ARARAT marz

By Rick Ney
Maps by Rafael Torossian
Edited by Bella Karapetian

INTRODUCTION

Area: 1995 sq. km
Population: 160,400
Marz Capital: Artashat

Distance from Yerevan: 29 km
Marzpetaran: Tel: (010) 28 60 23
Largest City: Ararat

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The marz is also home to the largest nature Preserve in the country, Khosrov Forest, established in the 3rd century and home to rare and endangered species of animals and flora,
along with ruined hamlets and monasteries, the detritus of history’s habitation.

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

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

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

NATURE

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

Though the marz has an arid climate, its terrain is tremendously diverse, much due to human activity. It mountains once covered with thick forests, the valley has been long cleared, continually farmed since the Agriculture Revolution, when settlers first learned how to domesticate the wild strains of wheat and oats that proliferated the valley. The valley is the largest that can be cultivated. The addition of irrigation in the late Bronze Age completely transformed the region, allowing settlers to cultivate fields far into the now barren eastern mountains.

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

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

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

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

The volcanic deposits include one of the largest deposits of stone in the country, and Ararat marz, along with Armavir, harvest most of that used in building the new Yerevan. This includes beautiful varieties of basalt, tufa and marble, as well as agate, obsidian and precious metals (gold and silver).

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

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

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

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

The engineering feat of this Urartian canal is the forerunner of the “Klahreeses” which were later built throughout Asia Minor, and the canal and tunnel are the oldest functioning hydra projects of their kind.

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

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

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

Flora Ararat’s flora is surprisingly diverse, though the season is restricted to a few short weeks in the lower region, longer in Khosrov Preserve. Intensively farmed, the lower valley still has pockets of endemic plants, including water loving plants in lower valley marshes, fish ponds and on the Arax River bed.
The Goravan Sands Reservation is a unique ecosystem; a desert terrain that blooms with poppies, purple Betony and Gundelia (the "crown of thorns" pollen grains of which were found in the Shroud of Turin) for a few weeks each spring. Irid may become extinct in its native habitat within the next decade. I. Araratises, the world’s leading expert on Armenian flora, and co-author of the 2008 Flowers of the Transcaucasus and Adjacent Areas (ISBN 978-3-906166-34-6; see Resources Online, p. 57). Getting her to guide is not easy (she is busy completing her 10 volume encyclopedia of Armenian flora) and all tours are custom-tailored to the flora in bloom (see flower tours under adventure tour operators, p. 15) but if you can, do it. She is worth every cent.

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

Ararat is a unique habitat for the rare Iris (Iris lineolata, I. Caucasia), Gladilous (Gladilous atrovialaceus), milk vetch (Astragalis distyrophus) and yellow verbascum; best seen between mid-to-late April and May. Other flora include Nigella oxyptetala, Actynolema macrolema, Gundelia tournefortii, Verbasum saccatum, Lallemanita iberica, Roemeria refracta, Scabiosa argentea, Scorzonera papposa, Muscaria neglecta, Stachys inflata, Astragalus distyrophus, A. kochianus, Aistlea tenuifolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, and Silene sparguflfola.

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

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

Ararat Flower routes: In Ararat, the best places to spot spring flowers are along the (M2) and it parallel state road (H8) which traces the valley from Yerevan to Yerask at the entry to Nakhichevan. Others include the (H11) spur from Polk Vedi to Ararat, which curves along the Arax River; the (H10) that connects the (M2) with Vedi town and then continues E through the Urts/Geghama valley with its alpine marsh and upper valley flora before rejoining the (M2) just before entering Vayots Dzor; The Yerask Valley NW of Vedi; Goravan Sands Reserve SE of Vedi; and the Khosrov Preserve (permission required), which is more easily entered from Ganni in Kotak marz, but with its park office in Vedi.

Flower Tour This tour of Ararat is part of a series of botanical tours in Armenia guided by Prof. Nora Gabrielian, the world’s leading expert on Armenian flora, and co-author of the 2008 Flowers of the Transcaucasus and Adjacent Areas (ISBN 978-3-906166-34-6; see Resources Online, p. 57). Getting her to guide is not easy (she is busy completing her 10 volume encyclopedia of Armenian flora) and all tours are custom-tailored to the flora in bloom (see flower tours under adventure tour operators, p. 15) but if you can, do it. She is worth every cent.
and geese) peak in early April, when they are replaced by waders (sandpipers, snipes) and in late April - early May an increase in nest building in most permanent residents and breeding bird species (geese, storks, waders and corvids).

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

**Lakes, Reservoirs, Fish Ponds, Wetlands Birds**


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

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

**OTHER FAUNA**

**River, Marsh Fauna** include endemic river fish such as Sturgeon (Accipenser), Cat-fish (Silurus glans), Chanar Barbel (Barbus capito), Gallician Crayfish (Astacus leptodactylus).
**Amphibians** include Marsh Frog (Rana ridibunda), Caspian Tortoise (Clemmys caspica), and Minor Asian Newt (Triturus vittatus).

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

**Mammals** include the hare (Lepus europaenus), Indian Porcupine (Hystrix indica), Caucasian Squirrel (Sicurus anomalus), Asia Minor Ground Squirrel (Spermophilus xanthophrymnus), Edible dormouse (Glis glis), Small Five-toed Jerboa (Allactaga elater), Southern White-breasted toad headed sun watcher, a rare Mediterranean species that can be found in Ararat marz at the Goravan Sands Preserve near Vedi and in the Khosrov Reserve.

**Other Fauna that are endangered** include the Wildcat (Felis silvestris), Pallas’s Cat (Felis manul), Caucasian Bearded (Bezoar) Goat (Capra aegagrus F. rd.), the Caucasian Brown Bear (Ursus arctos), and the Persian leopard (Panthera pardus saxicolor).

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

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

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

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

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

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

**RISKS/ ECO CHALLENGES**

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**DO:**

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

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

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

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

**Stop the slaughter**

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

No matter who gives what kind a certificate, these are illegal hunts, according to Armenia’s own legislation and the placing of these critically endangered species on the Red Book of endangered species list. However, hunting continues in the Khosrov Reserve, assisted by the very government official charged to protect the species: the Ministry of Nature Protection and the staff of the Khosrov Reserve itself, who derive additional income from bribes and private fees to helping to outfit hunting trips into the Reserve.


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

Contact the Minister of Nature Protection

[www.mnpiac.am/](http://www.mnpiac.am/)
Excavations Visit Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze / Iron Age and Hellenistic excavations by Norabats, Jrahovit, Urtsdzor, Govorg Marzpzetuni Castle, Aigevan, Tigranashen and Urtsalanj.

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

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

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

Urtsdzor, Marzpzetuni Castle, S. Hovhannes tower at Lanjianist, Lusashogh, Lanjar and at S. Karapet vank. Camping in Khosrov is possible for guided treks (see Adventure Tour Operators, p. 15).

Paruir Sevak Museum There is no set time for these days, alas, but they more often occur in the later part of winter, and after rain storms in early spring.

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

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

Hitting the Highlights

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

HISTORY

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

Quickly following this revolution was the Age of Cities, several of which developed into major urban centers. By the 2nd c BCE city was in fact built on top of an earlier victory, saying he occupied the country of Vaza. It was here that he established his military and political centers in the valley; the citadel of Erebuni and the military center of Arghishtihinili in present day Armavir.

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

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

BRONZE & IRON AGE sites in Ararat include Dvin, Artashat, Norabats, Jrahovit, Ararat, and Urtsalan. The rise of the Metsamor Culture marks the first wave of Indo-European migration, beginning with Indo-Iranian migrations in the 8th m BCE, followed by waves of Indo-European speakers into Anatolia, Central Asia and the Balkans in succeeding millennia.

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

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

URARTIAN EMPIRE

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

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

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

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

URARTIAN sites in Ararat include the lower layers of Artashat, Dvin, and at forts near Norabats, Jrahovit, Algevan, Ararat and Urtsalan.

HELLENISM AND ARTASHESIAN PERIOD

Hellenism arrived in Armenia with the fall of the Persian Empire in the 4th c BCE. As Alexander’s armies conquered Persia on his march towards the end of the known world in India, he left behind each victory Greek administrators charged with Hellenizing the eastern barbarians, including Armenia. Exhausted by 400 years of constant warfare, subject states to the Achaemenids eagerly
embraced the new world order, the Armenians embracing the Greek ways more than others. Some say this was due to the recognition Greek gods that bore more than a little similarity to their Armenian counterparts, which was their Indo-European origin.

The Orontids (Yervandunis) rose immediately following the collapse of Urartu, but came to prominence in 321 BCE, when Alexander’s Seleucid descendants reorganized their kingdom and recognized the upstart Armenian lords. They reigned from their Ararat valley Seat for about 150 years.

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

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

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

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

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

ARTASHESIAN & EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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

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

Arshakuni kings included King Trdat III, who instigated the conversion of the country to Christianity, and Khosrov II (r. 330-339), who established the forest that bears his name. That 4th c royal hunting ground became the incubator for the current Khosrov Reserve, the largest nature reserve in the country.

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

The pit is now the focal point of a major pilgrimage monastery on the Ararat plain, where the 2nd c BCE castle prison was located. Built at the eastern end of the old city and the tallest hill of the twelve that made up the ancient city, it marks the spot where Grigor was thrown after refusing to venerate the idol of Anahit during celebrations of the young King Trdat’s victorious reclamation of his kingdom.

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

His madness was precipitated by his ruthless suppression of his Christian populous and particularly for having the Roman maiden Hripsimeh, her nurse and 39 other maidens from Rome killed for refusing his advancements. Trdat’s sister, Khosrovadukht (secretly Christian), had a dream where she was told that only Grigor could cure her brother and save the kingdom, which was threatened by the Sassanid Persian empire.

Discovering that Grigor was still alive, the mad king summoned him, and the place they met is in the new capital. Something of a town persisted at Artashat, on the current border with Turkey. The Dvin period is perhaps the crowning glory of Armenia’s pagan temples, with the exception of only two: Garni was saved by the efforts of Khosrovadukht, and still stands, and the other was at Artashat, on the current border with Turkey. This latter was just discovered in 2007 and excavations show it to have been far grander than that at Garni. It was topped in the mid 4th century not by Grigor, but by a foreign power.

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

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

When the Arax River shifted west in the 3rd c, Arashat’s natural water defenses were replaced by feitid mosquito-infested swamps, and the decision was made to move the capital to Dvin—though politics are thought to have played the lion share of decision by King Khosrov III (353-388) to move the seat of power to Dvin; it was a time of great turmoil, with Sassanid kings breathing down the backs of the Armenians, and the Romans moving in to Constantinople to lend support. The move lessened the city’s importance in royal circles, but it remained as commercial city of some import until the fall of the Armenian Kingdom in 428.

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

Arshakunis-Early Christian sites are at Arashat and Khor Virap and underlying foundations for churches at St. Karapet monastery, Urtssador, Grigor Marzpetuni Castle, Lusahogh and Urtsalan.

DVIN ERA / EARLY MEDIEVAL

The Dvin period is perhaps the crowning glory of Armenia’s pagan temples, with the exception of only two: Garni was saved by the efforts of Khosrovadukht, and still stands, and the other was at Artashat, on the current border with Turkey. This latter was just discovered in 2007 and excavations show it to have been far grander than that at Garni. It was topped in the mid 4th century not by Grigor, but by a foreign power.
Bronze Age, the settlement was a fortress during the Urartu period and became a regional town of some importance during the Yervanduni Era (6th - 2nd cc BCE).

By 335 it had become so important that the Arshakunis’ move to Kosrov II (330-339) moved his seat of power there following the death of King T’rdat III, establishing the royal hunting grounds nearby that became the Khosrov Reserve. The Arshakunis lasted a little more than 100 years after this move, increasingly caught up in the perpetual fight between Persia and Rome over the region. An ill-fated attempt to throw off the chains of control cost the kingdom its autonomy and the Arshakunis their last king in 428, when the Sassanids took control of the eastern provinces, Arshakunis their last king in 428, when the Sassanids took control of the eastern provinces, installing their governor Ataturk), historically Armenian Nakhichevan was separated from Ararat region and given to Azerbaijan. In 1930, Ararat marz was officially formed with its capital at Vedi.

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

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

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

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

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

TheBagratunis were crowned with immediate success, but the region’s poverty stricken, its towns never reaching the status of their former medieval glory.

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

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

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

Assyrians The marz' main minority is its Assyrians, descended from one of the greatest cultures of the ancient world, which empire stretched between the Hindu Kush and the Mediterranean Sea. One of the oldest cultures on earth, Assyrians brought civilization to the world, with the same distances between points as the (M2). They have some kind of taxi service. Villages are normally linked to each other, requiring Jeep or other 4x4 vehicles to use.

Armenia are roughly 2700 people out of a total population of 4 million. Assyrians can be found in Dmtri and Verin Dvin villages. Contact:

*“ATUR” ASSYRIAN ASSOCIATION, 11 Pushkin p, Yerevan, tel: 565151. *“ASHUR” ASSYRIAN YOUTH CENTER, 105, Terian p (Polytechnic University), Bldg. 4, room 4102, Yerevan, tel. 598515

Another good valley (though without tree cover) is on the SE shore. Urtsadzor SE to the Urtsalanj, following the near the reserve. The Selav valley flows from Khosrov Reserve or on the Vedi and Selav Valleys wilderness areas. The best camping is inside the along the Turkish border), near villages and in

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

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

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

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

Before setting up camp, be sure you are not trespassing on private property, especially if you are close to a village or farm. Ask and you will almost certainly be given permission—candy, probably food, drink and an evening of stories into the bargain.

