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ARMAVIR marz

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INTRODUCTION

Area: 1251 sq. km
Population: 160300
Marz capital: Armavir
Distance from Yerevan: 48 km
Marzpetaran: Tel: (237) 63 716
Largest City: Vagharshapat (Echmiadzin)

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

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

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

A dozen or so settlements inhabit the marz, dating back to the Stone Age, and the marz has fantastic excavations of some of the country’s most famous cities, from each period of the country’s history.

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

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

NATURE

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

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

Even the marz western desert blooms each spring for a few short weeks with emerald green grass and fields of wild flowers, including rare and endemic Iris, Tulip and Gladiolus. The soil, built from layers of volcanic ash, is one of the richest in
The rich deposits of lava that streamed into the Ararat Valley from its volcanoes also created spectacular rock formations and one of the largest deposits of tufa and basalt in Europe and Western Asia. Most of the quarries in the country are in Armavir, others in Ararat and Aragatsotn marz.

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

Much of the deforestation was probably complete before the rise of the Urartu Empire in the 10th century BCE, the wood used to fuel metal foundries at places like Metsamor, Aratashen, Mokhrablur and old Armavir. and its adverse affects were recorded as early as the reigns of Kings Argishti I and Rusa, who both left behind cuneiform tablets attesting to turning “deserts into paradise” with their new irrigation systems. The same irrigation canals can be found throughout the marz, and modern extensions begun in the 1930’s have reclaimed some of the desert areas. Irrigation was restricted in the mid-1980’s as part of Gorbachev’s anti-alcoholism program (Armavir and Ararat marz had become a major wine production centers) and western Armavir has mostly returned to its desert state.

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

Much of the water has been shepherded into ponds and lakes for breeding fish, which has encouraged some diversity in water flora and fauna, but is also created one of the risks facing the marz. Several varieties of reeds, water flowers and ferns thrive in these marshland areas, which themselves are surrounded by cultivated land or semi-desert terrain.

**Irrigation** Armavir is heavily irrigated to produce agricultural crops though a system of canals dating back to the Bronze Age, expanded by the Urartu Empire between 900-600 BCE. Traces of the original canals can still be found in the region and western Yerevan (Armavir border), including the Dalma canal, which begins with a 400 meter tunnel bored into the side of solid rock to allow passage of Hrazdan river waters into the historic Dalma Vineyards.

The engineering feat of this Urartian tunnel and canal is the forerunner of the “Klahfreezes” which were later built throughout Asia Minor, and the canal and tunnel are the oldest functioning hydra projects of their kind. Other ancient canals can be seen along the road to Echmiadzin, including the misnamed Semiramis or Shamiram canal, attributed by legend to the Babylonian queen Semiramis, but in fact engineered by King Menues I or earlier. Further expansion of the canal network beginning in the 1930’s opened up vast tracts of semidesert land in western Armavir and the area around the town of Armavir.

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

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

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

**Thermal and Mineral Springs** Thermal Springs in Armavir include several types of mineral waters, including calcium, sodium and natural HCO

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

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

Other crops includes small fields of cotton (once a major source of income, now kept mainly by those wanting to spin their own cloth), and in the far south, a once thriving silk industry that is all but forgotten, save the wild mulberries that crowd the region and their silkworms. What the marz lacks in diversity it more than makes up for in the flowers that bloom during its short but glorious spring; several varieties of Poppy crowd fields of purple Betony and Gundelia (the “crown of thorns” pollen grains of which were found in the Shroud of Turin), yellow verbascum and purple gladiolus.

**Armavir Flora** Flora include several varieties of orange to red Poppy, Iris (Iris lutea, I. Caucasia), Gladiolus (Gladiolus atroviolaceus), milk vetch (Astragalus distyophysus) and yellow verbascum; best seen between mid-to-late April and May. Other flora include Nigella oxypetala, Silene spuria, Carpospermum thomitum, Verbascum saccatum, Lamiannata iberica, Roemeria refracta, Scabiosa argentea, Scorzonera papposa, Muscari neglecta, Stachys inflata, Astragalus distyophysus, A. kobchanus, Achillea tenuifolia, Helichrysum rubicundum, and Silene spergulifolia. Armavir marz: 4 of 94 - TourArmenia © 2008 Rick Ney. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
The most famous endemic species is the White Stork, which thrives throughout the marz, especially the eastern and southern regions, and on the Arax River. The stork builds its nests on top of power line supports, chimneys and special rooftop platforms built by villagers to encourage the nesting of this symbol of good luck and devotion (storks mate for life).

Bird watching, migrations  Armavir and Ararat marz have the best places to bird watch in the spring, at marshes, swamps and along river beds. Migrations begin in late March, reaching their peak in April and early May. The birds follow a predictable pattern which exacts dates are dictated by the annual thaw (give or take 1-2 weeks); small flocks of migratory water fowl (swans, ducks and geese) peak in early April, when they are replaced by waders (sandpipers, snipes) and in late April - early May an increase in nest building in most permanent residents and breeding bird species (geese, storks, waders and corvids).

In the autumn almost as many spring travelers return via the valley on their annual trek to Southern Africa, augmented by the mild weather areas around Lake Sevan (Armavir) and Arpalich (Shirak).
River, Marsh Fish include endemic river fish such as Sturgeon (Acipenser), Cat-fish (Silurus glanis), Chanar Barb (Barbus capito); Galician Crayfish (Astacus leptodactylus).

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

Mammals include the hare (Lepus europaenus), Indian Porcupine (Hystrix indica), Caucasian Squirrel (Sciurus anomalus), Asian Minor Ground Squirrel (Spermophilus xanthophrymnus), Edible dormouse (Glis glis), Small Five-toed Jerboa (Allactaga elater), Armenian Birch Mouse (Sicista armenica), Nehrini's Blind Mole Rat (Nannospalax nehringi), Turkish hamster (Mesoictrus brandti), Snow Vole (Chionomys nivalis), Dahl's Jird (Meriones dahli), Persian Jird (Meriones persicus), Tristram's Jird (Meriones tristrami), Vinogradov's Jird (Meriones vinogradovii), Striped Field Mouse (Apodemus agrarius), Yellow-breasted Field Mouse (Apodemus flavicollis), Black Sea Field Mouse (Apodemus ponticus), Ural Field Mouse (Apodemus uralensis), Harvest Mouse (Micromus minutus), Afghan Pika (Ochotona rufescens), Southern White-breasted Hedgehog (Erinaceus concolor), Armenian Shrew (Crocidura armenica), Radde's Shrew (Sorex raddei), Natterer's bat (Myotis natterer), Blasius Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus blasii), Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus euryale), Greater Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus ferrumequinum), Lesser horseshoe bat (Rhinolophus hipposideros), Mehely's Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus mehelyi),

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

RISKS/ ECO CHALLENGES

Cut up for agriculture, the marz faced its greatest ecological risks thousands of years ago, when intensive farming harvested hundreds of hectares of the region's only hardwood forests. Even then, it was not until the end of the 20th century that greedy businessmen cut the last forests of hardwood trees, to make furniture with. What remain are a few stands of trees on river beds, where in the 19th century thick forests covered 20% of the eastern marz. Archeological botanists have uncovered evidence of Bronze Age forests that suggest the marz may in fact have been 50% covered by forests, though these were mostly cut in the Bronze and Iron Age to feed a thriving metal industry.

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

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

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

Another risk is the continued destruction of the few areas of wilderness areas left, especially in the south and southeast, where bad farming practices have resulted in the salination of farmlands and a rush to "reclaim" wilderness areas for new fields. Weaned on farming in the Soviet days, when central authorities doled out petrochemical fertilizers that depleted the soil, and by soil erosion (Rhinolophus hipposideros), Mehely's Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus mehelyi),

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

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

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

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

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Hvordan Karmir Reserve (p. 92), 217 hectares marsh and grasslands that are the last native habitat for the Vordan Karmir (Cochineal) insect, and source of the deep red pigment used in Bronze Age, Urartian and Medieval cloth dyes and inks. The reserve is under pressure from nearby farmers and a state more interested in selling off public lands than preserving a 7,000 year heritage.
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beautiful 7th c Tarkmanchats at Aigeshat; and another half day to visit the south marz prehistoric sites at Vacheh and Gai and the Vordan Karmir hike through the desert hills to Karakert, with its excavation of ca. 9000-4000 BCE Aratasheh.


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

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

While Kotaik claims the oldest found humanoid in Armenia, and Yerevan the oldest cave settlement, Armavir claims the oldest cities, beginning with Aratasheh (7000 BCE), Mokhbrablur (ca. 6000 BCE) and Metsamor (5000 BCE), the latter with the oldest known bronze forgings in the world and a 2800 BCE astronomical observatory. These are conservative estimates; a growing body of historians believes that given increasingly older dates being placed on excavation sites throughout the region, it is plausible these settlements may be 1000-2000 years older. And while Armavir’s history reached back to the dawn of civilization, it also was at the heart of the country’s development through the next several thousand years; with no less than four of the country’s historic capitals, the kingdom’s birthplace of Christianity, and the birth of its first democratic republic.

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

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

Prehistoric (Chalcolithic/Neolithic levels) sites in Armavir include lower level excavations at Aratasheh, Mokhbrablur, Adablur, and Vacheh; chalcolithic tells at Zvartnots, Teghut (Echmiadzin), Gai, Tsaghkalanj, Mrasan and Tsaghkhus; the important 6th-2nd m BCE settlement of Khutanarkh at Gai; petroglyphs at the stone quarry near Aghavnatun.

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

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

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

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

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

The Metsamorians left behind thousands of glyphs and symbols on their rocks; some are early maps of the region, showing towns, fields and irrigation channels while others record the positions of the five known planets, constellations of the stars, and what experts say is the first calendar in the world, showing the four seasons and a spinning spherical world.

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

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

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

Copper-Bronze Age sites in Armavir include the museum, excavated citadel and observatory at Metsamor; Bronze Age levels at Mokhbrablur, Adablur, Aratashen; the Teghut Tell just S of Echmiadzin; the city of Khutanarkh near Gai; Bronze Age towns at Mrasan, Aigeshat, Aghavnatun, Mrasan; Armatir; Aratashen settlement; Bronze Age tomb mounds at Tsaghkalanj.

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IRON AGE

Around 2000 BCE, a second wave of Indo-European migration began, this time coming full circle back to the Armenian plateau. Thousands of years of development created distinct dialects and physical attributes, which further influenced the “mother tribes” in Armenia, among them the tribes inhabiting Armavir settlements at Aratashen, Adablur, Mokhrablur and Metsamor.

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

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

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

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

URARTIAN EMPIRE

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

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

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

HELLENISTIC & ROMAN ERAS

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

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

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

The Yervanduni Kings built both their capitals in the marz. Choosing a spot favorable for defense on a bend of the Arax River, the Yervandunis created their first capital in 331 on the regional capital of Armavir, the right bluff of Argishtikhinili (next to present day Haikavan). The capital thrived until 302, when the unpredictable Arax River decided to move west about 50 kilometers, leaving Armavir high and dry. Orontes IV then moved his seat to present Yervandashat, across the river from their religious center at Bagaran.

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

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

ORONTID (YERVANDUNI) DYNASTY

Orontid Kings in Armenian tradition

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

Attested Kings and Satraps

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

Orontid Dynasty

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

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

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

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

Later kings ruled over a country that still controlled the trade routes between Asia and the West, which was named the Silk Way in the 2nd c. BCE, and which gave Armavir unimaginable 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 Artashian kings attempted to placate each side, or to play one off the other to preserve Armenian autonomy, but they were not always successful; in 163 the Romans devastated the region, assuming renewed domination over Armenia.

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

**EARLY CHRISTIAN PERIOD**

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

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

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

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

Soon the "crusade" was nationwide. Pagan statues and icons were smashed or melted down, and crosses were set in place. Of the tens of thousands of pagan statues that stood inside temples or lined the roads of the kingdom, only one fragment of one bronze statue, the head of Anahit, survives, housed in the British Museum. It is also believed by many that among the religious items destroyed were all records of the early, or old, Armenian script. This old text was replaced with the Greek and Syrian used in the early Christian rites of the Near East. This would be easy to do, since Latin and Greek had become the languages of the court centuries before.

And of the hundreds of Greco-Roman temples in Armenia before the conversion, only a handful survived, and only one survived intact—the temple at Garni. Another, the temple to Mher (Mythra), recorded in historic chronicles, was recently found during excavations of Artashat, though it survives only in fragments.

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

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

When the Catholicos moved the Holy See to Dvin sometime in the 470s, Vagharshapat—and Armavir—became backwaters of the country, including the 4th c. cathedral of Echmiadzin, the martyria of Ss. Hripsimeh and Guyaneh and the shrine at Shoghakat; the central spot at Zvartnots cathedral where Grigor met and supposedly converted T’rdat III to Christianity; the lower portion of Tarkmanchats vank at Aigeshat; Manuks at Arevashat, Aghavnatun, Tsaghkalanj, Aknashen.

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

The crusade was not always peaceful, with rich and powerful pagans pitted against the Armenian Royal house. Several catholicos were martyred in defeat by the Romans in 189 BCE, who allowed the two former Seleucid satraps to set up independent Armenian states. A local general named Aertakaz (Artashes) declared himself King of Greater Armenia in 189 BCE with its capital at Artashat, 30 km south of Yerevan.

The conversion was also an astute political move. By converting to Christianity and then appointing Grigor (a fellow Parthian) as the first patriarch or archbishop, Armaiv—became backwaters of the country, rarely mentioned in the chronicles. It would be another 150 years before the marz was again mentioned in the affairs of the country.

**Early Christian sites** include the 4th c. cathedral of Echmiadzin, the temples to Mher (Mythra) recorded in historic chronicles, was recently found during excavations of Artashat, though it survives only in fragments.

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**Early Christian period**

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

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The Bagratuni era ended when the Byzantines conquered a weakened Armenian state, which was then unable to stave off Seljuk Turkish invaders in the mid 11th c. The Seljuks were much worse than the Arabs; they had no interest in preserving a prosperous subject state, instead choosing to raid, plunder and destroy what they could not take. Destruction of all towns and religious monuments are found from this period, as were reports of widespread famine and disease (a disease much like the Plague is suggested in some descriptions). The region rebounded in the late 12th century, when the Seljuks were driven out by a coalition of Georgian and Armenian armies led by the Armenian generals Zakareh and Ivaneh Zakarian. The Zakarians fostered a new Golden Age of culture in the country, sponsoring new churches throughout the region, including the S. Tovmas Arakeal church at Amberd village in Armavir. The caravan routes returned, bringing greater wealth. The Mongol invasions in the mid 13th century brought the golden era to an end, and the region went into further decline, accelerated by paganism and building churches throughout the successive waves of 14th c Tatar (Ak-Koyunlu and Kara-Koyunlu) raids and, worst of all, the 14th-15th century Timurid invasions, which completely devastated the country. The greatest of these was at Zvartnots, or Angelic Forces, the reputed site of the meeting between Grigor Lusavorich and T'rdet III, which began the conversion of the country.

After the fall of the Arshakuni kings in 428, the aristocratic houses fell into disarray, the squabbling nakharars further frustrating attempts to unify the country. Add to this the intensifying battle between Persia and Rome (now a Greek Empire based in Constantinople) to control the country, with competing armies wreaking havoc on the country. The struggle in Armavir is best summed by the departure of the Catholicoi to Dvin in the 470s and the dearth of construction of churches in the marz. Except for the renovation of the main cathedral at Echmiadzin ca. 486 (sponsored by the Greek appointed governor Vahan Mamikonian, whose seat was just north in Aragatsotn marz and whose donation can be seen as much an attempt to cement his house as the true head of Armenia as it was a pious act to renovate the dilapidated mother church), church-building had practically come to a complete halt.

After 150 years of relative obscurity in the affairs of state (which focus laid on Dvin and the western provinces) Armavir suddenly reappears during the reign of the Catholicoi Nerses III (the Builder), who many feel completed the conversion of the country by restoring parishes lost to Sassanid paganism and building churches throughout the country. The greatest of these was at Zvartnots, or Angelic Forces, the reputed site of the meeting between Grigor Lusavorich and T'rdet III, which began the conversion of the country.

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

Armenian revolts in the late 6th and 9th centuries were ruthlessly repressed, and Armavir suffered invasion and large scale destruction. One of these Arab raids is believed to have resulted in the burning of Zvartnots cathedral and the removal of key stones that led to its collapse in a 10th c earthquake. Arab rule ended in the late 9th century, and in 885 the Bagratuni Ashot I (the Great) assumed the throne of the new Armenian kingdom. Centered in the 10th century capital of Ani, the Bagratunis ruled over a prosperous, if fractured, kingdom, and Armavir benefited from the relative peace. Its churches were enlarged and the Silk Road was reopened under Bagratunis, the marz benefiting from being located on the Dvin-Ani road. Most of the basilica churches in the region date themselves to this period, when their early Christian structures were strengthened, and sometimes enlarged.

The construction began about the time of the first Arab invasion, in 649. Attempting to stave pilaging of the country by the Arabs, Armenian nakharars decided to sue for peace. This enraged the Byzantines who had refused to help the Armenians, demanding they adopt the Greek Chalcedonian doctrine first. Nerses favored union with the Greeks over subservience to Arabs, and for this was driven out by the nakharars. When the Greeks drove out Arabs and took control of the country, Nerses was reinstated in Dvin and began his rejuvenation of the church in earnest, including the cathedral at Zvartnots. In 648 he convened the council of Dvin, which accepted the Council of Chalcedon, bringing it back into communion with the Roman Orthodox Church, though based on the Monothest compromise.

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

The Dongolos proved adopted the Chalcedonian position, with its Armenian patriarch Nerses continued to battle nakharars led by Theodore Rohtuni who had mainly chosen titular Arab rule over complete control by Byzantines. On Nerses’ death, the country slipped into Arab rule, though it maintained an amount of political and religious autonomy, especially under the Umayyads. The region rebounded in the late 12th century, when the Seljuks were driven out by a coalition of Georgian and Armenian armies led by the Armenian generals Zakareh and Ivaneh Zakarian. The Zakarians fostered a new Golden Age of culture in the country, sponsoring new churches throughout the region, including the S. Tovmas Arakeal church at Amberd village in Armavir. The caravan routes returned, bringing greater wealth. The region rebounded in the late 12th century, when the Seljuks were driven out by a coalition of Georgian and Armenian armies led by the Armenian generals Zakareh and Ivaneh Zakarian. The Zakarians fostered a new Golden Age of culture in the country, sponsoring new churches throughout the region, including the S. Tovmas Arakeal church at Amberd village in Armavir. The caravan routes returned, bringing greater wealth.

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

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

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

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

DARK AGES (15th-18th CENTURIES)

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

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

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

The nineteenth century also fostered a lively and contentious nationalist movement, which was repressed by Russian authorities, but which grew nonetheless. As the century drew to a close nationalist and socialist cells increasingly challenged by the Catholicos at the gates, who said, “Do you know who you are talking to? I am the Catholicos of Armenia,” Tumanian famously retorted, “Do you know who you are talking to? I am the poet of Armenia!” and forced the patriarch to open the gates to the refugees.

Sardarapat Russian troops deserted the region after the abdication of the Tsar and a truce was made between Lenin and Turkey, which threw the region into a panic. Turkish troops that had been chased to central Anatolia regrouped and began a counter offensive, intent on finishing the eradication of the Armenian people and linking Turkey with Turkish speaking Tatars in the Caspian region, not yet named Azerbaijan. In 1918 the Turks began their attacks in earnest, routing Armenian held positions in Erzerum, Kars and finally, Alexandropol (Gyumri). Splitting into two armies, they began a final attack on the country, one army heading east to Karakilisa (Vanadzor) and the other to Echmiadzin and Yerevan.
The victory, as well as those at Kharakilisa and Bash-Aparan, drove the Turks to the other side the Arax River and allowed the Armenian National Council in Tiflis to proclaim the independence of the Democratic Republic of Armenia, which existed until the Bolshevik takeover of Armenia in November 1920.

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

**THE SOVIET PERIOD / SECOND REPUBLIC**

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

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

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

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

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

**ARMAVIR NOW**

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

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

By air

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

By road

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

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

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

**Public Transport**

Public transport includes intercity buses and minibans (Marshrutni Taxis) that travel from village to village and village to city; and taxis / hired cars with drivers. Inter-Village buses depart bus stops in Echmiadzin (Komitas Square, on Atarbekian p. two blocks west of Komitas Square and in front of the Shuka on Tumanian) and link to all villages in the eastern half of the marz. Western villages are normally linked via Armavir.

**Buses (Afto-bus)**

Yerevan - Giumri highway (M5) begins south of the marz at Markara, links with the (M5) at Echmiadzin (20 km), before continuing north to Ashtarak (38 km), Aparan (54 km), Vanadzor (114 km), Alaverdi (164 km) and Sadakholi at the Georgian border (201 km).

**Minivans (Marshrutni Taxis)**

Yerevan - Giumri highway begins at Bagaran in the far west of the marz, and travels northerly towards Talin (43 km) in Aragatsotn marz.

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

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

**BY RAIL**

An elektrichka (electric intercity) and Gnatsk (diesel interstate) travel between the Yerevan Central Station and Echmiadzin, Armavir and Aragats.

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

**Villages**

Villages themselves, despite the relative wealth of farming in a still impoverished nation, face the same population drain as the rest of the country. Able-bodied workers began to leave the country in the late 1990s, for Diaspora communities in Russia and the west. They send remittances to relatives left behind, and this forms the backbone of the economy.

While official figures say the population of the marz in 2006 was 279,500, mini-buses carry less than half that, and a visit to villages and Armavir city bears this out, the lion share of houses and apartments shuttered, their inhabitants "gone to Russia". Only Echmiadzin (Vagharshapat) seems to have escaped the population drop.

**PEOPLE**

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

**IN AND OUT**

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By Air

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

By Road

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

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

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

A secondary highway that is well-traveled is the Armavir-Giumri highway (H17), which links Armavir City with the (M9) highway (25 km) before continuing north along the Turkey-Armenia border to Giumri (91 km).
eastern half of the marz (100-200 AMD) and Armavir with Echmiadzin and all villages in the western half (100-200 AMD). Sample routes from Echmiadzin include Taronik (Metsamor excavation), Vachek, Markara, Gai/2rrat, Zvartnots, Parakar (Zvartnots Airport), Baghrman, Mrgastan, Aigeshtak Ainalchik. Sample routes from Armavir include Haikavan (ArgishtiKhinni excavation), Nor Artages (Armavir excavation), Sardarapat, Minsikian, Bagaran, and Yervandashat. Minivans run mornings and evenings, ask around for times.

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

OVERNIGHT/EAT

Lodging  Armavir has a number of overnights, most of them restaurant-hotels congregated on the (M5) between Echmiadzin and Yerevan. Near Echmiadzin is the ubiquitous Zvartnots Hotel, a large complex of 30 rooms renting by the hour, half day or night. Don’t be fooled by the tête-à-tête atmosphere—the staff have been catering to revelers and tourists for 15 years and their complex is convenient and secluded. Others are more temporary in nature, but all welcome tourists and most are quite accommodating. Figure 10,000-30,000 AMD for doubles –suites.

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

Armavir City has a Soviet Hotel (cheap but very run down) and a couple of restaurants-hotels that welcome tourists. 2500-30,000 AMD.

B&B-Home stays, which can be rustic but full of local hospitality, can be found at villages and towns throughout the marz. 3000-4000 AMD for basic room and breakfast is fair (toilet may be out back). Venues include Echmiadzin, Armavir, Vachek, Markara, Taronik (Metsamor excavation), Markara (Turkish border), Haikavan (ArgishtiKhinni excavation), Nor Artages (Armavir excavation), Arax (Sardarapat), Karakert, Bagaran, Yervandashat.

Camping  be had throughout the marz (except border), near villages and in wilderness areas. However, note this is primarily semi-desert terrain with no forests or woodlands—unless you camp in someone’s orchard or garden, you will be out in the open, which can be suffocating hot! Paid camping is possible around Ainalchik (2000-5000 AMD, not very pleasant). Free camping can be had around the lagoons and marshes adjoining Metsamor excavation and next to ArgishtiKhinni and Old Armavir excavations; near Sardarapat, and on the Kasakh, Metsamor and Sev Jur Rivers. For those who don’t mind open-space camping, the Selay-Mastara River Canyon and the western expanses around Mt. Spitakblur (1255m) and Sevblur (1110.6m) have spectacular views of wide open semi-desert spaces. The best time to camp is in the Spring (April-May), when the normally barren region bursts with emerald carpets of grass striated with fields of red, yellow and purple wildflowers.

Before setting up camp, be sure you are not trespassing on private property, especially if you are close to the border or a major area of Metsamor; you may almost certainly be given permission—and probably food, drink and an evening of stories into the bargain.

Details for lodging are listed in individual Day Trips (p. 52).

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

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

DESTINATIONS

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

Picturesque locales include the view of Mt. Ararat from Echmiadzin (S. Guyaneh is particularly good), Zvartnots and the entire SE rim of the marz; Aknalchik is the neighborhood of Metsamor; Metsamor citadel; J’rat or the Vordan Karmir Preserve; Kasakh River at Aratashen and below; The view of the valley from ArgishtiKhinni & Old Armavir; the lower plain from Sardarapat; the western desert between Bagaran, Argina and Karakert; Springtime at the Selav Mastara River canyon (between Minsikian and Karakert).

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

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

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

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

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

Early Christian sites include the 4th c. cathedral of Echmiadzin, the martyria of Ss. Hripsimeh and Guyaneh and the shrine at Shoghakat; the central spot at Zvartnots cathedral where Grigor met and supported Vardapet; converted into a ‘Christian’ church; the lower portion of Tarkmantschats vank at Aigeshtak; the basilicas at Yervandashat and Bagaran; Tukh Manks at Arevasht, Aghavnotan, Tsaghkalan, Aknashen.

Medieval sites include (7th century) Zvartnots Cathedral, Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Shoghakat; castle at Old Armavir; 12th c. Aigeshtak, Karmravor in Aghavnotan; (7th-9th centuries) renovations of Echmiadzin cathedral and Ss. Hripsimeh, Guyaneh, Shoghakat; (8th century) Bardughimeos church and buildings at Aknashen; (10th century) S. Gevorg and S. Shushanik at Yervandashat; (12th c) Tombv Arakeal at Amberd; (13th c) the funerary monument at Aghavnotan and S. Harutun church at Samahag; (14th c) Tsiranavor at Aghavnotan, Astvatsatsin at Bambakashat and S. Karapet pilgrimage shrine at Arshalus. Other sites include the medieval settlement and graveyard at Tsaghkalan.

Dark Ages / (15th-18th cc) include the 1413 Islamic (Timurid or Kara-Koyunlu) funerary monument at Argavand, Echmiadzin renovations and S. Shoghakat and Astvatsatsin in Echmiadzin city; S. Gevorg at Aigeshtak; the round tower at Aghavnotan.
19th c sites include the 1810 fortress of Sardarik and 18th c reconstructions of churches at Argavand, Meghri, Parakar, Arevik, Arazap, Artim, Aratashen, Armavir, Aghashat, Tandzut, Halkavan, Lenughi, Nalbandian, Getashen, Karakert.

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

Suggested hikes and treks are detailed in Natural Armenia: a traveler’s reference guide®

**Mountain treks**

There are very few mountains in Armenia, which is perhaps the (relatively) flattest marz in the country. Most are in the west of the marz: The tallest is Mt. Kogh (1310.2m) in the far NW of the marz, 6 km W of Shenik. Shenik is 4 km N of Mt. Spitsakblur (1255.0m), itself 5 km N of Mt. Uchtepe (1128.2m) and 9 km from Mt. Sevblur (1110.6m). About 4 km NW of Arax (Sardarapat) stands Mt. Grehako (1018.0m) with Bronze and Iron Age ruins on its slopes. Both Old Aramv (934.1m) and Aragistkhinili (937.4m) were built on low mountains. The sole mountain in the eastern marz is Mt. Dashtkar (1064.4m) which is due north of the Metsamor nuclear reactor on the marz border with Aragatsotn. The NE end of the marz (due N of Echmiadzin) has a large number of bluffs and tall mounds, most between 900-1000 m in height. All of them have the ruins (some intact, others lost) of Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age fortresses, settlements or grave mounds.

**Flower Watching**

Some flowers begin to bloom as early as late March in protected areas like river canyons but the main blooming season waits until Spring (March-April) and Autumn (September-October) are the best times to observe migrating birds, especially water fowls, which will congregate at the marshlands and ponds south and east of Aramv and Metsamor. Other

**Adventurer Tours Operators**

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

Avarayr Adventure Tours, (tel. 010 56 36 81, 52 40 42, Fax: 010 56 36 81), 1 Pavstos Biuzand p., Yerevan, E-mail: avarayr@arminfo.com, URL: www.avarayr.am/ has been arranging cultural and adventure tours to Armenia for more than 12 years, one of the first to provide fully equipped hiking, climbing and adventure tours. Their excellent guides, cooks and support staff for all tours. Tours run the gamut from hiking and climbing in the wilderness to cultural visits for the more comfort-minded. Their best seem to be tours that combine both aspects. A good, solid company.

