel between Yerevan and Martuni and between Yerevan and Gavar.

A paved road from Martuni heads south over the Selim Pass (2410m) to Yeghegnadzor in Vayots Dzor but it’s impassable in winter (November to April). No public transport goes over the pass so you’ll need your own vehicle to make the trip; a taxi will cost around AMD10,000.

About 20km east of Martuni is the handsome little Vanevank church (903), in a gorge south of the town of Artsvanist. Turn off at Karchagbyur and head up the valley through Lchavan to the centre of Makenis village to find the 10th- to 13th-century churches of Makenyats Vank, close to a gorge.

Further on, the road cuts inland to Vardenis. One road continues around the eastern side of the lake and another heads towards the mountains and the valuable Zod gold mines. A famously rough road used only by fearless truckers heads on from the mines over the Sodk Pass (2400m) into the wilds of Kelbajar and northern Karabakh.

Public transport around the lake is sporadic. For information on marshrutky from Yerevan to Gavar, Martuni and Vardenis see p143. The departure point in Yerevan is the Northern bus station. Vehicles depart hourly. To Gavar the cost is AMD1000, to Martuni AMD1200 and to Vardenis AMD1500. The best way to discover the lakeshore kilometres of quiet, clean beaches is with your own transport and perhaps camping gear.

The main road reaches a central square and veers left up to the House of Writers, or right and around to the active Kecharis Monastery. The road straight on from the monastery leads to the ski base where you can take a chairlift ride up the mountain, even in summer (per person AMD1500). It’s a far cry from the Alps but good fun for a day on the slopes. You can hire ski equipment at the ski base or from the Kecharis Hotel.

The forests around the base of the mountain provide some nice walks. Horse riding can be organised directly through Seran Mirzoya (093340058), reached through the Kecharis Hotel.

The Kecharis Monastery is a finely carved 11th- to 13th-century complex with khatchkars, a katoghike (cathedral), a Surp Grigor church and a smaller Surp Nishan chapel. It’s now the seat of the bishop of Kotayk marz.

**Sleeping**

Kecharis Hotel

(6 04 09; www.kecharishotel.am; Orbeli Poghots; r incl breakfast AMD20,000-30,000;Wi) A slick operation in the centre of town with top-notch facilities, modern rooms and lots of colourful art adorning the walls. Facilities include a business centre, a sauna and a branch of the popular Jazzve cafe chain. The English-speaking staff can also give tips on local activities or set up horse-riding trips. Prices increase by 30% during the ski season (November to March).

Jupiter Hotel

(091407394; www.jupiter-hotel.info; Grigor Magistros; r incl breakfast from AMD15,000) The Jupiter is perhaps the best of several hotels on Tsaghkadzor’s main square. It’s a clean and quiet place with colourful rooms.

House of Writers

(1-28 10 81; www.writershotel.am; s/d AMD12,000/13,000, apt AMD40,000-50,000; s) This one-time Soviet-ministry hotel has seen significant renovations. Some rooms have been renovated to a respectable standard and even the unrenovated rooms are at least well maintained. Follow the main road into town and look for the sign on the left.

Arminay Akopyan B&B

(6 04 25, 093252 642; 35 Kecharetsu Poghots; r AMD10,000) Clean and friendly guesthouse with hot showers, located 200m downhill from the Kecharis Hotel. No English spoken.
Getting There & Away

Tsaghkadzor is only about 40 minutes’ drive northeast of Yerevan. There are no direct buses or marshrutky, but a taxi to Yerevan costs about AMD5500.

There are frequent buses and marshrutky between Yerevan and Hrazdan (AMD400), 6km down the valley – a taxi up to Tsaghkadzor from here will cost AMD800. There are only a few taxis in Tsaghkadzor.

Dilijan

268  /  POP 17,000

It’s billed as the ‘Switzerland of Armenia’, and although that may be a bit of a stretch, alpine Dilijan is still one of the most pleasant regions in the country.

During Soviet times this was the peaceful retreat for cinematographers, composers, artists and writers to come and be creative; today it’s a centre for tourism with a number of fine B&Bs and a revitalised historic district.

There is certainly enough natural beauty to inspire creative thought: the lush oak and hornbeam forests surround the town with snowcapped peaks in the distance. In summer the villagers herd cattle down from the mountain pastures through the town, and people gather mushrooms and mountain herbs from the rich deciduous forests. Local architecture uses a lot of steep tiled roofs and wooden beams, along with some cute gingerbread-style structures. Even the local Soviet monuments have a touch of flair.

The gorgeous churches of Haghartsin and Goshavank are an easy day trip from Dilijan.

Sights & Activities

Dilijan Historic Centre

(Sharambeyan Poghots) The Dilijan Historic Centre is a little cobbled street next to Myasnikyan Poghots. This collection of stone and wooden traditional buildings includes shops, a hotel, eateries, souvenir stalls and workshops for local craftpeople.

As you walk along the main road into town you only see one part of it on the left; you need to turn down the stone steps to reach Sharambeyan Poghots, where most of the shops are located. The complex includes the modest Dilijan Historic Museum (Sharambeyan Poghots; admission AMD1000; 10am-7pm), a mock 19th-century Dilijan home with period furniture, photographs and crockery.

Dilijan Museum of Local History

(Myasnikyan Poghots; admission AMD500, tour in English AMD2000; 10am-5.40pm Tue-Sat, 10am-4.40pm Sun) This newly renovated museum houses a surprisingly varied collection of European and Armenian art from the 16th to 20th centuries. Some of the older works from Italian and French artists had been housed in museums in Moscow and St Petersburg but were moved to Dilijan during WWII for safekeeping.

Monuments

A crownlike monument to the 50th Anniversary of Soviet Armenia stands near the main roundabout. The WWII Memorial, with the huge silver figures of a soldier holding a dying comrade, is on a hillock south of the river.

Walks

There are pleasant walks to the 11th-century Surp Grigor Church and Jukhtakvank monastery, both located near the Dilijan mineral-water plant, 3.2km east along the Vanadzor road and about 3.5km up to the right. They are well signposted and a trail continues past Jukhtakvank, through pastures and woods, and back to Dilijan (a three-hour hike).

Further on towards Vanadzor the scenery is gorgeous, passing the Russian Molokan villages of Fioletovo and Lermontovo. Molokans (‘milk drinkers’) are a Russian fundamentalist Christian sect that broke with the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century; they earned their moniker by not fasting on official holidays.

Sleeping

There are lots of hotels and sanatoriums in and around town. Some beautifully located resorts, such as the House of Composers (where Khachaturian, Shostakovich and Prokofiev stayed), are still run by government ministries and often occupied by soldiers. There are a fair few B&Bs around town.

Ananov Guesthouse

(BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$$ (70 59; www.tufenkianheritage.com; Sharambeyan Poghots; r AMD43,000-48,000; ) This attractive heritage hotel features antique furnishings, high ceilings and a large wooden deck affording great views of Dilijan valley. It’s a quiet, intimate place that sweeps you
back to an earlier age but does not give up conveniences like wi-fi and an updated bathroom. It’s located in the Dilijan Historic Centre, a renovated confection of touryst shops and cafes.

**Daravand Guesthouse**  
B&B $\$$  
(78 57, 094420 965; www.daravand.com; 46 Abovyan Poghots; s/d without bathroom AMD10,000/16,000, with bathroom AMD16,000/22,000, all prices incl breakfast; ☎) This character-filled place has well-appointed rooms, a cosy common room and an outdoor deck with gorgeous views. The food is excellent. Owner Razmik is a diaspora Armenian with an Iranian upbringing and a German education. He can organise day trips to places of interest. The guesthouse is on the road toward Jukhtavank, 360m off the main Dilijan–Vanadzor road. Look for the red garage and the stairs leading up to the house.

**Nina B&B**  
B&B $  
(23 30, 09176734; 18 Myasnikyan Poghots; per person AMD7000; ☎) Most backpackers end up at this friendly B&B consisting of seven guestrooms of varying size and quality. There’s also a bright lounge were guests warm themselves with endless pots of tea. On the downside, the furnishings are a bit dated and the plumbing in the bathrooms isn’t great, but overall it’s a comfortable and homey experience. The best part of the place is mealtime; Nina spends half the day preparing a delicious dinner of soup, salads and either dolma (vine leaves with a rice filling) or khoravats (the main course switches each day). Dinner is an extra AMD3000. Meals for nonguests can be made with prior arrangement. At the shuka turn right and up the short hill (it’s well signposted).

**Magnit B&B**  
B&B $  
(26 80, 093224725; bb_ima@mail.ru; 86 Kalinin Poghots; per person AMD7000; ☎) This huge villa has 10 clean guestrooms, all modern and carefully decorated. There is a large dining room and a backyard where khoravats meals are sometimes prepared by the staff. It’s about 1km from the roundabout on the road to Vanadzor. Breakfast is overpriced at AMD3000.

**Tateh Guesthouse**  
GUESTHOUSE $  
(25 33, 093256430; 41 Komisarneri Poghots; r per person AMD5000) This family-run guesthouse is a no-frills operation (no breakfast, no internet, no English speakers). But rooms are spacious, clean and comfortable and the place is rarely full. From the main road (just past the internet cafe), walk down the steps and look for the metal fence with the green trim.

**Eating**

There are a couple of fast-food shwarma places at the bottom of the hill near the roundabout.

**Artbridge**  
CAFE $  
(Sharambeyan Poghots; meals AMD1500-3000; ☎8.30am-10pm; ☏) This branch of the Artbridge in Yerevan offers a short but sweet menu of soups, salads, pastas and sandwiches. It’s a pleasant place to while away an afternoon with a book and a cup of tea or coffee.

**Haykanoush**  
ARMENIAN $\$$  
(Sharambeyan Poghots; meals AMD3000-5500; ☎10am-10pm; ☏) This classy restaurant run by the Tufenkian Group has hardwood floors, cream-coloured walls and a muted traditional ambience meant to replicate 19th-century Dilijan. Speciality dishes include lamb and apricot stew, dolma rolled in raspberry leaves and warm souboereg (baked pasta and cheese). It’s a great chance to sample some delicious Armenian authentic cuisine.

**Getap Restaurant**  
ARMENIAN $\$$  
(meals AMD2500-4000; ☎9am-9pm) Located on the highway to Ijevan, this place consists of several wooden cabins overlooking the river. Food is typically khoravats, soups and fresh veggies.

**Bistro Lchap**  
ARMENIAN $  
(shwarma AMD800; ☎9am-9pm) Located near the main roundabout, this is fine for a quick shwarma or kebab.

**Information**

The Dilijan Tourist Office (Sharambeyan Poghots; ☎10am-7pm Tue-Sun May-Oct; ☏) is open for business in the Dilijan Historic Centre, a short walk uphill from the bus turnaround. It can provide lists of local homestays, B&Bs, craftsmen and artists.

Continue past the tourist enclave to reach the modern town centre. There’s a Haypost-ArmenTel (58 Myasnikyan Poghots) in the town centre next to the plaza. The five-storey building behind the plaza contains an internet cafe (per hr AMD400). There are moneychangers on Myasnikyan Poghots as well as the ArdashinInvest.
Buses and *marshrutky* to Yerevan leave from the main roundabout by the river. Buses (AMD1000, three hours) leave hourly between 9am and 3pm – some of these are services starting further north from Ijevan or Noyemberyan. Services to Ijevan (AMD500, 45 minutes) run hourly between 9am and 6pm. Services to Vanadzor (AMD500, 40 minutes) run at 9am, 10.20am, 3.20pm and 4pm. One daily bus goes to the Georgian border at 10.30am.

There are taxis at the main roundabout (the fare is AMD400 around town). During the day a local bus trundles between the western side of town around Kalinin Poghots up to Shahumian Poghots (AMD100). A taxi to Haghartsin or Goshavank and back costs around AMD5000, or AMD7000 for both destinations combined.

**Haghartsin** հաղարծին

The handsome Haghartsin Monastery (Haghartsin means ‘Dance of the Eagles’) was built in the 12th century by two brothers, princes of the Bagratuni kingdom. It’s hidden away in a lovely forest valley by some massive nut trees.

The monastery has three churches: the first for Gregory the Illuminator; the second for the Virgin Mary, named Surp Astvatsatsin (Holy Mother of God); and the last, a chapel to St Stepanos. The church is also famed for housing an image of the Virgin and Child, which has distinct Mongolian features.

**HIKING FROM HAGHARTSIN TO SHAMAKHYAN**

From Haghartsin, it’s possible to walk on trails over the mountain to Shamakhyan, a village 3km northwest of Dilijan. Bring water, a hat and sunscreen, and be prepared for sudden bursts of rain.

Walk past the monastery to find the trailhead, which is marked with a sign that reads: ‘Dilijan NP Eco-Tourist Route’. After five minutes the jeep trail reaches a creek and continues up the opposite bank. From here it’s a one-hour uphill hike to the ridge. The path is a bit overgrown in places but the route is fairly obvious.

At the ridge you’ll find another set of jeep tracks and you should follow these to the right. After a short distance, Dilijan will appear in the distance to your left. After about 30 minutes of level walking the jeep tracks start to head downhill below the treeline. After about 15 minutes of downhill walking (still on the jeep tracks) you’ll see a fence made from branches. Stay on the road as it hooks left and continues downhill. Five minutes after seeing the fence an open meadow appears on the right. Just downhill from here is an artillery range used by the army.

At this point you should walk right, off the main jeep track, and down towards the meadow. Cross the gully and walk along the hillside in a southwesterly direction (veering away from the artillery range). The trail disappears for a while but after 10 minutes you hit an obvious jeep trail heading downhill (now the artillery range is more or less behind you). Continue downhill to a creek and a farmhouse on the opposite bank. There is a wood footbridge a little bit left of the jeep track.

On the other side of the creek is a little picnic area. Continue along the jeep trail for another 20 minutes and at the next clearing veer to the right. Shamakhyan village soon comes into view. The road leading to the village can be very muddy so look for the small break which leads down to the creek and up the other bank to the village. The walk takes less than four hours. From here you can walk down to the highway and catch a lift back to Dilijan.

Alternatively, you can extend the hike by walking from Shamakhyan to Jukhtakvank (p157). Start by walking uphill from the taxi stand and follow this road as it wraps above the town to the cow farm (*kirova ferma*). Just past the barns and sheds is a sign that says ‘Nature Trail Jukhtak Vank – Shamakhyan’. Continue along this obvious jeep trail for about 50 minutes and you’ll eventually reach Jukhtakvank. Note that few locals know this trail, so if you ask for directions most people will tell you to walk down to the highway and turn right up the next valley for Jukhtakvank. However, the shortest route is definitely along the ‘Nature Trail’. Along the trail are some information panels that describe the flora and fauna of the area.

From Jukhtakvank you can walk 3km downhill to the main highway.
added to convince the next wave of Mongol invaders not to destroy the church (at the time of writing this carving was on display in an overseas museum and it is unknown when it will return to Haghartsin). The brothers’ family seal can be seen on the back of St Stepanos chapel.

There are some stunning khatchkars, a sundial on the wall of the St Gregory Church, and a refectory (1248) with amazing arcing interlocked stone beams. Mass is held in the Surp Astvatsatsin at 11am on Sunday. At the time of research the monastery was undergoing a massive renovation project funded by the Sheikh of Sharjah. In a somewhat controversial move, a hotel and cafe are also part of the building project. The project is to be complete by the time you read this.

The monastery is 4km off the main Dilijan–Ijevan road. You can get a lift to the turn-off and easily walk the rest of the way (or possibly hitch there, especially on a weekend when there is more traffic).

**Goshavank ԳՈՇԱՎԱՆՔ**

Goshavank monastery stands in the mountain village of Gosh, founded in 1188 by the saintly Armenian cleric Mkhitar Gosh, who was buried in a little chapel overlooking the main complex. Goshavank features a main church (Surp Astvatsatsin) and smaller churches to St Gregory of Narek and St Gregory the Illuminator. The tower on the matenadaran (library) was once taller than the main church. With a school attached, the library is said to have held 15,000 books before it was burned by Timur’s army in the 13th century.

Goshavank is considered one of the principal cultural centres of Armenia in its time; historians believe it was abandoned at the end of the 14th century. Goshavank then appears to have been reoccupied in the 17th to 19th centuries and restored from 1957 to 1963. The museum director Artur Osepian is usually available to answer questions and may show you a small museum (admission AMD250) behind the monastery.

### Sleeping

**Artur Osepian B&B**  
(☏ 093942491; per person AMD5000) This friendly B&B with three rooms is run by Artur Osepian, the director of the monastery complex. Artur can spin some yarns about the history of the area and give good advice on short hikes.

**Makhital Gosh**  
(☏ 093172777, 093758595; r AMD15,000-25,000) This 16-room hotel is next to the parking lot of Goshavank. The staff are quite helpful and will show you a variety of rooms; the best ones have excellent views of the monastery.

### Getting There & Away

Goshavank is 6.5km off the main Dilijan–Ijevan highway. You can ride on a local bus or marshrutka to the turn-off and walk or hitch the rest of the way. One bus (AMD250) serves the monastery; on Tuesday and Friday it goes to Dilijan at 9am and returns at 1pm. On Monday and Wednesday it goes to Ijevan at 9am and returns at noon. A taxi from Dilijan or Ijevan (both 23km away) is the easiest option (about AMD4500 one way).