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

\[\text{DESTINATIONS} \]

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

\[\text{PREHISTORIC SITES} \]

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

\[\text{BROZNE AND IRON AGE SITES} \]

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

\[\text{URARTIAN SITES} \]

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

\[\text{HELLENISTIC SITES} \]

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

\[\text{ARTASHISAN-CHRISTIAN SITES} \]

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

\[\text{DVIN ERA/MEDIEVAL SITES} \]

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

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

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

NATURE TOURING

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

The most famous natural area is the Khosrov Reserve, the largest reserve in the country. The reserve is home to about half of Armenia's flora and much of its fauna species, many of which are endangered. Permission is required to enter, easily arranged through an adventure tour operator (see Yerevan travel agents listing or one of the adventure tour operators on p. 15 of this chapter).

1-3 day hiking and camping trips can be arranged, well worth it for nature fans. There is more about the Khosrov Reserve in Trip 2 (p. 51).

Hiking and trekking

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

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

Mountain treks

Most of Ararat's mountains are in the east of the marz: The main ranges are the Geghama, which divides Ararat from Gegharkunik marz (lake Sevan) and the Urts, which divide the upper marz from the Arax River plain. The tallest is Mt. Geghasar (3443m) in the far NE end of the marz, part of the Geghama Leh mountain Range. Just south of Geghasar are Mts. Nightsara (3170.7m) and Tsagkhavet (3076m), while N and NW are Mts. Vishapark (3157.7m) and Yeragaghet (2589.6m). Just E of Azat Reservoir is Mt. Yeranos (1823.7m). Others in the Khosrov Reserve are Mts. Manukun (2932.1m) and Khosrovakar (1988.3m). Central marz mountains include Mts. Yerakh-Khosrovakar (2292.8m) and Kotutsar (2061.5m) which looks over the Grigor Marzpetuni Castle. Mountains in the south of the marz include Mts. Urts (2445.9m) and Dahnak (2534.9m), Mt. Gndasar (2094.1m) on the Yavos Dzor border, and Mts. Dashurun (1210m) and Khunut (2065.8m) on the Nakhchivan border.

Flower Watching

Some flowers begin to bloom as early as late March in protected areas like river canyons and marshlands, but the main blooming season waits until April and May, with peak blooms in the east in mid-April to mid-May. Best places to look are all along the (M2) highway between Artashat city and Yerakh, with most of the poppies and wildflower fields coming to bloom close to Arashm. Other places are the Goravan Sands preserve in May, the Yerakh ("Iris") valley in May, the mountain pass by Tigranashen, and the main road line near Yerakh.

Alpine flowers bloom from April to June in the Selav River valley, especially between Shaghap and Lusashogh. For a list of flowers see Flora (on page 5).

Birding

Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migratory birding. The best birding spots, combining wetland, mountain steppe and semi-desert species. See Birds (on page 6) and Resources (on page 57).

Adventure Tour Operators

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

Avarayr Adventure Tours, (tel. 010 56 36 81, 50 42 40, Fax: 010 56 36 81), 1 Pavstos Bluaznd, Yerevan, E-mail: avaryar@arminco.com, URL: www.avaryar.am, has been arranging cultural and adventure tours to Armenia for more than 10 years, one of the first to provide fully equipped hiking, climbing and adventure tours. Tours include expert guides, cooks and support staff for Those interested in mountain climbing and hiking in the wilderness to cultural visits for the more comfort-minded. Their best seem to be tours that combine both aspects. A good, solid company.

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

Armenia Green Cross Ecological NGO ("AGCE"), 14-10 Batumi, Vanadzor (tel. 0-322-24066, fax. 58449, mob. 093-32-32-84) is a local NGO that provides eco-tours as part of its mission to preserve and enlarge ecologically vital areas of the country.

Eco-tours are expert-led hiking, climbing and camping tours, including hiking and climbing equipment, tents, sleeping-bags, emergency and first aid facilities and the services of their professional rescue group (EU certification).

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

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

Hike & Go, (tel. France (+33 6) 88 34 04 11, local cell: 010 20 41 38), email: info@hikeandgo.com, arranges adventure and trekking trips to the Geghama mountains, as well as traveling with experts. They combine traditional touring with hiking into Armenia's wilderness and off-the-beaten-path monuments, some of which can only be reached by hiking. See web site (www.hikeandgo.com/)

Aradventour Travel, (tel. 010 53 96 09, cell: 091 42 54 99), 67 45), Email: adventourtravel@tacentral.com, arranges adventure, birding, botanical and historic tours.

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

Flower Tours

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

Archeological Tours

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

See Resources (p. 57) for more Archeological options.
TRIP 1: NORTHWEST ARARAT

(Yerevan) – (Norabats) – (Ghukasvan) – MASSIS – (Sis) – (Marmarashen) – (Ararat) – (Areativit) – LANZAT (AZAT RESERVOIR/ GARNI/KHOSROV RESERVE)

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

An extension of the rich fields to the NW in Arnavar, Ararat marz belonged to the same ancient cultures that shaped the history of the Near East: the Indo-European, Metsamor and Araxes-Kura cultures that spread forth from the Iranian, Indian and Anatolian cultures which evolved into their Bronze Age counterparts. The "spectacular finds are in Armavir, but that is probably more because they were the focus of well-funded excavations during ht elate Soviet period, not even the first settlements in the region. Like its sister excavation to the north, the excavation has scant remains.

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

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

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

From Yerevan's Sassuntsi David train station, continue south to the rail underpass turn that leads to the Arax valley—instead, continue straight for about 900 m to Erebuni Airport, turning right at the roundabout and continuing for another 1.8 km to the next major intersection, turning L and into the Nerkin Charbach neighborhood with the Karmir Blur river station about 650 m SW. Continue SW on the same road for about 3.2 km to the L (SE) Massis highway—do not turn here, but continue another 50 m to the Norabats village turnoff (L) and a final 1 km to a R (NW) turn that leads to the school in central (Norabats, DD 40.10741 x 44.43418, elev. 863m)

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

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

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

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

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

SIDE TRIP: Ghukasvan – (near village – shade in orchards, ask); Springs in the area.

From Yerevan's Sassuntsi David train station, continue south to the rail underpass turn that leads to the Arax valley—instead, continue straight for about 900 m to Erebuni Airport, turning right at the roundabout and continuing for another 1.8 km to the next major intersection, turning L and into the Nerkin Charbach neighborhood with the Karmir Blur river station about 650 m SW. Continue SW on the same road for about 3.2 km to the L (SE) Massis highway—do not turn here, but continue another 50 m to the Norabats village turnoff (L) and a final 1 km to a R (NW) turn that leads to the school in central (Norabats, DD 40.10741 x 44.43418, elev. 863m).

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IN AND OUT

By Train

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

By Bus, Minivan

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

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

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

By Taxi

Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). The bus station is by the train station.

By Car

Massis is off the (M2) highway at the intersection of the (H12) & (H13). The (M2) leads N to Yerevan (6 km), and S/E to Artashat (14 km) and then to Ararat (17 km), Yeraskh (18 km) before turning NE to the Urts Valley (H10, 9 km) and the Tukhmanuk Pass at Yavots Dзор (9 km). The (H12) in Massis connects to the (M2) at Yerevan (6 km), and the (M3) junction (13 km), which leads S to the Turkish border (6 km) and N to Vagharshapat/Echmiadzin (14 km). The (H13) in Massis heads NW to Vagharshapat/Echmiadzin (12 km). From Massis it is 12 km to central Yerevan, 14 km to Echmiadzin, and 14 km to Artashat, 31 km to Ararat, 49 km to Yeraskh, 93 km to Yeghiegndzor, 134 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 109 km to Vaik, 142 k to Jermuk, 177 km to Sissian, 206 km to Goris, 269 km to Goris, 295 km to Kadjaran and 335 km to Meghri.

AROUND

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

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

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101
Police – 102, 67112
Ambulance service – 103
Rescue Hot Line – 107
Trunk Line – 107
Telephone directory information – 109

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

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

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

Bank, Exchange

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

ACBA, 3 Central Square

ARDSHININVESTBANK, New District 3

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

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

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

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

MASSIS CLINIC, tel. 42011

OVERNIGHT

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

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

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

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovats Grills, Srjarans (on page 6), and cafes, and restaurants/motels on the (M2).

Food can also be bought at Mtekers (food shops) and kiosks in town.

Finite"**}

From Massis, take the S road towards Ranchpar for about 3.5 km and just across the Hrazdan River to R (NW) road that leads in about 3.3 km to the N entrance into central (Sis, DD 40.05659 x 44.47031, elev. 841m)
victims of both the Genocide in 1915 and the earthquake on the 7th of December in 1988.

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

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

**SIDE TRIP:** Jrahovit – Հայոց ազգային պատմական հուշարձան Հայաստանի բազմաթիվ ազգային պատմական հուշարձաններից է, որոնցից շատերը գտնվում են Հայաստանի տարածքում, այսինքն որոնք դարձան պատմական նշանակություն դարաշրջաններին և ուղղարկել են հայ հայտնի և մեծ կենսական գործեր և տեղեկություններ հայերի համար։

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**SIDE TRIP:** Jrahovit – Հայոց ազգային պատմական հուշարձան Հայաստանի բազմաթիվ ազգային պատմական հուշարձաններից է, որոնքից շատերը գտնվում են Հայաստանի տարածքում, այսինքն որոնք դարձան պատմական նշանակություն դարաշրջաններին և ուղղարկել են հայ հայտնի և մեծ կենսական գործեր և տեղեկություններ հայերի համար։

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Among other fauna, the gorse is host to a number of amphibians and reptiles, among them the giousa, a rare but extremely poisonous snake. The Garni Canyon is close enough to inhabited areas there is less chance of coming across one, but you can detect it by its sand colored to dark gray coloring and hexagonal shaped markings. If you do happen to spot any snake, simply stop. Snakes avoid contact with humans and take any chance to avoid confrontation. Taking the north shore road into the gorge, you first reach a dense forest, in the midst of which are the remains of a once thriving village, now abandoned. Its citizens were forcibly removed to the canyon rim by revolutionists, and for a while residents hid in caves and rock outcroppings on the canyon rim by revolutionists, and for a while

The gorse has a unique ecosystem with small forests, and sections of semi-desert, mountain steppe and xerophytes (dry condition) terrains. It also home to a number of rare and endangered animal species, including the exceedingly rare Persian leopard, which has been known to come down to the river to drink at night once or twice. Other fauna in the preserve include Eurasian lynx (Lynx lynx), Wild cat (Felis silvestris, oman group), Jungle cat (Felis chaus), Brown bear (Ursus arctos), Red fox (Vulpes vulpes), Gray wolf (Canis lupus), Stone marten (Martes foina), Roe dear (Capreolus capreolus), Wild boar (Sus scrofa) Indian porcupine (Hystrix indica), European hare (Lepus europaeus), Jay (Garrulus glandarius)
From the picnic area to Garni, the gorge alternates between narrow gaps and wide open spaces. The confluence of the Azat River and the icy cool waters of the Goghti River is another favorite picnic area, filled with summer trekkers and swimmers who dam up the rivers with small stones to create shallow pools. Above this spot is one of the most beautiful sights in Armenia: About 600 meters away and 300 feet above is the temple of Garni. In the morning it is yellow gold. In the evening it drips red with the setting sun.

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

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

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

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

Camping is possible in the river gorge and along the lake shore (ask if people are nearby), and at the Hangestian Got; Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs along river bed and across the lake.

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

KHOSROV RESERVE - ԽՈՍՔՐՕՎ ՀԿԱՆԴԻՇ ՈՒՓՆԵՐ ԿԵՆՏՐՈՆ ՄԱՐԶ

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

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

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

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

Backtrack to the (M2) at Jrahovit or Yerevan.

END OF TRIP 1
Dvin

**TRIP 2: ARTASHAT, DVIN**

(Yerevan/Lanjazat) – (Dimitrov) – (Berkanush) – (Dalar) – ARTASHAT CITY – DVIN – (Khosrov Reserve: Narket entrance)

Trip 2 explores the north central valley, a swathe of rich land from the Arax River to the northeast hills of the Khosrov Reserve. This area has historically been the home for Armenia’s kings; the country its greatest glories and its Christian creation of the Armenian Empire that rivaled Rome. Or if you are starting from Yerevan’s south border, head S on the (M2) for about 12.6 km to central Dimitrov. If you are starting from Yerevan’s south border, head S on the (M2) for about 12.6 km from the exit for (Dimitrov, DD 40.00695 x 44.48945, elev. 842m)

**SIDE TRIP: Dimitrov – (H2) (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) is one of a handful of villages inhabited by Assyrians, a tiny minority in Armenia (and not much larger in the rest of the Near East). Once on the greatest empires on earth, the Assyrian Empire thrived during two periods; the 3rd-2nd millennia BCE and then in the late Iron Age, coexisting and warring with the Urartian forebears of the Armenian people.**

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

Afterwards, Assyrians (called “Asori” or plural “Arosiner” in Armenian), became a semi-nomadic population, traveling from place to place as they sought a permanent home in inhospitable lands.