Ashot Levonian, (tel. 010 57 03 28, cell. 091 49 58 34), e-mail: levash77@gmail.ru is an experienced hiking/climbing/guiding team, his team arranges hiking, mountain climbing, caving, geology tours, churches and fortresses. They will arrange 7 days in Yerevan, airport pickup, transport, sight-seeing, etc. Group support includes guide, cook, medic and driver. Standard tour is a two-week hiking trip averaging 5-10 km walking a day: Yerevan - Mt. Aragats - Avanerd - Ijevan - Dilijan - Sevan - Martuni - Yeghegnodzor - Kapant - Meghri - Jermuk - Yerevan. One of the most experienced mountain climbers in Armenia is Andrej Chesnokov, (tel. 010 57 67 57), 10 Vardanants St., Apt. #49, Yerevan, Armenia 375010, email: ruzan@aua.am, who has climbed most of the mountains in Armenia and is a recommend, reliable guide.

The Armenian Mountain rescue teams “Spitak” (tel: 010 35 00 06), 50 Halabian p., Yerevan, tel. 091-71-73-82, email: ajdahag@yahoo.com, as early as late March in protected areas like river canyons but the main blooming season waits until early April and May, with peak blooms in the west between mid-April to mid-May. Best places to look are along the highway between Masnakan and Karakert (Selay-Mastara River Canyon), the fortress above Karakert, the Arax River canyon between Vardavashat and Bagaran (permission required), around Mt. Spitsakblur, Uchtepe and Sevblur. For a list of flowers see Flora (on page 4)
Professor Nora Gabriélian is the preeminent expert on Armenian and Transcaucasian flora, having personally discovered several new species of endemic flowers in Armenia, the latest in 2006. She is the author of the upcoming Field Guide to Armenian Flowers, the culmination of 50+ years work in the field. This seventy-something still out-hikes the fittest members of her tours and combines expert data with humor, enthusiasm and great good will. She is not easy to book (she continues to do her research and is not for the casual tourist), but if you can arrange for her to take you on a 1 to 8 day flower tour, you will never see Armenia the same way again. She doesn't have a travel agency but contact her through her daughter Mariam (also widely respected for her botanic work) who can check her schedule and make arrangements. (m_agababian@hotmail.com).

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

See **Resources** (p. 92) for more Archeological options.
ECHMIADZIN (VAGHARSHAPAT)

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

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

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

BACKGROUND

Pre-History Echmiadzin (Vagharshapat) was itself the site of a Bronze Age settlement, with some thought (however controversial) that as a center for early metallurgy, the city may have developed into a religious center based on fire and sun worship. The pictograms discovered on rock sides in the area are filled with fire, sun and star imagery. Certainly in Echmiadzin proper, fire pits and what are thought to be temple objects have been uncovered in and around the cathedral area. The fire pit under the main altar is a Zoroastrian (5th c. BCE) reconstruction of a much earlier pit (mid to early Bronze Age), left behind rich alluvial sediment that nourished large forests and grasslands. The valley remains one of the most fertile in Western Asia.

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

The valley was once covered with forests, but mass deforestation begun in the mid Bronze Age turned it into a heavily cultivated land, dependent on irrigation and massive artesian springs. The springs continue to support the most diverse wildlife population in Europe and Western Asia. More than 2/3rds of Europe's bird species can be spotted in Armavir region during their seasonal migrations, including the endangered Dalmatian Pelican, Greater Flamingo and the Imperial Eagle. Thousands of cranes inhabit the region, building their large nests on the tops of village homes and telephone posts.

The city is the pre-eminent pilgrimage destination for 9 million Armenians worldwide. Echmiadzin is also the See of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and residence for it's head, the Catholicos.

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

Add one of the most impressive Modern Sculpture collections in the CIS, a museum with a collection of Soviet Armenia's "Heroic Art", and a delightful home residence harking back to the elegance of the 19th century, and you'll find more to do than one day allows. Give yourself two days to explore this area properly.
Urartu The city was already an important site by the time the Sarmatians conquered the region, but some trace its “founding” and its first name to this period. A cuneiform of Rusa II records the construction of a canal in the environs of Karlini (also spelled Karshuni or Karlini) in the heart of modern Echmiadzin. The city thrived as an agricultural center, and as a site of worship; some trace the origins of the fire pit under the cathedral’s altar is to Urartu.

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

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

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

Echmiadzin achieved supreme status in the 2nd century, mainly under the reign of T’rdat, built a new capital at Kaipolis (present day Echmiadzin). Meanwhile Roman and Parthian domination continued into the early Christian era, when Armenia became the focus of religious as well as political change in the Western world. Two Roman inscriptions found in Echmiadzin (State History Museum) show the presence of a Roman legion in Echmiadzin, on the fringe of Rome’s Caucasian lands. One of the inscriptions was commissioned by a tribune of the 15th Legion in memory of his wife and daughter.

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

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

In later years the pagan kingdom became known for being—if not supportive, at least tolerant of—European philosophical, architectural, religious, and artistic influence. The conversion to Christianity, led by the early church fathers, was not without its challenges, as evidenced by the rejection of certain religious practices and traditions.

The Yervanduni branch of the Pahlav family promised to do the deed, whereupon Ardashir is written in the chronicles to have been so grateful he gave T’rdat an entire army of Roman Legions to regain the throne of Armenia.

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

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

Legend has it that when T’rdat celebrated his return with a veneration of the goddess Anahit, Grigor refused the king’s order to follow other officers in his retinue and place a wreath of flowers before the idol, instead extolling the king in no uncertain terms: “stupidity worship empty stones”. Enraged, T’rdat had Grigor tortured; first muzzling him as a mule and forcing him to carry a block of salt for 7 days, then then having him run one foot for 7 days. Neither torture swayed Grigor, who continued to imply the king to convert.
Tradition says that Hripsimeh was the daughter of a Roman nobleman, the most beautiful maiden in the empire and betrothed to the Roman Emperor and asked her to live with him in his palace. Her by Hripsimeh in more and more eloquent ways. Suspecting Guyaneh of coaching escapes from his advances, T'rdat commanded his soldiers to silence the older maiden. They did this quite effectively, cutting off her tongue before stoning her to death.

Hripsimeh and the remaining maidens were kept in the palace for several months while T'rdat attempted to persuade Hripsimeh to marry him. However, Hripsimeh became more and more eloquent in her refusals, finally declaring she could not wed one when she was already promised to another. Furious, T'rdat demanded to know her suitor. “Christ,” was the reply, and in a rage T'rdat like an animal. Medieval drawings and carvings boar on his head, and the more vivid legends interpret this literally to mean he turned into a pig. Actually the depiction is a symbolic one, meaning he had become "subhuman", since wild boars were seen as animals that were used to destroy crops and eat grain. The Sassanids brokered a peace with the Romans and divided the Armenian Kingdom between the two powers after having eliminated the Parthian-Arshakuni ruling class in Persia. The Armenian King T'rdat was a Parthian-Arshakuni, and was related to the Persian Parthian royal house by generation. The marriage between the two kingdoms. The destruction of the Arshakuni ruling class was a blow not only to the peace between Armenia and Persia; it was the end of blood ties between the ruling houses of each country. As a result of the Sassanid invasion, the Armenian kingdom was in a state of crisis. T'rdat was well aware of that and of the rise of the Sassanids in Persia, his own rule was in jeopardy, and eventual invasion of his remaining kingdom a matter of time.

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

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

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

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

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

Diocletian’s Edicts Against the Christians

The success of Galerius, following the abdication of Diocletian in 305, led to particularly severe repressive measures against Christians, inspired by the new emperor's fanatical attachment to the Roman pagan tradition. Tradition has it that after a serious illness during the winter of 310-311, Galerius - having repented his crimes - issued a decree at Nicomedia on 30 April 311 urging clemency for the Christians under his jurisdiction, two years before the more famous Edict of Milan issued by the Emperor Constantine. Some have thrown doubt on the year 301 for Armenia's conversion, pointing to the improbability of T'rdat's conversion, the Roman general—converting his country to Christianity when it would have been a direct challenge to Rome at the height of their persecutions. These doubts are given substance by historic accounts noting the official baptism of T'rdat and his court in 311, when Grigor was anointed archbishop at Caesura. However, a closer look at the political and economic situation in Armenia at the time provides an impetus for an earlier conversion.

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

Hripsimeh and Guyaneh

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

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

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

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

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

T'rdat's sister Khosrovadukht ("daughter of Khosrov"), herself a Christian, then had a dream where she was told that the only way to cure the king and save the nation was to release Grigor. She convinced T'rdat to free Grigor and come into his presence. Having survived 13 years imprisonment in the virab at Artashat (legends say through the kindness of an old woman who threw bread and drink into his pit), Grigor came before the king in rags covered with the train of his hair. In particular, the king was pleased to have told the king he would cure him of his madness only if he were to publicly...
repent of his sins and erect martyria in honor of
those who had died in the battle.  T’rdat ordered Grigor to
order the construction of a new church on the site of the
old one.

From Then to Now  Vagharshapat grew in political
and religious importance in the 4th c., when the
conversion of the country to Christianity expanded
and was the focus of attacks by invading armies,
including another Persian invasion in the mid 4th c.
In 311-314, the city of Vagharshapat was
occupied by Persian forces.  In 311-314, Vagharshapat was
renamed into the entire area between the cathedral and
Guyaneh.

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

NAVIGATING THE CITY

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

Echmiadzin’s center is Komitas H’raparak or Komitas Square, at the juncture of three main
streets that will give your coordinates: Mesrop Mashtots (“Mashtots”) poghotts, Atarbekian
and Araratian poghottser.

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

When the red army invaded Armenia in 1920, Echmiadzin was a center of fierce resistance,
and suffered at the hands of the soviet.  Churches
and seminaries were destroyed, and the Catholics
were forced to flee.  The church was
ruined in 1938, and Vagharshapat returned to
decline as a city and center of culture.

In 1945 the name of the city was changed to Echmiadzin as Soviets began to lure
Diaspora Armenians to immigrate to help build a
new country.  The city was industrialized and the church
was allowed to incrementally expand its work.  Under
Vazgen 1 (Catholics 1955-94), the cathedral complex was renovated and
expanded along with churches throughout the
country.  Since Armenia’s independence in 1991, the
church has been back, prospering despite
the soviet, and embarking on a
large construction program that will eventually
reclaim the entire area between the cathedral and
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Mesrop Mashtots p., also known as old Miasnikian
Street, runs west to the Yerevan-Echmiadzin Mairughi
(highway).  Atarbekian poghotts runs west
to Taronik village and the Metsamor excavation.  The
bus station for Taronik and the Metsamor excavation is on the same street.

The square is named after Komitas (Soghomon
Soghomonian, 1869-1936), whose statue (29) lies directly on the north side.  Born in
the village of Kiotahia (present day Turkey), Komitas is
considered one of Armenia’s cultural icons.  A graduate of the Gevorkian Seminary in
Echmiadzin as a specialist in Sacred Music, he spent much of
his time collecting Armenia’s folk songs, many of
which are direct descendants of Armenia’s pagan
culture.  This date coincides with Galerius’ edict of
clemency for Christians in the winter of 310-311, suggesting the official conversion of the state more likely to have occurred in 311, some say 314.  The dating is
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clemency for Christians in the winter of 310-311, suggesting the official conversion of the state more likely to have occurred in 311, some say 314.  The dating is
under intense debate.
Komitas efforts to decipher medieval Armenian musical notation is also credited with helping to read Europe’s medieval music. Ironically, Komitas research into polyphonic musical notation (that found on ancient manuscripts) helped to decipher Gregorian chant notation, which had its antecedents in Armenian medieval music, reputedly introduced to Pope Grigor by an Armenian monk. By the beginning of the 20th century Komitas believed he had succeeded in cracking the notation code, and was about to make public his research when the genocide ended his career.

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

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

Komitas’ unraveling of the medieval code was lost with his sanity, and it is only recently that researchers believe they have succeeded in deciphering the notation. It should be noted that current polyphonic notation of Armenian medieval music is still considered imperfect without this code. Komitas is venerated by Armenians worldwide, and his repertoire of both sacred and folk music is a hallmark of Armenia’s and Europe’s music traditions.

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

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

The museum displays paintings by Mher Abeghian (a protégé of the expressionist Martiros Sarian), whose work combined abstracted social realism from the Soviet era with Sarian’s mystical landscapes and evocative color schemes.

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

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

Abeghian’s resume reads like one of the communist faithful, with honors and medals awarded at regular intervals (Abeghian was both Honored Artist of Armenia and People’s Artist of the USSR), as well as the frequency of his ‘inspirational trips’ abroad. His work should by no means be judged on that level alone, though, but rather as a study in how an artist caught in a repressive system could both tow the official line while painting officially forbidden themes. Remember he worked when the communists had stamped out all attempts at experimental art.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The church is open from 8 am to dusk seven days a week. Also called the “village” or “peasant” church, Astvatsatsin is in the heart of Echmiadzin, and often neglected on visits, which is a shame, since it amply shows how the vast majority worshiped, denied access to the grander monasteries nearby. It also houses a beautiful Rococo style altar, the only of its kind in Armenia.
and hold one of the most elegant altars in Armenia, a work of Italianate art in itself.

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

**ZBOSAIJEE - ԶԲՕՍԱԻՋԵ - (ԶԲՈՍԱԻՋԵ)**
The park is on the south side of Komitas H’raparak and Atarbejian p. The park is open from dawn to 10/11 pm seven days a week. Cafes are open warm weather only from 9 am to 10/11 pm or when the last customer leaves. Rides are open generally in summer from 10 am to 8/9 pm.

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

Monuments in the park include one to the Armenian Bolshevik Stepan Shahumian (40) and another to Anastas Migoyan (44), older brother to Steve. Though grim, nameplates were carefully removed to prevent identification and feared vandalism.

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

The shade trees are massive, beautiful reminders of how forested the entire valley once was, and are de rigueur for recovering from the intense sun just a few yards away on the streets. Unkempt, this park is still more genuine and lively then the packaged gardening inside the complex. Come here to see how the other 99% live.

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

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

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

**KHOREN TER-HARUTIAN SCULPTURE MUSEUM ԽՈՐԷՆ ՏԵՐՀԱՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԸՆԴԻՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԴԻՊԱՇԱՐՑԱՇԱՆ (ԽՈՐԷՆ ՏԵՐՀԱՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԸՆԴԻՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԴԻՊԱՇԱՐՑԱՇԱՆ)**
The museum (tel: 52038) is located 100 meters south of H’raparak on the eastern side of Araratian p. It is across the street from the Gevorkian Seminary.

The museum is open Tuesday to Sunday from 9 am to 5 pm during May - October, and 10 am to 4 pm during November - April. Admission is 200 AMD, and donations are appreciated. The museum displays sculptures, graphics and paintings created by a Diaspora Armenian who was one of the foremost sculptors of the Modern Art Movement in the 1940’s-1960’s, and whose most famous works can only be seen here. Unfortunately, there are no guide booklets in English, and the displays are all labeled in Armenian.
**Outside the Museum**  
In the niches on the upper wall are two large sculptures made in 1949 from Georgian marble. On the left is *Pillar of Salt* (1) and on the right is *Hope* (2), both from a series based on Sodom and Gomorrah. From right to left on the ground level are *David Sasuntsi* (3), *Mother of the Cliffs* (4) (dates unknown, marble) and *Fertility* (5) (1966, serpentine marble). The two bronze plaques are miniatures of the *Life of Mher* series, done for a Philadelphia exhibition in 1976.

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

Take a look at *Gorilla* and *Tragedy* and you seem to be peering into two sides of the same mirror.

† **To continue, cross the street to the east gate into the Echmiadzin complex (p. 24)**
The complex is open from 8 am to dusk seven days a week. High service is at 10 or 10:30 am Sundays. The cathedral museum is open 9 am to 5 pm Tues-Sun, except during High Service on Sundays.

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

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

The treasures housed at museums in the complex are often eye-popping for both their beauty and access to the average visitor. Remember you are literally rubbing elbows with some of the oldest Christian relics on earth. You will find it wise to be cautious as you see and touch artifacts that would be sealed and roped away from view in the west.

HISTORY, BACKGROUND

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

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

THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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

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

In most of the Armenian churches there are no benches or seats, though Echmiadzin does have seats up front (reserved for dignitaries and some foreigners—feel free to take a seat if you are invited).

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

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

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

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

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

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

CATHEDRAL COMPLEX - ՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՅՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՅՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՅՈՒԹՅԱՆ (Երբակիր ։ Երթնագրություն) - Երթնագրություն

This tour will take about two and a half hours (3+ if you take time to look at everything in detail), and is divided between the Complex (45 minutes), the Cathedral and Museum (60 minutes), and the Old Catholicos Residence (45 minutes).

Enter the complex through the East Gate on Atarbekian p. (opposite Khoren Ter Harutian Sculpture Museum).
The north side of the gate (where you enter), above, has a prehistoric Vishap Stone that has been carved with religious symbols to “baptize” it to the new faith. Priests at the complex dispute this, saying the stone was carved in the Middle Ages as a Christian piece, but its Pagan roots are definite. On the back (west) face of the gate the inscription reads in grabar, “Khachi Koi Kristos Yerkir Pagahneh-amk yev Z’surb Yarutuunik Paravoremk (we will kiss the heavenly Cross of Christ and we will glorify your resurrection)”

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

EAST GATE KHACHKARS AND SEMINARY

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

When Grigor’s followers began the conversion, they were confronted with multiple Pagan deities and a plethora of icons. Like the Roman church, the new faith was adept at usurping pre-Christian traditions, turning them into a new, Christian way of worship. The same is true of the icons. Christians incorporated pagan symbols into their iconography, showing the triumph of the new god over the old. Hence the Cross is figured surrounded by stylizations of the Pagan Tree of Life (as seen in Mesopotamian/Urartian religious carving), sometimes resting on top of a disk, or sun symbol (some say the first god in Armenia).

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

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

EAST COURTYARD

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

Before entering the complex, you will find small stands selling everything from khachkars, paintings and jewelry crosses to refreshments and worry beads. The captive birds are meant for the tree-lined central courtyard. The walls on the old dormitory are pockmarked with rifle shots, and we have heard everything from fighting during the Persian era (not likely since the building is early 19th century) to fighting against Red Army invaders to explain this. It seems no one really knows, is wants to tell, as 50 visits later, the explanations get more interesting or faces more quizical. Locals have a need to explain everything, even if uncertain (though the Persian explanation came from a western Armenian), so you may find the answer, or you may just have to create your own myth.

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

INNER COURTYARD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Khrmian Hairik Ladde (17) deftly alludes to a comment the then Catholicos Khrmian (r. 1883-1907) made after returning from the 1878 Berlin Conference following the defeat of Ottoman Turkey by Russia. During the conference the World Powers first gave, then led by Bismarck, took away independence of Armenia and other ethnic groups in Anatolia while Bulgaria and Hungary were allowed to form republics. “It’s ironic,” the Khrmian Hairik said, “they gave us a big pot of porridge, and all the big groups took out their ladles and (made a country). But all I had was a ladle made from paper (the original agreement by the world powers giving independence to Armenia). How could I take my portion with a paper ladle?” The memorial is of a large eagle guarding a ladle made from stone. Pure spring water gushes from the ladle, a symbol of life to all who will partake.

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

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

The T’rdat Gate (23) commemorates King T’rdat III, and was first constructed in the 7th century as the main approach to the cathedral. Legend has it that the stones came from his 2nd century palace, but probably the gate is at the approximate location of the entrance to the old palace, since the pagan temple the church was built over would have been adjacent to the royal compound. The gate was renovated in the 19th century. Beyond the gate is the Residence Quarter, where the Old Residence (32), new Residence (36) and Treasury Museum (37) are located. See next section of details on the Residence Quarter.

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

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

(24) "Ammnaprich", 1279, Vayots Dzor.

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

(25) Sodk Khachkar, 1543.

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

(26) Old Juga Khachkar, 1602.

The Old Juga Khachkars are distinguished by their deep relief and oriental geometric patterns. Juga is in current Nakichevan and the Juga khachkars represent the last golden age of Armenian arts. This khachkar and those in front of the old residence were part of a field of 10,000 khachkars which was destroyed by Azerbaijanis in 2007.

(27) Geghard Khachkar, 13th century.

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

(28) Sodk Khachkar, 1543.

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

(29) Aghjots Vank Khachkar, 1278.

(30) Geghard Khachkar, 13th century.

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

Continue to the S side of the cathedral.

CATHEDRAL EXTERIOR

As you return to the cathedral on the northern face, you can see the different strata of construction, beginning with the main wall, which has blocks of stone from the original 301-303 edifice, inscribed in Greek, the language used before the adoption of the Mashtots Armenian Alphabet (ca. 405). You can also see angled cornices in the upper wall, which show where the original roofline was. A reconstruction of the original design shows that the original church had a central tower topped with a drum and a central cone, and four smaller “drums” over the four corner chapels.
An extensive renovation of the cathedral in 484-486 under the patronage of Prince Vahan Mamikonian transformed the church into a central plan with protruding walls at the cardinal points (the semi-circular walls below the small domes). A central dome, probably made of wood, was set above the entire edifice.

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

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

The **Catholicos Tombs** (21,22) The graves on either side of the bell tower are for eleven Catholicos from the 19th-20th centuries, each of which had a profound impact on events of their time. Most written in Grapar or old Armenian, they are the most asked about and least deciphered monuments in the complex:

- North side (21):
  a. Ter Ter Khoren I - 1873-1932-1938
  b. Hovhannes R. Karbetesi - d. 25 March 1842
  c. Gevorg IV - b. 5 July 1813 d. 6 December 1882
  d. Ter Matevos II Kostandnapoletsi (from Constantinople) - b. 22 Feb. 1845 d. 11 Dec. 1910
  - (Catholicos) 1908-1910

- Southside (22):
  b. Nerses V Ashtaraketsi - b. 13.02.1761 d. 13 Me. 1857
  c. Mkrtich I Vaneiti (Khrmian Hairik) - b. 4 Apr. 1820 d. 29 Oct. 1907
  d. Gevorg VI - b. 2 Nov. 1868 d. 9 May 1954
  e. Vazgen I - 1908-1955-1994
  f. Ter Ter Gevorg V T’p’khisetsi - 1911-1930
    - b. 28 Oct. 1847 d. 8 May 1930
  g. Makar I - b. 13 Apr. 1813 d. 16 Apr. 1891

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

**BELL TOWER**

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

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

Why six wings? In sacred numerology the number six was considered a perfect number (the sum 3+3, or 1+2+3, or 2x3; 3 was considered the holiest number, and now stands for the trinity). In the bible God created the heavens and earth in 6 days, Christ died in the sixth hour of the sixth day. It was considered the number before the end and the resurrection in early Christian symbolism. There are eight sides to the dome with eight supporting mantels. The first number after seven (connected with celestial life), eight was considered the symbol of life, the new life after baptism (both in pagan and Christian times). The resurrection of Christ occurred on the eighth day.

The octagon is the favored form for the baptismal font and conical domes.

The outer walls, arches and pillars are carved with geometric patterns, grape vines, plants and intertwining lines. The carvings on the upper arches depict two snakes (also called dragons) with open mouths. The symbol of wisdom, snake imagery is pre-Christian in origin, gloriously usurped in this design motif. The whole is a baroque fantasy surprisingly in harmony with the solemn 5th century exterior.
The two paintings flanking the main doors are of Ss. Poghos (1) and Petros (2), and the two grave stones underneath are inscribed in Grapar: (left of door) "1163 - 9th month… in 1405 Ter Aghexander Catholics laid in the mausoleum November", and (right of door) "Son of Christ the only son Ztraghksand'r Riiznadtsi - November 10".

**CATHEDRAL INTERIOR**

Legend and Movses Khorenatsi's 5th century History of Armenia say that the first cathedral at Echmiadzin was erected by King T'rdat III and Grigor Lasuvarich in two years (301-303). According to these accounts, the exact location and design for the cathedral appeared to Grigor in a vision, where Christ descended to the Ararat Valley with a golden hammer in his right hand and struck the locations where four churches were to be built: three Martyria (two of which were to be dedicated to the martyrs Hripsimeh and Guyaneh), and the future cathedral at Vagharshapat. The "Ijman Seghan" or Altar of Descent at the center of the Cathedral is the location of Christ's appearance in the vision; hence the name Echmiadzin ('the descent of the Only Begotten'). The vision described the church composition while interpreting its elements. The main site was marked with a circular base of gold on which rested a column of fire with a capital of cloud, surmounted by a cross of light. The whole was surmounted with four pillars of fire and one central. The sites for the martyr's chapels were of fire, and crosses of light; these columns were lower than the central column. The whole construction was surmounted by a canopied construction of cloud in the form of a dome.

As you enter the church, look at the floor plan. The original cathedral was intended as a physical duplication of Grigor's vision, and is believed to have had a quadruple apse (cruciform) hall with four corner chapels and entries on the west and southern sides. The whole was surmounted by five pointed domes; four in the corner and one central. Close off the corners of the present church; imagine the entire structure as a square with very thick walls and one window, and you have what many consider the original design (See Figure 1).

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

**WAS ECHMIADzin A FIRE TEMPLE?**

Of course there was a fire temple on the site before the cathedral was erected—the fire pit under the main altar with its Greco-Roman pillars confirms the fact. However, some have asserted that the fire pit was added after the first church was built by 5th c. Sassanian Magi intent on subverting the new religion. But if they did, then the entire story of the first church is called to question, and the original cathedral was indeed the Greco-Roman temple that surrounds the fire pit—something no historian is willing to admit. It also flies in face of Grigor's vision for the cathedral, which first destroyed the old temple (Christ's hand strikes the spot with...
golden hammer—destroying what was before) and then built a new.

Zoroastrian temple—2nd c A.D.

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

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

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

5TH CENTURY RENOVATION

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

[Figure 2]

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

DÉCOR

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

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

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

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

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

Interspersed with traditional themes like Hovnatan Hovnatanian’s Madonna and Child (17), Baptism (15), Christ Washing the Apostles’
Virgin and Child, S. Stepanos on the left, and S. Pilipos (Philip) on the right. Repeated use of cypress-like trees reinforces the tree of life effect in the dome.

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

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

South Hall  

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

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

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

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

d. Psalters, reliquaries and silver crosses.

e. Relic of St. Andreas.

f. Meron Vessel, 19th century

g. Painting of Vazgen I, 20th century

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

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

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

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

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

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

CATHEDRAL MUSEUM - Ս.Հ.Տ."ԳԵՐԳՈՒՅԱՅԻՆ" ՔՐԻՍՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՎԵՏԱՄԲՐԱՆ Ե.instagram

North and South Chapels 

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

The frontal decoration (33) were painted with gold leaf detail and feature the 12 apostles, the
The church has never been comfortable with the site’s existence, one time denying its existence before Soviet era archeologists published their excavation findings, with pictures. Still, they never openly publicized the site, reluctantly opening the door to the pit for (persistent) enquiring visitors. Lately they seem to have resorted to their previous form, removing the key to the door and even telling some unsuspecting visitor we talked to that the pit never existed in the first place! Ask, and be persistent, you may just be the lucky one to gain entry.

NORTH HALL

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

d. Bust of Komitas, based on death mask.

e. Komitas Crown on the center shelf.

f. 18th-19th cc. Vestments

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

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

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

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

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

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

The quarter itself holds some beautiful Khachkar examples:

35a. Sodk Khachkar, XVI c.

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

35c. Geghard Khachkar, XII-XIII cc.

35d. Geghard Khachkar, XIII c.

35e. Noradus Khachkar, 1745

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

38. Winged Khachkar, XVII-XVIII cc.

39. Hovhanavank Khachkar by Vardan, 1171

40. Khachkar

41. Gladzor Khachkar, 1279

42. Hairavank Khachkar, 9th c.

43. Sodk Khachkar, 1297

44. Gladzor Khachkar, 1296

45. Jugha Khachkars

A Jugha, 1602
B Jugha, by Grigor, 1602
C Jugha, 1601
D Jugha, 1602
E Jugha, 1602

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

OLD RESIDENCE - ԿԳԵՆԿԻՆԻՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

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

OUTSIDE

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

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

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

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

d. Khachkar, Old Juga, 1603. Five crosses in top panel, memorial carving of prince on horse at bottom.
staffs in ivory, silver, gold and gold with imbedded jewels.

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

KHOHANOTS (KITCHEN)
The old kitchen has a large fireplace set into a niche on the far wall. In front is a display of china, samples of those used by each Catholicos who lived here. On the walls are photographs and paintings including a small one, Nerses Ashtarak belonging to Komitas, barely a fraction of the collection from the old Komitas Museum which was closed to make way for the Gevorkian Seminary. 18th century manuscript miniatures also line the cases and ceiling. Adorned with clumps of grapes and delicate vine tendrils, the piece is actually 11th c. made for an Armenian prince in Kilkila.