### Ijevan ԻՋԵՎԱՆ

Surrounded by forested mountains and with the Aghstev River running through its centre, Ijevan is the attractive capital of Tavush marz. Ijevan means ‘caravanserai’ or ‘inn’ and the town has been on a major east–west route for millennia. The local climate is warmer than in Dilijan, and the town is the centre of a wine-growing district with some very acceptable white table wines. The town has some handsome early-20th-century buildings, a big shuka, a winery and a little museum. Outside the town there are opportunities for horse riding and hiking.

The local authorities are trying to encourage tourism, though the process has been slow: no one in the tourist office speaks English and most of the dozen or so listed B&Bs seem to only exist on paper. Still, there are some decent cafes in town and a friendly local populace.

Buses stop on the main highway close to the fountain; about 100m further is the police station, the Haypost office and the busy shuka, with plenty of moneychanging shops and stalls.

### Sights

Locals enjoy whiling away the afternoon in the **Sculpture Park**, in the centre of town.

**Ijevan Winery**  
(☏ 3 64 57; 9 Yerevanian Poghots; ☎ by appointment) The Ijevan Winery presses much of the local harvest into dry white and sparkling wines under the Haghartsin, Gayane
and Makaravank labels. It offers free tours and tastings with advance notice, and has cellar-door sales. The winery also puts on lunches overlooking the river. It’s about 1.5km from the town centre towards Dilijan.

Ijevan Local Lore Museum

(5 Yerevan Poghots; admission free, donations appreciated; 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) On the road to the winery you’ll pass this little museum, with a couple of rooms of ethnographical displays. The enthusiastic museum curator, Nariman Tananyan, enjoys showing off the ancient battle gear on display. Don’t be surprised if he yanks a thousand-year-old sabre out of the display case and waves it around as if under attack!

Sleeping

The B&B scene is more than a little dysfunctional. About 10 properties are listed in a brochure at the tourist office but in reality only two or three operate (and even these are not well signed and are difficult to locate).

GyuLnara Meliksetyan

B&B $ (3 15 54, 093191211; 2 Nalbandyan Poghots; per person AMD7000) This B&B is in a big house about 1km north of the centre, with six bedrooms, satellite TV and modern plumbing. Home-cooked dinners cost about AMD1500. To get there, travel north along the main highway from the shuka for around 800m, turn left uphill and then take the first right on a dirt track. There are no signs at all, so it’s best to take a taxi the first time or call first.

Vardan Vardanyan B&B

B&B $ (3 36 95, 093003695; 25 Proschyan Poghots; r per person incl breakfast AMD5000) This spacious home is run by the same man who owns the Vardanak Café near the bus stand; he’ll probably approach you about accommodation if you eat there. A filling breakfast with eggs and cheese is included. The B&B is on the hill behind the cafe.

Hotel Dok

HOTEL $ 4 01 71, 094515154; 40 Ankahutyan Poghots; r/ deluxe AMD10,000/20,000; The Dok is the flashiest hotel Ijevan can offer. Rooms are spacious, fairly modern and cheap compared to others of this standard. There’s an excellent restaurant downstairs that serves Armenian and international cuisine.

Hotel Mosh

HOTEL $ 3 56 11, 091452463; www.hotel-mosh.am; 3 Yerevan Poghots; r AMD7000, without bathroom AMD5000; This eight-room hotel doesn’t have much atmosphere, but it’s conveniently located on the main road and prices are very reasonable. Hot showers, satellite TV and wi-fi are available. It’s just past the large shuka.

Eating

Vardanak Café

CAFE $ (Yerevan Poghots; meals AMD600-1400; 11am-10pm; Among the three cafes in the centre of town along the main highway, this one, next to the bus stand, is the only one that serves hot food. The owner Vardan also has a B&B nearby (see Sleeping) and is keen to assist travellers.

Yeritarsardakan Café

CAFE $ (3 Ankahutyan Poghots; meals AMD800-1600; 10am-10pm Tue-Sun; Located opposite the Sculpture Park, this is the most popular spot in town for food and drinks. It serves decent lahmajo (minced-lamb minipizza), cutlets and soups, and claims to have wi-fi (though it never seems to work).

Information

The Ijevan Tourist Information Centre (3 32 58; 5a Melikbekyan Poghots; 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) gets our vote as the least-helpful tourist office in the country. No one speaks English and

PUNCH DRUNK

Oghee (pronounced something like ‘orh-ee’) are delicious fruit vodkas, sometimes called vatsun or aragh, made in village orchards everywhere. Around 60% alcohol, oghee is made from apples, pears, apricots, pomegranates, grapes, cherries, Cornelian cherries or cornels, mulberries and figs. The best mulberry (t’te) and Cornelian cherry (hone) oghee are intense, lingering liqueurs. Vedi Alco makes some oghee commercially, weaker than the village stuff. You won’t need to go far to try some; it’s a usual accompaniment to a khoravats dinner. The drink tastes best in autumn when homes turn into distilleries after the harvest.
SHAMSHADIN & AROUND

North of Ijevan, one road turns northwest at Azatamut through the captured Azeri enclaves of Upper and Lower Askipara (now Verin Voskepar and Nerkin Voskepar) to Noyemberyan and the Georgian border. Another road turns right just before the border to Berd in Shamshadin region. There are still landmines along this frontier; it’s unwise to explore the shattered villages around here.

Just past the turn-off to Noyemberyan there’s a road 4km to Achajur village and onwards another 6.5km to the 11th-century Makaravank monastery. The beautiful church is set deep in a forest, giving it a very peaceful atmosphere. There are some fine carvings on the exterior and interior of the structures, including ornate altar daises carved with eight-pointed stars, floral motifs, fish, birds and geometrical forms. There is no public transport here, but you may be able to get a lift with locals visiting the site.

The Shamshadin region east of Ijevan is a fertile stretch of woodlands, vineyards and farms carved by three valleys: the Khndzorut, Tavush and Hakhum. With Azerbaijan on two sides and rugged mountains dividing it from the rest of Armenia, it’s also quite isolated.

As the crow flies it’s just 21km from Ijevan to Berd; the mountains in between them, however, have forced the construction of a roundabout road that loops for 67km north and then south. About 44km into the trip you’ll spot Nor Varagavank up the hillside – the 3km detour is worth the trip to see the ruined monastery. The oldest sections were started in 1198 by David Bagrtuni, son of King Vasak I; a Surp Astvatsatsin church was added in 1237. The monastery once contained a fragment of the True Cross until it was lost in fighting in 1915.

Berd (population 8000) itself is nothing special but does have a restaurant and a couple of hotels. The main reason to come to Berd is to hike here along the old road from Ijevan. The 35km road twists and winds through the mountains and past some attractive old villages. The hike takes about 12 hours in total, best spread over two or three days. There are no hotels, but you can ask in the villages for a homestay. It’s best to have a taxi driver take you the first 5km or so out of Ijevan to get you on the right track. Just make sure they are taking you on the old road that heads east of town rather than the new road going north.

A daily marshrutka (AMD500) leaves from Ijevan to Berd (on the new road) at 9am. It returns from Berd at 2pm. A shared taxi between Berd and Ijevan is AMD1500 per person.

Getting There & Away

The bus stand is in front of a decrepit hotel, just uphill from the Vardanak Café. There is a little ticket window displaying departure information.

There are marshrutky to Yerevan (AMD1700, 2.5 hours, every hour from 10am to 6pm) that stop in Dilijan 36km down the road. One bus (AMD1000) for Yerevan departs at 9.30am. The cost to be dropped in Dilijan is AMD400. There are daily marshutky to Vanadzor (AMD1000, 9.30am, 11am, 3pm and 5pm).

At the time of writing there was no public transport from Ijevan to Georgia, but you could get something to Noyemberyan and change there. If you are headed that way it’s worth asking about a share taxi to the border or a resumption of bus services.

Yenokavan & Around ԵՆՈՔԱՎԱՆ

The rugged mountains around Ijevan hide old roads, forts and churches in their many folds. The first part of the journey is a 9km road from Ijevan to the village of Yenokavan. On the southern edge of Yenokavan is a small church perched on a rock overlooking

"WORTH A TRI"
a gorge. Inside the nearby gorge is the 13th-century **Sarp Astvatsatsin Church**.

A further 4km up the valley from Yenokavan is a unique tourist venture run by **Apaga Tour** (📞 091290939, 091495834; www.apaga.info; s/d AMD42,000/66,000; 📍).

There are horse stables here, and guided trail rides can be arranged for AMD3500 per hour or AMD25,000 per day (including meals). Guided hikes are also available if you prefer walking. Accommodation is available in newly built small cottages; the price includes three meals and horse riding.

A taxi to Apaga from Ijevan costs around AMD2000 each way.

The drivable road ends at Apaga but if you are looking to get further off the beaten path, continue another 3km on foot from Apaga down into the gorge to a separate tourist venture called **Anapat Tour** (📞 094603010, 093365437; www.anapattur.ru).

This small operation, run by brothers Vahagn and Hovar Tananyan, is a simple bush camp near the Khachagbyur River in a beautiful spot they have dubbed ‘Peace to the World’. Some locals also know it as ‘Lastiver’. Bring a swimsuit as there are some wonderful bathing pools and cascades nearby. You can stay and eat at the camp for around AMD10,000 (less if you bring your own tent and food). Facilities consist of basic huts and even tree houses. If you arrive in the cooler months (October to April), accommodation is in caves. Activities include fishing, hiking and cave exploration. Some of the caves in the area contain unique pre-Christian carvings of faces and human forms.

The 3km hike from Apaga Tour to Anapat Tour takes about one hour and is mildly strenuous. It can be difficult to find the way so coming here on your own is not recommended; it’s best to contact the brothers ahead of time so they can guide you to their camp.

### Sights

There’s not a whole lot to see, but there are parks and some interesting neighbourhoods to explore. A **regional museum** (admission AMD1000; 🗓 11am-6pm Mon-Sat) at the western end of Tigran Mets Poghota is housed in an unattractive-looking building, just past the cinema (on the opposite side of the road).

At the other end of town, the **Vanadzor Art Gallery** (Tumanyan Hraparak; admission AMD200; 🗓 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) shows off local talent across widely divergent styles of painting and sculpture.

Vanadzor’s **shuka** on Myasnikyan Poghots is one of Armenia’s busiest regional markets. The old village neighbourhoods of **Dimats** and **Bazum** are east of the town centre, over the Tandzut River. The centre of town has the usual Soviet look, but south along Myasnikyan Poghots there are some elegant stone villas and country houses. There’s a little **Russian Orthodox church** in the park by the train station, and the Armenian Apostolic church called the **Ghara Kilise** (Black Church), built from suitably black stone and surrounded by an elaborate cemetery. The Armenian church stands near the lower bridge on Tumanyan Poghots. There’s an interesting walk up Abovyan Poghots along the little valley of the Vanadzor River, past boating ponds, tall trees and shuttered sanatoriums to an overgrown **Dendropark** (Forest Reserve).

### Sleeping

**TOP CHOICE**

- **Maghay B&B**
  - 📞 091380305; marined61@rambler.ru; 21 Azatamartikneri Poghots; per person AMD7000; 🥢)

This very welcoming B&B has two rooms and a communal bathroom, plus a second building that has rooms with bathroom. Dinners are available and the food is a delectable array of traditional Armenian salads and main courses. The family often eats with the guests, which creates a homey atmosphere. Meals for nonguests are available upon request. To find it, take the lane that goes left of the Nshkhark Hatsatun restaurant; it’s at the end of the lane behind the big brown gate.
Hotel Argishti
(☏4 25 56; 1 Batumi Poghots; r incl breakfast AMD24,000; 🛋️) Three blocks from Hayk Hraparak on a quiet street you’ll find this reliable midrange hotel with high ceilings and a gated rose garden. The furnishings are new and comfortable, and there are some family rooms (for four people) for AMD35,000. It also has a restaurant, a bar and a billiards room.

Natasha & Lentrush’s Guesthouse
(☏4 63 43, 094914100; 24 Michuryan Poghots; per person AMD7000) A B&B with three rooms in an elegant two-storey villa with a garden. The couple’s daughter, Kristine, speaks English. To get there, head up Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, turn left at the army base and then take the first right after the Green House Hotel; number 24 is halfway up the street on the right, distinguished by a large grapevine and a little metal balcony.

Hotel Metropolina
(Gugark; ☏4 15 19; Hayk Hraparak; r per person AMD8000-15,000) This longtime Vanadzor hotel feels stuck in another age – USSR c 1978. A rickety elevator brings you up to the hotel and its scruffy rooms with temperamental plumbing. You may need to ask the ‘administrator’ to turn on the hot water before you hop in the shower. Some rooms have been renovated, which accounts for the cost difference between them. Note that the sign outside still displays the old name, the ‘Hotel Gugark’. Despite its shortcomings, it’s cheap, central and easy to find, and as a result sees a steady flow of budget travellers.

Eating
Oasis
(48 Tigran Mets Poghota; meals AMD2500; ☏10.30am-11pm; 🛋️) One of the most popular places in town, Oasis has an extensive
menu with most items pictured so you know what you are in for. There are many European dishes and some Caucasian regional fare.

**Jazzve**

(CAFE $)

(22 Tigran Mets Poghota; meals AMD1800-2500; (10.30am-11pm) This popular Armenian chain of coffee shops has made its way to Vanadzor. There's good coffee, desserts and light meals.

**Shwarma**

(FAST FOOD $)

(28 Tigran Mets Poghota; shwarma AMD400; (10am-11pm) Handy fast-food place serving shwarma and cold drinks.

**Information**

Tigran Mets Poghota has lots of moneychangers' signs as well as an ATM at the ACBA Bank (22 Tigran Mets Poghota). There are also internet clubs and internet telephone offices along Tigran Mets Poghota, including the Reborn Internet (Tigran Mets Poghota; per hr AMD300; (10am-10pm), near the corner with Batumi Poghots, and a post office. Wi-fi is available at Jazzve cafe and Oasis restaurant.

**Getting There & Around**

Vanadzor's avtokayan and train station (2.10 09) are at the bottom of Khorenatsi Poghots. Marshrutka to Yerevan (AMD1200, two hours, every 20 minutes from 7am to 7.30pm) take a 132km route via Spitak and Aparan to Yerevan. There's also transport to Dilijan (marshrutka or bus AMD500, up to one hour, hourly between 8am and 3.30pm), Stepanavan (AMD400, 45 minutes, 10am, 1pm, 2.30pm and 4.30pm), Gyumri (AMD800, one hour, 9.30am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm, 3pm and 4.30pm) and Alaverdi (AMD500, up to one hour, 10am, 11am, noon, 1.30pm, 2.30pm, 3.30pm and 4.30pm). A marshrutka to Tbilisi (AMD3500) leaves at 8.30am.

The churches of the Debed Canyon can be visited on a day trip by taxi for around AMD6000 to AMD8000 for seven or eight hours, negotiate with drivers based at the avtokayan. Alternatively, head to Alaverdi and visit the sites on public transport.

**Stepanavan & Around**

**STSÊPANÁVAN**

(256 / POP 14,000)

Stepanavan sits on a plateau above the steep-sided gorge of the Dzoragets River. It's fabled for its fine summer weather and, less proudly today, as one of the centres of Armenian communism. The area has been a site of settlement for millennia, on fertile fields above the river. The town is quiet, but it's a nice place for a wander (away from the usual monumental Soviet centre) and the locals are friendly.

An early cell of the Bolsheviks led by local lad Stepan Shahumian operated from hideouts and caves before the revolution. Shahumian died in a lonely corner of the Turkmenistan desert with the other 26 ‘Baku Commissars’ in 1918, later sanctified in countless memorials across the region. (The Baku Commissars were Bolshevik leaders in the Caucasus in the early days of the revolution.) A rather dashing Shahumian poses on a pedestal in the main square, Stepan Shahumian Hraparak.

**Sights & Activities**

The Stepan Shahumian Museum (Stepan Shahumian Hraparak; admission AMD100; (11am-7pm) has an art gallery, plus displays on Stepanavan’s history, and — excitement, comrades — the life story of the martyred commissar. It’s completely built around the Shahumians’ home, preserved like a doll’s house in a giant box.

On the north bank of the Dzoragets River about 3km east of Stepanavan is the dramatically sited fortress Lori Berd (berd means fortress). The road from Stepanavan passes hillocks in the fields, which are actually Bronze Age tumulus tombs. The fort sits on a promontory between the gorges of the Dzoragets and Misghana Rivers, with huge round towers and massive stone blocks along its exposed side. This was the capital of David Anhogin (949–1049) and later a
local power base for the Orbelians and Zakarians, powerful families of Armenian nobles. There is a story that the Mongols captured the fortress after the defenders became distracted by alcohol. There is an ancient cemetery nearby and a 14th-century bridge in the gorge below. A taxi from Stepanavan takes about 15 minutes and costs AMD1000. From the fort it’s a good idea to walk back to Stepanavan along a 4.5km trail in the steep-sided gorge. You can reach the trail from the north side of the fort.

The cool and tranquil 35-hectare Dendropark (admission free; ☛ daily May-Oct, Mon-Fri Nov-Apr) is a botanical garden near Gyulagarak village, 11km south of Stepanavan. Established in the 1930s, it has a vast array of conifers and deciduous trees. It’s especially popular in May when locals with respiratory problems come to inhale the pollen (not recommended for allergy sufferers!). A taxi should cost AMD2500 return. Cross the bridge in Gyulagarak and the park is about 2km away past the 6th-century Tormak Church.