Converting to Christianity in the 1st century, they formed the base of the Syrian Christian church, which had great influence on the development of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Not only did they shape the original liturgy, which Gregor II of Armenia saw in the 10th century, but they brought with him the Assyrian patriarch Hakok of Mtsbin (the first person in history who attempted to climb Mount Ararat), who assisted him in convening the council that invented the Armenian script, Syriac (Aramaic) was the language of the Armenian church, read by Assyrian priests. Yet during the Arab period, the Syrian church almost died, fracturing into 7 sects.

Allied with Armenian tribes evicted from Anatolia by Arab, Seljuk and Turks invaders, Assyrians and Armenians dwelt in the area around Lake Urmiya (Persia) for centuries. Those in Armenia today come from Assyrians in Urmia as well as Assyrians who resettled in Armenia in the early 20th century, when those living side-by-side with Armenians under Ottoman rule in western Armenia (especially Hakkari district) followed the Assyrians from Urmia escaped to eastern Armenia, given land grants by the Russian general Yermolov for services to the Tsar.

A second wave entered the country in the early 20th century, when those living side-by-side with Armenians under Ottoman rule in western Armenia (especially Hasankaldiran district) followed the Assyrian newcomers into eastern Armenia. Their fate was a direct result of western power interference: A British came calling for the creation of an Assyrian state during World War I encouraged the Assyrian population to resist Arab and Persian domination, which, when the British pulled its support for an Assyrian State, ended in the death of 750,000 Assyrians (2/3 of the population) by Turkish, Arab, Persian, and Kurdish populations (the latter then suffering the same fate when they became victims in the genocide of 1937-1939). Ironically, the Assyrian government has yet to recognize the Assyrian genocide, though none question it in the country.

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

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

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

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

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

SIDE TRIP: Baghramian – (till 1991 the village – shade in orchards, ask); like its neighboring villages, makes its living from farming the fertile Arax plain. The small village has a 19th century church that has been recently remodeled.

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

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

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

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

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

If you are starting from the end of Trip 1 (Lanjazat), backtrack to Mragavet (H8) and head SE for about 2 km to central Dimitrov. **If you are starting from Yerevan’s south border, head S on the (M2) for about 12.6 km from to the exit for (Dimitrov, DD 40.00695 x 44.48945, elev. 842m)**

The largest city on the Silk Road between the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, and the center for ceramics, metal and trade for the entire Near East.

Birding is good in the lowlands and bogs around village irrigation channels, and mountain steppes, from April through mid June.

The trip includes modern Artashat, capital of the kingdom, at over 150,000 people, Dvin (also known as Dabi by Arabs and Duin by others) was the largest city on the Silk Road between the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, and the center for ceramics, metal and trade for the entire Near East.

Flower watching is quite good in the area (especially the uninhabited slopes above Verin Dvin), from April-May. Don’t be fooled by the desert lands and sometimes inhospitable lands.

There is some scholarship that the Assyrians encouraged the Assyrian population to resist Arab and Persian domination (especially especially Hakkari district) followed their Assyrian neighbors into eastern Armenia.

They are a direct result of western power interference: A British came calling for the creation of an Assyrian state during World War I encouraged the Assyrian population to resist Arab and Persian domination, which, when the British pulled its support for an Assyrian State, ended in the death of 750,000 Assyrians (2/3 of the population) by Turkish, Arab, Persian, and Kurdish populations (the latter then suffering the same fate when they became victims in the genocide of 1937-1939).

Ironically, the Assyrian government has yet to recognize the Assyrian genocide, though none question it in the country.

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

The trip includes modern Artashat, capital of the marz, and the ruins of the ancient capital of Dvin, which reined over the fortunes of the Armenian kingdom for almost 1000 years. The center of commerce, politics and religion in the medieval kingdom, at over 150,000 people, Dvin (also known as Dabi by Arabs and Duin by others) was the largest city on the Silk Road between the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, and the center for ceramics, metal and trade for the entire Near East.

Birding is good in the lowlands and bogs around village irrigation channels, and mountain steppes, from April through mid June.
(Berkanush, DD 39.97328 x 44.51876, elev. 828m)

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

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

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

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

**SIDE TRIP:** Dalar – Դալար (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) has a 1904 newly renovated 1903 S. Hakob church in its center.

A traveler’s reference guide

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

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

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

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

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

The modern city has little to recommend it as a tourist stop, save its few eateries, a Soviet Hotel (cheap but challenging) and a restaurant hotel near the city park. Artashat is convenient for exploring the marz, within 30 minutes drive of both Ararat and Vedi, and a good start and stop point for half-day explorations of the rest of the marz.

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

**SITES**

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

**Monuments**

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

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

**Park**

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

**Other**

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

[MAP]

**PRACTICALITIES**

Area Code: 235

Long Distance: 0235 + local number

From abroad: + (374) 235+ local number

Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel (Beeline), 093/094 VivaCell (MTS)

International callers: Armentel/Beeline + (374) 91 + number, VivaCell-MTS + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

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

**IN AND OUT**

**By Train**

Elektrichka trains connect Artashat (central station) with Yerevan (David Sassuntsi metro).
The Trains leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the afternoon. Tickets at 250-350 AMD makes this the cheapest way to Artashat.

By Bus, Minivan

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

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

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

By Taxi

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

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

Phone, telegraphs

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

Internet

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

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

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks: ARDSHINVESTBANK, 15 Marx p., ARMECONOMBANK, Astarbekian p., CONVERSE BANK, 1 Khatsurian p., UNIBANK, 1 Khatsurian p.

Shopping

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

Film, etc.

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

Pharmacy

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

Hospital, Polyclinic

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

DENTIST

There is one dental clinic in town.

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

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

OVERRIDE HOTELS/MOTELS

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

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

Boarding/Apartment

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

FOOD AND DRINK

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

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

CONTINUE TRIP 2

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

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

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

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

One of the most important cities in medieval times, little of its grandness will be found in the dusty hill and poorly kept excavations that lie on the edge of the Geghama Lehr. This is not to say you should skip Dvin; absolutely not! You simply need a little imagination to life what was one of the greatest cities on earth.
There is a small, worn museum with knowledgeable and friendly guides that somehow eke out a living at the site and are fanatic about protecting its remains. There are good artifacts from Dvin's Bronze Age, and enough fragments and broken columns to allow you to get a pretty good idea of how sophisticated the city once was.

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

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

BACKGROUND

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

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

In the 3rd millennium BCE, a cyclocic stone fortress was erected at the site, which had grown into a significant regional center of trade and production. Even at the earliest, Dvin was already an important stop on an expanding network of trade routes that linked Anatolia and the Mediterranean coast with Central Asia. Like Metsamor, the site had a walled citadel (acropolis), where the palace and temples were located, surrounded by a necropolis of residential homes and services buildings. Ceramics and metal works had reached a sophisticated level of development; black and red earthen ware with cosmic and water imagery is found here several hundred years before they became widespread in Anatolia and in the Mediterranean world.

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

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

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

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

What the king called his new city is unknown; the word “Dvin” is a middle Persian word for “Hill”, a name given to the city later in the 5th c. The city prospered under Arshakuni rule, later reaching legendary fame as the wealthiest and most populous city east of Constantinople.

Khosrov’s reign was short and that of his dynasty even shorter, as they succumbed to Roman/Sassanid pressure in the late 4th c, the two super powers dividing the kingdom between them. An ill-fated attempt to rebel cost the kingdom its autonomy and the Arshakunis their last king in 428, when the Sassanids took control of the eastern provinces, making Dvin the capital of their Armenian marzpanate (the origin of the current word “marz” for Armenia's 10 districts).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What the king called his new city is unknown; the word “Dvin” is a middle Persian word for “Hill”, a name given to the city later in the 5th c. The city
the new international trade routes the Arab Caliphate fostered to increase the wealth of the city immeasurably.

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

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

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

The complex includes the small museum, a Citadel, and included fine textiles dyed with cochineal.

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

Armenian historians, Dvin was the birthplace of the colorful dynasts of Moslem rulers. According to the Shaddadids, hired as a temporary army, ended up staying more than a century, establishing one of Armenia’s more influential dynasties of Moslem rulers. According to Armenian historians, Dvin was the birthplace of the Bagratushids, a century, establishing one of Armenia’s more colorful dynasties of Moslem rulers. According to Armenian historians, Dvin was the birthplace of the Bagratunis in 1045, enjoying their prize for a series of Muslim lords until 1173 when the Armenian atabeg Orbelian King of Georgia George III captured the city for a short time. Led by the Armenian atabeg (general) Ivaneh Zakarian, the city was again in Georgian hands under Queen Tamara in 1201-1203.

The Zakarian period saw a burst of cultural revival in the country, and Dvin’s fortunes rose for one last, glittering time as caravan trade swelled the city’s coffers and elaborate churches and palaces were erected. As suddenly as it began, it came crashing down in 1236, when the city was completely destroyed by invading Mongols. The city never recovered.

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


Museum & Artifacts

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

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

Still, the small collection here gives a taste of what Dvin was known for, including examples of its substantial trade connections, if the large number of Sassanian, Byzantine, Arabic, Seljuk, & Georgian coins found at the site are anything to go by. The
coins (gold, silver and copper) include those minted at Dvin during the Caliphate period, which were widely spread throughout the Transcaucasus and Middle East, some of which found their way to the Baltic and Scandinavian peninsulas.

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

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

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

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

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

Once on top, the outline of the castle and royal premises become apparent, if you follow the line of the stone foundations. Sadly, there is very little left of the grandeur that Arab historians marveled at, instead there is a small block building with the remains of a staircase and fireplace that out guide attributed to 4th-5th c Sassanid Mazdaism fire rituals. For the more hardy, hike one km south to view the remains of a large 5th c market building, near the road to Artashat. This was still well within the city limits, giving some idea of the size of the old city.
Enlarged and enriched several times by successive rulers, the palace yielded rich finds allowing excavators to piece together how the rich and powerful lived in the early medieval period. When not dispensing justice or feuding with his nakharars, the king spent much of his time hunting in his private preserve, and banqueting with royal guests and his retinue. Feasts could last for days, and the menu revolved around large portions of meat; game included stag, boar, rabbit and the famous Armenian mutton, rounded off with wild pheasant, quail, water fowl and exotic game birds migrating through the country. Bread was an important part of local diet, as it remains today, as was seasonal fruit, nuts, and berries, all washed down with a kind of ale brewed from grain and wine. Feasts could start early in the day, breaking for the hunt or chase, then resume with eating and entertainment until late at night, the king and his guests staggering to bed to sleep off the night’s revelry, only to rise the next day and start all over again. Obviously this was not an everyday affair, but it occurred enough to leave behind vast quantities of food scraps that excavators found in the palace area.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dvin’s cathedral was unsurprisingly rich in its decor, with a mosaic floor made from multi-hued stone glass and column capitals carved with intricate nest hatching designs. Inscriptions covered the walls and framing was in elaborate geometric designs with animal and fruit imagery. Chandeliers boasted multi-colored glass lamp shades. The altar apse was also decorated with mosaic stone (7th c), depicting the Mother of God, the oldest mosaic of this type found.

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

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

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

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

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

TOWN SQUARE: SECULAR BUILDINGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

A couple of examples gypsum décor found at the site are in the small site museum, but the best are in Yerevan. Gypsum became popular in Dvin after the 973 earthquake as a cheaper, if less permanent, way of adding a little splash to the city's buildings. Gypsum is a form of plaster of Paris, poured into cut molds. Much cheaper and quicker than hiring a stone carver, it also permits more elaborate decoration on wall niches, doorways, window framings and as frontal pieces. Its drawbacks were far outweighed by the cheaper cost and the ability to replace crumbling fragments quickly and in many cases, in far richer designs than before. As proof of the technique, excavators point to a lintel piece that was cast from a template used in other castings, each one having the same identical flaw as the original mold.

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

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

CONTINUE TRIP 2

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

SIDE TRIP: Verin Dvin – Վերին Դվին (pop. 2000) was established in the 19th century by émigré Assyrians escaping the genocide. The village has the largest population of Assyrians (Dmitrov has the next largest) in Armenia. The villagers descend from Assyrian émigrés who came in 1828, with the signing of the Treaty of Turkmanchai that declared an end to the war between Russia and Persia. A population swap ensued, between Armenia and Persia, the Assyrians entering eastern Armenia for the first time in history during the exchange. For background on the Assyrians in Armenia, see Dmitrov in this same trip (p. 21) for an introduction to the Assyrian population.

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

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

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

Remains include the bases and one capital of the columns that supported the roof, the capital carved into volutes and palm fronds with great flourish.
The Assyrian culture is one of the oldest in the world, its traditions as old—perhaps older than—that of the proto-Armenians who became its most significant rival and the cause of its collapse in 605 BCE. Much of what Armenians consider their origin myths have parallels to—and some say sprang from—Assyria, which was one of the most significant influences of Armenia’s cultural development.

