

Armenia ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆ

Although Armenians carry a lot of psychological baggage from a traumatic 20th century, you'd hardly notice it from a quick tour around the country. The rapidly modernizing capital, the boutique tourism industry and the warm welcome you'll receive everywhere seems to belie the country's reputation for tragedy. Rather than letting past woes weigh it down, Armenia has built its memorials, dusted itself off and moved on. Politicians have set their sights on EU membership, while businessmen are enjoying a booming economy dubbed the 'Caucasian Tiger'.

For travellers, easily visited highlights include ancient monasteries, candle-lit churches and high-walled forts – but lasting impressions lie more with the Armenians themselves. You'll easily find friends among these gracious, humble and easygoing people, even without a common language. Ties are best forged around a dinner table, where endless rounds of toasting accompany a meal bursting with fresh vegetables and grilled meats.

Delving deeper into the country reveals a nation with a complex dichotomy. Despite its robust economy and liberalism (for this part of the world), it's simultaneously held back by oligarch attitudes and old feuds with neighbouring countries. It's a tough neighbourhood but Armenia seems to have made the best of it, thanks in part to a supportive diaspora stretching from Sydney to LA.

Much of the current tourist traffic comprises diaspora Armenians seeking a slice of their homeland. Their high standards enticed some international hotel chains and caused overdevelopment in places like Sevan. Yet it's still easy to escape to some hidden gems, including stalactite-filled caves and summer villages inhabited by Yezidi Kurds and Armenian shepherds. As most travellers whiz through on a brief side trip between other places, serious explorers will have the best sights to themselves.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 29,800 sq km
- **Capital** Yerevan
- **Famous for** Cognac, turbulent history, being the first Christian nation
- **Official name** Hayastan, Hayastani
Hanrapetutyan (Republic of Armenia)
- **Phrases** *Barev dzez* (Hello), *Genats!* (Cheers!)
- **Population** 3,215,800



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Yerevan** (p145) – A lively cultural life, buzzing late-night café scene and some fine museums smooth out some of the Soviet stylings of the Armenian capital.
- **Lori** (p195)– This northern region offers spectacular scenery at every turn; forests, canyons (such as the incredible Debed Canyon; p199), and a stunning string of medieval monasteries, including Sanahin (p201) and Haghpat (p201).
- **Goris** (p213) – Armenia's prettiest rural town, with 19th century architecture, hidden leafy lanes and ancient cave dwellings on its outskirts. The incredible Tatev Monastery is a short drive away.
- **Dilijan** (p190) – Forested mountain retreat town with pleasant accommodation, burgeoning tourist facilities and great walks near monasteries like Haghartsin and Goshavank.
- **Vayots Dzor** (p206)– A region peppered with historic and natural beauty including Noravank church (p207) and Yeghegis village (p209), plus caves, wineries and the relaxing mineral baths at Jermuk (p210).

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** - There's lots to do and see around Yerevan: take in live music at a concert or restaurant, and shop for brandy, *oghee* (fruit vodka) and handicrafts. Take short day trips to Garni and Geghard, Khor Virap or a longer one to Lake Sevan and Dilijan.
- **One Week** - Travel up to Lori to the awesome World Heritage-listed Haghpat and Sanahin churches, stay in Vanadzor or Dilijan, or concentrate on the best of the south – Tatev and Noravank in particular.
- **Two Weeks** - Take some time around Yeghegnadzor and taste more of Yerevan's cosmopolitanism, organise a village or town homestay, explore more of Dilijan, or head for Sisian and Goris in the south.
- **One Month** - Allows you to explore more off the beaten track places like Yeghegis, Meghri, Ijevan and Gyumri. Take time for some day hikes, spelunking in Vayots Dzor or climbing on Mt Aragats.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

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

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- Litre of petrol AMD650
- Litre of bottled water AMD200
- Bottle of beer AMD230
- Souvenir T-shirt AMD3000
- Street treat – *lahmajoon* (lamb and herb pizza) AMD100, *khoravats* (barbecued food) AMD1700

May) has more flowers but autumn (late September to early November) has long, warm days and more stable weather. It's also the time of harvest festivals and delicious fresh produce – Yerevan averages 27°C in both seasons. Summer (June to August) in Yerevan can be 40°C for days at a time, while conditions can be radically different in the north. Lake Sevan has a short summer – late June to September – but is Canadian during winter: -10°C on average. Winter weather lasts until April or May over much of the country. See p312 for details.

CURRENT EVENTS

Despite its limited resources Armenia has become a master at geopolitics. What other country in the world can say it maintains good relations with the United States, Russia and Iran? Recognising Armenia's small but influential role as a moderating force in the region, the US has moved swiftly to forge lasting ties, evinced by its huge new embassy in Yerevan (on 8.9 hectares of land) and incorporation of Armenia into its Millennium Challenge Account, a multi-billion-dollar aid package that rewards developing countries that have met certain requirements, such as press freedom, democracy and government transparency.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to bolster trade ties with Armenia and has signed multi-million-dollar energy and transit deals, including a natural gas pipeline and oil refinery. Russia, the main energy supplier until now, has upped the ante with a deal to build a new nuclear reactor at Metsamor. Russia also maintains a military base near Gyumri and posts its soldiers along Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran.

While Armenia shoulders up to the big boys of international trade and energy it remains mired in old feuds with its neighbours