You can make an interesting trip in this area by walking, hitching or bussing from Stepanavan to the village of Kurtan and staying overnight. The journey is 19km; to walk the whole route would take less than four hours. There are three or four basic B&Bs here; the most popular is run by Anahit & Vanichka (☏ 055454955), both of whom work at the local school. Activities include milking cows, making lavash and cheese, and if you are lucky, donkey rides.

If you are travelling from Stepanavan to Alaverdi, one sight worth visiting en route is the 7th-century monastery Hnevank, located 7km beyond Kurtan. The monastery has been ruined and rebuilt several times but most of what is visible today dates from the 12th century. It stands inside the gorge on the southern side of the canyon, near the confluence of the Gargar and Dzoragets Rivers.

Overnight camping trips in the mountains around Stepanavan were just getting underway at the time of research; inquire at the Stepanavan Information Centre.

Sleeping & Eating

There are three B&Bs on the north side of the river, costing around AMD7000 a night including meals. The hosts know the hospitality business but they may not speak English. Ask at the Information Centre for a recommendation.

Ruzanna Sargsyan B&B
B&B $ (☏ 093230320, 093226936; tag_sahakyan@yahoo.com; 9 Million Poghots; per person AMD7000) B&B offering a comfortable bedroom overlooking a garden. Ruzanna speaks Russian but her five daughters speak English and can provide information on the area (daughter Taguhi wrote a book about Stepanavan historical sites, and she can provide tours of the area with advance notice). Dinner is an additional AMD3000. It’s the house behind the Information Centre.

Information Centre
Guesthouse
GUESTHOUSE $ (☏ 2 21 58, 093196096; stepanavaninfo@gmail.com; 11 Million Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD7000/10,000; ☛) A convenient, low-priced option, the Information Centre has one room with bathroom, satellite TV and a laundry machine. The entrance is private so you don’t need to go through the Information Centre each time you enter.

Lori Hotel
HOTEL $ (☏ 2 40 50; 9 Nzdheh Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD10,000/12,000) This hotel near the town square has clean, modern rooms. It’s a little pricier than the B&Bs but you’ll get a bit more privacy. There is a billiards room downstairs.

Anahit Pensionat
ARMENIAN $$$ (☏ 2 25 78; meals AMD4000-5000; ☛) This Soviet sanatorium is in the forest on the ridge behind town. The restaurant here is probably the best in town, with unique Armenian cuisine including a tasty tandoori baked chicken. There is also a hotel on-site, and while the rooms are pretty neglected it does have a nice sauna.

Information

Several of the staff at the Stepanavan Information Centre (Language & Computer Centre; ☛ 2 21 58; www.stepanavaninfo.am; 11 Million Poghots) speak English and are happy to answer questions or perhaps arrange a tour for you. Internet (per hr AMD300) is available here as well as free wi-fi.

For more information see www.stepanavan.net or the blog www.sleeparoundstepanavan.blogspot.com.

There are banks and shops exchanging money around the main square and the shuca.
Getting There & Away
All transport departs from a parking lot near the main square. There are five marshrutky for Yerevan (AMD1500, three hours) between 7.30am and 3pm. For Vanadzor (AMD400, one hour) there are buses at 8.30am, 10.20am, noon and 4pm. Two daily buses go to Alaverdi (AMD700, 10.30am and 3pm). One daily bus goes to Gyumri (AMD1500, 1½ hours) at 2pm. Two marshrutky a day go to Tbilisi (AMD1500, 9am and 1pm). A taxi anywhere in town from the main square costs AMD400.

Debed Canyon
This canyon manages to pack in more history and culture than just about anywhere else in the country. Nearly every village along the Debed River has a church, a chapel, an old fort and a sprinkling of khatchkars somewhere nearby. Two World Heritage–listed monasteries, Haghpat and Sanahin, justly draw most visitors, but there are plenty more to scramble around. Soviet-era infrastructure is noticeable, however, with electric cables and railway lines running through the canyon, plus an ugly copper mine at Alaverdi. The road through the canyon is also busy, as this is the main artery linking Armenia to Georgia. Tourist facilities include a highly rated Tufenkian hotel and a few B&Bs around Alaverdi and Sanahin.

Sleeping
Avan Dzoraget Hotel
A 34-room luxury hotel run by the arty Tufenkian Group, near the confluence of the Debed and Dzoraget Rivers, midway between Vanadzor and Alaverdi. This is by far the best hotel in the region, with a spa, wi-fi, swimming pool and a restaurant, plus a bar in a Soviet bomb shelter.

Getting There & Away
Buses and marshrutky travel from Vanadzor to Alaverdi almost hourly between 10am and 4.30pm. But once you get to Alaverdi you’ll still need transport to visit all the monasteries. Sanahin is easy to reach on your own (using the cable car) and there are regular marshrutky to Haghpat and Odzun. Akhtala is the only tricky one, with just one daily marshrutka at 1.30pm. To see the sights quickly it makes more sense to hire a taxi from Vanadzor or Alaverdi. Expect to pay around AMD10,000 for the day. If your budget is tight or you prefer to explore the valley at a relaxed pace, hitching and bussing is still an option.

Kobayr
Don’t blink or you might miss this charmingly ruined 13th-century convent, hidden just off the Vanadzor–Alaverdi highway. The convent lies above the hamlet of Kobayr (also spelt Khober or Kober) – hidden behind trees near the road. Most travellers pass right by having never seen it.

When you spot the signs for Kobayr keep an eye out for the access road that heads up the mountain. Another landmark is the tiny Kobayr train station, a white structure on concrete pillars. Walk over the railway line and find the stone steps that lead into the hamlet. The path continues uphill through the woods (follow the metal pipe); at the metal memorial spring go right and follow the path up the stone steps – in total the climb takes 10 to 15 minutes.

The main building has a bell tower and some elegant, partially restored frescoes. At the time of writing locals had begun the process of restoring the monastery – given their painstakingly slow work they are likely to still be there by the time you read this. The work has left a temporary metal roof over the building – quite the eyesore if you were hoping for a good photo.

Kobayr is about 18km from Alaverdi and 33km from Vanadzor. As it’s on the main road you can hop on any passing bus or marshrutka between the two cities.

Dsegh
In Dsegh, 9km from the main road, you can find the birthplace of writer Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923). The home of his childhood has been converted to a museum (admission AMD200; 10am-5pm), with period furniture and mementos. The stone memorial outside the museum contains the heart of Tumanyan (the rest of his body is buried in Tbilisi). From Dsegh it’s 2km along a bumpy road to the edge of a steep canyon, and the footpath down to the ruins of the 8th-century Surp Grigor Bardzrakash Monastery. It’s heavily overgrown but considered a masterpiece of Armenian architecture. The lost-temple feeling is very evident, as if you’ve made an extraordinary discovery. The walk down the path takes less than 15 minutes. The village of Dsegh is attractive and affords stunning views of the surrounding mountains.
You can stay the night at the simple Mavneh B&B (094318711; per person AMD3000) next to the museum.

Two marshrutky per day come here from Vanadzor (AMD400, 8.30am and 4pm).

**ALVERDI ԱԼԱՎԵՐԴԻ**

The quiet, conservative mining town of Alaverdi is tucked into a bend in the canyon, with rows of apartment blocks and village houses cut into strata by the highway and the railway line. The town is rather poor with few jobs besides those at the half-open copper mine. A cable car (AMD50) climbs the lip of the inner canyon from the mine up to Sarahart and the nearby village of Sanahin. It runs according to work shifts at the mine – 7.45am to 9.45am, 11am to 2pm, 3pm to 7.30pm and 11.15pm to 11.45pm.

Tamara’s bridge, about 1km down from the bus stand, was built by Queen Tamar of Georgia. This humpbacked stone bridge was used by road traffic until 30 years ago. There are four kitten-faced lions carved on the stone railing. Legend tells that when a ‘real’ man finally walks across, the lions will come to life.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Iris Guesthouse**

GUESTHOUSE

(23839, 091088812; irinaisrayelian@gmail.com; per person AMD5000) Very popular among backpackers, this spacious house has several guestrooms and great views of the river. Owner Irina Israeliyan is an enthusiastic host and can prepare meals upon request: breakfast costs AMD2000 and dinner is AMD3000. The guesthouse is located right on the highway, about 2km south of Alaverdi (look for the small orange sign pointing to the left as you travel north).

**Flora**

ARMENIAN $$$

(meals AMD2500; 10am-10pm; ) Flora offers freshly prepared khoravats, kebabs, salads and sometimes dolma. To get here, cross Tamara’s bridge, climb the stairs on the far side and turn right for a short walk along a road.

### Getting There & Away

The bus and marshrutka stand is a parking bay off the main road – taxis wait here and further up the hill. A bus ticket and information window is located in the back of the lot. Marshrutky and buses are available to Stepanavan (AMD700, two hours, 10am and 3.30pm), Vanadzor (AMD500, up to one hour, seven buses between 8am and 4.45pm) and Yerevan (AMD1700, three hours, 8am, 9am, 12.30pm and 2pm).

There’s a bus to the Georgian border (AMD500) at 9am and 10am, or try to jump on a passing marshrutka. A taxi to Haghpat and Akhtala or to Odzun and Kobayr should cost between AMD4000 and AMD5000, or about AMD8000 to all of them.

**ODZUN ՕՁՈՒՆ**

Perched on a broad shelf that terminates at a sheer plunge down to the Debed River, Odzun is a substantial settlement of about 6000 with a magnificent 7th-century church in the centre of the village. The unusual monument next to it is a memorial but locals say it has the power to inspire fertility–approach with caution. The sturdy church features magnificent arches outside the main entrance. The custodian turns up sooner or later to unlock the church. There’s another church on the edge of the cliff. One kilometre south of Odzun, at the edge of the canyon, is the three-chambered Horomayri Monastery, the well-camouflaged remnants of which are visible below the cliff on the right.

If you’d like to spend the night here, try Alvard Nersisyan B&B (0536-16 96, 091760858; r per person AMD5000) located near the upper school (where Alvard is a teacher). It’s a large, comfortable house and breakfast is available for an additional AMD1000.

Buses come here from Alaverdi hourly between 10am and 5.30pm for AMD150. A taxi to and from Alaverdi should cost about AMD2000 return. Odzun is on the road to Stepanavan and a couple of times a day, around 10.30am and 3.30pm, an Alaverdi to Stepanavan bus passes through here.

**SANAHIN MONASTERY ՍԱՆԱՀԻՆ**

Moss-covered Sanahin is a fascinatingly detailed church and monastery complex, packed with ancient graves, darkened chapels and medieval gallery schools (study halls where pupils sat on benches on either side of a corridor). The inner sanctum of the Surp Astvatsatsin Church (Holy Mother of God Church), located in the middle of several buildings, is the oldest structure here, dating back to 928, while its adjoining gavit or entrance hall is one of the later buildings, built in 1211. A library was created at Sanahin in 1062, and a medical school flourished in the 12th century. Sanahin means ‘older than that one’, referring to its younger cousin in Haghpat.
From the cable-car station, walk up to the main square of Sarahart and take a left; after 900m you reach a T-junction in Sanahin village (separate from Sarahart). Sanahin Monastery is uphill, or follow the sign downhill to the Mikoyan Museum (admission AMD200; 10am-1pm & 2-6pm), a shrine to the Mikoyan brothers Anastas and Artyom. Anastas Mikoyan survived 60 years in the Politburo, outlasting even Stalin, and so deserves a museum. Artyom was the designer of the USSR’s first jet fighter in WWII, the MiG. There’s an early MiG jet outside the museum (no climbing allowed!). The charming administrator is unstoppable once she starts explaining every photo, medal and uniform on display – a tip is not required but would be a nice gesture after a tour.

**Sleeping**

In Sarahart, the best place to stay is Lilit Guesthouse (094671859; Apt 42, Bldg 2/30; per person AMD5000), located on the main square. Lilit speaks English, prepares a full breakfast and can arrange transport around the canyon.

**Getting There & Away**

The cable car (AMD50) from Alaverdi is a fun way to reach Sarahart, which is a little more than 1km from Sanahin Monastery. There are also marshrutky and taxis from Alaverdi to Sarahart (AMD800, 5km). You can also inquire about an early-morning bus that travels from Sarahart straight to the Bagratashen–Sadakhlo border. If you are hitching, the turn-off from Alaverdi is 1km south of town at the bridge. Hikers may want to walk from Sanahin to Haghpat, via the village of Akner. The 7km walk takes less than three hours.

**Haghpat Monastery**

This pearl of a monastery, perched on the lip of the Debed Canyon, has Unesco World Heritage status, along with Sanahin. This place has atmosphere and architectural splendour in abundance and the views around the canyon alone are worth the trip. Founded around 976 by Queen Khosrovunuch, who built Surp Nishan at the centre of the walled complex, it really took off in the 12th century with a magnificent bell tower, library and refectory. An inscription on the gavit of Surp Nishan reads in part: ‘You who enter through its door and prostrate yourself before the Cross, in your prayers remember us and our royal ancestors, who rest at the door of the holy cathedral, in Jesus Christ.’ Further around past a cute Surp Astvatsatsin chapel is the freestanding gavit built by Abbot Hamazasp in 1257, which has glorious acoustics. Uphill is the bell tower, and off by the wall a stone refectory. Khatchkars and study halls surround the central church.

**Gayane B&B** (253-6 06 18; per person incl breakfast AMD8000) is a surprisingly pleasant hotel with several rooms, brand-new furnishings, hot showers and meals. It’s a couple of kilometres back down the road from Haghpat Monastery (but before you reach the main road).

**Marshrutky** from Alaverdi run hourly between 10am and 5.30pm, costing AMD200. A taxi from Alaverdi to Haghpat and back, including wait time will cost AMD2000. Alternatively, walk to Sanahin Monastery if you are headed there anyway. It’s 7km via Akner village.

**Akhtala Monastery**

Situated at the edge of Akhtala village, this 13th-century complex is recommended for its fine decorative carvings and frescoes. A thick wall surrounds it. When you enter the wall, look left and you’ll see two large caves that were used for smelting copper. Historians aren’t sure if the church was dedicated to St Gregory (Surp Grigor) or the Apostles (Arakelots). Once inside, you can clearly see on the left side wall the image of bearded Persians, painted here so that invading armies would spare the church. Surrounding the church are a couple of well-preserved chapels and the ever-present graveyard with some new stones. Akhtala is about 18km northeast (downstream) of Alaverdi. A daily bus (AMD200) departs Alaverdi at 1.30pm. A taxi trip combined with a visit to Haghpat will cost about AMD4000. Alternatively, you can hitch to the signposted turn-off, then walk the final 3km up to the church (skirting around the edge of the copper-mine pond), which takes less than one hour.

**Gyumri**

A city of stately Russian architecture, cobbled streets and a bustling market, Gyumri is one of the most attractive towns in the country, and also one of the most tragic. The 1988 Spitak earthquake levelled large sections of the city and drove most of the survivors away. You can still see devastated buildings around town, as well as historic structures under careful reconstruction.
Twenty years after the quake, life is only beginning to normalise, although locals still seem to talk about it as though it occurred last week. Jobs have returned, permanent housing has replaced most of the cargo-container homes and the population has increased twofold.

The townsfolk of Gyumri have a distinctive accent with hints of western Armenian, and a famously ridiculous sense of humour in tandem with conservative social mores. Other Armenians like to tease Gyumritsis and a famously ridiculous sense of humour toive accent with hints of western Armenian, increased twofold.

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History
Gyumri was first settled around 400 BC, possibly by Greek colonists. The town was inhabited until the early 19th century, when the Russians moved in and built a large military garrison. It even received a visit from Tsar Nicolas I who, in 1837, renamed it Alexandropol after his wife. A steady influx of settlers arrived from Russia and the western Armenian cities of Kars and Erzurum (now within Turkey’s borders). As the third-largest city in the South Caucasus, after Tbilisi and Baku, Gyumri was an important trading post between the Ottoman Empire and the rest of Asia and Russia. As a transport hub it was a stop on the rail journey from Tbilisi to Tabriz.

In 1920 the Turkish-Armenian war ended here with the signing of the Treaty of Alexandropol, an event that ceased the Turkish advance on Yerevan. In Soviet times the border was shut and Alexandropol became known as Leninakan.

The Spitak earthquake on 11 December 1988 put paid to much of Gyumri’s historic splendour, as well as the myriad factories established here by the Soviets. Besides leveling large parts of the city and surrounding villages, it killed 50,000 people and made many more homeless. The botched recovery effort would haunt the city for years as successive winters passed without heating or electricity. Most of the city has been rebuilt, although a few patches remain under construction, most noticeably Amenaprkich Church in the city centre.

Sights & Activities
The historic core of town, the Kumayri neighbourhood, is between Vardanants Hraparak and the City Park. While not as intact as those of Goris, the buildings of Kumayri are of a finer standard. Gyumri’s atmospheric 19th-century Surp Astvatsatsin Church, locally called Yot Verk (Seven Wounds), stands on the northern side of the square. The battered and worn roof cones from an earlier incarnation of the church stand outside. On the south side of the square is the Amenaprkich Church (All Saviours Church), which is being ever-so-slowly restored to its pre-earthquake glory. Nearby, the shuka is something of an attraction with its endless piles of fruit, whirling coffee grinders and rows of cognac bottles.