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

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

The victory hailed the new year and the most important laws in the Code of Hammurabi, the world’s first constitution (ca. 1760 BCE).

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

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

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

The Nestorian church is the unique 19th Holy Tovmas basilica, one of the only working Assyrian Churches in Armenia. The original was built from clay bricks with plastered walls. The renovation of the church somehow explains the complex relations between the “brother” nations of Armenians and Assyrians. No money was allocated for the renovation of the church for the 1700th anniversary of the conversion of King T’rdat to Christianity (which officially marks the beginning of the Armenian conversion) in the year 2001. The churches do not have relations; despite their congregations share the same histories, Christianity and persecution.

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

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

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

**END OF TRIP 2**

**Trip 5: Khosrov Reserve**

Trekking MAP!

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

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

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

**SIDE TRIP: Baiberd / Khosrov Reserve**

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

For details about Baiberd, see **Trip 5: Khosrov Reserve**, p. 51.
TRIP 3: KHOR VIRAP, ARARAT

(Arashaat) - (Taperakan) - (Ginevet) - KHOR VIRAP/ARTASHAT - ARARAT CITY - (Surenavan) - (Arash) - (Yerasch)

Viticulture is old in the Arax valley; endemic grape species are still found in the valley and its foothills, and most of the world’s wine sorts are found only in Armenia, among them Areni, Ararat (Chaschapahre), Mchals, Vosevat (Chardgije) and others.

Urartian cuneiform mentions the valley’s established viticulture and potent wine, and wine cellars found in the ground and served in large jars, imiters using straws to drink the wine with. This may have been a form of mead (he mentions the wine was covered with a film of wheat), but historians generally believe it was among the earliest wine in recorded history, and may well describe an early form of brandy, which many believe originated in Armenia. It was certainly potent stuff; Xenophon includes descriptions of its hallucinatory effects on those who drank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, and Ararat.

From Aratsashat city square, head to the (H8), turn L (SE) and continue for about 5-6 km and then Hannagan, the modern village is no where near its ancient namesake, but is known for its PHOTO-777 LLC Winery (tel. 091-424219, 091-421307), located in the village center, and for its specialty wine, “Tushpa”, a semi-dry red varietal produced from the native Haghtanak grape that goes back 3000 years in the valley. The wine comes in several vintages and levels of dryness, and goes well with desserts and as a casual drink (mix with cabernet for a delightful rose.

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

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

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

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

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

(DD 39.87926 x 44.57763, elev. 830m)

ARTASHAT / KHOR VIRAP - URSUCUS

Arashaat - Արշաշատ - sits on a series of hills overlooking the Arax River with one of the most famous (and photographed) views of Mt. Ararat. It is also, after Echmiadzin and the temple of Garni, the most visited site in the country.

For good reason, too; the site is located next to the Turkish border, seeming within arm’s reach of the massive mountain that looms over the valley. Dawn at the monastery of Khor Virap or on top of Arashaat is a breath-taking experience not to be missed, as stars (and if you are lucky) the moon evaporate over the deep purple crest of Ararat and shadows creep behind you to reveal the mountain’s outline bit by bit with each moment.

Your tour schedule may have you visiting the site in the afternoon, but if you can manage it, take a taxi just before dawn to watch the sun rise. One of Armenia’s stunning splendors.

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

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

The city of Arashaat (“Artaxiasata”) was built on the twelve hills for the founder of the Arshashian Dynasty, Arshats I, between 189 and 180 BCE on top of settlements and fortresses that dated back...
to the Bronze Age. The city, called "the Joy of Artashes" by the contemporaries of Memnon and Arax Rivers, the delta of which nurtured a lush background to a city of broad streets and Roman stately, one of the most famous capitals in the ancient world, its beauty the stuff of legend and fact as recorded by the Romans Strabo and Plutarch.

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

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

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

Somehow, the Roman outcast Hannibal—having led the Seleucid King Antiochus to Roman defeat—befriended the friend-of-Rome Artashes and enters the king's palace.

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

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

"Artashat went to the spot where the waters of the Arax and Metsamor intermingle, and being pleased with the hill, he there constructed a city, calling it Artashat, after his own name. The Arax River aided him with (floating) the city, which was called after his own name, and made metropolis of Armenia." (Plutarch's Life of Lucullus)

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

During his reign, Artavazd became known as an accomplished playwright and actor, performing Greek tragedies, orations, and historical commentaries which were treasured in Greek literature and survived until the second century. During his lifetime, he was well-known to"... Of all this Germanicus was aware, but his declaration that if fewer than were given to those who... Thereupon, by a decree of the Senate, the provinces beyond sea were entrusted to Germanicus, with greater powers wherever he ran than were given to those who...
great extent on our provinces and stretching far away to Media. It lies between two mighty empires, and is very often at strife with them, hating Rome and jealous of Parthia. It had at this time no king, Vonones having been expelled, but the nation's likings inclining towards Zeno, son of Polemon, king of Pontus, who from his earliest infancy had imitated Armenian manners and customs, loving the chase, the banquet, and all the popular pastimes of barbarians, and who had thus bound to himself chiefs and people alike. Germanicus accordingly, in the city of Artaxata, with the approval of the nobility, in the presence of a vast multitude, placed the royal diadem on his head. All paid him homage and saluted him as King Artaxias, which name they gave him from the city."

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

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

Rebuilt, Artashat remained the principal political and cultural center of the kingdom until the 4th c, and the commercial city of some import until the fall of the kingdom to convert as well. The city was again rebuilt and it remained as a fortress walls and stone structures, burning the rest. The city was again rebuilt and it remained as commercial city of some import until the fall of the Armenian Kingdom in 428.

Before Vardanants War in 451, the Catholicos, bishops and princes met in Artashat (449) and wrote a now famous response to the Persian king's demand they revert to Zoroastrianism. This precipitated the war which ended in Armenia's demand they revert to Zoroastrianism. This wrote a now famous response to the Persian king's invasion, with the approval of the nobility, in the presence of a vast multitude, placed the royal diadem on his head. All paid him homage and saluted him as King Artaxias, which name they gave him from the city."

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

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

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

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

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

At the same time, a group of Christian maidens escaping persecution in Rome entered the scene, at T'rdat's request, one of his royal seats. They were of Roman aristocracy, and included a follower named Hripsimeh, a virgin of exceptional beauty. The king learned of this and summoned Hripsimeh to present her with each remaining corpse, telling her that she was married herself unavailable because she was "married to God", the spurned suitor had them stoned. Guyaneh's tongue cut out first to prevent her from preaching.

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

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

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

All this occurred sometime between 301-311, the exact date fiercely debated by scholars and the church, each pointing out valid arguments for their
The date celebrated by the church and the Catholicos, which would last 100 years. Finally, appointed his son Aristakis to be his successor, the king and his retinue, was consecrated as In 302 (312) Grigor Lusavorich, accompanied by Zoroastrian fanatics in Persia, saving Armenia from in rallying the country and repelling the second hand sources that depend on belief more than evidence. This much is known: on his around the king was already a convert helps put to live in, and, to read that practically everyone around the world, it has occurred at a time the kingdom was threatened by annihilation by Sassanids, who practiced a particularly fundamentalist version of the Pagan faith, one which had found favor in the local population and threatened to undermine the ruling house's authority. There was also a rift in the Parthian house itself, its Persian branch snuffed out by the Sassanids. The Christians had already found a tolerant society to exist in, and, to read that practically everyone around the king was already a convert helps put things into perspective. I have no doubt some kind of miracle occurred, but what kind is left to second hand sources that depend on belief more than evidence. This much is known: on his conversion, T'rdat reunited his branch of the Parthian House with Grigor's, and they succeeded in rallying the country and repelling the Zoroastrian fanatics in Persia, saving Armenia from complete assimilation.

In 302 (312) Grigor Lusavorich, accompanied by the king and his retinue, was consecrated as Patriarch of Armenia from Leonitus of Caesarea, becoming Armenia's first Catholicos. In 318 he appointed his son Aristakis to be his successor, establishing the Grigorian (Parthian) line of Catholicos, which would last 100 years. Finally, around 331, having torn down pagan temples and all traces of pre-Christian religion (including libraries, and religious texts in what some believe was the original Armenian script), Grigor withdrew to a cave and lived as a hermit on Mt. Sebuh in the province of Daranalia in Upper Armenia, where he died a few years later unattended and unobserved.

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

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

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

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

Outside the monastery and on your right as you reach the car park, there is a large cemetery, with mostly modern, but a few old graves and khachkars. At the car park, in high season you will find a number of vendors and on occasions, circus performers or costumed cartoon characters, all attempting to get your drams. Enjoy and buy if you wish.

**KHOR VIRAP MONASTERY - ԽՈՐ ՎԻՐԱՊ ԵՊՀՈՒՄԵՐԸ**

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

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

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**MAP**

**COMPLEX**

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

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

**SITES**

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

**Monastery Approach** The approach is one of the most dramatic in Armenia, its walled form jutting out from a low hillside that is in turn framed by the huge Mt. Ararat. On clear days the mountain is one of the most beautiful sites in the world, it snow-capped crest jutting out in front of a clear blue sky. Clearly seen in the early hours of dawn, the mountain is a cauldron of clouds that build up from the day's heat, often below the mountain's top, creating the illusion of a second set of mountains on top of the main.
The church is unique in that instead of the domed cruciform with four corner annexes typical for the period of its original construction, the church is in instead a domed hall type, was destroyed during the Timurid invasions of the late 14th c and rebuilt in the 17th c. It was damaged anew by earthquakes and rebuilt or renovated in 1939, 1949 and 1957 before its most recent renovation in the 21st century.

The church is entered from the north. The western entry is protected by a 17th c bell tower, itself topped with an eight column bell space topped by a conical roof.

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

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

Unlike Armenian churches, which are oriented East-West, S. Gevorg is oriented NW-SE, interestingly like the Temple at Garni, which is also oriented in the same directions, and was built over Urartian and Bronze Age worship sites.

The current structure was built in 642 for one of the greatest catholicos in Armenian history, Nerses the Builder, responsible of most of the religious structures of the 7th c, which were either begun or completed during his reign. In many ways Nerses brought the religious civil wars to an end, celebrating the Christian rites throughout the country, in churches and monasteries erected in its most remote spots. The church at Khor Virap has been repeatedly rebuilt during its history, after the Timurid invasions and after the 1679 and 1926 earthquakes.

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

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

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

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

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Nerses the Builder is supposed to be buried in Khor Virap, along with relics of Gregory himself.
of the Pagan temple precincts is shedding light on the city’s extensive contacts with the outside world, plus showing just how grand it really was.

**COMPLEX**

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

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

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

Artashat occupied about 400 hectares of territory, and in its heyday had a population of about 150,000; one of the largest in the world. From on top of the tallest hill you can detect both the city’s boundaries and the original flow of the rivers, and if you carefully comb the earth, you will still find small shards of pottery from different periods of the city’s existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The city’s extensive contacts with the outside world, plus showing just how grand it really was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the temple site excavators uncovered a lion-headed lug bowl, suggesting the temple was dedicated to the sun (the lion being the symbol of the summer sun and in the Near East was a symbol of the sun, fire, heroes and kings). Also found were a large quantity of imported vessels, which were used to hold olive oil and perfume, also pointing to the building’s use as a temple. The carved stones that have been found are beautiful—more beautiful than those at Garni, which would have been the way of course.

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

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

One of the most beautiful sculptural pieces from the Near East, a copy is in the State History Museum in Yerevan. The original is now housed at the British Museum, the curators choosing to ignore its Armenian origins in their description.

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

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

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

**Side Trip:**  
**Argevan – Ugqublub** (till 1945 Reghanlu, pop. 700) borders an important archeological find to its NW: the 4000 BCE - 6th c settlement that makes up the low mound (852m) on the N side of the highway. The mound includes foundations of buildings (mostly medieval), traces of a protective wall, and pottery shards.

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

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

**SITES**  
The town has an exhausted air about it, with soviet era stores shuttered en masse, interspersed with a small working mterk or khanut (shop). The **square** is fronted by a dormant culture center, Univermag and a dry fountain. Taking the
street to the L of the culture center as you face it, and continuing N, you soon pass a closed ethnographic museum (no one knows who has the key and the windows are shuttered) and in a short distance, the city park, with a restaurant-hotel, a large WWII monument, some fountains and flowers. There is also a small monument to a Soviet Armenian soldier who lost his life in the great patriotic War.

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

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

ARARAT VILLAGE

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

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

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

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

MINERAL SPRINGS

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

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

To get there, backtrack to the entry street you used to get into Ararat, and turn L (SE) on a road to the springs. The cost is about 1000 AMD for as long as you want. The managers provide food at the ticket office in the summer and you are welcome to bring your own picnic.

There are showers, a picnic area and a large pool for soaking. The garden has fruit trees and tall grass. For a cheap soak, you cannot beat this family-run place. A find!
Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop at the train station. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Minivans connect Ararat to Yerevan (11 km AMD), Arashat (150 AMD), Vedi (200 AMD) and Masis (250 AMD). Some interstate minivans stop in Ararat on their way south or north—again, ask when you arrive for particulars.