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

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

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

The floors are covered with 16th-18th cc. carpets, the walls are hung with early 19th c. Mktum Hovnatanian paintings and others of Gevorg VI, Khoren Murahakian (reputedly killed by order of Stalin in 1938), Gevorg IV, Martiros Izmilan and Nerses Ashtaraketsi.

The Hovnatanian paintings include Aram Takavor (King), Trdat Takavor, Tigran Takavor and Agat Takavor. Display cases show vestments, gold and silver implements, and a collection of cases (g) holding gold and silver embroidered vestments, gold, silver and jeweled scapulars, crosses, miters and belts. The 18th century hand-woven carpet is based on a dragon design.

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

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

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

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

TREASURY MUSEUM - Կերակուսի Թանգարան (Գյուղական Արարատ)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also impressive are embroidered scenes from scripture and religious characters, the Madonna, Christ, and the Evangelists. Particular masterpieces on display include the Miter of Catholics Khachatour and Catholics Pilpots; miter covers showing Grigor the Illuminator in Vestments; and armlets, which have a complex needlework pattern depicting scenes of The Holy Banner and Baptism.

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

IMPRINT ART
Imprinting is one of the oldest forms of Armenian applied art. Patterns were carved on oak or pear wood and fabrics were imprminted with dyes applied to separate wooden casts. Wool, cotton, silk, and other fabrics were used, while dyes were made from animal, plant, and mineral sources.
COINS

Included in the collection are 2nd c. BCE Thrace coins, Roman Republic dinars from the 2nd to 1st centuries BCE depicting Victoria, Mars, Jupiter and the Roman Twins, with Latin inscriptions; Roman Imperial coins depicting portraits of Augustus Octavius, Nero, Dometrianus, Marius Trajanus, and Marcus Aurelius; 2nd c. Roman coins; Late Roman coins from the 4th-5th centuries; Herodotos; Parthian coins with portraits of Arshakid rulers Mithridat, Orontes, Sanatrak, Vartan and Vagharsh; Sassanid coins minted in the 2nd-3rd centuries; Late Sassanid coins bearing pictures of Khosrov Anushirvan and Khosrov Parvis, widely used in Armenia and neighboring countries; Byzantine coins from the 12th century in gold and copper (copper was reserved for internal trade); Umayyad and Abbasid currencies minted in the 9th-10th centuries in Iraq and Iran; Abbasid coins minted in the cities of Dvin and Partav; Seljuk and Mongol coins from the 12th-13th centuries, including those minted with the Christian cross, struck in 1180 during Hulagu’s reign; Armenian Kilikia coins, with almost all the kings of Kilikia represented; Copper coins from the Safavid, Ahajarian, and Afsharian dynasties in Iran (with Persian inscriptions struck in Yerevan); Silver and copper coins with Persian inscriptions struck in Tbilisi, Georgian coins (19th c) and coins from the Ottoman and Russian Empires, Western Europe and the Americas.

PAINTINGS

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

MINIATURES

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

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

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

The 1374 Grigor Tatevatsi Bible includes miniatures added by Khachatur Kesaratsi. At the end of the manuscript is Tatevatsi’s rhymed colophon (page 329 and on) and a poem by Hovhannes Vorotnetsi (pages 327a and 328b). In conjunction with these texts the manuscript also displays frontal portraits of Hovhannes Vorotnetsi and Grigor Tatevatsi, represented as saints under the arches. The tradition of portraying contemporaries and historical figures in manuscripts evolved from the 11th century, beginning with the Kars Bible.

END ECHMIADZIN COMPLEX.

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

GUYANEH (GAYANE) VANK - ՔՈՒՅՆԵՀ (ԳԱՅԱՆԵ) ՎԱՆՔ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tomb Inscriptions:
13 a. "Shamaketsi Zorkocheh..."
b. "Monument (to) Ter Ter Yeghiazar Aintapetsi 1682-1691"
c. "Haik Gosar"
d. "Catholicos Mateos Ist K. Poisetsit. Died 21st August 1865"
e. "Mikents Hovsep..."
f. "The Prince killed...Russian Ambassador. Georgia 1829 January 30th. In his grave 1829 April 26"
g. "1817 November laid into the grave by the Catholicos' blessing"
h. No inscription
i. No inscription

15 a. No inscription
b. No inscription
c. "Ter Barsegh Pantsali - 1812 September 7"
d. "1801 March 9 - Ter Hovsep Pantsali"
e. "Tovma Yossepan - 1842 First Prosecutor of Echmiadzin"
f. "Ter Ghukas Catholicos December 8...year missing"
g. "Ter Ter Minas A. Akchetsi - Catholicos 1751-1753"
h. "Ter Ter Abraham B. M'shetsi - Catholicos 1730-1734"
i. "Semeon Yerevantsi (from Yerevan) - Catholicos..."
A fountain (7) is located in front of the seminary building. Located on the north, east and southern sides of the church is a graveyard (8). Three old khachkars (9a, 9b, 9c) stand just beyond the southeast corner of the church.

CHURCH EXTERIOR

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

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

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

DATING OLD KHACHKARS

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

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

GRAVESTONES

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

CHURCH INTERIOR

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

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

The most arresting image on entering the church is the 17th century marble canopy over the altar (18), which protected the Ijman Seghan at Echmiadzin Cathedral until brought to Guyaneh in the 1980’s. The decorative design and the figures of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost are by the Hovnanian family, and were painted directly on the marble, as was the Madonna and Child on the main altar piece, which is a renovation of the original 7th century stone altar.

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

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

Just under the dome is a wrought iron chandelier (under dome), designed in a ring of doves. Hripsimeh Vank has a chandelier just like it. Having said all this, there are a number of exceptions to this rule, and you may wrong as much as you are right, since numbering and dating in Armenia was as subject to the dominating cultural calendar as anything else. When under Arab domination, the Islamic calendar system was imposed, when under Russian domination, the Gregorian calendar was in vogue. There are monuments that incorporate more then one dating system, including the Armenian Era. It can be confusing.

The northern khachkar on the left (11b) does not have the letters ՔԱ, and is inscribed Ա Բ Գ , literally “1000+80+6”, or the year 1086, either AE (Armenian Era) or 1637 which is unlikely for this work. The one on the right (11a) is inscribed Բ Գ Է or (t’vin) 907 AE (Armenian Era), or 1458 in the Common Era.

Khachkars on the south end (17) have been defaced except for that on the lower right, which is inscribed Բ ՈՒ Հ Կ , literally “9-1000-20-8” in the old counting system, which signifies either “t’vin” or the 9th month of the 1028th year. Either interpretation is possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**HRIPSIMEH VANK - ՀԱՅՈՒԹՅՈՒＮ ՍՊԱՆԱՆԵՐ ՆՅուԵՐ ԲԵՆԵԼՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ (Հայություն Սպանաներ Նյուեր Բենելություն)**

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

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

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

One of the more interesting legends says that with each advance T’rdat was rebuked by Hripsimeh in more and more eloquent ways. Suspecting Guyaneh of coaching escapes from his advances, T’rdat commanded his soldiers to silence the older maiden. They did this quite effectively, cutting off her tongue before stoning her to death. Hripsimeh and the remaining maidens were kept in the palace for several months while T’rdat attempted to persuade Hripsimeh to marry him.

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

Just after this, T’rdat became gravely ill, raving like an animal. Medieval drawings and carvings depict his insanity by placing the head of a wild boar on his head, and the more vivid legends interpret this literally to mean he turned into a pig.

His sister Khosrovadukht (“daughter of Khosrov”), herself a Christian, then had a dream where she was told that the only way to cure the king and save the nation was to release Grigor. She convinced T’rdat to free Grigor, setting the stage for the conversion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The present church was built in 618 under the patronage of the Catholicos Komitas I. This was during the twilight of Armenia's first golden age, 20 years before the first Arab invasions brought a violent end to an intense flowering of culture and independence. As such, the church is considered a crowning achievement of Armenian architecture, its proportions a perfect representation of the cosmos and sacred geometry for that time. The bell tower was added in 1790.
EXTERIOR
The church is considered one of the masterpieces of early medieval Armenian architecture, a perfected form of that begun at Echmiadzin. Following the plan of Echmiadzin (cruciform with semi-circular apses at the cardinal points, chapels on the diagonal points), the architects at Hripsimeh created a harmonious and elegant space, one of the earliest uses of placing the dome directly over the supporting walls.

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

Hripsimeh seems austere and as a martyr shrine, that serves its purpose well. But unlike Guyaneh or even the Cathedral, the church saves it most impressive features for the inside. Just as the crypt and sanctuary were once covered with rich tapestries and gold imagery with precious stones, the architecture is covered with a kind of tapestry, and soars in its grand design--from the inside.

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

Hripsimeh’s geometry is sacred geometry in the way the lines of the building converge to points and circular patterns in a stunning display of lightness for such an obviously heavy structure. Numerology abounds: 2 niches and 3 openings on each side, 3 roof lines on each end, the 2 to 3 ratio in measurements--everything outside the building reinforces the sacred numbers 2 (duality of God on earth and in heaven) and 3 (The Holy Trinity); while all inside reinforces the number 4 (The totality, seasons, all time). It is a purest form of worship in architecture. Even the 8 niches (not at all common in Armenian church architecture) represent the 8th day, in biblical terms the day of resurrection, the beginning of life after God rested.

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

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

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

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

The paintings (C) covering the altar platform wall are a reconstruction of original fresco work, depicting the Virgin and Child flanked by The Apostles and S. Grigor and Hripsimeh, but they were lost long ago. Even without the original frescos, the masonry and angular niche patterns show a mastery of craftsmanship.

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

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

MARTYRIA
As you face the altar, the entrance to the Crypt (F) is to the left. The first room has fragments of Khachkars and inscription stones, as well as an old...
wood and bronze door. To enter the crypt, go into the unit passageway to the right and down the steps.

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

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

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

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

OLD CITY CEMETERY - ԿԵՄԵՏԵՐի ԳՐՈՒՊ (Նևին սարգարդարան)

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

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

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

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

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

SHOGHAKAT CHURCH - ՇՈՂԱԿԱԹ ԵՎԱՆԳԵԼԻԱ ԳՐՈՒՊ (Շողակաթ եվանգելիա գրուպ) is located 150 meters west of Hripsimeh at the corner of Nalbandian and Zoyayi p. . The church is open from 9 am to dusk seven days a week.

BACKGROUND

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

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

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

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

To continue the tour, retrace your steps to Mashtots pta, and go west, taking the first right (Hoktemberian/Martirosavi) which skirts Hripsimeh walls to the large cemetery on the right.
early as the 5th c, and common in the 6th-7th cc). As a result, some think a form of the current church may have been built in that period. The interior has a horseshoe-shaped apse and two small chapels flanking the altar. The SE chapel contains the remains of Shoghakat. The church hall is small, following the dictates of the times, which were harsh for Armenians, who had become a minority in much of their own country.

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

As with cruciform and central dome hall churches of the 9th-13th cc, Shoghakat’s octagonal drum rests on a central square, with pendentives providing the transition to the base of the drum. The Bell Tower is a later addition, and for once, it does not detract from the original building’s design, carefully integrated into the original church plan. It has some of the best wall carvings, with geometric signs and cross forms hailing to Armenia’s most ancient iconography. The main arch has multiple layers, each with its own geometric pattern. The all cornices and window frames echo the same details.

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

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

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

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

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

The museum is slated to be moved to an undisclosed location (the mayor’s office says it will take over the civil registration office, which was news to the folks at civil registration); the prime real estate (valued at more than $100,000) was sold at a widely-regarded bogus auction for $7000 by the mayor in 2005. Look for a mafia joint to rise on the premises.
Excavation
Metsamor Excavation (100 AMD, 30 minutes) departs from opposite the Yerevan, Zvartnots and Masis Bus Station (50 meters west in front of the Apoteka Shop) hourly between 10.30 am and 4.30 pm. Ashtarak Buses depart from the Bus Stop directly in front of the Shuka on Tumanian p. at 8.30 am and 5.30 pm daily (200 AMD, one hour).

PRACTICALITIES

Area Code: 231
Long Distance: 0231 + local number
From abroad: +(374) 231 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armetel, 093/094 Viva Cell
International callers: Armetel +(374) 91 + number, Viva Cell +(374) 93 or 94 + local number
Unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0231) prefix if calling long distance, or +(374) 231 prefix if calling from abroad.

IN AND OUT

By Air
Zvartnots International Airport is ten kilometers east of Echmiadzin. Taxis will run to Echmiadzin for around 2500 AMD, even though they always start the bid at the 6000 AMD (or the more popular "for you, $20").

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

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

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

To go to Zvartnots (village, motel or church) take bus #1, 2 and 3 which leave every 10 minutes between 8 am and 5 pm (100 AMD, 15 minutes).

To go to Masis and the lower Ararat Valley, take the Masis Bus from the same point (150 AMD, 2 hours), which leaves at 8, 9, 10 and 11 am and at 12, 1, 2 and 3 pm daily. Taronik and Metsamor

Excavation
The Bus to Taronik village by the Metsamor Excavation (100 AMD, 30 minutes) departs from opposite the Yerevan, Zvartnots and Masis Bus Station (50 meters west in front of the Apoteka Shop) hourly between 10.30 am and 4.30 pm. Ashtarak Buses depart from the Bus Stop directly in front of the Shuka on Tumanian p. at 8.30 am and 5.30 pm daily (200 AMD, one hour).

Armavir-Yerevan Express
The Armavir-Echmiadzin-Yerevan bus leaves every 30 minutes between 7 am and 5 pm at either end (400 AMD, 30 minutes either way). To catch the bus in Echmiadzin, go to the intersection of Tumanian and the Armavir-Echmiadzin-Yerevan Highway on the northwest end of town, and flag the bus from under the overpass.

Villages, Metsamor, Armavir Buses to the village of Arshaluis
Next to the pool is a large soccer field, open to any who wants to play. Admission is 2000 AMD per month. (100 AMD, 90 minutes) leave at 10.45 am and at 12.30, 2, 3.30 and 5.30 pm, passing through the villages of Tsaghkunk, Tsiatsin, Hovtamech, Samaghaz and Haitagh.

The bus to Markara at the Turkish border is around 2500 AMD, but expect to haggle. Taxis start the bidding at 5000 AMD (or the more popular "for you, $20").

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

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

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

AROUND

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

Bus, Van
Local bus routes were discontinued years ago, but unless you are lugging a lot of gear, you won't find walking from point to point difficult...
in Echmiadzin. However, Echmiadzin-Yerevan Bus #111 departs every 15 minutes between 7am and 6pm from the bus station on Aтарбекян p. and stops at the Markara Bus Stop (Komitas Hraparak), WW II Monument, Zoyayi p. (Shoghakat Vank) and Hripsimeh Vank en route.

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

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

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

TOUR GUIDES

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

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

COMMUNICATION

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

Phone, telegraphs
The Central Post Office is on Komitas Square. Two others are at 5 Charentsi p. Vartan Mamikonian. See HayPost site for list (http://www.haypost.am/)
The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegrams.

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

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

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

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

See MAP next page.
The Kodak Shop (16) at the corner of Atarbejian and Baghranjian Poghots can do same day development. Open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 6 pm.

**Laundry and Dry Cleaner**
The laundry and dry cleaner (82), (tel. 43812, 43583) is on Issy les Moulineaux, one block west of Araratian, open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 3 pm. The building is not marked, but has metal grills over the windows and door. Laundry is 500 AMD per kilo, dry cleaning varies from 500 AMD per pair of pants to 1500 AMD for suit coats. They will pick up and deliver for an additional 1000 AMD.

**Pharmacy**
Baghranjian Poghots is called Dethaghat or Apoteka p. for the number of pharmacies located there. Except for narcotic medication, most medicine can be bought without a prescription. A 24 hour deghatun is Karma (4 on city map), (tel. 52532 or 37888 after 11 pm) at 47, Baghranjian.

**Hospital, Polyclinic, Optician**
For a medical emergency, dial 103. If you can, go to Yerevan for medical aid.

**Echmiadzin Hospital** (3 on city map), (tel. 53310, 56027) is located behind the Maternity Hospital on Spendarian Poghots, 50 meters east of Baghranjian Poghots. Look for the Russian AiTEKA sign next to the main entrance. Open 24 hours.

The Main Polyclinic (2 on city map), (tel. 52568) is located at the corner of Baghranjian and Spendarian Poghots, and is open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm.

An optician is located opposite the bus station on Atarbejian Poghots, open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 5 pm.

**Dentist**
Atamnabuzhner can be found at the State Dental Polyclinic (13 ), (tel. 56331), next to the Computer Games on Atarbejian Poghots, 50 meters east of the bus station, open Monday to Saturday from 9 am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 5 pm.

A 24 hour service private dentist (35), (tel. 42527) is located one block north of Mashtots Poghots on Kirow, at the end of the apartment building on the west.

**Overnight**
NOTE: Overnight spots change rapidly in Armenia, and Echmiadzin is no different. Expect prices to rise, guest house owners to have emigrated, other spots to come up, and hotels and motels to change hands (or close) overnight.

Of the two hotels in the city, City Hotel is now reserved exclusively for Church officials and their guests, and the other, Hotel Vagharshapat, is in terrible condition, with one wing housing refugees from Artsakh, and the other perhaps the cheapest place in town—if you don’t mind sleeping without plumbing, windows or doors.

**Hotel/Motel**
GOLDEN CITY HOTEL COMPLEX, Tsaghkunik Village (Echmiadzin Hwy), tel. 0231-56688, cell: 094-556688, email: goldencityhotel@yahoo.com, proprietors: Yervand Danielian, is just W of Echmiadzin on the (MS). The hotel-restaurant opened in late 2007, and is focused on both local and tourist trade. Amenities include heating, a/c, Internet connection (suites and sauna. Largest suite can sleep up to 6 people. Prices are per room with SGL/DBL/STE at 8700-10,000/12,000-25,000,25,000-40,000 AMD.

VAN MOTEL/RESTAURANT (tel. 48024) is located on the Markara-Zvartnots Janapar, 2 kilometer east of the Markara Road. The motel is also a restaurant, with individual glass-roofed dining rooms off of each double room. There are also three luxe suites. Spacious rooms are basically clean with hot showers. Air-conditioned doubles/luxe cost 15,000/20,000 AMD. The complex also includes an outdoor pool and sauna, which cost extra. Meals are breakfast $3-4, lunch $5-6 and dinner $6-8.

**ZVARTNOTS MOTEL/RESTAURANT, Echmiadzin Hwy 200 meters W of Zvartnots, 3 km E of Echmiadzin, tel. 52024, 282423, 091-402631, Fax: 237-46619, is located 3 kilometers east of Hripsimeh (200 meters west of the entrance to Zvartnots Vank) on the north side of Echmiadzin-Yerevan Highway. The air-conditioned cottages have separate living/dining rooms, baths, bedrooms and porch, with ample space for folks to move around. Maid service and Jacuzzi tubs in the quads round out this well-maintained complex. Double/Quad cottages from 15,000-50,000 AMD. Meals around 3000-5000 AMD.**

**B&B**
This is a very short listing of the possible homes to stay in—if any are full or you find yourself in a different part of town—just start asking. By the time we left Echmiadzin the local grapevine had already been humming, and 5000-7000 AMD for B&B was the going rate.

**Advance Bookings:** Always call ahead before home stays, even If you don’t speak the lingo. Just showing up may mean you will be wasting a lot of walking time. Check with Harutuni (tel. 52038) at the Khoren Ter Harutunian Sculpture Museum to arrange home stays w/dinner and breakfast for 3500-6000. Also check with Khachik at Echmiadzin Shop (tel. 52084 at the shop, 56459 at home) for the same.

**Near Guyaneh Vank**
MRS. AGHUMIAN (tel. 56583), Sovetakan Banaki 38, lives in one of the red-tiled cottages opposite Guyaneh. She has two spare beds upstairs, and has hosted guests before.

**Near H’raparak**
SURIK (tel. 57304), Atarbejian 98, has two beds in a single room available for lodgers.

**Near Shoghakat/Hripsimeh**
The area above Shoghakat and Hripsimeh Vanks, between the Nalbandian, Spendarian, and Hkotemberian Poghots, has some of the nicest traditional homes in Echmiadzin. Homes are built around central courtyards with large porches or balconies overlooking the gardens.

**MRS. HASMIK AZATIAN (tel. 41630), Nalbandian Arachin Nerpanse 5a (1st Cul de Sac off of Nalbandian, house 5a). The house is on the right.
as you turn the corner into the cul de sac, has a pleasant little home with lace curtains on the window and a large porch in back overlooking her garden. She has two beds.

Three other homes on Nalbandian Poghots are #68, #70 and #73. Spaces vary from spare rooms to an entire home. Call or see David at Van Motel (tel. 48024).

**South of Mashtots Poghots**

ANDRANIK AZATIAN AND ANZHIK PETROSSIAN (tel. 55503), Nalbandian Poghots 45, have a large host-style building about 500 meters south of Echmiadzin on Manukian Poghots 1, with 12 rooms, shared bath, and a huge walled-in garden. The rooms are still being furnished, but this is an excellent option for small groups with their own bed rolls. 10,000-15,000 AMD per person.

SUKO (tel. 43983) at Kardjikian Arachin Nerpans #4 (1st cul de sac off of Karjikian, house # 4) has a private house with a spare room for two lodgers.

Next to the Ring Café is JULIETTA BABAIAN (tel. 57829), Mashtots Poghots 48 apt. 20, who has a spare room with two beds to let for single sex or married lodgers only. Nora Sarkissian (tel. 52463), Dzerzhinsky Poghots 82b, has a spacious and clean room.

**Boarding/Apartment** is a distinct possibility in Echmiadzin, the locals crave the income and some have very sweet little places to offer. Ask around and you will have your pick of several rooms or apartments to choose from. 5000-7000 AMD a night for bed and breakfast is fair.

**FOOD AND DRINK**

NOTE: Eateries change rapidly in Armenia, and Echmiadzin is no different. Expect prices to rise, and venues to close and open almost overnight. Summer season will have the best options, winter will seem like a desert.

Cafés and bistros are throughout the city, as are khorovats joints in town and on the Highway to Spitak/Alaverdi. Food can also be bought at mterks and kiosks around town.

$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks
$ = 2000-3000 AMD
$$$ = above 3000 AMD

**Cheap Eats**

**Cafés**

In the summer, outdoor café's can be found around Komitas H'raparak. One of the most pleasant cafés is in the Zbosaigi (Stroll Park) just south of H'raparak. Open during the summer, the café includes four cabanas and serves kebab, grill and sandwiches. $-$-$

**Center**

An ARMENIAN KITCHEN, cattycorner from the Central Bank serves khorovats (2000 AMD a shish), kebab (1000 AMD) and chicken grill (1000 AMD). $-$-$

Another ARMENIAN KITCHEN is located just above the Komitas Statue in Mashtots Park and has the same menu and prices. $-$-$

A GRILL is located between the Mterk Shop and Xerox on Mashtots Poghots, and serves sandwiches and kebab for 250-1000 AMD a serving. $-$

**KHOROVATS STANDS** khorovats stands proliferate on Baghramian Poghots, in and around the Shuka, and on Kirov Poghots. A shish of khorovats with lavash, onions and greens costs around 1500 AMD, and around the shuka, and include hot dogs, hamburgers, fried perashkis, cheburekis, Gharsi khorovats (a sandwich of grilled slivers of meat with onions, herbs and a tomato sauce) and khachapuri selling for 150-500 AMD a serving. $-$

**SHUKA** The cheapest of course is buying your own fresh meats, cheese, bread, vegetables and fruit at the shuka and preparing on your own. The Shuka is open from 9 am to 6 pm $-

KIOSKS line Kirov and Kostanian Poghots, and sell fresh meats, cheese, bread, vegetables and fruit at the kiosks. $-

A number of MTERK shops line Mashtots and Aterbekian Poghots, selling meats, cheese, canned goods and other staples. $-

Inexpensive food is found at the FOOD STANDS in and around the shuka, and include hot dogs, hamburgers, fried perashkis, cheburekis, Gharsi khorovats (a sandwich of grilled slivers of meat with onions, herbs and a tomato sauce) and khachapuri selling for 150-500 AMD a serving. $-

The building is a white stucco caravan tent design, with dining huts off a central buffet. A filling meal of khorovats, dolma, salads, fruit and dessert costs 30500+ AMD. $$$

Khorovats is sold at 4000 AMD a kilo, enough for four people. $

ZVARTNOTS RESTAURANT/MOTEL, (tel. 48024) is located on the Markara-Zvartnots Janapar, 2 kilometer east of the Markara Road. The motel is also a restaurant, with individual glass-roofed dining rooms off of each double room. Armenian feasts are their specialty, hard to get out for less than 3500 AMD. $$$

**END ECHMIADZIN**

**Travel Guide®**

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Armavir Marz: page 47 of 94 -
From Echmiadzin (S. Hripsimeh), go E on the Echmiadzin Hwy (M5) and continue for about 2.5 km to a metal gate and large stone column topped by an eagle on the S side of the highway enter onto a 900m asphalt drive to **ZVARTNOTS CATHEDRAL** (DD 40.160115 x 44.336709, elev. 882m) + O ZVARTNOTS - Զվարթնոց (2Qununluq) + cathedral and village, Pop. 750), open 10-5, 1000 AMD, is located in the village of the same name (also called Echmiadzin), next to Ptghunk, on the Echmiadzin Highway about halfway between Zvartnots airport and Hripsimeh Church in Echmiadzin.

The cathedral, referred to as both Zvartnots and Grigor Lusavorich by medieval historians, was built at the spot where legend has it Grigor Lusavorich met and cured the mad king T'rdat, thus initiating the conversion of the country to Christianity. It is also believed to be the spot where the 1st c apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew met during their ministry. And further, it is said to be the spot where Grigor Lusavorich himself was born, under a tree, while his family was fleeing the persecution of the Armenian King Khosrov in the mid 3rd century.

The church was a physical embodiment of the vision of Grigor saw in establishing the new religion, supposedly named for the archangels or "celestial soldiers" in his dream. In reality the church was built over one of Armenia's main Pagan complexes, a site of still practicing clandestine rituals in the 7th c when the cathedral destroyed the old temples and finally drove the pagans underground.

It was also the focus of Armenia's changing fortunes during the early Arab period, when Byzantium struggled with both the Arabs and Armenians for dominance over the region; with Arabs to stop their relentless drive west; with Armenia to force it to renounce its monotheistic religion and adopt the Greek Church entirely. Built for a Catholicos who was sympathetic to Byzantium and Armenia's struggle against Arab dominance, Zvartnots came to symbolize both the final triumph of Christianity over Paganism and a symbol of independence in the face of Moslem foes.

In 2000, Zvartnots, along with the churches of Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and the Mother See at Echmiadzin, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**BACKGROUND**

The site has been the focus of worship from at least the Bronze Age, as evidenced by a fire pit and Vishap fragments uncovered at the site. Excavations also uncovered Urartian temple foundations and a sacrificial altar. The name itself is the stuff of controversy. Usually attributed to a vision Grigor Lusavorich had when establishing the Armenian Church, it has been variously translated as "Vigilant Ones", "Vigilant forces", "Archangels" and "Celestial Beings" or variants on the theme of soldiers, angles and celestial.

Another suggestion is more controversial, saying the name derived from the pre-Christian word "Zvartnonk", a name given to a spirit that roused the dead to life.

Denied by church officials, this name nevertheless fits the pre-Christian period for the site and the discovery of Vishap fragments there, associated with rebirth and life after death. And for centuries the site was known as the center of a cult that lasted well into Armenia's Christian era, the church waging fierce and apparently fruitless battles to wipe out a center of Paganism just 3 km from the Holy See at Vagharshapat, on the main road to the Armenian capital of Dvin.

According to this view, finally, by order of the Catholicos Nerses III (known as "Nerses the Builder" for the number of churches built during his tenure, and the capitation of paganism under his reign), a Christian church was built on the site between 640-662 , and the holy seat of the Armenian Church was transferred there, thereby converting the center of paganism to Christianity.

Inspired by an interpretation of the Apocalypse that predicted the second coming of the Lord when the seven main churches of Christianity came together, Zvartnots was built to be the 'seventh seal of the seventh tier of God's presence on earth'.

At the same time, Armenia had been waging a carefully orchestrated diplomacy between their previous overlords that Achaemenid Persians and
Byzantium, both of which sought control over Armenian lands. The Arabs wiped out the Persian Royal family in their first invasion, leaving only the Byzantines to offer resistance. During the Marzpanate period, the Byzantines had used Armenia as a buffer zone in their fights with Persia, but now that the Persians were gone, and misunderstanding the seriousness of the Arab invasion, the Byzantine emperor Constans II (Constantine Heraclius) chose to ignore warnings and pleas for help from Armenia, instead demanding the Armenians apostatize their monothelitist belief and convert to the Greek Orthodoxy.