A couple of blocks north of Yot Verk is the more modest Surp Nishan Church, built in 1870 and restored in 2003. The old buildings along Gorki Poghorts and by the City Park are worth wandering around – some buildings are shells; others have been restored to their prime. On Teryan Poghorts there is a 19th-century pyramid-shaped Russian army chapel with a peaked silver roof. The small park behind the chapel is actually a burial ground for 19th-century Russian soldiers who died fighting Ottoman Turkey.

Continuing over the hill for 500m or so brings you to the Sev Ghul or ‘black sentry’ fort. From here you can see the Mother Armenia statue on an adjacent hill, towards the Turkish border.

The Museum of National Architecture and Urban Life of Gyumri (47 Haqtanaki Poghorts; admission AMD500; 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a substantial building set back from the corner with Teryan Poghorts. The 1872 mansion of the Dzitoghtsyan includes fine furniture and authentic decor, plus an art gallery and displays on local history. An attached gallery (admission AMD500) of sculptures by Sergei Merkurov contains more Lenins and Stalins than you can shake a sickle at. The Museum of the Aslamazyan Sisters (232 Abovyan Poghorts; donations accepted; 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), on what was once Kumayri’s finest promenade, is another house-museum with a display of traditional furnishings and more contemporary artworks.

About 30km north of Gyumri, the village of Ashotsk offers a range of activities in both summer and winter, including kayaking, biking and cross-country skiing. Artur Mikayelyan (093352111; mika-ski@mail.ru) organises these activities and offers accommodation in his simple home. A weekend of food and lodging costs around AMD15,000.
Marshrutky from Gyumri run to Ashotsk hourly during the day. It’s a great way to experience rural Armenia and stay active too.

In the other direction, 40km south of Gyumri on the road to Yerevan, the region of Talin has scattered villages that are home to both western Armenians and Yezidi Kurds. The Yezidi practise their own unique religion (Yezidism), which combines traditional Kurdish beliefs and Islamic Sufi doctrine.
**Hotel Araks**

(3 58 15; www.arakshotel.am; 25 Gorki Poghots; s/d AMD225,000/30,000; $$$)

High ceilings, frilly drapes and a huge staircase create an old-world feel at this hotel. Renovations have brought the rooms to a respectable standard. Amenities include a sauna and an indoor pool, rare sights anywhere in Armenia. The hotel also has an Italian restaurant and a disco.

**Vanatur Hotel**

(5 07 14; 70a Gorki Poghots; r AMD20,000, deluxe AMD30,000, prices incl breakfast)

The centrally located Vanatur offers comfortable rooms with TV. Deluxe rooms have a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. The restaurant also serves lunch and dinner with a Georgian-inspired menu. Entrance to the hotel is on the side of the building.

**Donara Kazaryan B&B**

(5 59 15, 093450557; rose-varduhi@yandex.ru; 142 Frunze Poghots; r per person AMD6000)

Donara runs a homestay from her fine family house, with two chintzy bedrooms and a shared bathroom. Daughter Vartuhi speaks English and granddaughter Lily speaks German. It’s about 100m south of the Vanatur Hotel.

**Artush & Raisa B&B**

(3 08 15, 093350314; artushdavtyan@yahoo.com; 1-2 Ayvazovski Poghots; r per person incl breakfast AMD8000)

Artush, an English-speaking local guide, runs this homestay with wife Raisa and son Martin. Three guestrooms are available, plus a piano room and garden. Breakfast includes bread, cheese, sausage, scrambled egg, jams and yoghurt. Artush, an accomplished musician, is very knowledgeable about the area and can provide good travel advice. Call ahead and the owners will meet you at Charles Aznavour Hraparak (from here it’s a three-minute walk).

**Eating**

There are cheap street snacks available from shops and stalls at the shuka and a wide range of new and historic restaurants around town. Besides the following, the Georgian restaurant in the Vanatur Hotel is recommended, as well as pizza joints at the Hotel IsUz and Hotel Araks.

**Polos Mukuch**

(75 Jivani Poghots; meals AMD2500; 9am-10pm)

This establishment occupies a historic building and prepares a mix of Armenian and Georgian dishes – khinkali (spicy meat dumpling), dolma and kebabs are popular. Many locals prefer to sit around the bar willing Gyumri beer and potent shots of oghee.

**Phaeton Alek**

(47 Hghntanki Poghota; meals AMD2500-3500; 10am-7pm; ARMENIAN $$)

In the cellars of the Museum of National Architecture and Urban Life of Gyumri, this spot often hosts groups for an ‘ethnic’ experience, with old artefacts on the walls, and sometimes entertainment as well. Solo diners may not feel so welcome, but the food is hearty and good value.

**Cherkezi Zor**

(50 Tkhnutak, Fish Farm; meals AMD3000-5000; Bulvarayin Poghots; 10am-10pm)

You’ll be guaranteed fresh fish at the appropriately named Fish Farm. Pick what type of fish you want and the chef literally plucks your dinner out of the pool and sets it on the barbecue. It’s on the western side of town and a little hard to find. From the stadium, cross the opposite bank and walk north up the canyon for 1.3km. Alternatively, go by taxi.

**Information**

Shirak Tours (5 76 59; www.berlinhotel-gyumri.am; 25 Haghntanki Poghota) is a useful local tour company run from the Gastehaus Berlin by Alex Ter-Minasyan. He arranges day trips by car to Marmashen for about AMD14,000 and to Harichavank for AMD21,000. It also does walking tours and can arrange visits to artist studios.

There are several internet cafes and banks along Sayat-Nova and Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots, including the Ultra Net (7 Sayat-Nova Poghots; 24hr). UniBank has an ATM at Khaghaghutyan Hraparak. You can also use the internet at American Corner (68 Shirakatsi Poghots; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), located next to the City Hall.

**Getting There & Around**

Buses and marshrutky, including those to Yerevan (AMD1500, two hours, every 20 minutes 7am to 7pm), leave from the avtokayan on Tigranyan Poghots. Transport to Vanadzor (AMD8000, one hour) leaves almost hourly between 10am and 4.30pm. A marshrutka to Stepanavan (AMD1500, 1½ hours) leaves daily at 9am.

For Georgia, marshrutky travel daily to Tbilisi (AMD5200, 3½ hours, 10.30am) and to Akhalsikhe (AMD3500, four hours, 10am). These will only set off if there is a minimum of five passengers.
Gyumri is on the train line between Yerevan and Tbilisi; there is a train every day in one direction (on odd days it goes to Tbilisi). A seat to Tbilisi is AMD5610 and a cabin berth costs AMD8810. The train departs at 12.30am and arrives in Tbilisi 10 to 12 hours later. The elektrochka train to Yerevan departs at 7.55am daily, takes 3½ hours and costs AMD950. Call the station (02 10 02) to confirm schedules.

Shirak Airport, which is 5km southeast of town, is served by Vim Airlines (Moscow three times weekly), Donavia (Sochi and Rostov-on-Don weekly, August to October) and RusLine (Krasnodar twice weekly). There are plenty of ticket agencies in town. A taxi to the airport is around AMD1500.

Marmashen

The monastery at Marmashen is about 10km northwest of Gyumri, just past the village of Varambert in the wide gorge of the Akhuryan River. There are three churches hewn from lovely apricot-coloured tuff clustered together next to an orchard, plus the ruins and foundations of other structures nearby. One of the ruins is of an unusual circular church.

The biggest church, Surp Stepanos, was built between 988 and 1029, with a 13th-century gavit. An Italian team led restoration work in the 1960s, so intricately carved old church stones have been incorporated into newer building blocks. Beautiful carved tombs and khatchkars dot the land around the churches, and it’s a peaceful, rural environment typical of Shirak, with grassy horizons. The caretaker is here during daylight hours, and he can recite some of the inscriptions on the sides of the churches by heart.

A return taxi from Gyumri is about AMD3000. Make sure the driver understands that you want to see the monastery and not the nearby village of the same name. There are hourly buses from Gyumri’s avtokayan to Varambert (AMD150) between 9am and 7pm (look for the bus to Kaps).

Harichavank

Harichavank monastery is in the sturdy old town of Harich, about 4km from the town of Artik. This complex was the summer residence of the Catholicos of Echmiadzin for a period after 1850 and is surrounded by 19th-century buildings. Harichavank is one of those monasteries where 13th-century gavits and domes have dramatically expanded a 7th- or 8th-century chapel. There is some beautiful geometric stonework over the main church door and around the dome of the gavit. It is still an active place; a new seminary was opened in 2011.

Inside, the church’s caretaker can point out the anteroom/storeroom with a hole in the ceiling leading to a secret upstairs room. During times of invasion, the room was used to house women and children and sometimes even important local officials. A stone would be fitted exactly into the ceiling hole once everyone had climbed to safety.

Direct buses depart Gyumri’s avtokayan for Harichavank (AMD350, 50 minutes) at 8.30am, 11.20am and 3pm. Alternatively, take a marshrutka or bus to Artik (AMD200, 30 minutes, hourly), from where you can wait for another marshrutka to Harich, or take a taxi from Artik (AMD1800 return). If you have your own vehicle, the monastery is about 15km off the main Yerevan–Gyumri road.

If you are in the area, check out the well-preserved 7th-century Lmbatavank church southwest of Artik; it contains important early frescoes.

SOUTHERN ARMENIA

Armenia’s remote southern regions, between Karabakh to the east and the Azeri enclave of Naxçivan to the west, are linked to Yerevan by a single, vital highway. Vayots Dzor (Gorge of Woes) centres on the headwaters of the wine-growing Arpa valley. The name comes from a history of ruinous earthquakes across these mountainous valleys and cliffs. It’s a great area to explore off-the-beaten-track trails by foot, horse or 4WD jeep.

In the south, Syunik is full of ancient churches and monasteries, rustic villages making homemade fruit vodkas, forests and high pastures. The 19th-century town of Goris is a great base for visiting Tatev or Karabakh or as a break before the long haul to Iran.

Areni

Few grape varieties can thrive in Armenia’s climatic extremes, but the Areni grape does. Most of the country’s vineyards are on the Ararat Plain, but the valleys from the
village of Areni up to Yeghegnadzor comprise a quality wine-growing region.

Wineries open for tastings (daily in summer, 10am to 6pm) include Areni in the town of Areni, Ginetas at Arpi and Getnatep on the main highway at Yeghegnadzor. The Surp Astvatsatsin Church across the river from Areni sits on a shelf below a cliff. Getap, just up the Yeghegis Valley before Yeghegnadzor, is also a local wine-making centre.

Hotel Noy (%0872-55 45; Arpi; r AMD7000-18,000; ), on the main highway, is a motel-style complex with clean rooms, a bar, a buffet and a swimming pool. At the back of the hotel is a pleasant picnic spot by the river. There are frequent buses and marshrutky along the main highway.

Noravank ՆՈՐԱՎԱՆՔ

This church complex, by the 13th-century architect Momik, is a masterpiece both for its architecture and its dramatic setting. Noravank (New Monastery) was founded by Bishop Hovhannes in 1105, and was last restored in the 1990s. Climb the narrow stone stairs outside Surp Astvatsatsin Church (1339) to get a closer look at its dome. Astvatsatsin is also known as Burtelashen, after its patron, Burtel Orbelian, who is buried here with his family. Historians say the church is reminiscent of towerlike burial structures created in the early years of Christianity. There’s a wonderful carving of Christ flanked by Peter and Paul above the door.

The smaller Surp Karapet Church (1227) next to Surp Astvatsatsin is the original shrine built by the miracle-working Bishop Hovhannes. Noravank once treasured a piece of the True Cross stained with the blood of Christ, acquired from a mysterious stranger. The side chapel of St Gregory includes a carved lion-human tombstone dated to 1300.

There are picnic spots and springs around Noravank, as well as an excellent restaurant by the car park. The valley really warms up in the middle of a summer’s day, so come early, or late in the afternoon. During medieval summers the monks of Noravank retired to a mountain retreat. The site is at its most spectacular around sunset when the reddish hues of the cliffs are accentuated by the setting sun.

Noravank features on many travel-agency tours from Yerevan, about 90 minutes away by road – many combine a visit with a stop at Khor Virap and a winery. Public transport from Yerevan or Yeghegnadzor takes you as far as the turn-off on the highway, 6km from Noravank. Get out at the Edem restaurant and hitch the rest of the way, a fairly easy process on weekends.

About 4km from the turn-off to Noravank is an unusual cave-cake dug out of the side of the cliff. There is no sign, but you’ll see the metal grating between the boulders on the right side of the road.

Yeghegnadzor & Around ԵՂԵԳՆԱՁՈՐ

An overgrown country town built on twisting lanes that wind into the hills, Yeghegnadzor (yeh-heg-nadzor) is the peaceful administrative centre of Vayots Dzor. The town is a mainly Soviet-era confection of wide civic spaces and tufa apartment blocks. A few small factories (eg a diamond-cutting plant) have opened, but remittances and agriculture provide the biggest incomes. There isn’t much to see in the town itself, but it does make a good base from which to explore the region – you could easily spend two or three days here in between trips to Yeghegis village, Noravank and the wineries in Areni and Spitakavor.

The town has moneychangers, a UniBank with an ATM (accepting Visa cards) and the Arpa Net Internet Café (per hr AMD300; 9am-9pm) just downhill from the avtokayan.

Sights

The Vayots Dzor Regional Museum (4 Shahumian Poghots; admission AMD200; 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) in the centre of town describes local history but was closed for renovation at the time of research.

There is a good walk from town down to the river and a 13th-century stone bridge, designed by the same architect who built Noravank. To get there, walk down the highway, turn right and walk for 400m, then turn left down a dirt track (just before the 256km post) and follow it for 1.3km to the bridge.

Another possible diversion is the Museum of Gladzor University (admission AMD500; 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) in the village of Vernashen, 5km uphill from the Yeghegnadzor avtokayan. The museum has displays on monasteries across the country, plus old
manuscripts and descriptions of Armenia’s various schools and universities. The museum is housed inside a 17th-century church called Surp Hagop. If the museum is closed, get the key from the family in the house in front of the museum. There are buses to Vernashen at 10am, noon, 2.30pm, 3.30pm and 5.30pm from the avtokayan.

The Vernashen museum marks the end of the village and just past it is a T-junction. The road to the left leads to Spitakavor Monastery, about 9.5km along a winding dirt track for vehicles or 5km along a more direct walking path. To find the trail, walk through the village and carry on straight up the western bank of the gorge past a small dam on the river (ignore the vehicle road, which switches back). The 20th-century Armenian military commander Garegin Nzhdeh was buried at Spitakavor in 1987 (his remains were secretly taken to Armenia from his grave in Russia). Nzhdeh fought in the Balkan Wars against the Ottoman Empire and commanded a force of Armenian volunteer fighters in WWI. In 1921 he was prime minister of the short-lived Republic of Mountainous Armenia before it was swallowed up by the USSR.

The Boloraberd fortress crowns a rocky crest across from the monastery. Some hikers have tried to walk over the pass and down to Yeghegis but the other side of the mountain is a steep and dangerous hike.

Back at the T-junction, the road to the right winds for 6km to Tanahati Vank. The impressive main Surp Stepanos Church was built by the Orbelians. There are significant stone reliefs of animals on the exterior of the church, including the crest of the Orbelians (a bull and a lion) on the tambour. All around the church are ruins that once made up the actual site of Gladzor University.

Another 3.5km along the road leads to the Monastery of Arkaz. It is well known
In 2008 an archaeologist exploring a cave in Vayots Dzor found an ancient leather shoe buried under a pile of animal dung. She estimated that the shoe was around 700 years old and dated from the Mongol period. But once the shoe reached the laboratory a new story began to unfold. Testing dated the shoe to around 3500 BC, thus making it the world’s oldest leather shoe (300 years older than a shoe found on a frozen mummy in the Alps in 1991).

The shoe is about a women’s size 7 (US), designed for the right foot and is made from leather sewn together like a moccasin. It was found stuffed with grass as if its owner wanted to maintain the shape of the shoe. (The whereabouts of the left shoe are unknown.) The shoe is now on display at the State Museum of Armenian History in Yerevan.

The cave where the shoe was found is known as Areni-1 and is located not on some distant mountaintop, but rather just behind the Edem restaurant, where the main southern highway intersects with the road to Noravank. At the time of writing the cave was closed to casual tourists as researchers continue to excavate. However, it’s possible that the cave will reopen for tourism during the lifetime of this book; inquire at the information centre in Vayk (p177).

Areni-1 is just one of thousands of caves around Areni and Arpi, some of which contain a kilometre or more of chambers. About 1km up the canyon from Areni-1 is Magili Karandzav, one of the deepest caves in the area and significant as the home of a large colony of fruit bats; Neolithic-era stone tools have also been found here.

Some caves are filled with a wonderful collection of stalactites and stalagmites, including the Arjeri, Mozrov and Jerovank caverns. These caves are not for the inexperienced, so it’s best to visit on a guided tour (the caves are also locked to casual visitors). Travel agencies in Yerevan (p142) can arrange cave exploration tours or contact Gor Hovhannishyan (☏093265576), a member of the Armenian Extreme Club.

Sleeping

Arpa HOTEL $$
(☏2 06 01; www.arpatour.com; 8/1 Narekatsky Poghots; s/d AMD10,500/16,500, deluxe AMD19,500, all incl breakfast; ©) This new hotel is the best in town. Rooms are small but modern, clean and well appointed with satellite TV and wi-fi. The friendly management speaks English and can provide travel assistance. A filling breakfast of potatoes, crepes and eggs is included. It’s located next to the avtokayan.