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

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

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

From Yerevan, it is 50 km to Artashat at 100-150 AMD per kilometer with a 600 AMD minimum charge. Taxis should charge 4600-6900 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone for same price. There are dozens of taxi services to choose from. Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

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

Birds that have been known to visit the ponds include Mute Swan (Cygnus olor), Tundra Swan (Cygnus cygnus), Greater White-fronted Goose (Anser albifrons albinornis), Lesser White-fronted Goose (Anser erythropus), Greylag Goose (Anser anser), Red-breasted Goose (Branta ruficollis), Bufflehead (Bucephala clangula), Northern Pintail (Anas acuta), Northern Shoveler (Anas clypeata), Marbled Duck (Marmaronetta angustirostris), Red-crested Pochard (Netta rufina), Common Pochard (Aythya ferina), Ferruginous Duck (Aythya nyroca), Tufted Duck (Aythya fuligula), Greater Scaup (Aythya marila marila), Long-tailed Duck (Clangula hyemalis), Velvet Scoter (Melanitta fusca), Common Scoter (Melanitta nigra), Northern Shoveler (Anas clypeata), Marbled Duck (Marmaronetta angustirostris), Red-crested Pochard (Netta rufina), Common Pochard (Aythya ferina), Ferruginous Duck (Aythya nyroca), Tufted Duck (Aythya fuligula), Greater Scaup (Aythya marila marila), Long-tailed Duck (Clangula hyemalis), Velvet Scoter (Melanitta fusca), Common Scoter (Melanitta nigra), Common Goldeneye (Bucephala clangula clangula), Smew (Mergus albellus), Red-breasted Merganser (Mergus serrator), Goosander (Mergus merganser merganser), White-headed Duck (Oxyura leucocephala).

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

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

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

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

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

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

END OF TRIP 3
The trip includes a stop at the birthplace and home-museum for one of Armenia’s most famous modern poets, Paruir Sevak, a firebrand of a wordsmith who has been compared to the medieval master Narekatsi for his poetry and imagery.

**Iris Valley** Trip 4 includes stops at two of Armenia’s most unique habitats; the Goravan Sands Desert Preserve and Yerakh Valley, a.k.a. “Iris Valley” for its splendid display of Iris blossoms. The iris blooms for a few short weeks in April and May, and the Valley includes Yerakh Valley near Vedi town (also known as “Vedi Hills” by birders), an excellent birding habitat, especially for those seeking the Red-tailed Wheatear.

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

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

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, and Vedi.

**Start:** From Yerashk (end of Trip 3), take the (M2) NE for about 9 km to the N exit to and roadside monument at (Paruir Sevak, DD 39.77100 x 44.92265, elev. 1224m)

**Valley** Deep—caves also lead to Nakhichevan and going northwards, huge labyrinth caves and soaring rock crevices. If you are trekking through Armenia, and you do not stop here, you are missing one of the most idyllic landscapes the country has to offer.

**The valley** is deep and winding, beginning as a gentle slope to the E of the village, then plunging into folds in the mountains. From the highway just E of the village you can scope the entire view. The mountain slopes that erupt above the valley are extremely tall and included several fascinating limestone formations, including a “wave formation” on the slope closest to the highway.

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

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

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, and Vedi.

**Start:** From Yerashk (end of Trip 3), take the (M2) NE for about 9 km to the N exit to and roadside monument at (Paruir Sevak, DD 39.77100 x 44.92265, elev. 1224m)

**Valley** Deep—caves also lead to Nakhichevan and going northwards, huge labyrinth caves and soaring rock crevices. If you are trekking through Armenia, and you do not stop here, you are missing one of the most idyllic landscapes the country has to offer.

**The valley** is deep and winding, beginning as a gentle slope to the E of the village, then plunging into folds in the mountains. From the highway just E of the village you can scope the entire view. The mountain slopes that erupt above the valley are extremely tall and included several fascinating limestone formations, including a “wave formation” on the slope closest to the highway.

**Caves** are very deep and not yet completely mapped. A professional guide is required for anyone other than the most experienced spelunker, and locals caution from going to deep—caves also lead to Nakhichevan and going too far might get you in trouble with Azerbaijani border guards on the other end. The caves house several of Armenia’s endemic bat colonies.
45.03251, elev. 1672m) in about 300m to the Paruir Sevak home turnoff into Zangekatun, which if followed leads (M2) for about 800 meters to the first L (N) museum in (near village – no shade); 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Overnight at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in the area (near village – no shade); Springs in the area.

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

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

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

From the Vardashat spur, continue E on the highway, straddling the Vardashat River. The village is 2 km S of the Zangekatun, DD 39.81004 x 45.06655, Tukh Manuk Pass (open 10-5m M-S) is a pilgrimage point for local and Diaspora Armenians alike, and who can shed light on his life, work and why he still has such a profound impact on Armenian literature almost 40 years after his death.

The Home Museum (open 10-5m M-S) is a pilgrimage point for local and Diaspora Armenians alike, and who can shed light on his life, work and why he still has such a profound impact on Armenian literature almost 40 years after his death.

The dedicated staff maintains the small museum and the superb garden that surrounds it, which includes Sevak’s grave and memorial, a huge block of black stone with carvings.

Hiking The village is 2 km S of the Zangekatun Reservoir and 1 km N of Karalich reservoir and Mt. Khunut (2065.8m). Both have good alpine camping and hiking in the area; from Zangekatun Lake north along the Aratsogot River to Mt. Gndasar (2878.0m), and from Karalich SW to Tigranashen and the Khosrov Reserve.

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

To Vayots Dzor: From Zangekatun continue E on the (M2) for about 2 km to the watershed for the marz and the border with Vayots Dzor, the (Tukh Manuk Pass, DD 39.81004 x 45.06655, elev. 1795m)

His studies took him to Yerevan State University and Moscow’s Gorky Institute of Literature. A doctor of philology, from 1963 until his death in 1971 Sevak was a senior researcher for The Literature Institute of the Academy Of Sciences, and in 1966 he was elected as the secretary of the Writers Union Of Armenia.

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

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

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

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

His poetry collections are The Immortals Command, 1948; Unreconciled Intimacy, 1953; UNRECONCILED INTIMACY, 1953; The Way of Love, 1954; Again With You, 1957; The Ever Ringing Bell Tower, 1959; The Man in the Palm, 1962; Let There Be Light, 1971; and Your Acquaintances, 1971. In addition there remain a number of unpublished manuscripts.

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

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SIDE TRIP: Tukh Manuk Pass – Թուխ Մանուկ Փաս (1795m) marks the point where the watershed for rivers that feed the Arax River flow west, and those feeding the Vorotan in Vayots Dzor flow east. It is a windswept barren land of tall mountains, and other than a sign and a small picnic table, not much to see, or much of a dramatic entrance. A few kilometers beyond the road switchbacks to the Yelipin Valley, one of the most beautiful in the country (see Vayots Dzor chapter).

From the Tukh Manuk Pass backtrack for about 7 km to Urtsalanj turnoff (H10), turn R (N) and then E for the 1 km spur into (Urtsalanj, DD 39.82254 x 44.99413, elev. 1850m) -

SIDE TRIP: Urtsalanj – Ուրթսալանջ (pop. 200) is set among alpine hills and rugged mountains; barren in the summer but lush and green at spring time.

S. KARAPET MONASTERY – Ս.ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏ ՄՈՆԱՍՏԵՐԻ – ՈՒրտսալանջ Փաս (1795m) is located in a fold of mountains that spurt off the Urts Mountain Range. The mountains divide the monastery’s valley from the long Shaghapi-Selav River valley which forms the heart of the marz.

S. Karapet is located in one of the remotest parts of the country, which quickly becomes apparent as you approach the ruins of Djindjirlu medieval village (now a nomad camp) with its ruined foundations and small cemetery with khachkars, then continue NW following a stream towards the distant monastery (1 km from the nomad camp).

As you approach the village you will spot a large hill on the left; find your way to its top where the old cemetery, wall fragments and foundations of a large Hellenistic-Medieval Settlement stand. The tombs stones are prolific and profound, combining tomb stones that appear to be Iron Age with later Hellenistic and Medieval markers.

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

En route you pass several khachkars, some grouped together as parts of now ruined shrines, others marking graves for important persons and monks. In its heyday the community was rather large but most of the graves were ruined or buried over during 14th-16th century Turcoman and Persian raids.

S. Karapet ("The Forerunner", or John the Baptist) is quite old; its origins are in the Pagan era, when sacred springs were developed into a shrine and worship area. The worship sites was converted into a Christian shrine in the 4th century, replaced over time until the current church was built in the 13th-14th century (experts disagree on the date, one setting it at 1254 during the reign of Smbat Orbelian, while another places it in the early 14th century, during the last, great, reign of the Orbelians, led by Burtel (Burtegh) Orbelian, who is most famously responsible for the three-story chapel that bears his name in Noravank, Vayots Dzor. Interestingly, S. Karapet also has a three-story chapel with a bell tower.

S Karapet (along with the nearby Aghjots Vank, Havuts Tar Convent and Geghard monastery), is part and parcel of the Orbelian influence on Armenian medieval life and architecture. Built for this powerful ruling family, this string of monasteries that hug the Geghama and Urts Mountain Ranges form a string of religious centers that thrived at their day, and it managed to survive the Dark Ages that followed the Mongol Era, when Turkish emirs, Timur’s hoards, the Persians and Ottomans waged a 300 year war over the Armenian lands, devastating the country in return. It was also an important link in a string of mountain monasteries that stretched from Geghard to Tatev, roughly identifying the northern and southern borders of the Orbelian landholdings.

There is little known of S. Karapet’s community; in contemporary chronicles it is mentioned in lists of religious centers that thrived at their day, and it managed to survive the Dark Ages that followed the Mongol Era, when Turkish emirs, Timur’s hoards, the Persians and Ottomans waged a 300 year war over the Armenian lands, devastating the country in return. It was also an important link in a string of mountain monasteries that stretched from Geghard to Tatev, roughly identifying the northern and southern borders of the Orbelian landholdings.

Complex
The complex (abandoned in the late 19th century) includes the S Astvatsatsin (also Spitakavor) Church, a mausoleum, three-story Mausoleum (with Chapel and Bell Tower), ruins of dwellings and service rooms, a small cemetery and defensive walls.

En route you pass several khachkars, some grouped together as parts of now ruined shrines, others marking graves for important persons and monks. In its heyday the community was rather large but most of the graves were ruined or buried over during 14th-16th century Turcoman and Persian raids.

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S. Astvatsatsin There are two dates suggested for the contemporary monastery, both of which may be correct. A 1254 dating corresponds with Smbat Orbelian’s successful trek to Karakorum to woo the Mangu Khan, and may mark the vanks official establishment, while the later early 14th century dating may refer to the three-story chapel and bell tower, the gavit and some of the out buildings. Both dates would correspond with the construction at S. Karapet’s sister vanks Noravank, Aghjots Vank, and Havuts Tar, as well as Geghard’s Orbelian (Proshian) period.

The 14th century work is attributed to the architect But (pronounced “Boot”), the church built in a central dome cruciform style, with an extended western end. The dome dominates the inner space, with its drum that seems overly tall on the outside fitting remarkably well with the interior hall. The altar apse is horseshoe shaped, flanked by two-story sacristies.

The only entry is from the west, where the now-destroyed gavit (narthex) was built sometime after the church. The entry door has a door frame with a double carving topping the doorway. The lower tympanum shows the Virgin flanked by two angels, set in front of deeply cut fretwork. The top panel shows Christ in a characteristic pose, flanked by icons of the four evangelists with what is thought to be the likenesses of two saints or perhaps the donors at the bottom corners of the panel.

The monastery’s Mausoleum is attached to the south-west corner of the church. From the outside it appears to have been square like the gavit, which it also adjoined, and had a double slope roof supported by cross vaulting. The mausoleum held (and still does), members of the Orbelian family, abbots and wealthy parishioners.

The Three-story Grave Monument and Bell Tower adjoins the western wall of the mausoleum. The structure was designed very like the three-story structure at Noravank, Yeghvard (Kotaik) and the grave monument at Aghudi (Aghitu) near Sissian. These monuments took their ideas from grave towers that populated the Near East from at least the Bronze Age, with a particular style popular in Zoroastrian Armenia.

Taking the idea from their ancient brethren, medieval Armenians took the idea and created a new form, combining a tomb memorial with a second floor chapel and a third floor belfry. Later Armenians reinvented the form again into the belfry entries that adorn some churches today.

Of the three floors, the first two have survived. The first floor held a small mausoleum and had no entry, suggesting it was intended for one-time use. There are two small windows on the lower walls, letting the curious to peak in and look on the sarcophagi.

The second floor is also vaulted, with a semicircular apse for the altar space. This was reached by steps that no longer survive.

The third floor - the Bell Tower - was crowned with rounded arcades, a spherical dome and octahedral spire. It no longer survives, no doubt because its open form with columns to support the dome was less solidly built.

A medieval earthquake destroyed much of the complex, including the bell tower and the gavit. The church, though survived with relatively little damage, a testament to its engineering. The chapel and bell tower are thought to have largely survived because of its engineering, while the third
level dome collapsed because it was attached to the lower chapel and gavit.

The earthquake destroyed the adjoining mausoleum, rending it in two—the cracks can be seen in the interior walls, with 50-80 centimeters gaps.