Finally, in an attempt to stave off the Arabs, Armenians sued for peace with the Arabs in 652, incurring the wrath and invasion of the Byzantines the same year, who took the capital of Dvin, again demanding a religious union with the Greek church and adoption of the tenets of Chalcedony; namely the acceptance of the "full humanity and full divinity" of Christ, as opposed to the Armenian monothelitist belief that Christ is only divine.

Arab supporters (mainly nakharars who stood to gain from making compact with the Arabs who offered semi-autonomy while the Byzantines demanded complete subservience), took the upper end and forced the Byzantines out, along with the Catholicos, Nerses, who actually favored union with the Greeks. He settled in the village of Ishkhan, where he supervised the construction of a church that became one of the precursors to Zvartnots.

In 652, the Byzantine Roman Emperor Constantine II attended the consecration of the temple, and, impressed by its design and achievement, decreed that a similar church be erected in Constantinople. The church architecture has a direct impact on the dome of St. Sophia in Istanbul, since the master architect for Zvartnots was commissioned to design the dome using the tubular arch system developed at Zvartnots.

The church became known as S. Grigor for the relics of the saint that were housed there. Similar churches in the region, built in the same period were the 7th c Ishkhan (present Turkey) and Liakit (present Azerbaijan), 7th-8th cc Bana (Georgia) and S. Grigor at Ani (ca. 1000).

Its fall is as controversially debated as its construction. According to a 10th c historian, the church lay in ruins in the same century, though no reason was given. Many suggest earthquake as the cause, though its construction technique defies that reason alone for the total collapse of such a well engineered building, one meant to last 1000 years (the projected date of the second coming of Christ).

Excavations uncovered signs of an earlier attempt to destroy the church through fire, possibly by invading Arabs. The fire had the reverse affect of strengthening the joints, firing them into brick.

One thought is that it took the pulling out of strategic key stones in the structure to ultimately weaken the structure. Still, it is believed that it took decades of exposure to natural elements to finally weaken the second tier, which fell in the 10th c (ca. 930).

RECONSTRUCTING THE CHURCH

As with its birth and death, what it actually looked like is also hotly debated in historical circles, with some consensus on the general outline but little else in the details.
The most widely accepted reconstruction was done by an Armenian architect in 1905 (refined in 1942). Toros Toramanian based his design on detailed excavations that painstakingly pulled stones out of the rubble and pieced them together on the grounds, assembling a huge jigsaw puzzle that explained much of the outer walls on the first and part of the second tier, but which failed to tell much about the roofing and the top tier.

Considering what he had to work with were foundations, pieces of vaulting, a few capitals, bases, piers, columns and fragments of relief sculpture, the resulting design is remarkable, its basic layout widely accepted as correct.

Toramanian had some help with excavations done at the same time as Zvartnots, at the Bagratuni capital of Ani (current Turkey). There excavators (including Toramanian) uncovered the foundations, fragments and a model of a later church, S. Grigor, which was built around 1000 for the Bagratuni King Gagik.

The medieval historian Stepanos Asoghiketsi wrote: ‘It was at that time, at the end of the 1000th year of Our Lord’s incarnation, at the time of the Emperor Basil, that Gagik, King of Armenia, was taken with the idea of building in the city of Ani a church similar in size and plan to the great church at Vagharshapat, dedicated to St. Gregory, which was then in ruins.”

Toramanian and his colleagues pieced together a design in 1905 after comparing the finds at Ani with that at Zvartnots, and especially the discovery of a large Model Statue of King Gagik that stood on the east wall of the Ani church.

Statuary like this was common in medieval times, church donors depicted in bas relief figures on the apse wall, holding a model of the church. It should be noted that an actual model of either church was never found, and most modern historians (and tour guides) rest the argument on an artistic rendition done by a Polish artist at the Ani excavation, based on supposition only. Still, enough of both excavations survived to allow Toramanian and his colleagues to make a preliminary reconstruction.

Toramanian’s design was widely disseminated until later excavations (Kuznetsov 1951, Marutunian, 1963; Mnatsakanian, 1959, 1971) refined the design and proposed different roofing and minor details. But by a large excavators agreed on the basic design of the huge building.

According to these men, the church was built in a three tiered circular design, which tapered like a wedding cake to the top. The walls were faceted, with 32 facets on the ground floor, 16 on the second and 8 on the third, the whole thing topped by a tent style or cupped dome.

The roofing over the other floors was either circular as well, or as the second picture on the right suggests, circular on the first floor and tent-roofed over four protruding second story apses and cupped on the top. Each facet had a window, with round windows like those at Ani on the ground floor. Much debate has centered on the type of elevation and form of what may have been the second level, shown by the opposing designs.

What is agreed to is that the interior was a cross, with arches, columns and pendentives supporting elevation and form of what may have been the second and third floors and the dome. The bottom floor was surrounded by a two story gallery (the faceted walls) with closely placed windows letting in light from all directions.

Four massive columns (or pylons) rose from the junction of the semi-circular arms of the cross, with monumental columns behind crowned by eagle crested capitals supporting the circular foundations of the second tier. The third tier was supported by four semi-columns with linking arches, which formed a square shape joined by pendentives (triangular sections of vaulting between the rim of a dome and each adjacent pair of the arches that support it) with the circular dome.

The interior was covered with rich detailing, including relief sculptures, mosaics, architectural detailing and frescoes of the saints, especially on the altar walls.
The church was actually one meter larger when it was first built, due to the use of lime cement that was deliberately laid to compress over time. Over 50-100 years the weight of the stones slowly settled to a much tighter and stronger edifice that was meant to last 1000 years (the predicted time for the coming of the Lord after the joining of the seven churches). On the north was a multi-step stylobate (foundation), which--with the then unheard of size of the church-- gave the entire complex a tremendous sense of grandeur.

The arms of a cross are made by six massive columns erected on a semi-circular plane, the eastern arm (where the elevated altar apse was placed) ending in a blind wall, covered with mosaic and fresco paintings. The ends of the cross created interior apses, the joints between held mighty pylons that supported the drum and dome by means of a series of spherical pendentives. The columns and the inner arcature for the four apses served as buttresses for the second floor, with a likewise series of supports for the third floor.

Placing the altar on the Eastern side of the church alters a tradition handed down by some pagans, which oriented the inner sanctum to the West. On one side of the altar was a stone pulpit with a baptismal font facing it. The vestry room was located immediately behind the altar in the back.

Using an early-medieval central dome design, Zvartnots extended the base to a 37.75 meter diameter circle (note the numbers 3-7-7-5). The church was built in three tiers, with the first and largest housing the congregation. It was girded by a corridor ringing the entire hall. The corridor was lit through the circular windows, one for each facet in the circular outer walls.

The three tiers formed three corridors, or inner circles, where the congregation stood during services. The uninitiated (folks like you and me) were forbidden from entering the inner two circles. Initiated (the baptized, priestly class and the favored aristocrats) were allowed in the second inner circle, while the innermost circle (where the baptismal font was located) was restricted to the most elect.

One of the outstanding features of Zvartnots is the decoration; frescoes covered the walls (especially at the altar) and highly decorative stone carvings were everywhere, incorporating florid designs on the five portals, decorative arcades, capitals of columns, spandrels (with images of the builders in high relief), the surface of facets, edges, window casings and cornices.

The images of the builders are particularly interesting, as they are rare instances of crediting builders other than through their initials or mark. The half-sized figures show the builders holding tools, with initials or names nearby (one says “Ionn” or “John”). Some say these depict the founders instead. In either case, they are a marvel of realistic depiction for the 7th c, showing individual faces, clothing and poses.

On reconstructed columns, you can see original capitals that combine Corinthian and early Armenian Khachkar (Stone Cross) geometric patterns. Among them are interior capitals combining cross hatching with volutes or a cross, each embellished with a letter standing for “Nerses” or “Catholicos”. Other capitals represent the eagle, while outer wall designs contained a continuous rim of grape vines and pomegranate trees with ripe fruit. The plasticity of the carvings established a new level of artistry in Armenia.

Following the tradition of carving Khachkars so that no two are alike, the designs on the facade of the Zvartnots are each a unique creation of the master, some of whom were represented on faceted gargoyles on the church facade.
consisted of four wine-press rooms where grape juice trickled down and along an inclined surface into round stone vats in the next two rooms.

The western wing had two large halls, one of which was the main hall (the "summer hall"), where receptions and conferences were held. The triple nave hall had vaulted ceilings and rows of support columns.

The second, smaller hall was the refectory and throne room, adjoining the main hall to the South. Like palace halls in Dvin and Harich, the Zvartnots hall had wall buttresses to support the vaulted roofing, which separated the walls into arched niches.

Later additions to the south of the throne room included three winery rooms that held square vats for fermenting wine. Each vat held 4,500 thousand liters of wine, with total capacity of 22,000 liters (almost 5,800 gallons). The large jar on display in this area is a copy, but it gives some idea of the size of the jars used to ferment and store wine.

The East Wing included living quarters, service rooms and private quarters, including storage and a bath. The bath was divided into public and private areas (reserved for privileged guests). The bath was similar to the Roman baths at Garni, with hypocaust heating under its tiled floors to heat the rooms in successive stages, from the dressing room to the cold bath, warm bath (tepidarium), a hot or steam bath (caldarium) and a cooling (frigidarium) room.

Adjoining the bath on its south side was a small 5th-6th century chapel, to the south of which was the large wine-press.

There are also some good artifacts on display, including a sun dial with the inscription “Pray to God as He expects”, and an inscription by Nerses III in Greek. A small hall has a large wall display of the church outlines, a great help in understanding ruins.

In front of the museum there is a basalt obelisk of the Urartu king Rusa II (685-675 BCE) with a cuneiform inscription commemorating the construction of a canal from the Hrazdan ("Tisrurün") River.

EXPLORING THE REGION

Most of these trips can be done in a single day by car, depending on how many sites you visit and how long you spend at each stop. Sites in UPPER CASE are considered sites definitely worth a stop, while those in (lower case italics) have value in visiting, but will probably take up more than a day if you include them all in one trip. Bear in mind that no matter how "close" a site seems to be on the map, it may be reached only by a rocky path or pot-hole filled road, and could take 30-45 minutes to get to.

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

TRIP 1: NORTHEAST ARMAVIR

ARGAVAND – (Geghanist) - (Arevashat) - (Baghramian) - (Parakar) - PTGHUNK/MUSALEHR - ZVARTNOTS - (Mrgastan) - (Shahumian) - (Dasht) - AIGESHAT - (Amberd) - (Dogs) - AGHAVNATUN - ARAGATS - (Tsaghkalanj) - (Samagh) - (Haitagh) - (Arshalus) - (Aviator Monument) - (Tsaghkunk) - (Tsialtsan) - (Hovtamech)

Trip 1 explores Northeast Arnavir marz, wedged between the Zvartnots International Airport and Echmiadzin. The region is also home to Zvartnots Cathedral, which everyone tires to see, and a large number of interesting stops most people never see.

This is a real shame, since the northeast has some great stops for the history buff, and tasty vegetables and fruits for the rest, all easily accessible from Yerevan or Echmiadzin. It also has some of the friendliest villagers in the country, thrilled to have visitors come by and proud of their heritage. Most villages were resettled I the 19th century, so memories of the bygone past may be sketchy (interlaced with stories of their "real home" in Western Armenia).

The Northeast has been the vegetable and fruit basket for Armenia for thousands of years, as well as capitalizing on Armenia’s flower craze; the eastern marz has thousands of greenhouses in just about every village’s backyard, growing exotic varieties of roses, lilies and even orchid. Don’t expect to get much of a discount though, locals sell wholesale to tourists at retail prices.

It has only recently started to experience a new purpose, as bedroom communities for the burgeoning capital. Four-story dachas and lavishly decorated houses are springing up between Yerevan and Echmiadzin, and their ostentatious displays of wealth (and outlandish taste) do not always sit well with old-timers, but it is a fact of life (and growing land wealth) for the rest, who seem to take it in stride as they farm their lands in the shadows of their new neighbors.

Stay: Hotels, restaurant-hotels and motels on the (M5) from Yerevan to Echmiadzin, Aknialch and near Armavir; guest houses/apts. in Echmiadzin and Arnavir; village homes (rustic) throughout the marz; Camping at Aknialch and near villages (no forest cover).

Eat: Restaurants & cafes on the (M5), Echmiadzin marz; Camping at Aknalich and near villages (no forest cover).

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, Echmiadzin, Metsamor, and Aknialch.

From Echmiadzin: (S. Hripsimeh), taking the (M5) E for about 11.8 km to the last stop light in Argavand, taking a R (S) for 200 m to the WW II monument at Argavand.

From Yerevan: (Cognc Factory), where the Echmiadzin Highway (M5) begins. From the factory continue about 3 km to the cloverleaf

Armavir Marz: page 52 of 94 - © 2008 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
The village center (200m S of the highway) has an impressive 1413 Tatar Funerary Tower. Attributed to the Kara Koyunlu period, which immediately followed Timur Lenk’s devastating rule, the tower celebrates in Arabic the piousness and humility of an equally ruthless Pir Hussein abn Sa’ad, a local tribal leader who ruled the area during the reign of Pir Budaq and Kara Yussuf, leaders of the Turcoman Kara Koyunlu (Black Sheep) tribe which inherited Timur’s Persian possessions, including Armenia. Pir Budaq shared the throne with his father before his death in 1413.

Tatar like the Timurids and the Mongols before them, the Black Sheep came from Central Asia, and ruled Armenia for about 50 years before being expelled by the Ak Koyunlu, of White Sheep who ruled for about 70 years before being wiped out by Ottomans. Historians are split on the effects of the Black and White Sheep rule, some pointing to treaties between a dying out nakharar regime with Black Sheep leaders as a tentative period of peace (one could not call it prosperity—Timur literally decimated the entire country, and famine was widespread). Others point to the continued loss of lands to Tatar, Kurdish and Turkish tribes, and treatment of Armenian subjects that made some wish for the Mongols instead.

They have not been dated, but some suggest they may be the remnants of a standing stone circle that once stood at the site, since covered over by the tower. Interestingly, on the outer face of the tower there are a few carvings much in the same vein as these smaller ones, and inside, a large khachkar stone with a central ansk (eye-hole) is embedded in one of the walls.

As a side note, the tribes’ names come from the heraldic forms on their battle flags, not from their herding preferences or, being better or worse than the Timurids—in fact, their reign in many ways cemented the splintering of the Armenian lands and the exile of native Armenians from the territory.

The Arabic inscriptions begin with a Sura from the Koran, then exult the virtues of the assumed exhumed, and read:

In the name of Allah gracious and merciful! Allah -- there is no god besides him, alive, real; neither drowsiness nor sleep can seize Him, He owns everything in the Heavens and on the Earth. Who will plead, except with His permission? He knows what was before them and what will be after them, while they perceive nothing from His knowledge other than He wishes. His throne embraces the heavens and the earth, and He is not burdened by guarding them. Indeed Great and High is He.

Ordered to build this blessed tomb (kubba) the greatest, the noblest, abundant in generosity and magnanimity, the support of kings and sultans, refuge for the weak and the poor, guardian of scientists and those who seek knowledge, aid to the poor and wayfarers, the glory of the state and the faith, Emir Pir-Hussein, son of the late absolved Emir elevated to His [Allah’s] patronage, the most merciful Emir Sa’ad, -- may the soil lie light upon him -- in the days of reign of the Great Sultan, the most generous Khakan, the Sultan of Sultans in the East and the West, the aid of the state and the faith, Pir Budaq Khan and Yussuf Noyon, -- in the yard during excavations, some saying medieval like the stones at Ria Taza in Aragatsotn, others saying Bronze Age like other ram head stones found throughout the country.

The tower is a tall 8-sided column that was once topped with a colored ceramic brick dome (assumed to have been blue like the ceramic bricks ringing the upper octahedron). The monuments rest in the center of a small cemetery, and inside there are a number of items found during excavations. They include vase and jar fragments and a number of small stones round on one end with petroglyph carvings on their face; designs resembling Egyptian hieroglyphs or constellations.

As to the first, every yard is taken up by greenhouses that overshadow their front homes and grow the roses, daisies and lilies street vendors charge a fortune for in Yerevan. For the latter, the main highway that fronts the village is taken up by mini-casinos and gambling joints elbowing room with neighboring cheap furniture stores, the den of many a ruined husband trying to win his family’s fortune.

The casinos can be dangerous; according to locals, fights involving knives and guns are more of a common occurrence than the authorities want to admit to. If you really want to try your luck, there are higher end (and relatively quieter) casinos on the E end of Yerevan on the road to Garni, and in the Hrazdan valley north of Yerevan at Ptghni.
From Argavand, continue SW on the main street for about 800 m from the rail bridge to central (Geghanist, DD 40. 14596 x 44.42736, elev. 869m) and to tie strips of cloth to nearby bushes (wishing trees or a “burning bushes”) at the site. In fact, while the village church is venerated in due Christian form, prayers for their Tukh Manuk, women especially who are barren or worried about conception.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Food at (M5) restaurants-cafes, mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

From Arevashat backtrack to Argavand and the (M5) highway, turn L (W) and continue for about 3 km to the church at (Parakar, DD 40.16216 x 44.39787, elev. 864m) and to tie strips of cloth to nearby bushes (wishing trees or a “burning bushes”) at the site. In fact, while the village church is venerated in due Christian form, prayers for their Tukh Manuk, women especially who are barren or worried about conception.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

A basilica, the church has a few remnants of old khachkars on it perimeter, and one in the front portico that is embedded with ceramic pictures of S. Sarkis, the crucifixion and other religious images. This stone is one of the oldest, and may have originally been a vishap or standing stone.

Backtrack to the tower and take the R (SE) road that in about 100m reaches the NE edge of the old cemetery. Almost in its middle are the scant ruins of the 5th c. S. Harutiuun church, surrounded by graves, bushes covered with tied strips of cloth and a couple of ancient stones. An upright stone in front of the makeshift metal altar is either a vishap or phallus, suggesting the pagan origins of this tiny sacred spot.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels situated in-between or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Food at grill stands in the village and restaurants-hotels on the (M5); Springs in the village.

A basilica church (19th century built over ruins of older shrine) and a Tukh Manuk (“Dark Youth”) shrine. The name denotes the color of the skin of this ancient deity that is an amalgam of Sanskrit-Caucasian origins and that is in some traditions a randy blood-thirsty youth that does out pain and favors in equal measure, depending on the sacrifices given. Steeped in the mists of time, the tradition is believed to come from at least the early Bronze Age, when Indo-Iranian and Indo-Aryan (Indo-European) tribes from the Caucasus scattered into Iran, India, Central Asia and the Mediterranean, combining proto-myths and religions into unifying concepts that extend to the present day.

Tukh Manuks are single sanctuaries with one identifying tomb or sacred stone that marks a long-forbidden sacred person or event that occurred at the spot. Converted into Christian shrines in medieval times, the Tukh Manuk never quite lost its pagan blood-thirsty meaning, local villagers continuing to perform matagh (ritual sacrifice) and to tie strips of cloth to nearby bushes (wishing trees or a “burning bushes”) at the site. In fact, while the village church is venerated in due Christian form, villagers often reserve their most fervent prayers for their Tukh Manuk, women especially who are barren or worried about conception.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

Musa Lehr Monument commemorates the heroes of Musa Lehr (also spelled Musa Ler or Musaler; Musa Dagh in Turkish), members of a community of six villages on the small Musa Lehr (Lehr means mountain in Armenian) on the Turkish Coast who chose to refuse Turkish death squad orders to evacuate their mountain during the genocide of 1915. Knowing the fate of their brethren who complied with Turkish orders (up to 2 million were slaughtered or starved to death on force marches led by Turkish and Kurdish forces), the citizens of Musa Lehr chose to resist, building fortifications on the small mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

For 53 days they repelled onslaughts by Turkish troops until French sailors sighted a banner the Armenians had tied to a tree on the mountain emblazoned with the words: “Christians in Distress: Rescue.” French and British naval ships then evacuated some 4,200 men, women and children from Musa Ler to Port Said in Egypt. The Armenians were allowed to return after WWI to their homeland in the newly formed Syria. The people of Musa Ler were soon forced to relocate, after Turkey annexed the region. Many were resettled in Lebanon, in the village Anjar, and distinguished solely for its location next to the Musalehr monument and restaurant complex on its E and a hotel in the village to the south.
many others settled in Armenia, in the village of Musa Ler.

Turkish denial of its complicity in the genocide began early, as Musa Ler shows. When Franz Werfel’s novel about the events, “Forty Days of Musa Dagh”, was published in 1933, it so infuriated the Turkish government that when Hollywood began a film version of the story, the Turkish government pressured the State Department to force MGM Studios to stop production. A filmed version of the story was eventually made independently and was released theatrically in 1982.

The Museum inside the memorial includes historical information and artifacts from the original Musa Ler settlement in present-day Turkey, as well as displays about the community across the highway. The cemetery outside the monument is reserved for descendants of Musa Ler, some of which fought in the 1991-1994 Karabakh War.

Every September descendent of survivors of the Genocide from Musaler in Western Armenia offer traditional Armenian Harisa (porridge) and dance in honor of the heroes of the Battle of Musaler.

OVERNIGHT
There is a HOTEL in Musalehr village, just south of the village taking a S road about 1.5 km west of the Musalehr memorial road. The hotel is a converted private house and caters to locals on trysts or partying, so can be loud, but safe. Basic DBLs with shared and separate baths go for 7,000-15,000 AMD.

FOOD & DRINK
MUSALEHR MONUMENT AND RESTAURANT (tel. 505655) is about 2 km W of Parakar, at the end of the border road to Ptghunk village, on top of a hill. Hugely popular with weddings, birthdays and family celebrations, the restaurant offers spectacular views of the Ararat plain and Mt. Ararat (on velar days), and reasonable prices (2500-5000 AMD for full course meal).

Other overnight in village home (rustic; 4000 AMD for B&B is quite fair, though hard to find); Springs in the village.

From Baghramian backtrack to the (M5), turn R (W) and continue for about 1 km to where the eagle column and metal front gates are on the S side of the highway. From Baghramian, continue W for about 1.8 km to the Echmiadzin (merge L or W) turnoff; stay on the highway bypass (merge R or NW) and continue for about 1.9 km to the first R exit onto a small road that heads N and in about 1.4 km ends at the (Battle of Oshakan Pillar, DD 40.18968 x 44.30868, elev. 891m)

He was made Marshall of the Soviet Union in 1955, one of only 4 Armenians to be awarded this highest position in the army.

Otherwise the village is nondescript, though it has a church and a S. Sarkis Shrine built in 1997.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5) or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Food at kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

For details about Zvartnots complex, see p. 48.

From Zvartnots, continue W for about 1.8 km to the Echmiadzin (merge L or W) turnoff; stay on the highway bypass (merge R or NW) and continue for about 1.9 km to the first R exit onto a small road that heads N and in about 1.4 km ends at the (Battle of Oshakan Pillar, DD 40.18968 x 44.30868, elev. 891m)

On Aug 17, 1827 Russian regiments from Sevastopol and Crimia engaged the Persians at the Battle of Oshakan, fighting in the fields around you. Russian victory broke the blockade and evicted Persian forces from Armavir and then Yerevan, ending with the ceding of all of Eastern Armenia to Russia in the 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchay.

When the Tsar announced his visit to his new domains in 1833, Echmiadzin clergy raised an obelisk at the site of battle in commemoration of the 1131 Russian soldiers who fell during the battle. The current monument was erected later.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotels on the (M5); Camping by the monument (no tree cover, better elsewhere); Food in Echmiadzin.
SIDE TRIP: Mrğastan - Øñ·³ëï³Ý (till 1935 Hajjilar, pop. 500) has an impressive WWII monument on the side of the road as you enter the village, to the R (S).

S. Hovhannes Church is located behind the Culture Center (from the statue, take a R (N) at the school to the center, then two blocks to the culture center, then behind). The triple nave basilica is newly renovated, with new polished tufa stones clapped over the 1912 structure.

Shresh Blur is a Neolithic-Bronze Age Tell and tomb field with stones from Hellenistic and medieval structures that once stood on the site. The blur is really a low brow about 50m N of the side of the road, in a field that covered with tall grass and wildflowers in the Spring and early summer. The field alternates as a marshland in the spring, so watch as you step!

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (no tree cover); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

➡️ From the north edge of Mrğastan, take the N village road that courses north, east, then north and east again for about 1.3 km to a bridge over a canal and immediately after a field on the L (N) with the remains of Shresh Blur on the W end of (Shahumian, DD 40.21056 x 44.29153, elev. 923m)

SIDE TRIP: Shahumian - Þ³ÑáõÙÛ³Ý (till 1935 Mullah Dursun, pop. 450) is surrounded by fertile farmland that has nonetheless failed to sustain the old village—most villagers live in Yerevan or Russia, sending remittances to family members back home.

The village was renamed from its older Tatar name Mullah Dursun to Shahumian in honor of the leader of the 26 Commissars of the 1918 Baku Commune. The commune started the Sovietization of the oil-rich city before being evicted by Dashnaks, arrested by the White Army and imprisoned, liberated by the Red Army, escaped to Krasnovodsk where they were captured again, and finally executed by a firing squad between the stations of Pereval and Akhcha-Kuyma.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (no tree cover); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

➡️ From Shresh Blur, continue E through Shahumian village to the Echmiadzin Road (M3), turn L (N) and continue for about 1 km to the L fork into central (Dasht, DD 40.22831x 44.30170, elev. 936m)

SIDE TRIP: Dasht - ¸³ßï (founded 1926, pop. 400) is located at the top edge of Armavir marz, with rich irrigated fields to the west ("Dasht" means field) and barren land to the right of the Lower Hrazdan Canal.

Villagers who resettled the village were from Western Armenia, and they named much of their surrounding after their homeland, including the tall 1024.1m hill to the NE, which is the site of an important Bronze-Iron Age cyclopean Fortress (DD 40.23756 x 44.30075, elev. 1029m). To get there, take the NE turn to the cemetery at the top of the village and start climbing the hill, heading towards the electric pylons.

Calling the site David Ardar ("David the Just"), locals say they followed a tradition of their ancestors, though none seem to know why. Most point to Sasuntsi Davit, the hero of an 8th century epic poem about the wars against the Egyptians and Arabs (Davit is a demi-god in Armenian literature, battling the forces of evil to save his homeland). The poem is believed to have its origins in the Bronze Age as it uses figures from Armenia’s founding myths.

Whatever, the site is impressive for its size, if there are few structures remaining to show the grandeur of what once was. At the topmost western hill there is what seems at first glance just a pile of rocks, but on closer inspection prove to be stacked in an orderly fashion—these are the remains of a round tower which formed the topmost defense. Once on top, survey the entire valley—all of which was under the watch
of soldiers to the king. Traces of walls can be detected running from this structure, showing the extent of the large space.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (tree cover in orchards, ask first); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

◆ From Dasht, take the western road for about 1 km to the SE edge of AIGESHAT (DD 40.23571 x 44.28924, elev. 947m)

H S (till 1935 Hajighara) is located on the left bank of the Kasakh River, like Dasht with fertile irrigated fields around and arid terrain to the E (the tall eastern hill is the Adar Davit fortress in Dasht v.). The village has had a mixed Armenian/Kurdish population for most of its recent history.

The 7th c Tarkmanchats Vank is located in the NE of the village. From the SE corner (where you arrived), take the eastern edge road about 500 m to an intersection. Left takes you to the center of the village and main square; instead go straight into a narrow street and in about 50m on the L you will see a gate and behind the substantial ruins of the vank. The gate is locked, but an old woman across the street (ask for "Tatik" or 'grandma') has the key.

Tarkmanchats ("Holy Translators") is named for Mesrop Mashtots and Sahak Partev, credited with inventing the new Armenian Alphabet and translating the Bible into Armenian. The adoption of the Mashtots script secured Armenia's cultural identity and independence from Sassanid Persians and Byzantine Greeks who were each trying to subjugate (and assimilate) the Armenian Parthian court.

A supporter of union with the Greek Church, Nerses seems to have added Byzantine forms to Tarkmanchats Church: the layout is a stretched cruciform with the addition of two small protruding apses on either side of the western hall. The result is a "Greek Cross" form that is unique in Armenian churches. The outlines of the small apses are clearly seen in the northern wall foundations.

The church was damaged in the 10th c earthquake that destroyed Zvartnots, but was rebuilt and sacked several times afterwards, finally succumbing to Timurid attacks in the early 15th c and later earthquakes.

The now ruined vank was once a major monastery and center for propagating the new language. Located just 4 km S of Mesrop Mashtots' burial shrine in Oshakan, and 8 km north of the Mother Cathedral in Echmiadzin, Tarkmanchats was a monastery, school and manuscript center.

Built in the mid 7th century, the church was—like Hripsimeh, Guyaneh and Zvartnots—a bastion of civilization in a wilderness of infidels, its outer defense meant to stave off dangerous resistance to the Armenian Church by Arabs and Byzantines alike.