Gohar’s Guest House GUESTHOUSE $$
(☏2 33 24; 44 Spandaryan Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD8000/15,000; ©) Gohar Gevorgyan offers rooms in her large, comfortable home. It’s set in a lovely spot in the upper part of town, with great views of the valley. Rooms are clean and modern and meals are available upon request. Gohar can arrange a 4WD taxi if you want to head to some off-road destinations. To get there, walk up Spandaryan Poghots towards the football field. When you reach the T-junction, turn left and then a quick right (so that you are walking next to the field) and walk 200m to Gohar’s house. Call ahead as the place fills up fast.

Artak & Ruzan Guest House GUESTHOUSE $$
(☏2 22 75, 094878990; 5 Spandaryan Narpansk; s/d incl breakfast AMD8000/15,000) Ruzan (a history teacher) and her husband run this quiet, comfortable guesthouse, surrounded by a garden. There are four rooms, hot water and excellent food. To find it, walk past Gohar’s Guest House and after about 150m take the second left up a short hill to house number 5. Note that the house is on Spandaryan Narpansk, not Spandaryan Poghots.

Eating & Drinking

If you have your own transport, there are several riverside restaurants along the main highway that set a good Armenian table for around AMD2500 per person, including kebabs, khoravats (including venison and fish), salads and drinks. They are open
8am until late outside of winter. A popular place for vehicles to stop is Karitak (10am-8pm), about 5km west of town on the road to Yeghegnadzor. Edem Café (10am-midnight), on the road to Noravank, is another excellent choice; it has live music from 9pm on weekends.

In the various seasons there are roadside stalls selling watermelons, fruit, honey, nuts and homemade wines and conserves.

Aygi (11am-midnight May-Oct) This popular outdoor cafe has simple dishes like pizza and khachapuri. It’s a good spot for a cold beer or ice cream. It’s located next to the Ferris wheel, about 150m past the Arpa Hotel.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutky and buses to nearby villages leave from the avtokayan in the centre of town, next to Arpa hotel. A daily bus to Jermuk (AMD700, 40 minutes) leaves at 2pm. There are marshrutky to Vayk (AMD200, 20 minutes) twice hourly between 9am and 5pm. Marshrutky to Yerevan (AMD1200, 90 minutes to two hours, hourly 8am to 6pm) usually leave from the junction with the main highway. Space permitting, you can also flag one down here to go to Goris. As yet there is no public transport to Martuni on the shore of Lake Sevan, but hitching is not too much of a struggle. Taxis can be hired near the avtokayan for AMD100 per kilometre.

Yeghegis & Around

The beautiful Yeghegis Valley (yer-ghiz) is surrounded by towering peaks and contains a rare concentration of churches. This and the surrounding valleys are well worth exploring for a day or two.

To reach the area, turn north off the Yerevan–Goris highway at Getap and after 12km turn right (east) towards Shatin village. The sights are well signposted off the road.

About 2km up from Shatin village, a road branches up the valley to the west towards Artabuyk. About 1km past the village of Artabuyk a sign points to the right for the 10th-century Tsakhatskar Monastery, a crumbling agglomeration of churches and old khatchkars. From the stream, continue up the main track to the right (the side of the valley with the power poles); the monastery eventually comes into view on the left.

From the monastery, head back down the way you came and at the fork in the path head left up the slope to Smbataberd fortress. The stretch up to the fort takes about 30 minutes. On the other side of Smbataberd you can look down on the Yeghegis Valley.

Yeghegis village is reached by taking the right fork after Shatin (ie away from Artabuyk). The village looks as though it’s been inhabited forever; it has a couple of churches, including the very unusual Surp Zorats, where worshippers gathered before an outdoor altar. It’s believed this courtyard was created so that horses and soldiers could be blessed before going off to battle.

Across the river from the village, a metal footbridge leads to an 800-year-old Jewish cemetery – Hebrew inscriptions are clearly visible on some of the grave markers. The engravings are biblical verses and the names of the deceased. Prior to the discovery of the cemetery there had been no evidence of Jews inhabiting Armenia. The cemetery was in use for about 80 years – the oldest tombstone is dated 1266 and the newest is dated 1346. Researchers theorise that this community of Jews arrived from Persia, having travelled up the Silk Road. The reason for their disappearance remains a mystery.

The next village up the valley is Hermon, where a rough track north up the valley (on the left) leads to Arates and Arates Vank, a monastery with three churches (from the 7th to the 13th centuries). Arates is about 10km beyond Yeghegis.

Public transport to the area is limited. Each day a couple of buses go from Yeghegnadzor to Yeghegis, Hermon and Artabuyk. You could catch a bus one way and hitch or walk back. At the time of writing buses to Yeghegis departed at 7.30am from the bottom of the hill and 4.30pm from the avtokayan. Taxis from Yeghegnadzor cost the standard AMD100 per kilometre.

The only place to stay in the area is the simple Lucy Guest Camp at Hermon, which was under construction at the time of research. Managers at the camp were planning to offer activities such as hiking and horse riding.

Vayk & Around

The rugged hills and valleys around this overgrown village hide lots of artfully positioned churches, monasteries and chapels.
from the 8th to the 12th centuries. Heading 6km up the valley, the first turn-off left leads 10km north to Herher and a cluster of churches at the Surp Sion Monastery 1km beyond it. There are the ruins of Kapuyt Berd (Blue Fortress) and khatchkars around Herher as well.

The Tourism Centre Hotel (9 28 09; vayktour@info.am; r per person AMD5000-8000; @) is conveniently located on the highway. It has 24 comfortable rooms, great rates, English-speaking staff and wi-fi. As indicated by the name, the hotel also has a regional information centre and can direct you to B&Bs in the region, including one in Herher.

You’ll find marshrutky to Yerevan (AMD1400, less than two hours, every two hours 8am to 7pm) from the main road.

Jermuk ՋԵՐՄՈՒ Կ

This small resort town, 2080m above sea level on the upper Arpa River, was popular in the USSR as a vacation spot for mineral-water treatments and hot springs, some of them very hot. The landscape around Jermuk is very pretty, and excellent for walks and hikes.

The spa business gets most of its customers in the July and August holidays, and largely hibernates outside this season. Some of its sanatoriums have immersion pools and treatment areas. The spa attendants take their job seriously – in the old days people would sign up for 18-day courses with medically supervised immersions in Jermuk’s waters.

Open to the public is the Gallery of Waters, with a facade of archways and a pleasant view. Water runs into stone urns from pipes set in the wall and the temperature of the water is printed next to its pipe. The various waters are said to have different properties, good for curing stomach and liver problems, heart disease and cancer.

The Armenia Hotel and Health Spa (9am-5pm) has hot baths, mud treatments, sauna, hydrotherapy rooms and various other treatment rooms. Treatment costs range between AMD600 and AMD2500. Even better, try the Jacuzzi at the Olympia Health Spa across the road.

The Jermuk Ski Resort (Nov-Mar) next to the town is smaller than the one in Tsaghkadzor but the facilities are new and the equipment in good condition. It makes for a fun day of swishing down the slopes if you happen to be here in season.

The town is entered via a bridge spanning a deep gorge high above the Arpa River; turn left at the end of the bridge, and a few hundred metres along is the taxi and bus stop that serves as a main square of sorts. The Haypost and Telecom offices are here. Just north of the taxi stand is the Armenia Hotel and Gallery of Waters. South of the taxi stand is the short main road with shops and an internet café.

Sleeping & Eating

There are lots of informal pensions and spas open in July and August, but options thin out in the winter. Prices following represent low season – in July and August prices can double based on demand.

Nairi Hotel HOTEL $ (2 20 08; www.jermuknairi.am; 5 Myasnikyan Poghots; per person AMD6000-8000) Jermuk’s newest hotel has functional rooms with modern furnishings and a big patio in the back that overlooks the canyon. If you don’t mind somewhat gaudy colour schemes (rooms range from lime green to maroon), it’s probably the best-value place in town. Breakfast is an additional AMD2000.

Armenia Hotel HOTEL $$$ (2 12 90; 2 Myasnikyan Poghots, s/d incl 3 meals AMD20,000/40,000) Located next to a scenic park and the Gallery of Waters, the Armenia is the best hotel in town. However, it also doubles as sanatorium so it can be a little creepy to see doctors and patients shuffling about in smocks. The price includes a range of diagnostic treatments – just keep reminding yourself it’s all part of the Armenia experience.

Gndevank Restaurant ARMENIAN $$ (meals AMD2500; 10am-midnight; E) This khoravats place stands out for its succulent grilled meats. The fresh-fruit dessert also deserves a special mention. Coming across the main bridge, turn right (away from the centre); it’s about 400m straight ahead in a wood-fronted building.

Getting There & Away

Jermuk is 177km from Yerevan, about two hours by the main highway and then 26km off the main highway on a spur road. In the low season there is one marshrutka to Yerevan each day.
Sisian ՍԻՍԻԱՆ 283 / POP 18,000
Sisian sits on a high plateau where it snows as late as March or April, and the autumn ends early here too. This quiet country town has a core of early-20th-century buildings and is divided into two districts by the wide Vorotan River.

The region was inhabited long before the town was built, evidenced by nearby Neolithic observatories and animal petroglyphs. Some examples have been gathered in the town’s karadaran (stone museum) park.

Sisian is mostly laid out on a grid and is small enough for walking around. The centre of town is on the northern side of the Vorotan. Marshrutky leave from the junction on the northern end of the bridge. The main street, Sisakan Poghots, runs parallel to the river, one block inland.

One end of Sisakan has a Soviet memorial cheerfully celebrating the crushing of the Dashnaks in 1920; from here a road swings to the right and up to Sisavan Church.

Sights
Originally built in the 6th century, Sisavan Church was restored as recently as the 20th century. It combines an elegant square-cross floor with some striking sculptures of royal and ecclesiastical patrons inside and out. Inside there’s a display of microsculptures by local artist Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan. Seen through a microscope, one features 17 images of the cross on a human hair coated with metal.

The road up from town passes a Soviet war memorial with a Karabakh War monument – local men were some of the first to volunteer to join their kin over in the next mountain range when the war began, and paid a heavy price for it.

The karadaran park in town one block from Sisakan Poghots gathers together stone carvings from different millennia, with sarcophagi, phallus stones, ram stones and megaliths. You can spot the evolution of the pagan khatchkars to rough stone crosses and finally medieval Armenian khatchkars.

Facing the park is the Museum of History (admission AMD500; ☎️10am-5pm Tue-Sat), with some carpets and ethnographical displays beside maps and historical information, mostly labelled in Armenian with some English. It also has some interesting photos taken after an earthquake levelled the town in 1931.

On the main road, a few doors west of Hotel Lalaneer, is the Sisian Art School (☏ 091 584 485; admission free), run by local artist Ashot Avagyan. Visitors are welcome to wander through the studios and Ashot is happy to show off his work. The school organises an annual local arts festival on 11 August that attracts artists and musicians from around the country.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Dina
Hotel Lalaneer
Hotel Kitchen

Jira Hars

Aminhanyan Shavash B&B

Hotel Nenna

Hotel Lalaner

Hotel Lalaneer

Hotel Taka
**Information**

An internet club is opposite Hotel Dina and a better one is opposite Hotel Lalaner. You can change money at stores and kiosks near the main bridge.

*Sasun Badasarian* (📞093821 472) is a guide who arranges jeep trips up the mountains to Ughtasar.

**Getting There & Away**

There are three *marshrutky* to Yerevan (AMD2000, four hours, 10am, 12.30pm and 2.30pm) and one to Goris (AMD800, 45 minutes, 9.30am) each day, where the bridge meets Israeliyan Poghots (along the north bank). Taxis wait at this junction too. There’s also a bus stop at the turn-off from the Yerevan–Goris road into town, where people often wait for rides.

Local tours can be negotiated directly with the taxi drivers or through one of the hotels. A trip to Shaki Waterfall or Zorats Karer costs about AMD700 to AMD1000, a ride to Goris AMD5000, and a longer tour to Tatev Monastery and back about AMD9000.

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**Around Sisian**

Two hundred and twenty upright basalt stones up to 3m high set along sweeping lines and loops, some punctured with sight holes aligned with stars, make up the ancient site of *Zorats Karer* (also known as Karahund) or Carahunge, which means ‘speaking stones’). The site, situated on a rise above the river plains ringed by mountains, is dotted with tombs dated to 3000 BC. The astronomical design of Zorats Karer is most evident at the solstices and equinoxes. Lines of stones define an egg-shaped area with a burial tumulus in the centre, with a north arm stretching 170m and a southern alley 160m long. About 70 stones are pierced with finger-sized holes. The builders had a deep knowledge of astronomy, including the zodiac and the lunar phases, combined perhaps with worship for stars such as Sirius. The site won’t blow you away (there’s no balancing stones like you’d see at Stonehenge) but the pleasant walk here from town and excellent panoramas make it a worthwhile trip. Zorats Karer is 6km north of Sisian, signposted on the left about 700m before the main highway. The stones are in the fields about 400m from the turn-off. It’s a pleasant one-hour walk from Sisian or a short drive in a taxi (AMD1000 including waiting time).

The *Shaki Waterfall* lies about 4km from Sisian near the village of the same name. About 18m high, it sluces down a wide expanse of stones above the Shaki River. The water is used for Shaki’s hydroelectric power station, so the waterfall isn’t always ‘on’.

About 6km down the Vorotan River from Sisian in *Aghitu* (Aghudi) village is a distinctive 7th-century *tower-tomb*. There are dragon stones nearby from the 2nd to 3rd century BC. The road continues as the canyon deepens past Vaghatin to *Vorotnavank*, 12km from Sisian on the south side of the Vorotan. Vorotnavank is a striking 9th- to 11th-century fortress and church complex built by Queen Shahandukht and her son Sevada.

The petroglyphs of *Ughtasar* (Pilgrimage Mountain) in the mountains north of Sisian are even older than Zorats Karer. They lie at an altitude of 3300m around a lake on Mt Tsghuk, accessible between June and September – and even then only if it’s not a cold summer. Carvings of leaping, dancing animals and hunters adorn rocks and boulders everywhere around the small lake. It’s a haunting place surrounded by isolated peaks, and you can only wonder why ancient people would hike to such an inhospitable place to leave their mark on stone. The tracks are steep, rocky and hopeless without a jeep (Villis) and a guide. Sasun Badasarian (see p180) can probably get you up here, with some advance notice. A round trip will cost around AMD20,000 to AMD25,000 per vehicle for a trip of eight to 10 hours – the ascent takes at least three hours.

The ruins of *Tanahati Vank* are 17km southwest of Sisian past the Tolors Reservoir. A university was established here in 1280. Called Karmir (Red) Vank by locals, Tanahat Monastery is on a high promontory by a gorge. The monks here were so pious and ascetic they refused soup, cheese and oil, eating only vegetables, hence the name Tanahat, meaning ‘deprived of soup’.

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**Goris** 🇦🇲

The endlessly winding roads that leap through the gorges over the mountains of Syunik come to a major junction at Goris, making this an inevitable stop between Yerevan, Stepanakert and the Iranian border. But it’s hardly a place to pass through – Goris is a destination in itself. Boasting fine stone houses with arched windows and balconies on tree-lined avenues,
it's a great place for strolling and chatting with locals. Goris is known for its variety of homemade fruit oghee including the deliciously potent mulberry and Cornelian cherry (hone) oghee – explore the shuka on Syuniki Poghots or ask at a B&B to find some.

There is plenty to see around the town too, including a weird cave city on the other bank of the river and equally bizarre sets of volcanic pillars that spear through the steep grassy slopes above town. Longer day trips can be made to Tatev, the Vorotan Canyon and the caves at Khndzoresk.

There is a fine selection of hotels and B&Bs in town, plus a couple of museums and a busy little shuka. All this plus the scenic surrounds make Goris a fine place to unwind for a couple of days.

**Sights**

Locals say the cave shelters and stables of Old Goris carved into the hillside on the east side of town were built and inhabited in the 5th century. Several trails lead up over a saddle where there are more volcanic pinnacle clusters to explore. Many of the rooms are linked together, and arched ‘shelves’ grace some walls. The caves are sometimes used to house cattle – watch your step.

The Museum of Axel Bakounts (41 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; admission AMD200; ☑10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a typical Goris villa with stone walls and a veranda looking onto a courtyard. The museum was the home of writer Axel Bakounts (or Bakunts), who died in Stalin’s 1937 purges. It features his personal effects and furnishings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The friendly director of the museum, Mikaelyan Kajik, may invite you into his office to sample some of the local mulberry vodka.

The Museum of Ancient History (Ankakhutyan Poghots; admission free; ☑10am-5pm) displays Bronze Age knives, traditional costumes, carpets and other locally found artefacts. The most unique item is a five-sided stone with carved faces that represent the sun, moon, water, earth and sky, believed to date back 4000 years. The museum is dimly lit and everything is labelled in Armenian, but it's still worth a look.

About 2km northwest of the avtokayan is the village of Verisheen, which houses the ancient Surp Hripsime Church. The barrel-vaulted structure saw restoration in 2007 and is believed to have been built on top of an old pagan temple. Continuing on the main road northwest you’ll spot plenty of cave dwellings by the road.

**Sleeping**

**TOP CHOICE** Mirhav Hotel

HOTEL $$$

(2 46 12; 100 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; s/d/tr incl breakfast AMD17400/21600/26700; ☑️). This tastefully designed boutique hotel is probably the best place to stay in southern Armenia. The brick floors, antiques hanging from the walls, wood furnishings and stone facade all blend with Goris’ historic character. While providing a rustic atmosphere it maintains modern bathrooms, cable TV and internet. It’s run by an Iranian-Armenian named Shahen Zeytourtchian, a retired surgeon who speaks five languages including English.