The graveyard has a number of prone stones on the ground, with some elaborately carved khachkars, a few with traces of their pre-Christian origins (look for eyeholes to spot those that were used as standing stones and stone telescopes).

The church looks more of a chapel, and the standing edifice is indeed a bell tower on the western end of the ruins, walled up with rubble stone that once filled the church walls.

The church dates to pagan times, its Christian history beginning sometime in the late 4th-early 5th centuries, when the area was officially converted to the new religion. The bell tower is mid or late medieval, while the foundation stones that outline the old church are thought to be contemporary with nearby S. Karapet Monastery.

Its ancient age is discernable by the pagan stones littering the field, "baptized" by crosses in the early Christian/medieval era.

Camping at the site or in the area (near sheep farm—no shade); Springs at the site.

From Karapet Vank, backtrack to the highway, turn L and continue for about 3 km to central (Lusashogh, DD 39.85183 x 44.97991, elev. 1979m)

SIDE TRIP: Lusashogh – Լուսաշող (till 1978 Karakhach, pop. 1500) has the elegant remains of S. Hovhannes, reached by turning off the main road into the village and going uphill. The foundations are on the east end of the village, near the graveyard.

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Camping at the site or in the area (near sheep farm—no shade); Springs at the site.

From Lusashogh turn R (NW) on the main road and continue W for about 4.2 and through a mountain pass with switchbacks to a village road that travels another 1.5 km into central (Lanjanist, DD 39.87091 x 44.95074, elev. 1755m)

SIDE TRIP: Lanjanist – Լանճանիստ (till 1968 Khidirtli, pop. 600) has a ruined church to the N of the village, while the highway boasts gorgeous fields of snow drops during spring's winter thaw, followed by teeming stands of poppies, straw flowers and narcissus. The ruins are enigmatic, but the flora spectacular. Come in mid April for the displays.

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

From Lanjanist backtrack to the main road, turn R (W) and continue for about 7 km and through more mountain pass switchbacks, alpine ponds and fields of wild flowers to central (Shaghap, DD 39.88080 x 44.89189, elev. 1290m)

SIDE TRIP: Shaghap – Շաղափ (till 1968 the Azeri village of Shaghaplu, pop. 800) has a Turkish cemetery (with fragments of gravestones) about 150 m uphill at the end of the village, and supposed Tukh Manuk/chapel on the top of one of the mountains overlooking the village (though 5 villagers had five versions
Take solace with the fields of bluebells that grow just outside the village.

**GEVORG MARZPETUNI CASTLE** – Գևորգ Մարզպետունի պալատ (Թունավան) is a small fortified structure with a church within its compound. The castle is set on a low hill, suggesting it may not have been built as a castle per se, but rather as a fortified monastery.

The castle is named for Gevorg Marzpetuni, the 10th century Sparapet (commander in chief) of Armenian forces during the reign of Ashot Yerkat (the Iron) Bagratuni, who forged the resurgent Armenian kingdom by evicting Arab invaders and cementing the power of the Bagratuni dynasty.

Marzpetuni is the subject of a famous 19th century book by the Armenian author Muratsan (Grigor Ter-Hovhannessian) (1854–1908) from Gevorg Marzpetuni (1896), based on a History of Armenia by Hovhannes Draskhanakertsi (Catholicos John V of Draskhanakert) (c. 840–930).

In the history (and novel) King Ashot (Yerkat; “of Iron”), his power riven by Arab raids and internal divisions in his kingdom (caused in no little part by his affair with the wife of one of his most important allies, Tslik Amram), is forced to rely on the efforts of Marzpetuni to defeat the Arabs and bring about the restoration of the Armenian kingdom, the Bagratuni Dynasty.

Prince Marzpetuni is actually buried in the courtyard of S. Gevorg Cathedral in Bagaran (Armavir) the ninth capital of the Armenian kingdom. His residence was almost certainly in the nearby (and daunting) fortress of Kakavaberd, in the Khosrov Preserve, which steep walls perch over sheer cliff drops of 100 meters and more.

Kakavaberd is the site of the defeat of the Arab chieftain Beshr by Marzpetuni in 924, and it may be that the monastery in front of you was built in memory of that event, its fortress walls deemed necessary to stave off attacks in uncertain times. It seems named to commemorate the deeds of one of Armenia’s most important princes and generals, though little known to the average Armenian.

Marzpetuni is contemporary with other powerful nakharars, whose petty rivalries and raw greed did as much to delay the kingdom’s liberation from the clutches of Arab rule as the Arabs themselves. By the time of Armenian revolts in the 920s these princes –Marzpetuni, Ashot Yerkat, Tslik Amram and Sahak Sevada—were each ruling petty kingdoms that were autonomous of Arab rule while still dependent on their tribute to the Arab caliph.

When they revolted, the caliph sent the Atrapetene tyrant Amir Yusuf to avenge him and to restore Arab control. Led by Marzpetuni, Armenian forces won several decisive victories in the 920s, finally evicting the Arabs in the same century and establishing the Bagratuni dynasty, which moved its capital to Ani, the “city of 1000 churches” and one of the largest cities in the medieval world.

The castle monastery has an extensive set of inscriptions on the walls, detailing its founding and the reign of the prince for which it is named. On the east wall, flanking the altar apse, exposed walls show hollow ceramic “jugs” that were embedded into the wall rubble. Thought by Arabs to hold treasure, they were exposed during raids on the church, but in fact these hollow vessels were used to enhance acoustics in the church, deacons adding or taking out sand to tune the church hall.
springtime the area is as green as Ireland but the Northwest. To its east lie the sands of Goravan, a heat waves in the dog days of summer, but this is hard to believe when you gaze on baking soil and with irrigation the land is still incredibly fertile, and this area grows some of the best fruits in Armenia, with grapes taking pride of place at the fermenting table.

Vedi is also home to one of Armenia’s major wine and alcohol concerns, famous locally for its semisweet wines and potent spirits.

\[MAP\]

**SITES**

One of the most startling effects is achieved each time you look South, where the dusty, broken pavement and forlorn housing gives way to magnificent views of Mt. Ararat, which hovers over the streets like a gift of the gods, something to look forward to whilst slogging through the broken pavement and clouds of baked soil.

Beyond that, there is little to draw your attention, and most use the town as a drive-through point en route to the nature areas around it.

With the exception of a decaying ethnographic museum and the Vedi Alcol winery/distillery, your options are limited to a couple of Oligarch motel-restaurants (read: “bozetuns”), and the thrill of strolling up one dust-infested road and down the other. To be fair, there are some friendly folks strolling up one dust-infested road and down the other. To be fair, there are some friendly folks inside all that dust, and the town lies adjacent to two top-notch flower sites; Goravan Sands Preserve to the South and the spring flowering Irises in the Yerakh Valley gorge on the opposite side of town (See “Vedi Hills”, below)

**Vedi Alcol** (Office in Yerevan, tel: +374 10 547401, +374 10 547402, +374 10 547403, e-mail: info@vedi-alco.am, URL: http://www.vedi-alco.am/pages/?lang=2) offers guided tours with pre-arrangement. Vedi-Alcol is a complex of two viniculture enterprises: the Getap Winery, established in 1938, and Vedi Winery, established in 1956. The distillery/winery is located in the town on its edge, and while it normally does not provide walk-in tours, you might be the lucky one to sweet-talk them into giving you a personal tour, with tasting.

While its more famous products includes the “Vedi Hills” by groups of migrating birders, to describe the Yerakh Gorge to the NW of town, Goravan Sands Preserve to the SE and the spectacular canyon entry to the Khosrov Preserve to the North and Northeast. As they aptly describe the area, it is easy to dismiss for its arid semi-desert / desert terrain, which blooms thick with flowers each spring rain, and teems with overlapping populations of birds.

**City park** is in the center, with trees, a WWII monument and a forlorn amphitheatre made from summer concerts but which has seen much its better days long before Brezhnev and his cronies began Soviet Armenia’s gradual decline. The park, though rather tired, is a pleasant place to rest on a hot day.

The town houses a (mostly closed) ethnographic museum in the center; ask when you arrive for the ‘tangaran’ and someone will guide you. It also has on its far NE end (on the road out of town, just before the road enters the wilderness) the headquarters of the Khosrov Nature Reserve, (director Samvel Shaboyan, local telephone 21332), which can provide permission to enter the preserve through its Vedi entrance. Don’t hold you breath though, they routinely deny access to unescorted tourists while giving hunting, herding and other concessions to locals, for a price. This is one of the most corrupt offices in the country, and should be reason for concern by its WWF partner.

**Vedi Hills**

The deadness that permeates the town is a blessing to the surrounding nature areas, populated by rare and extraordinary displays of flowers and birds. The area has been nicknamed the Vedi Hills by groups of migrating birders, to describe the Yerakh Gorge to the NW of town, Goravan Sands Preserve to the SE and the spectacular canyon entry to the Khosrov Preserve to the North and Northeast. As they aptly describe the area, it is easy to dismiss for its arid semi-desert / desert terrain, which blooms thick with flowers each spring rain, and teems with overlapping populations of birds.

**View Watching and Birding**

Detailed descriptions of the Yerakh Valley and Goravan Sands Preserve flora and fauna follow immediately after Vedi Town (p. 49)

**From Vedi to Turkey: Ancient Ararat**

Vedi lies in the heart of the Ararat Valley, a high plateau with complex climatic and topographic zones that experts feel made the place eminently suited to have been the center from which the human race spread in all directions.
Even with its high elevation the region is fertile, with abundant pasturage, its soils producing good crops of wheat and barley, while the vine is indigenous.

Don't be fooled by the arid climate; the area teems with unmistakable indications that in early times there was a much more abundant rainfall. The climate was then better adapted to the wants of primitive man. How else to explain the vast underground reserves that supply the valley's current needs, and the upper elevation beaches surrounding Lake Sevan, Van (in Western Armenia; modern Turkey), Urmiah (in present day Iran) and even throughout central Asia.

Great quantities of mammoth bones have been found in these bordering lacustrine deposits corresponding to those found in the glacial and postglacial deposits of Europe and America. In Armenia, bones have been found in Shirak, Armavir and Ararat marz, with evidence of ancient to rich grasslands that fed the huiling beasts.

Ancient Ararat
Not all agree that Armenia, or the Ararat Valley, was the actual place of Noah's landing, despite expeditions up the mountain claiming to have found a monolithic structure matching the biblical description of the ark, and local belief that Noah was buried in neighboring Nakhichevan, which translates as the "place of first descent".

Most accept that the place noted in the bible is in fact a region and not a particular mountain, the bible (Genesis 8:4) stating that Noah landed in the mountains (plural) of Ararat, or the Armenian lands, which stretched between Anatolia and the Caspian, the Black Sea and the Taurus Mountains.

The mountainous plateau encompassed the Euphrates, the Tigris, the Arax and the Khour through rivers, Assyrians noting the land was the "place of Rivers" ("Nairi"), Lake Van, which like the Dead Sea has no outlet, is nearly in its center, and Armenians claim Van as the heart of their historic lands.

The name The Babylonian name was Urartu, the consonants being the same in both words. In 2 Kings 19:31-33 the word translated in the King James Version "Arménia," which correctly represents the region designated. It was to Armenia that the sons of Sennacherib fled. In Jeremiah 51:27 Ararat is associated with Minni and Ashkenaz, which according to Assyrian monuments lay just to the east of Armenia.

Mt. Ararat is not directly referred to by the Assyrians, Babylonians or Genesis, which leads some to think the actual point of landing for Noah lies elsewhere, but none of the other candidates are proved and none are as impressive as the mountain that looms over the Ararat Valley, the birthplace of metal and one of the cradles of civilization.

Rising from the lowlands of the Arax (Aras) River to a height of 5165 m (16946 ft), supported by another peak (Sir), which tops out at 3896 m (12,782 ft), the mountain dwarfs the landscape, reason enough for many for its claim as 'the' mountain of Noah. However, it is only in comparatively modern times that the present name has been given to it. Armenians still call it Masis, believing that Noah was buried at Nakhichevan near its base.

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Arashat at 100-150 AMD per kilometer. Taxis should charge 5300-7850 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone for same price. There are dozens of taxi services to choose from. Note even the best can go bad overnight, ask around when you arrive for best taxi service.

By Car Vedi is on the (H10), which spurs off from the (M2) highway at Voskepar, some 7 km to the SW. To the NE, the (H10) leads to Urtsadzor (9 km), the Khosrov Preserve Vedi gate (21 km), Shaghap (17 km), Longandjan (24 km), Lusashogh (27 km), S. Karapat Monastery (36 km), Landjar (30 km), Urtsalan/m (M2) highway (32 km).

To the SW, it is 7 km to Voskepar and the (M2) and (H8) highways, parallel routes that lead N to Arashat (14 km), Massis (28 km) and Yerevan (46 km). To the SE the (M2) exit leads to Ararat (7 km), Yeraskh (22 km), before turning NE to the Urts Valley to join the (H10) (39 km) and the Tukmanau Pass at Vayots Dzor in another 9 km. From Vedi it is 53 km to central Yerevan, 14 km to Arashat, 22 km to Yeraskh, 20 km to Yegegndzor, 1140 km to Martuni (Lake Sevan), 95 km to Vak, 128 k to Jermuk, 163 km to Sissian, 192 km to Goris, 255 km to Goris, 281 km to Kajdan and 321 km to Meghri.