The yard is filled with cemetery stones from the early Christina to medieval periods, and stones from the ruins of the church. There are also a number of ceramic pieces from the medieval period lying about, the results of a 1980s excavation and attempt to rebuild the church.

Backtrack to the central road, turn R (W) and continue for about 200m to the village’s "Red Square", where an impressive WWII monument is set to the R (N), as well as the village mterk.

The interior of this triple-nave basilica has a wonderful example of the thatched roof style used in parish churches in the late medieval period (15th-19th cc). Unable to afford the stone columns and slate roofs used by their forebears (or replacing broken slate roofs), builders opted for wooden supports made from trees imported from Western Armenia or Lori (some being the actual columns used in Western Armenian churches abandoned during forced exile) and an ingenious roofing made from thatched reeds and sod roofs. Each spring, these earthen roofs literally spring to life with grass and wildflowers, adding an enchanting aspect to their design. Sadly, S.
The spot before you (under some trees and surrounded by plowed farmland) is all that remains of a once prosperous monastery, Tovmas Arakeal (The Apostle Thomas). Built sometime in the early Christian period (some trace it to the 9th c, the open air ruins are all that are left of the large triple-nave version of what may have been domed cruciform in the medieval period. All that remain are a stone and earthen entry, submerged walls made from rubble stone and tufa blocks collected from the area, and the eloquent relics of local worship; religious prints, embroidered cloth and plastic bits of Jesus.

The site is peaceful and strangely moving; open to the sky and filled with khachkars and khachkar fragments, pieces of ancient stones, and signs of the faithful.

Continue W and take the first R (N), entering the village. The road naturally curves L (W) to reach the center. On your right is the WWII monument, which has undergone some renovation and additions, adding the portraits and names of Karabakh warriors to those who fell in the Great Patriotic War.

Just beyond and to the L (S), wedged between and behind two buildings are the fragmentary remains of the small triple-nave Poghos Petros basilica, built over a Tukh Manuk in the 19th century in its last incarnation, but showing signs of a much older structure. To the right of the altar there is a small shrine with a gravestone to a now-forgotten saint and a small black khachkar. Locals still burn candles in the outdoor shrine and leave offerings on the stoop.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (Kasakh River, no shade); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

From central Aigeshat, take the western road for about 1 km to a spot on the N side of the road (cross and follow the Kasakh River to just after it bends away and heads W) on the E end of (Amberd, DD 40.23809 x 44.27730, elev. 938m)

SIDE TRIP: Amberd Ամբերդ (in 1978 Frankans, pop. 800) is set just off the Right bank of the Kasakh River, the source of its fertile alluvial soil and countless generations of human settlement on the upper Ararat Plain. The small village is well laid out in the Soviet style, though relics of the past point to a deeper history than the 19th century resettlement by émigrés from Western Armenia.

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The small village overlooks Amberd to the north. The small village is reputedly the site of an important Bagratuni Victory (894) by the forces of Smbat I (the Martyr) Bagratuni over those under the Emir Apshin of At’rapatakan, effectively curtailing Arab control over Bagratuni lands. The victory accelerated the ascent of the Bagratuni clan, ushering in the so-called Second Golden Age, which reached its apogee under Smbat’s heirs Ashot II the Iron (who cemented Bagratuni control by crushing the Arab army in Gegharkunik) and Ashot III the Merciful, who began construction of the Bagratuni capital at Ani. Sadly, nothing of the battle remains, nary a marker to point t his important moment in history.

From Amberd backtrack to the Aigeshat road intersection, cross over and continue S for about 1.2 km to a fork, where the L (SE) fork leads in about 250 m to S. Stepanos in (Doghs, DD 40.22516 x 44.27401, elev. 927m)

SIDE TRIP: Doghs - Դողս (pop. 600) overlooks the Kasakh River, sharing farming fields with its neighbor Amberd to the north. The small village was an important settlement in prehistory, judging by the number of petroglyphs, some trace it to the 9th c, the open air ruins are all that are left of the large triple-nave version of what may have been domed cruciform in the medieval period. All that remain are a stone and earthen entry, submerged walls made from rubble stone and tufa blocks collected from the area, and the eloquent relics of local worship; religious prints, embroidered cloth and plastic bits of Jesus.

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Just beyond and to the L (S), wedged between and behind two buildings are the fragmentary remains of the small triple-nave Poghos Petros basilica, built over a Tukh Manuk in the 19th century in its last incarnation, but showing signs of a much older structure. To the right of the altar there is a small shrine with a gravestone to a now-forgotten saint and a small black khachkar. Locals still burn candles in the outdoor shrine and leave offerings on the stoop.

Overnight in Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 5000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (Kasakh River, no shade); Food at mterks or kiosks in the village; Springs in the village.

From central Doghs take the W road for about 2 km to central AGHAVNATUN (DD 40.23011 x 44.25053, elev. 921m)

SIDE TRIP: AGHAVNATUN - Ագհավնատուն (pop. 1000) was an important settlement in prehistory, judging by the number of prehistoric artifacts found in and around the village. The huge tufa quarry W of the village was once covered with hundreds of Paleolithic-Bronze Age petroglyphs, most sadly cut away by quarry owners in a hurry to make a buck off the construction boom in Yerevan. Only in Armenia can you find 12,000 years of history sliced away with such abandon.

The village must have been a major settlement and religious center, judging by the large number of prehistoric structures and shrines found here. These include two Tukh Manuks, a 4th-10th century domed hall church and a 7th-14th cruciform church (both built on the foundations of pagan temples), Bronze Age tomb stones in the cemetery, a round tower to the north and a petroglyph field outside the village. There is also an Arabic "Gumbaz" or honey-comb tomb from the medieval period.
Quarry Petroglyphs
The stone quarry may provide jobs for locals, but it unfortunately also means the destruction of the village's 12,000 year history: the quarry is the site of important Paleolithic, chalcolithic (Copper) and early Bronze Age petroglyphs, most of which have been sliced away to create blocks for buildings in the “New Yerevan”.

There are almost no traces left of the hundreds that once adorned the tufa mounds around you. Aghavnatun’s petroglyphs, see Resources Online, p. 92.

Continue N and NE through the quarry, following dusty trails used by trucks and earth moving equipment; skirt around the field office and look for a dirt path that heads to the NW (ask at field office). The road rises to the base of a sharply rising hill, crowned by a rough stone round tower.

Round Tower (DD 40.25754 x 44.22110, elev. 1050m) is located about 6 NW of the village (7 as the rough roads course). The tower is made from stacked stone, some pieces quite large. It has one narrow entrance that requires scrambling over fallen stone slabs and stooping to get through—a great defensive design forcing all who enter to drop their weapons and bend over.

The tower is undated, but in good shape, suggesting to some it is not as old as its assumed origin in the late Bronze or Iron Age. Towers like this were common in the Urartian period; outposts and relay stations for communicating with the capital of Tushpa some 265 km to the S.

The small shrine is what is left of a once substantial church and monastery community, the trace remains of which line the side of the yard to the S of the current shrine. A small praecinctly tomb, plastered over in gray with white trim and a corrugated asbestos roof. The tiny space is nonetheless ancient, with its telltale gravestone features in the eastern altar, decorated with religious prints and offerings.

From the cemetery, take the deteriorating road that skirts the cemetery on its E side northwards and across the Hrazdan canal, taking the next L dirt path that skirts orchards and fields for a km or so before turning sharply R (N), skirting the same fields as it wends its way to a stone cutting complex. Navigate through the complex to the old Quarry road (ask for the “old stone tower” - hin sh'ranadzev Ashtarak’). From there you pass through the old quarry, site of important petroglyphs.

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perimeters of the yard and you can also detect the outline of the inner walls that run the sanctuary.

Located in the midst of fertile alluvial land that springs to life with a little water, the monastery at Karmravor is believed to have been first built in the 7th century, during the religious revival initiated by Nerses III the Builder, who tried to join the Armenian Church with the Greek Orthodox as a defense against marauding Arabs and rebellion in his own Nakharar corps.

The name comes from its original (lost) structure, which used red tufa (“Karmravor” = red in color). A couple of columns from the old structure lie in the grass near the current plastered structure. There is a “burning bush” south of the shrine, with torn bits of cloth tied to it branches; wishing totems from the faithful.

The current open-air building is quite large, with 7th-10th century khachkars embedded in its walls. There is also an interesting stone altar panel in the main apse, which was painted. The church is otherwise undecorated, though it was plastered and white washed in its day. The roof collapse in the 20th century, and locals wait for the church in Echmiadzin to cough up the funds to renovate the building.

The gumbaz is a unique funerary tomb favored by Turcoman and Kurdish tribes, while borrowing its form from the Zoroastrian “towers of silence”. The most famous Gumbaz is the Gol Gumbaz in India, which has the largest unsupported domed space in the world. Aghavnavatun’s more humble version has space enough for three, the caskets for which are now gone.

Finely made from carefully carved tufa. The building is nonetheless slipshod in its details, with a simple graphic on the arched stone over the entry (which same stone was taken from an early Christian or Hellenistic temple at the site), and a bare carving of a horseman warrior on the inner wall. Another stone inside the chamber has an ansk (eye-hole) showing its Bronze Age origins as part of an astronomical observatory—wherefrom is anyone’s guess, though considering the other prehistoric sites nearby it may have come from around the village.

Backtrack to the village, and at the fork you used to get to Karmravor, now turn R (S) and in about 50 m you reach the substantial walls of the 10th c S. Gevorg basilica.

The current building is an 18th-19th century renovation of a much older building. Its triple-nave basilica form closely follows the outline of its 10th century version, which was totally destroyed during late medieval raids and earthquakes. It in turn is thought to have been an enlarged version of an early Christian building that had its origins in the pagan era.

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Backtrack to the road fork, now turn L (S) on the SW road exiting the village and in about 400 m on a low hill on the R (W) side of the road are the remains of the 9th-14th cc Tsiranavor church.

Tsiranavor is set on a triangular promontory that forms a natural defense on the S and W approach to the village. Traces from the Bronze Age suggest the site was both military and religious in origin. As you approach the site from the north, you pass a smooth stones with “posner” (hollowed out cup-holes) in them.

These are exactly like those found at Bronze Age sites found throughout the country including Metsamor in Arnavir marz and Agarak just N of Aghavnavatun. The holes are thought to have been used to extract liquids, part of the reduction process in the refinement of metal, and as they cover large areas of rock, as star maps. These were probably used to reduce liquids or as holders in production of some sort, though they may have been parts of small altars.

In springtime the site is covered with bright white, yellow and red wild flowers with deep green undercover, lending a surreal effect to the ragged tops of the eastern apse and northern walls that make up the current building. The black tufa walls on the outer edges of the hill are believed to have been placed in the late Bronze or early Iron Age.

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The tiny church was a domed cruciform type with a squared western wall. Uniquely, entry is from the north, with two worn columns marking the doorway. The altar space is decorated with a few religious items, but is mostly bereft of offerings, like its brother church S. Gevorg. Instead, villagers seem to prefer the two Tukh Manuks, which are covered with religious offerings and artwork.

Outside the church there are few khachkars, including one fine sample made from orange tufa. It is judged to be 14th century, though the artwork suggests it borrows heavily from early Christian iconography.

From Aghavnatun (Tsiranavor) continue SW for about 1.5 km to central ARAGATS (DD 40.21730 x 44.23236, elev. 905m).

ARAGATS - ԱՐԱՐԱՏ (Արարատ) (pop. 1200) is on the left bank of the Lower Hrazdan canal, the lifeline of its agricultural endeavors, which stretch east and south of the village. Due to its population drop in the late 1990s, the western foothills are no longer cultivated, which provides a stark contrast in dry months between the green farm fields and orchards and the desert scrub to the west.

Just W of the village’s “Red Square” are the remains of S. Stepanos (DD 40.21712 x 44.23183, elev. 922m), its 1870 dating pointing to a complete reconstruction that totally obscured the older medieval structure. Used for storage in Soviet times, most of the thatch and earthen roof is now missing, though enough remains to show how it worked. The roof still sprouts with grass and wildflowers each spring, turning to a burnt umber by summer.

The large building is triple nave, made from finely cut and polished basalt stone that was plastered on the inside with painted texture and a stenciled blue pattern on the inside walls. Evocatively, a sapling grows in the center of the hall and the slate floor is covered with a thin layer of earth; grass sprouts in the cracks in the sanctuary floor. The support columns and roof trusses are massive; locals say they were imported from Western Armenia when the villagers first arrived.

The well preserved ruins of an Urartian Fortress (DD 40.21262 x 44.22468, elev. 918m) is in the SW corner of the village, in a place called “Halaju”. To get there, as you face the multi-story building NW of the center “square” take a L (NW) and then an immediate L (SW) behind the marzapet office onto a long street. Take the 1st R (NW) and 2nd L (SW) onto a street that leads into the orchards. The road peters into a path; take the path for about 50 m to the ruins.

The fortress-settlement was built over Bronze Age foundations, using the original stones to create outer walls, house foundations and streets. It is possible to trace the entire citadel, which foundations are well preserved and excavated, including a couple of subterranean rooms.

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); Springs in the village.

The village has an impressive WWII monument (DD 40.21883 x 44.22821, elev. 934m), set above the canal to the west. Ask for the best way to get to the monument—the western village is a web of meandering alleys and dead ends. It is worth it; for both the huge monument, the goddess Victory holding both a shield and an olive branch in a demure but defiant pose. The garden in front is lined with trees, and the view from the monument is spectacular—you can see the entire Echmiadzin plain including the mother cathedral and in the distance, Mt. Ararat.
Located in the western side of the cemetery is a small “shed” that covers a tiny but locally important Tukh Manuk, the so-called S. Gevorg church. The building has a large black marble slab advertising a local who paid for the renovation (and which probably cost more than the renovation itself).

Inside, the rough tufa walls and tin roof cover an earth floor and one lower foundation of the original structure, or what appears to be a foundation (it may be a Bronze Age grave slab). There is small khachkar in the center of the highly decorated interior.

The cemetery served countless generations of inhabitants, with an equal amount of historic layers. Neolithic, Bronze Age and Hellenistic artifacts can be found below medieval remains and modern graves. Little of it has been excavated for obvious reasons (who wants to dig up the bones of the recent dead just to see the bones of the ancient deceased?).

By turning L (W) at the north edge of the village you will reach the cemetery which is the oldest part of the village, and location for most of the sites.

SIDE TRIP: Samaghar -  urlparse(40.18509 x 44.24376, elev. 888m), which is reached by turning L (E) at the point you arrived at in the directions above, and stopping just over half way down the long block. The church is on the R, behind a house. Its roof can be seen between the house and its neighbor.

S. Harutun is a triple nave basilica which was first mentioned in 13th century chronicles. The current building dates to the 19th century, using stones from the original structure and replacing the roof. The whole is handsomely covered with plaster with brickwork framing the windows and the main portal. The brickwork may be medieval; it shows a distinctive Persian style.

The large chamber has a few rows of benches in the front, the rest empty. The roof is new, and beautifully done. It is protected by a second roof of corrugated asbestos roofing.

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in the village.

The interior is massive for a village church, suggesting a very large parish at one time, or the hubris of building too big. Still, it is one of the tidiest and prettiest I have visited in Armenia. The altar is whitewashed with carvings and the altar has a nice painting of the Madonna and child.
From Samaghar take the SW road for about 850m to a 3-way intersection in (Haitagh, DD 40.18206 x 44.23411, elev. 887m). To get there, go east on the main street from the square two blocks and turn R; the church is half a block S. The large church was erected 1903-1909, using black tufa blocks. The handsome building is locked and the neighbor with the key is not easily found—plan on waiting a bit before they find her.

The village has a S. Astvatsatsin church just east of the center (DD 40.16858 x 44.21630, elev. 873m). To get there, go east on the main street from the square two blocks and turn R; the church is half a block S. The church was erected 1903-1909, using black tufa blocks. The handsome building is locked and the neighbor with the key is not easily found—plan on waiting a bit before they find her.

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); Springs in the village.

From central Haitagh take the main road S and SW for about 2.5 km to central (Arshaluis, DD 40.16882 x 44.21315, elev. 861m). To get there, go east on the main street from the square two blocks and turn R; the church is half a block S. The church was erected 1903-1909, using black tufa blocks. The handsome building is locked and the neighbor with the key is not easily found—plan on waiting a bit before they find her.

The village has a S. Astvatsatsin church just east of the center (DD 40.16858 x 44.21630, elev. 873m). To get there, go east on the main street from the square two blocks and turn R; the church is half a block S. The church was erected 1903-1909, using black tufa blocks. The handsome building is locked and the neighbor with the key is not easily found—plan on waiting a bit before they find her.

The first shrine is in the best preserved building, and consists of an apse from the old vank with a large sacred stone in the center. The shrine—like that at Tsaghkalanj—is a museum of primitive religious art: embroidery, carvings, religious prints, painting and drawings crowd the walls and are draped over the sacred stones.

The second shrine is about 50m S of the first, and is more primitive on the outside, but just as stocked with religious offerings and artwork as the first. We are told that the Sunday after Easter and the August feast day of the Assumption, the shrines are filled with thousands of locals who visit the site seeking special intercession.

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); Springs in the village.

Back to the square, there are the bare suggestions of foundations for an old fort that sat behind the monument, easy to miss unless you know what to look for; long depressions in the ground.

The crash was more or less expected as authorities’ ability to cope with the horrific destruction collapsed, and bungling bureaucratic operations stymied efforts to deliver aid. Zvartnots was packed with transport planes from 46 countries trying to deliver aid, the largest such effort since WWII. The crash came a day after a Soviet military transport plane crashed at Leninakan (Giumri) airport, killing 9 crew members and 69 military personnel sent to aid in rescue work.

The monument was built from the remains of the airplane, and has the names and portraits of the aviators, plus words of gratitude from the Armenian people.

Backtrack to the (M5), turn R (E) and continue for about 3.7 km to the (Yugoslav Aviator Monument, DD 40.16611 x 44.25707, elev. 881m) .

SIDE TRIP: Yugoslav Aviator Monument - Ñàìñèìåíèå ñîìíîñòâàõëîæíîìîâèòåëåíèå 7 Ýîãëîâèàöèîâ äâèñèòåò îòèñü ñîòðèìåíèå â Ñàìíâåòëåêà âðåìåíèå â÷åñòâà 1988 ãðàíèè Òèïòêèòêîêîãî èçâîêîêà. Åñòü ìîòàéíîìèðîâàííî �ernetíûå ëèøøè, öèôåðàöèàòåëüíûå éíòðèìîê ñëåéñòâû îòèñü ïîîòèëîãèè íà âðåìåíèå Êàðìèíàëèçà, ãîâîçíèêàòèñü íà êîíñìåéíèè è íà êîíñìåéíèè Ïåðèíêàìà.
About 50 m behind the monument is a small mound, "Tasghkunk" or Mkhitapa Neolithic tell, with hundreds of pottery shards littering the ground. The tell is topped by a square tufa building, which is used as a Tukh Manuk, with appropriate sacred stone, religious art and burnt candles.

Continue E on the (M5) for about 2 km to the Tsaghkunk overpass exit, turn L (NW) and continue for about 1 km to central (Tsaghkunk, DD 40.17753 x 44.26940, elev. 880m)

SIDE TRIP: Tsaghkunk - Duqunjalg (till 1946 Abdurahman, pop. 600) is a suburb of Echmiadzin, its villagers farming the surrounding alluvial plain.

In the village center there is a small fenced in park with a now closed café, some benches and a headless Lenin statue. The statue shows Lenin in his famous pose pointing to the future. The villagers tried to destroy the statue in the heady days of the Soviet collapse, but finding the statue a bit too strong for hoes and hammers, they settled for decapitating the body and leaving the statue to the elements.

OVERNIGHT GOLDEN CITY HOTEL COMPLEX, Tsagghkunk Village (Echmiadzin Hwy), tel. 0231-56688, cell: 094-556688, email: goldencityhotel@yahoo.com, opened in late 2007. Amenities include heating, a/c, Internet connection (suites) and sauna. Largest suite can sleep up to 6 people. Prices are per room with SGL/DBL/STE at 8700-10,000/12,000-25,000/25,000-40,000 AMD.

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); Springs in the village.

Back at the small park on the W end of the village, there is a metal plaque commemorating local guardsmen from Tsatsin who fought against Turkish forces during the battles of Sardarapat and Arshaluis, keeping the front against Turkish attempts to break through to Yerevan. Their efforts—along with those of countless individuals from Yerevan and surrounding villages—routed the Turkish invasion of Eastern Armenia (decisively so after the battles of Karakilisa (Vanadzor) and Bash-Aparan), leading to Armenia’s declaration of independence on May 28, 1918. The plaque loosely translates:

“Here in 1918 was organized a group of 200 fighters led by Hovhannes Ter-Mkrchian. This group fought on the front lines at the battles of Sardarapat May 22 and Arshaluis on June 15.” --Dept. for the Preservation of Historic Monuments

Interestingly, there is no record in the history books of a second battle at Arshaluis, but, though the Turks were routed at Sardarapat, Karakilisa and Bash Aparan, they did not stop their attacks, and they had overrun the area when the treaty of Batum was signed in June 1918, returning Eastern Armenia only while losing WWI with the Armistice of Mudros was signed on October 30.

The village has a 19th century Astvatsatsin, uniquely built combining tufa blocks in its lower courses with thin slabs of tufa and bricks in the upper walls. The construction speaks to combining materials of different ages, and the church is in the oldest part of the village. The roof is missing its outer layer but the under trusses, columns and thatching are still in good shape.

From central Tsaghkunk take the NW road for about 800m to the edge of Hovtamech village and a R (NE) road that leads in about 500m and past the Aghavanatun road into central (Tsatsin, DD 40.18682 x 44.26406, elev. 885m)

SIDE TRIP: Tsatsin - Djwubul (till 1978 Gerampa, pop. 600), which name means "Rainbow", has the bare ruins of the 18th-19th c triple nave Astvatsatsin basilica (DD 40.18979 x 44.26819, elev. 896) in its far NE end (Take a R (E) at the triangle park at the village entry, 2nd L (N), immediate R (E), follow to the last street, L (N) then 3/4s N. The ruins are off an alley to R (E)

Overnight at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5), Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); Springs in the village.

SIDE TRIP: Hovtamech - Ajiqnulj (once Mughanjik, pop. 700) has one of the most interesting churches in the region; a massive triple-nave basilica made from brick and slab stone.

Backtrack to the Hovtamech-Tsaghkunk road, tun R (W) and go about 300m to central (Hovtamech, DD 40.18386 x 44.25947, elev. 884m)
Located a half-block N of the village center, the church ruins—with a missing roof and deteriorating walls—is still one of the most evocative buildings in the marz. Perhaps it is its extraordinary construction of slabs and brick plastered over with mud-based plaster, or the window frames that hang suspended in time, open, closed, closed, open; or maybe it is the artifacts that strew the inner landscape, the acoustic jars once set into the walls and filled with sand to muffle the echo bounce in the cavernous space, but which now lie precariously exposed in the uppermost walls.

The jars are an ingenious invention, inherited from Hellenistic temple traditions (Greek oracles used a temple’s acoustics to “whisper god’s breath” and jars filled with water or sand to control vocal projection goes back to temples in Egypt and Mycenae) and it was refined to great degree in Armenian churches. Through trial and error, sand was poured or emptied from the jars (which were set with their mouths facing the sanctuary), until the desired balance was reached. A couple of jars can be seen buried in the rubble at the top of the SW wall.

It may be just seeing it on a cloudy spring day with wildflowers springing from crevices and the sky’s mood matching the forlorn piles of rock, wood and earth that once mightily called itself a house of God. Whatever, this building stands with austere, broken spirit in a landscape of neglect, a ruin of memories and pride.

The church is slated to be renovated in the next few years (locals who made good in Russia as donors), which will shore up the walls and re-roof the building, but in all likelihood erase its unique character. This is probably the last place you will put on your list of things to see in Armenia, but try to make time to see it anyway. And pick a cloudy, moody, spring day, when the buds of May shiver under the gray sky.

**Overnight** at Yerevan, Echmiadzin, hotel-restaurants on the (M5). Oshakan-Ashtarak or in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in near the village (orchard or no shade, ask); **Springs** in the village.

**END OF TRIP 1**
inhabitants were among the first to forge copper and bronze; and are the first recorded to discover the properties of and successfully smelt iron.

As Mesopotamian empires rose, they referred to a rival power to the North, in the "Land where the Mountains of the gods live"; a land rich in bronze, gold and precious stones.

The metal ore mined in this area was among of the purest in the world, and the natives shaped their culture around it. They believed the technique for forging metal was given to them from the heavens, and they became the first recorded astronomers: they are earliest recorded to have accepted by western archeologists who are not convinced as their Armenian counterparts to let you pass. We include the sites in the hopes that the border restrictions will relax while this book is still in print. Forewarned is forearmed.

**Stay:** Restaurants/Hotels & Motels on the (M5), Armavir and Aknalich; guest houses/apts. in Echmiadzin and Armavir; village homes (rustic); camping near villages and Metsamor excavation (no tree cover).

**EAT:** Restaurants & cafes on the (M5), Armavir, Aknalich, Sardarapat; mtners and kiosks in Armavir and villages.

**Springs:** freshwater cold springs at villages, Metsamor excavation.

**SIDE TRIP:** Teghut - Stghn - is a Copper-Early Bronze Age settlement dated between 8000-4000 BCE, depending on the science involved. The metal objects found at the site have suggested the culture Teghut belongs to may be older (the so-called Shulaveri-Shomu culture) than that accepted by western archeologists who are not active in the area and rely on old data for refuting the claim with comments that frankly smack of cultural racism. The site is covered over, but after rainfalls, trace shards and object appear on the slope.

Note: The sites are cultural treasures: they are one of a kind, priceless because of their rarity and age, and unique in the history of the world. Don't muck them up. It is strictly forbidden to carry any object from the site away, including shards or fragments of pottery and stone. Count yourself very lucky you can touch them and feel the history, but put them back. You wouldn't take a chunk of the Parthenon as a souvenir, and (most of) you wouldn't cart off a Khachkar, so leave this part of history in its place too, and let others see how important Armenia's contribution to world history is.

The sites at Yervandashat and Bagaran are both on the border with Turkey, and off-limits to the casual visitor. Special permission and escort is required to gain entry. This permission is hard to get even if you are well connected (and impossible if you are not). Russian border guards are not as easy to convince as their Armenian counterparts to let you pass. We include the sites in the hopes that the border restrictions will relax while this book is still in print. Forewarned is forearmed.
they can still find intact perfume flasks and pottery loosened from the soil.

A. As you walk up towards the gate, you will pass a small swamp ("jahidj" duhuh), fed by spring water. This is what remains of the marshland that spread out in all directions around Mokhrablur 6-8000 years ago. The marshland formed an excellent natural protective barrier, as well as a reliable source of drinking water. The excavation site itself is the fortified center of the town. It served as the religious and military stronghold for the city. As in other cities of the era, townspople lived outside the main walls. The entire city stretched to the edge of the village behind you, holding up to 10,000 inhabitants (which was a large city in those days).

B. As you walk up the hill from the gate, look towards your left at the top of the hill, and you can see an outline of a cyclopic wall ("pahrisp" uñçuñçu) that encircled the central fortified citadel in the 4th-3rd millennia. The wall was made from foundations of blocks of stone averaging 1-2 tons each. These stones were dug to Mokhrablur from sources 10-20 kilometers away. There is some thought that the stones might actually be the middle level of an older wall. Since excavation stopped before they could complete uncovering layers, the actual age of the city is possible another 1000 years older. If so, these stones were either drug on sleds from unheard of distances at that time, or--using a relic the excavators found at the lower levels of the dig as a sign--they were among the first to use the wheel. Unfired mud brick was used to complete the walls above the stone foundations, which accounts for the current mound shape of the site.

At the top of the mound you will arrive on a large flat area with a series of holes in it. These are the actual digs.

C. The first pit on your right is shallow. You can see fired brick ("Aghius" uñçuñçu) forming the top of an interior wall in a building constructed around 4000 BCE. The rooms uncovered at Mokhrablur were not large or high. Skeletons uncovered in the area show that the average height of inhabitants was 4-½ feet (1.35 m). All about you are fragments of pottery, in different colors. The black unglazed pottery is among the first of its kind discovered in the ancient world. It and red pottery come from the earliest layers uncovered, ca. 6000-4000 BCE.

D. Next to the brick wall is an extension of the same building, but it is divided into two smaller rooms. The pottery found here suggested it was a living quarters.

E. On the other side of the hilltop is a very large pit. This is where the bulk of the excavation occurred. All along the slopes of this pit rain continues to wash free both intact and fragments of pottery. Though 20 feet deep, it is not bottom most layer of the site, as can be seen by comparing it with the surrounding landscape. If excavation resumes, it may well discover origins closer to the Mesolithic Period, just after the 13,600 BCE great flood that covered this part of the world.