Hostel Goris

B&B $

(2 18 86. 093287902; jirmar28@freenet.am; 55 Khorenatsi Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000; ☑️). This hostel is run by the affable Jirayr Martirosyan, an accomplished artist. There are two rooms, one with three beds and one with a double bed that is suitable for couples; the atmosphere is homely and old-fashioned but comfortable enough. There is a hot shower, freshly brewed coffee and a filling breakfast. The hostel is well signed and right next to the partially restored Hotel Olympia.

Khachik Mirakyan B&B

B&B $$$

(2 10 98. 091204012; www.khachikbb.com; 13 Davit Bek Poghots; s/d/tr incl breakfast AMD11000/15000/21000; ☑️). Situated near the park where Davit Bek Poghots meets Syuniki Poghots, Khachik Mirakyan B&B is welcoming, comfortable and the owners speak English. There are seven bedrooms with private bathrooms (and excellent hot showers), and a great balcony for resting up. On the downside, a constant parade of vehicles along this stretch of road disturbs an otherwise peaceful location.

Hotel Gyorez

HOTEL $

(3 00 12; Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD7000/13000; ☑️). Clean, functional and somewhat bland hotel with a decent location near the river. It’s excellent value for solo travellers who want a private room. No English is spoken but the manager is friendly enough.

Lyova Mezhlumyan B&B

B&B $

(2 16 00, 091753010; miyova@rambler.ru; 7 Makichi Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000; ☑️).
A fine stone house close to the Vararik River. It is 200m east of the main square and well signed. The large home includes six bedrooms, a spacious living room and nice bathrooms. However, it’s not as well maintained as some other places in town. Mrs Mezhlumyan’s daughter Nairi speaks English.

Andranik B&B

(2 16 39; sevadamalincyan@mail.ru; Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000) This centrally located guesthouse consists of three clean and quiet rooms. It’s in a large stone house with a big garden out back. No English is spoken.

Eating & Drinking

The best place to eat in Goris is the restaurant at the Mirhav Hotel, which serves a variety of items including rice pilaf and pork chops. However, the kitchen only does advance orders so it can take up to an hour to prepare a meal. You can probably kill a little time while you wait by visiting the traditional lavash factory, right next to the hotel.

KS restaurant

(2 16 39; sevadamalincyan@mail.ru; Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000) This centrally located guesthouse consists of three clean and quiet rooms. It’s in a large stone house with a big garden out back. No English is spoken.

KS restaurant

(2 16 39; sevadamalincyan@mail.ru; Mesrop Mashtots Poghots; per person incl breakfast AMD7000) This centrally located guesthouse consists of three clean and quiet rooms. It’s in a large stone house with a big garden out back. No English is spoken.

Turbaza Café

This lush garden-cum-cafe overlooks Old Goris. It’s a popular place for drinks but snacks are also served, including shwarma and boiled crayfish.

Shopping

Locally produced handicrafts are available at the Goris Women’s Centre (grcentre@rambler.ru; 26a Komitas Poghots), which supports
a cooperative of low-income handicraft makers. **Armenian Souvenirs** (cnr Mesrop Mashtots & Garegin Nzhdeh Poghots) is another good place to browse antiques and shop for local handicrafts.

### Information

**The Tourist Office** (2 26 50; goristourism@gmail.com; 4 Ankakhutyan Poghots; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) can provide basic tips on things to do around Goris. The English-speaking manager Anush is helpful but sometimes out of the office. It is located just south of the park in the centre of town.

**Tatev Link** (2 22 23; tatevlink@gmail.com; Gusan Ashoti Poghots) organises a variety of trips around Goris and Tatev, including horse-riding, biking and hiking trips.

The banks, the **Haypost office** (19 Syuniki Poghots), restaurants and shops are within a few blocks of the main square. The **Armeconom-bank** (4 Mesrop Mashtots Poghots) has an ATM that accepts MasterCard.

**The Zakyus Internet cafe** (Gushan Ashoti Poghots; per hr AMD400; 10am-midnight) just west of the taxi stand is clean and has a good connection. Wi-fi is available in almost every hotel and B&B and you can also get wi-fi at the Tourist Office.

### Getting There & Away

There are three main stands for onward transport. The old avtokayan is on the highway into town (where the highway continues to Yerevan in one direction and Stepanakert in the other direction).

Most marshrutka and taxis gather on Syunik Poghots, near the post office. The **marshrutka** to Kapan leaves from a corner near the Tourist Office.

At the time of writing the **marshrutka** service from Goris to Yerevan was indefinitely suspended. You’ll most likely have to take a share taxi (per person AMD3500), which leave when full from the post office. Arrive as early as possible and if nothing is available, ask at the Tourist Office to help arrange a ride.

One daily marshrutka departs for Stepanakert (AMD1500) at 10.30am from the top of Mesrop Mashtots Poghots. If you miss this one, you can wait at the same spot for a marshrutka to pass through from Yerevan (four or five will pass per day in the afternoon). A taxi to Stepanakert, 104km away, will cost AMD10,000.

Marshrutka to Kapan (AMD1500, two hours, noon and 3pm) depart from the corner of Komitas and Syunik Poghots.

The marshrutka to Sisian (AMD800) departs at 1.30pm from the town square. Buses for nearby villages, including Tatev (AMD500, 3pm), leave from the shuka on Syunik Poghots.

### Around Goris

There are several historic villages around Goris, many with ancient artificial caves that are still used as stables.

**Khndzoresk**, 10km east of Goris, perches above the ruins of Old Khndzoresk, which was dug into a grassy gorge of soft volcanic sandstone. Whole walls of rock are dotted with caves; you could spend several hours exploring the area.

There are more caves around **Tegh** on the Stepanakert road, and around **Hartashen**, a tough but rewarding 3km on foot from Old Goris or about 8km by road. A smattering of standing stones similar to the ones at Zorats Karer is visible from the main road towards Sisian.

The **Sev Lich Nature Reserve**, 14km northeast of town on the shoulder of Mt Mets Ishkhanasar, protects a lake (Sev Lich means ‘Black Lake’) at 2666m. The track up requires a jeep and a guide. The reserve can also be reached from Sisian.
Tatev ՏԱԹԵՎ
284 / POP 600
Built on a fairy-tale natural fortress of rock on the edge of the Vorotan Canyon, Tatev is as jaw-dropping as any of the World Heritage–listed churches in Lori. The views down the gorge reach to the peaks of Karabakh.

The bishops of Syunik built the main church of Surp Poghos-Petros (St Paul and St Peter) in the 9th century to house important relics. There are faint signs of frescoes, intricate carvings and portraits of the main donors on the northern side. The 11th-century Surp Grigor Church nestles next to it, and there’s a masterfully miniaturised chapel above the gatehouse. The fortifications, added in the 17th century, have been restored and are full of dining halls, towers and libraries. At the monastery’s peak some 600 monks lived and worked at Tatev, and national icon Surp Grigor Tatevatsi (St Gregory of Tatev, 1346–1409) is buried here.

In the courtyard, look for the 8m octagonal pillar topped by a khatchkar. The 9th-century monument is said to have predicted seismic activity (or the roar of hooves by approaching armies) by shifting.

Outside the main gate, have a look at a newly constructed oil press exhibit, an excellent display of seeds, tools and ancient machinery used in the process of oil extraction.

Just uphill from the monastery is a cafe and an Information Centre (☎9 73 32, 093845632; annshik14@yahoo.com; 9am-9pm), run by the English-speaking Anna Arshakan. This is the place to ask about hikes in the area or B&Bs where you can spend the night. More information can be found at www.tatev.org.

See p185 for information on travelling the new cable car to the monastery.

The scenery around Tatev is gorgeous and there is plenty of scope for short hikes. One trail leads to Svarants (population 250), a hamlet 20 minutes’ walk away on the other side of the valley. Another trail heads north to the top of Petroskhatch mountain, 4km from Tatev (the round-trip hike takes under three hours).

The most popular walk is downhill from Tatev to Mets Anapad, an overgrown 17th-century church. The cable car soars directly over Mets Anapad so you can get an idea of its location on the way up to Tatev.

The Information Centre has a copy of Hiking in Armenia, which describes this and other routes in the area. A knowledgeable hiking guide in Tatev is Saro Martirosyan (☎093575960).

Another attraction in the area is Satan’s Bridge, located deep in the canyon below Tatev. Legend tells that centuries ago, villagers fleeing a rebel army were blocked by the raging river. Before the invaders attacked, a bridge was magically created by a huge falling rock and the people were saved. The site includes two natural spring pools, so bring a swimsuit. There are also beautiful natural pools and caves in the canyon below the bridge but at the time of research the canyon was off-limits. Local authorities plan to build a staircase down to the canyon.

Satan’s Bridge is on the road, halfway between the cable car and Tatev village.

FOLLOW THE ZANGEZUR TRAIL
A new tourist initiative in southern Armenia is the creation of a network of hiking trails between Noravank (near the village of Arpi) to Tatev. The ambitious project is still in its early stages but when complete it will be an epic 21-day journey on foot between the two legendary monasteries. The first section is to be established around Tatev Monastery. The route connects villages, so in theory you don’t even need a tent or sleeping bag – it should be possible to stay at B&Bs during the entire journey. For details on the trail see www.zangezurtrail.am.

Sleeping
There are at least four B&Bs in tiny Tatev, each charging around AMD3500 to AMD6000 per person. They are not signed, but the hamlet is small so just ask around or contact the Information Centre. The main B&Bs include Gago (☎9 74 48), Norik (☎098104145), Raffik (☎093854632) and John & Lena (☎9 73 92). As it happens, Gago drives the bus from Goris so if you take the bus up to Tatev he’ll probably deliver you straight to his doorstep.
**WORTH A TRIP**

**GORIS TO MEGHRI HIGHWAY**

Travellers continuing from Goris to Meghri on the Iranian border will need to steel their stomach against approximately 160km of nonstop hairpin turns as the road climbs and dips through the mountains of southern Syunik. Most people coming this way are overlanders heading to Iran or curious road-trippers wanting to cover every inch of Armenian soil.

The first stretch is a 68km drive from Goris to Kapan. The most interesting sight along this route is the Bgheno-Noravank monastery, which was lost to the world until 1920 when writer Axel Bakounts happened upon it in the forest. The main church dates to 1062 and contains intricately carved biblical reliefs. It’s a great camping spot or a logical break for cycle tourists. The turn-off from the highway has a sign directing you towards Bardzravan, a nearby village. After 3.1km, turn off the road to the right and the church is visible after 150m.

Further down the highway, there is a military base (Karmerkar) and a turn-off for the 3km access road to the village of Davit Bek. The village is another pleasant stopover and sports a couple of old churches and a pristine river with cascades and swimming holes. From the village there is a pleasant 40-minute walk to a pagan temple.

On the final plunge towards Kapan a bizarre turquoise lake comes into view. This is an artificial lake created by the tailings of a nearby copper mine so while it might look like the Caribbean Sea, swimming is not recommended.

**Kapan** marks the halfway point to Meghri and is thus a logical place to spend the night. From Kapan there are two roads to Meghri: a 75km road via Kajaran; and a newer, more scenic 94km route through the Shikahogh Nature Reserve. The most attractive part of the reserve is the valley of the Tsav River, where at the hamlet of Nerkin Hand there’s an ancient grove of massive plane trees. The oak and hornbeam forests either side of the Tsav comprise the nature reserve, though you’ll need a Niva or Villis jeep to explore the 100 sq km of gorges and forests.

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**Getting There & Away**

Each day a single bus leaves Goris for Tatev (AMD700, 3pm). The bus returns to Goris the next morning at 9am.

The most novel way to get to and from the monastery is to use the brand-new cable car (one way/return AMD2000/3000; ☎️10.30am-5.30pm), which travels 5.7km from Halidzor village to Tatev (purported to be the world’s longest aerial tramway).

The cable car leaves once per hour (on the half-hour) but will also leave as soon as 15 passengers are assembled. A bus departs Goris for Halidzor (AMD350, 45 minutes) at 7.30am and 2.30pm (daily except Sunday). A taxi from Goris to the cable car costs AMD6000 return (plus AMD1000 per hour waiting time). A taxi from Goris to Tatev costs AMD6000/9000 one way/return.

It’s a good idea to take the cable car one way and travel by road in the other direction, giving you both the aerial and ground views. Another option is to take the cable car up, then hike down to Mets Anapad church and hitch a ride from Devil’s Bridge back to Goris (or arrange for your taxi driver to meet you at Devil’s Bridge).

There is also a bus from Tatev to Kapan (AMD750) on Friday at 8am and Sunday at 3.30pm. The same bus leaves Kapan for Tatev on Friday at 4pm and Sunday at 8am from outside the Lernogratz Hotel.

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**Kapan** կապան

285 / POP 45,700

The largest city in Syunik, Kapan is wedged between high mountains and splintered by numerous valleys. The name itself is derived from the Armenian word *kapel* (to lock), in reference to the interlocking mountain chains that converge here.

During the 18th century Kapan was a base for Davit Bek, an Armenian freedom fighter who took on Muslim invaders encroaching Armenia’s southern border. The village grew rapidly during the Soviet era when Russian geologists, seeing the potential for mineral extraction, arrived with blueprints for a massive mining complex. There is so much unrefined metal underground that compasses won’t work in some parts of town.
Despite its industrial background, Kapan has a pleasant downtown with leafy parks, outdoor cafes and fast-flowing streams. There are banks and shops on Shahumian Poghots and an internet cafe in Hotel Lernagordz.

Mighty Mt Khustup (3210m) is visible high above the town. The approach to the peak is via the village of Verin Vachagan, about 3km southwest of Kapan. There are various routes up from here, so ask in the village. It's about 7km to the base of the peak, where a small church has been built. You can get fine views from here; another three hours of hiking is required to reach the peak.

The main site in the immediate area is the remains of 9th-century Vahanavank, about 7km from Kapan just off the Kajaran road. The monastery was once the religious centre for Syunik’s kings. An attempt to restore the monastery in 1978 was later abandoned and what remains is a roofless structure of red limestone.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Mia & Max**

HOTEL $$

(2 03 00; 9th fl, 2 Demirchyan Poghots; s/d incl breakfast AMD18,000/25,000; )

The nicest hotel in town is located on the 9th floor of Hotel Lernagordz, making this a hotel within a hotel. Rooms are completely remodelled with all new furnishings. The price includes wi-fi.

**Hotel Lernagordz**

HOTEL $

(6 20 86; 2 Demirchyan Poghots; dm AMD3000, s AMD5000-6500, d AMD8000-12,000; )

This place has been around since Soviet times and not much has changed since then. Although dated, rooms are reasonably comfortable and come with TV and a nice balcony.

**Khach Meruk Café**

CAFE $

(9am-midnight) For food, try Khach Meruk Café, in the little park near Hotel Lernagordz. It serves salads, sandwiches and pizzas.

### Getting There & Away

There is one daily marshrutka to Yerevan (AMD5000, six/eight hours in summer/winter, 7.30am) from in front of Hotel Lernagordz. Shared taxis depart when full from the same location for AMD6000. There are two marshrutky to Goris (AMD1500, 90 minutes to two hours, 9am and noon). For Meghri (AMD1500) there are marshrutky at 7.30am and 3pm departing from a stop at the Davit Bek statue.

**Meghri**

Strategic Meghri, Armenia’s toehold on Iran, is worth exploring for its fine stone houses and stark but beautiful scenery. The town sits deep in the rocky, lushly irrigated gorge of the Meghri River surrounded by sawtooth peaks. The border crossing (open all day) is at the Araks bridge near Agarak (population 3500), 8km from Meghri.

The brick domes of Surp Hovannes at the Meghri town monastery date from the 17th century. In the centre of the main part of town is the fine Surp Astvatsatsin Church with a distinctive octagonal dome, built in the 17th century with later frescoes. There’s also the Surp Sargis Church across the river in Pokr Tagh, the smaller side of town, with two rows of columns and some delicately restored frescoes.

In Iran, just across the river from Agarak, is the ancient village of Noordoz (also spelt Noghdoz or Norduz) – the minarets of the local mosque are visible in the distance. This is a sensitive border area so be careful where you point your camera.

**Haer B&B**

(4 30 54, 093545414; info@bedandbreakfast.am; 14 Karakert Poghots; r per person AMD5000)

In Meghri is a cozy homestay run by Marieta Azatyan. The B&B is 900m from the town square. Walk past the Haypost and follow the road as it curves along the hillside; turn right just after the abandoned stone-and-brick army fort – it’s 50m uphill on the right.

### Getting There & Away

A Yerevan-bound marshrutka (AMD7000, nine/11 hours in summer/winter) departs at 9am from Hotel Meghri, just off the central square, on Block 2. A bus to Kapan (AMD1000) departs at 7.30am. A taxi to Kapan should cost AMD8000 to AMD10,000 (90 minutes) from Agarak or Meghri. A taxi between Meghri and Agarak costs about AMD2000.