AROUND
On foot is easy enough if you are in shape; from end to end the city is 3.5 km long. There is one main street, the one you entered on, with small offshoots from its main throughway. Shops, cafes and most apartment buildings are on the main street, with the main "square" boasting the best choices.

Taxis Ararat has taxis. The service is good, the drivers knowledgeable (though few speak English). The general rate is 500-600 AMD anywhere in town.

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

Phone, telegraphs
Ararat is covered by both Armelent/Beeline and VivaCell-MTS (2 Tumanian p.), mobile services. International calls can be made at the Central Post Office (Central Square), See HayPost site for list.
**OVERNIGHT**

**Restaurant/Motels**

Owing to the Vedi Alcohol Company, based in Vedi, there are a couple of RESTAURANT/MOTELS: MOTELS in town, located on the W end of the park (take the west side street by the culture house). It is used for weddings, celebrations and tête-à-têtes, and the motel welcomes tourists to clean rooms in multi-story building with DBLs at 5000/5 hrs or 10,000/overnight.

**Boarding/Apartment**

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

**FOOD AND DRINK**

**YERAKH VALLEY** – ԵՐԱԽ ՈՒՆԵՔ (Երախ Ունէք) juts into the striking Urts foothills through a seemingly barren landscape with towering red, amber and yellow rock formations dotted with cultivated vineyards and small garden plots. The view most the year is decidedly daunting, and few make the trek into this arid wonderland, replete with variable success due to the low number of water supports breeding Little Ringed Plover. Regularly breeding raptors of the area include Egyptian Vulture and Long-legged Buzzard, and are a good selection of them such as Lammergeier, Griffon and Black Vultures, Golden, Lesser Spotted, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, visit the nearby Khosrov State Reserve.

**This arid hillsides is characterized by low ridges with clayey and loose rocky slopes barely covered by short semi-desert vegetation and scrub. There are several gorges here with dry river beds, rocky walls and outcrops that are gradually crumbling away with a light, rust of wind or under the clumsy step of a Chukar. Water sources in the area are localized and in the hot summer months attract the local fauna like a magnet. Some such gorges with natural mineral springs are found just a few km north of Vedi town.**

The nature area’s potted road stretches for km from NW Vedi to Mt. Yerakh (1418.5 m), continuing for another km to the village of Narek near Dvin and its nearby area nature.

**MAP OF NAREK-VEDI**

including the elegant and fascinating Armenian Iris (I. lycots)

Further NW, near Narek, on a low mound among wormwood scrub, you can see and photograph a large number of the beautiful Iris elegantissima with its range of forms and colours is impressive. Other rare and endemic species can also be found there: Leontice armeniaca, Ornithogalum navaschni, the lovely Allium matucarum, Gladiolus atrovirens, S cercozera gororvanci, etc.

**Birding**

For birders, there are several main attractions in this area. Mongolian Finch, which was first found in Armenia in 2001, was subsequently proved to breed here, and the site remains the only known place in the country, where the species can be observed regularly, albeit with variable success due to the low number of water sources. Waterfowl and ‘birder unfriendly’ habitats. Trumpeter Finch is seen here more frequently and regularly and is far more ‘cooperative’, nevertheless it displays an equally enigmatic pattern of occurrence: common in some years and not found in others. One of the most sought-after West Palearctic birds, Grey-necked Bunting, Pale Rock Nuthatch, Woodchat Shrike, and with luck the Eastern Orphean Warbler, breed here. Of the many species that breed here are Chukar, Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Black-eared Wheatear, Rock Sparrow and Black-headed Bunting. From nearby areas the water source is visited by Ortolan and Rock Buntings and occasionally by Crimson-winged Finch.

On the way to the hills from Vedi town the road passes through orchards and vineyards, where Ménétries’s Warbler, Lesser Grey Shrike and restless flocks of Rosy Starling can be found. Further along the way, at an open badland area common birds include European Bee Eater, Roller, Crested Lark, Rufous Bushchat and Isabelline Wheatear. Gentle slopes with ridges hold Woodlark, Short-toed Lark and Tawny Pipit, a riverbed with meager amounts of water supports breeding Little Ringed Plover. Regularly breeding raptors of the area include Egyptian Vulture and Long-legged Buzzard, and are a good selection of them such as Lammergeier, Griffon and Black Vultures, Golden, Lesser Spotted, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, visit the nearby Khosrov State Reserve.

**CONTINUE TRIP 4**

From central Vedi, take the SE main spur street towards the SE set of apartment blocks and cross the bridge over Vedi River into ( Goravan, DD , elev. m) .

**SIDE TRIP: Goravan - Գորավան** (previously Gorovyan, Yenikend) village lies adjacent to Vedi, just across the water canal on its south underbelly. The village, though in plain site of the town, stubbornly maintains its village roots, with hodgepodge homes and rutted streets leading to desert fields east, home of the GORAVAN SANDS PRESERVE.

To reach Goravan Sands, immediately after you cross the bridge over Vedi River, turn L (NE) bridge to the northern edge of the village, where the street naturally turns R (SE) and continue to the end of the village and onto a dirt path leading to the village dump and past it a line of high power lines. Follow the path(s) as best you can towards the power lines, and soon you will enter what seems to be a wasteland, but which in fact is GORAVAN SANDS PRESERVE (DD 39.89442 x 44.73320, elev. 940m) .
one of the strangest places in Armenia. A desert for most of the year, the area teems with life in the short Spring season, and is home to some extremely rare flora and fauna species, including

The area is in plain site of Mt. Ararat, with one of the most spectacular views of the great crest, not least because of the contrast between the snow laden mount and the lunar landscape surroundings of the preserve.

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

**END OF TRIP 4**
TRIP 5: KHOSROV RESERVE -
AZAT RIVER / GARNI ENTRANCE -
HAVUTS TAR - BAIBERD - METS GILANLAR (Elijah) -
AGHOKTS - VANK - NAREK ENTRANCE (Gioalyazor) -
(Kerpikend) - (Mets Gilanlar) -
AZAT CAVES - KAKAVABERD - VEDI ENTRANCE (Mankunik) -
LANJANIST/LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE

Trip 5 explores Khosrov Preserve, one of the most important habitats in Armenia. The site is the home of several endangered species (the Armenian or Persian Leopard, the Caucasian bearded goat, several species of birds) and is host to endemic flora only found here. It is also home to several outstanding historic sites, including two ruined monasteries, each of which bears incredible mosaics and carvings not found anywhere else in Armenia. Though it is off the beaten path and requires hiking or guided visits, this is a must see Armenia. Though it is off the beaten path and requires hiking or guided visits, this is a must see

Note: permission is required to enter the Khosrov Reserve. Locals in Garni can organize half-day road trips to 3 days camping treks into the gorge. A new WWF (World Wildlife Fund) supported office for the Reserve has opened and sells tickets to the site and can provide (for a fee) a guide and overnight camping sites. They have a scant web site with limited information about the site and no practical information on tickets, times and how to get there. The site is http://www.khosrov.am.

PRACTICAL INFO: The information center is located at the bottom of the Garni gorge, reached via the village (follow the signs). It is opened 7 days a week, generally from daylight to dusk (though not always prompt). Tickets are at time of writing (prices available):
5,200AMD for half day, full day and multiple day visits at 7,000AMD. Camping sites are arranged on the spot and cost from 1,000AMD.

RESERVE MAP

The forest remains to this day, having grown beyond it original boundaries to encompass most of the Goght River above Garni and Geghard, and a large area between the Azat, Khosrov, Manuk and Vedi Rivers on the eastern side of Ararat District.

Khosrov is reputed to have had planted over one million trees, creating a private hunting preserve while saving a piece of Armenia’s unique ecosystem for hundreds of generations. Most of the forests from his time are gone, clear-cut by Mongols, Safavid Persians and modern Armenians on illegal logging expeditions.

The reserve is still important and quite large, consisting of 29,196 hectares, 9000 of which have trees, mostly scrub and cedar. The national park protects more than 1800 species of plants, 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or on the verge of extinction, listed in the Red Book. Fauna include rare insects, amphibians, snakes, the Armenian mufflon (Ovis orientalis gmelinii); Caucasian Bearded Goat (Capra aegagrus) and the Caucasian or Persian Spotted Leopard.

The preserve is under ecological attack by international and local huntmen and an ambivalent to cynical government that instead of protecting endangered species or those at risk instead actively hunts or sponsors hunts into the officially protected area. Reports of military officers organizing helicopter hunting trips into the preserve, where protected species are hunted down with automatic weapons are common. While gatekeepers stop eco-tourists from entering the area, generals, ministers and wealthy international hunters use the park as their private hunting grounds, further endangering the species that attempt to survive in the park.

I don’t mind hunting per se, as a Texan I understand and even support the sport if it does not target endangered species. Responsible hunting does have its purposes and it brings important income to local communities as well as helps to preserve the environment by seeking to preserve it. However, Armenia is blighted with hunting firms that organize the hunting of endangered species in Armenia, including the Armenian mufflon and the Bearded Goat (Ibex) these three easily found online:

Outfitters hunting endangered species:
Safari International (run by the Marzpet and several high ranking officials in the current government) info@safariinternational.com
Blue Water Big Game (may no longer be involved in Armenian hunting)
106 Medalist
Austin, TX 78734
ph: 1-512-261-1990
fax: 1-203-774-2002
Powers Internationale powersint@aol.com
Please contact these companies and tell them how you feel about their targeting endangered species in Armenia, and contact Green Peace (www.greenpeace.org) and World Wildlife Federation (www.worldwildlife.org) to lend your support to stop animal extinction in Armenia.

Background
The Khosrov Argelots (Reserve) or Khosrov Antar (forest), named after King Khosrov II Kotaka (r. 332-339), the founder of the capital at Dvin. Khosrov ordered the planting of a forest on both sides of and running the length of the Azat River.

Background
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The Caucasian Bearded Goat (also called the Bezoar or Persian Ibex, or the wild goat by scientists who believe it is the ancestor of the domestic goat) is an endangered species that has almost been hunted to extinction in Armenia.

Male bearded goats are marked by large, scimitar-shaped horns, their front edges in a sharp keel with a series of bold, sharp-edged, widely separated knobs above. Females are smaller than males and have short, slender horns, but no beard. The goat favors rugged country at all levels, descending into the lower valleys in the winter and upper regions in the summertime.

The bearded goat is listed in the Red Book and in the IUCN list of Endangered Species.

The Caucasian or Persian leopard is said to be the largest of all subspecies of leopards. It can grow to up to 1.5 to 2.7 feet tall and weigh as much as 155 lbs. Before 1990, when Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and Turkmenistan were the Soviet republics, the scientific names of the leopard used in these countries were P. p. tulliana and P. p. saxicolor, whereas the name P. p. saxicolor had been traditionally used by the western specialists for the cats in Iran and, partially, Afghanistan.

Most Leopards are light tan or fawn with black spots, but their coats are very variable. The spots tend to be smaller on the head, larger and have pale centers on the body. The name Leopard is a combination of leo (Latin for lion) and pard ("panther"), the animal believed to be a hybird of lions and panthers. Interestingly, the panther is simply a darker version of the leopard (for lion).

The name Leopard is a combination of leo (Latin for lion) and pard ("panther"), the animal believed to be a hybrid of lions and panthers. Interestingly, the panther is simply a darker version of the spotted leopard, they are very much related. The leopards are remarkable felines, able to hunt in everything from insects and rodents to fish and large game. Excellent tree climbers, leopards often protect their larger kills by carrying them up a tree.

In Armenia, the Persian leopards live in the juniper sparse forests and, to a lesser extent, in arid and mountain grasslands, subalpine and alpine meadows. Their haunts are extremely rough mountain grasslands, subalpine and alpine sparse forests and, to a lesser extent, in arid and xerophytes terrain combining semi-deserts, pinyon-juniper formations, arid thin forests and river beds.

Camping is possible in the preserve (ask at the Garni visitor center); Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs along river beds.

The path to the convent is narrow and surprisingly difficult for such a slight incline. There are few shady spots on the way, in hot weather take a hat and water. A spring is about 2/3rds of the way up.

Just past this khachkar the ruins of the village begin, a myriad of stone foundations of homes, shops and shrines for the once thriving community that supported the convent’s work and farmed its lands. The ruins cover the hillsides all around the complex. About 500 m past the 12th c khachkar is the gate to the walled Havuts Tar complex.

Flora in the preserve is as rich and varied as its stunning terrain, with over 1800 plant species (more than half of Armenia’s total), 156 of which are considered rare, endangered or verging on extinction. A number of species listed in the Red Book grow only here. Khosrov Preserve is the only Caucasian natural preserve of mountain xerophytes terrain combining semi-deserts, pinyon-juniper formations, and thin forests and tragacanthyss stepses.

Other fauna in the preserve include Eurasian lynx (Lynx lynx), Wild cat (Felis silvestris, ornata group), Jungle cat (Felis chaus), Brown bear (Ursus arctos), Red fox (Vulpes vulpes), Gray wolf (Canis lupus), Stone marten (Martes foina), Roe deer (Capreolus capreolus), Wild boar (Sus scrofa) Indian porcupine (Hystrix indica), European hare (Lepus europaeus), Jay (Garrulus glandarius). Among the 67 types of birds registered in the Armenian Red Book are sixteen in the preserve, including Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures, Lammergeier, Golden and Lesser Spotted Eagles and Northern Goshawk.