F. There is an indentation on the far side of the pit. This is where the excavators discovered 12 intact levels of the city, and located most of the archeological finds. While we were visiting, our host scoured around and found from the central strata (3rd millennium BCE) of the excavation wall a perfume flask, the bottom of a large earthen hearth, and pieces of a beautiful green stone the inhabitants used to create jewelry from. This stone is not native to these parts, or present day Armenia. They are commonly found in the Sinai, which may be the source of the stones at Mokhrablur.

G. Next to the indentation is a section of the pit where archeologists discovered at one of the middle strata signs of a sudden and violent destruction: there were hundreds of human skeletal remains, heaped in piles by the cyclopic wall defenses, the pottery and metal implements charred by fire. Skulls showed that many of the people had been killed by head blows inflicted by heavy weapons, their position along the wall suggest they were either trapped, or herded together and killed en masse.

It is at this strata where most of the jewelry and precious items were discovered, indicating that whoever destroyed the city did not bother to raid it before burning it down. The middle strata of excavation is the late 3rd to early 2nd millennium BCE, and corresponds with the huge migration of Indo-Europeans into Asia Minor. An hypothesis has been made that these charred bones and pottery are all that remain of the last non Indo European group to inhabit the area; all layers above this charred one show pottery designs and inscriptions like those used in Anatolia, by Indo-European speaking people (remember that Armenian is an Indo-European language).

H. The most unique feature of the excavation lies at the bottom of the pit: a 10-ton solid block of pure basalt, cut in the form of a rectangle column. The column is lying on its side, but was originally up right. Archeologists are unsure what its purpose was, and there are no inscriptions on its polished sides to give clues. Standing upright it would be as high as at the top of the present mound, which suggests it was a freestanding column in an open courtyard. The engineering feat of hand cutting and polishing a ten ton piece of stone 6000 years before our time is one thing to contemplate. 6000 years ago they had not yet discovered the use of iron, and copper was a poor substance for cutting stone. They had to use stone tools to wedge the piece free from its source, and special polishing stones to create the smooth surface.

The real feat was in how it got there at all: the nearest sources of that type of basalt are in Mount Aragats or Mount Ararat. It is 30 kilometers to the nearer of the two. Even using wheels, they would have had to build up a roadbed through the marshland to get it there. One can only gaze and wonder what the need was to place a mammoth block of basalt in the center of a marshland, in a fortified citadel, in a city of 10,000 people. Basalt is a mineral rich lava rock, and this stone is closely tied to the metal industry in the Metsamor Kingdom. It is thought that the volcanic properties (molten fire) of the stone was considered a talisman against evil. The huge stone column may have
been a protective idol worshipped by the inhabitants.

I. The large round concrete building by the large pit was built by a now defunct cooperative farm nearby. It is contemporary, but it covers a spring that is located within the walls of the citadel, a source of sweet water during times of siege.

The site is highest nearest the river, and has been eroded by the relentless movement of the river waters. The excavation began about the same time as Mokhrablur and ended in 1988, due to lack of funds (or as the director of Metsamor will tell you, it ended because Armenian archeologists were discovering too much that rivaled the official Soviet line on each ethnic group being no more equal than the others).

A. As soon as you cross the small bridge at the site, you will be entering the territory of Adablur. About 50 meters beyond are the remains of carvings done by the inhabitants of the site. Of the center hole, each point in the pentagon possibly standing for one of the five known planets at that time, the central space representing the known gods: from the top of the highest mound at the excavation, you are in a perfect line between Aragats and Ararat.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping in the area (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From the NW edge of Vacheh continue NW for about 2.9 km to the Aratashen road intersection in central Khorum (before Lenugh, 1880 S. N’Shan church), turn L. (W) and go for another 1.9 km and out of Khorum to the bridge over the Kasakh River at ARATASHEN and the ADABLUR EXCAVATION

Aratashen - Արատաշեն (Արատաշեն) excavation which straddles the Kasakh River S of the village bridge. There is a café/shop just past the bridge where you can get pretty good fare for about 1000-1500 AMD. The N dirt path immediately W of the bridge takes you to Adablur (which you can see from the bridge: A collection of low mounds about 800 meters from the bridge). Drive/walk north on the dirt path 700 meters, and stop at the metal bridge over a diverted river channel. Adablur will be on your right, about 100 meters NE.

Guide: Adablur is not a working excavation and it has no museum. The site is simple enough there is no need for a guide, but if you want to talk to a local who knows a few facts, ask for Vartan Terterian, who lives in the village, on the street just past the Kasakh river bridge, 5th house on your right.

Background

Adablur is an open-air excavation of a city straddling the Kasakh river (ca. 5000-3000 BCE). What remains of the site of Adablur are the outlines of the city walls, excavated rooms and buildings, and fragments of pottery and obsidian shavings. The river has shifted over millennia, dividing the once unified city into two sub-sites. On the edge of Aratashen Village, Adablur sits in a direct path between the ancient homes of the...
door. It is not until the Early Iron Age that Metsamor took full advantage of the high-grade iron ore it had been selling to others.

The observatory predates all other known observatories in the ancient world—who that is, observatories that geometrically divided the heavens into constellations and assigned fixed positions and symbolic design. Until the discovery of Metsamor it had been widely accepted that the Babylonians were the first astronomers. The observatory at Metsamor predates the Babylonian kingdom by 2000 years, and contains the first recorded example of dividing the year into 12 sections. Using an early form of geometry, the inhabitants of Metsamor were able to create both a calendar and envision the curve of the earth.

Metsamor River provided both transportation and means of navigating the river. From the hill, you can clearly see the bend of the river and the way it has changed its course over time. From circling the citadel, it now winds on the east side of the mound, and cuts through its center. The citadel was roughly twice its current size. Vartan told us that when the spring river swells, it washes more layers from the site, and reveals more obsidian, pottery fragments and bones.

They have yet to find the pot of gold reputed to be buried in the area. Pot of gold?! Well, every site has to have some mystery about it. It seems the villagers think there are more treasures to be found under the mound. Who knows? Maybe you’ll be the lucky one to find it (and then turn it over to the archeology department, right?)

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

From Aratashen, continue W on the main road out of the village for about 3.8 km to the far west side of the next village, TARONIK/METSAMOR EXCAVATION (DD 40.13252 x 44.19812, elev. 849m). The complex you are in was a large urban settlement which occupied an area of 10.5 hectares and consisted of a citadel within the inner metropolis in the Bronze Age. Nearby spring-fed marshes and lakes suggest the extent of the wildlife that covered the area up to the bases of Mount Aragats and Ararat. The area was rich in water, mineral and hunting resources at the time of the development of Metsamor. The nearby Metsamor River provided both transportation and the first irrigation source recorded in Armenia.

Excavations began at Metsamor in 1965 and have shown strata of occupancy going back to the Neolithic period (7,000–5,000 BCE), but the most outstanding features of the site were constructed during the early, middle and late Bronze Ages (4000–2,000 BCE). Inscriptions found within the excavation go back as far as the Neolithic period, and a sophisticated pictograph form of writing was developed as early as 2000–1800 BCE. The “Metsamor Inscriptions” have a likeness to later scripts, including the Mashtots’ alphabet. The excavation has uncovered a large metal industry, including a foundry with 2 kinds of blast furnaces (brick and in-ground). Metal processing at Metsamor was among the most sophisticated of its kind at that time: the foundry extracted and processed high-grade gold, copper, several types of bronze, manganese, zinc, strychnine, mercury and iron. Metsamor’s processed metal was coveted by all nearby cultures, and found its way to Egypt, Central Asia and China. The iron smelting process was not advanced in Metsamor, probably due to the vast quantities of pure bronze alloys at hand, and Metsamor primarily mined and sold iron ore to neighboring cultures which took better advantage of its properties. One of the early examples of R&D not getting past the lab
During the Middle Bronze Period (late 3rd to mid 2nd millennium BCE) there was a surge of urban growth and a development of complex architectural forms which extended the boundaries of the settlement to the area below the hill. Basically, that area within the inner cyclopic walls are the older city and that beyond represent newer areas. By the 11th c. BCE the central city occupied the lowlands stretching to Lake Akna, and covered 100 hectares (247 acres).

About 500 meters southeast of the citadel is the location of the traditional necropolis (town dwellings), which covered an additional 100 hectares of land. With a population of 50,000, Metsamor rivaled in size the largest cities in the world at that time.

Another 70-80 hectares (170-200 acres) next to the Necropolis comprises the main burial site, where thousands of people were buried in simple graves and large burial mounds. Once uncovered, these graves revealed an underlying layer of crushed-stone which further revealed large mausoleums built from red tufa, encircled by a series of cromlechs (monoliths of arched stone). What the excavators uncovered in the process was both a history of Metsamor’s burial rituals and a concern for hiding wealthy tombs. Like the Pharaohs buried in the Valley of the Kings, Metsamor’s rulers tried to thwart grave robbers by hiding the locations of royal tombs. Fortunately the grave robbers at Metsamor were not as lucky as those in Egypt, and the Mausoleums revealed intact and richly adorned burial vaults, giving us an excellent glimpse into the traditions for preparing the body for the afterlife.

Among the artifacts uncovered in the royal tombs were evidences of great wealth: gold, silver and bronze jewelry and adornments were found over and next to the body, which was placed in a sitting fetal position in a large stone sarcophagus (early Metsamor) or lying in a casket (late Metsamor). The bodies were laid out with their feet oriented towards the East, so they could greet the sun and follow it to the afterlife in the West. Included in the vaults were the skeletal remains of horses, cattle, domesticated dogs and humans—presumed to be servants or slaves to the deceased. The sacrifice of slaves and animals was a common feature of burial rituals during the Bronze and Early Iron Age, as they were considered necessary to assist their master in the next life. In addition to jewelry, pottery and tools, excavators discovered pots filled with grape and pear piths, grains, wine and oil. The fruit piths are a prominent part of the food offerings, and considered a necessary part of the funeral rites.

Other funerary objects discovered were rare amethyst bowls, ornamented wooden caskets with inlaid covers, glazed ceramic perfume bottles, and ornaments of gold, silver and semiprecious stones, and paste decorated with traditional mythological scenes typical of local art traditions. Egyptian, Central Asian and Babylonian objects were also found at the site, indicating that from earliest of times Metsamor was on the crossroads of travel routes spanning the Ararat plain and linking Asia Minor with the North Caucasus and Central Asia.
master, and though the pieces you see are not as delicate or refined as Ming Dynasty masterpieces, they are amazing engineering samples nonetheless, predating the Ming by 3000 years.

4. Jewelry display.

5. Jewelry display.

6. In the large display opposite cases 2-5, there is a large display showing pottery jugs and vases, and other implements found in the excavation. Most are from the Late bronze to early iron age. The jugs and pottery held wine, wheat, seeds and oil, and include serving and storage vessels.

7. In the same display hangs an Incense burner with lion head hanging in the center of the display. It has a bronze chain and bells, and was used in the temple (Late Bronze Age). The lion head is an often-used feature in royal and worship designs, and there were lions and tigers that inhabited this area at that time. There are still a few leopards inhabiting Armenian wilderness areas, but the lion was the preferred symbol.

The Name
The term Metsamor is a more recent name. The inhabitants of the city did not use a writing system as we do. They used a pictograph system of drawings that represented ideas and events, but did not spell out names as we do. We do not know what these people called themselves, but since Ancestral Armenia was a bridge between Asia and Europe we do know what other cultures at the time called the people living in this area.

The Observatory Map

8. At the end of the first exhibition hall is a display featuring the observatory uncovered at Metsamor (4th-3rd millennium BCE) and its use in the study of the cosmos.

The development of astronomical study at Metsamor grew from a need by the inhabitants to orient themselves in space and time. They had a specific need to understand where the spirit went in the afterlife, to understand the conception of time, and to fix their position in space. This is a far cry from earlier people’s who stared at the heavens and simply wondered at it all: this was a sacred study, so to speak, to actually fix the culture in the heavens, and to predict its influence on their destiny.

The means of orienting oneself are the beginning steps of social group development, and are usually very simple. For the people at Metsamor, it was typical to orient themselves, their culture, and their place in time and space by East and South.

Inner illustrations:
A. In the picture on the wall, you will see both a schematic of the observatory, and a series of illustrations showing how they charted the stars and created the first known calendar of time, a division of the year into twelve segments.

B. The small lines on the wheel illustration show 3 observation points on the actual wheel. The brightest star in the Northern sky, Sirius, lies in the constellation Canis Major, and is very close to earth, only about 8.6 light years away.

2nd Gallery, Ground Floor
9. The displays in this gallery focus on the Early Iron Age, when the culture at Metsamor advanced to a high level. The first display shows both implements used to smelt refined metals, and examples of finished products.

Jewelry made of tin and Silver is included. The inhabitants of Metsamor were able to extract gold from other ores, and there is even evidence they fabricated synthetic gold from other substances.

10. The next display focuses on the Urartian period of development, and you will notice in the farthest case several stone carvings that emulate the male genitalia. The Urartians believed that infertile women who worshipped and touched these phallus idols would become fruitful and multiply.

11. There is a very black stone, called gisher, (“night” stone, also obsidian) in the display which was used for its medical properties.

Upstairs
The second floor is divided into two sections. The first displays materials in trades common at Metsamor: stone, jewelry, textiles and leather, carpet weaving, ceramics, plus the glazed bluish-green decorative tiles that ornamented the palace and temple halls. The second section is devoted to the temple excavation and religious worship. Included are idols, phallus sculptures, fire hearths, pintader seals for stamping scared bread loaves and amulets.

12. Ringing the stairwell and along the walls of the upstairs gallery are large wine and oil pots, jugs and vases, all found from the Early to Middle Bronze Age (5000-3000 BCE). Note the design of the snakes and mountain rams on the surfaces. The snakes were considered life-giving creatures, and were worshipped as gods. The rams were at first thought to be god images, but are now known to also represent the constellation Aries in the horoscope, a power associated with the home, the hearth, and sustenance.

The Greek constellation and word for Aries did not arise until the 2nd millennium BCE. If you have read the history of Armenia so far, remember the importance of the first two letters “AR.” Etymologists believe the word Aries is not in fact Greek, but actually came from this area.

13. If you turn left as you enter the gallery from the stairwell, you will see a large bronze object in the center of the wall. This is an enlargement of one of the prize possessions of the museum, a Babylonian frog weight carved from agate and onyx.

On the surface of the frog, in Babylonian cuneiform is written “I, Burna Burnarishi, am a son of King Burna Burnarishi.” The weight of the original (in the basement vault) is 8 grams, 62 decigrams. It was used as jewelry, a measurement tool and a standard of weight. Found in one of the royal tombs around the neck of a woman, it is the only example of its kind in the world.
4th case: two belt decoration pieces in the shape of lions, made from bronze with silver overlay. Swastika detail on the hindquarters of the lions. The overlay process was probably created in the Armenian plateau, as this is one of the earliest during excavation. The skeleton lying on its side is a wealthy slaveholder, the heads along the side his slaves. The most important part of the body was understood to be the head, and Urartian burial rites included cutting the heads from the bodies of slaves when their master died, preserving their "identity" so the deceased master could recognize them when he went to the other world. There are several cases in two rooms in the gold vault. The craftsmanship and detail of the work was intricate and sometimes minuscule: take care to examine the pieces, and then imagine people creating such fine work more than 4000 years ago.

The Gold Rooms
There are several cases in two rooms in the gold vault. The craftsmanship and detail of the work was intricate and sometimes minuscule: take care to examine the pieces, and then imagine people creating such fine work more than 4000 years ago.

1st Gold Room
1st case: Gold jewelry pieces discovered in mausoleums, featuring a gold necklace with intricate design, 3rd-2nd millennium BCE.
2nd case: Hollow cylinder made from sardonic (a red-veined onyx), 4th millennium BCE. Lapis Lazuli was considered more valuable than gold in the ancient world, and was prized for its medicinal and cosmetic, as well as artistic value.
3rd case: actual frog weight carved from agate and onyx, 4th-3rd millennium BCE.
4th case: jewelry made from gold and carnelian (a semi-precious quartz gem). Gold medallions imbedded with cruciform design, 2nd millennium BCE.
5th case: royal seal made from carnelian, gold clasps, 3rd millennium BCE.
6th case: gold jewelry, including hairpin and medallion, 3rd-2nd millennium BCE.

Second Gold Room
1st case: amber necklaces, 4th-3rd millennium BCE.
2nd case: “matsuk” animal heads with eyes made from lapis lazuli, 4th millennium BCE. Lapis Lazuli was considered more valuable than gold in the ancient world, and was prized for its medicinal and cosmetic, as well as artistic value.
3rd case: amber jewelry and small agate stone called “achki ulunk” (eye beads), 4th-3rd millennium BCE. These are considered to be protective eyes warding off evil, and are still popular amulets worn around the necks of newborns in Armenia.

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15. In the right display case on the back wall are temple worship artifacts uncovered at Metsamor (Early to Late Bronze Age). Among these are several small carved stones, including one with the design of a swastika on one side and another with the head of a dog carved on the back side (the example at left is carved with a human deity). The swastika carving is one of the oldest sacred symbols in the world, and cave drawings in the Geghama Mountains dating back to the Neolithic times (7000 BCE) include them. It is unfortunate the Nazis corrupted their meaning in our times, as the swastika is a strong link between the Indo-Europeans and the indigenous cultures of ancient times. In Armenia examples of swastikas include swirling arms to both the right and left. Not a crooked cross, as some people call them, they are actually one of the first drawings of movement, showing a swirling power burning in the heavens. The swastika was the primary symbol assigned to the gods for several thousand years.

16. Included in the temple display is an illustration of the temple interior from the late Bronze Age. The worship of the bull was included in the deities, but it had a strong and negative position in the Metsamor pantheon: it was also used for placing curses. It is not until later, during the Urartian period, that it became a symbol of strength and fortitude.

17. Behind the central back wall, standing by the stairwell, is a large stone idol (11th-9th BCE). Yup, it’s a phallus.

18. The other half of the gallery is devoted to tools and implements used in the various trades in Metsamor. The last display holds examples of the types of stones and minerals mined and used at the foundry.

Lower Level
The lower level holds the most valuable archeological finds in the museum: a funerary crypt from the Urartu period and a collection of gold, silver, semi-precious stones, amber and paste jewelry, as well as other examples discovered at burial sites in the excavation.

19. Just at the bottom of the stairs is a replication of an Urartu burial site. It positions the artifacts and skeletons exactly as they were found during excavation. The skeleton lying on its side is a wealthy slaveholder, the heads along the side his slaves. The most important part of the body was understood to be the head, and Urartian burial rites included cutting the heads from the bodies of slaves when their master died, preserving their “identity” so the deceased master could recognize them when he went to the other world.

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THE EXCAVATION

1. Cyclopic Walls The cyclopic walls date from the 2nd millennium BCE, fortified during the Urartian Era. The stone blocks average 20 tons in weight, more than 3 meters thick.
2. Old Citadel and round dwellings The Old citadel was the first to be excavated at the site, and is the probably location of heretofore undiscovered archives. When uncovered, the area showed a complex of round house dwellings, temples and palace structures, dating back to the 4th millennium BCE.
Within the altar spaces are numerous bowls set into the temple floor and a complex series of clay holders. Very little is understood about the ritual that occurred here, though animal rare oil mixed with myrrh and frankincense, purified wine, wheat and fruit (seeds were discovered in some of the shallow bowls).

4. Foundry

The foundry dates from the Early Bronze Age (ca. 4000 BCE), though recent digs in the area uncovered signs of metal processing as early as 5000 BCE. The complex of smelting furnaces and molds around you date from the mid Bronze to Early Iron Age (3000-2000 BCE). The complex becomes more astounding the more you walk through it. Several huge underground caves were uncovered that are thought to have been storehouses for base metal, as well as a granary for winter months. Stretching just below and around the Upper Citadel, the foundries processed Copper, Bronze, Iron, Mercury, Manganese, Strychnine, Zinc and gold. The first iron in the ancient world was probably forged here, though it was not considered as important as bronze, giving the jump on development to the Babylonians.

5. Upper Citadel

The Upper citadel is covered. It should be no surprise to anyone who knows something of Armenia's history that astronomy is such an important part of the national character. Sun symbols, signs of the zodiac, and ancient calendars predominated in the region around 10,000 BCE. At Metsamor (ca 5000 BCE), one of the oldest observatories in the world can be found. It sits on the southern edge of the excavated city, a promontory of red volcanic rocks that juts out like the mast of a great ship into the heavens. Between 2800 and 2500 BCE at least three observatory platforms were carved from the rocks. The Metsamor observatory is an open book of ancient astronomy and sacred geometry. For the average visitor the carvings are indecipherable messages. With Elma Parsamian, the first to unlock the secrets of the Metsamor observatory as a guide, the world of the first astronomers comes alive.

The Metsamorians were a trade culture," Parsamian explains. "For trade, you have to have astronomy, to know how to navigate." The numerous inscriptions found at Metsamor puzzled excavators, as indecipherable as they were elaborate. Hundreds of small circular bowls were carved on the rock surfaces, connected by thin troughs or indented lines. But one stood out. It is an odd shaped design that was a mystery to the excavators of the site, until Professor Parsamian discovered it was a key component to the large observatory complex. By taking a modern compass and placing it on the carving, Parsamian found that it pointed due North, South and East. It was one of the first compasses used in Ancient times.

Another carving on the platforms shows four stars inside a trapezium. The imaginary end point of a line dissecting the trapezium matches the location of star which gave rise to Egyptian, Babylonian and ancient Armenian religious worship. Sketch the locations of the Jupiter moons over several nights and you're repeating an experiment Galileo did in 1610. Chart a star over several years and you repeat an experiment the Metsamorians did almost 5000 years ago.

"Sirius is most probably the star worshipped by the ancient inhabitants of Metsamor," Parsamian explains. "Between 2800 and 2600 BCE Sirius could have been observed from Metsamor in the rising rays of the sun. It is possible that, like the ancient Egyptians, the inhabitants of Metsamor related the first appearance of Sirius with the opening of the year."

Those wanting to plot the same event from Metsamor will have to wait a while. Sirius now appears in the winter sky, while the interval over several years and you repeat an experiment the Metsamorians did almost 5000 years ago.

The observatory rivals the discoveries at the citadel for importance, substantiating theories on the birthplace of the zodiac and origins of astronomy in the ancient world. Dated ca. 2800-2500 BCE, when the zodiac is figured to have been opened externally to the stars on the first day of the month to the next.

"There is so much I found in 1966," Parsamian adds, "and so much we do not know. We believe they worshipped the star Sirius, but how? I like to imagine there was a procession of people holding lights. These carved holes throughout the complex may have been filled with oil and lit. Just imagine what it must have looked like with all those little fires going all over the steps of the observatory. Like a little constellation down on earth."

Parsamian has a special regard for Metsamor, since it was she who uncovered many of the mysteries of the inscriptions on the observatory, answers which explained other finds uncovered at the excavation site. "When you walk over this ancient place, you can use your imagination to complete the picture. I love to visit Metsamor since I feel I am returning to the ancients."
7. Outer walls

The outer walls are 2nd-1st millennium BCE, laid during Urartian times. The walls mark the greatest extent of the ancient citadel, though the necropolis and graveyard extend for another 200 hectares into nearby Taronik Village.

Hundreds of shallow bowls are carved onto the surfaces of three large rocks that rise above the surrounding river delta. The use of the bowls are unknown, many are linked by equally shallow “canals” (we’re talking real small here, no more than a few inches in diameter for the bowls). They might have been filled with oil that was lit at night as part of a ritual celebration (if so, they would look very much like a ‘bowl of the universe’ on earth), or they may have been used to smelt and forge metal in another sort of ritual. Imagination allows you to decide for yourself.

You need to be very careful while exploring the observatory site, since the inscriptions are carved on basalt and tufa, and have already been eroded by exposure to the elements since uncovered in 1967. For more information on the site, see The First Astronomers?

8. Mediaeval Precinct

The Medieval Precinct was concluded, the observatory was also the primary religious site and navigation center for the Metsamor culture.

Once the haunt of local Soviet bigwigs manning the nuclear reactors and running things in Haktemberian (Armavir City), the tiny nature area (10 hectares) was privatized and converted into rendezvous (avant-hotels) and a Hangezian Goti (rest area) for locals. It is crowded on weekend, but deserted on weekdays (save the tête-à-têtes) and is for Armavir a pretty spot.

**Overnight, Food & Drink**

1.5 kilometers from the Metsamor excavation turnoff, going west (away from Taronik and towards Armavir City), is “LICH MOTEL”, with 7 bright and comfortable units, a lake to call your own and one of the best views of Ararat we’ve seen, unspoiled by urban growth. They have cable TV, an International telephone connection, central heat and air conditioning, hot showers, and the freshest food at their pier restaurant. At 10,000 AMD a room (double occupancy), they beat anything in Yerevan (note they also rent by the hour).

SETRAKI RESTAURANT/MOTEL, tel. 093-555652, is located on Aknalich, 700 meters from Lake Motel entrance (turn left on side street at a rock wall, go 200 meters, green wire gate is on left). 10 cottages in wooded area, no phone, but swimming pool, hot water, air conditioning and central heat, beautiful walks through wooded area up to edge of lake. 20,000 AMD for two people, meals included.

A new RESTAURANT-MOTEL is outside the E side of the lake and caters to revelers by the hour or night, depending on how busy they are (popular with local oligarchs). 6500 AMD per person in dining cottage with bedroom in back.

On the (MS) highway the #7 RESTAURANT MOTEL offers rooms at 4000-5000 AMD (per 5 hours or overnight).

**Camping**

The lake has a HANGESTIAN GOTI, next to the Cottages and restaurant. 2000-3000 AMD per day.

**Springs** are in villages and at the lake.

SIDE TRIP: Aknalich - Ujluw/jhöd was made by damming the waters of the Metsamor River.

SIDE TRIP: Metsamor village (pop. 1000) was purpose-built for the nearby Nuclear Plant, and houses the families of plant workers. The reactor is located some 5 km N of the village.

The reactor is controversial for several of reasons, not least of which is its design, which is a later form of the infamous Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine, which had a meltdown in 1988 and was forced to close, but not before killing or causing severe illness to tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Europeans. As a result of this, Armenia’s fledgling Green Party led protests against the reactor in Armenia, prompting authorities to shut it down.

Built in the 1970s (going online in 1976 and 1977) to supply the country’s burgeoning electric needs (and as a response to the severe drop in the waters of Lake Sevan due to hydroelectric power production), the reactor promoted the growth of industry and population in the 1980s while easing the reliance on hydroelectricity which the country had depended on since the 1930s. After the 1988 Spitak earthquake, ongoing protests on the Karabakh issue joined with Green protests against the nuclear reactor for mass demonstrations against the reactor, and both units were shut down in 1989. This victory against an entrenched Soviet government morphed into widespread anti-Azeri demonstrations and Karabakh’s declaration of independence, precipitating the undeclared war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The resulting blockades by Turkey and Azerbaijan created severe energy shortages in Armenia with widespread blackouts and panic. Attempts to send Russian gas to replace that lost from Azerbaijan largely failed as Azeri partisans in Georgia repeatedly blew up gas pipelines in 1993-1995.

In the face of this, the new government decided to reopen the plant in 1993, the first time any decommissioned reactor was restarted. Protests by European states and the US against the effort had little effect, especially since none offered to replace the lost energy with new supplies, or to guarantee sage gas supply. Finally, the US and Russia contributed funds to reinforce the reactors against earth tremors.
On October 26, 1996 unit 2 was brought back on line, generating 400Mw or 60% of the country's power in 1996. By 1999 that was down to 40%. Hydroelectric plants in Sjunik generate another 25% and small hydropower stations and gas generators supply the rest. Enough is generated that—in a strange twist of fate—Armenia now sells energy to Turkey, which continues to blockade the land border.

The reactor will be decommissioned by 2016, when a new reactor, generating 1000Mw will go online. Turkey is already seeking to buy a portion of the power.

Overnight at Aknalich motels, Armavir Highway motel, in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); Camping in the area; Food at motels; Springs in the area.

Background Despite is sad modern exterior, the town has a storied history, though in different locations. It started as an important obisidan and trade center (ca. 600-1000 BCE), as a few artifacts from this early period show. There was a settlement at the site of the town, but the large Armavir Hill was the town’s first location (7 km S), when the Urartu King Argishti built a city on the hill. Later, Orontid (Yervanduni) kings established their capital on the same hill, where it lasted until the 4th c BCE, when they moved their seat to Sardarapat. The town on the hill thrived through Romans, Arshakuni and Persian periods until its demise in the 15th c at the hands of the Timurids. The population scattered (some remained on the hill until the 19th c), and 16th-18th c Safavid Iranians governed the region from Sardari Castle just SW of the town. The current site was a speck in the desert when the Russians came to town and built the first railroad, placing a switching station in the settlement. This literally put the town on the map, as Sardarapat.

And as Sardarapat the then village became the focus of Turkish attempts to capture Yerevan, after succeeding in Alexandropol (Glumi). Their failure at the Battle of Sardarapat, followed by routes at Vanadzor and Aparan, insured the region freedom and a fledging First Republic.