On the other side of the border, buses are rare or nonexistent, but a taxi to Jolfa (Julfa, Culfa) should cost US$5 to US$8 (40 minutes) with bargaining. A shop just outside Iranian immigration exchanges currencies. See p142 for information on buses to Iran, which leave from Yerevan.
UNDERSTAND ARMENIA

Armenia Today

Despite its limited resources, Armenia has become a master at geopolitics. What other country in the world can say it maintains good relations with the USA, Russia and Iran? Each international giant has made moves to forge ties. The US has built a huge new embassy in Yerevan (on 8.9 hectares of land). Iran continues to bolster trade ties with Armenia and has signed multimillion-dollar energy and transit deals, including a natural gas pipeline and oil refinery. Russia, the main energy supplier until now, has upped the ante with a deal to build a new nuclear reactor at Metsamor. Russia also maintains a military base near Gyumri and posts its soldiers along Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Iran.

While Armenia shoulders up to the big boys of international trade and energy, it remains mired in old feuds with its neighbours that make the Montagues and the Capulets seem like bosom buddies.

On the one side stands Turkey and the long-simmering genocide argument. The issue flares up every so often; in 2006 the French Parliament voted to make it a crime to deny the genocide (the bill did not become law), and in 2010 a US congressional committee branded the killings a ‘genocide’ even though the US is not one of the 20 countries to officially recognise the genocide. More often than not it is the diaspora that pushes this agenda. As the actual events slide into history, modern Armenians still pay the price as diplomatic relations are frozen and the border closed. Still, free-marketeers have found ways around the blockade and manage to import Turkish goods via Georgia.

Recent political efforts between Turkey and Armenia hold promise of a thaw. In 2008 and 2009 the countries engaged in a round of ‘football diplomacy’ that involved national sides competing against each other in the World Cup qualifiers. There were two matches; Turkey came to Yerevan for one game, and Armenia travelled to Bursa for the second match. The presidents of each respective country accompanied their players and the matches included high-level talks between Turkish President Abdullah Gül and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. The sides discussed normalising relations, establishing embassies and opening the border. In the end, talks broke down over the Karabakh issue. Turkey said it would only normalise relations if the conflict was finally settled, and talks have been suspended.

Armenia was unable to move forward with Turkey because its relationship with Azerbaijan is in a shambles. Official fighting between the two countries ended in 1994, but the matter still feels closer to war than peace. A sniper war still brews along the border and brief skirmishes occurred in 2008 and 2010, with both sides suffering casualties. The status quo – with Armenia officially occupying 16% of Azerbaijan and negotiations at a standstill – is likely to last for some time.

Closer to home, domestic news is often centred on public dissent in the wake of the disputed 2008 presidential elections. The election pitted Sargsyan against Levon Ter-Petrossian, Armenia’s first president (1991 to 1998). Sargsyan won 52% of the vote in an election largely condemned as fraudulent by international observers. There were allegations of vote buying, ballot rigging and media suppression. Protestors gathered on Freedom Sq (Opera Sq) near the Opera House but were violently dispersed. At least 10 people died and Sargsyan called for a 20-day state of emergency. In the years since, Yerevan has seen a large number of political protests.

A SURNAME PRIMER

The vast majority of Armenian surnames end in ‘-ian’ or ‘-yan’. The spelling depends on whether the root ends in a vowel or consonant (Saro + yan = Saroyan or Gregor + ian = Gregorian). The suffix means ‘from’ or ‘of’, either from a town (Marashlian from Marash; Vanetsian from Van), from a parent (Davidian, son of David), from an occupation (Najarian, son of a carpenter; Boyajian, from the Turkish word ‘boyaj’ for someone who dyes fabrics), or from status or personal traits (Melikyan, son of a king; Sinanian, from a Turkish term for a well-endowed gent). Names with the prefix ‘Ter’ mean a married priest (Ter Hayr) was an ancestor, eg ex-president Levon Ter-Petrossian. Western Armenian names may spell it ‘Der’, as in Der-Bedrossian. There are also families with the suffix ‘-runi’, such as Siruni and Artsruni. These families were once aristocrats.
aimed at increasing democratic reforms, press freedom and other civil liberties.

On the economic front, Armenia was posting 13% growth until economic recession in 2008–9. The figure has since shrunk to around 4%. Critics point to Armenia’s over-dependence on resource exports and remittances as problematic for stable, long-term growth. But the streets of Yerevan and other cities display superficial improvements, with international brand-name stores and flashy SUVs at every turn.

With per capita income at around US$3090 and inflation at a crippling 9%, Armenia has a long way to go to catch up with Europe. The idea of joining the EU has been thrown around with much interest but, given the level of poverty that still exists (around 30%), the high levels of corruption and the shaky democracy, no one is holding their breath.

Kingdoms & Conquerors

Roman and Persian political influence gave way to new authority when western Armenia fell to Constantinople in 387 and eastern Armenia to the Sassanids in 428. The Arabs arrived around 645 and pressure slowly mounted from Baghdad to convert to Islam. When the Armenians resisted they were taxed to the point where many left for Roman-ruled territories, joining Armenian communities in a growing diaspora.

Better conditions emerged in the 9th century when the caliph (Muslim ruler) approved the resurrection of an Armenian monarch in King Ashot I, the first head of the Bagratuni dynasty. Ani (now in Turkey) served as capital for a stint. Various invaders including the Seljuk Turks and Mongols took turns plundering and at times ruling and splitting Armenia.

By the 17th century Armenians were scattered across the empires of Ottoman Turkey and Persia, with diaspora colonies from India to Poland. The Armenians rarely lived in a unified empire, but stayed in distant mountain provinces where some would thrive while others were depopulated. The seat of the Armenian Church wandered from Echmiadzin to Lake Van and further west for centuries.

The Armenian Question

The Russian victory over the Persian Empire, around 1828, brought the territory of the modern-day Armenian republic under Christian rule, and Armenians began returning to the region. The tsarist authorities

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**History**

**In the Beginning...**

Like all countries ancient, Armenia has a murky origin. According to Bible lore Armenians are the descendants of Hayk, great-great-grandson of Noah, whose ark grounded on Mt Ararat after the flood. In recognition of their legendary ancestry, Armenians have since referred to their country as Hayastan, land of the Hayk tribe. Greek records first mention Armenians in the 6th century BC as a tribe living in the area of Lake Van.

The Armenian highlands north of the Fertile Crescent had long been inhabited, and historians believe that local advances in mining, chemical and metallurgical technologies were major contributions to civilisation. With invasion routes open in four directions, the early Armenian kings fought intermittent wars against Persia and the Mediterranean powers. Greek and Roman cultures mixed with Persian angel-worship and Zoroastrianism.

In the 1st century BC the borders of Armenia reached their greatest extent under Tigranes II, whose victories over the Persian Seleucids gave him land from modern Lebanon and Syria to Azerbaijan.

**Christianity & the Written Word**

The local religious scene in Armenian villages attracted Christian missionaries as early as AD 40, including the apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus. According to lore, King Trdat III declared Christianity the state religion in AD 301. His moment of epiphany came after being cured of madness by St Gregory the Illuminator, who had spent 12 years imprisoned in a snake-infested pit, now located under Khor Virap Monastery. A version preferred by historians suggests that Trdat was striving to create national unity while fending off Zoroastrian Persia and pagan Rome. Whatever the cause, the church has been a pillar of Armenian identity ever since.

Another pillar of nationhood arrived in 405 with Mesrop Mashtots’ revolutionary Armenian alphabet. His original 36 letters were also designed as a number system. Armenian traders found the script indispensable in business. Meanwhile, medieval scholars translated scientific and medical texts from Greek and Latin.
tried to break the Armenian Church’s independence, but conditions were still preferable to those in Ottoman Turkey, where many Armenians still lived. When these Ottoman Armenians pushed for more rights, Sultan Abdulhamid II responded in 1896 by massacring between 80,000 and 300,000 of them.

The European powers had talked often about the ‘Armenian Question’, considering the Armenians a fellow Christian people living within the Ottoman Empire. During WWI some Ottoman Armenians sided with Russia in the hope of establishing their own nation state. A triumvirate of pashas (Ottoman governors) who had wrested control of the empire viewed these actions as disloyal, and ordered forced marches of all Armenian subjects into the Syrian deserts. What is less certain – and remains contentious to this day – is whether they also ordered pogroms and issued a decree for Armenians to be exterminated. Armenians today claim that there was a specific order to commit genocide; Turks strenuously deny this. What is inescapable is the fact that between 1915 and 1922 around 1.5 million Ottoman Armenians died.

The first independent Armenian republic emerged in 1918, after the November 1917 Russian Revolution saw the departure of Russian troops from the battlefront with Ottoman Turkey. The republic immediately faced a wave of starving refugees, the 1918 influenza epidemic, and wars with surrounding Turkish, Azeri and Georgian forces. It fought off the invading Turks in 1918, and left the final demarcation of the frontier to Woodrow Wilson, the US president. Meanwhile, the Turks regrouped under Mustafa Kemal (later Kemal Ataturk) and overran parts of the South Caucasus. Wilson’s map eventually arrived without troops or any international support, while Ataturk offered Lenin peace in exchange for half of the new Armenian republic. Beset by many other enemies, Lenin agreed.

The Armenian government, led by the Dashnaks, a party of Armenian independence fighters, capitulated to the Bolsheviks in 1921. They surrendered in order to preserve the last provinces of ancient Armenia. The Soviet regime hived off Karabakh and Naxçivan (Nakhchivan) for Azerbaijan. Forced from their homes, hundreds of thousands of survivors of the genocide regrouped in the French-held regions of Syria and Lebanon, emigrating en masse to North America and France. Remarkably, the Armenians who stayed began to rebuild with what was left, laying out Yerevan in the 1920s. Armenia did

**KOMITAS & SOGHOMIAN TEHLIRIAN**

Two figures from the genocide are particularly well remembered by Armenians. Komitas represents the losses. A vardapet (monk) of the Armenian Church, Komitas travelled through Armenian villages collecting folk songs; he was the first great ethnomusicologist. He also worked on deciphering the mysteries of medieval Armenian liturgical music. His concerts in Europe in the early 1910s were hailed as the arrival of a distinct national musical tradition. His Liturgy remains unfinished. On 24 April 1915 Komitas was in Istanbul when he was rounded up with 250 other Armenian community leaders and intellectuals. He was one of possibly two to survive – his life was literally bought from the Young Turks by a benefactor and he was smuggled to France. But the atrocities he witnessed broke his mind, and he died in an asylum in Paris in 1937 having never again spoken. His ideas for breathing life into the ancient harmonies and chorales were lost with him.

Soghomian Tehlirian represents a different face of the genocide. After losing his family to the killings, he ended up in Berlin in the early 1920s, where, on 15 March 1921, he assassinated the man most responsible for the genocide, Mehmet Talaat Pasha. Talaat Pasha was Minister of War in 1915, and founder of the covert Teshkiliat Mahsusa (Special Organisation), which among other things recruited psychotic killers from prisons to serve on the deportations. Tehlirian’s trial was one of the few public vindications of the genocide. Survivors and witnesses gave testimony on the marches, massacres, tortures and rapes, and Talaat Pasha’s prime role. After two days the German jury found Tehlirian not guilty and released him. Other senior Turkish officials were killed in the early 1920s in Operation Nemesis, a secret Dashnak (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) plan to execute their own justice. Tehlirian later settled in the US and remains a kind of Armenian icon of revenge.
well in the late Soviet era, with lots of technological industries and research institutes.

Independence

The debate over the Armenian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh inside Azerbaijan brought a new wave of leaders to the fore under Gorbachev’s glasnost (openness) reforms. Armenians voted for independence on 21 September 1991, and Levon Ter-Petrossian, a 40-year-old scholar and leader of the Karabakh Committee, became president. The war with Azerbaijan over Karabakh exploded just as the economy went into freefall. See the Nagorno-Karabakh chapter (p 277) for more information on the conflict.

After the war, rumours of coups and assassination attempts prompted Ter-Petrossian to reverse civil rights and throw Dashnak leaders and fighters from the Karabakh War into jail, where some spent three years as political prisoners. Ter-Petrossian was re-elected for another five-year term in 1996 but resigned in 1998, isolated and unpopular. He was replaced by Robert Kocharian in March 1998, a war hero from southern Karabakh. Kocharian entered the war with one tank and amassed 13 more by the time of the ceasefire. Kocharian quickly moved to woo back the diaspora, especially the influential Dashnak faction.

By the end of the 1990s the new class of wealthy import barons stood out in shocking contrast to the country’s poverty. Anger over this disparity was at least partly responsible for the terrible 1999 massacre in the national assembly, when gunmen, screaming that the barons were drinking the blood of the nation, murdered eight members of parliament and wounded six others. The event sparked a wave of emigration and endless recriminations, but the 1700th anniversary of the founding of the Armenian Church in 2001 marked something of a turning point in the country’s fortunes. Memories of the suffering and upheaval since independence linger on, but the rapid economic revival through the first decade of the 21st century has raised spirits.

Arts

Cinema

The ArmenFilm studios on the Ashtarak road out of Yerevan once thrived with productions but are now mostly moribund. Sergei Paradjanov (Parajanian) was born in Tbilisi and was ‘encouraged’ by Soviet authorities to adopt the Russian -ov suffix to his name. Frequently out of favour with the culture moguls, he still managed to unleash camp-visionary theatrical films including Colour of Pomegranates. The reward for his genius was four years’ hard labour in a Soviet prison camp. After his release in 1977 he went on to produce Ashough Gharib and The Legend of Souram Fortress, but his final masterpiece, The Confession, was left unfinished with his own death. While the films may not have seen success in the USSR, he won fans internationally including Fellini and Bertolucci.

Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan has made several films on Armenian themes, including 1993’s Calendar and 2002’s Ararat, a film within a film on the genocide. Ararat is typical of Egoyan’s arthouse leanings, leaving you wondering about how it all fits together more than the subject matter. You could say the interweaving plot structure is intrinsically very Armenian. Calendar, another Egoyan arthouse classic, describes the story of a photographer sent to Armenia to shoot Armenian churches for a calendar. The plot, one of lost love, is filled with twists. Much of the dialogue between the characters was improvised.

Here (2010), directed by Braden King, is an American arthouse film set in Armenia that focuses on the romantic interlude between an American mapping engineer and a diaspora Armenian returning to her homeland.

Music

Armenian religious music’s mythically complex harmonies are partly lost, though there are many fine, melancholy choirs of the Armenian liturgy. The great composers of the 19th and 20th centuries include Komitas, whose works for choir and orchestra put Armenian music on an international stage, and Armen Tigranyan for his opera Anush. Aram Khachaturian is best known for his Sabre Dance and the ballet Spartacus. Sayat Nova, often considered the greatest singer-songwriter in the South Caucasus, began his career in the court of Erekle II of Georgia but was exiled for his forbidden love of the king’s daughter (see p284). The country is still a centre for classical music, with a ballet theatre, an opera company, orchestras for chamber music and symphonies, and an active world of composers and performers.
Folk music is alive and well in town troupes and late-night clubs and khoravats palaces. Spend a night at a popular venue like Ashtarak’s Ashtaraki Dzor complex (p150) and marvel at the range of talent. The duduk, a double-reed instrument made from apricot wood, will become the soundtrack to your journey in Armenia. Its inescapable features in traditional music and many modern pop tunes blaring from the speakers of taxi cabs.

For good traditional music try the Real-World label, which has albums by duduk master Djivan Gasparian. Also try Parik Nazarian, Gevorg Dabagian and the album Minstrels and Folk Songs of Armenia by Parseghian Records.

Current artists of note include Lilit Pipoyan, a Joni Mitchell–esque singer and songwriter, and Vahan Artsruni, a composer with folk-guitar pickings who also rocks out in Yerevan’s small live music scene.

There are plenty of emerging young singers, including Hasmik Karapetyan, Armenia’s version of Celine Dion, and at the opposite end of the sound spectrum, the speed metal band Vordan Karmir.

Visual Arts

There are enough art galleries, artists’ studios and house-museums to fill several weeks in Yerevan. Miniaturisation and microsculpture are peculiarly Armenian pursuits, with a number of impressive artists, including Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan of Sisian, whose pieces require a microscope to be appreciated. You can see examples of his work at Sisavan Church (p179).

Martiros Sarian is one of Armenia’s most famous painters, and a museum in Yerevan preserves his studio (p125). Suitably enough, a Sarian sculpture in a Yerevan park is the focus of Yerevan’s art market, where painters gather to offer a critique of each other’s work and sell their paintings (p140). Most of the paintings have religious iconography or capture familiar Armenian landscapes. Yervand Kochar has his own gallery filled with portraits nearby on Moscovyan Poghots (p125).

Yousef Karsh was one of the great portrait photographers, and once achieved a famously defiant photo of Winston Churchill after snatching away his cigar.

The illustrated manuscripts preserved in Yerevan’s Matenadaran (p125) and the libraries of Echmiadzin are testament to centuries of monastic endeavour.

Theatre & Dance

Theatre runs deep in Armenian culture – a 10th-century fortress at Saimbeyli in Cilicia had three storeys of theatres and two storeys of libraries.

The Hellenic kings of Armenia patronised theatre in the 3rd century BC, and Greek dramas played to King Tigran the Great. There are about a dozen active theatre houses in Yerevan specialising in musical comedy, contemporary plays and drama revivals. The musical comedies and shows for kids are easy to follow and very professionally done (for booking details, see p139).

Armenia has a rich tradition of folk dancing, and chances are you’ll stumble across a performance in a public square. Revellers at country weddings might not be so professional, but then it is the real thing. Armenia has a rich diversity of dances and costumes, straight out of a medieval spring festival. There are also dance and ballet companies in Yerevan.