A thundering vista of Garni temple, the village and the area. As you get closer to the convent, you will pass some khachkar fragments, intricately carved pieces of once grand monuments. About 2/3rds of the way there look for a couple of khachkars on a hill on the left, plus the base of what was once a great khachkar. Closer to the convent is a bend in the path and a stunning 12th c khachkar.

Flora

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The convent thrived under Grigor Magistros converted to Christianity. Written in three days at the request of a infidelities) to prayer and contemplation at the convent, Havuts Tar held important relics, including the 9th c masterpiece The Savior of All of Havuts Tar, now at the Echmiadzin Treasury.

The "Kusanats anapat" (convent) continued to find favor with succeeding nakharars, including the Chalcedonian Ivaneh Zakarian who funded its great spurt of growth in the early 13th century, introducing the intricate lace-like design covering the walls of the convent. Later, the Khaghbakians (Proshians), well known for their work at Geghard, were equally responsible for the crowning works at Havuts Tar and the nearby Aghjots vank. The convent was destroyed and rebuilt during Seljuk, Mongol and the Timurid invasions, succumbing to the 1679 earthquake. When it was rebuilt in the 18th c., workers used rubble left over from the earthquake, including khachkar fragments and pieces of decorated stones from the original buildings.

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The complex is large, taking up several hectares inside the walled compound, with the remains of the surrounding village and two churches from the 7th-10 cc on a western hilltop, the site of the original pagan temple and the convent's first Christian structures.

The current gate to the site is embedded into the compound walls. The foundations of the original wall remains are traced to the 9th c when the convent was established, though there is some thought walls from the Bronze Age may also have existed at the site. Originally made from finely hewn basalt and tufa, the walls were mostly destroyed during the Timurid invasions and the 1679 earthquake. When it was rebuilt in the 18th c., workers used rubble left over from the earthquake, including khachkar fragments and pieces of decorated stones from the original buildings.

1. 4th-13th c wall and gate
2. Red khachkar
3. Khachkar
4. Khachkar
5. 9th-13th c Church
6. 9th-13th c Chancellery
7. 9th-13th c Church
8. 9th-18th c Storage rooms
9. 9th-18th c Service building
10. 11th c Gavit
11. Dormitory, dining, storage
12. 11th c Amenaprkich
13. 11th c Gavit
14. 7th c Church

To your right is a large building with three vaulted halls. The 9th-13th cc building was rebuilt in the 18th c and used to house members of the convent. The farthest west is believed to have been the kitchen/dining hall for the dwindling community. Khachkar fragments were incorporated into the walls during reconstruction.

The Convent

The Convent

The Convent

The Convent

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The Convent
The scattered capitals, columns and stones on the ground outside the church, as elaborate and beautiful as they are, are but a taste of the magnificence that awaits you inside. The 13th c renovation of the church included replacing gray basalt stone with decorative red and black tufa, adding extravagantly carved stone casements and frames throughout the building.

The effect is breath-taking, and unlike any other church we have seen in Armenia. Many churches of the 13th century added florid details on their walls, but none so completely, or luxuriantly as Havuts tar. The comparison to lace embroidery is not an exaggeration; niches, columns and frames are covered with intricate lace patterns of never-ending lines, unbreakable cords and flora and geometric details.

Walk to the south exterior of the church, and you have to wedge between two very large, intricately carved stones, weighing a half a ton or more. Note the back of the one with a large carved handle. This was a door for the gavit or church, one of a handful surviving to this day and truly impressive entry to what must have been an extraordinary building.

The second church, a 9th-13th cc cruciform type with a square exterior was built like its southern neighbor, with gray basalt clasped onto strong rubble walls fixed with lime. The church once had a drum and dome set above its central space, supported by protruding wall abutments supporting the main arches. You can detect the slight curve of the arch base inside. The four corners were open to the main space, marked off by the abutments. When erected, it must have been an extraordinary building.

The southern wall is as elaborately carved as the northern, with crosses, icons and royal markings on the façade.

The south walls of both churches, abutting the fortress walls is a large underground chamber, seen from its western side. The top appears to be a grassy mound and it had an upper chamber that was destroyed before the 18th c renovation. The chamber was used for storage in the original convent, then as a dormitory and dining area in later times.

The impressive altar apron is decorated with a series of khachkars with prominent tree of life iconography, popular in the 10th c. The apron is framed with another popular design motif, the pre-Christian water line, representing the Biblical flood and redemption by baptism for early Christians but recognized by lingering pagans as the symbol of life, the primordial ‘soup’ that spawned all of creation in pagan mythology.

About 100 m to the west, on a rough path marking the main street of the medieval village is the 10th c Amnaprkich with a 7th c basilica next door. Amnaprkich was built in 1013 for the young Grigor Pahlavuni a.k.a. Grigor Magistros, well before he became his nom de plume and during the last heyday of the Bagratuni period.

Amnaprkich is a classic cruciform central dome type with antechambers in the four corners. The building is built from red and black tufa clasped over rubble filled walls. The antechambers on the east side flank the horseshoe-shaped apse and were used as vestal changing room and chapels.

The rear chambers were probably chapels as well. The structure was well-built, surviving a number of invasions and attempts to destroy it, succumbing only to the forces of nature, when the 1679 earthquake toppled the dome and severed the western and eastern walls, which no doubt must have seemed a judgment of God’s wrath to the faithful, like the rending of the temple cloth in Jerusalem. Even so, the building has survived well the last 300 years, retaining most of its original structure. There is relatively little of the extravagant decoration found inside the walled compound, window casings and some framing shows signs of 13th c carving, but otherwise the church maintained its original integrity and the beauty of its rich lines. This was a building meant to impress, and it continues to, despite its ruined status. The view of the Garni valley is wonderful from here. Bring your binoculars or zoom lens.

There are numerous gravestones and khachkars all around the convent, and exploration may uncover signs of medieval plumbing, well worth exploring on a pleasant day.

Camping is possible at the site or nearby; Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Spring about 2/3rd of the way to the site from the reserve gate.

Ararat marz: 54 of 58 - TourArmenia © 2012  Rick Ney.  ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
surviving are the remains of a single nave hall church with a protruding apse, built over a Pagan temple in the 4th-5th centuries. The church was built from finely hewn stone with chamfered joints (beveled) on its edges. The semi-circular apse has a pentagonal exterior and there are Equal crosses carved over the doorway and at the keystone for the apsidal arch, which itself rests on a unique set of columns, their palm pattern echoing those on the pilasters in the outer gallery found at other churches (Tekhor). A second church was added to the southern wall in the early Middle Ages.

The village houses a few of the Reserve workers and their families, who may be willing to point you to some of the area’s more interesting sites, including graveyards and the remains from the pre-Christian era.

Camping is possible in the river gorge or village (permission required); Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs along river beds.

**SIDE TRIP:** from --- to (Eljjah, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) (Eljajah)

**AGHJOTS VANK - Աղջոց վանք**

Aghjots Vank is perched on a mountain ridge overlooking the Gilanlar River. Local lore traces its founding to Grigor Luisavorich (Gregory the Illuminator) in the 4th c on the site of the martyrdom of S. Stepanos (a companion of Hripsimeh), which places the site in the Pagan era, Grigor spending his time knocking down or converting Pagan temples. The site was part of a Bronze and Iron Age culture in the area, developed into a walled compound by the 2nd millennium BCE. You can find the remains of Bronze Age fortresses and Vishaps in the surrounding mountains.

If the Christian church was established in the 4th c, it was probably a wooden structure, rebuilt in later centuries before becoming an important vank that was greatly expanded in the 13th c, resulting in its current layout. Sacked in 1905-06 during the Azeri/Armenian fighting in 1905-06, the vank was partially restored in the 18th c along with Havuts Tar, only to be sacked again in the same century and permanently ruined during Azeri/Armenian fighting in 1905-06.

The vank was quite large; as large as nearby Havuts Tar and possibly bigger. The outer walls once rung around the entire complex but all that remain are on the western and northern edges. The remaining walls contain the ruins of outer buildings, sunken chambers and still to be excavated residential quarters.

**SIDE TRIP:** from --- to Agahjots Vank (DD 40.1071 x 44.8083, elev. 1715m) (Eljajah)

**NAREK ENTRANCE - ՆԱՐԵԿ ԵՆՔՐԵՆՔ**

(till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sarvanlar, pop. 12,000) is the main entrance to the complex.

The village houses a few of the Reserve workers and their families, who may be willing to point you to some of the area’s more interesting sites, including graveyards and the remains from the pre-Christian era.

Camping is possible in the river gorge or village (permission required); Overnight in Garni (rustic, 3000-5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Springs along river beds.

**SIDE TRIP:** from --- to (Giolaiyzor, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m) (Eljajah)
the former village of Gyolaysor (trans. Assyrian garden) located in the Khosrov forest. The village, settled in 1833, was razed to the ground on the actor's birthday, May 3, 1949. This was the only instance, a period during May 1 to May 15, when the Assyrians were persecuted in the Soviet Union. It was a time when the Assyrian movement overseas had gathered momentum and when, naturally, the Assyrian communities both here and abroad were in contact with one another. It was also a period when speaking to a foreigner openly on the street could be perceived as an act of treason to the fatherland. There were eighty households in Gyolaysor. The villagers had moved down into the Araratian plains. Most had relatives in the village of Verin Dvin and relocated there soon after the death of Stalin. 2,000 of the 2,700 Assyrians living in Armenia settled in Verin Dvin.

**SIDE TRIP:**

- From --- to (Kerpikend, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)  Kerpikend – Ուղո (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) [official]

- From --- to (Mets Gilanlar, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)  Mets Gilanlar – Ուղո (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) [official]

- From --- to (LANJANIST/LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)  LANJANIST / LUSASHOGH ENTRANCE - Ուղո (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the

- From --- to (AZAT CAVES, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)  AZAT CAVES - Ուղո (till 1991 the hamlet of Sarvanlar, pop. 500) [official]

- From --- to (KAKAVABERD, DD 40.06013 x 44.38485, elev. 828m)  KAKAVABERD - Ուղո (till 1993 Hoktemberian, till 1935 Sardarapat, pop. 12,000) is the
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**Regional**

Ararat Marz

Khor Virap

Artashat

Dvin

Archeology (general)

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www.armenianbirding.info

wwd.birdquest.co.uk/HolidaysbyRegion.cfm?Holiday=790

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**History, Culture, Background**

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Armenian Highland

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http://www.nature-ic.am/NCSAPublication/SPAN_eng.pdf

Red Book

http://grants.iatp.irex.am/red_book/extinct_animals.htm

Mountains

www.masis.am/mountains/?lang=eng

Massis.am Flora

www.masis.am

PGR/CAC

cac-biodiversity.org/arm/index.htm

Eco Agrotourism in South Caucasus (excellent maps)

eatsc.com

Ecotourism.com

ecotourismsarmenia.com

EcoTeam Development

users.freenet.am/%7Eecoteam

Weather Forecasts

tacentral.com/weather.asp

Climate Change Info Center-Armenia

nature.am/Index.htm

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rick Ney (author) first came to Armenia in 1992 to work at the American University of Armenia. In 1993 he began his work in humanitarian aid and development for USAID-funded projects at the Armenian Assembly of America and Fund for Democracy and Development, the latter as Caucasus Region Director. This morphed into writing about Armenia for various publications, which became the first English language complete guide to Armenia in 1996 (online) and 1998 (CD-ROM). It has since become an online resource, visited by more than 24 million unique visitors (www.TACentral.com and www.TourArmenia.info). Rick is passionate about Armenia’s deep history, amazing ecology, and making the country accessible for independent travelers, whom he believes will be the basis of Armenia’s entry into the open world. In 2000 he began dividing his time between Armenia and caring for a parent in Texas, both of which he considers the richest experiences of his life.

Rafael Torossian (research, maps, and graphics) has been collaborating with Rick on TourArmenia since 1996, providing some much needed reality checks and commentary along the way. In his other life Rafael drives his sequences, Rafael became the finance manager for these projects, creating the first multi-denomination accounting system for USAID projects in the Caucasus, tracking currency that inflated at one time 150% per day. Rafael is an Honored Coach of the Republic of Armenia and lives in Yerevan, a proud Yerevantsi who did not leave during the dark years of 1991-1995.

Bella Karapetian (Editing, Translations, Russian Edition) first met Rick in 1993 when she came to the American University and worked in his office as Faculty services Manager and Special Events Coordinator. There she had the chance to use her remarkable patience and good humor with wide-eyed professors wanting to know where the nearest shopping mall was (God give us patience and a good dose of Pamatian). She then worked at the World Food Program in Armenia as administrator and Program Officer. In her previous life Bella worked with International architects at the ArmStateDesign Institute as an information program assistant and translator. She is currently Executive Director of the NGO Historic Armenian Houses. History and architecture are her true loves and she has traveled to China, Thailand, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, and Lebanon and throughout the former Soviet Union. Bella tops this off by maintaining her membership in the World Esperanto Association. Saluton!

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