The village became a town in Soviet times, growing off of increasing farming (canning), cotton production (textiles) and light industry, its goods shipped to Russia via the rail line built in the 19th c.

Bearings Armavir is extremely easy to get around in. There is one main street, the (M5) highway, and it divides the town into two parts. To the North is the new town, with its wide streets, railroad station, hotel, cafes, shops and banks, and apartment blocks. To the far NE lie the park and sports stadium. This makes up the largest part of the town. To the south of the highway and rail line is

Sites

Despite the fact all sites worth seeing are outside of town, I would not discount it as a place to crash if you are going to explore the western marz in detail, or are heading NW to Aragatsotn and Shirak.

Within 45 minutes drive of Armavir you can hit all sites in the marz, with those near the town including the Argishtikhinili and Old Armavir excavations, Sardari Castle, Sardarapat battlefield and Museum, Yervandashat and Bagaran and the entire western desert.

Armavir is within 1 hour drive from all of southern Aragatsotn, and 90 minutes from Glumi on the western road. It is 20 minutes to Echmiadzin.

Area Code: 237
Long Distance: 0237 + local number

1. Armenian Restaurant/Hotel
2. WWII Monument
3. Rail Station, Bus Station
4. Hotel
5. Converse Bank
6. Tickets Agency
7. Trade Hall
8. Shuka/GUM
9. College
10. Srjaran - khovrats

Practicalities -

Area Code: 237
Long Distance: 0237 + local number
From abroad: + (374) 237 + local number
Mobile Phones: 091 Armentel, 093/094 Viva Cell
International callers: Armentel + (374) 91 + number, Viva Cell + (374) 93 or 94 + local number

From Yerevan, just about any taxi will take you to Armavir at 100-150 AMD per kilometer. Taxis should charge 5000-7500 AMD for up to four passengers. You can also order a taxi by phone (5000-6000 AMD). Most Yerevan taxi services provide this service, but we used Kalina (tel 010-555-333). Note even the best can go bad unless otherwise noted, local numbers require the (0237) prefix if calling long distance, or + (374) 237 prefix if calling from abroad.

In and Out

By Train

Electricka and Gnatsk trains connect Armavir with Yerevan and Glumi, originating at the Central Station in Yerevan, arriving at the main station in Armavir. The Electricka leaves Yerevan every morning, returning in the afternoon. Tickets at 703-3650 AMD makes this the cheapest way to town. The gnatsk continues to Tbilisi, with a connecting train to Batumi (and ferries to the Ukraine and Istanbul).

By Bus, Minivan

Buses and minibuses (marshrutni taxis) connect Armavir with Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Ashtarak, Talin, and villages in the marz. The bus station is on the (M5) or at the train station, ask.

Buses Buses to Armavir from Yerevan depart from the corner of Sarian and Mashtots pts (350 AMD) and Central Bus Station on Ishakian (850 AMD) and arrive at the Armavir bus stop. Buses from Armavir include to Echmiadzin (250 AMD).

Minivans (Marshrutni taxis) leave from the bus stop on the (M5) or at the train station. Ask. Minivans do not have a set schedule; they leave when they are full and generally run once or twice a day to outlying villages. Armavir Minivans connect to Yerevan (400 AMD, Central bus station), Echmiadzin (200 AMD), Sardarapat (100 AMD), Naibandian/Old Armavir (150 AMD), Halkavan/Argishtikhinili (200 AMD), Hoktemberian village/Sardari Castle (100 AMD), Yervandashat/Bagaran (300 AMD), Karakert (250 AMD).

By Taxi Taxis are more expensive but the most convenient way to travel (you decide when you go, and you can stop along the way). If you split the price between 2 or more travelers, it is cheaper. Armavir call taxis at tel. 61081
By Car  Armavir is on the (M5) highway, which leads to Echmiadzin (25 km) and Yerevan (50 km) to the E, and Sardarapat (10 km) and the Turkish border (19 km) to the SW.  The (M5) in Armavir connects to the south and southeast (H15) leading to Haikavan/Arghitshikhi (9 km) and Markara (21 km).  To the NW it connects to the (H17) which leads to Karakert (25 km) and the (M9) which leads to Bagaran (23 km) and the (M1) highway that leads N to Giumri (53 km).  From Armavir it is 50 km to Yerevan, 25 km to Echmiadzin and 92 km to Giumri.

COMMUNICATION, ETC.

Fire – 101
Police – 102, 67112
Ambulance service – 103
Rescue Hot Line – 118
Gas emergency service – 104
Trunk Line – 107

Telephone directory information – 109

Phone, telegraphs

Armavir is covered by both Armentel and VivaCell (28 Hanrapetutian) mobile services.  International calls can be made at the Central Post Office,  See HayPost site for list (http://www.haypost.am/).  The post office has trunk line phone service, sells phone cards and can deliver telegrams.

Internet

ARMINCO has a local representative in Armavir at 7 Hanrapetutian p.  (Manuk Simonyan), tel. 61452, 61456, e-mail: armavir@arminco.com.  They offer prepaid card service.

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

Bank, Exchange

ATM, Money wires and credit card advances can be done at banks;
ARMECONOMBANK, 8 Spandarian ARDSHININVESTBANK, 17 Hanrapetutian CONVERSE BANK, 22a Yerevanian INECOBANK, 17 Hanrapetutian UNIBANK, 29/5 Hanrapetutian

Bank, Exchange

There are a number of shops in town, including mterks, souvenirs and clothing stores.  Most are on Hanrapetutian p and its side streets.  The Shuca and Yarmaka are on the first street to the R W of the railway station.

Film, etc.

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

Pharmacy

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

Hospital, Polyclinic

The hospital and clinic are on the first street to the right, just west of the railway station.  For a medical emergency, contact your lodging venue or go to Yerevan.

Hospital: tel. 62640

ARMAVIR RESTAURANT-HOTEL

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

FOOD AND DRINK

There are a couple of khorovats Grills, Srjarans and cafes, and the restaurant at Armavir Hotel.  Food can also be bought at mterks (food shops) around town.

$ = 2000 AMD or less for meal w/o drinks
$$= 2000-3000 AMD
$$$ = 3000 AMD or more

ARMAVIR RESTAURANT-HOTEL, one block north of the (M5) using the street before the railway station, has Armenian, khorovats menu.  Meals can go for as much as 4000 AMD.  $-$$$

OVERNIGHT

HOKTEMBER HOTEL is located on the main street (M5), almost opposite the railway station.  The hotel houses refugees from the Karabakh war, but there are rooms in a basic way (water included, not much else) at 4000 AMD for DBL.

ARMAVIR RESTAURANT/HOTEL is one block north of the (M5) opposite a park.  The hotel caters to weddings and tête-à-têtes with decent rooms with hot water, TV and clean linen at 5000-20,000 AMD.

Boarding/Apartment

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

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SJRJARANS/CAFES are on the west end of the town on the (M5).  Cheap eats with sandwiches at 500-1000 AMD and khorovats at 1500 AMD per shish.  $-$$$

From central Armavir cross over the rail tracks to the S side of town, head south two blocks, turn R, then L at the next block to the SE road for about 5 km to the main intersection in the village of HAIKAVAN (DD 40.0852 x 44.04557, 861m).  Merge L and in about 400 m take the R (SW) Nor Artages road for about 1.5 km to the OLD ARMAVIR excavation (DD 40.07918 x 43.03445, elev. 937m) H

HAIKAVAN / OLD ARMAVIR - ՀԱԻԿԱՎԱՆ / ԱՆԹԱՐԹԻՔԻՆԻԼԻ (ՔՈՒՐՈՒ-ՔԻԼԻ, ՊՈՓ. 1350)  The Hellenistic city of Old Armavir sits on a tall hill just SW of the villages of Haikavan and Armavir.

Old Armavir is often mistaken for Armavir Village to the NE and the city of Armavir further N.  The city was once Hocketbian, a name locals still insist on calling the once thriving, now derelict Soviet era town.

Complicating things further are two hills to the west of Old Armavir, both of which share much of the same history and were inhabited at the same time.  These are (first) the Urartian city of Arghitshikhi (p. 79), which lies barely 3 km away, and (second) the battlefield of Sardarapat, just 4 km further west.
Background
The hill you are at was inhabited from the 6th millennium BCE, when the tall hill was surrounded by the Arax River and a delta of water that created a thick bog; a near perfect natural defense against enemy incursions. Excavated artifacts from the period include obsidian tools, bronze pieces and pottery fragments. The Bronze Age was particularly rich in finds, and was the source of the cyclopean wall stones.

In the 8th c BCE Urartians established their administrative center at the next hill to the west (see Argishtikhinili), but Armavir continued to be inhabited, as an Urartian possession. The hill, and the city, really came into its own in the wake of Alexander the Great's march through Persia, when in 331 BCE the Armenian Orontid Kings asserted their independence from the Persian Achaemenid Empire, and Armavir was chosen as their seat of power.

The entire hilltop was refortified with cyclopic stones, and topped with a citadel, the necropolis growing to perhaps 10,000 inhabitants. Clay tablets from this period, written in Elamite and recounting episodes of the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic have been found, showing a developed level of contact between the Orontids and the Near East. The tablets are written in an archaic language even for the Achaemenid period, and might have been treasured by the Orontids for centuries before they were brought to the city.

Other writings include 3rd c BCE Greek inscriptions, including the poems of Hesiod, texts by Euripides, a Macedonian Calendar and a name list of the Orontid kings.

The Byzantine conquest of the region lasted barely 20 years before the Seljuks devastated the city, followed by a short revival in the late 12th-early 13th cc and the early Mongol era, before a period of long decline began. Still inhabited (perhaps as a defensive spot only for surrounding villages), the hill was finally abandoned sometime during the 17th-18th c, during the protracted Persian-Turkish wars.

What remains now are traces of massive wall formations, foundations for the large Hellenistic Temple, a few capitals and carved stones, and thousands of pottery shards, including a few glazed pottery fragments from the medieval period.

The Site
It is a steep climb up the massive hill; you’ll need 20-30 minutes and sturdy shoes. At the bottom there is a large cemetery that wraps three sides of the hill.

Several paths wind their way up the hill, take the easiest for you to navigate to the top. As you walk up, the outline of the wall defenses become clearer, their massive blocks of basalt stone carefully hewn and laid in layers.

Though evidence of Bronze Age inhabitation have been found, including mammoth blocks of stone, surviving structures date to the 8th c when Urartians built on this and the next hill to the west. The layout, foundations and overall design bear a striking likeness to the Urartian layer at Metsamor, suggesting both sites were utilitarian settlements in support of nearby administrative cities (in this case, Argishtikhinili). Metsamor was a center for forging Iron in Urartian times, while Armavir seemed dedicated to crafts and arts.

When the Arax River shifted southwards, the capital lost its best defense and was moved by to Artashat in 189 BCE. Armavir continued to be an important (if defenseless) religious and trade center, apparently continuously inhabited throughout the Artashesian and Arshakuni Dynasties of Armenian kings, the early Christian era (though curiously, the only Christian structures found are at the bottom of the pagan temple hill), until its capture by Arabs in 645.

The history of the city becomes confused with that of the region and the other two hills in the area; Argishtikhinili and the hill called Sardarabad. The temple was converted to a church in the early Christian era, with some 5th c evidence of alteration. Objects dating to the Arab, Bagratuni and Seljuk eras have been found at the site, suggesting some kind of habitation, though all vestiges of administrative importance were by now gone, royal favor placed on the Bagratuni capital at Ani.

Part way up the hill there is a metal cross over a large cave shrine, replete with icons and candles. The cave may have at one time connected to the hill top by a series of tunnels (not unusual for the period). What remains are rock walls bedecked with religious fragments, embroidered cloth, pieces of plastic crucifixes and innumerable pebbles stuck to the wall with melted candle wax.

Facing the border are remains of old Soviet defenses, designed to foil Turkish/NATO surprise attacks. The abandoned, decrepit tank-topped bunkers are still considered national defense points, and technically off limits.

At the very top there is a large platform surrounded by fallen blocks of stone. This is the temple mount, once surmounted by a large structure that no longer remains. Excavations
showed the temple to have followed Urartian, Achaemenid and then Hellenistic styles, though none of the wall blocks remain, suggesting it was dismantled and used elsewhere, perhaps in a later capital, or by locals for their own purposes. The black tufa stones at the site are from the medieval church that replaced the old temple.

If it followed the same conventions as other temples from the era, its original fire worship temple would have been converted into a temple to one of Urartu’s deities (Khaldi?), oriented N-S, with an inner courtyard surrounding the sanctuary building. It would then have been used again as a fire worship temple in the Achaemenid period (Ahuramazd/Aramazd, Mher), later reserved for one of the Hellenistic Armenian deities (Mythra, Astghik, Vahagn) before its conversion to a Christian church. The lower cave shrine shows evidence of pagan rituals into the modern era, suggesting the conversion of the temple mount never fully took hold. Recent excavations have opened an entrance on the east end of the temple, typical for Pagan sites.

Excavations also opened another sanctuary on the North face of the hill, with a rocky outcrop worked into a three-stepped pedestal (parakon) for a statue of a god. A basalt idol was found at the base of that pedestal. Also found were the bones of sacrificial animals and a movable stone altar.

To the west there is a substantial excavation of the Hellenistic period, important in understanding the Seleucid period in the region. Once covering two cliff areas, the installation of Soviet defenses obliterated all evidence of this period from one of the cliffs (including a famous inscription of the 5th c BCE Greek playwright Euripides), leaving only the current area for archeologists to explore.

The medieval layer shows continued craft production, as well as large bakery that was uncovered in 2002 excavations. A layout of the streets, and two approaches to the temple mount can be seen from the last excavation.

Pottery shards proliferate around the hill, including a few rare fragments of medieval glazing.

Excavations also opened another sanctuary on the North face of the hill, with a rocky outcrop worked into a three-stepped pedestal (parakon) for a statue of a god. A basalt idol was found at the base of that pedestal. Also found were the bones of sacrificial animals and a movable stone altar.

It includes five inscriptions (which you can still see if you comb the western hills) of historical importance:

(A) A listing of the headings of three 3rd c BCE histories of Armenia, saying they had to be returned to the archives at the temple (an early stone library card?);

(B) A list of Macedonian calendar months;

(C) A tribute by the Greek condottiero (leader) Numenio, ca. 188-160 BCE, describing how a shipment (Arms? Goods?) from the Syrian king Antioch IV helped the first king of Armenia Artashes to secure his independence from the Achaemenids.

The imagery is typical for Soviet edge, combining an obvious Pieta motif with...
monumental size and angles and an equally obvious church imagery with the three apse arches and the cross form in the placement of the bodies. This was as much a statement striking against the Soviet aesthetic forms as it was an artistic expression of pain and grief.

Nearby there is a small Tukh Manuk shrine in a private house, the so-called S. Hovhannes (DD 40.06477 x 43.98518, elev. 879), reached by taking the street at the big tree 1 block from the WWII monument, the metal roof is seen from afar. The village has some interesting buildings and homes.

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

From Nalbandian’s central intersection take the N road for about 2 km to a T-intersection where A R (E) turn leads in about 700 m to a dirt path on the R (S) that climbs past a monument to the top of the hill that is the NOR ARMAVIR/ARGISHTIKHINILI EXCAVATION (DD 40.07903 x 43.99601, 912m) sits within splitting distance of Old Armavir on a hill that skirts the south side of the village of Nor Armavir. The hill is more easily mounted than Old Armavir (there is a navigable dirt road to the top), and the site has more extensive fortifications; a good example of how the Urartians engineered their defense systems.

Otherwise the site has few of the dramatic effect (pottery shards, temple mount, caves) of Old Armavir, and—except for the magnificent view it affords of the Ararat valley—should be reserved as a secondary trip or for those mad about archeology.

Background
As early as the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmanaser I (1280-1266 BCE), the first mention of Urartu is made, under the name “Uruatri”. By the 9th c. BCE the Urartu kingdom had established its regional power far beyond its capital at Tushpa.

The Urartians called their country Biainili (the name Urartu comes from the Assyrian).

The two volcanic hills that make up the ancient capital were—like Armavir—inhabited from prehistoric times, and like Armavir, naturally defended by a web of waterways cut through the area by the Arax River.

It is most famous for its Urartu period, when the hill was chosen in 776 BCE by King Argishti I as a fortress and capital to accompany those at Karmir blur and Erebuni, linchpins of his extension of the empire that included the Ararat valley, the Lake Sevan basin and southern Georgia. The city became known as Argishtikhinili.

To the greatness of our god Khaldi, Argishti son of Menua, says: I built a great fortress and made its name of my own, Argishtikhinili. The land was a wilderness: nothing there was flourishing. I tamed them. Out of the rivers I made four canals; (from them) the grape lands and fruits lands were divided. I made many great heroic things there.

The fortress was one of many in the Ararat valley, part of a complex string of defensive positions established by Argishti, built to arrest invasions by “Northern Tribes” (the Scythians and Cimmerians) who were attempting to migrate into the region. His father, king Menua, had established a foothold in Armavir region, referred to as Etius in Yazlitas and Zolakert inscriptions, the name of its capital as Lununis. The capital is assumed to be the same hills occupied by his son Argishti.

The capital lasted until 5th c BCE raids by Scythians, who had made compact with Medians to capture the Urartian empire, plundered the city, burning it to the ground. Rebuilt and reinhabited in later periods, the site’s last important period was during the medieval period, which left pottery shards and mud-brick structures behind.

The Complex
The excavated remains flow along the top and inner valley of two hills, roughly forming the S and SE end of the village of Nor Armavir.
Periods. Very rarely, visitors report finding an ancient coin (mostly Arab and later periods).

Foundations of Urartian and medieval dwellings (the latter are mud-brick and straw), lie scattered throughout the main and secondary, eastern hill, those excavated in the inner valley between were covered up after archeological digs, and some lie below the modern cemetery.

**MAP East Hill**

The western hill has the most developed foundation system, a large complex of rooms, temples and palaces that stretch more than 200 m.

**MAP East Hill**

The East hill had a large citadel, carefully protected by several rings of defensive walls. It is here the governor lived and where the king slept when visiting the area. Excavations uncovered a more sketchy outline of the area; it was badly damaged at the end of its life.

Below the W hill, on its E side, there is small Tukh Manuk dedicated to S. Davit, its recent renovation unable to obscure its prehistoric origins (look for the ancient stone lying inside the chapel. Outside, a small casket stone replaces an ancient one that sit nearby, worn into a saddle shape by hundreds of generations of use. The new stone is decorated with flat pebbles, wishing stones seeking favor with the gods. The legend goes that if you can make a stone stick to the casket sides, your wish will be granted. Some cheat with candle wax, others rub their smooth stones vigorously before attempting the task.

**Overnight** at in a village home (rustic, 4000 AMD for B&B is fair); **Camping** in the area (no shade); **Food** at village mterks and Sardarapat cafe; **Springs** in the area.

† From Nor Armavir backtrack to the T-intersection and continue forward (W) for about 1.5 km to central Amassia; continue W for another 2.8 km to the (MS) above Hushakert where a R (NE) turn leads in about 2.8 km to the SARDARAPAT (ARAX) (DD 40.07993 x 43.99601, 928m) 

**SARDARAPAT (ARAX) - ՍԱՐԴԱՐԱՊԱՏ (ԱՐԱԿ) **

(Sardarapat memorial, URL: http://ac.aua.am/shkachat/Web/index.html, open 10-5 every day, except Mondays and National Holidays (open Independence Day: May 28), 300 AMD, guided tour +500 AMD, is located 15 km S of modern Armavir (called Hoktemberian by locals), 7 km W of Argishtihinili excavation and overlooks part of the site of the May 1918 battle between the Turkish 36th army and local Armenians that led to Turkish defeat at the hands of local Armenians, many of which were armed only with pitchforks and scythes.

Further defeats of Turkish forces near Aparan and Vanadzor cemented the end of Turkish aspirations to eliminate the Armenian people and establish a Pan Turkish Empire, and to the establishment of the First Republic of Armenia.

The site includes an excellent Ethnographic museum with artifacts from nearby 8th c BCE Argishtihinili, 4th c BCE Armavir and medieval Armenian life.

**BACKGROUND**

Part of the Ararat Fertile Crescent, the area is site to prehistoric settlements from the Stone Age, with small settlements dating to ca. 9000 BCE and more complex urban sites to 6000 BCE. The three hills to the E of Sardarapat have excavations of two of Armenia’s prehistoric capitals; immediately east the two fortified hills of the Urartian capital Argishtihinili (8th-6th cc BCE), and further east the large 4th c capital of Armavir. About 30 km west are two more; the Orontid capitals of Yervandashat (302 BCE) and Bagaran (211-200 BCE).

After the removal of the capital to Artashat, the citadels all fell into slow decline, remarked only in a few written sources, including one by the Roman historian Tacitus describing the Roman invasion of Armenia by the general Corbulon in 59 CE.

In the middle sits the long, low brow of Sardarapat, once a key stop on the Kars to Isfahan Rail line, a linchpin in control of the Ararat Valley. The hill (site of the monument and museum) formed the battery of Armenian forces that fought the Turkish 36th army to a standstill and then retreat in a series of battles between May 21-29, 1918.

The Battle of Sardarapat

Following the entry of Turkey into WWI on the Axis side, and a disastrous Turkish campaign to invade Russian-controlled Eastern Armenia, the Young Turk government instigated a campaign in 1915 to wipe out their Christian populations. This included up to 2 million loyal Armenian subjects.

Russian advances in 1916-1917 halted the slaughter in the farthest East of Anatolia and threatened to finally retake historic Armenia from the Turks, but when the October Revolution came, the Bolsheviks signed a treaty of peace and then the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, which gave all of the Eastern Anatolian territory captured by Russians in the 1877-78 War with Turkey back to the Turks. The Russian army was then called back to Russia, leaving Armenia defenseless against Turkish aggression.
The other two Turkish divisions sent to support the central thrust were also halted, first at the Battle of Aparan-Bash on May 21-24, which pushed the Turks back to Alexandropol. Meanwhile, Armenian forces at Alexandropol (Giumri), at first surrounded by Turks, retreated to Kara-Kilisa (Vanadzor), where their resistance cut off Turkish advances towards Baku (May 22-28), forcing a general retreat of the defeated army back into Anatolia. Turkish attempts to invade did not end at the Battle of Sardarapat; the defeated army regrouped in a few months began anew to put pressure on Armenian forces, often by sending Kurdish raiding parties into Armenia. In the meantime, Georgia, worried of Turkish aggression against their lands, made compact with Germany, who forced the Turks to stop at Batumi. Azerbaijan was again isolated, and immediately faced an internal crisis as Bolsheviks began to agitate oil workers to revolt and establish a Socialist Republic.

While the battle of Sardarapat did not end Turkish aggression, it did buy crucial time for Armenia, enough to establish the Democratic Republic of Armenia (DRA) on May 28, 1918. The republic was short-lived, harassed by Turks and Kurds on its western borders, an increasingly proactive Bolshevik movement, and a swollen population of 394,000 refugees from the genocide, and ensuing starvation, disease (the Spanish Flu was particularly brutal during the winter of 1919), poverty and lack of housing. The republic fell to political infighting, an invasion of Turks in September of 1920 and the Red Army in November of the same year. Yerevan ceded control to the Bolsheviks on December 2, 1920, finally ending Turkish aggression.

The site was dedicated in 1968 and includes a memorial to the Sardarapat Battle of 1918 and perhaps the best ethnographic museum in Armenia, with well-kept interpretive displays of life from the prehistoric era to the 19th c, using artifacts unearthed from the area. There are also a café and restrooms.
THE MEMORIAL
The Memorial (Architects and Sculptors: R. Israelian, A. Harutiunian, S. Manasian, A. Shahinian) sits at the end of a long walkway south from the parking area, and is made of two large Urartian style bull sculptures which frame a large carillon.

The 26m high tower is made of 9 arches and twelve bells, one for each of the Western Armenian towns and regions in Anatolia where Turkish atrocities are known to have occurred. The bells are rung for groups of tourists and continuously on May 28). A group of memorials to the fallen of the 1988 Nagorno Karabakh conflict sit to the W (R) of the bell tower.

To the E (L) of the tower there is a long walk flanked by Eagle carvings, which leads to the curved 55m long Wall of Glory, with imagined scenes of the battle carved on the wall.

THE MUSEUM
The Ethnographic Museum (tel. 091-425026) is located behind the Wall of Glory, at the end of a long walk. It was founded in 1978 as the first comprehensive ethnographic museum in Armenia, and remains its largest. The collection includes artifacts collected beginning in 1906 by the Tflis (Tbilisi) Ethnographic Society, augmented with items from the vast collection at the State History Museum in Yerevan.

The square building is built around an enclosed central hall with three domes designed in the traditional peasant “hazarashen” style, and serves as a gallery for temporary exhibitions. The gallery halls are in turn built around inner courtyards that hold small gardens and outdoor exhibitions. The building is in turn surrounded by an wide walkway with carved stones and khachkars, including a mountain spring vishap (“dragon stone”, ca. 4000 BCE).

The museum is on two floors, divided into seven galleries.

Ancient Armenia contains one of the richest collections of antique artifacts in the country, with over 7000 items on display. The displays are chronologically organized from the Middle Stone Age to the late Medieval periods. Of note are artifacts uncovered during excavations at Argishtihinili, Old Armavir & Zevia (Armavir marz), Dvin, L’chashen & Zolakar (Gegharkunik marz), Lori Berd (Lori marz), Noyemberian (Tavush marz), and Shirakavan (Shirak marz/Turkey border).

Included are Bronze Age arts and crafts, an Urartian cuneiform stone found at Argishtihinili, and elaborate khachkars from the medieval period.
Farming constituted the greatest part of Armenian life for the longest period, and not surprisingly, it makes up the longest gallery in the museum, with displays focusing on the life style and the implements that made it work. Displays break agrarian life into different climatic and geographic zones, as well as auxiliary rural occupations and the variety of traditional food.

Handcrafts include an extensive collection of Armenian folk art that was widely used in the Armenian household and community. Crafts artisans constituted the major population of the urban centers in both Eastern and Western Armenians (80 per cent of urban dwellers in Russian Caucasus were Armenians craftsmen). Items include handmade tools, utensils, weapons and other objects of the pre-industrial Armenian world.

The second floor Urban Life galleries have displays on the 19th c life of the relatively few Urban dwellers who lived in the few urban centers of the time; Yerevan, Alexandropol (Giumri), Echmiadzin, Nor Baiyazet (Gavar), and Goris. Built on a new European model of living, these inhabitants (usually no more than 20,000 in each city) led gracious, cultured lives in an otherwise agrarian, tough world, and the artifacts on display reflect that; furniture, costume, objects des art, and the incorporation of traditional folk art on "modern" items.

The Family and Community gallery exhibits focus on folk and the traditional family and community as it was before the onset of industrialization and the modern era. On display are artifacts and examples of folk Christian and pre-Christian customs and design, the village, which formed the essential fabric of Armenians life in the pre-industrial world, and the rites that reflected this pre-modern world; agriculture, fortune telling, traditional dwellings and interior design, community rites.

The Costume collection includes examples of traditional costume design from Armenia's diverse regions. Displays show both urban and rural clothing samples, embroidery and weaving, and particular designs organized along the historic provinces of the country in the late 19th c.

Modern Decorative Art includes displays of arts and crafts from the 1980s; ceramic ware, carvings, glass and wood work that incorporate traditional design motifs in their modern form.

Overnight in Armavir (Hoktemberian): Camping in the area (little shade); Food at museum café, grills on the road to Armavir, Armavir; Springs in the area.

FROM SARDARAPAT TAKE THE (M5) TO THE NE FOR ABOUT 3 KM AND PAST ARAX V. TO A L (NW) TURN THAT IN ABOUT 1.4 KM LEADS TO CENTRAL (VOSTANIK, DD 40.123812 X 43.96105, 890M)

SIDE TRIP: VOSTANIK – (TILL 1946 AGHLANLI NERKIN OR YASAKHLI, THEN LENUGHI, POP. 500) HAS A S. N'SHAN CHURCH BUILT IN THE 1870S.

OVERNIGHT AT IN A VILLAGE HOME (RUSTIC, 4000 AMD FOR B&B IS FAIR); CAMPING IN THE AREA (NEAR VILLAGE – SHADE IN ORCHARDS, ASK); FOOD AT ARAX MTERK AND IN ARMAVIR; SPRINGS IN THE AREA.

FROM VOSTANIK, BACKTRACK TO THE (M5), TURN L (NE) AND CONTINUE FOR ABOUT 3.8 KM TO CENTRAL (HOKTEMBER, DD 40.13009 X 44.00492, 924M)

SIDE TRIP: HOKTEMBER – (TILL 1935 SARDARAPAT, POP. 2600) IS THE ACTUAL VILLAGE MENTIONED IN THE BATTLE OF SARDARAPAT, CAPTURED ALONG WITH THE RAIL STATION TO THE N BY TURKS ON MAY 21, 1918. THE BATTLE BEGAN TO THE N AND W AS ARMENIAN MILITIA BEGAN A COUNTER ATTACK THAT PULLED THE TURKS BACK TO THE ARAX RIVER ON MAY 27.
The ruins of the important Sardari Castle are 2.2 km NW of Hoktember, on the R (NE) side of the Dzerzhinsky road (the cemetery). Using British aid, the castle was built in 1810 for Sardar Hussein Khan Qajar (Sardari Iravani), the last Qajar governor of the Erivan Khanate (r. 1807-1828). The Persians had divided the Caucasus into khanates, Erivan being one of several.