RABIZ MUSIC

Rabiz is a contraction of the Russian words ‘rabochee iskusstvo’ (workers’ art). It’s entertainment and it’s also a lifestyle – the guys in the silk shirts and gold chains driving too fast while smoking and talking on their mobile phones. If you ask a hip student, they’ll say that Armenian popular culture is divided between loud, showy, raucous rabiz culture on one hand, and everything of good taste on the other. Rabiz also covers a lot of highly inventive slang. Rabiz music is marshrutka-driver music, a mix of brainless pop and over-the-top tragic ballads (girl has cancer, boy says he’ll kill himself before she dies) that strike a sentimental Middle Eastern chord in Armenian hearts. Fans want music that will make them cry, as well as impassioned love songs and arms-aloft dancing music. This kind of music booms from taxis in Greek, Russian, Turkish and Arabic. The Armenian variety comes from Los Angeles, Beirut and Moscow as well as Yerevan, where it plays in neighbourhood bars, clubs and khoravats (barbecued food) joints late into the night.
Armenian cuisine is a national treasure, a delicate mix of lightly spiced meats, fresh salads, lots of chewy light lavash and homemade specialities dating back centuries. It combines elements of the cuisines of all its historic neighbours – Arabic, Russian, Greek and Persian – but remains distinctive. Scientists believe the first wheat was grown on the southern flanks of historic Armenia, south of Lake Van, while the Romans dubbed the apricot *prunus armeniaca* (Armenian prune). The freshness of Armenian produce is another trait – crops are often grown on a small scale in villages and backyards across the country.

If there's one word for dining, it's *khoravats* (barbecued food). Pork is the favourite, though lamb, beef and sometimes chicken are usually available too. *Ishkhan khoravats* is grilled trout from Lake Sevan. *Siga* is another good grilled-fish dish. Kebabs are also very common.

Broadly speaking, western Armenian cuisine is more similar to Lebanese and Turkish cooking, while eastern Armenian has more Russian and Georgian influences. Besides *khoravats*, staples include dolma (rice wrapped in vine leaves), soups, vegetable stews and lavash fresh from the oven. *Khash* is a thick winter stew made from animal parts. Hors d'oeuvres include cold salads, salty cheeses and dips such as *jajik* (yoghurt with cucumbers and fennel). Cured meats include *sujukh* or *yeghchik* (dark, cured spicy sausage) and *basturma* (finely cured ham).

There are few strictly vegetarian restaurants in Armenia but any restaurant will offer numerous veggie dishes, made from tomatoes, rice, eggplants (aubergines), zucchinis (courgettes) and a profusion of herbs and spices. Western Armenian cuisine has hummus, tabouleh and other dishes associated with Lebanese cuisine, and lots of homemade ratatouilles are made from beans, carrots and onions with olive oil. Adventurous eaters might want to consider *kartofel atari graki mej* – baked potatoes cooked in cow dung (which is said to boost flavour).

### Drinks

The most popular drink is *soorch* (Armenian coffee), also claimed by Georgians, Greeks and Arabs. It’s a potent, finely ground cup of lusciously rich coffee, with thick sediment at the bottom. It goes well with honeyed pastries such as baklava. Tea is also popular. There is an interesting array of mineral and table waters, ranging from salty, volcanic Jermuk to lighter Noy and Dilijan waters. Fruit juices are cheap and delicious.

The two main lagers are Kilikia and Kotayk, widely available and quite refreshing on a hot summer afternoon. Kilikia is a typical middle-European lager, very good when fresh. Its main rival, Kotayk, is sold everywhere and is a little more reliable, if bland, while Erebuni has more flavour and is made by the same company.

The country’s national liquor is cognac (around 40% alcohol). There are several other producers, such as Great Valley, but the Yerevan Brandy Company’s Ararat label is the real thing, a smooth, intense liquor with a smoky aroma similar to whisky. Armenian *konyak* (cognac) has a huge following in Russia and Ukraine. Even Winston Churchill favoured it over the French stuff, and Stalin used to send him cases of Ararat cognac.

Most red wines are made from the Areni grape, well suited to the hot summers and harsh winters. Some reputable Areni makers are Vayots Dzor, Vedi Alco, Getap and Noravank, and new wineries are springing up. White wines are produced from vineyards in Tavush, Lori and Karabakh, and are generally sweet or with extra tannins from the skins.

If you want to propose a toast it's polite to ask the permission of the *tamada* (toastmaker). There’s a custom in clinking glasses of holding your glass lower than the next person’s, as a sign of deference. This can develop into a game until the glasses are at table level. If you empty a bottle into someone’s glass, it obliges them to buy the next bottle – it’s polite to put the last drops into your own glass.
SURVIVAL GUIDE

Directory A–Z

Accommodation

Peak season runs from June through July. Even outside these months it’s a good idea to book your room ahead of time. This is especially true for B&Bs so that the hosts can organise food and be available at the time of your arrival. Discounts are usually available in the low season (November to March).

Some definitions of terms used in this chapter:

**B&Bs**: Private apartment or home occupied by a local family with rooms available for guests. Breakfast is sometimes just bread, jam and tea, although some places offer full meals. Some B&Bs offer dinner for an additional cost. Local tourist offices usually keep an updated list of B&Bs. Prices range around AMD5000 to AMD7000 per person.

**Cottages & Domiky**: These are typically located around Sevan for summer holiday-makers. Construction quality is often poor but lakeside location is generally good. Expect to pay AMD10,000 to AMD35,000.

**Homestays**: These are similar to B&Bs but do not offer breakfast or other meals. Prices are similar to B&Bs.

**Hostels**: At the time of writing there were four or five hostels in Yerevan, with more on the horizon. They are locally run but somewhat more institutional compared to the B&Bs, with a reception desk that opens during the day and some travel services. Dorms and private rooms are available but bathrooms are usually shared. Breakfast is usually included in the price, with costs often AMD6000 to AMD7500 per person.

**Hotels**: There is a wide variety of hotels across the country, from old Soviet dinosaurs in rural areas to five-star international chains in Yerevan. Prices are considerably higher in the capital, with a midrange double in Yerevan costing around AMD30,000, while a similar room in the other areas might cost AMD15,000 or AMD20,000. Top-rated hotels cost up to AMD60,000 per room. There are a few excellent boutique hotels in Yerevan, Dilijan and Goris. For upmarket hotels we’ve included government taxes in the prices.

**Resorts**: Resort areas such as Dilijan, Tsaghkadzor, Jermuk and Lake Sevan have a range of Soviet-era hotels and sanatoriums either recently privatised or owned by government ministries.

**Activities**: Armenia is quickly building a reputation among bird-watchers – 346 species have been recorded here, including one-third of Europe’s threatened species, and 240 species breed here. The Birds of Armenia Project at the American University of Armenia (Map p126; 21-27 45 32; 40 Marshall Baghramian Pogho-ta, Yerevan) has maps and books on the country’s profusion of avian plumage. A Field Guide to Birds of Armenia and Handbook of the Birds of Armenia are both by Martin S Adamian and D Klem. For further information, see the informative website www.armeniabirding.info.

Hiking to the top of Mt Aragats is possible in summer, and there are great walking trails in the forests and mountains around Dilijan. Country hikes are made easier by the profusion of piped springs. Adventure Armenia: Hiking and Rock Climbing by Carine Bachmann and Jeffrey Tufenkian will serve you well. It details 22 hiking routes and several rock-climbing spots. The book is produced by the Kanach Foundation.
www.kanach.org), which supports environmental protection programs in Armenia. A new initiative called Zangezur Trails aims to connect villages between Tatev and Noravank monasteries (see the boxed text, p184).

Horse riding is becoming more popular and is a great way to explore out-of-the-way places; a good place to start is Yenokavan Canyon near Ijevan (p162). Sailing and fishing on Lake Sevan on a mild summer’s day is idyllic—quire at the Harsnaqar hotel (p153). Underground there are karst (limestone) caves in Vayots Dzor, largely unexplored and for experienced spelunkers only. The cave villages around Goris are an easier challenge.

**Business Hours**

Most churches are open 9am to 6pm daily, though in winter you might have to wait a while for the key to appear. Fairs and markets open daily. Museums and galleries often close Monday.

Reviews in this chapter only list opening hours where they differ significantly from the following typical hours:

» Banks 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat
» Bars 7pm until last customer (times can vary)
» Cafes 10am-midnight (times can vary)
» Churches 9am-6pm
» Government offices and international organisations 9am-5pm Mon-Fri
» Restaurants 11am-midnight (times can vary)
» Shops 9am or 10am, closing between 7pm and 10pm

**Customs Regulations**

The usual restrictions apply (one carton of cigs, 2L of booze, no guns) and there’s no currency declaration to keep. If you plan to take something out of the country considered to be of cultural, historical or national value (eg a rug, a samovar or similar), a certificate is required from the Ministry of Culture (Map p130; 2-52 93 49; 5 Tumanyan Poghots, Yerevan). You’ll find it’s much easier if the shop you bought the item from arranges the permit for you, or if you can speak Armenian. Otherwise the bureaucracy can be quite baffling.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Armenia is one of the safest countries in the region. Health and safety precautions are minimal, just exercise the same type of caution you would if travelling in Europe. One common problem, however, is stomach bugs that come from drinking untreated water. Avoid the water fountains found in most cities. Be aware that the transport system in Armenia tends to run early in the day so don’t plan on making any long-distance journeys in the late afternoon. When dealing with taxi drivers use a meter or set an agreed price prior to departure or risk being overcharged.

**Embassies & Consulates**

A full list of Armenian embassies and consulates can be found at www.mfa.am.

The following are all in Yerevan (phone code 1):

- **Canada** (Map p130; 256 79 03; aemin@freenet.am; Armenia Marriott Hotel, 1 Amriyan Poghots)
- **France** (Map p130; 259 19 50; www.ambafrance-am.org; 8 Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)
- **Georgia** (Map p130; 220 07 42; geoemb@netsys.am; 2/10 Babayan Poghots)
- **Germany** (Map p130; 252 32 79; germemb@arminco.com; 29 Charents Poghots)
- **Greece** (Map p130; 253 00 51; grembarm@arminco.com; 6 Demirchyan Poghots)
- **Iran** (Map p126; 228 04 57; www.iranembassy.am; 1 Budaghyan Poghots, Arabkir Park)
- **Italy** (Map p130; 254 23 35; www.ambjevervan.esteri.it; 5 Italia Poghots)
- **Nagorno-Karabakh** (Map p126; 224 99 28, 52 64 28; www.nkr.am; 17a Zaryan Poghots)
- **Poland** (Map p130; 254 24 93; polemb@arminco.com; 44/1 Hanrapetutyan Poghots)
- **Russia** (Map p130; 256 74 27; 13a Grigor Lusavorich Poghots)
- **Turkmenistan** (Map p126; 222 10 29; serdar@arminco.com; 52 Erznkian Poghots)
- **UK** (Map p130; 226 43 01; www.britishembassy.gov.uk; 34 Marshall Baghramian Poghota)
- **USA** (Map p126; 246 47 00; http://yerevan.usembassy.gov; 1 American Poghota)

**Food**

For coverage of Armenian food and drink, see p192.

**Maps**

The maps made by Yerevan-based company Collage are the best available, with a full-colour foldout map Armenia & Mountainous Karabakh; the nifty, brochure-sized, 26-page Roads of Armenia; and the brilliant Yerevan Atlas, with new and old street names, street numbers and lots besides. They cost AMD3000 to AMD6000 from souvenir shops and bookstores in Yerevan.
Media

The main English-language weekly newspaper is *Noyan Tapan*. *Armenia Now* (www.armenianow.com) is an online newspaper. Armenian-language dailies include *Aravot*, *Azg* and *Yerkir*.

Hye-FM (91.1 FM) plays a good mix of popular music on international playlists and some local music as well.
The only TV channel with an independent editorial policy, A1 is constantly at odds with government and often dragged through the courts. CNN is broadcast over public TV in Yerevan. Big hotels carry satellite TV.

**Money**

Armenia’s currency is the dram (AMD). Coins are available in denominations of 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 dram. Paper currency is available in notes of 1000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 dram.

A strong dram means that Armenia is no longer the bargain it once was, but prices are still moderate by European standards. For a list of exchange rates, see p122; for an idea of costs, see p12 and p122.

**EXCHANGING MONEY**

The best cash currencies are US dollars, euros and Russian roubles, roughly in that order. Georgian lari can also be changed in Yerevan and border towns. Other currencies are hard to change except at a handful of major banks in Yerevan. There are money-changing signs waving flags and rates at customers everywhere in Yerevan and around shukas (markets) in all major towns. Virtually any shop can change money legally, and many food stores and smallgoods vendors do. Scams seem to be rare, and transactions straightforward.

Travellers cheques are rare in Armenia and not recommended. Bring cash or an ATM or Visa card. Some local ATMs are linked to the Plus system and others to the Maestro system. ATMs are in prominent locations around Yerevan, including half a dozen HSBC branches. You can withdraw money in US dollars from HSBC machines and sometimes from local bank ATMs as well. All other main cities and even some small towns have ATMs, though you may have to poke around to find one that matches your card. Western Union money transfer is not available in Armenia.

**TIPPING & BARGAINING**

The usual tipping rule at cafes and restaurants is 10%. Taxi drivers won't complain if you set the price when getting in and stick to it when getting out. Shops have set prices, but shukas (markets) and outdoor fruit and vegetable stands are more negotiable.

**Post**

National postal service Haypost has offices in every major town. A letter might take anything from two weeks to six weeks to reach North America or Australia, but the service is fairly reliable. If you're sending out something of value you might feel safer with UPS, FedEx or a local courier company in Yerevan (p141).

**Public Holidays**

Annual public holidays in Armenia:

- **New Year’s Day** 1 January
- **Christmas Day** 6 January
- **International Women’s Day** 8 March
- **Good Friday** varies, from mid-March to late April
- **Motherhood and Beauty Day** 7 April
- **Genocide Memorial Day** 24 April
- **Victory Day** 9 May
- **Republic Day** 28 May
- **Constitution Day** 5 July
**Independence Day**: 21 September

**Earthquake Memorial Day**: 7 December

**Telephone**

The country code is 374, while Yerevan's area code is 10. It's possible to make calls from central call centres.

International calls using either landlines or mobile phones can be expensive. Internet clubs in Yerevan often have VoIP calls at much lower rates (about AMD100 per minute anywhere).

For calls within Armenia, dial 0 + city code + local number; for mobile numbers dial the 09 prefix first (most people will give you this along with their mobile number), then the number. Note that the 0 is not dialled when calling from overseas. For international calls, dial 00 first.

**MOBILE PHONES**

Mobile-phone services, operated by VivaCell, Orange and Beeline, are fairly priced and wide-ranging. You can get mobile-phone service just about anywhere in the country these days, unless you are hiking in the backcountry. There is little difference between the providers, although there seem to be more subscribers to VivaCell (and calling other VivaCell phones is a little cheaper).

**Tourist Information**

The main tourist office is the Armenia Information centre (p141), which was closed at the time of research and there is no indication if or when it will reopen. Tourist information offices are also located in Dilijan, Goris, Ijevan, Sevan and Stepanavan.

**Visas**

Armenian visas are available at all entry points - 21-day tourist visas cost AMD3000 and a visa valid for 120 days costs AMD15,000. The officials might not speak much English, but it's just a matter of filling out a form and paying. You'll need one empty page in your passport for the visa and you must also pay in dram (moneychangers are available at border points and the airport).

It's also possible to get an e-visa by applying through the website www.mfa.am. However, since it's easier to just pick up a visa upon arrival, few travellers bother with the e-visa. If you do buy an e-visa, it's a good idea to print out a copy of your receipt just in case the border officials can't locate your records on their computer.

See p303 and p305 for lists of entry points into Armenia.

**VISA EXTENSIONS**

You can get a visa extension at the Passport and Visa Department of OVIR (Map p130; 1-53 07 22; 090007 007; 13a Mesrop Mashtots Poghota, Yerevan; 2-6pm Mon-Fri). At room 211 you fill in a form and provide a photocopy of the picture page in your passport and return the next day to confirm authorisation of the extension. Once you have confirmation you pay AMD500 for every day you want to extend (maximum 60 days).

You will be given an account number for you to make the deposit, which can be done at any bank (the ABB across the street will do this for an AMD100 fee). Then go back to room 211 and leave your receipt and passport. You can pick up the extension the following day.

For people of Armenian descent and their partners, OVIR issues 10-year residency permits. The process takes about three months and costs around US$300.

**VISAS FOR ONWARD TRAVEL**

**Georgia**

The Georgian Embassy (Map p126; 1-58 55 11; geoemb@netsys.am; 2/10 Babayan Poghots, Yerevan) provides visas for 100 GEL (US$60). However, many Western nationals can enter Georgia visa-free (see p119). Those who need a visa can get one at road borders, but not at railway borders, so train travellers needing visas must get one in advance.

**Iran**

The Iranian Embassy (Map p126; 1-28 04 57; www.iranembassy.am; 1 Budaghyan Poghots, Arabkir Park, Yerevan) provides visas only after you have received approval from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and for this you'll need to go through a travel agent. The whole process can last two weeks or more. Contact Tatev Travel (p142).

**Work & Volunteering**

Wages are very low in most sectors, but there is a ton of NGO and volunteer work going on. NGOs have bloomed everywhere - international relief agencies are well represented, and there are many local and diaspora bodies as well, covering everything from health to the environment to teaching. The website www.armeniadiaspora.com is a good place to start investigating.