Sardari castle was lost to the Russians at the end of the war, despite its strong fortifications and the efforts of Hussein’s brother, Hassan Khan Sardari Iravani, to defend the fortress. It was taken in 1828 by forces under the Russian General Paskevich.

The Qajars (also known as Ghajars or Kadjars) were the last Persian rulers of Armenia, inheriting the country from the Safavids in 1781. The Qajars ruled in Iran until 1925.

The Qajar army suffered humiliating defeats and was forced to surrender in 1813, signing the Treaty of Gulistan which recognized Russian annexation of Georgia and much of the Caucasus. It did not include Erivan Khanate and Nakhichevan, which was ceded to Russia after the Russo-Persian War of 1827-1828.

SIDETRIP: Bambakashat – Բամբակաշատ (before Mullah-Bayazid, pop. 1000) the name means “Lots of cotton”, an apt name for a village that excelled in cotton production. It now lives off of vegetable and animal husbandry, though most of its citizens have found their way to Yerevan or Russia to earn a living wage.

The village has a 1914 renovation of the 14th c S. Astvatsatsin, which appears to have been built over an early Christian structure. The church was renovated in 1991, which has done little to preserve its original character.

END OF TRIP 2
TRIP 3: SOUTH ARMAVIR

(Aknashen) - (Gai) - (J’rarat) - (Markara) - (Arazap) - (Argavand) - (Tandzut) - (Aigeshat) - (Janfida) - (Nalbandian) - (Getashen) - (Arax)

Trip 3 does not cover mainstream sites, and is not for the visitor on a whirlwind “greatest hits” tour; not even close. This collection of villages is part of a backwater of the marz, even of the country, many maintaining old world ways in the face of 21st century mechanization and a distressing loss of their population to greener fields in Russia and the west.

Despite (or in spite of) all this, the trip’s three-four hour tour can be a pleasant escape from the jostling crowds at Echmiadzin, exploring a land of old world farming, intense heat and laid back ways. The trip explores the area’s extensive marshland and river delta (good birding sites), the Vordan Karmir preserves (the last native habitat for a small ground beetle (Cochineal) which red excretion formed the basis of an ink prized by the courts of Arabia, Egypt and medieval European) and skirts along the same byways as sites in Trips 2 and 4, allowing a pleasant diversion from either one.

The trip includes Markara, on the Turkish border (the closest you can get in Armenia without breaking border rules), which may well become a boom town and bring prosperity to the region, when the border is finally opened (no one is placing bets on that momentous event yet). It also includes villages with extremely friendly locals who follow up their surprise you bothered to visit with cups of coffee (and home-made brew), fresh fruit and vegetables from their garden and a peppering of questions about your neck of the world.

Note: While Markara is on the trip, the border is closed, and you are advised not to get too close to the border crossing, which is manned by Russian guards who are not at all as understanding as their Armenian compatriots.

Handful named after the apostle Bartholomew, one of two apostles believed to have preached in Armenia in the 1st century (the other is Tadeos, also known as Tadevos or Thaddeus). Bartholomew is connected to several Near East and Indian traditions, including a Syrian belief that his name was originally Jesus (which was a common name for the time, like John is for England), and he changed it when he became an apostle.

About 1 km southeast of the village center is the small, reconstructed S. Sarkis Tukh Manuk, just in front of a Bronze Age Tell (the low hill behind the building) (DD 40.09057 x 44.29546, elev. 839m). The shrine is built over an ancient site, and the area in front has a number of Bronze Age Vishap and worship stones, including one low stone with a telescopic eye hole carved throughout its top. The stones mark the probable location of a Bronze Age cromlech (stone circle) at the site, connected to the Tell that is behind the shrine.

Armavir Marz: page 85 of 94 -  © 2008 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
banks of the Arax River that the soil was 'red like a carpet'; so seeped in the beetle's red secretions that the animals grazing there seemed dipped in paint.

The natural habitat for the Armenian cochineal was decimated in Soviet times. Once covering the entire Ararat valley, the salt marshes required to nourish the beetle were reduced to 3000 hectares in the mid 20th century, when intensive reclamation for farming (which failed due to the salt left in the soil) destroyed the insects' habitat in Ararat Marz, causing its extinction there. Ironically, despite failing with land "reclaimed" from the vordan's habitat, farmers continue to drain salt marshes thinking they can somehow till the saline soil. Instead, they simply destroy more natural habitat, leaving wasteland in their wake. The preserve is not protected by law, and what remains are a few hundred hectares of land and a small research office trying to recover the process for making the carmine color.

From J'rarat, take the N road for about 2.8 km to the (M3) intersection in Lusagiugh; turn L (SW) and continue for about 10.5 km and past Yeraskhahun and Vardanashen to the Turkish border in Markara, DD 40.03061 x 44.17886, elev. 840m

**Vordan Karmir Reservation** covers a wide swath of marshland beginning at J'rarat and hop-scotching to Arazap, Argavand and Nor Alashkert (Sovetakan). The reserve is the last native habitat for the Vordan Karmir, an endemic cochineal (Porphyrophora hamelii) that thrives in the area's salt marshes and unique vegetation (Aeluropus littoralis (Gouan) Parl. and Phragmites australis (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud.).

The name also means both "red dye" and the color is one of the strongest and most resilient of natural dyes, which was the reason for its popularity in ancient times. While written descriptions of the dye and how to make it date to the 5th century, the dye is known to have been used in the late Bronze Age and especially the Urartian period, when it was exported to Egypt and the Mediterranean. Its native habitat once stretched into Ararat marz and beyond; medieval chroniclers wrote that cochineal "worm" so was common on both

The natural dye (also known as carmine red) extracted from Ararat cochineal and known in the Orient as Armenian "krmez" ("wine-colored") was superior in hue and stability to that later produced from Mexican and Polish cochineal. It was prized by royal courts of medieval Europe and the Caliphate in Baghdad. Its color was used in royal and spiritual treatises, in miniatures and manuscripts, and in frescoes on the walls of churches and palaces in Armenia, Persia, Byzantium and Europe.

The village was renamed Gai in honor of Gai Nahapet (Haik Bzhrskian, 1887-1937), a general of the Russian Imperial Army who joined the Bolsheviks and routed the White Czechs in 1918. Arrested in 1935, he was executed on orders of Stalin during the Great Purge. For more details, see Yerevan Chapter, Nork Monuments, and Gai Nahapet Statue. Sites include the working S. N’shan church, rebuilt between 1888-1892 and newly renovated in the 1990s; and the remains of the important 6000-2000 BCE settlement of Khatunarkh to the E.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Gai, head SW for about 3.8 km and past Metsamor village to central (J’rarat, DD 40.06971 x 44.26636, elev. 834m)

**SIDE TRIP:** J’rarat - Հայաստան (formerly Gharkhun, pop. 1200) is a tired looking village, its rail station and once bustling warehouse empty and bereft of any human activity. The village seems deserted; even the 50% cut in population seems conservative.

Sefi was ruler of the Erivan Khanate during the waning years of the Safavid Persian dynasty, which had engaged in a life-or-death struggle with Ottoman Turkey over control of the Caucasus. One of the tactics used by Safavids during this 150 year struggle was a slash-and-burn campaign during retreat, forcing Armenians locals to emigrate to Iran and wasting the lands left behind. Thus the destruction of the medieval village. The Soviets vastly rebuilt the village so that nothing remains of either its medieval or Persian times, save some stones.

It was not easy to extract the color. The color comes from the female beetle, which can be picked only from the end of September through October, the female emerging only a few hours in the morning. The beetles must be hand picked, then boiled to release the color, stained, and mixed with special oils to create the dye. It can be dried to make cloth dye. The exact process for creating carmine ink, paint and dye is lost; though it was superior, competition of more plentiful (and cheaper) cochineal carmine from Poland and Mexico suppressed demand, and synthetic dyes ended all natural production.

The natural habitat for the Armenian cochineal was decimated in Soviet times. Once covering the entire Ararat valley, the salt marshes required to nourish the beetle were reduced to 3000 hectares in the mid 20th century, when intensive reclamation for farming (which failed due to the salt left it the soil) destroyed the insects' habitat in Ararat Marz, causing its extinction there. Ironically, despite failing with land "reclaimed" from the vordan's habitat, farmers continue to drain salt marshes thinking they can somehow till the saline soil. Instead, they simply destroy more natural habitat, leaving wasteland in their wake. The preserve is not protected by law, and what remains are a few hundred hectares of land and a small research office trying to recover the process for making the carmine color.

This is a tragedy, since natural dyes have made a comeback, and cochineal carmine is highly prized by make-up, fashion and natural product companies, a growing multi-billion dollar business, and several companies are particularly interested in Armenian carmine, which is longer lasting. It has yet to make a difference in the fate of this important part of Armenian culture and history.

**Overnight** at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From J’rarat, take the N road for about 2.8 km to the (M3) intersection in Lusagiugh; turn L (SW) and continue for about 10.5 km and past Yeraskhahun and Vardanashen to the Turkish border in (Markara, DD 40.03061 x 44.17886, elev. 840m)

The village was renamed Gai in honor of Gai Nahapet (Haik Bzhrskian, 1887-1937), a general of the Russian Imperial Army who joined the Bolsheviks and routed the White Czechs in 1918. Arrested in 1935, he was executed on orders of Stalin during the Great Purge. For more details, see Yerevan Chapter, Nork Monuments, and Gai Nahapet Statue. Sites include the working S. N’shan church, rebuilt between 1888-1892 and newly renovated in the 1990s; and the remains of the important 6000-2000 BCE settlement of Khatunarkh to the E.

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The village has one of the most impressive WWII monuments, if the size of the statue matters; the stout goddess of victory that looms over the main square is a welded mass of steel and weighs in at several tons.

Taking the small street to the right of the statue as you face it, you soon meet the back of the renovated S. Sahak, originally built in 1912 on the site of a Tukh Manuk. The renovation is one of the most successful church preservations in the country, maintaining the integrity of its 19th-early 20th century structure while remodeling the building.

This is mostly due to the donor, a French-Armenian who—according to locals ordered to fix the church in a vision—gave the funds and directed the renovation in 2004. Before then the church was in ruins; In Soviet times it was used for wheat storage, which caused mildew and salt release in the walls and roof, gradually eating away the structure.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From central Arazap take the NW road for about 1 km to central (Aigeshat, DD 40.07918 x 43.03445, elev. 937m) ⬆️ ⬇️ ⃰️

SIDE TRIP: Arazap - Unuquq (till 1947 Evjilar, pop. 750) is a border village with splendid views of Mt. Ararat and Western Armenia, from whence its citizens come (they are descendents of Sumaru émigrés). The name means 'on the banks of the Araks', so true for this village that is but 200 meters from the riverbank.

The village has the small S. Astsvatsatsin Tukh Manuk, in the old center, and its surrounding marshlands are a part of the Vordan Karmir Preserve (see p. 86).

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Arazap take the N/NW road for about 2.4 km to central (Tandzut, DD 40.07072 x 44.07910, elev. 860m) ⬆️ ⬇️ ⃰️

SIDE TRIP: Tandzut - Sulánan (formerly Armutlu, pop. 900) is just NW of Arazap and by rights it should be included in the Vordan Karmir Preserve: the village sits just beyond a wide arc of marshlands and river deltas that form the preserve. For information about the Vordan Karmir Preserve see p. 86.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Tandzut take the wide arc of marshlands and river deltas that form the preserve. For information about the Vordan Karmir Preserve see p. 86.

There are several old khachkars in the yard and walls, which point to a much older origin, but the main church was built in 1890, using rubble stone that was plastered over and painted with frescoes. The new work adds pink tufa stones to the new portico and frames the side walls with arches.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From the central intersection in Aigeshat take the SW road out of town for about 4.8 km to central (Janfida, DD 40.04527 x 44.02955, elev. 865m) ⬆️ ⬇️ ⃰️

SIDE TRIP: Janfida - Գհզիղան (pop. 1200) is barely a spec on the horizon save its World War II monument designed by Ara Sargsian, and its location on the Turkish border.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Janfida back track to Aigeshat, then take the NW road for about 1 km to central (Haikavan, DD 40.07918 x 43.03445, elev. 937m) ⬆️ ⬇️ ⃰️

SIDE TRIP: Haikavan/ Old Armavir - Նագորնու ծինատիր / Նագորնու ծինատիր (till 1935 Ghrdghuli/Kuru-Kill, pop. 1350) has the nearby Old Armavir Excavation. For a description see Trip 2, page 76.

From Haikavan take the N road for about 6 km to ARMAVIR (DD 40.14695 x 44.03278, elev. 866m) ⬆️ ⬇️ ⃰️

END OF TRIP 3

Armatir Marz: page 87 of 94 - © 2008 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - www.TACentral.com
Trip 4 explores the Western desert, in reality a semi-desert land of scrub and brush, which blooms an emerald green in the spring with large swaths of yellow, red, pink, blue and fuchsia from March through May. During the rest of the year the ground turns to the color of old leather, with striations of red, black and green on the slopes of dormant volcanoes and the ragged cliffs of the Arax and Selay-Mastara Rivers.

Summer can be blistering hot and the area tough country to explore, its salt marshes and once verdant grasslands reduced to the desert space that surrounds it. The deforestation of primeval forests in the area meant the desertification of the western region as early as the Iron Age, requiring irrigation canals to keep the fertile soil useful. That ended in the late medieval period, when Armenians were forced off the lands they had cultivated for millennia and the lands went arid. Limited irrigation has reclaimed some of the western desert, but most is still untlilled, the marks of its ancient tillage petrified by hundreds of years of neglect.

Despite the lunar landscape, the area has fertile soil, and it is slowly becoming known as Apricot Country, due to the distribution of over 30,000 high-quality apricot trees to villages in the region by the Armenian tree Project. The combination of arid climate, hot days an cool nights is ideal for producing incredibly juicy, naturally sweet fruit. If the ongoing population-loss reverses, the area could become a prosperous fruit-growing area.

Herpetologists (amphibian fans) will find the region a good place to find for rare and endangered species of vipers, lizards and other reptiles. The area around Karakert has an important wetland habitat for rare species of batracho-fauna (water frogs) and reptiles.

The region has its charms (most in the spring), and several important sites worth investigating; the Bronze Age fortress at Karakert and the Iron Age empires capitals of Yervandashat and Bagaran.

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Note: Bagaran and Yervandashat are still technically off-limits to foreigners, but they definitely deserve a stop, with the ancient Armenian political and religious capitals on both sides of the river. It is becoming more possible to visit the villages, but you still may be stopped and asked for "dokumenti" by Russian guards. If you can make the arrangements (ask at a travel agency like one of the Adventure Tour Operators, p. 15), do try; the sites are enigmatic reminders of a bygone day and locals are living history books.

Stay: Hotel, restaurant-hotel at Aramvur; guest houses/apts. in Aramvur; village homes (rustic); camping near villages and Mts. Spitakblur and Sevblur (no tree cover).

Eat: Restaurant & cafes at Aramvur; mterks and kiosks in Aramvur and villages.

Springs: freshwater cold springs at villages, Aramvur.

From the Aramvur rail station, take the western highway (H17) out of Aramvur for about 10.8 km to the rail station in (Miasnikian, DD 40.18372 x 43.91854, elev. 902m) AMD for B&B is fair; camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Miasnikian, continue NW on the (H17) continuing forward at the Dalarik intersection and in about 4 km turning R (N) to (Baghramian, DD 40.19355 x 43.85468, elev. 1032m)

SIDE TRIP: Baghramian - Pngunnujulu (pop. 900) is barely hanging on, despite intensive aid efforts by international aid. There is no reason for the village to exist; it was purpose built in 1983 with an eye to turning it into a industrial town and administrative center for old Baghramian Rajyon. The stone quarries and ore mines in the area were the instigators of this ill-fated attempt to force urban activity in place that hadn't any. The village is less than a quarter of its official population of 3500, with those who could having already left for greener pastures in Yerevan or Russia, and those who can't lingering on in a quiet, desperate way.

There is an eerie atmosphere in the hamlet, with 5 and 6 story apartments inhabited by a handful of families, and the hulks of Soviet technology rusting everywhere.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Baghramian backtrack to the (H17) at Miasnikian and L (NW) and continue for about 5 km to a L (W) and another 1 km to the train station in (Dalarik, DD 40.23034 x 43.87596, elev. 1006m)

SIDE TRIP: Dalarik - լարակը (till 1965 Mastara, pop. 1200) was founded in 1902 as a rail stop on the Alexandropol (Giumri)-Yerevan railroad. The area has stone quarries and some mining, but mostly lives on remittances sent from abroad. Like Karakert, Miasnikian and nearby Lernagog, Dalarik receives support from the Children of Armenia Fund (COAF) (see Resources Online, p. 92) in an attempt to reverse rural trends of population loss and poverty. The village is reviving a renovated school and other infrastructure upgrades.
NOTE: The next two sites are inside the Turkish border area and technically still require permission to enter. The Russian guards are at times not very accommodating to tourists. Permission can be had at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (almost impossible for walk in tourists) or through well connected guides. Check Adventure Tour Operators (p. 15) for escort.

From Dalarik continue NW on the (H17) for about 6 km to the train station at KARAKERT (DD 40.24885 x 43.82220, elev. 1090m)

KARAKERT – ՔԱՐԱԿԵՐՏ (ՔԱՐԱԲԱԳ) (pop. 1200) is a “Model Village” sponsored by an Armenian charity organization with funds from a wealthy Diaspora Armenian and international and US aid. The village has newly renovated schools, culture center and new trees in the park, with perhaps the most important aid coming from the school projects and the Armenian Tree Project, which started a tree nursery at the village that supplies high quality fruit and shade trees to villages in the area. If it continues, the program will reverse the desertification.

Bring back on the further W path and in about 1 km where the path bends to the SE, stop and walk W for about 500 m to the ruins of a hamlet and a tiny church looking over the River gorge to the Turkish Village of Kilistasi (see Bagaran, below). The church walls facing Turkey have a number of bullet holes, not all of them from the 1918 war.

From the SW corner of Karakert, take the W/SW road for about 12 km to a R (N) road that leads in another 5.5 km and into the Border Zone (permission needed from Ministry of Foreign Affairs—or a well connected guide), where a 200 m hike W to the Akhurian River gorge takes you to the hexagonal Aragats Church with tile roof, just under the gorge crest. Opposite the river to the NW are the ruins of the Armenian village of Karabagh, with a medieval church and cemetery.

Backtrack using the further W path and in about 1 km where the path bends to the SE, stop and walk W for about 500 m to the ruins of a hamlet and a tiny church looking over the River gorge to the Turkish Village of Kilistasi (see Bagaran, below). The church walls facing Turkey have a number of bullet holes, not all of them from the 1918 war.

From the SW corner of Karakert take the S road (M9) for about 6.5 km to (DID 40.21141 x 43.77134, elev. 1127m)

SIDE TRIP: Shenik - Տիկնիկ (pop. 600) was founded in 1971 as a commune farming community specializing in wheat production. The name comes from a village in Sassun, where most of the villagers descend.

As happened to all Armenian communes, when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the farms—there were no seeds, fertilizer or water available to farmers, and they lost their way of living. The country faced the possibility of real starvation of the first time in 80 years. It was not until US assistance came in the late 90s that the newly privatized farms were finally able to become self-sufficient and the population loss was staunched. A recent US grant has renovated the school and sports complex, and Shenik is a part of the COAF “Model Community” program, along with Karakert, Miasnikian and Dalarik. The village has an 5th century basilica built over the remains of a pre-Christian worship site.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

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LIterally meaning “God’s Place”, Bagaran was founded at the end of the 3rd century BCE by the Armenian King Orontes III (also Yeruand or Yervand I, r. 220-201) to house idols of the gods and the remains of royal ancestors, and the treasury, brought from the old capital of Armavir which was left dry after the Arax River shifted 5 km south.
Bagaran was built on the right bank of the Akhurian River, immediately after he established his new capital in Yervandashat at the confluence of the Akhurian and Arax Rivers.

Yervand established his brother Yeruaz (Yervanz or Yervand) there as high priest of the Armenian pantheon, and established a sacred forest at the site, populated by animals and called Ts'vendots Antar (“new born forest”). During his reign Bagaran became the religious center for the Armenian kingdom.

Not to be outdone, their rivals the Byzantines, under Basil I (867-886) sent a crown and declaration recognizing the Bagratuni kingdom, which had its initial capital at Bagaran.

The ducal palace (replaced later by the royal palace) was built on an acropolis, the city formed on three hills encircled by a large wall. At the same time, the churches of S. Theodore and S. Shushanik were built (see below).

Ashot died in Karspar near Bagaran and was buried in the family sepulchre. On his death one son Smbat was crowned, and another, the Sparapet Shapuh, inherited Bagaran.

In 890 Smbat I (890/91-914) moved the capital of the kingdom to Yeraskavors (Shirakavan), establishing his seat at Ani. Bagaran continued to flourish as a stop on the transit trade route from there to the West, and as a supplier of fruit to the royal table. It was destroyed during Seljuk attacks in 1048, rebuilt and then destroyed permanently by the Timurids in 1394.

One branch of Bagratuni family in the middle of 9th c established the Georgian Bagratuni kingdom which ended in 1801 when the country was annexed to Russia.

The complex Most of the site is across the border in Turkey, but some parts are in Armenia. The Turkish side has the ruins of the important St. Theodore, which was built between 624 and 631 for Prince Bout (Bultyl) and later for his wife Anna. The church is a domed cruciform with the dome resting over 4 pillars.

The church became a model for western churches—one being the Carolingian Oratory of the villa Episcopal Théodulphe (806) at Germigny des Pres, France, built for Charlemagne. The architect for Théodulphe, Odo, who also designed the cathedral of Aachen, was an Armenian.

In 1909 the dome was destroyed but the walls remain more or less stable. The church site is now used as a border guard office.

On the Armenian side of the border is the small St. Shushanik Church which was probably built in the 9th-10th century, over the place of a Pagan shrine. The red tufa building was a ‘Hexaconque’, or six-sided central dome church with niche buttresses in each side.

The founder of the Artashesian dynasty, Artashes I (Artaxias I, 190 BC - 160 BCE) occupied Bagaran and Yervandashat when he took power, killing Yervand and his brother and giving 500 of Yeruaz servants to his favorite general Smbat, who settled them in a new city in Masis canyon, which they also named Bagaran.

The Artashesian dynasty was established by the Kamsarakans in Bagaran, which expanded their lands and power, soon rivaling the ruling Arshakuni House. Overplaying their hand, the Kamsarakans were almost wiped out during an insurrection against Arshak II in the mid 4th century. They were further decimated in the 772 revolt against Arab rule, and forced to sell their lands to Ashot IV (the Meat Eater) Bagratuni in 780. They then left for Asia Minor where they reestablished their dynasty in the Byzantine empire.

Ashot established his dynastic center at Bagaran, building a family palace and sepulchre inside he walled city. In 790 he was made Armenian Prince of Princes and lived at Bagaran until his death in 826.

Arab revolts occurred throughout the Arab Caliphate (652-858), the strongest led by the Mamluks in 747-750 and 774 and the son of Ashot the IV, Bagrat Bagratuni in 850. The Arab Caliphate finally recognized Armenian autonomy by appointing Ashot as Armenian Sparapet (855-862) and then Prince of Princes over the Armenian Caliphate. Ashot used this position to create an army of 40,000 well trained soldiers and surround himself with Armenian Ishkhans led by Gevorg II Garnetsi Catholicos (877-887), becoming king in 885. The Caliphate immediately recognized him, sending a crown and royal raiment in the same year. On the border is the small St. Shushanik Church which was probably built in the 9th-10th century, over the place of a Pagan shrine. The red tufa building was a ‘Hexaconque’, or six-sided central dome church with niche buttresses in each side.

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The ancient capital (one of three in Armavir) was established ca. 302 BCE by King Orontes (Eruand or Yervand) II (317-300), who is said in a 5th century history to have been forced to move his seat when the Arax River moved 5 kilometers S, leaving the original capital of Old Armavir high and dry. In reality the move had more to do with political expediency and Yervand’s alleged paranoia and fear of court intrigues and the instability of his reign.

Embracing on the massive construction project, Yervand included in the fortress plans the creation of an inordinate number of secret rooms and cells embedded in the walls for his retinue, supporters and soldiers. When completed, he moved the state treasury and many of the residents of the old capital at Armavir. He then had built the religious center of Bagaran across the canyon, and a little north of the capital he built Yervandakert Dastakert, his country estate.

Early excavators noted both the strength of the massive walls (secured by copper locks at the gates) and the number of cells—far more than found in any fortress excavated to that time. He strengthened the entrance to the city and bored tunnels to the bottom of the hill in order to take water during times of siege.

The locks and secret chambers could not save an unstable reign, and Yervand lost his crown and city to Artashes I, a rival kinsman whose battle against Yervand was instigated by the Seleucid king Antiochus III, who was losing grip over the renegade country. Winning the battle, Artashes took Yervandashat and had Yervand and his brother (and head priest of the temple) killed. He then declared Armenia independent of the Seleucids, establishing the Artashesian dynasty (189 BCE-). Artashes moved the capital to his new capital at Artashat.

Until the 4th century Yervandashat was one of the biggest cities but the army of the Sassanid King Shapur II (333-378) occupied Yervandashat, forced 20,000 Armenian families to flee and ruined the city. Afterwards Yervandashat became a small settlement, never recovering its former glory.

About the Orontids The Orontid dynasty is said to have originated in Armenia around 400 BCE first ruling from Old Armavir, and then Yervandashat. The Orontids (Yervandunis) established their reign over Armenia around the time of the Scythian and Median invasion in the 6th century BCE, or at the end of the Urartian Empire at the hands of Scythians and Medes (ca. 610 BCE) Orontids ruled over the Kingdom of Sophene for a short while and in Commagene until the year 72.

Most get confused with the names, which have been bandied about by Azeris and Armenians to prove or disprove Armenia’s origins. In fact the name “Orontes” is the Hellenized form of a masculine name of Iranian origin; Yervand in Armenian. The name is only used in Greek (Gr.: Ὀρόντης), which adoption by western historians has led to much of the confusion.

An Avestan connection is Auruuant (brave, hero) and Middle Persian Arvand. Some say it is tied to the Hittite name Arnuwanda. The Hittites are said in some histories to be one of the origin tribes for the Armenians.

Nature The river gorge is a native habitat for the endangered Persian toad headed lizard (Phrynocephalus persicus), which is already extinct in Echmiadzin region, and live sonly in pockets in the rest of the marz.

The ruins are on the ridge overlooking the Akhurian at its confluence with the Arax River, about halfway between modern Yervandashat and Bagaran (2 km N of Yervandashat). The site is also opposite old Bagaran, which became the religious center for the kingdom in the late 3rd century. Yervandashat (literally “a lot of Yervand” or “the power of Yervand”) was destroyed by the Persian King Shapuh II (353-372) in the mid 360s. In the 360s AD, Yervandashat was destroyed and what have been preserved today are traces of houses, streets and city fortifications. Recent archeological digs have uncovered extensive waterworks and signs of the villas, the palace and gardens celebrated in Movses Khorenatsi’s 5th century History of Armenia.

The Akhurian River gorge has traces of an Orontid bridge connecting Yervandashat to the fortress of Yervandakert on the opposite bank of river. Nearby is a 4-5th c. ruined basilica.

Flora the Akhurian canyon is home to several endemic species of flora, including newly discovered varieties of Poppy. The best time to visit is late April-May.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

From Yervandashat backtrack to Bagaran and take the (H18) east for about 15 km to (Vanand, DD 40.10219 x 43.82227, elev. 1015m)

SIDE TRIP: Vanand - 4-km walk (pop. 1200) was founded 1994 from a collective and is the improbable modern capital of a medieval nomadic terrain, the so-called Saadli mahal of the Safavid and Qajar Armenian domains. Once a major center of Armenian activity (the Arax River still runs plentiful throughout the year and the region was once teeming with orchards, fields and villages), the area was taken over in the late medieval period by nomadic Kurds, Shaddadis and Yezidis. Armenians began to reclaim the area in the 19th century, but it remained mainly empty until the 1970s when the Soviet authorities tried to repopulate and industrializes the area.

Overnight at village home (rustic; 3000-4000 AMD for B&B is fair); camping near village (flat lands, no trees); springs in village.

Return to Armavir by continuing SE on the (H18) for 9 km to the (M5); turning L (NE) and continuing another 14 km to the town limits.

END OF TRIP 4
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